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Theory of Perception and the Characteristics of Bhavanga

Abhidhamma Pitaka, the seven treatises (pakaranas), was composed after the

third Buddhist councils with the addition of Kathāvatthuppakara 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 were in an eager to mention that Abhidhamma was

a deliverance of the Buddha himself. Since the Abhidhamma is accepted as the

systematization of the discourses delivered by the Buddha, the current scholars are

observing 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.

Early Buddhist Theory of Perception

The practical aspect of the perception given in the *Madhupindika Sutta*¹ where

the Buddha first explains in brief and Ven. Mahakaccāyana explains in details. The

seventeen thought moments of Abhidhamma are the latest development which aims at

answering the questions raised by various Buddhist sects regarding the cycle of birth

and death.

¹ MN. i, p. 109

Buddhism gives a priority to the perception since it is directly related to the knowledge. Because we are human beings, we always depend on senses i.e. eyes, ears, nose, tongue, body and mind for gaining knowledge. In Buddhism, the final extinction is the *Nibbāna* that should be realized through the wisdom ($pa\tilde{n}\tilde{n}a$).

"On whatever account there is behaviour in the diffuseness of the world, you should not be pleased, or welcome it and appropriate it, then all de-meritorious things that rise from the latent tendencies to greed, to averse, to hold views, to doubt, to measure, to hanker to be, to ignore, to take sticks, and weapons, to fight, to take sides, to dispute, to slander and to tell lies, cease remainderlessly" is the brief answer made by the Buddha to the question raised by Sākya Dandapāni and in this context the deep explanation made by Ven. Mahakaccāyana is "Friends, on account of eye and forms arise eye consciousness. The coincident meeting of the three is contact (passa). On account of contact feelings arise (vedan \bar{a}); what is felt is perceived ($sa\tilde{n}\tilde{n}\bar{a}$); of what is perceived there is thinking or investigating (vitakka); in thoughts there is diffuseness (papañca); on account of that, diffused perceptive components of forms of the past, future, and present cognizable by the eye consciousness arise and behave in that man."³

Perception in Theravāda Abhidhamma

The first chapter of the *Abhidhammattasangaha*, *Citta-Sangaha-Vibhāga*, Consciousness is classified according to the nature (*jāti*) and planes or states (*bhūmi*).

² MN. i., p. 110

[&]quot;Yato nidānam bhikkhu purisā papañcasaññāsankhā samudhā caranti..."

³ MN. i., p. 112

[&]quot;Cakkhuñcāuso paticca rūpe ca uppajjati cakkhuvuññāṇanam, tiṇṇam saṅgati phasso, phassapaccayā vedanā, yam vedeti, tam sañjānāti, yam sañjānāti tam vitakketi, yam vitakketi tam papañceti, yam papañceti tatonidānam purisam papañcasaññāsankhā samudācaranti atītānāgatapaccuppannesu cakkhuviññyeiyesu rūpesu"

In *Kicca Saṅgaha*, the different function of all the 89 types of consciousness are explained in detail.⁴ The fourteen modes of functions introduced in *Kicca-Saṅgaha*:⁵

- 1. re-linking (paţisandhi)
- 2. life continuum (bhavaṅga)
- 3. apprehending (āvajjana)
- 4. seeing (dassana)
- 5. hearing (savana)
- 6. smelling (*ghāyana*)
- 7. tasting (*sāyana*)
- 8. contacting (phusana)
- 9. receiving (sampațiccana)
- 10. investigating (santīraṇa)
- 11. determining (vottapana)
- 12. impulsion (*javana*)
- 13. retention (tadārammaṇa)
- 14. decease (cuti)

The stage of the development of the perception is the seventeen thought moments. The fourth Chapter of the *Abhidhammattasaṅgaha*, *Vīthi-Saṅgaha-Vibhāgo*, seventeen thought moments are given.

1. Past bhavanga - atīta bhavanga

2. Vibrating *bhavanga* - *bhavanga calana*

3. Arrest bhavanga - bhavangupaccheda

4. Sense-door consciousness - dvārāvajjana

5. Sense-consciousness - pañca viññāṇa

6. Receiving Consciousness - sampaţicchana

7. Investigating Consciousness - santīraṇa

8. Determining Consciousness - *votthapana*

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⁴ Narada, p. 163

⁵ ibid., p. 161

[&]quot;Paṭisaṅdhi-bhavaṅgāvajjanadassana-savana-ghāyana-sāyana-phusana-sampaṭiccana-santīrana-vottapana-javana-tadārammana-cutivasena cuddasavidāni bhavanti".

9. Javana 1
10. Javana 2
11. Javana 3
12. Javana 4
13. Javana 5
14. Javana 6
15. Javana 7
16. Registering Consciousness
- tadārammana - i
17. Registering Consciousness
- tadārammana - ii

The above stated seventeen thought moments can be explained with process occurred through the eye.

- 1. A visible object enters the avenue of the eye.
- 2. The *bhavanga* consciousness vibrates for one moment
- 3. The *bhavanga* consciousness perishes, arresting the *bhavanga* stream
- 4. The five doors apprehending consciousness arise and apprehending the very visible object.
- 5. Eye-consciousness seeing that very form
- 6. Recipient consciousness receiving it
- 7. Investigating consciousness investigating it
- 8. determining consciousness determining it
- 9. 15. Sense-sphere *javana*-s (7)
- 16. 17. Two retentive resultants arise accordingly

The perception is a subject that is upgrading from the time of the Buddha.

1. The discourse, *Madhupindika Sutta* explains that the perceptual knowledge begins from the eye and object with the arisen of the eye-consciousness (Brothers, the eye-consciousness arises because of the contact between the eye and the form.).⁶

In one moment there arises only one consciousness, no two or more consciousnesses arise in a moment. The consciousness is named according to the

⁶ MN. i, p. 112, "Cakkhuñcāuso paṭicca rūpe ca uppajjati cakkhuvuññāṇaṃ,

function of it. For examples: when the consciousness contacts with the eye and the object, the consciousness is named "eye-consciousness". Likewise, the consciousness is named as "ear-consciousness, nose-consciousness, tongue-consciousness, body-consciousness, and mind-consciousness". When the consciousness gets the contact of the eye and the object, it leaves the mind. In *Abhidhamma* this function is named "arresting the *bhavanga*". Just before the *bhavanga* is arrested, it is vibrating. Before the vibration of the *bhavanga* it is with the past consciousness. This process of the consciousness is systematised in *Abhidhammattasangaha* - atīta bhavanga, bhavanga calana and bhavangupaccheda.

- 2. The next moment of the process is "contact occurs because of the three conditions". In this moment, the man begins to cognise the object. In *Citta-Saṅgaha-Vibhāga*, this is named as *āvajjana* and in *Vīthi-Saṅgaha-Vibhāgo* it is named as *pañcadvārāvajjana*. Visual cognition results from the presence of the three conditions:
 - i. an unimpaired internal sense-organ of sight (ajjhattikam . . . cakkhu aparibhinnam hoti) 8
 - ii. external visible forms entering into the field of vision (*bāhirā ca rūpā* āpāthaṃ āgacchanti)
 - iii. an appropriate act of attention on the part of the mind (tajjo ca samannāhāro hoti)⁹

⁷ MN. i, p. 112, tinnam sangati phasso,

⁸ MN. i, p. 190

⁹ MNA. ii, p. 229, *Tajjassa ti tadanurūpassa*, i.e. *tajja* - means appropriate to it;

Sarachchandra. p.21, Sarachchandra says that "samannāhāro" here can refer to either "an automatic act of sensory attention" or a 'deliberate act directed by interest'. He prefers the former and adds that 'the Sanskrit is preserving the original meaning of the term' (op. cit., p. 22) but the Sālistamba Sūtra (quoted by him) merely has 'tajja - manasikāram pratītya' i.e. on account of the reflection resulting from it (v. ed. N. A. śāstri, Adyar, 1950, p. 15; cp. Mādyamaka V"tti, ed. Poussin, p. 567.)

When these conditioned are satisfied, it is said that 'there is a manifestation of this kind of perception' (viññāṇa-bhāgassa pātubhāvo hoti).¹⁰

3. The next moment after the cognition is the feeling (*vedanā*) that arises because of contact. In *Citta-Saṅgaha-Vibhāga*, this is one of the five kinds of *viññāṇa*. The term *viññāṇa* is explained by K. N. Jayatilake:

The sense of 'Knowledge' for $vi\tilde{n}\tilde{n}ana$ is quite clear where it is said that 'the Tathāgata should be examined in order to know whether he is perfectly enlightened or not'. Defining the $vi\tilde{n}\tilde{n}ana$ it is said that 'one discriminates (by means of it), therefore it is called knowledge' ($vij\bar{a}natiti...tasmavi\tilde{n}anantivuccati$,) 'what does one discriminate - one discriminates the pleasurable from the painful and the neutral' (vijanatiti...tasmavija

- 4. The $sa\tilde{n}\tilde{n}\bar{a}$ arises in the next moment of the process of perception. The chief characteristic of $sa\tilde{n}\tilde{n}\bar{a}$ is the cognition of an object by way of a mark as blue etc. Citta-Saṅgaha-Vibhāga in Abhidhammattasaṅgaha the function of the $sa\tilde{n}\tilde{n}\bar{a}$ is done by sampaticcana and it is same with $V\bar{t}thi$ -Saṅgaha-Vibhāgo.
- 5. In the next moment of the perception there arises the *vitakka*¹⁶. In the Sutta Pitaka it has been employed in the sense of notion, ideas, thoughts, reasoning etc. In Abhidhammma it is "lifting of the concomitants to the object (*abhiniropana*)."¹⁷

¹¹ MN. i, p. 112, phassapaccayā vedanā,

¹⁰ Jayathilake, p. 435

¹² MN. i, p. 317, tathagate samannesanā kātabbā, sammāsambuddho vā no vā iti viññānāvāti,

¹³ MN. i., p. 292

¹⁴ MN. i, p. 112; yam vedeti tam sañjānāti,

¹⁵ Narada, p. 84

¹⁶ MN. i, p. 112; yam sañjānāti tam vitakketi,

¹⁷ Attasālinī, p. 114; ārammane tena cittam vicaratīti vicāro

According to the context it is the reflection 18 (initial application). The term sampaticcana is stated in both places of Citta-Sangaha-Vibhaga and Vīthi-Saṅgaha-Vibhāgo in Abhidhammattasaṅgaha in respect to the term vitakka.

- 6. The phenomenal reality $(papa\tilde{n}ca)^{19}$ is the next respective function of thought process as it is stated in Madhupindika Sutta.²⁰ This is the obsession or imagination.²¹ Considering the characteristics of papañca and the continuing process given in the Citta-Sangaha-Vibhāga and Vīthi-Sangaha-Vibhāgo, it can be applied to votthapana.
- 7. The following moment perception "papañcasaññāsaṅkhā of the is samudācaranti". In this process, the consciousness imagines different formations in regard to what it perceived through the sense. According to the Citta-Sangaha-Vibhāga it is javana. Since it has been a long process of realisation and conformation of the object, the Vīthi-Sangaha-Vibhāgo dedicated seven thought moments.
- 8. The final function in the process of the perception is the comparison of what is perceived with what would have been perceived in the past, present and future.²² In Abhidhamma this is the registration (tadārammaṇa). This arises in two consecutive moments.

The perception states in Madhupindika Sutta gradually developed up to fourteen thought moments and seventeen thought moments with the evolution of the Abhidhamma. This is further clarified by the diagram attached here with (p.157). The

¹⁸ Pali-English Dictionary, p. 620

¹⁹ Sarachchandra, pp. 4-10

²⁰ MN. i, p. 112; yam vitakketi tam papañceti,

²¹ Pali-English Dictionary, p. 412

²² MN. i, p. 112; atītānāgatapaccuppannesu cakkhuviññyeiyesu rūpesu

purpose of the perception given in *Abhidhamma* literature is crystal clear with addition of *cuti*, *paṭisandhi* and *bhavaṅga*. With the addition of these three, the *Abhidhammikas* wanted to confirm the existence of the being as a consecutive process. They introduce *cuti* and *paṭisandhi* that cannot be applied to the early Buddhist theory of perception through that they could prove the consecutive process of two thought moments and even two consecutive existences.

The Concept of Bhavanga

Bhavaṅga, being related to the *Abhidhamma*, discusses the Patthānappakarana²³ for the first time in the Pali canon. The Attasālini, Ven. Buddhagosha's commentary to the *Dhammasangani*, *Visuddhimagga* of Ven. Buddhaghosha, Abhidhammāvatāra of Ven. Buddhadatta and Abhidhammatthasangaha of Ven. Anuruddha are the texts where the Bhavanga appears. Encyclopaedia of Buddhism suggests that the term first appears in the Patthānapakarana of the Pali Abhidhamma-piṭaka.²⁴ Prof. Ediriwira Sarachchandra suggests that the term Bhavanga first appears in Milinda Pañha. The notion of Bhavanga appears in the text where King Milinda questions Nāgasena on the psychology of dreams and sleeps.²⁵ Accordingly, the condition of the mind is described as "gone into *Bhavanga*" (cittam bhavangagatam).²⁶

²³ Patthāna, ii, pp. 34, 159, 160, 169

²⁴ Encyclopedia of Buddhism, iii, p. 17

²⁵ Sarachchandra, p. 76

²⁶ Ibid., p. 76; Mil., p. 299; "Middhasamārulhassa citte bhavangagate titthamāne pi sarire cittam appavattam hoti"

However, Prof. Sarachchandra rejects the term in the Pali Canon saying `the occurrence of the word *bhavanga* in the Anguttara Nikaya²⁷ is evidently a wrong reading, for the commentary reads and explains the word as *bhavanga*.' ²⁸ He further proves that the word *bhavanga*, borrowed from the *Sarvāstivāda Abhidhamma*, meant originally a link in the Causal Chain of *pratītyasamutpāda*. The twelve factors, beginning with *avidyā*, *sanskāra*, and *vijnāna*, were called the twelve factors of becoming, in the sense of *bhavanga angāni*.²⁹ Another definition states in *Abhidhamma* Philosophy, "the passive state of mind- when it is having its own smooth course is called *bhavanga*".³⁰

The Comprehensive manual of *Abhidhamma* interprets the term *bhavanga* as 'life-continuum' and further it says; "The word *bhavanga* means factor (*anga*) of existence (*bhava*), that is, the indispensable condition of existence.' *Bhavanga* is the function of consciousness by which the continuity of the individual is preserved through the duration of any single existence, from conception to death. After the *paţisandhicitta* (rebirth linking consciousness) has arisen and perished, it is then followed by the *bhavangacitta* but which performs a different function, namely, the function of preserving the continuity of the individual existence. *Bhavangacittās* arise and perish in every moment of the life whenever there is no active cognitive process taking place. This type of consciousness is the most evident during deep dreamless sleep, it also occurs momentarily during deep dreamless sleep, and it also occurs momentarily during walking life countless times between occasions of active cognition.

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²⁷ Ibid., p. 75; AN., ii, p. 79

²⁸ Ihid

²⁹ Ibid.; *Dasabhumika*, p. 117

³⁰ Pandey, p.123

When an abject impinges on a sense door, the *bhavanga* is arrested and an active cognitive process ensues for the purpose of cognizing the object. Immediately after the cognitive process completed, again the *bhavanga* supervenes and continues until the next cognitive process arises. "Arising and perishing at every moment during this passive phase of consciousness, the *bhavanga* flows on like a stream, without remaining static for two consecutive moments." ³¹

The meaning of the term *Bhavanga* is `the constituent of becoming, function of being and functional state of sub-consciousness'. The scholars analyse the *bhavanga* with different interpretations. Accordingly, *bhavanga* is a state of mind where there nothing happens. According to Collins, *bhavanga* can be seen within the process of death and rebirth, in general perceptions and in deep sleep. The mind gets thoughts through fourfold ways. The mind

- 1. Any thought that comes through the sense organs such as $r\bar{u}pa$ (matter), sadda (sound), gandha (odour), rasa (taste) and potthabba (touch) representing the past, present or future.
- 2. Any thought whether it is a *citta* or *cetasika* belonging to the past, present or future.
- 3. Concept (paññatti)
- 4. Un-constituted *Dhamma* (asaṅkata dhātu)

Among the four ways given above, the first three are reasonable for the origination of *bhavanga*. Usually, mind operates in accordance with the six-fold perception that comes through the senses. When we perceive an object, the fourteen or seventeen though moments should be followed respectively. All these thought

³¹ Bodhi Bhikkhu, p. 123

³² Pali-English Dictionary, p. 499

³³ තිලකරත්න, p. 137

³⁴ Ibid., p. 138

³⁵ Aung, pp. 199-22; Narada Mahā Thero, pp. 181-194

moments follow within a very short period of time or a moment (*khana*). This process continues like a stream or the current of a river.³⁶ Further, a thought is interpreted as a thought that may be compared to a wave of the sea. The wave rises up from the surface of the sea as seen above for a while and then sinks down, giving rise to another, and that also to another. Just like that, a thought rises up on the surface of the *bhavanga*, is felt above, and then sinks down, giving rise to another, and that to another. Thus, a thought has three stages namely;

- 1. *uppāda* (rising up)
- 2. *thiti* (remaining up on the surface)
- 3. *bhanga* (sinking down)

The life of a thought, from rising up to sinking down, is called a *citta-kkhana* or a thought-moment.³⁷ An external object perceived by the mind follows 14 places where the consciousness is known with different names. According to the *Visuddhimagga*, the Fourteen Modes of Occurrence of Consciousness (the seventeen thought moments) are; ³⁸

- 1. rebirth-linking (paţisandhi)
- 2. life-continuum (bhavanga)
- 3. adverting (āvajjana)
- 4. seeing (dassana)
- 5. hearing (savana)
- 6. smelling (*ghāyana*)
- 7. tasting (sāyana)
- 8. touching (phusana)
- 9. receiving (sampaticcana)
- 10. investigating (santīrana)

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³⁶ Galmangoda, 2005, p. 136

³⁷ Pandey, iv, pp.123-124

³⁸ Nyanamoli Bhikkhu, pp. 513-514

11. determining (votthapana)

12. impulsion (*javana*)

13. registration (tadārammana)

14. death (cuti)

For the recognition of each of those consciousnesses, *Attasālinitīkā* relates a story.

A person, having fully covered his face, sleeps under a mango tree that is full of ripe mangoes. While he is sleeping, a mango fruit falls near by him. Hearing the sound of the fallen mango fruit, he awakens. He opens his face and looks where the fallen mango fruit is. Then, he gets up and walks towards the mango fruit. He takes it up and having smelled eats. And then he goes back to sleep.³⁹

According to the *Abhidhammatthasangaha*, the above mentioned fourteen modes of consciousness runs thus:

kicca-sangahe kiccāni nāma paṭisandhi- bhavaṅgāvajjanadassana-savana-ghāyana-sāyana-phusana-sampaṭiccana-santīraṇa-votthapana-javana-tadārammana-cutivasena cuddasavidhāni bhavanti. 40

The term *bhavanga* appears in several occasions in the mind. According to the suggestions given by the scholars, there are three places where the *bhavanga* arises:⁴¹

1. In the deep sleep where there are no dreams

2. Between two thought processes (*citta-vīthi*)

3. Between two existences

In the *Milinda Pañha*, Ven. Nāgasena explains to King *Milinda* that in both conditions that of deep sleep as well as that of deep trance the mind does not function although the body does.⁴²

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³⁹ Galmangoda, 2005, p. 136

⁴⁰ ADS., v, p. 140

⁴¹ තිලකරත්න, pp. 139-141

dvinnam mahārāja sante pi sarire cittam appavattam hoti: middhasamārulhassa bhavangagatassa sante pi sarire cittam appavattam hoti, nirodhasamāpannassa sante pi sarīre cittam appavattam hoti ⁴³

Ven. Mahā Koṭṭhita, in the Majjhima Nikaya, asks Ven. Sāriputta what he thought was the difference between a man in deep sleep and a man who was dead. A man on the condition of the trance known as $nirodhasam\bar{a}patti$ had neither empirical consciousness nor feelings ($saññ\bar{a}vedayita$), and would appear, to an ordinary observer, as though he were in a state of coma, with all his senses dulled, and in a condition very similar to that of death. Ven. Sāriputta replies by saying that in deep sleep trance there remained in the body life ($\bar{a}yu$), and breath ($usm\bar{a}$), both of which were absent in death.⁴⁴

Visuddhimagga gives detailed explanation of the fourteen thought moments. The being is born with paţisandhi citta just after the cuti citta. There are nineteen kinds of resultant consciousnesses that give the paţisandhi citta. When a being comes to be reborn among the deities and human beings, there arise eight kinds of sense-sphere profitable consciousness (1-8). And a being is reborn in the same spheres as eunuchs etc. with the resultant mind consciousness without root-cause

⁴² Sarachchandra, p. 76

The Resultant Mind-consciousness-element without root cause - 1

Fine Material Resultant - 5

Immaterial resultant – 4

The Unprofitable Resultant without root cause - 1

- 1. Somanassa sahagatam ñāṇasampayuttakam asamkārikam
- 2. Somanassa sahagatam ñāṇasampayuttakam sasamkārikam
- 3. Somanassa sahagatam ñāṇavippayuttakam asamkārikam
- 4. Somanassa sahagatam ñāṇavippayuttakam sasamkārikam
- 5. Upekkha sahagatam ñāṇasampayuttakam asamkārikam
- 6. Upekkha sahagatam ñāṇasampayuttakam sasamkārikam
- 7. Upekkha sahagatam ñāṇavippayuttakam asamkārikam
- 8. Upekkha sahagatam ñāṇavippayuttakam sasamkārikam

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Sarachchandra, p. 77; MN., i, p. 296

⁴⁵ Note: Sense Sphere Resultant with root cause – 8

⁴⁶ Nyanamoli, Bhikkhu (tr.), The Path of Purification, p.514

associated with equanimity (41).⁴⁷ Beings are reborn in the fine material sphere because of one of the five consciousnesses (57-60).⁴⁸ And also the beings are born in the states of loss with the influence of unprofitable consciousness (56).⁴⁹ On each of those states, which ever following object should appear at the time of death for the influence of *paţisandhi citta*.

- 1. kamma
- 2. sign of kamma
- 3. sign of destiny

The nineteen kinds of resultant consciousnesses are subjective of the *paţisandhi citta*. And objectives of those nineteen kinds of consciousnesses are their respective profitable consciousnesses.

Taking one of the above three as the object, there arises the *paţisandhi citta*. The continuum of the *paṭisandhi citta* itself is the *bhavaṅga*. If there is no any disturbance to the *bhavaṅga* it goes like the current of a river. However, if any disturbance gets through one of the six senses, the *bhavaṅga* ceases and there arises the *āvajjana*.

1. Vitakka, vicāra, piti, suka, ekaggatā sahitam paṭhamajjhānam

⁴⁷ Somanassa sahagatam santīrana

^{2.} Vicāra, piti, suka, ekaggata sahitam dutiyajjhānam

^{3.} Piti, suka, ekaggata sahitam tatiyajjhānam

^{4.} Suka, ekaggata sahitam catuttatjjhānam

^{5.} Upekkhā ekaggata sahitam pañcamajjhānam

⁴⁹ Upekkhā sahagataṃ santīranaṃ ahetukam akusala vipaka cittam