

# Early Buddhist Theory of Perception and the Seventeen Thought Moments

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Abhidhamma Pitaka, the seven treatises (*pakarana*), was composed after the Third Buddhist Council with the addition of Kathāvattthupparakaraṇa by Ven. Moggaliputtatissa Thera. The eminent scholars well-versed in Abhidhamma confirm that the Abhidhamma is the doctrine abstracted from the discourses delivered by the Buddha though the commentators observe that Abhidhamma was a deliverance of the Buddha himself. Since the Abhidhamma is accepted as the systematization of the discourses, the scholars have noticed the relationship between the Suttas and the Abhidhamma. One of the latest systematizations of the Abidhamma is the theory of perception that is formed with the seventeen thought moments or the fourteen modes of functions.

The practical aspect of the perception given in the Madhupindika sutta where the Buddha first explains it in brief and Ven. Mahakaccayana explains in detail. The seventeen thought moments of Abhidhamma are a latest development which aims at answering the questions raised by various Buddhist sects regarding the cycle of birth and death.

*“Yato nidanam bhikkhu purisā papaññāsankhā samudhā caranti”* is the brief answer of the Buddha to the question raised by Sākya Dandapāni and in this context, the detailed explanation made by Ven. Mahacaccāyana is *“Cakkhūñcauso paticca rūpe ca uppajjati cakkhuvūññānanam, tinnam sangati phasso, phassapaccayā vedanā, yam vedeti, tam iññānāti, yam sññānāti tam vitakkeṭi, yam vitakkeṭi tam papañceti, yam papañceti namatopidhisam papañcāsāññāsankhā samudācaranti atitānāgatapaccuppannesu*

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*caḅḅhuvīṅṅeyyesu rūpesu*". By following the process mentioned in the Madhupindika Sutta, the *Abbidhammatthasangaha* introduces the fourteen modes of functions in Kicca-Sangaha as "*Paṭisaṅdhibhavaṅgāvajjanadassana-savana-ghāyana-sāyana-phusana-sampaticcana-santirana-vottapana-javana-tadārammana-cutivasena cuddasavidāni bhavanti*".

This shows that the monks who lived during the time of the Buddha were also able to interpret the teachings divulged by the Buddha. The theory of perception under the heading "the seventeen thought moments" can be a result of this process of analysing and interpreting the Dhamma.

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