Self-Awareness in Tibetan Buddhism

The Philosophical Relevance of *Rang rig* and Its Contribution to the Contemporary Debates on the Nature of Consciousness

Chiara Mascarello

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Chiara Mascarello

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Chiara Mascarello

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Chiara Mascarello

Abstract

This book, based on the Author's doctoral dissertation, examines the concept of self-awareness (SKT *svasaṃvedana*; TIB *rang rig*) in the Indo-Tibetan Buddhist tradition, where it is understood as the mind's inherent ability to know itself. It analyzes traditional interpretations of this concept and concludes by engaging with contemporary debates on the philosophy of mind, aiming to demonstrate how Buddhist thought can contribute to modern discussions on the nature of consciousness. The volume begins by tracing the origins of *svasaṃvedana* within the Indian Buddhist context, exploring its development from early formulations to the sophisticated epistemological frameworks of Dignāga and his successors. This historical overview lays the groundwork for the second part of the book, which investigates Tibetan perspectives on *rang rig* and analyzes their epistemological, ontological, and soteriological dimensions. Key themes include the interplay between the intentionality and luminosity of consciousness, as well as its connection with the doctrine of the two truths. The final section bridges these Buddhist perspectives with contemporary philosophical discussions, exploring how the former can deepen and enrich modern debates on issues such as the conditions for subjective experience, the so-called 'hard problem of consciousness', and the relationship between the mind and its objects. By focusing on the reflexivity of the mind, the book examines a crucial yet underexplored theme in Buddhist philosophical discourse. At the same time, it underscores the relevance of these perspectives for contemporary thought, fostering intercultural dialogue on fundamental questions within the broader field of philosophical inquiry.

Keywords Self-awareness. Reflexivity of mind. Nature of mind. Subjective experience. Phenomenal consciousness. Consciousness. Buddhist philosophy of mind.

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1 Introductory Remarks

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1.1 The Need for a Philosophical Approach to *Svasaṃvedana* (TIB *Rang rig*): A Cross-Cultural Perspective

This work aims to furnish a philosophical overview of the main aspects and relevance of the concept of self-awareness (SKT *svasaṃvedana*; TIB *rang rig*) in the Buddhist tradition, with a central focus on the Tibetan assimilation of this notion as part of its Indian heritage. The present text originates from the Author's doctoral dissertation, which emerged from a research project concluded in 2018 and was motivated by the attempt to explore the deeper implications of this fundamental trait of the mind's nature – an inquiry that continues to open up new avenues of thought and interpretation. As a philosophical reflection on self-awareness, this survey will relate the traditional accounts to the universal problems that underlie this topic and, in doing so, will open up possible resonances and fruitful interactions with the ongoing philosophical debate on self-awareness.

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The typical understanding of *svasaṃvedana* or *rang rig* sees it as the mind's knowing of itself, its reflexivity, the awareness that awareness has of itself. Thus, this work attempts to shed light on a term around which various issues concerning consciousness converge significantly – its nature, features, functioning and development. Although it is specific and technical, the concept of self-awareness, observed through different interpretations, reveals its importance and stands out as a key element in discussions of consciousness. Acting like a prism that refracts light, it clarifies the multiple components and levels of this vast subject. As such, even though self-awareness often appears to be a minor concept, it has the ability to reveal the ontological, epistemological and, in some cases, soteriological facets of the debates on consciousness that converge on it.

Specific conceptions of *svasaṃvedana* or *rang rig* have been studied by a number of scholars over the last four decades. Only a handful, though, have attempted to examine the overall concept. Several scholars have noted that this issue still deserves much more investigation in its Buddhist formulations (Kellner 2010, 204; Kapstein 1993, 171 fn. 39), and its significance has often been underscored in discussions of contemporary epistemology and the philosophy of mind. Consequently, this study aims to present an overview of *svasaṃvedana* or *rang rig* that captures its various interpretations – at least the main ones – and addresses the universal issue of self-awareness from multiple angles. This endeavor will then conclude with an attempt to create a dialogue between some Buddhist stances and those of the contemporary philosophy of mind, by enacting a cross-cultural praxis of thought.

The interest in this concept arises from its multifaceted importance within the Indo-Tibetan tradition. In fact, the way this concept is understood seems to be deeply affected by the different philosophical tenets that tap into its most fundamental coordinates. The epistemological perspectives of the various schools are also affected, with self-awareness playing a decisive role in the foundation of subjective experience. Thus, in a close survey of the controversy about *svasaṃvedana* or *rang rig*, it is interesting to examine the hermeneutical strategies that each Indian or Tibetan author applies to traditional sources. In this connection, it is important to recall how Buddhist thought exhibits a close link between philosophical inquiry and commentarial methodology. The various analytical philosophical approaches remain firmly grounded in scriptural exegesis and doctrinal elaboration; yet they continually engage with the concerns of contemporary scholarship. In addition to the ontological, epistemological, and hermeneutical implications of the *svasaṃvedana* or *rang rig* issue, it is crucial to remember that it cannot be separated from the broader soteriological objectives of the Buddhist tradition. In some interpretations, such as those within

the bKa'-brgyud school, it becomes evident just how significant this concept can be for attaining liberation (Dreyfus 1997, 438-42), insofar as *rang rig* guarantees "the continuity and identity of the subject of awareness", thus enabling the breakthrough towards emptiness (Van Der Kuijp 1987, 63).

From the very beginning of this volume, the main methodological guidelines that shape its approach will be outlined. In this context, Coseru's observations on his distinctive approach to philosophical practice serve as a key reference:

> I am committed to the view that both the specific style of these broadly Sanskritic argumentative strategies and the universality of the metaphysical and epistemological theses under dispute are better showcased (and understood) if made continuous with contemporary philosophical concerns. The principal methodological reason for emphasizing continuity over comparison reflects a specific intuition about the scope of philosophical inquiry: one which says that its problems, though often couched in historically and culturally contingent terms, are nonetheless grounded in all aspects of conscious experience for a person at any given time. (Coseru 2012, 2-3)

Using a philosophical approach, some relevant passages of the Indo-Tibetan Buddhist tradition will be read and contextualized in the endeavor to articulate them as parts of a wider reflection upon the universal philosophical problems related to the concept of self-awareness. Although emerging from diverse historical and cultural contexts, these sources can enrich and expand the philosophical understanding of this topic. In doing so, they can be integrated into a global history of philosophy, of which contemporary philosophy of mind is simply the most recent development. A cross-traditional or cross-cultural perspective enables the use of a methodology that puts together, in a fruitful dialogue, accounts and models rooted in quite different commitments and assumptions, originating from distinct needs and experiences.[1] The richness of interactions among several stances is guaranteed by retaining the diversity of their contexts, viewing them as different ways of sharpening questions about self-awareness.

So far there have been a few proponents of what is here called 'the cross-cultural philosophy model',[2] that is, a way of incorporating

1 For some encouraging statements about this approach cf., among others, Coseru 2012; MacKenzie 2017.

2 For references to the earliest proponents of this method, see Mills 2009, 275 fn. 15. Note that a similar approach is the one adopted and endorsed by Ganeri 2012.

stances belonging to different traditions and cultures into "one's philosophical practice" (Mills 2009, 124). As attested in several studies (Garfield 2015, 3; Mills 2009; Siderits 2003, xi-xiv), this marks a growing tendency within philosophical practice. It emerged alongside the decline of comparative philosophy, an approach initiated by the late nineteenth-century Indian philosopher, Seal (1899). Among those who welcome and reflect upon new and up-to-date methods for studying various cultures and traditions, scholars such as Mills and Garfield endorse the cross-cultural philosophical perspective; Siderits, on the other hand, prefers the 'fusion philosophy', a stance oriented towards a problem-solving practice that uses elements from one tradition to tackle issues in another.[3] Compared with the fusion approach, cross-cultural philosophy turns out to be more encompassing and methodologically different: it allows engagement in lively philosophical 'conversations' (and not merely 'comparisons' or 'combinations') between traditions. It includes not only a "problem-centered" method but also an "historical/interpretative" attention to sources considered in their own contexts (Mills 2009, 125). At this point, it is useful to recall Seyfort Ruegg's description of the modern philosophers who are engaged in a "global 'world philosophy'" (2016, 232): those who want to consider whether an old tradition has valuable thoughts to share with today's world proceed from the present back to the past, attempting to integrate the depth of earlier thought into a new philosophical context. Thus, the work of the contemporary hermeneut might be seen as crossing over with that of the translator-interpreter. The latter moves in the opposite direction, proceeding "forwards starting from the past" (the source-text) "and ending in the present" (its translation) (233).

In such a cross-cultural conversation, any philosophical stance can become an opportunity for self-transforming philosophical practice. This process involves a dynamic interplay among at least three interdependent factors: the questioning thinker and the two primary elements of each cross-cultural inquiry. Through mutual interactions, all three are shaped by one another (Pasqualotto 2005; Ghilardi 2012). Such a methodological approach should prevent any research from ending up as a mere list of resonances and differences between cultures, and from appropriating the ideas of historical traditions into a supposedly functional synthesis in service of a universal, global, and abstract philosophy. The very act of questioning affects and changes each element involved in the quest – especially the researcher – and this is exactly what should happen whenever a philosophical engagement takes place, given the relational nature

3 For Garfield's reasons for not adopting Siderits's fusion philosophy, see Garfield 2015, 3.

of this activity, whether it involves only one or more cultures. In exploring a subject, the thinker engages in a mutually transformative process with the topic and with the insights of those who have already approached it. Thus, it can be said that the very movement and breath that keep the philosophical task alive should unfold not only 'inside' each culture – in what could be called intra-cultural philosophy – but also, for the same reasons and with the same attention to detail, 'across' different cultures – as a cross-cultural philosophy. The outcome of such a dynamic, cross-cultural practice can never be a synthesis of different accounts or the selection of one as the favored perspective. All that can be set out is an ever-changing philosophical landscape: an open and infinite horizon where numerous mutual transformations can be enacted.

Given the wealth of primary sources dealing with the notion of *svasaṃvedana* or *rang rig*, this study aspires to be merely a preliminary survey. It is based on doctoral research completed in 2018 and aims to highlight the multifaceted philosophical significance of the concept of self-awareness. Further research is needed to explore not only the multidimensional Tibetan approach to the topic – far from being fully covered in this study – but also the vast Indian literature, particularly in light of the complex relationship between the initial formulations of the Buddhist idea of self-awareness and its non-Buddhist counterpart. Moreover, since interest in the complex issue of self-awareness is rapidly growing within contemporary philosophy of the mind, it is important to monitor and attempt to bridge the gap between the Indo-Tibetan tradition and the lively discussions of the ongoing debate on consciousness, assuming that the image of a gap is an accurate representation of the intellectual landscape under consideration. This research, therefore, aims to serve as an encouragement towards further studies.

1.2 Self-Awareness in Modern Thought and the Buddhist Concept of *Svasaṃvedana* (TIB *Rang rig*)

In contemporary discourse, the notion of self-awareness is notoriously ambiguous owing to the various definitions that neuroscience, philosophy and psychology have provided thus far. To offer an introductory overview of this broader topic, it is necessary to conduct a brief examination of some of its key aspects.[4]

Stemming from the field of psychology, self-awareness is primarily associated with the notion of a self. In social psychology,

4 For a list of the main current definitions of self-awareness, with references to some of their proponents, see Zahavi 2005, 13-17.

self-awareness arises from adopting the perspective of the other toward oneself (Mead 1962). In developmental psychology the mirror-recognition task has occasionally been indicated as the decisive sign for self-awareness: it manifests itself in children when they are able to recognize themselves in the mirror.[5]

From the philosophical point of view, most perspectives tend to link the 'self' of 'self-awareness' or 'self-consciousness' (widely considered a synonym of 'self-awareness') with the subject of experiences. It is mainly seen as the ability to think 'I'-thoughts, to conceive of oneself as oneself.[6] Similarly, it is also understood as thinking of self-ascribed experiences as belonging to one and the same self, the bearer of various experiences (Cassam 1997, 117-19). Moreover, alongside self-awareness in thought, there is also a philosophical effort to identify self-awareness in experience. This approach focuses on the non-conceptual realm of the experiential dimension, distinguishing it from the activity of thinking. Along these lines, self-awareness revolves around the non-conceptual element or factor corresponding to first-person concepts. As explained, for example, by the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*,

> The claim that there is a form of self-consciousness in experience, one which arguably grounds the capacity to entertain first-personal thought, can be understood in a number of ways. According to one view there is a perceptual, or quasi-perceptual, consciousness of the self as an object of experience. On another, there is a 'pre-reflective' form of self-consciousness that does not involve the awareness of the self as an object. A third claims that various forms of experience involve a distinctive 'sense of ownership' in which each of us is aware of our own states as *our own*.[7]

The three main philosophical accounts of self-awareness in experience typically consist of the following: (i) identifying it in subject-object forms of self-perception, (ii) considering self-awareness as the pre-reflective continuous awareness of oneself as the subject of one's stream of experience, and (iii) defining this issue as the awareness not only of one's mental states, but also of them as one's own. In any

5 Cf. Lewis 2003, 281-2; Gallup 1970; Gallup, Anderson, Platek 2011; Gallup, Platek, Spaulding 2014.

6 See, among others, Baker 2000, 67-8. Note also Block's definition of self-awareness (in his translation, 'self-consciousness'): "By this term, I mean the possession of the concept of the self and the ability to use this concept in thinking about oneself" (Block 1997, 389).

7 See *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, s.v. "Self-Consciousness" (`https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/self-consciousness/`); italics in the original.

of the three formulations, self-awareness revolves around the subject as the owner of experiences.

One issue to consider in this preliminary survey is the relationship between self-consciousness (or self-awareness) and consciousness, specifically whether the former is a necessary condition of the latter. Generally speaking, the current philosophical debate on this matter is structured around three main theoretical frameworks – Higher-Order Thought theories, Higher-Order Perception theories, and Self-representational views – to explain the relationship between consciousness and self-consciousness, often suggesting that the latter is, in fact, a necessary condition of the former. Interestingly, according to all these theories, simply being aware that a certain mental state is occurring does not suffice to make that state 'conscious'; self-consciousness must also be present. One must be aware of being in the (first-order) state in question and, in so doing, recognize oneself as the subject experiencing that state. Accordingly, these three perspectives are often interpreted to underscore the 'ownership' of mental states. In other words, the word 'self' in the expression 'self-awareness' refers – sometimes implicitly, sometimes explicitly – to the subject, the person who bears those mental states. This topic will be explored further in "Part Three: Contemporary Developments" of this volume, where these three accounts will be examined in more detail. As will be illustrated, it is possible to read them from a standpoint that does not necessarily focus on the person or the subject. Drawing from the Buddhist perspective, one might argue that each 'mental event' can be considered capable of knowing 'itself'; thus, self-awareness would refer to the subjectivity of experience as such, rather than to its subject. For now, however, it is worth noting that the modern approach to the issue of self-consciousness (or self-awareness) typically centers on the self, the subject who undergoes experiences.

Another constellation of meanings related to self-awareness comes under the label of 'self-knowledge', that is, the knowledge of one's own sensations, thoughts, beliefs, and other mental states.[8] In this context, self-knowledge possesses some distinctive epistemic features, and its acquisition varies depending on different accounts – for example, through acquaintance with one's mental state, an inner sense, transparency, or thanks to one's rationality. The emphasis is on the cognitive relationship between the subjects and their mental states, as well as the mechanisms through which they can be accessed.

Nevertheless, among the various ways in which self-awareness has been understood and investigated in contemporary philosophy,

8 See *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, s.v. "Self-Knowledge" (`https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/self-knowledge/`).

the view that treats it as a property of mental events, specifically the mind's capacity to know itself, is particularly relevant here. This is because it aligns with the conception of self-awareness found throughout much of the Indo-Tibetan Buddhist tradition and forms the central topic of this volume. Accordingly, this research will bring into dialogue several Indian and Tibetan interpretations of self-awareness with contemporary philosophical perspectives that examine how a mental state or event becomes aware of itself.

The specific idea of *svasaṃvedana* (or *svasaṃvitti*, most commonly translated into English as 'self-awareness') is a concept that formally entered Buddhist discourse as part of Dignāga's (ca. 480-540) epistemological project. Subsequent to this formulation, it has been asserted, negated or held in various ways by different Indian authors and was later assimilated as *rang rig* (*pa*) by Tibetan scholars.[9] In short, it can be described as a mental event's awareness of itself.

Note that, within the Indo-Tibetan Buddhist tradition, any acceptance of self-awareness is far from referring to the awareness of a self or a person – and it ultimately has to be so, in order to match the philosophical tenet of selflessness.[10] Yet, upon closer examination, this point is not as straightforward and unproblematic as it may initially appear. There are strong reasons to argue that the topics of self-awareness, subjectivity and self are not utterly unrelated, even within the Buddhist tradition (MacKenzie 2011, 271 ff.; Matilal 1986, 111-12), but for now it is practical to adopt this general perspective. In short, when comparing the most commonly adopted perspective on self-awareness in modern philosophy with Buddhist accounts, which are based on the Abhidharma legacy on the one hand and the Madhyamaka contribution on the other, a remarkable difference in paradigm emerges. The first follows a subject-centered view, where self-awareness is primarily attributed to the subject of experience,

9 For the equivalence in translation between the Sanskrit word *svasaṃvedana* (or *svasaṃvitti*) and the Tibetan word *rang rig pa* (or *rang rig*), cf. Fukuda, Ishihama 1989, no. 4500, s.v. "svasaṃvedanam"; Sakaki [1916] 1987, no. 4514, s.v. "svasaṃvedanam"; Negi et al. 1993-2005, s.v. "rang rig pa"; Chandra [1959-61] 1976, s.vv. "rang rig pa" and "rang rig". For a definition of the Tibetan word *rang rig* (or *rang rig pa*), see Krang-dbyi-sun et al. 1993, s.v. "rang rig": "*'dzin rnam gyi shes pa ste | blo rang gis rang myong ba'am gsal bar mthong ba | dper na bum 'dzin mig shes kyi steng gi rang gis rang myong ba'i yul yul can gnyis su med pa'am rang yul gyi rnam pa med pa'i shes pa'o |*" (It is the consciousness that has the aspect of an apprehender: the self-experiencing of the mind by itself, or its clear seeing of itself by itself. For example, based on an eye-consciousness perceiving a vase, it is the absence of dualism between object and object-possessor (or subject) that self-experiences itself, or the consciousness that has no aspect of an object). No specific lemma for *rang rig* (*pa*) is found in Jäschke [1881] 1987, or in bTsan-lha Ngag-dbang-tshul-khrims 1997. As for the Sanskrit words *svasaṃvitti* or *svasaṃvedana*, neither Monier-Williams [1899] 1986 nor Edgerton [1953] 1985 records any lemma.

10 Cf. Williams 1998, 3; Yao 2005, 157. For further considerations on this topic, cf. MacKenzie 2008; 2015a.

while the second adopts a consciousness-centered view, where consciousness itself is considered self-aware. Moreover, the Buddhist perspective suggests understanding cognition as a succession of discrete cognitive events, unfolding one after the other, rather than conceiving of consciousness as a monolithic, substantial entity. Consequently, this approach to self-awareness implies that each cognitive state or event is self-aware, suggesting a perspective that examines cognitive processes in their detailed complexity.

1.3 On Translating the Terms *Svasaṃvedana* and *Rang rig*

Like the semantically equivalent *svasaṃvedana*, the word *svasaṃvitti* is composed of "the reflexive pronominal prefix '*sva-*'" followed by "a nominal form of the verbal root *sam-√vid* 'to be aware'" (Arnold 2008, 7 fn. 11). While Arnold prefers to leave it untranslated, allowing the contexts and passages where it occurs to reveal its meaning, other scholars have proposed various translations of the technical term *svasaṃvedana* or *rang rig*. 'Self-awareness' is the most commonly used term in English, followed by other similar renderings such as 'self-cognition',[11] 'self-knower' (Hopkins 2011), 'self-knowing' (Klein 1986; Hopkins 2011), 'self-consciousness' (Yao 2005), 'self-cognizing consciousness' (Hopkins 2011) as well as 'autocognition' (Cabezón 1992). A few attempts have been made to capture the phenomenologically-oriented nuance of this term, rendering it with expressions like 'self-intimation' (Seager 2007; Ryle 1949; Ganeri 1999) and 'self-presentation' (Kapstein 1993). Another quite technical rendering is 'self-referential awareness' (Van Schaik 2008; Davidson 2004), while 'apperception' (Arnold 2005a; 2005b; 2008) is reminiscent of Kant's transcendental unity of apperception. It is also worth mentioning the specific but potentially misleading translation of the term as 'introspection' (Germano 1992; Stcherbatsky [1932] 1962; Wayman 1991), which can be easily mistaken for the concept of *samprajanya* (SKT) or *shes bzhin* (TIB). In this context, it is crucial to consider what Lati Rinbochay (1980, 62) and Hopkins (1983, 377) emphasize with regard to the fundamental difference between *rang rig* and introspection. While the latter actually involves observing oneself and serves as a key element for effective meditation, it is characterized by a dualistic cognition that is not simultaneous with its object – a feature that, as will be explored throughout this volume, cannot be attributed to *rang rig*.

When it comes to the challenges of translating the term *rang rig*, some cases show an explicit choice to alternate between different

11 Suganuma 1963; Dreyfus 1997; Yao 2005; Almogi 2009; Komarovski 2011.

renderings, depending on the philosophical contexts in which the concept is used. One example is Williams's (1998, 3) well-known choice to utilize two main renderings of *rang rig*: on the one hand, the "reasonably literal 'self-awareness'", and, on the other, "reflexive awareness" or "the reflexive nature of awareness".[12] There are also a few rather unusual translations, such as 'self-excitatoriness' (Guenther 1984, 24, 222 fn. 37), tailored for the specific context of Great Perfection (rDzogs-chen). In order to appreciate the subtlety of these translation choices and to grasp how different the nuances and meanings of this concept can be, consider the methodological approach that Germano suggests at the beginning of his "Mini-Encyclopedia of Great Perfection Terminology":

> [I]n each context those terms' gestalt of meaning varies, and thus inordinate devotion to one's lexicon inevitably entails obscuration of the overall passage. Thus we need not only an extremely sensitive reading of the original […], as well as an extremely sensitive translation […]. The end result is the necessity for a difficult balancing act between sensitivity to contextual variance of terms' significance and an awareness of the remarkable continuity and interlinkage between individual syllables and terms throughout. (Germano 1992, 812-13)

Interestingly, in these general notes Germano mentions the word *rang rig* as the first of few concrete examples of difficulties in the translator's task:

> Apart from the numerous English terms we may be inclined to render it [*Rang*] with ("natural", "intrinsic", "auto-", "inherent", "self-", etc.), the grammatical relation of *Rang* to the following term in a compound is often unclear (*Rang Rig* can connote "aware *as* self", "aware *of* self", "aware *by* self", "aware *via* self", etc.), and/or the precise reference of *Rang* as "self" can be ambiguous (*Rang Rig* as "awareness inherent to the Universe itself" or "our own intrinsic awareness"). (Germano 1992, 814; italics in the original)

Also, in Germano's "Mini-Encyclopedia of Great Perfection Terminology", the entry "Awareness, aware-ing (*rig pa*; *vidyā*)" includes a specific paragraph on *rang rig*, where a concrete application of the delicate balancing act that translation entails can be observed.

12 These two phrases will be discussed later in this book, but for a concise overview, see Williams 1998, 6-7 fn. 8.

> Along these lines we must interpret the term *Rang Rig*, literally "self-awareness", and often used in the sense of "introspection" (i.e., aware of ourselves as the thinker). In the context of Great Perfection literature, it signifies the "inherent (*Rang*) intelligence" of the Universe itself, i.e., the aware-ing that is intrinsic to cosmos from its primordial beginnings, as well as our own "awareness-as-self": in our primordial encounter with the luminosity that presences to us as if external, we must recognize it as self-presencing, and thus be "aware of the presence *as* self" (*Rang Rig*), whereby we tune into the pure intensity of awareness within us (*Rang Rig*), and realize the hidden unity of all that is. (Germano 1992, 829-30; italics in the original)

Despite Germano's observations on the unclear grammatical relationship between *rang* ('self') and *rig* ('awareness') in the Tibetan compound *rang rig* – a relationship that the original Sanskrit term *sva-saṃvedana* does not clarify – Negi et al. (1993-2005, s.v. "rang rig") attempt to make this grammatical connection explicit. They argue that *rang rig* is equal to *rang gis rig pa* 'to be aware by self', with the agentive particle. Nevertheless, in Tibetan literature several occurrences of the technical term *rang rig* can be found expressed as *rang gi rig pa* 'one's awareness', linking the two components of the compound with the genitive particle. It appears that most contemporary scholars expand the compound *rang rig* by rendering it as *rang gi rig pa*.[13]

That said, keeping in mind the challenges involved in rendering this concept into English, the term 'self-awareness' will be used consistently throughout the following pages. Other expressions such as 'self-cognition', 'self-knowledge', or 'self-consciousness' will only appear in specific contexts where a deviation from this choice is explicitly noted.

1.4 Previous Studies on *Svasaṃvedana* and *Rang rig*

This section provides a brief overview of the main studies on *svasaṃvedana* or *rang rig* conducted by contemporary scholars. Although a comprehensive examination of the Buddhist concept of *svasaṃvedana* or *rang rig* has not been made thus far,[14] at least two main studies aim to broaden the scope of the investigation

13 See, for instance, Williams 1998, 1; Davidson 2004, 237; Van Schaik 2008, 15; Higgins 2013, 90.

14 For similar considerations on the attention contemporary scholarship devotes to this topic, cf. Yiannopoulos 2012, 145-6.

beyond a single author or source. The first is *The Reflexive Nature of Awareness: A Tibetan Madhyamaka Defense* (Williams 1998), a philosophical inquiry primarily focused on a section of Tibetan Madhyamaka literature on the issue. The second is *The Buddhist Theory of Self-Cognition* (Yao 2005), which attempts to identify possible precursors of Dignāga's notion of *svasaṃvedana* in earlier Indian Buddhist thought.[15]

Williams's reflections on the topic of *rang rig* first began with a short article entitled "On *Rang rig*" (1983) and later developed into his monograph (1998). So far, this seminal work has had the unquestioned merit of drawing the attention of several scholars to the issue, laying the groundwork for further studies. In fact, most subsequent works engage, in one way or another, with Williams's well-known distinction between "self-awareness (i)", understood as a result of the subjective aspect of consciousness taking the objective aspect as its object, and "self-awareness (ii)", or "reflexive awareness", which refers to the inherent self-knowing nature of awareness – the proper reflexivity of the mind. Williams's philosophical approach offers a framework for engaging with the textual materials related to this topic. Indeed, Kapstein, among others, commends Williams's "determination to unpack philosophical arguments thoroughly and with great care" and his ability to guide the reader "through the maze of conceptual and dialectical difficulties the material presents" (Kapstein 2000, 106). Williams's monograph is particularly significant for highlighting the originality of Tsong-kha-pa Blo-bzang-grags-pa (1357-1419) and his followers' interpretation of Śāntideva's (685-763) refutation of *svasaṃvedana*. While the broader Indo-Tibetan tradition unanimously considers Śāntideva's critique applicable only at the level of ultimate reality (SKT *paramārthasatya*; TIB *don dam bden pa*), the dGe-lugs school, following Tsong-kha-pa, extends its validity to conventional reality (SKT *saṃvṛtisatya*; TIB *kun rdzob bden pa*) as well. The volume also provides a clear and detailed analysis of the key developments in the debate on self-awareness, tracing them over the centuries. It examines the perspectives of major figures, such as Śāntarakṣita (725-788), Prajñākaramati (950-1030), and Mi-pham rNam-rgyal-rgya-mtsho (1846-1912), and explores the interpretative tensions between the dGe-lugs and rNying-ma traditions, particularly

15 Besides Williams's book, Yao (2005, 2) also takes into consideration a second work on this topic, *Yuishiki no kenkyū: Sanshō to shibun*, by Shōshin Fukihara (1988). Yao reports that a substantial part of this book is devoted to the issue of self-awareness as conceived by Dharmapāla (530-561), therefore considering self-awareness and the cognition of self-awareness. Unfortunately, the language of this book restricts access to its material. Yao reviews it as follows: "Fukihara's book is sophisticated and detailed. However, his discussion is dominated by the later commentaries and relies too heavily on East Asian sources; and does not attempt to make use of the Sanskrit and Tibetan materials, which makes his book a bit outdated" (Yao 2005, 2).

in the polemical exchanges between Mi-pham and his dGe-lugs critics. Despite some critical remarks (Kapstein 2000; Tatz 2001; Wangchuk [2004] 2005, 175-6 fn. 14), the book remains a landmark study on self-awareness in the Indo-Tibetan Buddhist tradition.

With regard to Yao's monograph, the book[16] devotes a chapter to each major stage in the development of the idea of self-awareness across four Buddhist schools: Mahāsāṃghika, Sarvāstivāda, Sautrāntika, and Yogācāra.[17] Drawing on sources in Chinese, Pāli, Sanskrit, and Tibetan, Yao argues that the idea of *svasaṃvedana* initially emerged within the Mahāsāṃghika school in the context of omniscience, a soteriological concern, before evolving into an epistemological issue in Yogācāra thought. Additionally, Yao addresses the longstanding debate over whether Dignāga includes self-awareness within mental perception or treats it as a distinct category; ultimately, he argues in favor of the latter position. The book concludes with an exploration of Dignāga's *svasaṃvedana* through the lens of contemporary philosophical terminology and categories. In doing so, it bridges the study of Buddhist sources with modern debates on the topic, albeit adopting a strictly comparative approach that highlights similarities and differences between the two.[18] By providing valuable resources for the study of Buddhist philosophy of the mind, this volume makes a significant contribution to the field.

Over the years, alongside these two monographs, key landmarks in the secondary literature on this topic, a number of more focused studies have further explored and refined specific conceptions of *svasaṃvedana* or *rang rig*.[19] One key point of intense scholarly debate concerns whether Dignāga includes *svasaṃvedana* within mental perception or treats it as a distinct category. The former view has been advocated mainly by Hattori (1968), Nagatomi (1980), and Franco (1986; 1993; 2005); the latter by Wayman (1977-78; 1991) and Yao (2004; 2005) (see § 3.1.1). The special issue of the *Journal of Indian Philosophy* (Kellner et al. 2010) is also worth mentioning for it considers various Indian perspectives on *svasaṃvedana*. Moreover, several books, articles, and papers have touched upon this topic in passing while addressing broader Indo-Tibetan Buddhist issues,

16 Originally submitted as his PhD dissertation (Yao 2003), it was published after two years of revisions (Yao 2005).

17 Part of the last chapter first appeared in the *Journal of Indian Philosophy* 32 under the title "Dignāga and Four Types of Perception" (Yao 2004).

18 As Yao (2005, 5) states from the beginning, the book is also to be conceived as a contribution to the study of the human mind, since the Buddhist tradition can play a significant role whenever it is put in dialogue with the contemporary analysis of consciousness.

19 See, for instance, Levman 2024, where the roots of *svasaṃvedana* are explored within the Mahāsāṃghika school, which has broken away from the Theravādins.

such as the theory of perception (SKT *pratyakṣa*; TIB *mngon sum*), the relationship between perception and its objects, the theory of memory or awareness (SKT *smṛti*; TIB *dran pa*) in Buddhist practice, the concept of luminosity in relation to the mind (SKT *prakāśatā* and *prabhāsvarātā*; TIB *gsal ba* and *'od gsal ba*), and the notion of *rig pa* in the Great Perfection (rDzogs-chen) tradition. Another relevant category of secondary literature includes early attempts to establish a dialogue between Indo-Tibetan perspectives on self-awareness and contemporary debates on the subject. The significance of these works will be explored in the third and final part of this volume.

1.5 Technical Note

When a passage from a source is discussed primarily in its original language, the quotation is first provided in that language, followed by its translation. In other cases, the original language is included in a footnote or, where possible, in the main text within parentheses.

For Sanskrit sources, existing translations of the quoted passages are used. For Tibetan sources, unless otherwise stated, all translations are by the Author. Whenever relevant for a clearer understanding of the sources, different translations of the same passage are compared. For the Pāli passages quoted, existing translations are used, with textual references provided in the footnotes. The same applies to Chinese sources.

Titles preceded by an asterisk (*) indicate that they have been reconstructed based on secondary sources or philological deductions.

Given their status as classical texts, Indian sources are cited by the name of the author and the title of the text rather than by the year of publication. This will ensure more immediate recognition.

Part One: India

2 The Buddhist Historical and Doctrinal Background of *Svasaṃvedana* and Its Pre-Dignāga Developments

Summary 2.1 Introduction. – 2.2 Mahāsāṃghika. – 2.3 Sarvāstivāda. – 2.4 Sautrāntika. – 2.5 Yogācāra. – 2.6 Nāgārjuna's Specific Contribution. – 2.7 The Problematic Link Between Self-Awareness and Self-Realization

2.1 Introduction

Part One of this volume is based primarily on Yao's monograph (2005), retracing his line of reasoning as it unfolds through the analysis of Chinese, Pāli, Sanskrit, and Tibetan sources. The aim here is to provide a brief survey of key early issues concerning the emergence of the idea of self-awareness.[1] As will be demonstrated, some of these topics have shaped the historical development of this concept, while others have endured and continue to spark debate in contemporary

1 Before starting this survey, a general doxographical structure that will underlie and guide the present investigation should also be borne in mind. According to the doxography that was first formulated by later Indian philosophers and then adopted by Tibetan scholars with a few changes in its further subdivisions, (i) Vaibhāṣika, (ii) Sautrāntika, (iii) Yogācāra, and (iv) Madhyamaka make up the four major Buddhist philosophical tenets or schools (SKT *siddhāntāḥ*; TIB *grub mtha'*). In order to follow the structure of Yao's monograph, this classificatory schema should be kept in view throughout. Furthermore, it should be noted that the chronological references to individual thinkers will follow the dating proposed by Yao.

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philosophy of mind. To structure the discussion, this chapter will adopt a framework outlined by Yao, supplemented by additional insights drawn from other authors and further critical reflections.

Yao traces the development of the idea of self-awareness through two main phases – the pre-Dignāga and post-Dignāga periods – each comprising two cycles of 'refutation', 'synthesis', and 'systematization'.

The first phase stems from the emergence of the notion of self-awareness, while the second begins after its Yogācāra systematization, primarily owing to Dignāga's contributions. Understandably, whereas the first refutation targets the Mahāsāṃghika doctrine, the second has the Yogācāra position in its sights. The Mahāsāṃghikas are regarded as the originators of the concept of self-awareness.

However, their view faced criticism from the Sarvāstivāda school, who refuted the notion. The Sautrāntika school, in turn, synthesized elements of the Mahāsāṃghika and Sarvāstivāda positions, while the Yogācāra school later systematized the concept, turning it into a more structured and comprehensive framework.

Turning to the second phase, that is, the philosophical debate sparked by Dignāga's epistemological formulation of self-awareness, based on the Yogācāra systematization, the refutation was led by the Madhyamaka school. Bhāvaviveka (490-570), Candrakīrti, and Śāntideva are the three figures Yao mentions in connection with the Madhyamaka refutation of the Yogācāra systematization of *svasaṃvedana*. While these three thinkers share this common agenda within the broader Madhyamaka tradition, the Yogācāra-Madhyamaka branch assumes a different approach – what Yao refers to as 'synthesis'. Here, the two principal scholars, Śāntarakṣita and Kamalaśīla (740-795), neither follow their predecessors' arguments against self-awareness nor simply accept Dignāga's Yogācāra systematization.

> By rejecting the articulated epistemological formulations, they have returned to a Mahāsāṃghika-like position, according to which self-cognition is more simple, fundamental and soteriologically oriented. (Yao 2005, 149)

The final phase of the Indian history of the idea of self-awareness is represented by the Sākāravāda position, initiated by Dignāga, Dharmapāla, and Dharmakīrti. Prajñākaragupta (ca. 750-810) and Jñānaśrīmitra, the two principal voices in this strand, exhibit a Sautrāntika-like tendency in their understanding of self-awareness, situating it within an epistemological framework. Thus, the Sākāravāda branch of Yogācāra extended Dignāga's formulation by further systematizing it within their doctrinal framework.

This evolution underscores the dynamic interplay of critique, synthesis, and refinement in the treatment of self-awareness across these Buddhist traditions. Since this summary relies on doxographical distinctions between schools and sub-schools, it fails to delineate these phases precisely. Nevertheless, the framework will serve as a useful structure in this chapter and the next (chs 2-3), providing a guide to the ebb and flow of the historical development of the idea of self-awareness.

Before examining the cycles of the two phases in detail, however, it is important to consider first what the origin of the idea that the mind knows itself in Buddhism might be. Following May, "L'origine de la thèse, que la pensée se connaît elle-même, est rapportée aux Sautrāntika […] ou aux Mahāsāṃghika" (1959, 113-14 fn. 284).

May's position is particularly significant as it brings together two references: La Vallée Poussin[2] for the former option, which attributes the origin of this thesis to the Sautrāntika school (also supported by Tibetan doxographical schemas), and Bareau[3] for the latter, which links its origin to the Mahāsāṃghika tradition. These two scholars are often cited as the earliest and primary authorities in Buddhist scholarship for tracing the historical development of the concept of the mind knowing itself. However, La Vallée Poussin (1928, 129) also claims elsewhere that discussions on this topic originate from the **Mahāvibhāṣā* (henceforth *MV*), specifically in the context of refuting the Mahāsāṃghika theory of self-awareness.

As for modern East Asian scholarship, building on Yao's insights, it is possible to outline the main opinions regarding the origin of the concept of *svasaṃvedana*.[4] The studies by Lü (1991) and Katsura (1969) are based primarily on La Vallée Poussin's statements relating to the origins of the *svasaṃvedana* issue within the Mahāsāṃghika context. Yamaguchi (1951) reaches similar conclusions independently, without referencing other contemporary studies, while Kajiyama (1983) builds on Yamaguchi's claims.

Yao's perspective embraces both possibilities. He argues that the concept of self-awareness originates with the Mahāsāṃghika, the earliest Buddhist school to emerge after the first schism, and was later refined within the Sautrāntika school as a more technical category. Thus, while Dignāga was the first to use the term in a strictly technical sense, the idea itself predates his work by a significant margin.

2 See La Vallée Poussin 1909, 181-3. In particular, for the references to Candrakīrti's (ca. 600-650) discourse about awareness knowing itself, see La Vallée Poussin 1909, 182 fn. 2; for the correction of La Vallée Poussin's reference page, see May 1959, 114 fn. 284.

3 See Bareau 1955, 64, where this issue is addressed in relation to thesis no. 29 of his list of Mahāsāṃghika theses.

4 Since the language barrier limits access to sources in Japanese and Chinese, reference is made to Yao's overview of these works.

2.2 Mahāsāṃghika

To revisit Yao's analysis of the Mahāsāṃghika view of self-awareness, the starting point is the *MV*, an encyclopedic Sarvāstivāda Abhidharma work that provides information about Mahāsāṃghika by refuting its stances. This text has become the best-known source for tracing the origins of the concept of self-awareness in the Mahāsāṃghika context. In this work, the issue arises within the larger discourse on *buddha*'s omniscience. First, the composers of the *MV* (42c) question whether an awareness can know all *dharma*s, and thereafter they express the Mahāsāṃghika view that "mind (*citta*) and mental activities (*caitta*)"[5] are capable of "apprehend[ing] themselves" (Yao 2005, 15).[6] This is followed by a discussion (*MV* 42c) about the reflexive nature of 'awareness' – it should be noted that in this passage, 'awareness' is employed as the translation of *jñāna*, which, in the remainder of these pages, is consistently rendered as 'gnosis':

> It is the nature (*svabhāva*) of awareness (*jñāna*) and so forth to apprehend, thus awareness can apprehend itself as well as others. This is like a lamp that can illuminate itself and others owing to its nature (*svabhāva*) of luminosity. (Yao 2005, 15)[7]

The relation between self-awareness and omniscience becomes clear when it is acknowledged that, in Mahāsāṃghika doctrine, the latter entails the cognition of all *dharma*s in a single moment. Thus, this school holds a view in direct contrast with the more widely accepted Buddhist position, which denies the possibility of knowing all *dharma*s in one instant, as the perceiving mind cannot know itself, its co-emerging mental factors, and the sense organs correlated with it in that same moment. This point indicates that, in this case, self-awareness is linked to 'gnoseological' controversies, namely, issues related to the potentials of gnosis's (SKT *jñāna*; TIB *ye shes*), its limits, and time of engagement with its objects. Here, 'gnosis' refers to the high-level mind at the stage of a *buddha* or at other phases of the path towards enlightenment. To clarify this term and its implications further, Wangchuk explains:

> Gnoseology, here primarily in the sense of a theory of meditative insight or gnosis (*jñāna*; *ye shes*) within the Buddhist context,

5 Note that Yao translates *caitta* (TIB *sems byung*) as 'mental activity'. The term 'mental factor' is preferred here, following the rendering that is chosen by Hopkins (1983) and Napper (Lati Rinbochay 1980), among others.

6 For the original Chinese, see Yao 2005, 37 fn. 52.

7 For the original Chinese, see Yao 2005, 37 fn. 52.

> may simply be understood as a kind of "higher epistemology". In a certain way, if one were to make a distinction between mind (*citta*: *sems*; *manas*: *yid*: *vijñāna*: *rnam par shes pa*) and gnosis (*jñāna*: *ye shes*), as is done, for example, in some Mahāyāna and rDzogs-chen sources, epistemology may be said to encompass the theory of knowledge mediated by the mind, and gnoseology a theory of transcendental knowledge, or gnosis. Soteriologically, as the concept of the four types of reliance (*pratisaraṇa*: *rton pa*) suggests, gnosis is clearly ranked higher than the mind. (Wangchuk 2007, 43)

Thus, the context in which debates on self-awareness first emerged is closely tied to the issue of omniscience, understood as the possibility of knowing all *dharma*s in a single moment, which also requires awareness to be able to know itself.

This raises the question of why the topic of omniscience is formulated in these terms within Mahāsāṃghika discourse. To shed light on the underlying need for such a view of omniscience as held by the Mahāsāṃghikas, and to understand the theoretical context in which this doctrine emerged, it is important to recognize the broader effort undertaken immediately after the historical Buddha's death to come to terms with the loss of such a pivotal figure. Schmithausen (2000, 12-15) identifies six approaches employed during that period to reestablish the presence of the Buddha. Among other approaches, these include practices such as worshiping the Buddha's relics, introducing portraits of the Buddha to serve as objects of veneration and as aids for visualization and meditation, and fostering the belief in the simultaneous existence of multiple *buddha*s within countless world systems. Moreover, it is worth noting the tendency to

> transpose the dignity the teachings were treated with onto the teacher, thereby destining the Buddha to become an object of reverence in his own right [and it is] this tendency [that], in the course of time, led to ever increasing supramundane qualities being ascribed to the Buddha, particularly in the school of the Mahāsāṃghikas, where he is extricated from the earthly domain and divinized into a transcendent realm. (Wangchuk 2007, 209)

Because of this process, his powers and knowledge were radically reinterpreted:

> Originally, his knowledge was considered superior to that of others only because he had won his liberating insight (into the wholesome and unwholesome) by dint of personal capacity. Now his knowledge was elevated to total omniscience. While other non-Mahāyāna schools saw in the Buddha's omniscience merely the ability to

> cognise any desired object at any time, just as a fire has the ability to burn all kinds of fuel without having to bum perpetually, the Mahāsāṃghikas went so far as to postulate that every moment the Buddha is cognisant of each individual phenomenon. (Wangchuk 2007, 209)

This helps contextualize the conceptual drive underlying the specific and unusual Mahāsāṃghika doctrine of omniscience, within which the idea of self-awareness is situated.

Yao also takes into consideration another important text, the *Samayabhedoparacanacakra*, composed by the Sarvāstivāda scholar Vasumitra (dated to either the first century BC or the second or fourth century AD). Available in a Tibetan and three Chinese translations, this work presents the doctrine of self-awareness in relation to the Mahāsāṃghika tradition. Here, however, the discussion is framed with reference to the soteriological category of *srota-āpanna* 'stream-winner', the first of four stages leading toward the attainment of Arhatship.[8] Yao (2005, 16) compares his translations of that specific passage with the four extant versions of the text,[9] though the key-term corresponding to the Sanskrit *svabhāva* is by no means easy to render, posing a challenge in translating the relevant statements about self-awareness.[10] As a consequence, the passage may be too vague to provide any concrete help. In fact, especially in light of the extant Chinese versions, it is open to two main interpretations. The first, more soteriologically oriented, views self-awareness as a tool of the mind and mental factors, acquired by stream-winners in their practice and enabling them to recognize their own identity (*svabhāva*) as stream-winners. The second, more epistemologically oriented reading, considers self-awareness a general characteristic of all minds and mental factors which enables them to cognize their own nature (*svabhāva*), thus bracketing the specific situation or identity of stream-winners.[11]

8 The other categories are, in Sanskrit: *sakṛdāgāmin* 'once returner', *anāgāmin* 'non-returner' and *arhat* 'worthy one'.

9 For Yao's translations and all the references, see Yao 2005, 16.

10 Vasumitra, *Samayabhedoparacanacakra* 143a3: "*rgyun tu zhugs pa'i sems dang sems las byung ba rnams kyi ngo bo nyid shes so* |" (apprehend[ing] the *svabhāva* of mind and mental factors of the stream-winners).

11 Another text that could be mentioned is the *Samayabhedoparacanacakre nikāyabhedopadeśanasaṃgraha* by the Yogācāra scholar Vinītadeva (645-715), which extensively comments upon the works of Vasubandhu (400-480) and Dharmakīrti (600-660). The text is extant only in its Tibetan translation. There, Vinītadeva uses the technical term *rang rig* with reference to Mahāsāṃghika, but the rendering of the relevant passage in translation is the subject of long debates among interpreters. For a summary of the various versions held by modern scholars, see Yao 2005, 18-19.

Exploring the connections between the Mahāsāṃghika theory of self-awareness and its later developments, Yao concludes that, although Dignāga, Dharmakīrti and their commentators never explicitly acknowledged their Mahāsāṃghika sources, it seems highly likely that they drew upon them:

> The Mahāsāṃghika doctrine of self-cognition can be summarized as a general assertion about the mind and mental activities being self-cognizant and its illustration through the simile of the lamp. This has been verified by the limited sources of Mahāsāṃghika […]. However, in some later Yogācāra texts, we also come across similar expressions. I see them as the Mahāsāṃghika influence on the Yogācāra doctrine of self-cognition. (Yao 2005, 19-20)

A strong indication of this Mahāsāṃghika influence is Dharmakīrti's brief statement in *Nyāyabindu* 1.10: "All mind and mental activities are self-cognizant" (Yao 2005, 15).[12] When compared with the aforementioned passage from the *MV* (42c), the similarity becomes evident. While the metaphor of the lamp is not mentioned here by Dharmakīrti, we find it in Vinītadeva's *Nyāyabinduṭīkā*, an early commentary on the *Nyāyabindu*, where the author explains self-awareness in the Mahāsāṃghika style using the lamp metaphor:

> Whatever illuminates the own entity of those [mind and mental factors, all of them,] is [their] self-awareness. In this way, all mind and mental factors arise while they make known their own entity, because they have the nature of cognition, just as a lamp arises while it illuminates itself, because it has the nature of illumination, and in order to illuminate its own entity it does not depend on another lamp. Likewise, also mind and mental factors do not depend on another cognition to make their own entity known;

12 Dharmakīrti, *Nyāyabindu* 1.10: "*sarvacittacaittānām ātmasaṃvedanam* ||".

> therefore, things that are established in their own right are direct *pramāṇa*s for themselves.[13]

Moreover, Yao considers the possibility that not only Dharmakīrti but also Dignāga shared this Mahāsāṃghika legacy. In arguing for this, Yao finds some possible traces of this heritage in Dignāga's thought, particularly in one line of reasoning that is ascribed to his *Pramāṇasamuccaya* (henceforth *PS*) and quoted in the **Buddhabhūmyupadeśa*, a work attributed to Bandhuprabha (fl. sixth century AD) et al. The passage (**Buddhabhūmyupadeśa* 303a) confirms the two key features of the Mahāsāṃghika theory of self-awareness: that the mind and mental factors know themselves, and that self-awareness is illustrated through the metaphor of the lamp. Moreover, it situates this theory within the broader context of the memory argument, which is characteristic of Dignāga's doctrine of self-awareness.[14] However, as Yao notes, the first part of the quotation, which refers to mind and mental factors as being able to know themselves, is not found in any of the Tibetan versions or the Sanskrit fragments of *PS*. Nor is there any trace of it in any of Dignāga's works. "So we are left with a mystery" regarding whether Dignāga himself had articulated or referenced a Mahāsāṃghika-like notion of self-awareness (Yao 2005, 22). Although certainty is lacking, the possibility that Dignāga and Dharmakīrti's theory of *svasaṃvedana* was influenced by the Mahāsāṃghika tradition warrants consideration.

The Andhaka school, a sub-school of the Mahāsāṃghikas that played an important role in the later development of Mahāyāna Buddhism, is also among the forerunners of the idea of self-awareness. The main sources relating to its doctrine of self-awareness are the *Kathāvatthu*, an Abhidharma work of the Pāli tradition ascribed to Moggaliputta Tissa (327-247 BC), and the *Kathāvatthuppakaraṇ*

13 Vinītadeva, *Nyāyabinduṭīkā* 6b (Tibetan version): "[*sems dang sems las byung ba'i thams cad] de dag gis rang gi ngo bo rab tu gsal ba gang yin pa de ni rang gi rig pa yin no || 'di ltar sems dang sems las byung ba thams cad ni rtogs par bya ba'i rang bzhin can yin pa'i phyir rang gi ngo bo rig par byed bzhin du skye ste | dper na mar me ni rab tu gsal ba'i rang bzhin can yin pa'i phyir bdag nyid rab tu gsal bar byed pa bzhin du skye'i | rang gi ngo bo rab tu gsal bar bya ba la mar me gzhan la mi ltos so || de bzhin du sems dang sems las byung ba rnams kyang rang gi ngo bo rtogs par bya ba la shes pa gzhan la mi ltos pa yin te | de'i phyir rang grub pa'i ngo bo rnams ni bdag nyid la mngon sum gyi tsad ma yin no ||*". Cf. the Sanskrit reconstruction by Gangopadhyaya (1971, 107): "[*sarvacittacaittānām] teṣāṃ ca yat svarūpaprakāśanaṃ tadātmasaṃvedanam | sarve hi cittacaittāḥ pratītisvabhāvatvāt svarūpajñāpakā bhavanti | yathā pradīpaḥ prakāśasvabhāvatvād ātmano 'pi prakāśako bhavati | svarūpaprakāśe ca pradīpāntaraṃ nāpekṣate | tathā cittacaittā api svarūpāvabodhe jñānāntaraṃ nāpekṣante | tataśca svasiddhabhāvāḥ svayaṃ pratyakṣapramāṇaṃ bhavanti ||*".

14 For different translations of this passage, cf. Yao 2005, 21; Keenan 1980, 569; La Vallée Poussin 1928-29, 130.

a-aṭṭhakathā, Buddhaghosa's (fl. fifth century AD) commentary on the *Kathāvatthu*.[15] One significant difference between the Andhaka view on self-awareness and the aforementioned position of the Mahāsāṃghikas is that the former denies self-awareness to *caittas*.[16] Moreover, whereas the Mahāsāṃghikas (*MV* 47b) claim that two minds can function simultaneously, this position is probably refuted by the Andhakas (Buddhaghosa, *Kathāvatthuppakaraṇa-aṭṭhakathā* 5.9). Consequently, the former hold that omniscience occurs in a single moment[17] while the latter assert that awareness operates sequentially, with each moment of awareness cognizing the preceding one – for example, A_2 knowing A_1, A_3 knowing A_2, and so on.[18] Yao highlights the concept of having, as a consequence, an awareness of self-awareness and comments on it by stating that

> we cannot find any reference to it in the extant Indian texts. Now, as we have seen, this Pāli passage is probably the earliest source that has discussed the issue of the awareness of self-awareness. (Yao 2005, 28)

Among the Andhakas' contributions to the discourse on self-awareness, a key point is the debated issue of awareness taking itself as an object (P *ārammaṇa*). The Andhakas admit the possibility of awareness being both subject and object, albeit in successive moments: awareness must first become an object in order to be cognized by itself in the subsequent moment.[19]

Moreover, in the *Kathāvatthu* (5.9) other metaphors appear that are commonly used in Sarvāstivāda and Madhyamaka refutations of self-awareness. A proponent of the Sakavāda school, debating with an Andhaka opponent, challenges the latter's position using various images that frequently reappear in later developments of the debate:

> Does one cut a sword with that sword, an axe with that axe, a knife with that knife, an adze with that adze? Does one sew a needle with that needle, handle the tip of a finger with that finger, kiss

15 The *Kathāvatthu* passages that Yao identifies as relevant to the topic of self-awareness are the following: 5.9 (on awareness of the present), 13.7 (on enjoying meditation), and 16.4 (on self-awareness itself).

16 See Moggaliputta Tissa (ascribed), *Kathāvatthu* 5.9. For Yao's translation, see Yao 2005, 28; for the corresponding original text in Pāli, see Yao 2005, 40 fn. 113.

17 For all the references to the texts, see Yao 2005, 11.

18 See Moggaliputta Tissa (ascribed), *Kathāvatthu* 5.9. See Yao 2005, 25 for the translation of the passage and see Yao 2005, 40 fn. 99 for the original text in Pāli.

19 See Yao 2005, 25 for his translation and Yao 2005, 40 fn. 99 for the original text in Pāli.

> the top of the nose with that nose, handle the head with that head […]? (Yao 2005, 29)[20]

Unfortunately, given the limited sources available for the Andhaka theories of self-awareness, it is impossible to delineate a precise and detailed account. It is noteworthy, however, that their approach to this issue frequently appears in the later developments of the Indo-Tibetan tradition. These parallels include references to mind and mental factors in discussions of self-awareness, the use of the simile of the lamp and other metaphors, considerations on the simultaneous functioning of one or multiple minds, reflections on 'awareness' (P *ñāṇa*) in relation to 'self-awareness', and mind or 'cognition' (P *citta*) in relation to 'self-cognition', explorations of awareness as both subject and object, and connections with the concept of self-awareness in the contexts of omniscience, epistemology, and soteriology.

2.3 Sarvāstivāda

Turning now to a brief examination of the Sarvāstivāda position on the subject, as presented in Yao's research (2005, 42 ff.), the term 'Sarvāstivāda' will be used as an umbrella term that includes the Vaibhāṣikas, the Mūlasarvāstivādins and, to some extent, the Dārṣṭāntikas. Scholars from the Sarvāstivāda sub-groups share a common agenda in refuting self-awareness, albeit from different perspectives, by contrast with the Sautrāntikas, who regard self-awareness as one of their major doctrines.

As noted above, the Sarvāstivādins and Mahāsāṃghikas debate this issue primarily on soteriological grounds, particularly in relation to the *buddha*'s omniscience. Whereas the Mahāsāṃghikas maintain that it is possible to know all *dharma*s in a single moment, other schools, including the Sarvāstivāda, reject the notion of instantaneous omniscience, as previously explained. From the Sarvāstivāda perspective, it is not possible to know all *dharma*s within a single moment; therefore, self-awareness does not imply that the mind simultaneously knows itself but rather that it knows previous moments in its own *continuum*. While the Sarvāstivādins aim to reject self-awareness, they must still address how omniscience can encompass all *dharma*s, given that the omniscient mind itself must be included within the scope of what is known. They resolve this problem by asserting that omniscient awareness knows all *dharma*s except itself, its 'associates' (SKT *saṃprayuktāḥ*, that is, mental factors that share the same object with the mind, e.g. feelings), and its 'co-existed'

20 For the original Pāli text, see Yao 2005, 40 fn. 115.

(SKT *sahabhavaḥ*, that is, its accompanying material elements and accompanying *dharma*s that are not part of the mind itself, e.g. the sense-organs). Instead, these are known by subsequent moments within the same *continuum* of that omniscient consciousness. In fact, as stated by Vasubandhu:

> We [the proponents of the Sarvāstivāda view] do not say that the Buddha is omniscient in the sense that he knows all in a single moment. (Yao 2005, 45)[21]

Kātyāyaniputra's (fl. first century BC) *Jñānaprasthāna*, one of the seven Sarvāstivāda Abhidharma works, discusses this topic in the form of a dialogue, answering an opponent who expresses the Vaibhāṣika point of view. One passage (Kātyāyaniputra, *Jñānaprasthāna* 919b) is particularly relevant, as the opponent points out that, in holding the view that all *dharma*s are no-self, one's awareness (*jñāna*) must know all *dharma*s. The Sarvāstivāda reply maintains that an omniscient awareness knows all *dharma*s except itself, its 'associates', and its 'co-existed'. Each moment of awareness, along with its 'associates' and 'co-existed', is known by the subsequent moment of awareness.

In commenting on this significant passage, Yao offers an important observation:

> In other words, [in the Sarvāstivāda view] the mind knows itself through a *reflection* of the past mind. In contrast, the Mahāsāṃghikas hold that the mind can know itself at the same time that it knows other objects because the mind is endowed with a *reflexive* nature. These two views represent two different models of self-cognition: one is *reflective*, while the other is *reflexive*. (Yao 2005, 47; italics added)

This distinction between the reflective and reflexive models of self-awareness echoes a differentiation found, for instance, in Matilal (1986a, 148-9), who includes it within the topic of knowing that one knows,[22] and later in Williams (1998), who adopts it as the main framework in his monograph on *rang rig*, using it to articulate and organize how the Indo-Tibetan philosophical tradition approaches this issue.[23] As this structural distinction remains widely used to

21 Vasubandhu, *Abhidharmakośabhāṣya* 9.935: "*naiva ca vayaṃ sarvatra jñānasammukhībhāvād buddhaṃ sarvajñam ācakṣmahe* |".

22 Actually, Matilal (1986a) suggests a broader, three-fold presentation of the ways Indian philosophers deal with the awareness of the awareness. This will be introduced when discussing the two categories Williams outlines.

23 Yao explicitly refers to those two authors in Yao 2005, 90 fn. 15.

address such a complex issue, including in contemporary philosophy of mind, it will be examined in greater detail in the discussion of Williams's significant contribution to the topic of self-awareness. For now, this distinction will serve as an effective tool for highlighting the differences between the Sarvāstivāda and Mahāsāṃghika doctrines. By introducing these two interpretative models (reflexive *versus* reflective), Yao suggests that, according to the Mahāsāṃghikas' idea of self-awareness, the mind is aware of itself as the knowing subject, rather than as an object – whereas the Sarvāstivāda school asserts the opposite.

In order to appreciate this difference fully, particularly in relation to awareness (*jñāna*) or consciousness (*vijñāna*) being self-aware, it is first necessary to investigate how this mental feature or ability is conceived. For Sarvāstivāda proponents, present awareness can take a previous awareness as its object while still considering it as itself. However, how is it possible to argue that a preceding cognitive event is still the present one? To answer this question, one must examine the Sarvāstivādins' conception of the three times: past, present, and future. For Sarvāstivāda proponents, the three times are equally real;[24] therefore, when something falls into the past, it does not perish but rather changes its status.[25] Consequently, each previous moment of awareness can easily be argued to belong to the same awareness that is manifest now, since present and past cognitive events equally exist as parts of the same mental *continuum*. The Sarvāstivāda school thus proposes a gradual model of omniscience consisting of a mental *continuum* capable of knowing everything, just as fire is capable of burning everything through continuous combustion. In a passage from Vasubandhu's *Abhidharmakośabhāṣya* (9.935), quoted by Yao, it is stated:

> The Omniscient One is like a fire that burns everything through a process (*santāna*) [of burning]. He does not know everything all at once. (Yao 2005, 48; square brackets in the original)[26]

Here, the identity of any present awareness appears to shift dramatically towards the mental *continuum* to which it belongs.

Continuing to follow Yao (2005, 48 ff.), the argument then connects this particular notion of omniscience to the sophisticated theory of

24 With regard to that, cf. Yao 2005, 47. Note that Yao (2005, 158) uses the effective expression 'pan-realism'.

25 Although, with respect as to how the three times differ from each other, there are differing opinions held by various Sarvāstivāda authors, it is most commonly expressed in terms of a 'difference of state' (SKT *avasthānyathātva*).

26 Vasubandhu, *Abhidharmakośabhāṣya* 9.935: "*santānena samarthatvād yathā 'griḥ sarvabhug mataḥ | tathā sarvavid eṣṭavyo 'sakṛt sarvasya vedanāt* ||".

causality developed by the Sarvāstivāda Abhidharma, demonstrating that awareness cannot know itself in a single moment. A key aspect of this reasoning is that no *dharma* can observe or know itself; it can only serve as a condition for others. This notion of causality is also central to Vaibhāṣika literature, in particular, where it is asserted that nothing can, in a broad sense, act upon itself. For awareness to know itself, it would need to exist in a causal relation with itself. However, since a distinction must exist between cause and effect, and nothing can be different from itself, it is impossible for any awareness (or anything in general) to stand in a causal relation with itself. This rules out the possibility of awareness acting as the knower of itself.

The Vaibhāṣikas also employ a variety of metaphors to reject self-awareness, such as those found in the *MV* (43a):

> What we see in the world is the following: the finger-tip cannot touch itself; the knife-blade cannot cut itself; the pupil cannot see itself; a strong man cannot carry himself. Thus [awareness] in itself cannot know itself. (Yao 2005, 52; square brackets in the original)[27]

However, unlike the Mahāsāṃghikas, who rely exclusively on supportive examples to argue for self-awareness, the Vaibhāṣikas (*MV* 43c) maintain that "one should not dispute the teachings of the Sage [i.e., the Buddha] with worldly similes" (Yao 2005, 53; square brackets in the original).[28]

Metaphors are therefore only a secondary tool in supporting their main argument, which is causality.

Among these images, two – the finger and the knife – were already discussed in § 2.2, where they were listed among various examples used in a debate between a Sakavāda and an Andhaka (Moggaliputta Tissa [ascribed], *Kathāvatthu* 5.9). The Vaibhāṣikas note that the lamp metaphor is unsuitable as an illustration of self-awareness, given their understanding of the lamp's illumination. They point out that a lamp is composed of material particles, lacks sensory faculties, cannot take anything as its object, and is not a faculty of a sentient being. As an example of this, Yao explains how Saṃghabhadra's (fl. fourth-fifth century AD) **Nyāyānusāra* (742b), representative of an orthodox Vaibhāṣika position, strongly objects to the lamp metaphor as an effective illustration or proof of self-awareness. Saṃghabhadra argues that an independent entity, such as illumination, cannot be found: when something becomes illuminated, it is due to the conjunction of various factors, such as an object, a lamp, eyes

27 For the original Chinese text, see Yao 2005, 91 fn. 36.

28 For the original Chinese text, see Yao 2005, 91 fn. 37.

and light. Therefore, since the lamp does not possess the nature of illumination, how can it illuminate itself? Even assuming that it has the nature of illumination, the lamp could not illuminate both itself and others. In fact, this would absurdly imply that fire, not only burning other things, would also have to burn itself, and that darkness, besides preventing one from seeing objects, would paradoxically have to obstruct the perception of darkness itself. However, since this is not the case for fire or darkness, the lamp cannot act this way either. Saṃghabhadra's line of reasoning echoes the one expressed by Nāgārjuna (150-250), which will be clarified in the discussion of his *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā* (7.8-12) (see § 2.6).

Despite these considerations, the Mahāsāṃghika scholars Bandhuprabha et al. (**Buddhabhūmyupadeśa* 303b), among the proponents of the metaphor of a lamp illuminating itself in relation to self-awareness, defend the appropriateness of this image:

> One can directly perceive the absence of darkness and the apparent luminosity [in lamps]. If they did not illumine themselves, they would be enveloped in darkness, and would not be directly perceptible. Therefore, I know that lamps illumine themselves. (Yao 2005, 55; square brackets in the original)[29]

This straightforward argument unfolds as follows (Bandhuprabha et al., **Buddhabhūmyupadeśa* 303):

> Things like a jar or clothes are not darkness in their essence, but when they are not illumined by lamps their edges (*anta*) are enveloped in darkness and are not directly perceptible. When lamps illumine them, those lamps expel the darkness on their edges and cause them to be directly perceived. And so we say that they are illumined. It is just the same with lamps. When their nature [of being luminous] arises, the darkness on their edges is expelled, and they become directly perceptible. Thus we say that they illumine themselves. (Yao 2005, 55; square brackets in the original)[30]

Reaching a definitive conclusion about Bandhuprabha et al.'s argument may be challenging; however, it is evident that their approach introduces an empirical perspective to the issue. In this framework, luminosity and darkness intertwine in such a way that their boundary corresponds to the edges of objects: luminosity exists where the edges of something are directly perceptible while darkness is present where they are not. This provides a criterion for identifying both. Still, it

29 For the original Chinese text, see Yao 2005, 91 fn. 45.

30 For the original Chinese text, see Yao 2005, 91 fn. 46.

remains unclear whether the descriptive accuracy of this account of light and darkness can legitimately be extended to self-awareness, thereby making it a valid metaphor. Moreover, as will be shown (§ 2.6), Nāgārjuna's logical analysis fundamentally challenges the very possibility of any contact between darkness and light.[31]

Another significant contribution can be found in the work of the Sarvāstivāda scholar Vasumitra of Gandhāra, a key center of orthodox Vaibhāṣika thought. Vasumitra was highly regarded by other Vaibhāṣikas: most of his views gained favor and were adopted by them. His work sought to systematize the Sarvāstivāda doctrines as well as to formulate new arguments against self-awareness. These arguments can be categorized into two main groups: the first focuses on epistemological aspects; the second addresses issues that are relevant to soteriology (Yao 2005, 56).

In order to appreciate the epistemological arguments, one must first recall the Vaibhāṣika view (*MV* 558b) of the relationship between awareness or cognition, broadly understood as an object-possessor, and its objects:

> Awareness and the knowable are established as a pair. So there is no awareness that does not know the knowable, and there is no knowable that is not known by awareness. If there is no awareness, there is no knowable, and if there is no knowable, there is no awareness. (Yao 2005, 56)[32]

The significance of this view is further emphasized by Vasumitra's (*MV* 43b) arguments against self-awareness:

> If [awareness] in itself (*svabhāva*) knows itself (*svabhāva*), the following cannot be established: grasper and the grasped, knower and the known, the one who is aware and what it is aware of, object and that which possesses object, image and object of cognition, senses and object of senses, and so forth. (Yao 2005, 56; square brackets in the original)[33]

Given the importance of the reciprocal foundation between cognition and the knowable, Vasumitra's statements align with similar arguments found later in the Tibetan tradition, which will be examined in § 5.1 during the analysis of the dGe-lugs critique of *rang rig*.

31 See Nāgārjuna, *VV* 38-9.

32 For the original Chinese text, see Yao 2005, 91 fn. 48.

33 For the original Chinese text, see Yao 2005, 91 fn. 49.

Within this subject-object framework, Vasumitra (*MV* 43a)[34] raises another objection to self-awareness by refuting the very idea that awareness can be regarded as an object – an objection that Yao finds to be as problematic as it is effective:

> On my view, this is the most clear and effective refutation of self-awareness in terms of epistemology. It reflects Vasumitra's style of clear definition, his conceptual coherence and his fondness for systematization. Examining **Mahāvibhāṣā* carefully, though, I find that Vasumitra contradicts the Vaibhāṣikas on this point. When discussing which have a greater number, awarenesses or objects, the Vaibhāṣikas explicitly say: "Awareness can also be an object […]. Because the associates and co-existents of the awareness and the awareness itself can all be an object" [**Mahāvibhāṣā* 228b-c]. For this reason, we always have a greater number of objects than awarenesses. This contradiction may indicate a difference between Sarvāstivāda masters in Kaśmīra and Gāndhāra. (Yao 2005, 57)

Whether awareness can serve as an object is a pivotal and widely debated topic, particularly in discussions on self-awareness. Originally affiliated with the Sarvāstivāda tradition in Gāndhāra, Vasubandhu follows Vasumitra on this point. In his *Abhidharmakośabhāṣya* (7.18), Vasubandhu refutes self-awareness with a single move: the object-possessor (SKT *viṣayin*), i.e., the subject or awareness, must be distinct from the object and, as such, cannot itself be an object.

Vasumitra finds self-awareness problematic for an additional epistemological reason: subject and object are distinct entities, and cognition arises only when the two interact; neither can produce it independently of the other (Yao 2005, 58 ff.). However, in the case of self-awareness, cognition would arise from a single cause: the awareness itself. Since this contradicts the Buddhist tenet of dependent origination (SKT *pratītyasamutpāda*; TIB *rten 'brel*), this option must be refuted. The significance of this argument resurfaces in various phases of the historical debate on this issue (chs 4-5).

Alongside these epistemological concerns, Vasumitra also addresses several critiques of self-awareness that relate to soteriological issues – such as wrong views, negative mental attitudes, the four mindfulnesses, awareness of the Four Noble Truths, memories of past lives, and awareness of others' minds.

34 "Why does [awareness] in itself (*svabhāva*) not know itself (*svabhāva*)? Because it is not of the objective realm" (Yao 2005, 57; square brackets in the original). For the original Chinese text, see Yao 2005, 92 fn. 53. Yao (2005, 57) points out that the term 'objective realm' (Chinese *jing jie*) is rarely used in the text. When it does appear, it is within the discussion of the interdependence between subject and object, where the terms 'objective realm' and 'object' are effectively synonymous.

However, since not all of these arguments are directly relevant to the present discussion, only the first one (*MV* 43b) will be examined, as it raises reflections that remain central to ongoing debates in the philosophy of mind.

> If [awareness] in itself knows itself, the World Honored One would not admit the existence of wrong views. If a wrong view can know itself as wrong, then it becomes a right view. This is to say that if the wrong view can observe itself as wrong, then it should be called a right view rather than a wrong view. (Yao 2005, 59-60; square brackets in the original)[35]

The Buddha's refusal to deny the existence of wrong views raises questions about the acceptance of self-awareness, a stance that involves several problematic aspects. One issue, only implicitly addressed here, concerns how one accesses one's own mental state. Specifically, how can a view 'observe itself'? Does this occur through conceptual means or in a non-conceptual, direct manner? Furthermore, the reasoning suggested in the passage assumes that when a view observes itself, it simultaneously recognizes its own status as either true or false. This assumption is problematic, as the term 'observe' seems to imply a complex evaluation of the content of a view. On the other hand, a fundamental and widely accepted notion of self-awareness holds that, regardless of the potential falsity of a belief or mental state, one is still aware of having that belief or being in that state. The recognition of falsity is not typically considered an inherent feature of basic self-awareness.

Before further examining the Sarvāstivāda soteriological perspective on self-awareness, it is important to revisit the relationship between self-awareness and omniscience as discussed in Kātyāyaniputra's *Jñānaprasthāna*. This dialogue, previously cited in relation to the Vaibhāṣika perspective, explores the cognition of all *dharma*s as a capability of *jñāna*. However, other sources, such as the *MV*, address the same topic but attribute this ability to *vijñāna*. This raises questions about the relationship between *jñāna* and *vijñāna* and, consequently, whether the Vaibhāṣikas reject self-'consciousness' (*vijñāna*) in the same way they refute self-'awareness' (*jñāna*).[36]

Continuing the line of inquiry inspired by Yao (2005), it is now necessary to summarize some key terminological aspects highlighted in his work. Certain Sarvāstivāda scholars distinguish *jñāna* from

35 For the original Chinese text, see Yao 2005, 92 fn. 66.

36 Please note that in this paragraph, the term 'self-consciousness' is intentionally distinguished from 'self-awareness' to reflect the difference between self-knowing as related to *vijñāna* and *jñāna*.

vijñāna, attributing the former to all mental activities and the latter specifically to the mind (*MV* 44c). Thus, mind (*citta*) and *vijñāna* are considered synonyms. The Vaibhāṣikas also recognize another distinction between awareness and consciousness: the former is essentially an undefiled *dharma* and serves as the foundation for all undefiled ones while the latter is a defiled *dharma* and forms the basis for all defiled *dharma*s (*MV* 44c). Even though their natures differ, awareness and consciousness share the same function and can take all *dharma*s as their objects. However, when discussing the omniscience of consciousness, certain items are excluded: consciousness itself, as well as the *dharma*s that are associated with and co-exist alongside it – the same exclusions mentioned earlier. Although consciousness does not know itself or its associated mental factors, it is still regarded as omniscient because it encompasses the majority of *dharma*s. For the Vaibhāṣikas, therefore, it is not contradictory to affirm the omniscience of consciousness while rejecting self-consciousness. The resulting model of omniscience does not require cognition of every single *dharma*; rather, knowledge of the majority.

A further issue emerges when comparing the Sarvāstivāda rejection of self-awareness with the Mahāsāṃghika stance: the simultaneity of multiple minds. For the Mahāsāṃghikas, the reason to admit the possibility of two minds functioning simultaneously lies in their observation that processes such as seeing and hearing can occur at the same time. By contrast, the Sarvāstivāda view (*MV* 719c) holds that these consciousnesses "come and go rapidly and only appear to be simultaneous, but actually are not" (Yao 2005, 74).[37] According to this perspective, two minds cannot exist simultaneously in the same mental *continuum*, nor can identical types of mental factors operate at the same time. However, different types of mental factors can function concurrently. This difference clearly highlights how the Vaibhāṣika understanding of omniscience diverges notably from the Mahāsāṃghika account.

2.4 Sautrāntika

To contextualize the Sautrāntika position on self-awareness, Harivarman's (310-390) *Satyasiddhiśāstra* proves to be a valuable source. Recognized as a significant text reflecting Sautrāntika doctrines in their formative phase, it offers insight into the development of a theory of self-awareness through a synthesis of Mahāsāṃghika and Sarvāstivāda views (Yao 2005, 97 ff.).

37 For the original Chinese text, see Yao 2005, 92 fn. 124.

In this text, Harivarman addresses the topic of self-awareness by presenting a series of arguments that challenge the Mahāsāṃghika position. His critique unfolds within a broader epistemological framework which engages with a central issue in Buddhist thought: the question of whether the mind is one or many. By contrast, as previously noted, the Mahāsāṃghikas and Sarvāstivādas approach the issue from a soteriological perspective, specifically in relation to the topic of omniscience. Harivarman supports the Sautrāntika position on self-awareness, holding that the latter is possible only in successive moments of cognition. He critiques what he identifies as the Mahāsāṃghika account of mind, which, in his understanding, posits a single substantial mind that manifests itself in various forms of consciousness and through different mental factors. Instead, he argues for the 'multiplicity' of minds by denying the existence of mental activities or, more precisely, elevating them to the same status as the mind, thus positing multiple minds (Harivarman, *Satyasiddhiśāstra* 278b).

> There are multiple minds. Why? Consciousness refers to the mind. The consciousness of visual objects is a different [mind], and the consciousness of odors is another different [mind], hence there are multiple minds. (Yao 2005, 101; square brackets in the original)[38]

Yao's commentary on this passage is particularly effective for fully appreciating Harivarman's perspective:

> Harivarman is saying that there exist multiple minds because of the multiplicity of their objects. To a certain extent, every particular object requires a different mind to perceive it. These multiple minds have no chance to arise simultaneously because each of them possesses an independent substance. These minds arise and cease successively the same way as their objects arise and cease successively. (Yao 2005, 101)

The main elements entailed in this line of reasoning are as follows: different objects require different minds, and different minds have distinct substances and occur in different moments. These are key-factors that will always play an important role in discussions on self-awareness, as they constitute the fundamental structure of all cognitive processes.

When discussing whether the mind is one or many, that is, whether it arises as one continuous mind or as multiple successive minds, Harivarman (*Satyasiddhiśāstra* 278b-c) argues as follows:

38 For the original Chinese text, see Yao 2005, 119 fn. 15.

> The grasper differs on account of the difference of the grasped. For instance, a certain person knows his own mind sometimes. How does [the mind] in itself (*svabhāva*) know itself? Eyes do not see themselves; a sword does not cut itself; a finger does not touch its own tip. Hence the mind is not one. (Yao 2005, 102; square brackets in the original)[39]

The two metaphors, the finger and the sword, as seen in the context of the Andhakas and the Vaibhāṣikas, might initially suggest a rejection of the doctrine of self-awareness. However, upon closer examination, it becomes clear that the issue at hand concerns, rather, the singularity or multiplicity of minds. Therefore, the question is not "*whether* the mind can know itself" but rather "*how* it knows itself" (Yao 2005, 103; italics in the original). Whereas the Mahāsāṃghikas hold the view that a single mind knows both itself and other objects, Harivarman maintains that a single mind cannot have two objects, and that different objects (for instance, an external object and the mind knowing it) require distinct minds. This claim recurs frequently throughout the history of Buddhist philosophy and also plays a crucial role, for instance, in phenomenological discourse within the European tradition.

How, then, does Harivarman explain the cognitive phenomenon of self-awareness? In *Satyasiddhiśāstra* 279c, he employs the well-known simile of the lamp – though in a way that has not appeared in the sources examined thus far:

> When a lamp expels darkness, eye-consciousness arises. The eye-consciousness, after arising, can see the lamp as well as things like a jar. (Yao 2005, 103)[40]

In this image, the mind that illuminates other objects corresponds to the lamp, while the mind that knows itself corresponds to eye-consciousness. These are clearly two different minds, reflecting Harivarman's 'different objects-different minds' principle. This, however, leaves unresolved the problem of their different times of occurrence: since eye-consciousness arises following the lighting of the lamp, the implication appears to be that self-awareness occurs after the cognition of other objects (Yao 2005, 103). According to the Sautrāntika view, in a sequence of cognition, mental consciousness (third moment) arises after the emergence of a sense organ and its sensory object (both in the first moment), and after the subsequent arising of a sense consciousness (second moment). When mental

39 For the original Chinese text, see Yao 2005, 119 fn. 17.

40 For the original Chinese text, see Yao 2005, 119 fn. 19.

consciousness arises (third moment), it can never directly access the sensory object (first moment) because the latter already belongs to the past. This is because the Sautrāntikas do not share the Sarvāstivāda view of the real existence of the three times mentioned above. Therefore, a past (or future) *dharma* cannot serve as an object of cognition.

This raises the question of how the past and the future can become objects of knowledge. For the Sautrāntikas, this is precisely where the notion of image or aspect (SKT *ākāra*) plays a crucial role, alongside the cognitive function of memory. Memory arises from grasping the cognitive image of an object (Harivarman, *Satyasiddhiśāstra* 288b); in the specific case of mental consciousness, memory enables the conceptualization of this consciousness. According to Yao (2005, 109), since both memory and mental consciousness take past experiences as their object, they are largely identical. Memory itself, given its importance, serves as the fundamental argument for the existence of both self-awareness and external objects.

Harivarman seems to be rejecting the idea of self-awareness but then, in apparent contradiction, applies it to mental consciousness alone – consciousness that is free from dependence on sense organs and sensory objects. Indeed, in *Satyasiddhiśāstra* 364b, Harivarman links self-awareness to yogic practice, thereby introducing a phenomenological perspective on this inner function of mind. In doing so, he appears, at least at first glance, to suggest a potential contradiction with what has previously been claimed regarding the sequential arising of minds over time:

> Here is a saying that mental [consciousness] is self-cognizant. In other words, a yogi, by following his mind, observes that there is no mind in the past or the future, so he knows that the present mind takes this very present mind as object. (Yao 2005, 106; square brackets in the original)[41]

The above passage may help approach self-awareness as pertaining only to mental consciousness, and it does so from a phenomenological standpoint: when yogis observe their own mind, they cannot find it in the past or the future, only in the present. Mental consciousness becomes the object of a mind that arises simultaneously with it. Yao (2005, 106) draws on this passage from Harivarman to explore further the connection with the inner laboratory of yogic practice by proposing a link between self-awareness, understood as an epistemological concept, and 'self-realization' (SKT *pratyātmasaṃvedya*), a specific term with strong soteriological focus, commonly found in Buddhist

41 For the original Chinese text, see Yao 2005, 119 fn. 28.

texts, particularly within the Yogācāra tradition. Within such a framework, this meditative practice consists in the yogi's mind observing itself and realizing that only the present mind serves as its object; this appears to be the way the yogi establishes self-awareness. In fact, the central thesis of Yao's entire monograph is that self-awareness evolves from being a soteriological issue to an epistemological concern. The pages in which Yao (2005, 123-7) explores this point in greater depth will be revisited in the following chapters, particularly in the context of a more detailed discussion about the connection between self-realization and self-awareness.

Even though, as just seen, Harivarman affirms the existence of self-awareness, in a particular passage (Harivarman, *Satyasiddhiśāstra* 331b), he explicitly states that mental consciousness cannot know itself. This is not contradictory, though, as Harivarman introduces an important conceptual filter that deepens the analysis of self-awareness: the two truths, namely, *saṃvṛti-satya* 'conventional truth' and *paramārtha-satya* 'ultimate truth'. These represent two different levels of reality. For Harivarman, self-awareness is denied at the ultimate level whereas it still exists at the conventional level. Self-awareness is a provisional construct employed by individuals to articulate the mind's capacity for self-knowledge – a conceptual designation that operates at the level of conventional truth. From the standpoint of ultimate reality, however, it is considered nonexistent. The doctrine of the two truths will come to serve as a key lens through which the ontological status of *svasaṃvedana* or *rang rig* is examined throughout the various phases in the historical development of the concept.

Summarized in this brief overview, the main elements of Harivarman's philosophical view of self-awareness illustrate how the Sautrāntika position on this issue began to take shape and be formulated. Yao identifies Harivarman as the earliest Sautrāntika scholar – although generally considered a divergent one – who developed his theory of self-awareness in response to controversies with the Mahāsāṃghika and Sarvāstivāda schools. Harivarman's early project must, therefore, be distinguished from the later and more mature systematization of the Sautrāntika doctrine of self-awareness reported in Candrakīrti's *Madhyamakāvatārabhāṣya*. In this text, while refuting the Yogācāra doctrine, Candrakīrti presents arguments for self-awareness attributed to both the Sautrāntika and Yogācāra traditions, reflecting the outcome of several centuries of philosophical discussions. For now, a brief outline will suffice to grasp the mature arguments proposed by the Sautrāntika advocates of self-awareness and to provide an introductory overview of the main lines of reasoning that will appear in the subsequent Indo-Tibetan discourse on the topic.

As reported by Candrakīrti (*Madhyamakāvatāra*, henceforth *MAv*, 6.73 ff.), the view of the proponents of self-awareness provides three

proofs: one refers to the use of appropriate metaphors, another consists in the memory argument and a third denounces the problem of infinite regress. The first reflects the Mahāsāṃghika tendency to use similes as a means of conceptualizing self-awareness, employing the familiar image of a flame that illuminates both itself and other objects. The second proof relies on one of the most recurrent, effective and well-known arguments developed within the Indian Buddhist tradition in relation to self-awareness. The central point here is that memory pertains to objects that have been experienced, and memories of objects, or of experiences of objects, would not be possible without self-awareness. That is, self-awareness enables awareness to cognize its own experience. The role of memory in Sautrāntika thought has already been mentioned; in the following chapters (§ 3.1.4 and § 3.2.1), it will be shown how the structure of this argument was also employed, albeit in a different way, by Dharmakīrti and Dignāga. The third proof, involving the problem of infinite regress, recurs in nearly every instance of the debate on this topic, both in the Indo-Tibetan Buddhist tradition and in modern discussions. If a consciousness (that sees an object) is not perceived by itself but has to be known by another consciousness, then this second consciousness would, in turn, require yet another to be known. This would lead to an infinite regress that calls into question the very possibility of any knowledge whatsoever, including that of objects, insofar as their apprehension would necessitate knowing the consciousness that apprehends them.

In summary, this section presents Harivarman as an exponent of the Sautrāntika perspective, which synthesizes elements of both the Mahāsāṃghika and Sarvāstivāda traditions. For the first time, the focus on self-awareness shifts from soteriology – where the Mahāsāṃghika and Sarvāstivāda views emerge in connection with the notion of omniscience – to epistemology. Here, in fact, the central debate revolves around whether the mind is single or multiple, as well as questions concerning the timing, object, and substance of consciousness, along with the mental function of memory. Nonetheless, soteriology returns to the forefront when Harivarman suggests that yogic practice is the context in which self-awareness is both experienced and established, perhaps moderating these epistemological concerns by situating the discussion within the realm of meditative self-realization. Finally, Harivarman's contribution to the theme of self-awareness also includes an ontological dimension, namely, the introduction of the two truths framework as a decisive criterion for determining the degree of reality that can be ascribed to self-awareness.

2.5 Yogācāra

Yogācāra accounts of self-awareness necessarily involve consideration of their doxographical subdivision into the Sākāravāda and Nirākāravāda positions. This differentiation is based on the former school's assertion that cognition occurs through an image or aspect (SKT *ākāra*; TIB *rnam pa*) while the latter rejects this view. Thus, before addressing the Yogācāra view of self-awareness, the following sections will offer a brief survey of this doxographical distinction, providing a foundation for its proper understanding.

The term *ākāra* literally means 'form' or 'shape', with a secondary meaning of 'aspect', 'appearance' or 'image'. Indian philosophers, both Buddhist and non-Buddhist, have long discussed the role of *ākāra* in cognition.[42] However, the most debated issue is, perhaps, its ontological status: do the images perceived as objects of cognition belong to awareness itself or do they serve as evidence of an external world?

Behind this single term lies a complex evolution of thought which encompasses not only ontological issues but also soteriological and doxographical ones. From a soteriological point of view, the term *ākāra* refers to the sixteen aspects of the Four Noble Truths (Eltschinger 2014) but can also denote *buddha*'s cognition (Matsuoka 2014), which, according to some Buddhist views, is ultimately free from the duality of an 'objective aspect' (SKT *grāhyākāra*) and a 'subjective aspect' (SKT *grāhakākāra*). With regard to Buddhist accounts of ordinary epistemic acts, in line with the epistemological turn initiated by Dharmakīrti, the notion of *ākāra* is debated in relation to its capacity to represent the true nature of mind or, alternatively, to its being ultimately false. When it comes to philosophical and doxographical concerns, the Sākāravāda position holds that external reality imprints its likeness on to consciousness. By contrast, the Nirākāravāda view maintains that consciousness remains clear and pure even in the act of perceiving external reality, as it is a substance that does not undergo change, despite revealing the forms and features of the objects it apprehends.

To complete this summary, it may be helpful to reconstruct a genealogy of these two branches and highlight the main figures, some of whom were deeply influential in shaping the development of the doctrine of self-awareness. Among the main proponents of the Sākāravāda school are Dignāga (the founder), Dharmapāla, and Dharmakīrti, while, for the Nirākāravāda branch, the lineage begins

42 On the issue of *ākāra*, cf. Dreyfus 1996; 1997; 2006; Coseru 2012, 102 ff. For Śākya-mchog-ldan's (1428-1507) view on the topic, see Komarovski 2011. For the Sākāravāda and Nirākāravāda positions as they are described by Klong-chen-pa (1308-1364), see Almogi 2009. For further references to the topic of *ākāra*, see Kellner, McClintock 2014 and, in particular, Kellner 2014b.

with Asaṅga (395-470), followed by Vasubandhu and Sthiramati (475-555).

However, tracing the genealogy of the division between these two sub-schools remains quite problematic.[43] Funayama (2007)[44] offers a critical overview of the history of scholarship concerning the distinction between the Sākāra- and Nirākāravāda schools in the Yogācāra-Vijñānavāda tradition, noting that most of this research has been conducted within the context of Tibetan Buddhism. In the 1960s, Kajiyama (1965; 1966, 154-8) shed light on the final stage of Indian Mahāyāna philosophy by examining the controversy between Jñānaśrīmitra (980-1030), a Sākāravādin, and Ratnākaraśānti (ca. eleventh-twelfth century AD), a Nirākāravādin.[45] Other studies have also applied the definitions of *sākāra*- and *nirākāravāda* to earlier Indian texts, dating back to the time of Śāntarakṣita, Dharmakīrti, or even Sthiramati and Dharmapāla. However, as Funayama points out, it is not evident whether the same controversy can be found in these earlier texts. In fact, neither Śāntarakṣita nor his commentator, Kamalaśīla, explicitly employs terms such as *sākāra* or *nirākāra* when referring to the Yogācāra school (Funamaya 2007, 190). The same applies to Dharmakīrti: his *Pramāṇavārttika* (henceforth *PV*) suggests – according to Funayama – that Dharmakīrti was simply unaware of this distinction between the two Yogācāra sub-schools. Thus, Funamaya warns contemporary scholars against the risk of projecting later views on to earlier sources.[46]

Although the genealogies of the two Yogācāra sub-schools are complex and not easily delineated, one figure stands out in any comprehensive account for his role in mediating between their respective positions: Dharmapāla. Included by Katsura (1969) and Yao (2005) in the intellectual genealogy of the Sākāravāda tradition, Dharmapāla is noteworthy for his work on the texts of both Dignāga and Vasubandhu. Notably, Dharmapāla analyzes self-awareness from an

43 Yao (2005, 122) reconstructs this genealogy relying on Katsura 1969.

44 In order to compare Funamaya's perspective on this genealogy (2007) with the account provided by Kajiyama and Frauwallner, see Kajiyama 1965, 32-4.

45 In the literature on this topic, Kajiyama's (1965) study is particularly worth mentioning, as it examines the controversy between Jñānaśrīmitra and Ratnākaraśānti, addressing the connection between self-awareness and the luminosity of the mind. For further details, cf. Yiannopoulos 2017, 190 ff. For a wider discussion on the topic of reflexive awareness as luminosity in Ratnākaraśānti, see Yiannopoulos 2012, 171 ff. Moreover, the 18th Congress of the International Association of Buddhist Studies devoted a panel to *Prajñāpāramitopadeśa*: "A New Study of Ratnākaraśānti's *Prajñāpāramitopadeśa*" (25 August 2017).

46 When discussing Dignāga's and Dharmakīrti's accounts of self-awareness in this volume, the epistemological role of *ākāra* with respect to self-awareness will be revisited, considering the main proponents and references of the Sākāravāda branch (see § 3.2.1 and § 3.2.3).

epistemological perspective, integrating it into the broader Yogācāra doctrinal framework and elaborating it as an important component of the system. Moreover, Dharmapāla is well-known for introducing an additional layer to the concept of self-awareness: the cognition of self-awareness. While closely following Dignāga's conception of self-awareness, he nevertheless incorporates distinctive features that reflect his own perspective.[47] For Dharmapāla, self-awareness is the substantial basis for the subjective and objective aspects of cognition, and serves as a prerequisite for memory. A mental event, therefore, comprises four main elements: the subjective and objective aspects, self-awareness, and the cognition of self-awareness.[48]

Having laid the groundwork with this brief survey of the two Yogācāra sub-schools, it is now appropriate to consider how self-awareness was understood in early Yogācāra thought, especially in relation to the (alleged) founding figures of the Nirākāravāda tradition. To that end, it is appropriate to begin with two relevant and representative *sūtra* sources, regarded as authoritative by this school. A typical Nirākāravāda position on the concept of self-awareness is cited by Yao (2005, 124) from the *Saddharmalaṅkāvatārasūtra* (10.567-8):

> When it is said that there is something resembling body, property, and abode produced in a dream-like manner, a mind, indeed, is seen under the aspect of duality; but Mind itself is not dualistic. As a sword cannot cut itself, or as a finger cannot touch its own tip, Mind cannot see itself. (Suzuki 1932, 268)[49]

Once again, the images of the sword and the finger appear, this time in a passage that could be seen as aligned with the Yogācāra doctrine, where self-awareness is explicitly denied. The second *sūtra* source Yao picks is the following passage from the *Saṃdhinirmocanasūtra*:

> "Bhagavan, if the image that is the sphere of action of *samādhi*[50] is not different from the mind, how does the mind itself observe the mind itself?"

47 See also Williams 2009, 100 ff.

48 For specific references to Dharmapāla, see Yao 2005, 143-7.

49 *Saddharmalaṅkāvatārasūtra* 10.567-8: "*dehabhogapratiṣṭhābhaṃ svapnavajjāyate yadi | dvicittatā prasajyeta na ca cittaṃ dvilakṣaṇam || svadhāraṃ hi y athā khaḍgaṃ svāgraṃ vai aṅguliryathā | na chindate na spṛśate tathā cittaṃ svadarśane ||*".

50 This is the specific theme of the dialogue between the Buddha and Maitreya, but here this passage serves to consider the broader issue of the relationship between a mental object and the mind that observes it.

> The Bhagavan replied: "Maitreya, although no phenomenon observes any phenomenon, nevertheless, any mind that is generated in that way appears in that way. Maitreya, for instance: given a form, in a perfectly clear round mirror one sees the *form* itself, but one thinks, 'I see an *image*'. The form and the appearance of its image appear as different things. Likewise, the mind that is generated in that way and the sphere of action of *samādhi*, that is, the 'image', also appear as different things". (Italics added)[51]

Yao demonstrates that this passage is not as straightforward as it may seem initially: it is unclear whether the Bhagavan's response can be directly connected with *svasaṃvedana* as the technical concept later formulated by Dignāga. Regarding the perspective expressed in the question, there appears to be an implicit difficulty in accepting that the mind sees – actually, 'observes' or 'understands' (TIB *rtog par bgyid pa*) – itself:

> Maitreya's question challenges the fundamental thesis of Yogācāra idealism: the object of the mind is not different from the mind itself. On his view, this thesis faces the same difficulty as the mind seeing itself. (Yao 2005, 125)

51 The Tibetan reads (see Lamotte 1935, 90-1; for textual references, see Lamotte 1935, 9 ff.): "*bcom ldan 'das ting nge 'dzin gyi spyod yul gzugs brnyan de gal te gzugs sems de las tha dad pa ma lags na | sems de nyid kyis sems de nyid la ji ltar rtog par bgyid lags | bka' stsal pa | byams pa de la chos gang yang chos gang la 'ang rtog par mi byed mod kyi | 'on kyang de ltar skyes pa'i sems gang yin pa de ni de ltar snang ngo || byams pa 'di lta ste dper na | gzugs la brten nas me long gi dkyil 'khor shin tu yongs su dag pa la gzugs nyid mthong yang gzugs brnyan mthong ngo snyam du sems te | de la gzugs de dang | gzugs brnyan snang ba de don tha dad par snang ngo || de bzhin du de ltar skyes pa'i sems de dang | ting nge 'dzin gyi spyod yul gzugs brnyan zhes bya ba gang yin pa de'ang de las don gzhan yin pa lta bur snang ngo |*". As for the reading of *gzugs* in the passage "*gal te gzugs sems de las tha dad pa ma lags na*", Powers's (1995, 155) translation differs from the translations provided by Lamotte (1935, 211), Yao (2005, 125), and the Author. It seems difficult to make sense of the (a quasi-oxymoronic?) expression 'physical mind', with which Powers links *gzugs* and *sems*. As for the understanding of the passage "*gzugs nyid mthong yang gzugs brnyan mthong ngo snyam du sems te*", compare, on the one hand, the Author's translation and Powers's version (1995, 155: "form itself is seen […] but one thinks, 'I see an image'"), which entirely corresponds with Yao's translation (2005, 124), with Lamotte's rendering (1935, 212: "on s'imagine voir la matière et voir le reflet"), on the other. Here, whereas Powers, Yao, and the Author share the same reading, Lamotte seems to be conveying a different nuance. For a review of Powers's translation of *Saṃdhinirmocanasūtra* against Lamotte's, see Tillemans 1997.

If, despite holding an idealistic perspective, the early Yogācāra followers found it difficult to conceive of the mind as observing itself,[52] perhaps this is linked to the fact that their theory of self-awareness emphasizes a more soteriological perspective instead (Yao 2005, 123). They tended to interpret it differently, as 'self-realization' achieved through yogic practice – an aspect that will be explored in the next section. It was Dignāga, then, who first transformed this soteriological concern into an epistemological one.

2.6 Nāgārjuna's Specific Contribution

Before this chapter concludes, special attention should be given to Nāgārjuna, a key figure who, rather surprisingly, receives little attention in Yao's (2005) treatment of pre-Dignāga sources on *svasaṃvedana*. Nāgārjuna's approach to self-awareness revolves around the image of a burning lamp or fire in the context of the self-establishment of *pramāṇa*s – that is, epistemically valid cognitions. His work appears, therefore, to intersect with the theme of self-awareness by linking metaphors central to the Indian tradition with an epistemological reflection.

In the Indian tradition, one of the most frequently used analogies to illustrate self-awareness is that of a lamp, which not only illuminates the surrounding space but also simultaneously shines light on itself. In the same way, consciousness is said to be aware of itself at the very moment it perceives external objects. Nāgārjuna follows a similar line of reasoning in the two main sources where he addresses this topic: the *Vigrahavyāvartanī* (henceforth *VV*) (33-9) and the *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā* (7.8-12). The view Nāgārjuna (*VV* 33) argues against is that: "'Fire illuminates itself as well as other things. Likewise, the *pramāṇa*s establish themselves as well as other things'" (Johnston, Kunst 1978, 26).[53]

The philosophical issue at stake here is whether *pramāṇa*s can be established by themselves. Various arguments supporting this

52 Yao (2005, 127 ff.) takes into account the figure of the (allegedly) late Vasubandhu referring to his **Buddhadhātu-śāstra*, a work preserved only in its Chinese recension. Yao also shows the proximity that his view about self-awareness has to Harivarman's, namely, in terms of arguing for self-awareness. However, he rejects the image of the lamp as inappropriate, positing only mental consciousness as self-cognizant. The author of **Buddhadhātu-śāstra* bears Sautrāntika influence, but also seems to be oriented towards the Yogācāra position, at least in terms of arguing for a mental consciousness that always accompanies the consciousnesses of the five senses. However, with the help of Yao's access to and comments on the text (Yao 2005, 127-30), no significant addition to the present discourse was found in relation to the implications of self-awareness.

53 Nāgārjuna, *VV* 33: "*dyotayati svātmānaṃ yathā hutāśas tathā parātmānam | svaparātmānāv evaṃ prasādhayanti pramāṇāni ||*".

hypothesis are raised and addressed by Nāgārjuna. To begin with, it is not possible to claim that fire exists initially in darkness, unilluminated, and is then subsequently illuminated. Therefore, it cannot be said to illuminate itself (*VV* 34). If that were the case, fire would also burn itself – an argument that underscores a fundamental philosophical principle: the subject cannot be the object of its own act (*VV* 35). Moreover (*VV* 36), "If, as you say, fire illuminates both other things and itself, then darkness will cover both other things and itself" (Johnston, Kunst 1978, 28).[54]

But this is absurd: darkness does not conceal both itself and other things. Moreover, since illumination is the destruction of darkness, but "there is no darkness in fire", how can fire possibly illuminate?[55] There is no light before fire exists, as there is only darkness, and there is no darkness once fire exists, since darkness and light cannot coexist (Nāgārjuna, *VV* 38). One may argue that fire can expel darkness even without reaching it, but, in response, Nāgārjuna (*VV* 39) states: "then this fire, standing here, would destroy darkness in all the worlds" (Johnston, Kunst 1978, 29),[56] which is clearly absurd (cf. Nāgārjuna, *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā* 7.11). Thus, since fire does not expel darkness, it cannot illuminate itself. Nāgārjuna's equivalent assertion in *VV* 51, "The *pramāṇa*s are not established by themselves" (Johnston, Kunst 1978, 34),[57] would later be quoted frequently and "taken to mean that there is no self-consciousness" (Cozort 1998, 159) by subsequent Buddhist tradition.

Nāgārjuna's reasoning stands as a cornerstone in the Mādhyamika refutation of self-awareness, alongside the arguments outlined by Candrakīrti, and remains a pivotal reference in the dGe-lugs philosophical critique of *rang rig*, shaping the discourse on this issue for centuries to come.

2.7 The Problematic Link Between Self-Awareness and Self-Realization

To build on the overview presented in this chapter, a deeper examination of Yao's general thesis is in order. His argument focuses on the transition of *svasaṃvedana* from a soteriological concern to

54 Nāgārjuna, *VV* 33: "*yadi ca svaparātmānau tvadvacanena prakāśayatyagniḥ | pracchādayiṣyati tamaḥ svaparātmānaui hutāśa ivā ||*". Cf. Nāgārjuna, *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā* 7.12.

55 Nāgārjuna, *VV* 36; for a translation, see Johnston, Kunst 1978, 118.

56 Nāgārjuna, *VV* 39: "*sarveṣu lokadhātuṣu tamo 'yamiha saṃsthito hānyat ||*".

57 Nāgārjuna, *VV* 51: "*naiva svataḥ prasiddhirna*".

an epistemological one, as it gradually evolves from the first to the second phase in the development of the notion of self-awareness.

Yao (2005, 123 ff.) argues that, in the Yogācāra view, the emphasis on the soteriological aspect of self-awareness fully emerges through its connection to a specific aspect of yogic practice known as 'self-realization'. This concept is expressed, as referenced by Kapstein (2000, 110), through the equivalence between *pratyātma-vid* (SKT) and *so so rang rig* (TIB), paralleling Yao's (2005, 126) corresponding pair of terms, *pratyātmasaṃvedya* (SKT) and *so so rang gis rig pa* (TIB). With respect to this connection, two points must be considered.

The first point concerns how Yao introduces this topic within the Yogācāra view, specifically by referring to a short list of possible understandings of *rang rig* drawn from the Tibetan scholar Tsong-kha-pa Blo-bzang-grags-pa's *dBu ma la 'jug pa'i rang 'grel dang rnam bshad dgongs pa rab gsal* (2009, 347.11-13). Yao (2005, 127) quotes a particular passage from Tsong-kha-pa to interpret self-realization as an aspect of the broader concept of self-awareness within early Yogācāra thought. Thus, Tsong-kha-pa's quotation serves as a convenient tool for Yao to emphasize, or even lend legitimacy to, the inclusion of the soteriological theme of self-realization within the wider discourse on self-awareness. However, a closer examination of this quotation reveals that Yao's use of it is not fully substantiated:

> *de'i phyir de 'dra ba'i rang rig bkag pas rnal 'byor pa so so rang rang gis de kho na nyid rig pa'i rang rig bkag pa dang | 'jig rten pas ngas nga rang rig ces pa'i tha snyad kyi don gyi rang rig bkag zer ba ni blun po'i gtam mo* ||. (Tsong-kha-pa Blo-bzang-grags-pa 2009, 347.11-13)

> Therefore, it is foolish to claim that, by refuting such a [i] self-awareness, one refutes [ii] self-awareness in the sense of a yogi's individual realization of suchness and one refutes the [iii] self-awareness in the conventional sense, as when ordinary people say: "I understand by myself". (Numbers added)[58]

This passage contains three instances of the term *rang rig*, each with a distinct gloss: (i) *rang rig* in its technical sense (which is clear from the context); (ii) *rang rig* as 'the yogi's individual realization of suchness' (*rnal 'byor pa so so rang rang gis de kho na nyid rig pa'i rang rig*); and (iii) *rang rig* as a conventional expression meaning 'I understand by myself' (*ngas nga rang rig*). While refuting the first, Tsong-kha-pa does not refute the last two meanings.

58 Cf. Yao 2005, 123-4 for his translation.

Yao (2005, 124) identifies two key points in Tsong-kha-pa's statement. First, he notes that Tsong-kha-pa interprets (ii) self-realization as an element within the broader concept of self-awareness. Additionally, he observes that

> [Tsong-kha-pa] links it [self-realization] especially to the yogis (*rnal 'byor pa*). By 'yogi' he does not necessarily mean the Yogācāra (*rnal 'byor spyod pa*) because the yogi can refer to any yogic practitioner in various tradition of Buddhism. But it is also true that the Yogācāra tradition has a strong link to the practice of yogis. (Yao 2005, 124)

Thus, in an effort to strengthen the connection between yogic practice in general and the Yogācāra approach specifically, Yao introduces the overarching framework of a 'broader sense of self-cognition' to reinforce the arguably loose link between the epistemological and soteriological purposes for positing self-awareness, which correspond, respectively, to the first and second glosses of Tsong-kha-pa's quotation. However, in the lines of the text that precede those cited, Tsong-kha-pa does not indicate explicitly an intention to categorize or classify *rang rig* as a broader concept. Instead, the above quotation should be understood within the common tendency in Tibetan philosophical literature to present 'terminological divisions' (TIB *sgras brjod rigs kyi sgo nas dbye ba*) of a concept. This implies that, within such subdivisions, some items may not necessarily represent the concept itself but are simply designated by the same term. Therefore, unlike the first of the three meanings, the second and third glosses mentioned above can be labeled as *rang rig* without actually bearing that meaning. In fact, while the technical concept of *rang rig* emerges as a combination of 'reflexivity' and 'cognition', that is, some sort of cognition of oneself, the latter two do not refer to a 'reflexive' cognition but rather to a type of cognition that occurs 'within' a person, 'by' and 'for' themselves. Although Yao attempts to unify these three meanings under a broad overarching category of self-awareness, this book intends to focus on the term's most technical usage.

However, what has just been discussed should not preclude a second consideration regarding Yao's claim about the link between yogic self-realization and self-awareness. Broadly speaking, the relationship between the epistemological and soteriological implications of self-awareness is complex, a theme that will be explored in various contexts in the chapters to follow. In his insightful review, Kapstein remarks on Williams's monograph on self-awareness (1998), stating that

> there is very good reason to hold that *pratyātma-vid* has no special relationship in Indian Buddhism with Cittāmatra and that the concept in question belongs even to very early Buddhism. (Kapstein 2000, 112)

This concept refers more broadly to the adept's intuitive realization that one "must make by and for [oneself]" and certainly, in its original meaning, has "nothing whatsoever to do with epistemological theories of reflexive self-awareness" (Kapstein 2000, 113).[59] Thus, the key point here, once again, is that technical terms must be properly distinguished. Yao is fully aware of Kapstein's perspective, which is grounded in Sanskrit and Tibetan texts, but he argues for a more nuanced and complex approach to the relationship between these two notions. He does so by examining the ambiguity found in Chinese sources – which Kapstein does not address – where the term *zi zheng* could refer to either *pratyātmasaṃvedya* or *svasaṃvedana*. For Yao (2005, 126), this ambiguity challenges a strict distinction between the two concepts. While textual sources and technical terminology must be approached with caution, the vast variety of contexts and the specific nuances of the accounts in which this connection is presented make it difficult to reach a definitive conclusion about the nature of this link.

At the close of this chapter on the doctrinal background of *svasaṃvedana* prior to its formulation in Buddhist epistemology, the philosophical elements and controversies explored thus far, guided by Yao's valuable survey, should be kept in mind as integral pieces of the broader philosophical puzzle surrounding the notion of self-awareness. In the next chapters, this will function as the foundation for the subsequent unfolding of the Indo-Tibetan tradition and, in the third and final part of the volume, for a consideration of the relationships between the Buddhist views and the contemporary studies on consciousness.

59 On the distinction between the concept of *svasaṃvedana* (*rang rig*) and the general Mahāyāna Buddhist idea of *pratyātmavedya* or *vedanīya* (*so so rang* [*gi/gis*] *rig* [*par bya ba*]), that is, a sort of interiorized awareness, one's intuitive realization that one must make by and for oneself, cf. Yao 2002, 124, 126-7; Kapstein 2002, 109-18; Seyfort Ruegg 2002, 221-2 fn. 120.

3 Dignāga and Later Developments

Summary 3.1 Dignāga on *Svasaṃvedana*: A Hotly Debated Issue. – 3.1.1 Is Self-Awareness Included in Mental Perception or Is It a Separate Type of Perception? – 3.1.2 Self-Awareness, Memory, and the Two Forms (or Aspects) of Cognition. – 3.1.3 Self-Awareness as *Pramāṇaphala*. – 3.1.4 Some Readings of Dignāga's *Svasaṃvedana*. – 3.2 Later Developments in the Issue of *Svasaṃvedana*. – 3.2.1 Dharmakīrti and the Continuation of Dignāga's Epistemological Project. – 3.2.2 Candrakīrti and Śāntideva: A Sharp Criticism of *Svasaṃvedana*. – 3.2.3 Śāntarakṣita's Contribution.

3.1 Dignāga on *Svasaṃvedana*: A Hotly Debated Issue

In Buddhism, the notion of *svasaṃvedana* is first articulated formally within an epistemological framework by Dignāga, the principal figure behind the epistemological shift in the fifth and sixth centuries AD. To better appreciate this Indian scholar's pivotal philosophical contribution, his writings will also be analyzed from the perspectives of modern philologists and philosophers who have engaged with these materials, the aim being to integrate his thought with the questioning process in the ongoing debates on the nature of self-awareness. The intention is to move beyond the comparative method that scholars have relied upon primarily thus far, in order to engage more critically and deeply with the implications of Dignāga's philosophy.

There are two main texts in which Dignāga deals with *svasaṃvedana* in detail. Both have been lost in Sanskrit, their

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original language: the *Pramāṇasamuccaya* (henceforth *PS*) and its *-vṛtti* 'autocommentary' (henceforth *PSV*). The first chapters of these texts, dealing with perception, form the main passages devoted to the issue and will be analyzed in order to show the extent of variation in their interpretation. A comprehensive examination of Dignāga's treatment of self-awareness across these two texts would necessitate a far-reaching investigation that exceeds the limits of this study. Thus, attention will be restricted to the most contested elements of the concept of *svasaṃvedana*.

The main difficulties in this analysis stem from the selection and interpretation of the textual sources. In recent decades, modern scholars have often debated Dignāga's account of self-awareness; only in the last few years, however, have some philological studies been able to provide additional textual materials. In addition to some extant Sanskrit fragments (Hattori 1968), there are also two often problematic and divergent Tibetan translations of Dignāga's *PSV* – one by Kanakavarman and the other by Vasudhararakṣita – as well as a relatively recent hypothetical reconstruction of the original Sanskrit text undertaken by Steinkellner (2005; 2014). Steinkellner et al. reconstructed this text based on Jinendrabuddhi's (ca. eighth century AD) commentary on Dignāga's work, which frequently incorporates material from the original text (Steinkellner, Krasser, Lasic 2005). However, it must be noted that relying on this commentary carries the risk of superimposing Dharmakīrti's later, and possibly distinct, ideas onto Dignāga's thought, as Jinendrabuddhi's interpretation closely aligns with Dharmakīrti's *PV*. In light of these materials, Kellner (2010), in particular, has attempted a radical reconsideration of the issue of Dignāga's account of self-awareness, thus rebooting the contemporary debate on it and advancing a new interpretation that challenges significantly the established exegetical tradition and aligns with some modern perspectives on self-awareness. Yao (2004; 2005) is another who invites the contemporary scholarly community to consider also what Dignāga's *Nyāyamukha* has to say about this topic and disapproves of the lack of adequate attention this earlier text has received so far. A more recent tendency in scholarship – seen, for instance, in Steinkellner (2005) and Kellner (2010, 207) – has been to read the *PS* and *PSV* together as a single, unified composition in which verse and prose are interwoven rather than to treat them as two independent works. As one might expect, this approach has led to an array of intricate philological issues.

3.1.1 Is Self-Awareness Included in Mental Perception or Is It a Separate Type of Perception?

The following section engages with the philosophical foundations of self-awareness as formulated by Dignāga, examining its defining features within his epistemological system. *Svasaṃvedana* is a *pramāṇa* 'epistemically valid cognition' that is free from conceptual construction[1] and included within perceptions that are independent of the senses (SKT *indriyāni*). This category encompasses mental perceptions of external objects as well as self-awareness of desire and other mental factors,[2] and also includes conceptual cognitions.[3] Before going into the details of Dignāga's account of self-awareness, however, it is important to locate this specific type of cognition within the broader system of perception as outlined by Dignāga, a framework on which modern scholarship has yet to reach a consensus.[4]

Some scholars argue that Dignāga subsumes self-awareness within mental perception,[5] while others claim that he considers it as a separate type of perception. The former group includes Hattori (1968), Nagatomi (1980), Franco (1993; 2005), and Kellner (2010); the latter is composed of Wayman (1977-78; 1991) and Yao (2004; 2005). In a brief examination of the main arguments each side advances,

1 Dignāga, *PS* 1.3c: "***pratyakṣaṃ kalpanāpoḍhaṃ***". Please note that, here and in the following quotations, the Sanskrit text of the *PS* and *PSV* is taken from Steinkellner's (2005; 2014) hypothetical reconstruction (revised). Fully reconstructed words without attested Sanskrit fragments are in roman typeface; bold script is used for the *ślokas* of *PS* (and for the words of the *ślokas* used in the prose of the *PSV*).

2 Dignāga, *PS* 1.6ab: "***mānasaṃ cārtharāgādisvasaṃvittir akalpikā*** |". The related autocommentary (Dignāga, *PSV* 1.6ab) states: "*mānasam api rūpādiviṣayālambanam avikalpakam anubhavākārapravṛttaṃ rāgādiṣu ca svasaṃvedanam indriyānapekṣatvān mānasaṃ pratyakṣam*". In Hattori's translation: "The mental [perception] which, taking a thing of color, etc., for its object, occurs in the form of immediate experience (*anubhava*) is also free from conceptual construction. The self-awareness (*sva-saṃvedana*) of desire, anger, ignorance, pleasure, pain, etc., is [also recognized as] mental perception because it is not dependent on any sense-organ" (Hattori 1968, 27; square brackets in the original). Note that both of the extant Tibetan versions (Hattori 1968, 180-1) are identical in listing instances of mental factors: "*'dod chags dang zhe sdang dang gti mug dang bde ba dang sdug bsngal la sogs pa ni*" (attachment, anger, ignorance, pleasure, pain etc.).

3 Dignāga, *PS* 1.7ab: "***kalpanāpi svasaṃvittāv iṣṭānārthe vikalpanāt*** |". In Hattori's translation: "7ab. even conceptual construction, when it is brought to internal awareness, is admitted [as a type of perception]. However, with regard to the [external] object, [the conceptual construction is] not [admissible as perception], because it conceptualizes [the object]" (Hattori 1968, 27; square brackets in the original).

4 For a brief summary of the controversy, see Kellner 2010, 207 fn. 11; Coseru 2012, 254 fn. 69.

5 For a detailed study on the role of *mānasa-pratyakṣa* 'mental perception' within the whole cognizing process, in its Indian and Tibetan understandings, see Tillemans 1989.

many questions will arise regarding the nature of self-awareness and how it relates to other forms of cognition.

The earliest position on this issue was advocated by Hattori on the basis of his rendering of *PS* 1.6ab:

> there is also mental [perception, *which is of two kinds*:] awareness of an [external] object and self-awareness of [such subordinate mental activities as] desire and the like, [both of which are] free from conceptual construction. (Hattori 1968, 27; square brackets in the original; italics added)

Nagatomi (1980, 245) concurs that Dignāga subsumes self-awareness under mental perception but offers a different interpretation of this passage. According to his understanding, Dignāga would be referring not to two distinct 'kinds' of mental perception (SKT *mānasa-pratyakṣa*), but, rather, to two different 'aspects' of it: the object-cognizing aspect and the self-cognizing aspect. Nagatomi's claim is supported by two main reasons. First, if one were to read two types of perception in *PS* 1.6ab, the passage would offer no indication as to why mental perception must be acknowledged or how it differs from sense perception (SKT *indriya-pratyakṣa*). Second, it would turn out to be incongruous with Dignāga's *svasaṃvedana* theory, according to which self-awareness is considered a *pratyakṣa* 'perception' and applies to every mental event, indicating that, because of its self-luminous nature, a given cognition does not need another cognition to be cognized. These two difficulties, Nagatomi explains,

> can be removed if we understood the passage as Dignāga's explication of the first aspect, viz. the 'awareness of an object' or the object-cognizing aspect, of *mānasa-pratyakṣa* whose second *aspect* is its 'self-awareness' in the form of passion, etc. (Nagatomi 1980, 245; italics in the original)

Thus, in the former aspect, *mānasa-pratyakṣa* manifests itself in an object-form, while, in the latter aspect, it cognizes it. Nagatomi finds further support for his interpretation in Dignāga's reference (*PS* and *PSV* 1.11-12) to the two-fold appearance of every mental event, namely, the appearance of an object and that of cognition itself, which will be discussed in § 3.1.2.

Franco (1986) is perhaps the scholar most devoted to this issue, taking active part in the controversy. While it is true that he generally aligns with Hattori and Nagatomi in reading Dignāga as subsuming self-awareness under mental perception, he nevertheless articulates his own position by contrasting the opposing views of Hattori and Wayman and proposing a third interpretation that

incorporates elements of both, thus seeking a "compromise between the two" (Franco 1986, 79). Hattori interprets *svasaṃvedana* as a kind of mental perception that takes a subordinate mental activity as its object whereas Wayman considers it to be a distinct type of perception, separate from the mental one and the others. Franco's position navigates between these poles, seeking to reconcile their insights. Franco states about Dignāga:

> he did not accept *svasaṃvedana* as a fourth type of perception. The point becomes quite clear when we look at *Pramāṇasamuccaya* 1.6ab and the *Vṛtti* thereupon: in a manner which leaves no place for ambiguity Dignāga *subsumes* the self-apprehension of desire etc., under mental perception! (Franco 1986, 82; italics in the original)[6]

Franco's view represents a middle path: it incorporates Hattori's perspective by classifying *svasaṃvedana* within the domain of mental perception while, at the same time, treating it as an 'aspect of cognition' – a position that, albeit within the restricted framework of mental perception, appears to align with Wayman's interpretation of *svasaṃvedana* as a distinct type of perception.

In 1993 Franco came back to this topic, responding to Wayman's provocative footnote (Wayman 1991, 423 fn. 17) which directly expressed his criticism of Franco's reading of the passage in *PSV* 1.6ab. In the first pages of his article, Franco (1993) reflects on his understanding of the aforementioned passage against Wayman's interpretation, which holds that Dignāga posits four kinds of perception: *indriya*, *mānasa*, *svasaṃvedana* and *yogi* (Wayman 1977-78, 393). Then, addressing the issue of the Sanskrit rendering and its interpretation and making a strong case for reading only three types of perception in the *PS*, Franco demonstrates that the assumption of a four-fold perception in Dignāga's view is highly doubtful and not supported by Dignāga's own words but rather "only by Dharmakīrti's reshuffle of them" (Franco 1993, 295).

Although it appears, as Coseru (2020, 124) suggests, that Dignāga formulated *svasaṃvedana* within an epistemological framework particularly concerned with the nature and function of perception,

6 The main debate Franco recalls and relaunches revolves around the following passage of Dignāga's *PS* (1.7cd-8ab): "*bhrāntisaṃvṛtisajjñānam anumānānumānikam || smārtābhilāṣikaṃ ceti pratyakṣābhaṃ sataimiram |*". In Hattori's translation: "erroneous cognition, cognition of empirical reality, inference, its result, recollection, and desire are not true perceptions and are accompanied by obscurity (*sataimira*)" (Hattori 1968, 28). For all the references related to this philological and philosophical debate, revolving around the meaning of the word *sataimira* in this context, cf. Hattori 1968, 95-7 fn. 53; Wayman 1977-78; Franco 1986.

Franco challenges the broader interpretative framework that underlies much of contemporary exegesis:

> However, even by arguing for three against four types of perception, we are already caught in Dharmakīrti's web. For by doing so we already presuppose that Dignāga was typologyzing different types of perception. A less biased reading of Dignāga does not seem to warrant such a presupposition. Reading the text independently of Dharmakīrti, one should probably maintain that for Dignāga there is only one type of perception, that is, a cognition which is free from conceptual construction. Or better still, that Dignāga was not at all concerned with types of perception. (Franco 1993, 298)

This is also seen as an invaluable insight by other contributors to the debate. In fact, Dunne (2006, 505) follows Franco, and Kellner's specific contribution to the debate on three- *versus* four-fold perception also originates from Franco's aforementioned analysis:

> The PSV distinguishes mental perception and self-awareness in terms of its object – the former applies to external objects, the latter to mental associates – but also points out a common feature: their independence of the external sense-faculties. Agreeing with Franco's suggestion that Dignāga did not intend to provide a typology of perception in the first place, I am referring to self-awareness simply as *a form of* (mental) perception. (Kellner 2010, 207 fn. 11; italics added)

Later, Franco (2005, 632) once again draws attention to the topic by claiming that Dignāga refers to *svasaṃvedana* as a "subspecies" of *mānasa-pratyakṣa*. This time he targets the interpretation Yao gives of *PSV* 1.6ab. The conundrum is about the word *mānasaṃ*, which is found in a Sanskrit fragment but not in the Tibetan versions, and occurs towards the end of the passage: "*rāgādiṣu ca svasaṃvedanam indriyānapekṣatvān mānasaṃ pratyakṣam*" – "The self-awareness (*sva-saṃvedana*) of desire, anger, ignorance, pleasure, pain, etc., is [also recognized as] mental perception because it is not dependent on any sense-organ" (Hattori 1968, 27; square brackets in the original; see § 3.1.1 fn. 2). Franco (2005, 632-3) employs a philological argument to support his position against Yao, emphasizing that the Sanskrit

fragment, being the *lectio difficilior*, should be given preference over the Tibetan translations, as previously noted by Hattori.[7]

Yao's (2004; 2005) contribution will now be examined as he represents another prominent voice in the debate on Dignāga's *pratyakṣa*, particularly among those who argue that Dignāga regards *svasaṃvedana* as a distinct type of perception. Yao's first criticism (2005, 132), aimed at Franco and like-minded scholars, is methodological in nature. He argues that these scholars have overlooked Dignāga's early works preserved in Chinese, as well as the commentarial tradition of Dharmapāla and his Chinese counterparts. This is a sizeable omission because, in the *Nyāyamukha* (a work, as mentioned before, extant only in Chinese), Dignāga clearly describes not a three- but a four-fold type of perception – listing self-awareness separately. Thus, Yao claims:

> most contemporary scholars follow [Prajñākaragupta] to interpret Dignāga's position on the typology of perception. This reflects a general tendency among scholars of Indian Buddhism, who give Sanskrit texts a higher preference despite the fact that the Sanskrit manuscripts we have today are usually dated quite late. In the case of Dignāga, […] many scholars still prefer to study him on the basis of the Sanskrit fragments found in later commentatorial works. When these Sanskrit fragments do not agree with the Tibetan or Chinese translations, they would disregard or emend the translations accordingly without hesitation. (Yao 2004, 75)

Against Franco and other scholars, Yao (2005, 141) claims that mental perception can only be directed towards external objects and that self-awareness is the internal awareness of mental consciousness only – by itself, sense perception would not be self-cognizant. This last claim, in particular, is openly rejected by Franco (2005, 632). Moreover, Yao (2005, 141) raises another criticism against those who deny *svasaṃvedana* as a distinct type of perception, arguing that such a position stems from a misunderstanding of the relationship between self-awareness and the two-fold 'appearance' (SKT *ābhāsa*) of cognition, that is, the self-appearance of cognition and the appearance of the object. With respect to that, the first scholar Yao criticizes is Nagatomi, for, as seen previously, he understands self-awareness as the subjective aspect or the self-appearance of

7 "I do not believe that the disappearance of *mānasaṃ* was accidental. I think rather that the word *mānasaṃ* was intentionally deleted, or not copied (or not translated), from a manuscript. Some attentive copyist or reader (or translator) must have realized that Dignāga's text, as it stood, was incompatible with Dharmakīrti's statements on perception, and that by simply eliminating the word *mānasaṃ* a harmony between the two could be achieved" (Franco 2005, 633).

cognition. Yao's point in distinguishing them and clarifying their relationship is straightforward; he maintains that self-awareness inherently 'possesses' the two-fold appearance:

> The way Dignāga understands the relationship between self-cognition and the self-appearance of cognition, in brief, is that the former possesses the latter but not *vice versa*. (Yao 2005, 142)

In this section it has been shown that while some scholars argue *PS* 1.6ab presents self-awareness as a distinct type of perception, others maintain that Dignāga incorporates it within mental perception. In the end, as Franco suggests, all of this may ultimately be symptomatic of the extent to which the discussion is already shaped by Dharmakīrti's later interpretation of the topic. Although no agreement has been reached by modern scholars, this is an important point to contemplate in order to attempt locating this cognition within Dignāga's system of perception as a whole.

3.1.2 Self-awareness, Memory, and the Two Forms (or Aspects) of Cognition

To fully explore the implications of the various standpoints in this ongoing debate, it is necessary to take an additional step by outlining the distinctive features of Dignāga's understanding of *svasaṃvedana*. The main scholars discussed so far have raised the aforementioned issues for different reasons. Some focus on strictly philological aspects, concerning the availability and selection of textual materials as well as the interpretation of specific expressions. Others emphasize the role of the commentarial tradition, highlighting how later scholars and commentators may have influenced the reading of Dignāga's original account. Finally, some engage with the internal structure of *svasaṃvedana*, examining its objects, functions, components and its two aspects. In order to unpack all these controversies, it is worthwhile investigating some crucial philological points, using the most recent textual sources available, to see whether and how they could shed light on the core issue itself, that is, the nature and structure of self-awareness. Thus, the philological dimension will be involved here through the analysis of relevant passages with the aim of deepening the philosophical inquiry into the meaning of this notion, its internal constituents, and defining characteristics. This survey on Dignāga's position will begin with his demonstration of the necessity of self-awareness and its two-fold nature, and examine one of the most dense and intricate aspects of his account: the implications of his conception of *svasaṃvedana* as the result of a

pramāṇa (SKT *pramāṇaphala*) – that is, a resulting cognition, a notion that will be addressed in the course of the discussion (see § 3.1.3).

According to Dignāga, self-awareness is a *pramāṇa* free from conceptual construction, a perception that is independent of the senses and that holds mental factors as well as conceptual cognitions as its objects. The nature of the relationship between self-awareness and the subjective and objective aspects of cognition is set forth in *PS* (and *PSV*) 1.11, where Dignāga explains that cognition has two forms or appearances, namely, the object-appearance and its own appearance. Three arguments are jointly used as proof.[8] The first argument is that in order for the object-cognition and the cognition of the object-cognition to be different from each other, as they actually are, two aspects are needed. Concerning the second argument, the object-appearance has to be posited in order for memory to connect with objects that have been cognized previously. Finally, the third argument for positing the two forms of cognition is that memory retains both the object and the act of cognition itself. These three lines of reasoning do not suggest any specific stance on the ontological status of the objects of cognition, whether they exist externally or not. However, they effectively account for the internal structure of cognition, regardless of its object,[9] and provide a framework for understanding both its intentionality, which refers to its capacity to be about, represent, or cognize something, and its phenomenal feature, which pertains to how something appears subjectively.

Concerning the third line of reasoning just mentioned, in the final part of *PSV* 1.11c, Dignāga asserts that, since there is memory of both the object and its cognition, cognition has two forms or aspects, and it is also brought to awareness by itself (*svasaṃvedyatā*) (Kellner 2010, 210).[10] Hattori's translation of the same passage (*PSV* 1.11c) in its entirety reads as follows:

8 Dignāga, *PS* (and *PSV*) 1.11a-c: "*atha dvirūpaṃ* jñānam iti kathaṃ pratipādyam. (1.11ab) ***viṣayajñānatajjñānaviśeṣāt tu dvirūpatā* | *viṣaye*** *hi rūpādau yaj* ***jñāna****ṃ tad arthasvābhāsam eva. viṣayajñāne tu yaj* ***jñāna****ṃ tad viṣayānurūpajñānābhāsaṃ svābhāsaṃ ca. anyathā yadi viṣayānurūpam eva viṣayajñānaṃ syāt svarūpaṃ vā, jñānajñānam api viṣayajñānenāviśiṣṭaṃ syāt. na cottarottarāṇi jñānāni pūrvaviprakṛṣṭaviṣayābhāsāni syuḥ, tasyāviṣayatvāt. ataś ca siddhaṃ dvairūpyaṃ jñānasya*. (1.11c) ***smṛter uttarakālaṃ ca*** dvairūpyam iti sambandhaḥ. *yasmāc* ***cā****nubhav****ottarakālaṃ*** *viṣaya iva jñāne 'pi smṛtir utpadyate, tasmād asti dvirūpatā jñānasya svasaṃvedyatā ca*". For a translation of these passages, see Hattori 1968, 29-30.

9 Kellner (2010, 216) makes this point explicit and clear: "If Dignāga borrowed the idea of two appearances from Yogācāra, then his argumentation does not indicate this was because of its relationship to the non-existence (or non-cognizability) of external objects".

10 As Kellner (2010, 210 fn. 20) notes, here, in Sanskrit, the term *svasaṃvedya* is a passive form that seems to suggest that cognition is brought to awareness by itself – corresponding to the active *svasaṃvedana* (meaning that cognition cognizes itself).

> Some time after [we have perceived a certain object], there occurs [to our mind] the recollection of our cognition as well as the recollection of the object. So it stands that cognition is of two forms. Self-cognition is also [thus established]. (Hattori 1968, 30; square brackets in the original)[11]

Memory, therefore, not only proves the two forms of cognition but also self-awareness.

In order to see how this memory argument for *svasaṃvedana* further unfolds, the next step is to consider *PS* (and *PSV*) 1.11-12.[12] Memory requires a precondition, namely a prior experience of either objects or their cognition. An object or its cognition cannot be recalled unless it has been experienced previously. In other words, in *PS* (and *PSV*) 1.11d it is stated: "Whatsoever is recollected has been experienced before" (Hattori 1968, 110 fn. 75).[13] Therefore, either cognitions are experienced by other cognitions, just as objects are, or they are self-experiencing. If cognitions were known through other cognitions, this would lead to an infinite regress (*regressus ad infinitum*);[14] therefore, following Dignāga's reasoning, self-awareness is established.

However, despite Dignāga's whole argument, a crucial problem does not seem to have easy solutions. Kellner raises it as follows:

> If, however, Dignāga intends to establish self-awareness as an intrinsic feature of all mental states and thereby as a part of their nature, then his argument based on memory is problematic, for strictly speaking it proves self-awareness only of cognitions that are or can be remembered. But does Dignāga believe that all cognitions can be remembered? To my knowledge, it is by no means

11 As Kellner (2010, 213 fn. 31) observes, this is a delicate passage that has often led scholars (modern ones, such as Arnold, and Tibetan ones, mainly dGe-lugs) to the identification of self-awareness with the subject-aspect.

12 Dignāga, *PS* (and *PSV*) 1.11d-12b: "*kiṃ kāraṇam*. (1.11d) ***na hy asāv avibhāvite*** **||** *na hy ananubhūtārthavedanasmṛtī* rūpādi*smṛti*vat. *syād etat* – rūpādivaj jñānasyāpi *jñānāntareṇānubhavaḥ*. tad apy ayuktam, yasmāj (1.12ab1) ***jñānāntareṇānubhave 'niṣṭhā*** anavasthāiti tajjñāne ***jñānāntareṇa***+anubhūyamāne. kasmāt. (1.12b2) ***tatrāpi hi smṛtiḥ*** **|** *yena* ***hi*** *jñānena* taj *jñānam anubhūyate,* ***tatrāpy*** *uttarakālaṃ* ***smṛtir*** *dṛṣṭā. tatas tatrāpy anyena* jñānena-*ānubhave 'navasthā syāt*". For a translation of these passages, see Hattori 1968, 30.

13 Dignāga, *PSV* 1.11d: "*na hy ananubhūtārthavedanasmṛtī rūpādismṛtivat*".

14 For a thorough analysis of this argument in Dignāga (and in Dharmakīrti), see Kellner 2011b. Kellner is particularly incisive in her considerations on this point: "Self-awareness is neither *reflective* (a subsequent act of reflection directed at an earlier mental state) nor *introspective* (a look 'inside' at one's own mental realm), since both of these approaches would involve stipulating a separate higher-order mental state" (Kellner 2010, 215; italics in the original).

> clear from his works whether Dignāga would limit subsequent memory to certain classes of mental states, or to states that occur only under specific conditions, like wakefulness. (Kellner 2010, 215)

Moreover, Kellner continues, it is unlikely that Dignāga did not intend to present *svasaṃvedana* as an intrinsic feature of all mental states since *PS* and *PSV* 1.8cd-10 mention the self-awareness of a mental state regardless of whether it is later recalled. This potential weakness of Dignāga's argument will be brought up again later in the inquiry when Dharmakīrti's line of reasoning will be taken into account and a comparison between the two arguments will be made. For the moment, this is sufficient to reveal that, for Dignāga, the (supposed) possibility to establish self-awareness stems from epistemological issues concerning the mnemic cognitive function.

3.1.3 Self-Awareness as *Pramāṇaphala*

Another intricate and profound aspect of Dignāga's position on *svasaṃvedana* is its role as the 'result of a *pramāṇa*' (SKT *pramāṇaphala*). As mentioned above, Dignāga deals with this topic in *PS* and *PSV* 1.8cd-10.[15] In 1.8cd he says that cognition (of external objects) is a result of *pramāṇa*. In 1.9a, however, he claims that self-awareness is a result of *pramāṇa*. What is, then, the relationship between the two statements? The link between them is the particle *vā* 'or', which indicates an alternative. It introduces the second clause, namely "*svasaṃvittiḥ phalaṃ vātra*" (Dignāga, *PS* 1.9a) – "or self-awareness is the result here" (Kellner 2010, 220). To synthetize the overall point, the sentence could thus be rephrased as: the result of a *pramāṇa* is either the cognition of external objects or self-awareness. Moreover, in the *PSV* passage commenting

15 Dignāga, *PS* and *PSV* 1.8cd-10: "(1.8cd) ***savyāpārapratītatvāt pramāṇaṃ phalam eva sat*** || *na hy atra bāhyakānām iva pramāṇād arthāntaraṃ phalam. tasyaiva tu* phalabhūtasya *jñānasya viṣayākārat*ayā utpattyā ***savyāpārapratītiḥ***. *tām* upādāya *pramāṇatvam upacaryate nirvyāpāram api sat. tad yathā* phalaṃ hetvanurūpam utpadyamānaṃ heturūpaṃ gṛhṇātīty kathyate nirvyāpāram api, tadvad atrāpi. (1.9a) ***svasaṃvittiḥ phalaṃ vātra*** *dvyābhāsaṃ hi jñānam utpadyate svābhāsaṃ viṣayābhāsaṃ ca. tasyobhayābhāsasya yat svasaṃvedanaṃ tat* ***phalam***. *kiṃ kāraṇam*. (1.9b) ***tadrūpo hy arthaniścayaḥ*** | *yadā hi saviṣayaṃ jñānam arthaḥ, tadā svasaṃvedanānurūpam arthaṃ pratipadyata iṣṭam aniṣṭaṃ vā. yadā tu bāhya evārthaḥ prameyaḥ, tadā* (1.9c) ***viṣayābhāsataivāsya pramāṇaṃ*** *tadā hi jñānasvasaṃvedyam api svarūpam anapekṣyārth****ābhāsataivāsya pramāṇam****. yasmāt so 'rthaḥ* (1.9d) ***tena mīyate*** || *yathā yathā hy arthākāro jñāne pratibhāti śubhāśubhāditvena, tattadrūpaḥ sa viṣayaḥ pramīyate. evaṃ jñānasaṃvedanaṃ anekākāram upādāya tathā tathā pramāṇaprameyatvam upacaryate. nirvyāpārās tu sarvadharmāḥ. āha ca* (1.10ab) ***yadābhāsaṃ prameyaṃ tat pramāṇaphalate punaḥ*** | (1.10cd) ***grāhakākārasaṃvittyos trayaṃ nātaḥ pṛthak kṛtam*** ||".

on 1.9a, Dignāga specifies that the result is self-awareness 'with both appearances' (SKT *tasyobhayābhāsasya*), employing a *bahuvrīhi* compound that implies self-awareness possesses the very qualities it refers to: *svasaṃvedana* possesses both appearances. However, the implications of using this type of compound are not entirely unambiguous, as Kellner observes.

> [T]his could again be taken in a narrower and a wider sense: either cognition is just aware of itself as having both appearances – it is aware of itself as somehow encompassing both aspects – or it also has access to both these appearances. In other words, is the *existence of* both appearances within the scope of self-awareness, or are the appearances themselves within its scope? (Kellner 2010, 221; italics in the original)

In other terms, when getting at the internal articulation of *svasaṃvedana*, it seems that no clear indications can be found in Dignāga. Kellner appears to question the potential significance of this compound, 'having both appearances'. Is it merely a secondary, descriptive detail that adds little to our understanding of the kind of experience one can have of one's own cognition? Or is it a deliberate and meaningful specification, one that opens up a deeper interpretative layer – suggesting that self-awareness grants access to, and a deeper insight into, how each of the two appearances discloses? The relevance of that *bahuvrīhi* is still a mystery and the variety of the subsequent traditional developments of the notion of self-awareness is evidence of this ambiguity.

However, returning to the main line of reasoning in the text – which concerns the alternatives of *pramāṇaphala* being either the cognition of external objects or self-awareness – it is worth examining in detail the way this alternative is presented in *PSV* 1.9b, where the order is reversed in comparison to how it was originally stated in the *PS*. First of all, Dignāga describes the latter of the two alternatives, which will be presented here both in translation and in the original Sanskrit: "when *a cognition possessing [the form of] an object* (*saviṣayaṃ jñānam*) is itself the object to be cognized" (Hattori 1968, 29; italics added; square brackets in the original) – "*yadā hi saviṣayaṃ jñānam arthaḥ*" (Dignāga, *PSV* 1.9b) – "then one cognises the object as desirable or undesirable in conformity with self-awareness" (Kellner 2010, 222) – "*tadā svasaṃvedanānurūpam arthaṃ pratipadyata iṣṭam aniṣṭaṃ vā*" (Dignāga, *PSV* 1.9b). The text then introduces the former alternative, in which *pramāṇaphala* is the cognition of external objects, and this case is described as "when, on the other hand, *only an external thing* is [considered to be] the object" (Hattori 1968, 29; italics added; square brackets in the original) – "*yadā tu bāhyaevārthaḥ prameyaḥ*" (Dignāga, *PSV* 1.9b).

Thus, for Hattori and most scholars, the Sanskrit particle *vā* introduces two alternatives of *pramāṇaphala*: the result is the cognition of an object when the object is an 'external object'; alternatively, the result is self-awareness when the object is 'a cognition possessing the form of an object'. In modern scholarship there has been notable research around these alternatives and it has been unanimously assumed that Dignāga's reason for specifying them rests in the difference between objects of cognition, whether 'external' (in the first case) or 'internal' to the mind (in the second case). As one might expect, these two instances have been interpreted as a convenient means for Dignāga to put and keep together the Sautrāntika and Yogācāra views – the former positing external objects from which cognition arises and the latter advocating an epistemic idealism – bridging their two tenets with the notion of self-awareness.[16]

Interestingly, it is once again Kellner (2010, 225) who offers a thoroughly innovative interpretation of this particular passage. She provides a couple of philological remarks and, on the basis of those, a revealing interpretation of the particle *hi* 'because' and the compound *saviṣayam* 'with an object' in the phrase "*yadā hi saviṣayaṃ jñānam arthaḥ*" (Dignāga, *PSV* 1.9b), which opens the description of the alternative indicating self-awareness as the result. This passage could be roughly translated as: "[Self-awareness is the result] because (*hi*), when a cognition with [the form of] an object (*saviṣayaṃ*) is the object to be cognized".

Regarding this passage, the first consideration Kellner makes is that the *PSV* introduces its commentary on 1.9b with the explanatory particle *hi*, meaning 'because'. This particle introduces the reason why self-awareness is described as the result and it is present in Steinkellner's reconstruction of the Sanskrit version but was overlooked by Hattori and other scholars who have primarily relied on the Tibetan translations, where the connection is not explicitly indicated. This is a primary element to consider in the broader interpretation of this passage within scholarly discourse. Thus, according to Kellner, *PSV* 1.9b would introduce the account of self-awareness as the result using 'because' (SKT *hi*), a particle that, as noted, is absent in Hattori's and other scholars' translations. The relevance of this term will be clarified in the following pages.

This said, Kellner explains, according to Jinendrabuddhi, that another major point of that passage is the compound *saviṣayam* 'with an object', which follows immediately after the particle *hi*. Following Kellner, *saviṣayam* – 'with an object' – should not be understood as

16 Hattori (1968, 102 fn. 61), for instance, is aligned with this interpretation; for some considerations referring to the Sautrāntika and Yogācāra views, also see Yao 2005, 143; Kataoka 2016. For a radically different account, cf. Kellner 2011a.

indicating that cognition is 'endowed with' (the form of) an object, as most other interpreters suggest. Rather, it implies that what is at stake is (everything from) cognition 'extending up to and including' the object. Actually, Kellner points out that *saviṣayam* is "an indeclinable compound signifying completeness", that is, indicating 'everything up to' (see Kellner 2010, 222 fn. 58). Thus, the phrase should not be understood here as saying "when a cognition *possessing* [the form of] an object is itself the object", as Hattori (1968, 29; square bracktes in the original; italics added) translates, based on the Tibetan rendering of the compound as "*yul dang bcas pa*" 'possessing an object' (183). The entire clause should instead be translated as "when the object is [everything,] cognition *right down to* the object" (Kellner 2010, 222; italics added; square brackets in the original).

Now, bringing together both of Kellner's considerations on the aforementioned passage *PSV* 1.9b – "*yadā hi saviṣayaṃ jñānam arthaḥ, tadā svasaṃvedanānurūpam arthaṃ pratipadyata iṣṭam aniṣṭaṃ vā*" –, particularly regarding the particle *hi* and the compound *saviṣayam*, the full sentence would be translated as follows:

> [Self-awareness is the result] *because* when [everything,] cognition *right down to* the object, is the object, then one cognizes the object as desirable or undesirable in conformity with self-awareness. (Kellner 2010, 222; italics added; square brackets in the original)

As will become clear in the following discussion, this rendering – far from being a merely philological matter – significantly reshapes the content of Dignāga's account of self-awareness and its philosophical implications.[17]

The following chart displays the two exemplary scenarios that most scholars – Kellner being the notable exception – have inferred from their reading of Dignāga's *PS* and *PSV* 1.8cd-10.

When the object to be validly cognized is **just an internal object**, namely, the object-appearance		
object:	*means:*	*result:*
object-appearance	apprehending aspect	self-awareness

When the object to be validly cognized is **just an external object**		
object:	*means:*	*result:*
external object	object-appearance	cognition of the external object

17 For a useful summary on the issue, also see Arnold 2010, 348-50.

In other words, for most scholars the two paradigms of 'internalism' and 'externalism'[18] are all that is at stake here. In Kellner's words:

> Hattori and Iwata, among others, have interpreted PS and PSV 1.8cd-10 on the assumption that the status of intentional objects is the main underlying issue – is the object of valid cognition something external, or internal to the mind? (Kellner 2010, 226)

Therefore, those scholars read the particle *vā* in 1.9a – where Dignāga says that the result of a *pramāṇa* is the cognition of external objects 'or' the result is self-awareness – as presenting two alternatives: externalism in the first case, where the object is something external to the mind, and internalism in the second, where the object is the object-appearance and therefore is internal to the mind.

They then read the following passage, in 1.9c, as a shift back to the externalist perspective. From their point of view, self-awareness would bridge externalism and internalism, that is, the Sautrāntika and Yogācāra doctrines, and it would perform this function as an "intentional self-awareness", that is, "the awareness that the subjective aspect of a mental state has of its objective counterpart" (Kellner 2010, 218). Following Kellner, however, a couple of important considerations must be made. First, Dignāga offers no explicit or unequivocal support for such an understanding of self-awareness. Second, he chooses to establish *svasaṃvedana* through the memory argument, where consciousness cognizes its own 'apprehending' aspect. This implies that he assigns greater relevance to a facet of consciousness's reflexivity that is distinct from the awareness of the apprehended aspect by the apprehending one. In light of this, it seems unlikely that Dignāga conceives of *svasaṃvedana* as the awareness that the subjective aspect of a mental framework has of its objective aspect.

Kellner's innovative reading of Steinkellner's impressive reconstruction (based on Jinendrabuddhi)[19] shows a different possibility: instead of externalism and internalism, that *vā* particle marks a shift from the 'particular' case of having just external objects of cognition to the 'general' case of having all kind of objects, internal (object-appearances) and external to the mind. Then, it follows that in 1.9c, the text returns to the 'particular' case – namely, the former one. For Kellner, what is at stake in 1.8cd-10 is not the type of intentional object the mental event engages with (as shown in the

18 "The externalist theory assumes that some extra-mental, material object causes a perception that has its form. By contrast, the internalist theory assumes that perception, as well as all other cognitive activity, takes place solely within the mind, and that nothing else is to be experienced by cognition" (Kellner 2011a, 294).

19 For Jinendrabuddhi's commentary on 1.8cd-10 of the *PS* and *PSV* cf., in particular, Steinkellner, Krasser, Lasic 2005, 58-77.

chart above), nor is this what the passage aims to clarify. Rather, the actual underlying problem is the following:

> Self-awareness is the result because, owing to its providing access to how objects of valid cognition appear subjectively, it allows for a comprehensive conception of the result, applicable to intentional objects as well as mental associates, and also applicable regardless of whether externalism or internalism are advocated. (Kellner 2010, 226)[20]

Thus, the main point that Dignāga seems to be making in this passage is crucial, in that it might actually suggest an account of self-awareness as non-conceptual access to 'how' all kind of things appear to the mind, relegating the issue of internalism or externalism to secondary importance. In addition to the possible differences in the internal structure of self-awareness, namely its various internal articulations concerning cognitive means and objects, what emerges is an account of *svasaṃvedana* that is universally applicable to any form of cognition. The key issue then is the development of a model of self-awareness that can accommodate all types of experiences. In fact, recalling *PSV* 1.9b on the basis of Kellner's work, with the compound *saviṣayam* (suggesting completeness), Dignāga is understood to be addressing the totality of objects: self-awareness is the result with respect to every kind of object, both external and internal to the mind. He would then explain that this is the case 'because' – hence the relevance of the Sanskrit particle *hi*, highlighted by Kellner and previously discussed – the determination of objects as desirable or unattractive conforms to the self-awareness that pertains to them. In other words, Kellner states:

> Dignāga's argument can be explicated as claiming that intentional objects (as well as mental associates) are determined as desirable or undesirable depending on how they appear in the mind, and it is this *how* of appearing that is accessed through self-awareness. From this perspective, the feature of self-awareness that grants it its status as the result is its access to the way things subjectively present themselves in the mind. (Kellner 2010, 222-3; italics in the original)

20 As for Dignāga's commitment to either internalism or externalism, Kellner (2016, 226) points out that in the *PS* "the existence of two alternative accounts, externalism and internalism, is presupposed without any further elaboration; no commitment is made to one or the other as superior. This is, as is well known, different in the *Ālambanaparīkṣā*, where Dignāga points out fundamental problems of externalism and presents internalism as the superior account of what counts as the 'object support' (*ālambana*) of a mental state".

In its universal applicability, then, self-awareness boils down to the immediate access to how things subjectively and experientially manifest, being either external or mental. If Dignāga borrowed the notion of the two appearances from the Yogācāra discourse on cognition, that might have been in order to introduce an internal and phenomenal structure that could fit 'any' mental state (Kellner 2010, 216). Moreover, coming back to the 'mysterious' *bahuvrīhi* compound in *PSV* 1.9a, *tasyobhayābhāsasya*, stating that self-awareness is the awareness a mental state has of both its appearances, it is important to bear in mind that this model of self-awareness is a form of access to both the apprehending aspect and the object-appearance of cognition, even though the nature of this access is not further explained in Dignāga's work. Therefore, based on this, one could argue for certain variations in the internal articulation of self-awareness – which, in any case, as *pramāṇaphala*, remains the access one always has to experience – including the possibility for a cognition to access the subjective aspect (for instance, in the memory function) and the objective aspect.

It is therefore time to consider another remarkable aspect of the internal articulation of *svasaṃvedana*, in light of the distinctive features of Dignāga's thought concerning *prameya*, *pramāṇa*, and *phala*. These three aspects of a mental event – the object of epistemically valid cognition, the epistemically valid cognition, and the correspondent cognitive result – are not separate from one another, despite the tendency to distinguish them metaphorically (*PS* and *PSV* 1.10). On the basis of this statement, Dunne stresses the absence of a causal structure in Dignāga's account of self-awareness:

> That reflexive awareness is noncausal follows from its simultaneity with its object, namely, the awareness that is reflexively perceived itself. Indeed, what can be most confusing about reflexive awareness is the notion that it is a cognition distinct from its object. This distinction is clearly the case for all forms of perception, including mental perception (*mānasa-pratyakṣa*), for in all cases the object (*grāhya*) of perception is its cause […]. In contrast, what Dignāga first identifies as the three aspects of an awareness – namely, reflexive awareness, the objective aspect (*grāhyākāra*), and the subjective aspect (*grāhakākāra*) – are all ultimately identical and hence simultaneous. The notion that reflexive awareness is cognizing the subjective- and objective-aspects is merely a way of conceptualizing the process of knowing (see the *locus classicus* in *PS* 1.10 […]). (Dunne 2004, 276-7 fn. 93)

One more piece needs to be added to the overall picture of what Dignāga's account of *svasaṃvedana* might be. Despite the common belief that a cognition performs the activity of apprehending its object,

for Dignāga – following a Sautrāntika position – it does not perform 'any' action at all (*PS* and *PSV* 1.8cd). Rather, it is a 'result', an effect that is similar to its cause, resembling the apprehended object by bearing its aspect or image. Along this line, it is interesting to quote the important paradigm shift Matilal (1986a, 112-13) suggests, from mental 'acts' to mental 'episodes': whatever happens in one's mind is something that takes place within oneself and is not something that one enacts. This would actually shape a model whose "demands are minimal" (Matilal 1986a, 113): there is no need for any actors or agents, and mental episodes may be treated as effects brought about by certain conditions.

Thus, as has been shown, in *PS* and *PSV* 1.8cd-10 Dignāga presents *svasaṃvedana* as *pramāṇaphala*. For decades, it has been thought that its primary role, as conveyed by this passage, was to bridge the gap between externalism and internalism, and that self-awareness's nature consisted in the intentional cognizance of the objective aspect by the subjective one. However, more recently, mostly thanks to Kellner's contribution, it has been argued that its role as *pramāṇaphala* is rather that of providing access to 'any' experience whatsoever, to the 'how' of appearing of any possible object. Thus, while it may indeed serve to bridge the gap between externalism and internalism, it does so in a fundamentally different way than previously suggested – namely, by indicating self-awareness as the very means of accessing the subjective cognition of any object, regardless of whether objects are conceived as internal or external to cognition, and encompassing mental factors.

3.1.4 Some Readings of Dignāga's *Svasaṃvedana*

The complexity of the textual materials and their exegesis has contributed to the diversity of interpretations proposed by modern scholars. Now that the main elements have been critically examined, it is possible to explore some of the most significant contemporary interpretations of Dignāga's standpoint, particularly in relation to current debates in the philosophy of mind. This, in turn, allows for a deeper appreciation of how scholars of religious studies and the philosophy of mind attempt to decipher and integrate the contributions of the Indian Buddhist tradition into a dialogue with modern and contemporary thought and concepts.

Given the extensive discussion of Kellner's contribution in the preceding section, it seems fitting to return briefly to her position. In her commentary on *PS* and *PSV* 1.12, she draws on the infinite regress argument to rule out any interpretation of Dignāga's *svasaṃvedana* as either "*reflective* (a subsequent act of reflection directed at an earlier mental state)" or "*introspective* (a look 'inside' at one's own

mental realm)" (Kellner 2010, 215; italics in the original). Arguing that self-awareness is made possible by any separate higher-order mental state would simply go against the above-mentioned argument in Dignāga's text.

Nevertheless, there are a few interpreters who suggest a reading of Dignāga's account of *svasaṃvedana* that implies a second-order mental event. For instance, Matilal (1986a, 152) seems to read self-awareness along these lines. Another example is Yao (2005, 159), who assumes that Dignāga would support the higher-order theory (HOT) perspective, which argues that a mental state becomes conscious only when it is the object of a higher-order state. Yao acknowledges that Dignāga gets close to the position held by the phenomenological tradition, in that he appears to regard self-awareness primarily as immediate access to one's own mental state as they present themeselves, rather than as a retrospective glance at it occurring at a later moment. However, Yao ultimately concludes that it is possible to "*safely* assume that Dignāga would support the HOT theory" (Yao 2005, 159; italics added), that is, a higher-order thought theory, according to which a mental state becomes conscious when it is taken as the object of a higher-order thought. According to Yao, since Dignāga posits a three-fold cognition – comprising self-awareness itself, self-appearance as subject, and object-appearance as object – it follows that he adopts a HOT perspective. Within that framework, self-awareness, as a form of 'perception', is a non-conceptual type of cognition; yet, being a 'mental' perception, it is "of the nature of mental" (Yao 2005, 159) and does not rely on sensory organs. It is precisely for this reason – insofar as the kind of perception at stake is distinct from that which is tied to the senses – that Yao does not associate Dignāga's account with the strand of philosophy of mind known as higher-order perception (HOP) theory.

Some scholars label Dignāga's self-awareness as 'introspection' (Stcherbatsky [1932] 1962, 12; Hattori 1968, 95 fn. 50). Notably, Wayman applies the same label to *svasaṃvedana* as it is presented in the works of both Dignāga and Dharmakīrti, portraying it as a kind of mirror, "the only faculty of the system that can be credited with the role of figuring out the system as given" (Wayman 1991, 429). One more instance of a recent reading that frames Dignāga's self-awareness in terms of introspection is Ganeri's:

> This is perhaps the rationale behind Dignāga's claim that, when one is introspectively thinking about one of one's own thoughts, the subjective aspect of the latter becomes the objectual aspect of the former. That is, the objectual aspect of a second order thought = the subjective aspect of its first order thought. (Ganeri 1999, 470-1)

Kellner's precise understanding of Dignāga's self-awareness as a "*mode* of awareness" (Kellner 2010, 227; italics in the original) that provides access to how things present themselves subjectively is quite an exception in the landscape of modern scholarly exegesis and is a thoughtful insight on the issue. It seems that Kellner aims to highlight the structure or function of self-awareness in opening the phenomenality of experience to one's own immediate knowledge of it, being a constitutive disclosing part of one's cognitions but in such a way that thinking of the quality of subjective experience as separate from one's own access to it would be deeply misleading. Could self-awareness be thought of in terms of the immediate and lively 'transparency' of the quality of experience, whatever this might be? In light of the same textual and philological work shared with Kellner, Arnold (2010, 349) ends up interpreting self-awareness not as a "mode" but rather as a "quality" of the mental, a feature or nuance that is there regardless of what the cognition's content might be. Compared to Kellner's stance, despite an overall proximity in their readings of Dignāga's work, Arnold's approach arguably situates Dignāga's standpoint on a slightly different level of philosophical discourse. Rather than focusing on 'access to' experience, as Kellner does, Arnold emphasizes the 'features of' experience itself. Kellner's insight on Dignāga's contribution appears as a way to conceive self-awareness as a 'modality' that is constitutive of experience and that is there as an experience-disclosing factor, an access to it, no matter what the actual qualities of the accessed experience turn out to be. On the other hand, in Arnold's understanding, Dignāga's contribution can be seen as addressing the status of awareness or cognition in its qualitative dimension. His focus is on the fact that there is always a way in which experience unfolds for someone, rather than on the very access one has to it. It is interesting to examine the implications of claiming that *svasaṃvedana* is the result from such an angle:

> [It] amounts, on my reading, to the point that it is only as first personally cognized that anything is epistemically accessible to us at all. I take it that Dignāga advances, in this way, a case for thinking that *epistemic* idealism (the view that we are only immediately acquainted with mental items) represents the only reasonable epistemological position, even for those reluctant to

> give up reference to external objects. (Arnold 2010, 349; italics in the original)[21]

Arnold (2005a, 35) identifies the role of *svasaṃvedana* as being the epistemological foundation or the basic model of any possible cognition, the only certainly immediate cognition, and in focusing on its immediacy he is very close to the position held by the phenomenological tradition (see Part Three). He argues that cognition is characteristically contentful, and for Dignāga, as interpreted by Arnold, this is "just to make a phenomenological point (not an ontological or metaphysical one): that cognition seems to be *of* things" (Arnold 2010, 353; italics in the original).

If cognition's being contentful is known by the subject, this can function as a common ground for both Sautrāntika and Yogācāra tenets: any cognition is "only as first-personally known" (Arnold 2010, 353). On his reading of Dignāga, Arnold further insists on this unique feature of self-awareness, noting that the object of a cognition "is how the cognition seems to us" (Arnold 2009, 141), that is, the way in which experience is given and presented to the subject, from a first-person perspective. In contemporary terms, the identity between the 'intentional' content – what a cognition is about – and the 'phenomenal' quality – how it is presented to the experiencer – constitutes the most salient feature of self-awareness, to the extent that this minimal cognitive disclosure has often been chosen as what guarantees and establishes knowledge itself.[22]

The possibility of interpreting self-awareness in line with the classical phenomenological view is also explored in Coseru's

21 The term "Epistemic Idealism" is used by Arnold to refer to Dunne's understanding, that is, to the view that "All Entities are Mental" (Dunne 2004, 59), meaning "idealism […] only with regard to what we know" (Arnold 2008, 15). This is also compatible with an ontological or metaphysical commitment to existent external objects. Thus, the difference between Sautrāntika and Yogācāra would lie only in their metaphysical stances and not in their epistemological perspective, since both hold that one is immediately acquainted only with mental things, with the contents of one's own awareness.

22 Also see Arnold 2009, 141; for the equivalence of intentionality and phenomenality in the Yogācāra view, see Ram-Prasad 2007, 70. With regard to phenomenality and intentionality, Ganeri (1999, 471-2) offers a different perspective by arguing against the possible claim that Dignāga's notion of the subjective aspect refers to the phenomenological quality of experience, to 'how it feels' to the experiencer. For Ganeri, while the phenomenological quality of an experience does not give any information as to what its intentional content is, Dignāga's subjective aspect involves also the specific intentional content of experience. Thus, for him (Ganeri 2012, 171), the apprehending aspect "is better described with the help of the idea of a mode of presentation as a constituent of intentional content: the subject-aspect is an intentional mental state's mode of presentation of its own object-directed intentionality".

remarkable contribution.[23] In his view, Dignāga's explanation closely aligns with Husserl's concept of 'noematic content', referring to the 'perceived as such', which phenomenological reduction aims to reveal (Coseru 2012, 237). Nevertheless, whereas Coseru emphasizes the intentionality dimension of Dignāga's *svasaṃvedana*, MacKenzie, in dialogue with Coseru and inspired by readings of Dharmakīrti and his commentator Śākyabuddhi, chooses to set intentionality aside, or more precisely, to subsume it under the experience's phenomenal availability, in terms of the various subjective and objective contents. Thus, he offers a perspective which considers self-awareness as a form of "unmediated acquaintance of consciousness with its own subjective and objective contents" (MacKenzie 2015b, 42). For MacKenzie (2017), in line with the aforementioned accounts, Dignāga's self-awareness is not a distinct higher-order cognition but rather an intrinsic feature of first-order consciousness itself: a "primitive" and "direct acquaintance" one has with one's own experiences. This means that, according to MacKenzie, this leads to a same-order model of self-awareness,[24] without requiring any higher-order structure. In recent years, Coseru (2020) has revisited Dignāga's contribution, stating:

> Dignāga's dual-aspect theory of mind can in large measure be understoodas an attempt to bring the debate about the primacy of either "intentionalityover phenomenality" or of "phenomenality over intentionality" to a resolution. (128)

In Coseru's interpretation, Dignāga's perspective holds that conscious experience entails a subjective aspect, marked by an inherent openness to what is given, and an objective aspect, which determines the specific content toward which the mental state is directed. In addition to these two aspects, every conscious cognitive episode is characterized by a reflexive awareness of itself (*svasaṃvedana*), which constitutes its distinctive mode of presentation. Through Coseru's lens, Dignāga's notion of self-awareness encompasses several key dimensions: the "self-intimating aspect" of cognition, or its for-me-ness; the "modality-specific nature of conscious apprehension", according to which remembering is not the same as perceiving, and

23 For a deeper exploration of the phenomenological dimension of self-awareness, based on experiential reports, see Metzinger 2020; 2024. See also Coseru 2020 for an innovative interpretation of Dharmakīrti's account and the classical Indian Buddhist debate on self-awareness, advocating for the efficacy of phenomenal experience as a vehicle for self-knowledge.

24 Cf. the first-order representational theories (Dretske 1995; Tye 1995), which argue for a type of reflexiveness that is implicit in the first-order consciousness itself.

both differ from conceiving; and, finally, the distinct "phenomenal character" that marks each mental state (Coseru 2020, 133).

This brief overview of the main interpretations of Dignāga's account of *svasaṃvedana*, while reaching no determinate conclusions, ends with a further question, adding one more piece to the puzzle or, perhaps, providing a way to reformulate some of the main issues just mentioned. In several of the key contributions examined thus far, *svasaṃvedana* appears to have emerged as a foundational concept – one that accounts for the very possibility of experience itself.[25] However, in attributing such a central role to it, one may wonder whether this involves a metaphysically overreaching claim, potentially at odds with the core spirit of Buddhist philosophy and some of its fundamental tenets, such as no-self (SKT *anātman*) and dependent origination (SKT *pratītyasamutpāda*). Should *svasaṃvedana* be understood not as a metaphysical principle, but as a doctrinal and soteriological concept that aims to articulate and clarify specific features of experience within the broader context of Buddhist thought?

By addressing this question, one targets the ontological status of self-awareness and the role it plays in a wider philosophical tenet or view. Actually, this is a question that runs through all the studies on the different traditional accounts of self-awareness. Williams (1983, 329) introduces it in terms of "the problem for the philosopher" and some years later Kellner (2010, 227) advances her thoughts on it referring to the specific case of Dignāga's view, where *svasaṃvedana* seems to be there to explain certain features of consciousness – a view shared by Cozort (1998, 157). The bottom line is the alleged experiential base of experience, meaning the threat of subjectivity, deeply linked to that mineness.[26] Commenting on Dignāga's account of self-awareness, Ganeri argues along this line of thought by recalling Nāgārjuna's view and saying:

> as soon as one allows the idea that experience has a base at all, the game is lost. That stronger claim leads immediately to the Mādhyamika View, that there is neither base nor place. (Ganeri 2012, 167)

25 Cf. Coseru 2020, 134 for a discussion on Dignāga's central concern, which is presented as "pragmatic rather than soteriological" and framed around the guiding question: "what relevant criteria must be in place for our mundane cognitions to succeed?". Self-awareness thus emerges as the necessary 'condition' for the Buddhist practitioner's attainment of self-knowledge.

26 For a lucid and brief description of the 'whole' of one's own experience and its difference from any other person's in relation to the Buddhist notion of self-awareness, see Mookerjee 1935, 328-30.

However, Dignāga's stance on the subjectivity of experience is, for Ganeri, deeply aware of this risk:

> Dignāga goes to the philosophical heart of the matter. As soon as one postulates a base for experience distinct from the experience itself, whatever it may be, nothing can block its subsequent identification with self, its identification, in other words, with the *place* of experience, a site of experiential ownership. The only way to defend a No Place View, therefore, is to base each item within the stream of experience *in itself*. That is the fundamental point of transition from an Abhidharma to a Yogācāra View. (Ganeri 2012, 167; italics in the original)

As such, Dignāga's brief remarks on *svasaṃvedana*, its first formulation within the Indian Buddhist epistemological context, give rise to a vast range of issues and interpretations that the Indo-Tibetan tradition continues to grapple with.

3.2 Later Developments in the Issue of *Svasaṃvedana*

The scope of this research is primarily focused on the Tibetan contribution to the global philosophical discourse on self-awareness. However, an overview of the main Indian Buddhist developments of this idea is inevitable in order to contextualize the debate that later unfolds in the Tibetan setting. The initial stages of this discourse in the pre-Dignāga period have been examined, followed by a close reading of Dignāga's challenging exposition. Here the core difficulties surrounding the subject came to the fore. The next step will be to investigate the transmission of this legacy to Tibet, along with its many complexities. This requires a prior outlining of the essential aspects of Indian Buddhist thought in the post-Dignāga phase as similar ideas will re-emerge in the Tibetan context and will also resonate with contemporary philosophical discussions on the topic.

3.2.1 Dharmakīrti and the Continuation of Dignāga's Epistemological Project

After Dignāga, Dharmakīrti (*Nyāyabindu* 1.10 and *Pramāṇavārttika* – henceforth *PV* – 3.485-503) continues the epistemological discourse on *svasaṃvedana* that had begun. His *PV* is ostensibly promoted as a commentary on Dignāga's *PS*, but it would be misleading to take these thinkers as exemplifying a unified body of thought. Here, the main philosophical aspects of Dharmakīrti's account of self-awareness will be presented in an attempt to grasp its unique

features while also linking them to some of their interpretations in modern scholarship.

Dignāga's only argument for self-awareness is that from memory, implying the infinite regress. In Dharmakīrti, on the other hand, the discourse on self-awareness in the *PV* is much wider in scope, but the sections in which he provides many of the important arguments have not yet been studied carefully. However, in order to appreciate the different philosophical implications of Dignāga's and Dharmakīrti's arguments for self-awareness from memory, it is necessary first to recall the elements of Dignāga's line of reasoning (in *PS* and *PSV* 1.11d-12). To begin with, memory requires past experience,[27] and one can remember either past objects or their cognitions.[28] Dignāga's argument, then, is that cognitions must also have been experienced prior to their subsequent recollection: either they have been experienced by a separate cognition or by the same cognition, and since the former would lead to an infinite regress, the latter is asserted and self-awareness is thus established.

Is the problem of infinite regress truly compelling in Dignāga's argument? Kellner argues (2011b, 417; 2010, 215) it is not: in order to be such, an infinite regress must entail that 'every' single cognition that cognizes a cognition is remembered. This would imply that "all cognitions are remembered – which, however, is wildly implausible" (417). Alternatively, one could take this as implying merely a 'possibility' of memory: every cognition might possibly be remembered. However, in doing this, one would be claiming arbitrarily, as a matter of principle, that some cognitions cannot be remembered – a position that would, in turn, raise further philosophical difficulties.

Now, turning to an analysis of Dharmakīrti's argument for self-awareness from memory, the *PV* contains only a brief reference to Dignāga's reasoning: "from memory, too, self-awareness is established" (Kellner 2011b, 419).[29] The closest argument to that of Dignāga's infinite regress is, instead, in *Pramāṇaviścaya* (henceforth *PVis*) 1 (40.11-41.13 *ad* 54cd). Unpacking *PVis* 1.54cd,[30] these are the main passages according to Kellner:

27 Dignāga does not explain why and how experience (of objects or object-cognitions) is a precondition for memory; on the other hand, Dharmakīrti (*PV* 3.179) for his part makes it clear: if there were memories of cognitions without any previous experience of them, it would follow that cognizing one's own past cognitions would be the same as cognizing others' cognitions.

28 Interestingly, Tsong-kha-pa Blo-bzang-grags-pa (1970, 26.1-8.9) presents the memory argument in a different way: subsequent memory establishes that the earlier cognition 'includes' self-awareness. On this point, cf. Kellner 2011b, 419.

29 Dharmakīrti, *PV* 3.485a-b1: "*smṛter apy ātmavit siddhā jñānasya*".

30 For the Sanskrit passage and the translation, see Kellner 2011b, 420.

> (1) we perceive objects not because they exist, but because their perception exists. In other words, the existence of an object's perception is a precondition for the object's being perceived. (2) If the existence of the perception of the object is unknown, it cannot serve as the basis for subsequent forms of behaviour that presupposes existence. (Kellner 2011b, 420-1)

This said, (1) and (2) are the premises from which Dharmakīrti concludes in (3) that if perception is unestablished, the perceived object is also unestablished.

The main problem or weakness of this argument, as Kellner (2011b, 421) notes, resides in a slight but crucial shift in the reasoning: from saying, with premise (1), that perception needs to 'exist' in order for its object to be cognized, to stating, in premise (2), that perception needs to be 'known' in order to exercise its function. Interestingly, for Dharmakīrti, the regress would turn out to be as follows: when the object-cognition is perceived by another cognition, that second-order perception is not established and therefore it needs another perception to follow and establish it. A person then needs to wait for the end of this chain of perceptions without perceiving anything because so long as one member of the chain is not established, none are established. Since there is no end to the sequence of perceptions, therefore, one would be unable to perceive any objects.

The similarities between Dignāga's and Dharmakīrti's arguments lie in the shared requirement that any cognition must itself be cognized – whether this occurs through a subsequent act of cognition or through self-awareness. Since the former leads to a vicious infinite regress, the latter is (allegedly) established. Nevertheless, to talk about only 'one general' regress argument within the Indian epistemological project would overlook the significant differences between the two arguments, particularly in their premises – premises whose weakness has just been pointed out. For Dignāga, the 'subsequent memory' of the cognition of an object is what is at stake, and the memory of all the higher-order cognitions leads to infinite regress; Dharmakīrti, on the other hand, focuses his argument on the 'cognition of an object', and, since a cognition has to be cognized, this is what actually leads to infinite regress.

Since, by contrast with Dignāga, Dharmakīrti offers additional arguments in support of self-awareness,[31] it is worth examining the so-called *sahopalambhaniyama* argument, widely regarded by subsequent philosophers as the definitive rationale for *svasaṃvedana* (Taber 2010). It consists of

> the argument that the most salient fact about objects of awareness is the constraint (*niyama*) that they be known only together with the apprehension thereof (*sahopalambha*). (Arnold 2010, 327)

In an effort to understand this line of reasoning in dialogue with the modern philosophical tradition, Taber (2010, 292-3) proposes reading this as a specific instance of the traditional principle of the 'identity of indiscernibles' according to which "two things having exactly the same properties are identical". In this context, Taber argues, Dharmakīrti maintains that identity – or more precisely, non-difference – is not established through the sharing of all properties but rather by the sharing of a single decisive one: the awareness of a cognition is not something over and above the cognition itself since there is no difference between the two in terms of either content or temporal structure.

Arnold, by contrast, proposes interpreting the issue through the lens of Sacks's (2005, 444) notion of 'situated thoughts'. For him, thoughts are essentially embedded in the context of an experiencing subject's perspective and situation.[32] In these terms, Dharmakīrti's point will turn out to be that anything one might say about the nature of an experience will inevitably involve some form of 'it-is-like' for its subject. One's thoughts about experience are always already phenomenologically embedded in the very thing one is trying to explain: awareness has an ineradicable first-person character. However, leaving aside this particularly modern take on the *sahopalambhaniyama* argument, it states that there can be no awareness of a cognition without awareness of an object-form: in

31 It is worth mentioning another argument Dharmakīrti (*PV* 3.448-59) offers, a reasoning that leads to the recognition that self-awareness is important for establishing subjectivity and privacy, and for avoiding another person's access (that is, a yogi's direct access) to one's own mental state. In Moriyama's (2010, 261) words: "when we compare it to Dignāga's argument, we notice an interesting change of focus from the temporal sequence of cognitions in a single mind-stream to the co-occurrence of cognitions in the same moment in multiple mindstreams – what Dharmakīrti tries to avoid with self-awareness is […] the absurdity that one person can experience another's mental states".

32 For an attempt to analyze the *sahopalambhaniyama* argument by focusing on its logical and philosophical features, assessing its strengths and weaknesses as an argument, its formal validity, and the defensibility of its premises, see Taber 2020.

apprehending itself, a cognition must apprehend itself as possessing a form (*ākāra*), that is, as having some content.[33] What is at stake is

> the two parts of the equivalence which is the *sahopalambhaniyama* of cognition and object – no perception of an object without perception of awareness and no perception of awareness without perception of an object-form. (Taber 2010, 293)

Delving deeper:

> Dharmakīrti presents the decisive point in *Pramāṇavārttika* [3.]335: Whenever an object is apprehended as having some form, awareness will be apprehended as well; but conversely, whenever awareness of a particular form is apprehended, an object having that form is apprehended. From this we can confidently conclude that the form of the object and awareness are actually in some sense the same. (292)[34]

In this regard, in *PVis* (1.54ab), Dharmakīrti makes the straightforward statement: "Blue and its cognition are not different because they are necessarily perceived together" (Kellner 2011b, 419).[35]

In examining the main philosophical implications of this argument, Arnold (2010, 357) finds it fruitful to engage with several contemporary views in order to establish a dialogue on the topic of self-awareness. In particular, drawing on insights from the Buddhist epistemological tradition, he seeks to challenge, expand, and reconsider certain modern philosophical perspectives. Through this approach, he further aims to clarify the distinctive contribution of the Buddhist tradition to ongoing philosophical debates. In doing so, he finds it convenient to recall the "governing disjunction" formulated by Bilgrami (2006, 28), an interpretive framework through which theories of self-awareness in the philosophy of mind are analyzed as falling into two distinct models, with the claim that only one of these can be correct: either the 'perceptual' model or the 'constitutive' one. According to the former approach, self-awareness of intentional states is characterized as direct or immediate, akin to how colors or sounds are perceived; such an understanding of *svasaṃvedana* would see it as a distinctive kind of ordinary perceptual awareness, only with a specific object or content, that is, a mental state. According to the latter model, self-knowledge would instead be constitutive of intentional states themselves, in such a way that they would depend

33 See also Matilal 1986b.

34 For other occurrences of the same argument in Dharmakīrti's works, cf. Taber 2010.

35 Dharmakīrti, *PVis* 1.54ab: "*sahopalambhaniyamād abhedo nīlataddhiyoḥ* |".

fundamentally on the self-awareness one holds of them. One's very concept of a mental state would then imply that mental states are inherently tied to one's capacity to be aware of them rather than existing independently of that awareness.

In other words, in the perceptual model, cognition is treated analogously to the perception of external objects. According to Bilgrami's perspective, these exist independently of whether they are perceived. A house's existing, for instance, is not constituted by someone's perception of it; similarly, mental states are taken to be independent of one's awareness of them. On this view, the awareness of a mental state is a separate act, added to the state itself. By contrast, the constitutive model maintains that a mental state is not truly a mental state unless it is accompanied by self-awareness. Here, awareness is not external to cognition but internal to its very structure: to have a mental state just is to be aware of it. In this sense, mental states lack the kind of independence from one's epistemic access that external objects possess. Under this model, therefore, cognition is not merely something observed; it is something that, in occurring, conceptually entails awareness of itself.

Bilgrami argues that these two views are mutually exclusive – either self-awareness is perceptual or it is constitutive. Both cannot be correct simultaneously. However, Arnold (2010, 357) suggests that Buddhist thinkers like Dignāga and Dharmakīrti significantly blur this disjunction. It is in this light that Arnold's decision to draw on Bilgrami's work becomes clear as a means of illuminating the distinctive contribution of Dignāga and, above all, Dharmakīrti. In fact, they treat self-awareness as perceptual (by calling it *pratyakṣa*), but their arguments – especially Dharmakīrti's *sahopalambhaniyama* – point to a constitutive understanding where cognition and awareness of cognition are inseparable. Drawing on Dharmakīrti's and Dignāga's accounts, Arnold argues for a constitutive model of self-awareness that is nevertheless perceptual in nature. This position is framed within Buddhist idealism, in which perceptual knowledge and self-awareness would not turn out to be different, and nothing is considered independent of the cognition through which it is apprehended.[36]

Moreover, a key philosophical implication of Dharmakīrti's account often emphasized by modern exegesis is the phenomenological dimension of self-awareness. This can be characterized as follows:

36 See Arnold 2010, 328. Thus, as Arnold (2010, 356) and Yiannopoulos (2012, 156-7) note, Bilgrami's theory of the "governing disjunction" seems to be problematic: it begs the question by asserting a priori that perception is the cognition of an objectively-existing external world.

> Dharmakīrti [...] seems to conflate two distinct concepts in his use of the term *svasaṃvedana*: following Dignāga, as a primitive non-objectual source of a sense of ownership (i.e. the implicit *de se*); but also as a cognition's immediate presentation to itself of its intentional content (i.e. the transparency of content). The second concept is in reference to the grounds of one's access to the contents of one's own mental states. (Ganeri 2012, 169 fn. 8)

In this way, two sides of the account of self-awareness emerge: a sense of minimal ownership upon the experience itself,[37] on the one hand, and an aspect of intentionality, on the other, *via* an immediate presentation of consciousness to itself. In this regard, the Yogācāra context in which Dharmakīrti operates is particularly well-suited for articulating a phenomenological account of consciousness without requiring any metaphysical commitments. On the one hand, the immediate acquaintance that consciousness has with its unfolding cognitive events does not necessarily entail a belief that these states belong to a self; nor, on the other hand, does this immediate access to experience necessarily imply any specific ontological stance regarding the existence of external objects.

Among the most influential contemporary studies on Dharmakīrti's theory of intentionality is that of Dreyfus (2007), who argues that, within Dharmakīrti's epistemological project, the reflexive nature of cognition is intrinsically linked to the very structure of mental activity. Within this process, the aspects of consciousness play a crucial role. If subjective and objective aspects do not exist separately, and a mental state encompasses them both in such a way that the subjective aspect 'beholds' the objective one, "self cognition is nothing over and above this beholding" (Dreyfus 2007, 202).[38] There is no subject-object duality between the two, they are not separate, and there is an intimate contact between them: a mental state directly experiences itself, has an immediate access to itself, and self-awareness is nothing but the self-revealing feature of a mental event. Dreyfus also suggests that the aspects of consciousness which are representative of the objects play a crucial role as intermediaries between the external world and the mind. In fact, these aspects possess a double nature, partaking of both domains – being the forms of the objects cognized by the consciousness and the "aspected

37 This account of self-awareness implies that all one knows is something that 'seems' or 'appears' to them; thus, the resemblance with Kant's transcendental unity of apperception is made clear by many scholars (Arnold 2005b; Dreyfus 1997, 398 ff.). In fact, both stances emphasize that immediate cognitive acquaintance is never with things-in-themselves but only with things-as-they-appear. This way of appearing follows a necessary structure which entails, first and foremost, a perspectival unity of experience.

38 Cf. Dreyfus, Thompson 2007, 103-4.

consciousness itself" (Dreyfus 2007, 201). The *ākāra* is the mark of the object in the mind, such that

> [t]o be aware of an object means to have a mental state that has the form of this object and is cognizant of this form. The aspect is the form or epistemic factor that allows us to distinguish mental episodes. (336)

It is with respect to this that Dreyfus describes Dharmakīrti as a "representationalist" (336),[39] thereby seemingly aligning him with a Sautrāntika metaphysical framework. However, this represents only one aspect of a far more complex issue, one that requires considering Dharmakīrti's metaphysical position in light of his ability to navigate between Sautrāntika and Yogācāra ontologies. Although this shift in perspective remains the subject of ongoing debate, its significance and implications continue to be actively explored (Dunne 2004; Dreyfus 2007; Kellner 2011a).

Nevertheless, fully-fledged intentionality arises only when conceptions are present to discriminate and determine what objects are. Perception, without this ability, may thus be described as exhibiting "phenomenal intentionality", to be distinguished from "cognitive" (or conceptual) intentionality (Dreyfus 2007, 109). In that respect, Dreyfus points out a problem that Dharmakīrti raises and leaves unsolved – a problematic legacy for the later tradition to deal with. For Dharmakīrti, valid cognition boils down to perception and inference, and they are distinguished both by their modes of apprehension and by their objects. (Real) specifically characterized phenomena (SKT *svalakṣaṇāni*; TIB *rang mtshan*), or particulars, are the only possible objects for perceptions; (unreal) generally characterized phenomena (SKT *sāmānyalakṣaṇāni*; TIB *spyi mtshan*), universals or conceptual constructs, are the only ones for inferences. Since they necessarily hold different objects, perception and inference lack any epistemological point of contact. Nevertheless, fully-fledged intentionality requires both perception and conceptuality. Therefore, the problem of the need for a bridge between the perceptual and conceptual components of intentionality in self-awareness lies at the core of Dharmakīrti's account of *svasaṃvedana*. Eventually, the very core of his extensive epistemological project intersects with the teleological and soteriological dimensions of his discourse insofar as the epistemological framework is intended to describe the cognitive approach to a reality that the Buddhist practitioner must explore and understand by advancing through a series of stages that lead to full-fledged knowledge and ultimate liberation. A gap or inconsistency

39 Cf. MacKenzie 2007, 47.

within the epistemological system would therefore compromise the very trajectory of liberation it is meant to support.[40]

In fact, one crucial aspect of the whole issue of self-awareness lies in its ultimate function considered both from an epistemological and a soteriological standpoint. In Wayman's (1997) reading, the need for a separate and specific type of *pratyakṣa* that is *svasaṃvedana* – a need shared, according to him, by both Dignāga (although, as previously noted, this remains a matter of debate) and Dharmakīrti – is linked to the fundamental necessity of a faculty that can play the role of figuring out the whole system.

> Inference (*anumāna*) could not do it, because associated with 'delusion' (*bhrānti*), even though being the best of the faculties so tainted. 'Perception of the yogin' (*yogi-pratyakṣa*) cannot do it, because it was acknowledged to be unmixed[41] with the guru's precepts. But 'introspection' [*svasaṃvedana*] can entertain as object disparate features or images, as though in a mirror; therefore, could feasibly have the entire system as its object (the *svalakṣaṇa*). (Wayman 1997, 429)

How is it possible that self-awareness has the whole system of cognition (as formulated by Dharmakīrti) as its object, that is, as a *svalakṣaṇa*? Dunne (2006) provides a detailed explanation of this point on the basis of Dharmakīrti's theory of self-awareness and yogic perception (as it is articulated, for instance, in *PVis* 1.28-31). This is the type of knowing that should lead the practitioner through the teleological framework of liberation. Through the sequential development of the three types of insight, based respectively on hearing (or studying), thinking and meditating (*śrutamaya-*, *cintāmaya-*, and *bhāvanāmayajñāna*), one should start studying the concepts and discourse of the Noble Truths and deepen one's meditation on them. At some point, thanks to the third insight, one finally has a non-conceptual, vivid, perceptual cognition of those concepts. However, at this point a question immediately arises: how is it possible to shift from a conceptual cognition to a non-conceptual one (*PVis* 1.7ab and *PV* 3.287)? Moreover, how can one 'perceive'

40 For valuable contributions to the soteriological aspect of Dharmakīrti's thought, cf. Dreyfus 1997; Steinkellner 1999; Wayman 1991; Dunne 2004; 2006. As for Dignāga's and Dharmakīrti's accounts of self-awareness, see Yiannopoulos's (2017, 156 ff.) insistence upon the fact that dualistically structured cognitions are not epistemically reliable whereas non-dual self-awareness is.

41 Wayman (1997, 424) explains that the expression refers to the yogi who has gone beyond the insight or cognition induced by 'hearing' and 'thinking' and has reached the insight induced by 'contemplating' or meditating (the three insights being, in Sanskrit, *śrutamaya-*, *cintāmaya-*, and *bhāvanāmayajñāna*). For a better understanding of the way Dharmakīrti unpacks Dignāga's expression (*PS* 1.6cd), cf. Dunne 2006, 505 ff.

something that, being a conceptual construct (*sāmānyalakṣaṇa*), is unreal? Concepts are "causally inefficacious": universals are "incapable of the causal activity" necessary to generate a perceptual image or *ākāra* (Dunne 2006, 510-11). These are crucial questions. According to Dunne, it is here that *svasaṃvedana* intervenes as the solution for both difficulties: as far as it is known through self-awareness as a mental event, any cognition – even a conceptual one – is a particular and thus a real element. Self-awareness would constitute the solution, therefore, acting as the central pillar of the entire cognitive system, with significance on both the epistemological and soteriological levels (Dunne 2006, 512 fn. 41). Following his interpretation, since in *apoha*, the process of 'exclusion' that forms the concept, the negation is not ontologically distinct from the *ākāra* in conceptual cognition, that cognition, which is a concept, *qua* mental event is actually a particular; and it is known as a particular mental event by self-awareness itself. Dunne elaborates on this explanation by using the example of recognizing an individual through the act of making a conceptual judgment:

> The judgment, being conceptual, has a vague – not vivid – image that results in part from the *apoha* process; in short, the image is vague in that it is not a phenomenally clear depiction of the object that it represents. Nevertheless, even though the judgment's image is vague as a representation, it is nevertheless an image. In other words, the judgment does contain some type of phenomenal content. And as a mental event, that phenomenal content is a real mental particular that can be known in its nature as a mental event *through reflexive awareness* (*svasaṃvitti*). In relation to that reflexive awareness, however, the content no longer appears to stand for something else; that is, it is no longer conceptual. (Dunne 2006, 512-13; italics added)[42]

This is the role of *svasaṃvedana* that seems to be claimed and argued for by Dharmakīrti, according to Wayman's and Dunne's

42 See Dharmakīrti, *PV* 3.287: "*śabdārthagrāhi yad yatra taj jñānaṃ tatra kalpanā | svarūpaṃ ca na śabdārthastatrādhyakṣam ato 'khilam* ||". In Dunne's translation: "A cognition that apprehends a linguistic object (*artha*) is a conceptual cognition of that [object] which it is cognizing. The actual nature [of any cognition *qua* mental event] is not a linguistic object; therefore, any [awareness of awareness itself] is direct [and hence non-conceptual]" (Dunne 2006, 512; square brackets in the original).

interpretations.[43] The centrality of self-awareness in Dharmakīrti's soteriological and epistemological framework ends up being stressed by some subsequent strands of the tradition. On the basis of Śākyabuddhi's (ca. 660-720) reflections upon Dharmakīrti's project, for instance, conventional perceptions and inferences are considered as instruments of knowledge and action in life, but are left behind once one has reached the ultimate instrument of knowledge, that is, the non-dual self-awareness. In his commentary on *PV* 3.212-13, where awareness is described as being in itself undifferentiated, while, owing to confusion, its appearances are perceived as dualistic, Śākyabuddhi (*Pramāṇavārttikaṭīkā* vol. mdo 'grel nye 203*v*) remarks:

> even if external objects do not exist, awareness nevertheless arises with that cognitive image [i.e., with an image that appears to be external]. (Dunne 2004, 406; square brackets in the original)[44]

He then adds: "However, dualistic awareness is not real" (Dunne 2004, 406).[45] In fact, the pairing of non-dualism and non-ignorance constitutes a line of reasoning that runs as a consistent thread throughout the entire philosophical discourse that has developed around *svasaṃvedana*. As will be shown (§ 6.3), this theme reappears in the Tibetan tradition as well, particularly at the delicate intersection between the soteriological and epistemological dimensions of the broader issue of self-awareness.[46]

43 Dreyfus (1997, 413), instead, although acknowledging the link between soteriology and epistemology, is extremely cautious – as opposed to Dunne – when talking about the problem of how conceptual understanding could be deepened and intensified and thus gradually made clearer until it is so vivid as to be non-conceptual. He (1997, 413) claims, "Dharmakīrti does not discuss this […]. How can conceptual cognitions, which are mistaken, become […] undistorted, merely by becoming vivid?". Moreover, Dreyfus (1997, 414) argues that Dharmakīrti explains yogic perception in relation to inference without linking it to apperception. While Dharmakīrti discusses the clear nature of mind in a soteriological context, he does not explicitly associate it with apperception. Therefore, the idea that yogic perception is apperceptive likely stems from sources other than Dharmakīrti's texts. Although there may be a connection between wisdom and self-awareness, it does not directly correspond to the type of *svasaṃvedana* Dharmakīrti describes. This suggests that the link between yogic perception and apperception emerged later, even if it remains compatible with Dharmakīrtian thought.

44 Śākyabuddhi, *Pramāṇavārttikaṭīkā* vol. mdo 'grel nye 203*v*2: "*phyi rol gyi don med na yang shes pa nyid de'i rnam par skye pa*".

45 Śākyabuddhi, *Pramāṇavārttikaṭīkā* vol. mdo 'grel nye 203*v*2: "'*on kyang ngo bo nyid gnyis pa can gyi shes pa de yang bden pa ma yin par*". Cf. Yiannopoulos 2017, 157 ff.

46 It must be remembered here that the Tibetan tradition is divided on this issue between those who support epistemology as meaningful to the soteriological discourse and those who do not (Dreyfus 1997, 439-40). For a lucid consideration on the tight relationship between the Buddhist epistemological project and its philosophy of liberation, and on its biased interpretation by modern scholarship, see Steinkellner 1982.

Dharmakīrti's continuation of Dignāga's epistemological project adds precious elements to the formulation of the notion of *svasaṃvedana*. Reflection on the implications of the *sahopalambhaniyama* argument and the crucial role of *ākāra*s has demonstrated that the two key aspects of Dharmakīrti's view of cognition are the phenomenality and intentionality of consciousness. Nevertheless, as has been shown, Dharmakīrti's entire system hinges upon a problematic point that cuts across both the epistemological and soteriological dimensions, with self-awareness potentially emerging as the crucial factor in the search for a resolution.

3.2.2 Candrakīrti and Śāntideva: A Sharp Criticism of *Svasaṃvedana*

The notion of self-awareness has been the object of sharp criticism from numerous Indian Mādhyamikas commonly associated with the Prāsaṅgika school, such as Candrakīrti and Śāntideva, who commented shortly after the epistemological enterprise of Dignāga and Dharmakīrti. It is important to mention their contributions to the broader discourse, as they also constitute the main landmarks for the subsequent critiques developed within the dGe-lugs system in Tibet. This study will return to these figures when examining the views of Tsong-kha-pa and Mi-pham rNam-rgyal-rgya-mtsho (ch. 5), highlighting how the dGe-lugs tradition, following Tsong-kha-pa, interprets Candrakīrti and Śāntideva as rejecting self-awareness entirely, while Mi-pham, drawing on Śāntarakṣita's legacy, understands their critiques as denying only its ultimate existence. For now, the focus will be on the contributions of Candrakīrti and Śāntideva.

In *Prasannapadā* 7.8-12, Candrakīrti follows and retraces Nāgārjuna's work, but it is in *MAv* 6.72-77 that, analyzing and criticizing the notion of self-awareness, he (*MAv* 6.75 [TIB 6.76]) poses a crucial question that threatens the very foundations of Yogācāra metaphysics. In this passage, he questions the knowability and, by extension, the very existence of the other-dependent (SKT *paratantra-svabhāva*; TIB *gzhan dbang*), whose nature consists in being not-different from mind. Thus, his whole criticism ultimately addresses the existence and knowability of the mental, which lies at the core of Yogācāra metaphysics.[47] Even before that criticism, in Candrakīrti's *Madhyamakāvatāra*, three more attacks are found

47 See Candrakīrti, *MAv* 6.75c [TIB 6.76c]. This critique is framed against the Yogācāra doctrine of the three natures (SKT *trisvabhāva*), which holds that only the other-dependent is really existent. Candrakīrti wants to know: if the *paratantra-svabhāva* exists as empty of both subject and object, then who is aware of its existence? For the whole argument's implicit passages, see Garfield 2006, 205.

on the doctrine of self-awareness. The first targets the memory argument for self-awareness, showing that it begs the question (Candrakīrti, *MAv* 6.73 [TIB 6.74]).[48] The point, as formulated by Cozort, is as follows:

> Candrakīrti argues that self-consciousness is not necessary for the function it is imputed to serve – facilitating later memory of the subjective aspect of experience – because the memory of a previous consciousness and that previous consciousness are not inherently different. (Cozort 1998, 163)

The second point raised by Candrakīrti rejects the possibility of any self-cognizing cognition from the conventional standpoint of everyday experience (Candrakīrti, *MAv* 6.74 [TIB 6.75]). The third points out its incoherence due to entailing an identity of agent, action and object (Candrakīrti, *MAv* 6.75c [TIB 6.76c]).[49]

For his part, Śāntideva (*Bodhicaryāvatāra* – henceforth *BCA* –, 9.17-26) gathers together various elements that have previously been used in arguments for and against *svasaṃvedana*. In criticizing a Yogācāra opponent, he recalls the blade of a sword that cannot cut itself (Śāntideva, *BCA* 9.17) and criticizes the metaphor of the lamp (Śāntideva, *BCA* 9.18-22). He then attacks the memory argument by stating that memory can be established by virtue of a 'connection to having experienced something else' (TIB "*gzhan myong ba dang 'brel ba las* |", Śāntideva, *BCA* 9.23 [TIB 9.24]). The arguments used by Śāntideva are rather obscure and, particularly with respect to the example he gives for explaining memory without *svasaṃvedana*, modern scholars do not always agree in their interpretations of the main point he makes. The example offered involves a hibernating bear that, despite being bitten by a rodent, remains asleep. When it awakens in the spring, the bear feels the pain caused by the resulting

48 As formulated by Cozort (1998, 163), the point is as follows: "Candrakīrti argues that self-consciousness is not necessary for the function it is imputed to serve – facilitating later memory of the subjective aspect of experience – because the memory of a previous consciousness and that previous consciousness are not inherently different". As Arnold points out, "The main thing that Candrakīrti's critique in *Madhyamakāvatāra* adds that is not in the *Prasannapadā* is a refutation of the memory argument for *svasaṃvitti*" (Arnold 2005b, 106 fn. 46).

49 In this regard, see Arnold 2005b, 91-2: "It is important to note, though, the extent to which Candrakīrti's version of that argument is informed particularly by Sanskritic grammatical analyses; […] Candrakīrti takes Dignāga's *svasaṃvitti* as an action – that is, as some kind or episode of cognition that will admit of the sort of agent-instrument-object analysis that can necessarily be given for anything involving a verb". This is precisely the point that Śāntarakṣita denies. See Nurboo 2022 for a thought-provoking comparison between Dignāga's and Candrakīrti's accounts of self-awareness, arguing that, despite their methodological differences, their fundamental epistemic agenda remains identical.

infection and, through that sensation, recalls the experience of the bite; actually, the bite was not experienced at the time it occurred, only later. To mention just a few interpretations of this line of reasoning, Cozort writes:

> According to Śāntideva, self-consciousness is unnecessary because the earlier object and the consciousness that experienced it are relatedly remembered. For instance, when one remembers having seen a patch of blue, one does so by first of all remembering the patch of blue and then remembering the eye consciousness that saw the patch of blue. It seems that this is *not* a case of merely *inferring* that an eye consciousness must have been present, since that would not actually be a memory of a previous awareness, but of *experiencing newly* what was previously experienced, if it was at all, only in a subliminal way. (Cozort 1998, 169; italics added)

While, for Cozort, it is not a matter of inference, for Williams, inference itself is what is at stake. He comments on the example as follows:

> In the case of the poisoning the person is not remembering that something experienced occurred. Rather he is *inferring* the occurrence of something not actually experienced at the time, something which, nevertheless, accompanied an experience of being bitten. What Śāntideva appears to want to say, therefore, is that in a memory of seeing blue I remember blue but *infer* seeing blue, although at the time there was only the experience of blue, not a concurrent experience of seeing blue (i.e., self-awareness as well). In remembering seeing blue I remember blue but *infer* (if I wish) seeing blue. (Williams 1998, 153; italics added)

Garfield offers yet another interpretation, reading the example of the bear as positing a cognitive state directed toward the past. He grounds this interpretation in the Tibetan commentary by rGyal-tshab Dar-ma-rin-chen (1973), one of Tsongkhapa's principal disciples (1364-1432), and explains it as follows:

> one can develop *a cognitive state directed at* a past perceptual episode even if one was not also aware that one was perceiving at the time of that perceptual episode. (Garfield 2006, 210; italics added)

The diversity of interpretations is evidence of the obscurity of the example itself (cf. Thompson 2011; Jinpa 2002, 128) while the nature of the specific link between experience and memory emerges as a recurrent point of debate for the subsequent Madhyamaka tradition, both in India and Tibet (Kellner 2010, 215 fn. 35).

3.2.3 Śāntarakṣita's Contribution

The discussion now turns to a final figure within the Indian Buddhist landscape, Śāntarakṣita, whose contribution significantly shaped subsequent developments on the topic of self-awareness and who would later serve as a key reference point for Mi-pham rNam-rgyal-rgya-mtsho's elaboration in the context of the Tibetan reception of this notion. In the eighth century, Śāntarakṣita, together with his disciple, Kamalaśīla,[50] developed what Williams (1998) defines as a theory of "reflexive" self-awareness; it is considered a "more simple, fundamental" (Yao 2005, 149) version of self-awareness, of which Mi-pham rNam-rgyal-rgya-mtsho was to be the main Tibetan heir. Some of Śāntarakṣita's relevant verses will be examined, as they later (ch. 5) serve as a key reference point for understanding Mi-pham's contribution in the context of the Tibetan reception of the notion of self-awareness.[51]

Śāntarakṣita takes as a given that there is a clear distinction between two classes of entities, the sentient and the non-sentient or matter, and that this distinction pertains only to the ordinary level of discourse. The important criterion for this differentiation is self-awareness itself, the absence of which renders something non-sentient. Śāntarakṣita's position, as found in his *Madhyamakālaṃkāra* (henceforth *MAl*) (16), is as follows:

> Consciousness arises as the opposite
> of the nature of what is matter;
> whatever belongs to the nature of non-matter,
> that is consciousness [aware] of itself.[52]

50 Although the Tibetan tradition considers Śāntarakṣita a Yogācāra Sākāravādin, Ichigō (1989, 177-9) suggests that this classification may be misleading or at least inaccurate. While Śāntarakṣita does adopt certain elements of the Sākāravāda position, considering cognition as aspectual, and cognitive appearances as real, other aspects of his philosophy align more closely with the Alīkākāravāda view, which holds that such appearances are deceptive or illusory. For this reason, it would be more appropriate to classify him simply as a member of the Yogācāra school. See Funayama 2007 for a detailed study on the difficulty of classifying Śāntarakṣita and Kamalaśīla in relation to the *satyākāravāda/sākārajñānavāda* and *alīkākāravāda/nirākārajñānavāda* categories.

51 For further studies, see Ichigō 1985; 1989. Cf. Blumenthal 2004 for a detailed explanation of how Śāntarakṣita's stance is in dialogue with Dharmakīrti's.

52 Śāntarakṣita, *MAl* 16: "*rnam shes bem po'i rang bzhin las || bzlog pa rab tu skye ba ste || bem min rang bzhin gang yin pa || de 'di bdag nyid shes pa yin ||*". Cf. Blumenthal's translation: "Consciousness is produced in the opposite way from that which is of an inanimate nature. That which is not the nature of being inanimate is the self-knowledge of this [consciousness]" (Blumenthal 2004, 83; square brackets in the original).

Self-aware cognition is the very quality which defines sentience. That which is conscious must be self-aware, by definition.[53]

Next, Śāntarakṣita rejects the idea that reflexive awareness entails any identity among agent, object and action, as these components are absent from its structure. According to him, it has a unitary nature and should be understood as a basic, inherent feature of sentience. In saying so, he refutes the notion that consciousness should be conceived as a form of action. In fact (Śāntarakṣita, *MAl* 17):

> In the nature of what is single and partless,
> a threefold nature cannot be sustained;
> the self-awareness of that
> does not [exist] as the entities of action and doer.[54]

Before moving on to the next stanza, Śāntarakṣita's autocommentary argues that since consciousness does not rely on anything external to itself in order to be illuminated, it must possess a nature that is self-illuminating. This leads into the next major point (Śāntarakṣita, *MAl* 18):

> Therefore, this [consciousness],
> being the nature of consciousness, is able to cognize itself.
> With regard to the nature of other objects,
> how can it come to cognize it?[55]

Since consciousness is by nature the opposite of non-sentience, it is not possible for consciousness to contact it. Thus, in knowing an object, consciousness must be apprehending itself in the form of an object, that is, it must be cognizing an aspect of itself. Arnold reads this point in terms of "ontological parsimony":

53 For a speculation on the reasons why Śāntarakṣita takes this position, see Arnold 2005b, 95.

54 Śāntarakṣita, *MAl* 17: "*gcig pu cha med rang bzhin la* || *gsum gyi rang bzhin mi 'thad phyir* || *de yi rang gi rig pa ni* || *bya dang byed pa'i dngos por min* ||". Cf. Blumenthal's translation: "Self-cognizing cognition is not an entity which [exists as] agent and action [with its object] because it would be incorrect for consciousness, which is of a single, partless nature, to be three (i.e., knower, knowing, and known)" (Blumenthal 2004, 86; square brackets in the original).

55 Śāntarakṣita, *MAl* 18: "*de'i phyir 'di ni shes pa yi* || *rang bzhin yin pas bdag shes rung* || *don gyi rang bzhin gzhan dag la* || *de yis ji ltar shes par 'gyur* ||". Cf. Blumenthal's translation: "Therefore, this [consciousness] is capable of self-consciousness (*bdag shes*) since this is the nature of consciousness. How [though] could that cognize the nature of objects from which it is distinct?" (Blumenthal 2004, 88; square brackets in the original).

> insofar as cognition is constitutively distinct from putatively material objects, it makes more sense for the direct objects of cognition to be of the same nature. (Arnold 2005b, 96)

However, with the distinction between the sentient and non-sentient, representationalism – described by Garfield (2006, 212) as "curiously Cartesian in character" – emerges as its direct consequence.[56] Since a state of consciousness is immaterial and cognizant by nature, its content must be as well. This epistemological theory closely aligns with the Yogācāra position, with the key difference that Śāntarakṣita – who does not regard the mind as ultimately existent – confines the validity of this view to the conventional level only.[57] Suganuma offers a short but useful summary of the view Śāntarakṣita holds of self-awareness:

> Briefly speaking, cognition is defined as 'the no-unconscious' (*ajaḍa*), not as the unconscious (*jaḍa*), only because the cognition is 'self -cognisability', in the concrete, 'self-revelation' (*ātmaprakāśa*). Śāntarakṣita explains it more concretely. A cognition does not depend upon any other cogniser (*anyadvedaka*: *shes byed gzhan*) for cognition of its own form; and yet this all is not uncognised; this is what is meant by 'self-cognition' (*svasaṃvid*: *rang rig pa*). According to him, cognition is the illumination of its own by its nature. In order to illuminate itself, cognition never needs any other things than itself. (Suganuma 1963, 69-70; Author's adjustments for the transliterations from Tibetan)

For Śāntarakṣita, cognition is devoid of the cognized and the cognizer, is one and impartite. Śāntarakṣita's account of self-awareness may be seen as bearing resemblance to Kant's notion of the transcendental unity of apperception:

> Candrakīrti's arguments fail to undermine the understanding of *svasaṃvitti* that can be developed following Śāntarakṣita – with the invulnerability of Śāntarakṣita's view now expressed as a function of its being a basically *transcendental* idea. More precisely, while Candrakīrti's critique targets the view on which *svasaṃvitti* is considered a particular kind of *intentional* cognition (considered, that is, to *display* intentionality), Śāntarakṣita's is more like the

56 For thoughtful considerations of the reasons why the 'given' embraced by Śāntarakṣita and Kamalaśīla differs from the 'given' that is rejected by the dGe-lugs scholars, see McClintock 2003.

57 For a parallel analysis of the exposition of this theory as it appears in Śāntarakṣita's *Tattvasaṃgraha*, see Ichigō 1989, 173-7. For an interpretation of Śāntarakṣita from a naturalist perspective, see MacKenzie 2019.

> view that *svasaṃvitti* is *itself* 'intentionality'. (Arnold 2005b, 78; italics in the original)

Svasaṃvitti or *svasaṃvedana* would then denote the intentional and constitutive structure that characterizes any cognition[58] and would be able to defend itself against Candrakīrti's criticism that agent, action, and object would become identical. The whole issue will return (§ 5.2) in the context of the Tibetan philosophical framework, where the way Śāntarakṣita's landmark assertions influenced the subsequent tradition will be made clear. In conclusion, Śāntarakṣita's view of self-awareness presents it as a 'presupposition' of experience itself, rather than as a philosophical 'explanation' of specific cognitive functions (as in Dignāga's case, for instance, in relation to memory). For Śāntarakṣita, it is 'obvious' that there are sentient and non-sentient entities, and that self-awareness is what makes the former sentient. This line of reasoning represents a fundamentally different approach from the view that self-awareness exists solely to enable specific mental functions.

In this way, the rich and nuanced spectrum of Indian Buddhist reflections on the topic of self-awareness in the post-Dignāga phase of its development laid the ground for the subsequent Tibetan discourse, where various standpoints would intersect, evolve, and continue to shape the philosophical conversation on the reflexivity of mind.

58 See MacKenzie's (2017) useful identification of the "transcendental" role of *svasaṃvedana* as the distinguishing feature or nature of consciousness, and its "epistemic" role as the most basic and secure means of knowledge.

Part Two: Tibet

4 A Difficult Heritage: Reflectivity and Reflexivenity in the Tibetan Assimilation of *Svasaṃvedana*

Summary 4.1 Reflectivity and Reflexivity: A Closer Look at Williams's Contribution. – 4.1.1 Reconsidering Williams's Manifesto on the Two Models of *Rang rig*. – 4.1.2 Further Considerations on the Two Models. – 4.2 Reflexivity and Luminosity of the Mind: Photism in Indo-Tibetan Buddhism. – 4.2.1 The Doctrinal Developments of the Notion of the Mind's Luminosity (SKT *Prabhāsvaratā*. – TIB *'Od gsal ba*). – 4.2.2 The Convergence of *Gsal ba* and *'Od gsal ba*.

4.1 Reflectivity and Reflexivity: A Closer Look at Williams's Contribution

The Tibetan assimilation of *svasaṃvedana*, translated as *rang rig*, is by no means uniform: its complex Indian heritage encouraged further elaborations within the Tibetan intellectual landscape also. The challenges Tibetan scholars encountered in inheriting and developing this philosophical concept were closely tied to and conditioned by the exegetical practices characteristic of the commentarial tradition. The philosophical richness of the concept invited sustained reflection, yielding significant implications for both Indian and Tibetan Buddhist doxography. The present analysis will focus on the philosophical and doxographical importance that the various dimensions of the *rang rig* discourse came to acquire in the Tibetan context, particularly in dialogue with contemporary exegetical interpretations.

The point of departure will be Williams's (1998) milestone monograph on the notion of self-awareness in the Tibetan tradition. Since its publication, it has been widely assumed that the two

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categories of self-awareness outlined therein, namely, the "reflective", and the "reflexive", are representative of how that tradition has approached the topic. However, more than a decade earlier, a significant classificatory effort had already been made by Matilal in his study on perception (1986), another important contribution to the field of Indian and Buddhist studies. In that work, well known to Williams, Matilal identified three principal Indian views on self-awareness, encompassing both Buddhist and non-Buddhist perspectives. He describes these three as follows:

> (i) […] an awareness is *reflexively* aware of itself […] if it is self-aware or it reveals itself.
> (ii) […] [for being] *introspectively* aware […] we need a separate perceptual awareness to apprehend the immediately preceding awareness. I concede this is not the usual meaning of "introspection" but I recommend its use in this connection […].
> (iii) Lastly, […] [for being] *reflectively* aware […] one needs an inference […]. Here too, I recommend the use of the word "reflection" in this special sense. (Matilal 1986a, 148-9; italics in the original)

Thus, three types of self-awareness are presented: reflexive, introspective, and reflective. Williams adopts at least two of these designations, 'reflexive' and 'reflective', and builds upon them to develop a study that has significantly influenced subsequent scholarship on the topic. The contribution of his work will serve as an entry point to the section of this volume dedicated to the Tibetan reception and development of the concept of self-awareness.

By highlighting "an ambiguity (or at least a systematic lack of clarity)" in the use of the concept of self-awareness within Buddhist literature, Williams (1998, 4) acknowledges that, although the term *rang rig* is singular, its interpretations are multiple. Among these, Williams seeks to establish a fundamental and fully explicit distinction between two types of *rang rig*, in an effort to clarify – or even 'resolve' – the ambiguity found in the textual tradition. The first type refers to the use of the term within the Yogācāra (and Sautrāntika) framework, beginning with Dignāga and Dharmakīrti; the second is associated with Mi-pham's usage, which draws on a particular interpretation inherited from Śāntarakṣita. Williams (1998, 6-7 fn. 8) refers to these two types of *rang rig* as 'self-awareness (i)' and 'self-awareness (ii)', the latter also described as 'reflexive awareness' or 'the reflexive nature of awareness'. In what follows, an examination will be made of how Williams identifies and characterizes each of the two types. The first will be referred to as 'reflective self-awareness', and the second as 'reflexive self-awareness'.

The analysis will begin with the former model, which implies that the apprehended aspect (or objective aspect) becomes the 'object'

(TIB *yul*) of the apprehending aspect (or subjective aspect), and that self-awareness consists in the experience of the former by the latter. These two aspects of consciousness are linked by a subject-object relationship; this means that the other-cognition (TIB *gzhan rig*) model, that is, the pattern involved in the cognition of things that are outside one's mental *continuum*, is applied also here, even though the object is a 'simultaneous' consciousness in one's mental *continuum*.

As Williams explains, this model stems from Dignāga and, more broadly, from Yogācāra epistemology. It is also closely tied to the ontological tenets of that tradition, as the argument for self-awareness is intimately connected with the demonstration of non-dual, consciousness-only reality. In fact, what is at stake

> in the argument for self-awareness (i) is an epistemological theory showing that the one *dravya* ['substance'] which serves as a substratum for conceptual construction in Cittamātra is, as a matter of fact, non-dual self-aware consciousness. (Williams 1998, 15)

In this framework, consciousness is regarded as the central element, the fundamental and inherently existing factor that serves as the backbone of the entire ontological structure. Following the Abhidharma assertion that conceptual constructs (SKT *prajñaptayaḥ*) must be grounded is some real substance (SKT *dravya*), and in opposition to the Madhyamaka view of *prajñaptimātra*, which holds that everything is 'merely a conceptual construction', the Cittamātra system necessarily posits a *dravya*, thereby implying the inherent existence of something (Williams 1998, 11). Following Willias, according to the Cittamātra view, that substance is identified as an inherently existing, non-dual consciousness. In the absence of external objects, both subject and object are understood to be consciousness; hence, self-awareness arises. In other words, such a consciousness is self-aware precisely because both the perceiving subject and the perceived object are aspects of the same consciousness:

> there is no other thing for [self-aware consciousness] to be aware of, and therefore [it is] self-aware in that a subjective aspect of consciousness takes an objective aspect of consciousness as its object. The argument for *svasaṃvedana* in this Cittamātra context is intimately involved with the argument for nondual consciousness-only, and combines with the need for a *dravya* to give what seems to me to be the characteristically Cittamātra perspective of an inherently-existing nondual consciousness continuum. (Williams 1998, 15)

According to Williams, self-awareness, together with its underlying ontological program,[1] is the target of the critiques Candrakīrti and Śāntideva make: the criticism of a situation where consciousness knows itself *via* a subject-object relationship.

In Williams's view, this reflective structure is included in both Sautrāntika and Yogācāra tenets, notwithstanding their different views regarding the existence of external objects. From the Sautrāntika standpoint, objects, which are assumed to exist outside the mind, serve as the causes for their corresponding cognitions; the mind apprehends these objects by taking on their aspects. By contrast, according to the Yogācāra doctrine, it is the seeds (SKT *bījāni*; TIB *sa bon*) deposited in the store-consciousness (SKT *ālayavijñāna*; TIB *kun gzhi rnam par shes pa*) that function as the causes of mental events. These events are comprehensive of both the subjective and the objective aspects of consciousness, understood as two facets of a single cognitive event that arise simultaneously. Thus, from a Yogācāra perspective, there are no external objects: all phenomena are of the nature of mind. At least, within the Sākāravāda subschool, consciousness appearing with the aspect of the object is all that exists.

A key expression for better understanding Williams's presentation of the reflective model – drawn from the dGe-lugs Tibetan text he selects as a convenient source for illustrating the two types of *rang rig*, one which will deserve closer attention (§ 4.1.1) – is the following: "the apprehending aspect's experience of the apprehended aspect is explained as the meaning of self-awareness" (Thub-bstan Chos-kyi-grags-pa 1990, 752.11-12).[2] The Tibetan passage here does not clearly indicate whether what Williams calls the reflective self-awareness is to be identified with the subjective aspect itself, or rather with the result of the cognition performed by the subjective aspect, that is, its experience of the objective aspect.[3]

1 Were one also to mention the soteriological dimension of this Cittamātra framework, one should remember that such a consciousness "is the substratum for that polarization into postulated inherently separate subjects and objects, a polarization which forms the root delusion, the illusion of duality" (Williams 1998, 15).

2 Thub-bstan Chos-kyi-grags-pa 1990, 752.11-12: "*'dzin rnam gyis gzung rnam myong ba rang rig gi don du bshad do* ||".

3 In this regard, see also Kellner (2010, 214 fn. 31). The same problem seems to be spreading among some modern interpreters of the tradition: cf., for instance, the debate between Coseru (2012, 259 and 265) and MacKenzie (2015b, 40-1). Yiannopoulos's straightforward criticism towards most contemporary accounts of the reflexive nature of awareness in Buddhism points out two main misunderstandings, and the second resonates with one of the aforementioned readings of self-awareness: "Reflexive awareness has been systematically misrepresented as a particular kind of consciousness that takes itself as an object, or even as being strictly identical with the 'subjective aspect' of ordinary cognition" (Yiannopoulos 2012, 154).

Williams (1998, 4 fn. 5) acknowledges this indeterminacy and comments on this part of the text by remarking a "lack of clarity". Then, he appears to take the passage as implicitly allowing for both readings, reflecting the fact that different strands of the Indo-Tibetan tradition have offered both interpretations. On the one hand, Williams recalls Dignāga's claim that self-awareness is the *phala* 'result' of cognition, and observes that this has been interpreted as the outcome of the intentional cognition by which the subjective aspect apprehends the objective one. However, as the present inquiry has shown (ch. 3.1) – particularly on the basis of Kellner's close analysis of the *PS* and the *PSV* – the validity of this reading of Dignāga's account has already been seriously questioned. On the other hand, Williams also notes that certain Tibetan thinkers, particularly within the dGe-lugs tradition, interpret self-awareness not as the result of a cognitive act but rather as the subjective aspect itself. There is at least a third way in which the dGe-lugs tradition might appear to be engaging with a reflective model of self-awareness, namely the one proposed in Newland's exegetical account (1992, 203-4). Building on the definition of *rang rig* in the Sautrāntika system by the dGe-lugs scholar *Phur-bu-lcog Byams-pa-rgya-mtsho* (1825-1901), who identifies it as "the apprehending aspect" itself,[4] Newland further explains:

> Self-consciousnesses are one entity, indivisible and simultaneous, with the apprehending consciousness that they observe. […] That is, a self-consciousness accompanying an eye consciousness apprehending blue must apprehend not only the eye consciousness, but itself as well. Since they are apprehenders, and since they are generated in the aspect of the apprehending, or subjective, side of an experiential moment, they necessarily apprehend themselves. […] They directly and non-mistakenly perceive themselves in a non-dualistic manner, that is, without any appeareance of subject and object as different. (Newland 1992, 203-4)

Newland distinguishes *rang rig* from the subjective aspect of experience, even though the two are simultaneous and indivisible. Nonetheless, the three perspectives just mentioned, two from Williams and one from Newland, may simply reflect the analytical approach adopted in the step-by-step deconstruction of *rang rig* into its various 'components', which are examined and ultimately assessed from the standpoint of the dGe-lugs Prāsaṅgika perspective. According to this view, the identification of self-awareness (as perceiver) with

4 Phur-bu-lcog Byams-pa-rgya-mtsho 2006, 175: "'*dzin rnam rang rig gi mtshan nyid*" ('the apprehending aspect' is the definition of self-awareness).

consciousness (as perceived) leads to a logical absurdity, as it implies the identity of subject and object – a position considered untenable.[5]

All of these articulations of *rang rig* from a dGe-lugs perspective may thus be regarded as possible interpretations that, from Williams's point of view, would fall under his first type of self-awareness. Thus, this model encompasses at least three main views offered by the dGe-lugs tradition regarding reflective self-awareness: one that identifies it with the subjective aspect of cognition; another that considers it as the result of the subjective aspect's cognition of the objective aspect; and a third, that distinguishes *rang rig* from the subjective aspect while nonetheless considering them simultaneous and indivisible.

These articulations appear to lend support to the 'ambiguity' highlighted by Williams, offering different ways of conceiving the relationship between *rang rig* and consciousness that retain a certain degree of dualism and thus fall within the scope of his reflective model. However, as will be explored in the following pages, these articulations of self-awareness may not necessarily point to a genuine dualistic interpretation of *rang rig* itself. Rather, the so-called reflective model might represent an analytical or conceptual device used to unpack a cognitive process that is, at its core, intended as non-dualistic. In this light, the reflective model could be understood less as a doctrinal position and more as a didactic framework – perhaps marginal, and likely later than Dignāga – developed to conceptually express an experience of *rang rig* that remains fundamentally reflexive and non-dual.

As for the second type of self-awareness, the reflexive one, Williams presents it in terms of inherent self-knowing, the proper reflexivity of consciousness as such. In his view, this model targets

5 In an article devoted to the later dGe-lugs reception of the Buddhist doctrine of perception, Klein makes a similar point by describing how *rang rig* is explained and analyzed in the dGe-lugs monastic curriculum in recent times: "In relation to the self-knower, all other consciousnesses are *objective* apprehension aspects (*gzung rnam*); a self-knower is the only type of consciousness that is never an appearing object of any other non-conceptual consciousness in the same *continuum*. The consciousness which a self-knower apprehends never apprehends that self-knower" (Klein 1985, 74; italics in the original). In Klein's understanding, the apprehending subject is identified as the factor of experience, *rang rig*, while the apprehended object is considered as involving two factors: the object of cognition along with the consciousness that apprehends it. This appears to be how the functioning of a mental event in which *rang rig* is posited is generally analyzed in the dGe-lugs understanding of it. Such a type of *rang rig*, however, leads to some problems: "because the self-knower is a factor of experience that is one entity [TIB *ngo bo gcig*] with the perceiving consciousness, the difficulty remains of explaining more fully how the two factors of a single directly perceiving consciousness relate to one another" (Klein 1985, 75). For a summary of Klein's (1985, 73-7) section on the perceiving consciousness as both subject and object, that is, on *rang rig*, see Klein 1986, 110-14. On the topic, see also Cozort 1998, 154-7; Dreyfus 1997, 408-9. For a discussion on the differences between the Sa-skya and the dGe-lugs views on *rang rig*, cf. Cozort 1998.

the defining characteristics of mind: its quiddity, its distinctive feature. It represents a perspective that departs from the ontological and epistemological framework of the Yogācāra project, and instead emerges as an alternative model of self-awareness

> which is initially and usually mixed with self-awareness (i) but comes into its own in certain innovations in the theory of *svasaṃvedana* which were stressed by and probably originated with Śāntarakṣita. (Williams 1998, 18)

Actually, as Williams (1998, 28 fn. 12) notices, a well-formulated reflexive account is already present before Śāntarakṣita, in Vinītadeva's *Nyāyabinduṭīkā* (D no. 4230, vol. we: 6*v*) – as shown at the beginning of this inquiry (§ 2.2) in the consideration of the lamp image in the Mahāsāṃghika school. The peculiarity of the reflexive model is expressed by Williams in the following terms:

> Thus the character of self-awareness here has nothing to do with taking itself as an *object* in a way which might lead to an infinite regress. Rather, self-awareness *means* reflexivity, where there is no sense of referring to an actual subject/object relationship and, therefore, no stage of validation beyond the consciousness itself. […] In other words, the epistemological model based on act and agent where an agent acts on itself is inappropriate. (Williams 1998, 28; italics in the original)

The reflexivity of consciousness does not involve any intentional subject-object structure and, therefore, unlike the reflective model, it avoids the difficulty of an infinite regress. According to Williams's model of reflexive awareness, consciousness validates itself through its mere occurrence, without the need for any additional means of validation.

Thus, according to Williams, two different understandings of *rang rig* can be identified within the tradition: one revolving around a certain dualism, the other based on an account of mere non-dual luminosity.

> The subjective aspect in experiencing the objective aspect is involved in a situation of *at least some sort of duality*, and inasmuch as it depends on an objective aspect which depends upon an "external" object, it can itself be said to be dependent upon the external object insofar as there is one. But here [in the reflexive model] the mere luminosity is said to be without any dependence on an external object, and *completely uninvolved in any dualistic appearances of subject/object*. (Williams 1998, 20; italics added)

These two categories represent the fundamental structure of his exegetic interpretation of the concept of self-awareness in the Tibetan tradition and have become an important point of reference for subsequent scholarship.

4.1.1 Reconsidering Williams's Manifesto on the Two Models of *Rang rig*

Now that the main elements of the two broad categories of self-awareness outlined by Williams have been introduced, in order to trace their textual source, it is necessary to analyze the passage he treats as a kind of manifesto, and consider more closely how he interprets the Tibetan material he deliberately selects to support his distinction.

In his 1998 monograph (2-18), Williams derives these categories from his reading of an explanation of *rang rig* offered by the dGe-lugs scholar Thub-bstan Chos-kyi-grags-pa (also known as Mi-nyag Kun-bzang-bsod-nams, 1823-1905) in his commentary on the ninth chapter of Śāntideva's *BCA*, entitled *sPyod 'jug shes rab le'u'i spyi don rim par phye ba zab mo rten 'byung gi de kho na nyid yang gsal sgron me*. In this text, Thub-bstan Chos-kyi-grags-pa draws inspiration from the *sTong thun chen mo* (that is, *Zab mo stong pa nyid kyi de kho na nyid rab tu gsal bar byed pa'i bstan bcos skal bzang mig 'byed*), an encyclopedic treatise by mKhas-grub-rje (mKhas-grub dGe-legs-dpal-bzang, 1385-1438). Along with rGyal-tshab Dar-ma-rin-chen, Tsong-kha-pa's immediate successor at dGa'-ldan, mKhas-grub-rje is regarded as one of Tsong-kha-pa's two principal disciples.[6] Both texts express the fully-fledged dGe-lugs perspective. Following mKhas-grub-rje (1972, 418),[7] Thub-bstan Chos-kyi-grags-pa opens his passage with a citation from the *Tarkajvālā* (henceforth *TJ*), a work traditionally attributed

6 For further information on the scholar and his works, see Lessing, Wayman [1968] 1993, 11-16; Cabezón 1992, 13-22. For an introduction to *sTong thun chen mo*, a work that attempts to summarize the main Mahāyāna strands around the topic of emptiness, see Cabezón 1992, 1-11.

7 For its translation, see Cabezón 1992, 345-6.

to Bhāvaviveka,[8] and subsequently offers a detailed explanation of self-awareness. The full excerpt used by Williams to illustrate the distinction between the two types of *rang rig*, identified in the text by the numerals (i) and (ii), is presented below with the original Tibetan and Williams's corresponding English translation:

> *rtog ge 'bar ba las | sems tsam pas rnam shes ni gnyis su snang ste | rang snang ba dang yul du snang ba'o || yul du snang ba'i rnam shes ni phyi rol gyi yul gyi rnam par gyur nas rang snang ba'i rnam shes kyi yul du 'gyur ro zhes phyogs snga'i 'dod pa bkod pa ste | (i) rang snang ba zhes pa 'dzin rnam dang | yul du snang ba zhes pa gzung rnam dang | yul gyi rnam par gyur pa'i gzung rnam de nyid 'dzin rnam gyi yul du bshad pas 'dzin rnam gyis gzung rnam myong ba rang rig gi don du bshad do || des na rang rig ces pa ni 'dzin rnam yan gar ba ste (ii) gzhan rig gi shes pa thams cad kyi steng na rang nyid gsal tsam dang rig tsam pa phyi rol gyi yul la ltos med du kha nang kho nar phyogs shing yul yul can gyi gnyis snang thams cad log pa zhig la 'jog go* ||. (Thub-bstan Chos-kyi-grags-pa 1990, 752.7-14; numerals added)
>
> As it is said in [Bhāvaviveka's] *Tarkajvālā*:
>
> "According to the Cittamātrin, consciousness has a twofold appearance. It appears to itself and it appears as the object. The consciousness which appears as the object-having taken

8 This passage appears in *TJ*, the commentary on *Madhyamakahṛdayakārikā* and serves as part of the introduction to *Madhyamakahṛdayakārikā* 5.20. See Hoornaert 2000, 84 for the Tibetan text; see Hoornaert 2000, 101-2 for the English translation. Moreover, for speculations on the possible textual sources of the position presented in the *TJ*, see Yamaguchi's and Hoornaert's thoughts as reported in Hoornaert 2000, 102 fn. 1. One more helpful annotation Hoornaert provides is about the Yogācāra doctrine of consciousness appearing as subject and object: "at least prior to Dignāga, the doctrine of duality was taught as a purely *soteriological* doctrine and was not concerned with epistemological issues. The purpose of the doctrine was not to explain how perceptual cognitions originate, what their object is, how their object is cognized, and so forth. The purpose was to explain what defilement (*saṃkleśa*) is, how it originates and how it can be eliminated" (Hoornaert 2000, 102 fn. 1; italics added). Along these lines, Kellner further comments on two different meanings of 'appearance', claiming that "The soteriological purpose of the doctrine of duality yields a specific connotation for the idea that there is an appearance (*ābhāsa*) of duality: duality is an appearance, but it is not real; it can and should be overcome on the path to liberation. This amounts to using the predicate 'appear' as it is used in sentences of the kind 'it appears to be the case that *p* (but it is not)', where appearance *connotes falsehood*. However, a second usage of 'appearance' is also generally present in Yogācāra literature, when for instance texts speak of a 'subject-appearance' or an 'object-appearance'. This usage of 'appearance' corresponds to [...] a descriptive phenomenological usage, where the verb 'to appear' *simply informs how things present themselves* to a cognizing subject" (Kellner 2010, 209; italics added). Concerning in particular Dignāga's usage of the term, see Kellner 2010, 209, where she suggests that in *PS* 1.10 Dignāga conveys a certain degree of falsehood in the separation of the three aspects of cognition, whereas in *PS* 1.11 the two distinct appearances are mentioned in a non-soteriological, descriptive way.

> on the aspect of an external object-becomes an object for the consciousness which appears to itself". Thus is set forth the position of the *pūrvapakṣa*.
>
> (i) That which is spoken of as appearing to itself is the subjective aspect. That which is spoken of as appearing as the object is the objective aspect. That very objective aspect which has taken on the aspect of the object is explained as the object of the subjective aspect. Therefore, the experience of the objective aspect by the subjective aspect is explained as the meaning of 'self-awareness'. Thus what is called self-awareness is a separate subjective aspect.
>
> (ii) Accompanying all the consciousnesses that are aware of others there is also a mere luminosity, a mere awareness, of its own nature, turned solely inwards, without dependence on the external object, and [here] all the dual-appearances of object and subject are posited as a mistake. (Williams 1998, 4-5; square brackets and numerals in the original)[9]

Williams presents this Tibetan passage as a kind of conceptual manifesto and aims to demonstrate both the lack of clarity in the sources that employ the term *rang rig* in multiple, often ambiguous ways, and the necessity of distinguishing between its possible interpretations, namely those corresponding to what he identifies as reflective and reflexive self-awareness. In fact, he remarks: "This ambiguity can be seen reflected in a *convenient* explanation given by the dGe-lugs lama Thub bstan chos kyi grags pa" (Williams 1998, 4; italics added).

9 In the Author's translation: "As it is said in the *Tarkajvālā*: 'According to the Cittamātrins, consciousness appears as two: namely, its *appearing as itself*, and its *appearing as the object*. The consciousness appearing as the object, having taken on the aspect of an external object, becomes the object of the consciousness that is its appearing as itself'. The opponent's stance is thus presented. (i) Its 'appearing as itself' is the apprehending aspect. Its 'appearing as the object' is the apprehended aspect. That very apprehended aspect which has taken on the aspect of the object is explained to be the object of the apprehending aspect. Therefore, the experience of the apprehended aspect by the apprehending aspect is explained to be the meaning of self-awareness. Thus, 'self-awareness' is an independent apprehending aspect; (ii) accompanying every consciousness that is an other-cognition there is a mere self-luminosity, a mere self-awareness, directed solely inward, independent of external objects, and [here] all the dualistic appearances of object and subject are posited as erroneous" (italics added). When comparing this version with Williams's translation (1998, 4-5), particular attention should be paid to his choices in translating key terms. For instance, *rang snang ba* is rendered as 'appearing to itself'. However, in the *TJ*, the phrase actually appears as *rang du snang ba*, which might be more appropriately read in parallel with *yul du snang ba*. In this light, the former could be understood as 'appearing as itself' (possibly interpreting rang as referring to the appearance itself, indicating the appearing of the appearing of the object), while the latter would then be 'appearing as the object'. Furthermore, Williams translates the pair *'dzin rnam* and *gzung rnam* as 'subjective aspect' and 'objective aspect', respectively.

One might question whether this ambiguity is in fact present. This, in turn, raises the question of why the passage just quoted and translated is considered a 'convenient' explanation, especially since Williams does not explicitly clarify this point in his work. It appears to be 'convenient' insofar as, from Williams's perspective, Thub-bstan Chos-kyi-grags-pa provides a description of *rang rig* that seemingly encompasses both of the two types Williams identifies. This raises the further question: is the bifurcation introduced by Williams in fact an extrinsic interpretive move, imposed upon a passage that exhibits no explicit need or recognition of such a differentiation? As will be argued below, a careful reading of the Tibetan source makes it highly doubtful that the author himself intended or endorsed such a distinction. The more plausible hypothesis is that Williams selects this particular passage because it lends itself to an interpretive strategy that allows him to draw out two distinct categories of *rang rig* even though such a division is not articulated by Thub-bstan Chos-kyi-grags-pa himself. If this is the case, then Williams's interpretation must be understood as an extrinsic intervention. His distinction becomes representative of two major tendencies he identifies within the broader Tibetan exegesis of *rang rig*, but without any conscious alignment – so to speak – on the part of the Tibetan author. By choosing this quotation as emblematic of the ambiguity surrounding the term, Williams aims to uncover and make explicit two conceptual strands that he believes are present in the text.[10]

Dividing the Tibetan passage cited above (Thub-bstan Chos-kyi-grags-pa 1990, 752.7-14) into two paragraphs, one for each type of *rang rig*, is not entirely convincing. As will be argued below, the excerpt seems to express just one description of *rang rig* while the division into two different accounts seems to be unwarranted.

To begin with, Williams identifies a clear-cut division between the two accounts at a particular point in the passage, and this presents a first problematic aspect. If two genuinely distinct meanings were intended, this difference would have been more clearly emphasized by the Tibetan author – which is not the case. On the contrary, linguistically speaking, the point where Williams locates the shift from one paragraph to the other is immediately after the following phrase: "*des na rang rig ces pa ni 'dzin rnam yan gar ba ste*" ("Thus, 'self-awareness' is a separate apprehending aspect"). The semi-final particle *ste*, which generally functions as a connective

10 Most importantly, it should be noted that the corresponding passage in *sTong thun chen mo* (Cabezón 1992, 345-6) does not present a clear thematization of this distinction.

or explanatory element,[11] is rendered by Williams with a period, to mark the point where the paragraph on the second type of *rang rig* begins – something that is not grammatically supported among the accepted uses of this particle.[12] This is the first problematic point: either a weakness of his reading or an intentional intervention in the meaning of the text.

The second issue concerns the phrase *'dzin rnam yan gar ba*, as it constitutes the final section of the paragraph Williams associates with the reflective model. Williams feels the need to explain this phrase, commenting on its meaning and implications, and stating that, in the subject-object reflective model,

> the subjective aspect and the objective aspect are not literally and in all respects the same, nor are they experienced as the same, even if they occur in the same consciousness continuum. This point is made quite strongly in referring to a separate (*yan gar ba*) subjective aspect. (Williams 1998, 7-8)

Soon after that, he remarks that there is "a subject(ive aspect) aware of a conceptually (and also phenomenologically?) different object(ive aspect)" (9).

So now, to shed more light on the phrase *yan gar ba* in this passage, it could be useful to compare it with the textual source from which Thub-bstan Chos-kyi-grags-pa draws inspiration. Commenting on the same quotation from the *TJ* that Thub-bstan Chos-kyi-grags-pa discusses, mKhas-grub-je's *sTong thun chen mo* (mKhas-grub dGe-legs-dpal-bzang 1972, 418.6-19.3) holds some relevant clues regarding this occurrence of the expression *yan gar ba*. Immediately after the quotation from the *TJ*, mKhas-grub-rje comments as follows:

> *rang snang ba zhes pa 'dzin rnam dang | yul du snang ba zhes pa gzung rnam dang | yul gyi rnam par gyur pa'i gzung rnam de nyid 'dzin rnam gyi yul du bshad pas 'dzin rnam gyis gzung rnam myong ba rang rig gi don du bshad pa yin no || des na mdo sems gnyis kyi*

11 For a detailed explanation of the range of applications of this particle, see Hahn 2002, 104-7. To summarize, this particle has the following principal functions: introductive (to provide an explanation of the preceding sentence); temporal (to indicate that the next verbal action follows it in time – but only when the particle is used after a verbal stem); causal (to indicate that the preceding sentence is a cause for the following one); adversative or restrictive (with a contrasting function or a restrictive one); modal (to qualify the manner in which the following verbal action is carried out); coordinating (to express the type of connection a semi-colon punctuation mark might convey); and finalizing (only when it is not followed by any other clause).

12 Reading the particle *ste* as having an adversative or restrictive function might have been behind Williams's choice; however, the text as a whole does not seem to corroborate this option.

> *lugs la shes pa yin na kho rang gi ngo bor gyur pa'i 'dzin rnam de kha nang kho na la ltas pa gnyis snang thams cad dang bral zhing | kho rang gis kho rang rig pa yin la | des kho rang rig pa dang gzung rnam rig pa gnyi ga yang yul gang gi'ang rnam pa 'char ba la gtan nas mi ltos pa'i 'dzin rnam yan gar bar 'dod pa yin te* |. (mKhas-grub dGe-legs-dpal-bzang 1972, 418.6-19.3)

A translation of the above quotation reveals the following picture – very similar to the one in Thub-bstan Chos-kyi-grags-pa's text:

> Its 'own appearance' is the apprehending aspect, the 'appearance as the object' is the apprehended aspect, and that very apprehended aspect, which has taken on the aspect of the object, is explained to constitute the object of the apprehending aspect. Thus, the experience of the apprehended aspect by the apprehending aspect is explained as the meaning of self-awareness. In the Sautrāntika and Cittamātra systems, it is asserted that every consciousness possesses an apprehending aspect which turns out to be of [that consciousness's] own nature. This aspect is oriented solely inwards, devoid of any dual(istic) appearances and, by virtue of cognizing itself, it cognizes both itself and the apprehended aspect. It is an independent (*yan gar ba*) apprehending aspect, free from dependence on the appearance of the aspect of any object whatsoever.[13]

mKhas-grub-rje does not mention 'self-luminosity' (*rang gsal*). Aside from this omission, all the other elements found in Thub-bstan Chos-kyi-grags-pa are also present here, though arranged in a different order. In mKhas-grub-rje's passage, the phrase *yan gar ba* occurs together with and next to the elements that, according to Williams's reading, would refer to the second type of *rang rig*. However, as noted above, in relation to Thub-bstan Chos-kyi-grags-pa's text, Williams assumes that the phrase *yan gar ba* still belongs to the first type. For Williams, it serves as a description of the subjective aspect (understood as *rang rig*) as 'different' from its objective counterpart (understood as cognition), thus implying a dualistic account of *rang rig*. On the other hand, in mKhas-grub-rje's version, it is clear that the term *yan gar ba* should be read as 'independent', since *rang rig* is not depending on the appearance of the aspect of any object and, therefore, remains without dependence on any object, in so far as there is one. This leads to a different point: in the passage quoted above, the qualifications of the apprehending aspect as "independent", "oriented

13 Cf. Cabezón's translation (1992, 346).

solely inwards",[14] and "cogniz[ing] itself" all seem to address the self-referential or independent character of cognition itself, rather than implying any ontological separation between self-cognition and cognition. Simply put, any cognition, *qua* self-cognizant, does not have to depend on its specific object(-appearance) and is not affected by the way the object(-appearance) is. After all, every cognition has a self-luminosity that does not 'care' about the object of the cognition. Thus, in mKhas-grub-rje's excerpt, what seems to be at stake is the independent or self-referential character of cognition itself, rather than the difference between *rang rig* and its *gzung rnam* – as Williams claims.[15] In other words, the distinction made by both Tibetan scholars between the two aspects (the subjective and the objective) is not intended to suggest any form of subject-object dualism between them: rather, it appears to serve as an analytical device to describe the reflexive and non-dual nature of cognition. Therefore, it is not fully obvious how and why Williams reads the reflective model into Thub-bstan Chos-kyi-grags-pa's passage.

Thub-bstan Chos-kyi-grags-pa's (1990, 752.7-14) passage forms a single, coherent description of the notion of *rang rig*, incorporating various expressions that all point toward a unified reflexive account. If this *yan gar ba* subjective aspect truly existed, it would entail the collapse of any distinction between knower and known, ultimately leading to an untenable and absurd conclusion. Indeed, just a few pages after the excerpt quoted above, mKhas-grub-rje (1972, 421.6) expresses the core of the general dGe-lugs criticism against *rang rig*:

> No matter how extensively one reflects on the independent (*yan gar ba*), inward-directed apprehending aspect, not even the slightest conceptual image of distinct isolates (*ldog pa*) for what is cognized (*rig bya*) and what cognizes (*rig byed*) arises.[16]

14 For some specific expressions that appear in Tibetan accounts of self-awareness, like those in consideration, and their relation with classical Indian *pramāṇa* theory, see Yiannopoulos (2012, 155), who comments: "'Mere awareness' and 'mere luminosity' are more or less accurate glosses, but 'turned solely inwards' (*nang kho nar phyogs*) is a fatal mischaracterization". This comment hints at the fact that talking about an inward direction implies an outer direction and therefore dualism, whereas dualism is not present in the *pramāṇa* theory. If applied to the two passages at stake in these pages, Yiannopoulos's reflection would perhaps support the idea that the expression *nang kho nar phyogs* retains a dualistic *substratum*.

15 Cf. the description of *rang rig* offered by Tshong-kha-pa (2009, 363.4-5), for instance: "*rang rig ni shes pa thams cad kha nang lta la rig bya dang rig byed tha dad par snang ba nub pa'i 'dzin rnam yan gar ba yin*" (Self-awareness is the inward orientation of all consciousnesses and the independent apprehending aspect in which the appearances of 'what is cognized' and 'what cognizes' as distinct subside).

16 mKhas-grub dGe-legs-dpal-bzang 1972, 421.6: "*kha nang ltas kyi 'dzin rnam yan gar ba de la rtog pas ji tsam yid gtad kyang rig bya dang rig byed kyi ldog pa so so'i spyi 'char rgyu cung zad kyang med*".

As a consequence, the objects of the actions and their doers (*bya byed*) would become the same (mKhas-grub dGe-legs-dpal-bzang 1972, 422). For the Prāsaṅgika Mādhyamikas, the reasons for refuting *rang rig* are self-referentiality, a non-dependence on the object of the cognition, a lack of proper duality, and a lack of dependence-on-other. This refutation seems to provide further evidence that the model of *rang rig* refuted by them is reflexive.

Thus, it is difficult to accept the legitimacy of Williams's use of this very passage as a foundation for introducing the major topic of his book – namely, the two distinct categories for understanding self-awareness. In addition, it must be noted that although Williams does distinguish between these two models, in one passage he also acknowledges that one can collapse into the other, thus weakening the rigidity of the distinction and possibly reflecting a reconsideration of it. This is what Williams claims about the relationship between the two models and the possibility for either one to be reduced into the other:

> It should also be clear, however, that although I am arguing self-awareness (i) is different from self-awareness (ii), I do not wish to maintain that the one cannot be reduced to the other through a combination of (sometimes debatable) presuppositions and inference. Quite the reverse. It might be argued, for example, that in the case of self-awareness (i), since for Cittamātra there is no external reality causing the aspect of blue when the eye-consciousness takes on the aspect of blue, it follows that in reality the eye-consciousness cannot take on the aspect of blue. Thus when the subjective aspect experiences the objective aspect, pure awareness experiences pure awareness. If this is the case, there is no longer any differentiation into subjective and objective aspects. Therefore, if we have consciousness at all we must be left simply with self-reflective consciousness with absolutely no differentiation into subject and object – that is, it would seem, self-awareness (ii).
>
> One could also argue for the reverse […]. Śāntarakṣita wants to argue that […] it is not possible in reality for consciousness to contact insentient objects. Thus in knowing an object, consciousness must really be apprehending itself in the form of the object. Therefore, from the reflexive nature of consciousness as its uniquely defining quality one moves to an epistemology where consciousness apprehends itself in the form of the object. That is, one moves from self-awareness (ii) to self-awareness (i). (Williams 1998, 32-4)

Ram-Prasad observes, even more strongly, what Williams points out in the above quote:

> I am indebted to Paul Williams here for his acute remark that there are two types of self-awareness here: one is the cognition of the object which turns out actually to be part of cognition itself; and the other is the constitutive cognition of its own occurrence. But, as he points out, the former collapses into the latter, regardless of whether that is what Śāntarakṣita and Kamalaśīla intended or not. Since the objectual aspect of a cognition is itself part of consciousness, to be aware of that aspect is to be aware of the fact of consciousness itself. (Ram-Prasad 2007, 69 fn. 31)

Returning to the term 'ambiguity' used by Williams (1998, 4) in reference to the 'lack of clarity' in the Indo-Tibetan Buddhist tradition between two models for understanding *rang rig*, one might speculate that the core issue actually lies in the relationship among the structural aspects of cognition itself, that is, in the 'tension' between them. It might be seen as an ambiguity in the sense that self-awareness can be conceptually described as composed of two aspects, yet no bya-byed relationship can be distinguished, since both aspects share the same nature. Alternatively, it could be viewed as an ambiguity insofar as *rang rig* is non-dualistic, and yet is often described as a cognition being aware of itself while remaining dualistically open to the other – being the self-awareness of a cognition which, in turn, is a cognition of something else. However, rather than a true doctrinal ambiguity, these instances could be seen as subtle analytical nuances of a fundamentally non-dual phenomenon, nuances that require careful and precise analysis and that have historically presented a challenge for dGe-lugs interpreters.[17]

In this light, and with reference to the classificatory attempt made by Williams in his manifesto, one might question whether the reflective model of self-awareness can, in fact, be identified as an explicitly and evidently doctrinally endorsed view within the Indo-Tibetan Buddhist tradition. Williams himself does not appear to share this concern: he asserts that this model stems primarily from Dignāga and the Yogācāra tradition. However, as shown (§ 3.1), such an intentional model is not mapped out clearly in Dignāga's account, and, therefore, this claim appears to be unfounded.

In any case, it is perhaps not difficult to fall into a dualistic misunderstanding when trying to grasp how *rang rig* operates.

17 The usual way the later dGe-lugs exegesis describes the relation between mind and its *svasaṃvedana* is in terms of *ngo bo gcig ldog pa tha dad* 'one nature, different isolates'. As they are the same entity, whatever is the one is necessarily the other, and there is no instance of one that is not also the other. They are not different consciousnesses. However, being different isolates, they are different for and separable by thought. For a detailed analysis on isolates as they are seen by Phur-bu-lcog Byams-pa-rgya-mtsho, see Perdue 1992, 411-80. See Williams 1998, 8 fn. 9, for his understanding of this exegesis in light of what he identifies as the reflective model of *rang rig*.

One possible example of the misunderstanding that conceives the notion of *rang rig* as reflective – implying a simultaneous intentional dualism within the two aspects of any cognition – can be traced to a thesis presented precisely in the *TJ*, specifically in the section from which, as previously noted, both Thub-bstan Chos-kyi-grags-pa and mKhas-grub-rje cite a passage. Although this *TJ* excerpt claims to represent the Cittamātra view, it does not present it faithfully;[18] rather, it formulates a position in which the two aspects of cognition are held to arise simultaneously and to possess distinct entities. There is no scholarly consensus regarding the actual source of the theory presented in this *TJ* passage; it is clear, however, that it does not correspond either to Dignāga's view or to the general Cittamātra perspective. Since the sources of the position expressed in this *TJ* passage are unclear, it is doubtful whether it actually represents any coherently endorsed tenets. Interestingly, though, the quotation that both Thub-bstan Chos-kyi-grags-pa and mKhas-grub-rje take from the *TJ* constitutes only a small portion of that thesis – specifically, a part that is compatible with and taken by them to represent the common presentation of Cittamātra *rang rig*, in which the two aspects of cognition are not regarded as possessing different entities. It is possible, in any case, that the Indo-Tibetan tradition may have, in some cases, given rise to misunderstandings of the non-duality of *rang rig*, stemming from its analytical elaboration into two aspects. If so, this could lend some support to the ambiguity noted by Williams. However, such ambiguity is not as evident – nor as strongly emphasized or systematically linked to the main Buddhist tenets in doxographical terms – as Williams suggests. Thus, it seems that his reflective model, rather than representing a tenet or a proper standpoint on the issue, instead gives voice to the possible (and perhaps frequent, in the subsequent tradition) risk of wrongly interpreting it by positing a non-dual mental phenomenon in a dualistic framework.

In conclusion, the analytical division of cognition into two aspects, the apprehending and the apprehended, does not seem to imply an interpretation of *rang rig* that aligns, even partially, with Williams's reflective model, at least based on the passages from the two renowned dGe-lugs authors examined here. As argued above, it is clear that their understanding of *rang rig* corresponds to the reflexive model, that is, to a fully non-dualistic form of self-awareness. This, in fact, is precisely the reason why *rang rig* is refuted by these authors: adhering to the Prāsaṅgika perspective, they reject the notion of non-dual awareness, as it would imply independence from the object and, consequently, intrinsic existence. In other words, the very fact

18 For the Tibetan text, see Hoornaert 2000, 84; for the English translation, see Hoornaert 2000, 101-2.

that *rang rig* is refuted by the dGe-lugs authors serves as a clear, albeit indirect, confirmation that their interpretation follows the model that Williams identifies as reflexive. At the same time, the method of analyzing *rang rig* by dividing it into two aspects has undoubtedly led to misunderstandings. As previously discussed, this didactic strategy, as employed in the dGe-lugs context, may perhaps be understood as a way of setting the ground for the refutation of self-awareness according to the Prāsaṅgika-Madhyamaka standpoint – that is, as the first step toward refuting *rang rig*, since it exposes the absurd consequences that follow from collapsing the distinction between knower and known, agent and action. This tendency is exemplified in the previously cited passage from the *TJ*, and continues to generate confusion, as evidenced in Williams's exegesis.

4.1.2 Further Considerations on the Two Models

The global impact and resonance of Williams's identification of the two categories of interpretation of *svasaṃvedana* within the Indo-Tibetan Buddhist tradition is well attested in more recent Buddhist studies literature. The two models outlined by Williams, which purportedly emerge from the complexity of the Indian tradition and are subsequently traced within the Tibetan Buddhist tradition as well, have become the principal categories of interpretation of self-awareness in most subsequent studies on the topic.[19] If his study represents the initial attempt in a series of increasingly detailed mappings of the ways in which the Buddhist tradition has conceptualized self-awareness, then it is worth examining and comparing some of the developments that followed – some more narrowly focused on the Indian Buddhist epistemologists, others broader in scope, extending to include other Buddhist authors as well as figures from European phenomenology and analytic philosophy. It will be interesting to observe how the exegesis of Indo-Tibetan Buddhist sources diverges from case to case – an evident sign that the debate on these texts remains open. Such divergences likely reflect and are shaped by the ongoing philosophical discourse on these topics in contemporary thought.

This discussion begins with the reflective model of self-awareness. This constitutes one of the most debated notions in the field – particularly in relation to its affirmation within the Indian Buddhist epistemological tradition and its subsequent developments. In this regard, it is worth revisiting Kellner (2010, 226). Although

19 In Arnold's words, for instance: "It has […] been widely noted, at least since Paul Williams's 1998 *The Reflexive Nature of Awareness*, that there are basically two main ways to understand this doctrine" (Arnold 2010, 324).

she does not provide a classificatory framework, Kellner offers a particularly insightful observation that helps to illuminate the difficulties involved in delineating a reflective model – and, more crucially, in attributing such a model to Dignāga. In her commentary on Williams's work, she underscores that the structure of reflective *svasaṃvedana* – or, as she terms it, 'intentional self-awareness' – is identified by Williams on the basis of a Tibetan commentary concerning the view of the two appearances in the *TJ*, and is rooted, therefore, in a post-Dignāga source.

> One should note […] that Dignāga's exposition of means and result does not unequivocally indicate that self-awareness here is nothing but intentional self-awareness – in fact, if one reads it unrelated to any subsequent tradition, one finds little in terms of explicit statements that point to intentional self-awareness. (Kellner 2010, 227)

Thus, Kellner draws her conclusions:

> Clearly, Williams' two kinds of self-awareness cannot be neatly mapped onto the different areas or contexts of Dignāga's presentation. (Kellner 2010, 228)

In fact, the intentional structure does not seem to do justice to the disclosure of one's own experiences to oneself, that is, what *svasaṃvedana* consists of, and this model cannot be clearly traced in Dignāga. The same point about Williams's 'self-awareness (i)' is also made clear by Yiannopoulos (2012, 154-5) in relation to the Indian Buddhist tradition: for him, the concept of 'self-awareness (i)' is inaccurate regarding the views of Dignāga, Dharmakīrti, Śāntarakṣita, and Kamalaśīla as none of these theorists ever proposed it.

Among the most significant classificatory contributions to the topic, Duckworth's (2015, 207) study stands out. His analysis encompasses both Indo-Tibetan Buddhist and European philosophical perspectives. He identifies three distinct models of *svasaṃvedana*, notably including a reflective model which, he argues, is not explicitly addressed within the Indo-Tibetan Buddhist traditions. This first model, labeled "awareness of a self", is presented not as a doctrinal stance endorsed by these traditions – indeed, it is explicitly rejected – but, rather, according to some interpretations (including that of Tsong-kha-pa), as a view that may nonetheless be implicitly operative within the latter two models of self-awareness. The second type is "first-personal access to experience". This implies "being aware as an experiential subject when aware of something" in a manner characteristic of modern phenomenology. The third model is

a form of self-awareness that not only describes subjective experience but also encompasses "the structure of reality" (Duckworth 2015, 207) and, as Duckworth presents it, follows the accounts of Dignāga and Dharmakīrti. It constitutes "the way that the mind presents itself in the phenomenal features (*ākāra*) of an object and a subject" (208).

According to this view,

> everything, subjects and objects, arise in and as awareness. In this interpretation, experiential reality is nothing but awareness; the world is irreducibly singular (or rather, non-dual) even though it presents itself as a duality of subjects and objects. (208)

For the sake of clarity, Duckworth provides a chart:

> Reflective self-awareness (object-directed; ontological):
> – SA-1: Awareness of self.
> – SA-2: Awareness of subject.
> Prereflective (reflexive) self-awareness (phenomenological):
> – SA-2: Awareness as subject (apprehender-aspect); subjective feel of a cognition.
> – SA-3: Awareness as structure of experience (apprehender-apprehended).
> Notice that SA-2 pivots between egological (SA-1) and ecological (SA-3). (Duckworth 2015, 208)

In particular, without dwelling further on the first type of self-awareness – the reflective type – which has perhaps already been sufficiently addressed through Williams's exegesis, it is worth noting that the second meaning, namely, the subjective feel of a cognition, can be conceived as a minimal self: the most basic sense of being a subject of experience. This perspective on self-awareness is reflected in the phenomenological tradition and is embraced by Buddhist thinkers such as Śāntarakṣita and Śākya-mchog-ldan (Duckworth 2015, 209). Regarding the third meaning of self-awareness, Duckworth explains that it can be identified with the self as universe, or a boundless self, "an all-embracing unity, the source and substance of everything" (208). This third type, in Yogācāra:

> is not only prereflective, but also resembles the substance of Spinoza's dual-aspect monism. Like Spinoza, who used thought and extension as examples of *attributes* of substance, Dignāga […] and Dharmakīrti […] outlined subjective and objective features of self-awareness. […] Self-awareness in this case is thus both the means and content of knowledge, similar to Spinoza's notion of substance […]. Spinoza also supported the case that subjects and objects only appear to be distinct but in fact are not by following

> the principle that unlike things cannot be causally related,[20] like Dharmakīrti. (Duckworth 2015, 209; italics in the original)

Watson's (2010, 315) classification pertains and is limited to the work of the Indian Buddhist epistemologists. In his account, the model of *svasaṃvedana* is explicitly intentional in structure and is outlined as three-fold: (i) "the subject-pole of a cognition perceiving the object-pole", (ii) "the subject-pole perceiving itself" or "cognition perceiving its subject-pole", and (iii) "cognition's perception of both the subject-pole and the object-pole". Following Watson, the first model might be derived from Dignāga's *PS* 1.10 and may also be found in Dharmakīrti's account; the second might be derived from *PS* 1.11-12, related to the memory argument and, therefore, the context of memory in which consciousness cognizes its own apprehending aspect; and the third from *PS* 1.9a – the very passage previously examined in detail thanks to Kellner's work (2010).

For his part, in a highly detailed and comprehensive study, MacKenzie (2007, 40 ff.) distinguishes three theses concerning the notion of self-awareness, each applicable to both Indian and non-Indian perspectives. Each of MacKenzie's three models, however, possesses specific nuances and facets, allowing for various ways in which the models interrelate and intertwine, thus suggesting a spectrum of positions between intentionality and the phenomenology of experience.

- The Self-Awareness Thesis: if a subject is aware of an object, then the subject is also aware of being aware of that object;
- The Reflection Thesis: self-awareness is the product of a second-order awareness taking a distinct, first-order awareness as its intentional object;
- The Reflexivity Thesis: conscious states simultaneously disclose both the object of consciousness and (aspects of) the conscious state itself. (MacKenzie 2007, 40)

According to MacKenzie, Dignāga, Dharmakīrti, and Śāntarakṣita are "Buddhist reflexivists", much like most of the major thinkers in the European phenomenological tradition, including Sartre, for whom reflexivity becomes the centerpiece of the entire philosophical system (MacKenzie 2007, 40). Moreover, in one of his most recent works, MacKenzie (2024) refines and reaffirms the reflexivity model in terms of 'dual-aspect reflexivism', a notion that will be revisited (§ 7.2.1) in the context of contemporary reinterpretations of the richness of contemplative traditions, particularly as they engage

20 Here the reference is Spinoza's *Ethics* (Scholium to Proposition 10; Spinoza 2002, 221).

with current debates on widely discussed topics. Self-awareness is thus conceived as the most basic apprehension of the two facets of a cognitive event, with self-awareness, the object-aspect, and the subject-aspect all constituting features of a single occurrence. One possible hypothesis for understanding dual-aspect reflexivism, in its phenomenal character, is that, in some respects, it may straddle SA-2 and SA-3, to use Duckworth's terminology.

As seen in the classificatory examples mentioned above, contemporary scholarship has interpreted the reflective model in various ways, most often with reference to two distinct orders of consciousness. However, there is no consensus as to whether it should be regarded as a significant and autonomous type of self-awareness, nor regarding the authors to whom such a model can be reliably attributed. These divergences and ongoing debates clearly demonstrate how much scholarly attention this area continues to merit: the topic remains philosophically fertile and deeply promising in its implications.

4.2 Reflexivity and Luminosity of the Mind: Photism in Indo-Tibetan Buddhism

The next step in this reflection moves from the issue of the reflexivity of awareness, discussed thus far, to opening the discourse to another perspective – one already suggested by certain analogies encountered along the way such as the lamp or fire. The entire discourse, in fact, leads naturally to the topic of the luminosity of mind, given that the reflexivity of mind is "no different from the property of 'luminosity' [of mind]" (Kapstein 2000, 106). Since the notion of mind's luminosity is pervasive throughout the Indo-Tibetan tradition, while remaining far from homogeneous, the aim here is to outline its principal meanings and trace the key stages of its development, linking it to the concept of reflexivity. This offers an alternative yet complementary perspective on the same theme, one that may serve as a valuable lens through which to investigate further the nature of self-awareness.

In initially examining how consciousness is understood within the broader context of Indian philosophy, it is helpful to consider how Ram-Prasad introduces its luminosity in terms of the "phenomenal feel of consciousness" (Ram-Prasad 2007, 53). He proceeds by offering further elements of luminosity from the Indian perspective:

> Luminosity is the rendering of an event as subjective. It is that by which there is an occurrence, which it is like something to undergo. The subjective is *the having of experience* (*anubhava*). Luminosity is the Indian metaphor for phenomenality, the undergoing by

> the subject of something else (its object). The philosophers are agreed on all sides that consciousness is *phenomenological*; it is luminous. The debate is over the constitution of the phenomenality of consciousness. The debate is about what it is for there to be subjectivity. (Ram-Prasad 2007, 54; italics added)

Ram-Prasad stresses an understanding of luminosity in terms of the phenomenal experience that a 'subject' undergoes, but, as MacKenzie (2017) points out by shedding light on the 'transcendental' role of reflexivity, not all Indian philosophers would link phenomenality to subjectivity. In fact, from the Buddhist viewpoint, if experiences present themselves to a subject, that subject is none other than consciousness itself. Therefore, the necessary condition of any phenomenal appearance is the luminosity of mind – that is, for those strands of Buddhism that assert reflexive awareness, *svasaṃvedana* – since it is the condition for any object-directed intentionality and any phenomenal appearance. Conscious states exist only in so far as they are experienced, so they presuppose a subjective point of view within which they take place. This basic and minimal first-person point of view is luminosity, and it is in this sense that luminosity comes to be seen as transcendental (MacKenzie 2017). In other words, the mental event is itself the subject of experience, the minimal unit of what is perceived as the space and time of experiential events, that is, the insubstantial, luminous and transparent scenery or horizon of their manifestation.[21]

In Indo-Tibetan Buddhist philosophy, there has always been a great importance attached to light in all its various manifestations, metaphorical understandings and phenomenological forms. Thus, what might be called 'photism' is a fundamental trait running through the tradition, encompassing many different philosophical understandings of light or luminosity in relation to the mind. Within the broad domain of photism, however, it is essential to establish from the very outset a fundamental distinction that is linguistic in nature or, more precisely, semantic.

The concept of luminosity utilized when talking about self-awareness is conveyed by the term *prakāśa*(*tā*) (SKT; TIB *gsal* [*ba*]). This notion of

21 For further thoughts on the spatial and temporal dimensions of consciousness, see the "Abhidharmic Problematic" in Waldron (2003, 54-7). A few words might be helpful here to summarize the tension identified by Waldron and later discussed by MacKenzie (2011) regarding self-awareness. In Buddhist accounts of consciousness, the 'synchronic' analysis of discrete and momentary mental processes might be seen as challenging its overarching soteriological framework, particularly the 'diachronic' dimension of continuity over time and the path toward liberation. In relation to these two dimensions, *svasaṃvedana* could be understood as both an intrinsic part of the internal structure of a mental event and a crucial element in enabling the diachronic function of memory, at least within certain strands of Buddhist thought.

luminosity is exemplified by the metaphor of the lamp, which, in Indian Buddhism, originates in the Mahāsāṃghika philosophical tradition. It illustrates the idea that, just as a lamp illuminates itself while casting light on other objects, so too does the mind illuminate itself as it apprehends phenomena. Casey (2016) observes that, within Yogācāra and Madhyamaka views, luminosity is associated with emptiness, ultimate reality and the "illumination (*prakāśatā*) of the mind that makes apparent objects of awareness". *Prakāśatā*, therefore, denotes the feature or function of mind that renders objects of awareness manifest. It is the conceptual cornerstone of reflexive self-awareness, in which consciousness becomes present to itself in the very act of presenting or disclosing its object. Thus, the two terms *paraprakāśa* and *svaprakāśa* refer to other- and self-luminosity, respectively. On the other hand, with regard to the significance and function of light, a closely related notion is that of 'luminosity', expressed by the term *prabhāsvara*(*tā*) (SKT; TIB *'od gsal* [*ba*]), representing the underlying idea behind the notion of the purity of mind. This is a concept marked by multiple layers of meaning, encompassing soteriological, epistemological, ontological and physiological dimensions. Despite the distinct philosophical ideas they express, the two terms share semantic affinities, particularly within the Tibetan tradition. As a result, several scholars have translated both with the English term 'luminosity', a choice that has often led contemporary readers to conflate them as if they were interchangeable.

Having drawn this initial distinction, the following discussion will offer several clarifications within the broad framework of *prabhāsvaratā*. The aim will be to unpack the diverse aspects and iterations of this rich and expansive notion. In the final part of this section, the two concepts of *prakāśatā* and *prabhāsvaratā* will be revisited, with particular attention to their noteworthy points of intersection in the Tibetan tradition. The analysis will highlight the connections between these two conceptions of the mind's luminosity, elucidating their areas of convergence.

4.2.1 The Doctrinal Developments of the Notion of the Mind's Luminosity (SKT *Prabhāsvaratā*; TIB *'Od gsal ba*)

While the concept of the luminosity of mind as *prabhāsvaratā* is pervasive in the Śrāvakayāna, Pāramitāyāna, and Vajrayāna traditions, it is by no means homogeneous. Thus, the intention here is to sketch briefly the main steps of its development within these three main branches of the tradition. Tracing this conceptual trajectory from early to later doctrines contributes to a deeper understanding of what *prabhāsvaratā* entails and what its implications are. It also provides the basis for a meaningful comparison between its

characteristics and significance and those associated with the notion of luminosity as *prakāśatā*.

With regard to the secondary literature on the topic, it is worth noting that, despite the central role of the concept of luminosity in Buddhist thought and practice, relatively little academic research has been dedicated explicitly to this theme. To date, with few exceptions,[22] no comprehensive or systematic study has examined the term across the full range of major Buddhist traditions. Most informative references remain embedded in footnotes or passing remarks within works whose primary focus lies elsewhere. Moreover, the majority of available scholarly discussions on luminosity are framed from the perspective of Indo-Tibetan Buddhism.

Originally, the concept of the luminosity of mind (SKT *prabhāsvara*[*tā*]; TIB *'od gsal* [*ba*])[23] appears to refer to the purity of mind. Thanks to Franco (2000), who analyzed the few extant

22 For a cross-cultural philosophical study of the notion of the luminosity of the mind within both Indian and Chinese traditions, see Berger 2015. For a critical and comparative study of the notion of the luminous mind in Pāli discourse, see Anālayo 2017. As for Indo-Tibetan Buddhism, Casey introduces the topic as follows: "In the context of Indo-Tibetan Buddhism, the term is commonly translated as 'clear light' or 'radiant light', both of which are literal renderings from the Tibetan [*'od gsal*], while in the context of East Asian Buddhism it is commonly translated simply as 'purity'. Other common English translations include 'radiance', 'inner radiance', 'brightness', and 'luminous clarity'. Although luminosity is interpreted differently according to the various Buddhist traditions, it is most often employed to describe the mind's inherent characteristic of purity that lacks defilements such as afflictive emotions (*kleśa*)" (Casey 2016). A remarkable inquiry on the luminosity of mind is the chapter "La luminosité naturelle de la Pensée" in Seyfort Ruegg 1969, 409-54. Many further references are cited there. Among these, it is worth mentioning those referring to Dignāga and Dharmakīrti. Skorupski (2012) offers a complete overview of the notion of luminosity among the Early Buddhist, Mahāyāna, and Vajrayāna traditions, covering the most popular quotations from primary sources that describe the notion of luminosity in the Indo-Tibetan tradition. Primarily focusing on Dharmakīrti's interpretation of the notion of a naturally luminous mind, Jackson (1990) provides one among the few studies solely dedicated to an overview of the notion of luminosity in Buddhism. Another useful source is Harvey [1995] 2004, 166-79. Lamotte ([1976] 2011, lxxii–lxxx) briefly describes the luminosity of mind when presenting the concept of mind in Buddhist philosophy. Wangchuk (2007, 206-10) devotes a few pages of his monograph to the question of how the luminosity of mind comes to be regarded as *bodhicitta* and thereby offers a useful summary of the historical development of the concept of the luminous mind. For further information on the pre-Mahāyāna development of the concept, see Takasaki 1966, 34 fn. 57, and Rahder 1966, 420. Buswell and Lopez (2014, 653-4) have composed two short entries that give an accurate and concise introduction to the notion of luminosity in Buddhism. As for the importance of luminosity according to the general Tibetan understandings, cf. Tucci 1980, 63-7; Kalu Rinpoche 1997, 15-25; Kapstein 2004. Moreover, Casey (2015) devotes a paper to ignorance and luminosity in early bKa'-brgyud bsRe-ba literature, where she explains the non-duality of the two on the basis of their true state, that is, the true nature of mind which is luminosity.

23 Nevertheless, the Sanskrit does not always correspond to this Tibetan rendering: sometimes *prabhāsvara* is, problematically, translated as *gsal ba*, creating another source of confusion between it and *prakāśa*. See, for instance, Fukuda, Ishihama 1989, no. 450, s.v. "prabhāsvarā".

fragments of what is considered the earliest philosophical manuscript in Sanskrit, the so-called *Spitzer Manuscript*, there is evidence of some intricate arguments for and against the concept of the natural luminosity of mind among pre-Mahāyāna schools. The issue appears to have held considerable significance for them, as evidenced by the fact that an entire chapter of the manuscript is dedicated to the controversy surrounding the luminosity of mind and its relationship to cognitive-emotional defilements (TIB *kleśa*).

Anālayo (2017) argues that in the earliest layers of the discourses, the image of luminosity appears in relation to gold which, when heated, worked, and refined, becomes soft, workable, and luminous. This metaphor is used to illustrate the quality of equanimity when it is fully cultivated in the mind of the practitioner. Thus, in the early discourses attributed to the Buddha, luminosity is presented only as a simile, not as a defining characteristic of equanimity itself. Over time, however, a gradual doctrinal shift can be observed in the Pāli discourses. As Anālayo (2017) notes, luminosity begins to be directly associated with equanimity, and eventually it comes to describe the mind itself as luminous prior to the advent of defilements. This marks a transition from viewing the cultivation of the mind as a process of purification to one of recognizing its original purity. Moreover, in early Buddhist thought, "consciousness is something that is receptively aware, not something that actively illuminates" (Anālayo 2017, 17 fn. 26). Hence, in the early tradition, luminosity is not part of a general definition of the functions of consciousness. The conception of the mind as originally pure and luminous, and merely obscured by adventitious defilements, reflects a later stage of textual and doctrinal development.

Now, that said, going into further detail: among the pre-Mahāyāna schools that refer to a luminous *citta*, the Vibhajyavāda school, which is closely related to the Theravāda tradition, maintains that the root or fundamental nature of mind (SKT *mūla-bhāva*) is *prabhāsvara* – translated as 'brightly shining' by Harvey ([1995] 2004, 144), and as 'pure' by Bareau (1955, 175 th. 23).[24] The Mahāsāṃghikas assert that the own-nature (*svabhāva*) of mind is *prabhāsvara* (67-8 th. 44) while the Dharmaguptaka school maintains that this luminosity constitutes the nature (*bhāva*) of mind (194 th. 6). The Vaibhāṣika school takes a markedly different stance, rejecting the idea that the mind is naturally luminous. Instead, it holds that the mind is originally tainted by defilements and must be purified by abandoning them gradually (147 th. 80). Thus, while the aforementioned schools concur in affirming that the mind, once

24 Note that Bareau translates *prabhāsvara* as 'pure' (Bareau 1955, 175 th. 23) or "fondamentalement pure" (Bareau 1955, 147 th. 80).

purified, is luminous, they differ in their views concerning its original condition. The central point of contention lies in whether the mind is primordially luminous and subsequently obscured by defilements before being purified or whether it is originally defiled and attains luminosity only through a process of purification. In general, and taking into account Anālayo's (2017) observations about the earliest discourses, the growing tendency within early Buddhist doctrines to use the term *prabhāsvara* reflects an effort to convey that, since defilements can be completely removed from the mind, awakening is indeed possible. In this way, the luminosity of the mind functions as a doctrinal safeguard for the coherence and viability of the entire Buddhist soteriological project. Among the various Pāli sources on the topic, the well-known *Aṅguttaranikāya* 1.6 states:

> O Bhikṣu, cette Pensée est lumineuse (*pabhassaram*). Tantôt elle est affectée par les Affects adventices, et le profane qui l'ignore ne la connaît pas telle qu'elle est; par conséquent, je dis que le profane qui l'ignore n'a pas la cultivation de la Pensée. Et tantôt elle est libre des Affects adventices, et l'Auditeur Saint qui en a eu communication la connaît telle qu'elle est; par conséquent, je dis que l'Auditeur Saint qui en a eu communication a la cultivation de la Pensée. (Seyfort Ruegg 1969, 411)[25]

It seems that the fundamental understanding of the statement that mind is by nature luminous is that consciousness is fundamentally unpolluted or, at least, unpollutable. The Saṃyuttanikāya contains important passages, later quoted in the Ratnagotravibhāga, that explore the relationship between the defilement and the purification of the mind. These passages articulate the present condition of sentient beings in terms of the extent to which their minds are defiled or purified, thereby offering a framework for understanding their existential state (Lamotte [1976] 2011, lxxiv).

In this context, Shih's (2009) analysis of the notion that the mind is pure by nature is particularly noteworthy. This idea has prompted extensive discussion within the Abhidharma literature, as, in certain instances, it appears to contradict the foundational Buddhist principle of impermanence. If the mind possesses an unchanging nature, whether pure or impure, such a view would seem to violate the understanding that all conditioned phenomena are subject

25 *Aṅguttaranikāya* 1.6 (Morris, Hardy, [1885-1900] 1999-2013, 1: 10): "*pabhassaram idaṃ bhikkhave cittaṃ | taṃ ca kho āgantukehi upakkilesehi upakkiliṭṭhaṃ | tam assutavā puthujjano yathābhūtaṃ nappajānāti | tasmā assutavato puthujjanassa cittabhāvanā natthī ti vadāmī ti | pabhassaram idaṃ bhikkhave cittaṃ | taṃ ca kho āgantukehi upakkilesehi vippamuttaṃ | taṃ sutvā ariyasāvakō yathābhūtaṃ pajānāti | tasmā sutavato ariyasāvakassa cittabhāvanā atthī ti vadāmī ti |*".

to change. Moreover, this notion may also be seen as conflicting with another core Buddhist doctrine, namely the selflessness of phenomena, as it could be interpreted as implying the existence of a fixed self. Shih demonstrates that, within the Abhidharma literature, perceptive responses were developed to address these objections. By examining the context of key statements in the Pāli canon concerning the primordial luminosity of mind and the adventitious nature of its cognitive and emotional defilements, Shih clarifies that such assertions serve primarily as exhortations aimed at encouraging monks to cultivate and discipline their minds. By acknowledging that the original nature of mind is pure, practitioners are moved to eliminate the defilements from their mind and restore its luminosity. Shih concludes that:

> Unlike the Mahāyāna theory of *tathāgatagarbha*, which claims that the innately pure mind possesses all the virtues of the Buddha and that the revelation of this mind is the attainment of the Buddhahood, statements in the Pāli texts only emphasize the knowledge of the innate purity of the mind as a prerequisite step in the cultivation of the mind and the restoration of the purity of the mind is not the end of religious practice. […] the tranquil, luminous, and pliable mind is only the basis for further religious practices. (Shih 2009, 168)[26]

Moreover, in comparing Abhidharma sources with Mahāyāna and Vajrayāna perspectives, Skorupski calls attention to another significant dimension of the pre-Mahāyāna understanding of the luminosity of mind:

> While the Abhidharma sources largely analyzed the character of consciousness in terms of its ethical qualities, the Mahāyāna and Vajrayāna pay more attention to the innate propensities of consciousness. In its innermost condition, the consciousness is understood as being pure or luminous irrespective of the ethical qualities that it may acquire. Considered in its innate condition, it is said to abide in a state of non-duality, but when it is defiled, it arises and functions in the form of duality. Its appearance in a dual form is attributed to ignorance (*avidyā*) as the main source of

26 One more understanding of the luminosity of mind in early Buddhism is suggested by Tan (2004), who takes inspiration from Harvey's above-mentioned work for listing various key references to the luminosity of mind in the early canon. Tan (2004, 45) concludes his inquiry by stating that: "In early Buddhism, the 'radiant mind' (*pabhassara citta*) refers neither to an absolutely pure state of mind nor to spiritual liberation, but is the dhyanic mind that is radiant on account of not being disturbed or influenced by external stimuli".

> defiled or erroneous misconceptions. The ultimate goal is not just the purification of consciousness from discursive misconceptions, but also the attainment of omniscience by awakening its pristine potentialities. (Skorupski 2012, 51)

In the Pāramitāyāna tradition, several scriptures describe the nature of mind as luminously pure. These include the *Aṣṭasāhasrikā*, a text from around the first centuries BC or AD, in which it is stated: "C'est que cette Pensée [*citta*] est en fait non-Pensée, et la nature de la Pensée est lumineuse" (Seyfort Ruegg 1969, 413).[27] The uncovered luminous *citta* turns out to be

> the ideal springboard from which to attain awakening, such that it can be seen as a kind of enlightenment-potential. Appropriately, one strand of Mahāyāna thought identifies the brightly shining *citta* with the *tathāgata-garbha*. (Harvey [1995] 2004, 175)

A valuable contribution to a comprehensive understanding of the Buddhist conception of the luminosity of mind can be found in Almogi's reflections. These examine the doctrine of momentary luminosity by contrast with the notion of non-momentary luminosity:

> [Luminosity of mind] has been conceived by most schools of conservative Buddhism and by later Mahāyāna traditions, such as Yogācāra, simply as referring to one 'moment' of a pure mind (which is momentary by nature) – one replacing a previous 'moment' of a defiled mind after the latter has ceased. Therefore, 'pure mind' in such systems has no connotations of unconditionedness or eternality, unlike the term *prakṛtiprabhāsvaracitta* of the Tathāgatagarbha tradition. (Almogi 2009, 140-1 fn. 4)

To account for the later emergence of two distinct doctrines – that of momentary luminosity of mind and that of non-momentary luminosity – Wangchuk proposes that the concept of luminosity evolved to include not only conditioned, momentary manifestations but also an unconditioned and non-momentary dimension:

> It will thus perhaps be necessary to classify the luminosity of the mind under two types, namely, one that is conditioned (or momentary) and one that is unconditioned (or not momentary). […] I hypothesise that the extension of the idea of [conditioned] luminosity […] to that of [unconditioned] luminosity […] is connected

27 *Aṣṭasāhasrikā* 1 (Mitra 1887-88, 19): "*tac cittam acittaṃ prakṛtiś cittasya prabhāsvāra* ||". For references and further studies on this passage, see Seyfort Ruegg 1969, 413; Harvey [1995] 2004, 175.

> with the development of the notion of the historical Buddha or of any *buddha*. (Wangchuk 2007, 208)

Thus, the development of this notion in the Pāramitāyāna implies that becoming a *buddha* involves a clearing up of the defilements, with a pristine immaculate mind as the result. Therefore, although the Mahāyāna and Vajrayāna traditions place primary italics on the stimulation and maturation of the mind's pristine qualities as the path to enlightenment, they also acknowledge the necessity of purging the mind of all defilements. This dual emphasis stems from the Prajñāpāramitā and Tathāgatagarbha literature, which portray the mind as naturally luminous and inherently pure.[28] Moreover, Mahāyāna sources do not limit the attribution of luminous purity to the nature of mind alone; rather, they extend this characterization to the nature of all phenomena (Wangchuk 2007, 208). The philosophical foundation for this view lies in the ontological discourse concerning the ultimate nature of phenomena, understood to be devoid of inherent existence. A central strand within the Madhyamaka tradition emphasizes this ultimate emptiness as the very condition that enables the purification of the mind, thereby allowing it to be understood as luminous.[29]

While the notion of the luminosity of mind recurs with notable consistency across most Indo-Tibetan Buddhist literature – including the Śrāvakayāna, Pāramitāyāna, and Vajrayāna traditions – its interpretation is far from uniform. Differing doctrinal perspectives, ranging from ontological analyses of emptiness to soteriological frameworks of mental purification, reveal a rich and multifaceted conceptual terrain in which luminosity operates both as a descriptive construct and as a transformative dynamic.

28 For references to the topic of *tathāgatagarbha* in relation to the luminosity of mind, see for instance Skorupski's (2012, 52-3) considerations on *Laṅkāvatāra-sūtra*.

29 One important contribution to the topic is Jackson's (1990) essay on the doctrine of the luminosity of mind in Dignāga and Dharmakīrti. As Jackson states, "the common theme among these various contextualizations of the concept of luminous mind seems to be that it is understood as referring to the mind's ultimate nature and/or its liberated state. The context, thus, is primarily ontological and soteriological, and few or no implications are drawn for 'conventional' epistemology" (Jackson 1990, 96). Interestingly, "for Dharmakīrti the mind's luminosity has not only soteriological importance, but importance also for our understanding of the conventional operations of the mind, i.e., for precisely that epistemological enterprise to which Dharmakīrti devoted the bulk of his labors" (97). Dharmakīrti's perspective is particularly meaningful in that it provides an epistemological analysis, at the conventional level, of luminosity in terms of the correct apprehension of objects and the adventitiousness of defilements in terms of the incapacity of error to persist in a correctly cognizing mind, in so far as an error lacks a support in how things actually exist. This analysis ends up having important consequences in the soteriological dimension: precisely because mind's nature is such, an ultimate correct cognition cannot be replaced by its false contrary, and thus a liberated state is irreversible.

As Kapstein (2004) insightfully observes, Indian Buddhism exhibits a certain ambivalence in its use of light imagery, at times suggesting a tangible or even physiological experience, and, at other times, employing it in a purely metaphorical sense. This complex legacy gave rise to two distinct currents in Tibetan Buddhism. On the one hand, the emphasis in Tibetan Tantric Buddhism on visualization practices and experiential engagements with light reinforced a 'cataphatic' use of light imagery, linked to the detailed description of a multitude of luminous manifestations and aligned with the affirmative tendencies of later Indian Buddhism. On the other hand, the Tibetan Madhyamaka perspective may be seen as continuing the 'apophatic' strand, in which light functions as a metaphorical, philosophical, and deconstructive figure, pointing not to phenomena themselves but rather to the emptiness that underlies them.

In the Vajrayāna tradition, the concept of a naturally luminous mind seems to have gained even greater prominence.[30] Before the consideration of even its soteriological significance, it is worth noting that this centrality arises in a context where, in Tantric experiences, various manifestations of light – whether visualized or visionary – permeate the stages of meditation and are "used to characterize those experiences phenomenologically" (Kapstein 2004, 128). Tibetan literature is rich in diverse modes of light,[31] and addressing them would require "a fuller phenomenology to disclose its varied modalities", necessitating further research (136). However, delving too deeply into this would take these considerations beyond the scope of the present work. What is crucial to highlight in the Tantric context is that luminosity becomes intimately connected with the practitioner's experiential path. It is integrated into a structured framework of training and internalized as part of a lived process, one that is guided by the wisdom necessary for its recognition and understanding in the pursuit of Buddhahood. Rather than being treated solely as an attribute of the mind's potential, luminosity is thus encountered directly as a transformative mode of conscious experience.

According to the Tantric tradition, a profound experience of luminosity can arise only when the grosser levels of consciousness have been absorbed or dissolved – such as during sleep or at the moment of death – thereby allowing the more subtle dimension of awareness to manifest itself. Thus, a Buddhist tantric practitioner aims to train in meditation in order to be able to recognize the

30 As, for instance, in Nāropa's *Sekoddeśatīkā* (Seyfort Ruegg 1971, 466 fn. 82).

31 Light can be "dim, radiant, or effulgent; diffused, refracted or sparkling, monotonal or multicolored; internal or external; holographic or unidimensional; and so on" (Kapstein 2004, 130).

appearance of luminosity in the death process, considered as a means for attaining enlightenment. In fact, in the Tibetan tantric traditions, the explanation of consciousness as luminosity and emptiness has been adopted to elucidate the death process in particular.[32] When examining the Tibetan traditions of Phyag-rgya-chen-po (Mahāmūdra) and rDzogs-chen, one encounters an interpretation of luminosity that appears to harmonize both apophatic and cataphatic dimensions. Rather than opposing these modes, these approaches interweave them into a subtle and integrated understanding of the nature of mind and reality. In fact, looking at those traditions, Casey (2015; 2016) remarks that luminosity is also seen as synonymous with the *dharmakāya*, the *dharmadhātu*, and the fundamental nature of reality as well as with self-awareness. In particular, when considering the Mahāmudrā tradition, Marpa's direct teachers, Maitrīpa and Nāropa, describe the naturally luminous mind as that which shines forth when reflexive awareness – understood in this context as both the path and the object of purification – is freed from the stains of conceptuality (Casey 2022). Consideration of the rDzogs-chen pivotal esoteric instructions reveals that, among them, there exist the pair of *thod rgal* and *khregs chod* – the two sets of practices that Dudjom Rinpoche (1991, 2: 334-5), a contemporary rDzogs-chen master, translates as 'all-surpassing realisation' and 'cutting through resistance', respectively. In *thod rgal*, luminosity plays a crucial role in

> clarif[ing] the apparitional aspect or corporeal objects into inner radiance in a spontaneusly present manner, and so caus[ing] the cessation of apparitional reality. (Dudjom Rinpoche 1991, 2: 334-5)

In particular, through this practice, the apparitional aspects of objects and consciousness of the three realms is said to dissolve in the inner radiance of five-colored light which Dudjom Rinpoche (1991, 2: 337) calls the 'natural tone of awareness'. 'Four lamps' (TIB *sgron ma bzhi*) are involved in the practice and they constitute a foundational set of contemplative instructions that gradually lead the trainee toward the recognition of *rig pa*, the innate, non-dual awareness. They are called 'lamps' because each functions as a source of illumination, metaphorically shedding light on distinct dimensions of experience and thereby disclosing the nature of both reality and mind. Taken together, they facilitate a progressive unveiling of awareness itself. The practitioner is called to follow detailed procedures of visionary steps and complex visualizations. The core of the practice is experienced through inner light:

32 For a brief overview of this topic, see Skorupski's (2012, 54-64) description and analysis of this process.

> Within the expanse of emptiness […], the essence abides through its spontaneous presence in the manner of the light which is radiant within a crystal but not externally manifest. (Dudjom Rinpoche 1991, 2: 342)

In summary, as this brief survey has shown, the notion of the luminosity of mind is far from homogeneous in its application. Across the various phases of the Indo-Tibetan tradition, multiple interpretations and uses of the concept have emerged. By outlining at least some of the key developments, this study has highlighted its associations with the theme of purity, its centrality to the soteriological aim of awakening, its importance to the practitioner's lived experience, its relation to the discourse on the ultimate nature of phenomena as devoid of inherent existence, and the doctrinal debate concerning the momentary *versus* non-momentary nature of luminous mind. The Indo-Tibetan Buddhist *corpus* abounds with both apophatic and cataphatic treatments of light and luminosity. At times, it employs the imagery metaphorically; at other times, it points to direct, experiential dimensions of the path. As such, luminosity permeates the tradition across its many layers, from abstract philosophical reflection to the most refined contemplative practices.

4.2.2 The Convergence of *Gsal ba* and *'Od gsal ba*

Having briefly explored the rich notion of *prabhāsvaratā* and its subsequent doctrinal developments, attention now turns to the convergence and interplay of *prakāśatā* and *prabhāsvaratā*, which together give rise to a comprehensive account of the luminosity of mind within the Tibetan context. As will be shown, their intersections reveal and disclose other important aspects of consciousness, such as those of the phenomenality, subjectivity and unity of experience.

To begin, it is worth noting that *prakāśatā* appears to correspond to the understanding of luminosity as expressed in the traditional Tibetan Buddhist definition of the nature of mind as *gsal zhing rig pa* – that is, 'clear' (or luminous, or illuminating) and 'cognizant'. This formulation is widespread in Tibetan literature, and it is along these lines that a contemporary dGe-lugs scholar asserts:

> The definition of mind is that which is clarity and cognizes. In this definition, 'clarity' refers to the nature of mind, and 'cognizes' to the function of mind. Mind is clarity because it always lacks form and because it possesses the actual power to perceive objects. Mind cognizes because its function is to know or perceive objects. (Geshe Kelsang Gyatso 1993, 16)

Thus, there are two claims being made in terms of 'clarity' (*gsal ba*): the feature of being different from matter and that of being able to perceive whatever appears to it. To further clarify the definition of mind as *gsal zhing rig pa*, a particularly relevant passage can be found in a recent Tibetan compendium dedicated to consciousness and related themes. The text states:

> *gsal zhing rig pa shes pa'i ngo bor 'jog cing | 'di'i gsal ba ni shes pa'i ngo bo dang rig pa ni shes pa'i byed las so | de yang gsal ba zhes pa la (i) thogs reg can gyi bem po'i rang bzhin las 'das pas ngo bo gsal ba | (ii) me long du gzugs brnyan 'char ba bzhin shes pa la'ang yul bzang ngan dang bde sdug sogs phyi nang gi yul ci yang 'char du rung bas yul gsal ba dang | (iii) yang rang gi ngo bo la chags sogs nyon mongs pa'i dri mas bslad pa ma zhugs pas rang bzhin gsal ba'am 'od gsal ba ste go don du ma gsungs* |. (Kuntue Committee 2014, 2: 4.8-14)
>
> It is established that being luminous and cognizant is the essential nature of consciousness. Here, being luminous refers to the essential nature of consciousness, and being cognizant refers to the function of consciousness. Furthermore, many meanings are taught regarding 'being luminous': (i) the essential nature is luminous, as it is beyond the nature of tangible matter; (ii) the object is luminous, since, just as a reflection appears in a mirror, in consciousness too any type of external or internal objects – positive or negative, pleasant or unpleasant, etc. – can appear; (iii) furthermore, the nature is luminous insofar as the contamination of defilements, such as attachment and others, does not enter in its essential nature.

Here, three meanings of *gsal ba* are outlined. The first pertains to the essential nature, or entity (*ngo bo*), of mind, and is particularly crucial when considering how to differentiate matter from consciousness, the latter being free from obstructive contact. This understanding of the term recalls Śāntarakṣita's view on the distinctive features of consciousness (§ 5.2). The second meaning relates to the object (*yul*) of mind: here, clarity is conceived of as what makes consciousness suitable to let internal or external objects appear to it. The third interpretation of clarity concerns the nature (*rang bzhin*) of mind, conceived as fundamentally undefiled by contaminations. In this layered explanation of *gsal ba* within the definition of mind, the third sense, which corresponds to *'od gsal ba* (*prabhāsvara*), is presented

alongside the second, which aligns with *gsal ba* (*prakāśa*).[33] Thus, this contemporary account of the luminosity of consciousness, particularly significant as it aims to serve as a compendium of Tibetan Buddhist thought, bears witness to the integration of the principal meanings examined thus far, reflecting how Tibetan philosophy has brought together diverse dimensions in which the themes of consciousness and luminosity intertwine.

Tucci's (1980, 63-7) illuminating account of photism in Buddhism contributes significantly to the present discussion by shedding light on the proximity between the two principal notions of the luminosity of mind. First, Tucci clearly states (1980, 64) that *'od gsal ba*, "light", has to be distinguished from *gsal ba*, "luminosity", which is "the capacity to emit light from the mind".[34] In an evocative passage on this point, on the one hand he states that "in the cognitive process (*shes pa*) luminosity and cognition belong essentially to each other" (Tucci 1980, 64), and, on the other, he claims that

> when the light (*'od gsal*) is not […] affected by defilements, and emerges in its natural purity, it is not a characteristic sign but an essential quality of the *sems*. (64)

In this context, Tucci appears to point to two distinct yet interconnected dimensions. The first pertains to the cognitive process, in which luminosity is associated with the activity of both self-cognizing and cognizing what is other. The second relates to the natural purity of the undefiled mind, in which the intrinsic light of consciousness is able to shine forth. Tucci thus seems to reveal a connection between these two forms of luminosity (TIB *gsal ba* and *'od gsal ba*; SKT *prakāśatā* and *prabhāsvaratā*), suggesting a deeper link between epistemology and soteriology. That is, he tends toward

33 One could distinguish between reflexivity (*svasaṃvedana*) and luminosity understood as the illuminating ability of mind because, as Williams points out, "as a conventional truth, in order for its [the mind's] nature to be luminosity it would seem that it should conventionally be reflexive, i.e. there should be *svasaṃvedana* conventionally […]. On the other hand it would not be incoherent for a dGe-lugs-pa to reply that he grants the conventional existence of luminosity but denies that this is *svasaṃvedana*, since one cannot speak of self-awareness where there is no subject-object relationship" (1998, 26 fn. 10).

34 Tucci remarks that, as for the Sa-skya view on the topic, luminosity is the "characteristic sign" (TIB *mtshan nyid*) of the mind, voidness is the "essence of mind", and these two aspects coincide in "transcendent consciousness" (TIB *ye shes*) and "flow together" (TIB *zung 'jug*) (Tucci 1980, 65). On the other hand, in the dGe-lugs view, luminosity is "the actual essence of *sems*", and a "characteristic sign of the cognitive faculty" (TIB *shes pa*) (66). Since his presentation is extremely concise, there is not sufficient material to understand why Tucci so strongly distinguishes *sems*, defined by him as "an energy of thought" (63) and "mental energy but also light" (64), from *shes pa*, "the cognitive faculty" (66).

a relationship between the dynamics of cognition, on the one hand, and the non-defilement or intrinsic purity of mind, together with its emptiness, on the other.

Once again, it is clear that the various aspects of photism that have emerged in Indo-Tibetan Buddhism are far from uniform in their interpretation and interconnection, spanning from early Buddhism in India to its later developments in Tibet. Nevertheless, the different philosophical understandings of consciousness's luminosity remain interrelated. Moreover, in light of the considerations outlined above, *prakāśatā* and *prabhāsvaratā* themselves may be seen as conceptually converging, as their respective meanings – one emphasizing the cognitive function of illumination, the other the intrinsic purity of consciousness – begin to overlap and mutually inform one another within the broader framework of Buddhist thought. In fact, purity of mind is its being devoid of defilements and stains, that is, of that which blocks, obstructs or twists the nature or activity of consciousness. Once cleansed, the mind is pure, and, therefore, its cognizant nature gains unimpeded and proper access to its objects. Thus, being pure, it is free to let its other- and self-cognizant activities fully unfold as an unrestrained cognizant luminosity. From this perspective, the two notions of the luminosity of mind reveal their link.

The deep link between mind and its luminosity – and, therefore, its reflexivity – reveals an account of consciousness that is quite dynamic and multi-faceted. The epistemological process, through which cognition allows appearances to arise and illuminates both other objects and itself, discloses the phenomenal and reflexive horizon of one's subjective experiences. This self- and other-illuminating process is also at the basis of one's ability to understand and penetrate reality and, hence, of one's ability to reach the soteriological goal. The luminosity of mind in terms of its purity converges with the soteriological trajectory of Buddhist practice. Luminosity also shows a deep link with emptiness, since in many strands of the tradition, the luminous nature of all phenomena is considered to be the ontological discourse on their ultimate nature, which is devoid of inherent existence. In sum, the Buddhist framework of the reflexivity of mind, combined with the concept of *prabhāsvaratā* as the purity of mind, carries profound implications; together, the two main notions of luminosity create what has been called the vast and encompassing dimension of photism that characterizes Indo-Tibetan Buddhism.

5 Tsong-kha-pa and Mi-pham: A Multidimensional Controversy

Summary 5.1 Tsong-kha-pa and His Disciples: Negating Self-Awareness Even Conventionally. – 5.2 Mi-pham: Positing Reflexive Self-Awareness Conventionally.

5.1 Tsong-kha-pa and His Disciples: Negating Self-Awareness Even Conventionally

To explore the broader Tibetan philosophical discourse on self-awareness, it is particularly illuminating to focus on a central controversy between two distinct positions on *rang rig*, as articulated by two of the tradition's most influential thinkers. Among the many interpretations of *rang rig* that have emerged over time, this debate is especially significant in that it engages both the epistemological and ontological dimensions of self-awareness while simultaneously intersecting with the doctrine of the two truths. Representing distinct doctrinal lineages and hermeneutical approaches, the opposing perspectives of Tsong-kha-pa and Mi-pham serve as the focal point for an enduring dispute that both reflects and shapes centuries of Tibetan philosophical and exegetical thought.

Mi-pham, an important figure in the Ris-med 'non-sectarian' movement that flourished in Tibet during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, features as a prominent scholar of the rNying-ma tradition who also underwent a thorough dGe-lugs education. With regard to *rang rig*, he challenges Tsong-kha-pa's rejection of the conventional existence of reflexive awareness – a

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position Tsong-kha-pa grounds in his interpretation of Candrakīrti and Śāntideva.[1] By contrast, Mi-pham contends that the reflexivity of consciousness at the conventional level is simply self-evident. The implications of the ensuing debate are both far-reaching and complex. While not representative of the entire spectrum of Tibetan philosophical thought, this controversy offers a particularly significant lens through which to map much of the epistemological and ontological understanding of *rang rig*. The following discussion outlines its key elements, aiming to shed light on how this specific disagreement contributes to the broader discourse on self-awareness in the Tibetan tradition.

First of all, it is essential to return to Śāntideva's *BCA* to understand how Indian and Tibetan commentators have reflected on the topic, a perspective that will also be enriched by insights from contemporary exegesis. Williams offers a concise overview of these interpretations to show that verse 9.26,[2] where Śāntideva (*BCA* 9.17-26) concludes his critique of *svasaṃvedana*, appears to have prompted a distinct and innovative response specifically among dGe-lugs interpreters. For Tsong-kha-pa and his disciples, in *BCA* 9.26, Śāntideva is understood to be refuting self-awareness both on the ultimate and the conventional levels. By contrast, the pre-dGe-lugs commentators unanimously interpreted Śāntideva's critique as targeting only the ultimate reality, excluding the conventional level from the scope of the refutation.[3]

In fact, the main point emphasized across the various pre-Tsong-kha-pa commentaries is that the Mādhyamikas do not negate the conventional: they accept whatever is well established in the world as it is, remaining unconcerned with mere conventional appearances. By contrast, the innovative dGe-lugs interpretation of Prāsaṅgika Madhyamaka on this point warrants close attention. As Williams (1998, 70 fn. 16) observes, a significant shift occurs with Tsong-kha-pa and his disciples, with whom the explicit articulation of the conventional nonexistence of *svasaṃvedana* emerges, marking a move toward a more deliberate doxographical strategy.

1 For textual references, see Moriyama 1995.

2 Śāntideva, *BCA* 9.26 (Bhattacharya 1960, 191); here follows the Sanskrit text: "*yathā dṛṣṭaṃ śrutaṃ jñātaṃ naiveha pratiṣidhyate | satyataḥ kalpanā tvatra duḥkhaheturnivāryate ||*". *The Tibetan reads: "ji ltar mthong thos shes pa dag | 'dir ni dgag pa bya min te | 'dir ni sdug bsngal rgyur gyur pa | bden par rtogs pa bzlog bya yin ||*" (The seen, the heard, and the known | are not what must be negated here. | Here what must be reversed is the thought [of them] as tru[ly existent], | which has come to function as the cause of suffering). It is interesting to see that La Vallée Poussin translates "*dṛṣṭaṃ śrutaṃ jñātaṃ*" as "la connaissance sensible, la connaissance par témoignage, la connaissance produite par le raisonnement" (La Vallée Poussin 1907, 116-17).

3 For an extensive list of Indian and Tibetan commentaries concluding that Śāntideva does not refute self-awareness at the conventional level, see Williams 1998, 61-73.

By contrast with all other commentaries, Tsong-kha-pa approaches *BCA* 9.26 by shifting the focus of the debate. He alters the line of reasoning attributed to the presumed opponent, who originally argues that, without reflexivity, there could be no cognition of objects (that is, *mthong ba* 'seeing', *thos pa* 'hearing', and so on).[4] Tsong-kha-pa interprets the passage as if the opponent were claiming that, without self-awareness, there could be no 'memory', and, 'therefore', no experience, nor any seeing or hearing of objects (*rang rig med na dran pa med pas yul myong ba dang mthong thos sogs med par 'gyur ro*).[5] This represents a strategic move: by introducing the element of memory, as will be discussed below, Tsong-kha-pa shifts the debate in a direction aligned with Candrakīrti's reasoning, which becomes the central support for rejecting the necessity of self-awareness as a condition for memory. In other words, while commenting on *BCA* 9.26, Tsong-kha-pa stands out as the only interpreter to reintroduce the memory argument previously advanced by the opponent and rejected by Śāntideva in 9.24,[6] though in a slightly altered form. Śāntideva's text itself offers no clear indication in support of such a reading, and there appears to be no compelling textual reason for Tsong-kha-pa to adopt this reinterpretation. In exploring possible motivations for this move, Williams ultimately sees it as a deliberate and refined commentarial strategy designed to reinforce the view that Prāsaṅgika Mādhyamikas, Śāntideva included, reject self-awareness even at the conventional level.

A crucial clue in resolving the puzzle of Tsong-kha-pa's unusual reading of *BCA* 9.26 lies in the fact that dGe-lugs scholars consistently

4 In La Vallée Poussin's annotated translation, the opponent's argument in 9.26 would be the following: "Mais si la pensée ne se connait pas elle-même, l'objet non plus n'est pas connu, et il faut nier toute l'expérience" (La Vallée Poussin 1907, 116).

5 Tsong-kha-pa 1997b, 826.6-7.2: "*des na rang rig la khyad par ma sbyar bar tha snyad du rang rig grub pa'ang slob dpon 'di mi bzhed par gsal te | rang rig [mi] bzhed na rnam shes dran par ji ltar 'gyur | zhes pa'i lan du gzhan myong ba dang 'brel pa las zhes sogs smas mi dgos kyi | rang rig pa'i rgyu mtshan gyis yin no zhes smos pas chog pas so || ci ste rang rig med na dran pa med pas yul myong ba dang mthong thos sogs med par 'gyur ro zhe na* | […]" (Therefore, it is clear that this Master does not accept self-awareness as conventionally established without positing some special features for it. If one does [not] accept self-awareness, one might ask, 'How then could consciousness be recollected?' – but in order to reply there is no need to invoke arguments such as 'it is connected with someone else's experience', and so on. It suffices to say that it is established by the very reasoning that proves self-awareness. If one objects, 'Without self-awareness there could be no recollection, and therefore no experience of objects, no seeing or hearing, and so on, then how would that be the case?' […]). Here, the emendation to the Tibetan text suggested by Williams has been retained in square brackets, and is reflected in the translation, since Tsong-kha-pa "must be alluding to *Bodhicaryāvatāra* 9.24 which reads: '*gal te rang rig yod min na | rnam shes dran par ji ltar 'gyur* |'. The alternative in this context makes no sense" (Williams 1998, 74 fn. 20).

6 For the Sanskrit and Tibetan texts of Śāntideva's *BCA* 9.24, see Bhattacharya 1960, 191; for an annotated translation see La Vallée Poussin 1907, 116.

appeal to a single quotation in support of their stance on *rang rig*.[7] This passage, repeatedly cited across dGe-lugs commentaries, comes from Candrakīrti's *MAv* 6.73, where, within the context of the memory argument, the following is asserted: "appealing to worldly conventions, even on such a basis, it is impossible for there to be memory which has *svasaṃvedana* as a cause".[8]

The connection between this passage in which Candrakīrti explicitly denies the existence of self-awareness and Śāntideva's *BCA* 9.26 is constructed by inserting the memory argument into the final part of Śāntideva's treatment of *svasaṃvedana*. As a result, the dGe-lugs exegetical tradition comes to perceive no significant difference between Candrakīrti's and Śāntideva's positions on this issue. This alignment is considered crucial as both figures are identified as authoritative representatives of the same philosophical school: Prāsaṅgika Madhyamaka. Thus, the refutation of self-awareness even at the conventional level becomes one of the 'eight great difficult points' (TIB *dka' gnad brgyad*), a set of key topics whose correct interpretation is said to define the true doctrinal identity of the Prāsaṅgika Madhyamaka school.[9] The *dKa' gnad brgyad kyi zin bris rje'i gsung bzhin brjed byang du bkod pa*,[10] composed by rGyal-tshab Dar-ma-rin-chen, explicitly includes the rejection of *rang rig* at the conventional level among these eight critical points. This refutation is developed through the argument that memory does not require *rang rig*, and that one's prior cognition of an object can be established through the recollection of the object itself without recourse to self-awareness.

The impact of the dGe-lugs doxographical move becomes evident in the fifteenth century by the time of rGyal-tshab Dar-ma-rin-chen, when the entire claim that self-awareness does not exist conventionally has become thoroughly blended with the refutation of the memory argument. In his commentary on *BCA* 9.24, rGyal-tshab Dar-ma-rin-chen (1973, 222) explicitly states the following regarding Śāntideva's intentions:

7 This reference is quoted, for instance, by Tsong-kha-pa (see Thurman 1984, 318), mKhas-grub-rje (1972, 422.3; see Cabézon 1992, 349), and Thub-bstan Chos-kyi-grags-pa (1990, 756.4-5).

8 Here is the Tibetan from La Vallée Poussin (1970, 169): "'*jig rten gyi tha snyad kyi dbang du yin te | de lta na yang rang rig pa'i rgyu can gyi dran pa mi srid pa nyid do |*".

9 It should be noted that, in general, a positive or negative stance toward self-awareness is employed by Tsong-kha-pa and his followers as a doxographical criterion for distinguishing among Indian philosophical schools.

10 Concerning the authorship of the text, the contents are stated to go back to Tsong-kha-pa himself but, nevertheless, rGyal-tshab Dar-ma-rin-chen has been considered its author (Seyfort Ruegg 2002, 153-4).

> Regarding the statement "The intention of the *Bodhisattvacaryāvatāra* is not to negate self-awareness on the conventional level", it is said that this is definitely not the position of the Great Bodhisattva [Śāntideva].[11]

In considering this strategic dGe-lugs move in interpreting *BCA* 9.26 and in assessing how it contributes to a broader philosophical reflection on the notion of self-awareness, the first point that can be firmly reiterated is the central role played by memory in the debate surrounding the necessity of self-awareness. From the outset, this study has examined various uses of the memory argument, demonstrating the deep conceptual connection between memory and *rang rig*. Yet, what emerges here from the dGe-lugs strategy is a distinct nuance: it appears to constitute a deliberate and calculated shift, one that strategically avoids engaging with the opponent's original challenge as presented in the text, namely, that without self-awareness, there could be no experience of objects such as seeing, hearing or knowing. This is what Williams (1998, 74) identifies as "an argument concerning the nature of consciousness as such (the 'Śāntarakṣita' argument)", that is, an argument akin to Śāntarakṣita's position that self-awareness is a necessary condition for ordinary cognition. The fact that the dGe-lugs exegesis explicitly sidesteps this aspect of the debate raises a critical question: does this avoidance reflect a philosophical vulnerability? Why is Tsong-kha-pa so invested in denying the conventional existence of self-awareness? As will be shown, from Mi-pham's perspective, denying the conventional status of *rang rig* amounts to overlooking the mind's reflexivity, something he considers to be self-evident.

In examining the implications and motivations behind such a denial, Garfield (2006, 220) claims to have identified a specific passage in which, according to his reading, Tsong-kha-pa directly addresses the argument that, without reflexivity in awareness, awareness itself would be impossible. This line of reasoning closely parallels

11 rGyal-tshab Dar-ma-rin-chen 1973, 222: *"spyod 'jug gi dgongs pa ni tha snyad du rang rig 'gog pa min zhes pa ni rgyal sras chen po'i bzhed pa gtan min zhes gsung ngo* ||". Cf. a very similar passage by Tsong-kha-pa (2009, 357.21-3). Much later, in the nineteenth century, Thub-bstan Chos-kyi-grags-pa also adopts a characteristically dGe-lugs style (and intention) in his commentary on *BCA* 9.26 although he reorders the elements in Tsong-kha-pa's interpretation of the opponent's argument. Indeed, Thub-bstan Chos-kyi-grags-pa (1990, 608) presents the opponent's reasoning as follows: "If self-awareness does not exist, then there is no experiencing the object through seeing, hearing, and so on. If such experience does not exist, then there is no memory, and consequently, even the conventions of having seen or heard something and so on, as expressed by saying 'I saw' or 'I heard', do not exist". The Tibetan reads: "*rang rig med na mthong thos sogs kyis yul myong ba med la de med na dran pa med pas ngas mthong ngas thos zhes pa'i mthong thos sogs kyi tha snyad kyang med par thal lo*" (Thub-bstan Chos-kyi-grags-pa 1990, 608.7-9).

the opponent's claim in *BCA* 9.26 to the point that Tsong-kha-pa's passage could be interpreted as a kind of reply. For this reason, it is a passage worth careful consideration. Yet, as Garfield presents it, the excerpt might appear to represent Tsong-kha-pa's actual position on the very point he had earlier modified – and arguably avoided – in his reading of *BCA* 9.26. The excerpt from Tsong-kha-pa's *dBu ma la 'jug pa'i rang 'grel dang rnam bshad dgongs pa rab gsal* identified by Garfield is presented here, along with the sentences that immediately precede and follow it. Three sections are marked typographically for emphasis.

> *'di yang yid shes kyi dbang du byas kyi dbang shes kyi tshor ba gsum gyis gzugs sgra sogs yongs su gcod de | de'i grub tshul ni sngar bshad pa bzhin no ||*
>
> *'o na yid shes kyi tshor bas bde sdug sogs mngon gyur du gcod na rang rig tu mi 'gyur ram snyam na |*
>
> *skyon med de bkag pa'i rang rig ni shes pa thams cad kha nang lta la rig bya dang rig byed tha dad par snang ba nub pa'i 'dzin rnam yan gar ba yin zhing | 'dir ni nyams su myong ba khyad par can tshor ba'i mtshan nyid du mdo sder gsungs la | 'jig rten gyi tha snyad las kyang bde ba dang sdug bsngal nyams su myong ngo zhes brjod pa'i phyir ro | myong bya dang myong byed tha dad pa nyid du snang ba'i phyir na phyogs snga ma'i rang rig dang mi gcig go || de'i phyir bde ba sogs nyams su myong bas grub pa nyid kyis tshor ba grub bo ||*. (Tsong-kha-pa Blo-bzang-grags-pa 2009, 363.1-9)

> Moreover, through the three feelings associated with the sense consciousnesses, which are subordinate to the mental consciousness, forms, sounds and so on are determined; as for how this is established, it is as previously explained.[12]
>
> Suppose one thinks as follows: "Well then, if pleasant, unpleasant, and so on are directly determined by the feeling of the mental consciousness, then doesn't this turn out to be self-awareness?"
>
> There is no such fault because, regarding the self-awareness that we have denied: the inward orientation of all the consciousnesses is a separate apprehending aspect, for which the appearing of the cognized and the cognizer as different has vanished. What is presented here is that distinct experience is taught to be the

12 This likely refers to a passage a few lines earlier in the Tibetan text (Tsong-kha-pa 2009, 362.18-21), where three interpretations of the term 'feeling' (TIB *tshor ba*) are listed. These follow the standard three-fold division (TIB *'khor gsum*) into *byed pa po*, *byed pa*, and *las*: respectively, as 'the feeler' (the person who feels), 'the feeling' itself (as a mental factor and valid cognition), and 'what is felt' (an object of knowledge, such as pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral feelings).

> definition of feeling in the *sūtra*s, and even in ordinary language we say, "I experience pleasure" or "I experience pain". Since the experienced and the experiencer do indeed appear as distinct, this is not the same as the self-awareness of the previous part [of the argument]. Therefore, since there is experience of pleasure and so on, by this very proof, feeling is established.

Note that, unusually, in the second section Garfield (2006, 220) translates "*yid shes kyi tshor bas* […] *gcod*" as "one experiences […] through the introspective consciousness" whereas in the Author's translation, the same phrase is rendered as: "are determined by the feeling of the mental consciousness". In translating thus, Garfield shifts both the focus and the terminology of the passage, introducing 'introspection' where the text speaks of 'the feeling of mental consciousness', and 'experiencing' where the Tibetan refers more specifically to the process of 'determining' sensations such as pain or pleasure.

Moreover, the central part of this passage is so shortened and edited in Garfield's translation that, ultimately, his rendering resembles more a paraphrase than a direct translation.[13] In its final paragraph, partially departing from the textual source, Garfield (2006, 221) writes: "there is no need to posit reflexive awareness as per the previous position". However, the Tibetan reads: "*snga ma'i rang rig dang mi gcig go*", which the Author translates as: "it is not the same as the self-awareness of the previous part". Therefore, Garfield does not consistently adhere to the Tibetan text, and this weakens the reader's ability to navigate the complex and nuanced epistemological framework characteristic of the Indo-Tibetan Buddhist tradition. His translation reinforces the impression that one is accessing the very core of Tsong-kha-pa's solution, namely, the refutation of *rang rig* at the conventional level while preserving awareness as such. However, upon closer examination, the passage in question does not appear to be directly addressing this specific issue.

In fact, when one adheres closely to the Tibetan text, the opponent's claim can be summarized as follows: if pleasant and unpleasant sensations are directly determined by the feelings of the mental consciousness (*yid shes kyi tshor ba*), does this not amount to self-awareness? The point Tsong-kha-pa appears to make in his response is that this situation does not qualify as *rang rig*. The reason is that, in this context, the experienced and the experiencer still

13 Garfield's point is as follows: "We commit no such error, because the denial of reflexive awareness is consistent with the distinction between subject and object with respect to all cognitive states that are directed inwards […]. According to mundane nominal convention as well, the experience of pleasure and pain occurs in this way" (Garfield 2006, 220-1).

appear as distinct whereas, in models of self-awareness, the cognized and the cognizer are not distinct entities. The mental consciousness's experience of pain does not entail a form of self-awareness in which subject and object are non-dual. To say that one's mental consciousness experiences one's own pain is not the same as affirming *rang rig*. Furthermore, since pain or pleasure can be experienced without invoking self-awareness – and in a way that accords with both the *sūtras*' definition of feeling and with conventional worldly usage – the reality of feeling is thereby established.

Although this is all the text appears to indicate, Garfield employs it in a somewhat different way. He interprets the passage as addressing the opponent's claim that, in the absence of *rang rig*, "one would never be aware at all" (Garfield 2006, 220). In doing so, Garfield treats the objection as concerning the very possibility of awareness as such rather than the more specific issue of feeling – which is what the opponent's question and the concluding part of the passage clearly refer to. The target Garfield proposes is, thus, considerably broader than what the text actually suggests, which concerns *yid shes kyi tshor ba* 'the feeling of the mental consciousness', not the general category of awareness in its entirety. According to Garfield's interpretation, Tsong-kha-pa replies by asserting that, even without *rang rig*, the structure of 'introspective consciousness' alone is sufficient to account for awareness. The justification lies in the fact that this structure preserves a distinction between subject (the perceiver) and object (the perceived) – precisely how experiences such as pain or pleasure are understood in everyday convention. Therefore, Garfield concludes, *rang rig* is not necessary.

By shifting the focus of the debate from mental feelings to awareness in general, Garfield's rendering of the Tibetan passage leads the reader to believe that this is the point at which Tsong-kha-pa explains why and how conventional awareness as such is possible even without *rang rig*. However, a closer reading of the Tibetan suggests that Tsong-kha-pa is simply stating that the mental feelings of happiness, pain, and so forth do not constitute *rang rig* because, in such experiences, the experiencer and the experienced appear as distinct. It is difficult to discern anything beyond this in Tsong-kha-pa's words.

Garfield, by contrast, interprets the passage as responding to the opponent's claim that *rang rig* is necessary in order to be aware of anything whatsoever:

> Tsong-kha-pa anticipates that behind the view that awareness must be reflexive is the intuition that if it were not, there would be no awareness at all: how could I be said to be aware of a strawberry if

> I am not at the same time aware that I am aware of the strawberry? (Garfield 2006, 221)[14]

And Tsong-kha-pa's alleged argument, according to Garfield, would be as follows: "I certainly can be aware of the pleasure of a strawberry […] without being aware that I am aware of it" (221).

Therefore, Garfield appears to use this passage to advance a broad and ambitious claim about awareness in general despite the fact that Tsong-kha-pa's words refer to a specific case, namely, that of mental feelings. The introduction of the term 'introspective consciousness' seems to serve as a convenient rhetorical device to amplify the philosophical weight of the passage beyond its textual scope.

The claim Garfield builds upon the passage discussed above also extends to another significant issue: the problem of infinite regress in meta-awareness. Garfield argues that, for Tsong-kha-pa, it is possible to be aware of mental feelings without being aware that one is aware. However, if one wishes to determine whether one is aware of being aware, this can be accomplished through a subsequent cognitive act directed at the preceding one.

> I can keep climbing the hierarchy of meta-awareness as long as I like, but that is only a *potential* regress, and hence is not vicious. I will get bored at some point with the endless contemplation of my own cognitive states and reach for another strawberry. (Garfield 2006, 221; italics in the original)

Once again, if these considerations, although perhaps legitimate, are being made on the basis of this quoted passage, then the textual evidence is insufficient.

However, when recalling the challenge posed by the opponent in *BCA* 9.26, the passage that Garfield explicitly selects and presents as a potential instance in which Tsong-kha-pa directly addresses this very question does not, in fact, succeed in demonstrating that ordinary awareness (*mthong*, *thos*, and *shes* 'seeing', 'hearing', and 'knowing') persist even in the absence of *rang rig*. Where Garfield suggests Tsong-kha-pa's position on the matter might be located, the issue does not appear to be directly confronted. Consequently, further inquiry is necessary in order to reach a more comprehensive understanding of Tsong-kha-pa's refutation of *rang rig* at the conventional level.

14 Curiously, the experience of strawberries is also the example Williams (1998, 135-6 fn. 17) chooses when commenting on the fact that, according to Mi-pham, "there is a real problem in maintaining that the mind which is the subject is a separate substance from the happiness and so on which are its experiential objects when experiencing happiness, and so on, and that the happiness and so on which are the objects are separate from that mind" (Williams 1998, 135).

Thus, to address the dGe-lugs refutation of *rang rig*, the refutation of the memory argument should be recalled once again. Tsong-kha-pa replies to the objection that without *rang rig* memory cannot occur can be found, for instance, in the pages devoted to *rang rig* in the *Drang nges legs bshad snying po* (Tsong-kha-pa Blo-bzang-grags-pa 1973, 170.14-9.8); in Tsong-kha-pa Blo-bzang-grags-pa/rGyal-tshab Dar-ma-rin-chen's *dKa' gnad brgyad kyi zin bris rje'i gsung bzhin brjed byang du bkod pa* (1997), where this topic is addressed as one of the eight difficult points; and in the *dBu ma la 'jug pa'i rang 'grel dang rnam bshad dgongs pa rab gsal* (Tsong-kha-pa Blo-bzang-grags-pa 2009).[15] For Tsong-kha-pa, as shown above, memory is to be conceived simply as a causal process while there is no conventional evidence of self-awareness: a previous cognition of an object can be established through the recollection of the object itself. In other words, self-awareness is considered to be unnecessary for memory because a previous consciousness that has experienced an object and the later recollection of that object have 'the same' object. Among contemporary interpreters of Tsong-kha-pa, Jinpa (2002, 128) highlights the "rather pragmatic" character of Tsong-kha-pa's account of memory, emphasizing that his focus is on explaining 'how' memory occurs rather than 'why' it does. For Jinpa (2002, 129), Tsong-kha-pa is concerned with a first-person perspective because, in recollecting past experiences, one does so from a first-person perspective. In his way, the founder of the dGe-lugs tradition avoids speculating "beyond the phenomenal facts of the actual experience of memory", being aware of the risk of hypostatizing the phenomenon and thereby reintroducing an intrinsic nature into things (Jinpa 2002, 127). However, the mechanism of memory has been the subject of intense reflection and divergent views, even among dGe-lugs scholars (Cozort 1998, 160-9).

15 To gain insight into Tsong-kha-pa's line of reasoning, it is useful to consider the following steps (Tsong-kha-pa Blo-bzang-grags-pa 2009, 352.12-18): "*dran pas rang rig dpog pa min gyi | sngar bshad pa ltar dran pas sngar gyi shes pa la myong ba yod par dpog la | de la rang gis dang gzhan gyis myong ba gnyis su bcad nas bkag pa na | rang gis rang myong ba 'grub bo zhes smra mod kyang shes pas rig pa la mdo sde pa dang sems tsam pas bzhag pa de gnyis su kha tshon ma chod pa'i phyir te | mar mes rang gis rang gsal bar mi byed kyang | de la gsal ba mi ldog pa bzhin du | shes pas phyogs snga mas 'dod pa ltar du rang gis rang myong bar mi byed kyang de la myong ba tsam mi ldog pa'i phyir ro ||*" (It is not that self-awareness is assessed by means of memory; rather, as previously explained, what is assessed through memory is the existence of an experience in relation to a past [moment of] consciousness. Now, if one attempts to refute this by distinguishing between being experienced by oneself and [being experienced] by another, then – although it is said that 'It is proven that one experiences oneself' – regarding the fact that consciousness cognizes, the Sautrāntika and Cittamātra positions, being in agreement, are not thereby divided into two [distinct views]. Indeed, although a butter lamp does not act to illuminate itself, its illumination is not denied; likewise, even if consciousness, as considered in the first part [of the argument], does not act to experience itself, its mere experience is not negated).

Another important aspect of the dGe-lugs Prāsaṅgika view in rejecting self-awareness brings the discussion back to the concept of the mind's luminosity, a useful framework for clarifying their explanation of how memory functions (Cozort 1998, 160 ff.). According to this view, the mind is luminous but it is not self-aware in either a reflective or reflexive sense. Rather, since consciousness is by nature both awareness and luminosity, it is self-certifying through its very operation. However, it does not apprehend itself as an agent acting upon itself – this point will be examined further below. Thus, consciousness requires no supplementary awareness just as a lamp does not need to be illuminated in order to give light.[16] What follows will show how this very nature of mind serves as the basis for explaining memory. In Cozort's words:

> Consciousness shines forth as it knows its objects, and that shining forth is why it needs no further knower in order to be seen clearly at a later time. This, it seems, is finally how these explanations of memory without self-consciousness are justified; we can easily remember even that of which we were not specifically aware earlier simply because awareness shines forth just as does a previously experienced object. To engage in recollection, whether of the previously experienced object or of the consciousness that knew the object, is simple because one was illuminated and the other was simply luminous. (Cozort 1998, 173)

Jinpa's contribution to the discussion introduces another important concern related to the dGe-lugs argument against *rang rig*: the risk that a consciousness capable of validating its own nature would be construed as independent, and thus inherently existent. In fact, Jinpa identifies Tsong-kha-pa's central objection to *rang rig* as rooted in the concern that "positing such a faculty is tantamount to resurrecting the ghost of *svabhāva*, i.e., intrinsic being", something Tsong-kha-pa rigorously argued against (Jinpa 2002, 127). Garfield, by contrast, notes that there is no evidence Tsong-kha-pa explicitly formulates a logical argument against self-awareness on the basis of this concern. That is, he does not argue along the following lines: if awareness were self-aware, it would thereby validate its own nature and thus be independent and inherently existent; but since nothing possesses inherent existence, self-awareness cannot exist. However, Garfield notes that "this is indeed an argument that crops up in discussion with dGe-lugs scholars with disturbing regularity" (Garfield 2006, 218). Williams (1998, 186-7) reports this as a general dGe-lugs argument while Blumenthal (2004, 85) ascribes it to Tsong-kha-pa,

16 For textual references, see Cozort 1998, 170-3.

albeit without quoting any textual evidence. Williams (1998, 187-8) and Garfield (2006, 219) agree that this is not a strong argument, as self-validation is distinct from causation. One cannot be mistaken in wondering whether one is having a particular mental event or not; however, this does not imply that conscious episodes exist independently of their causes and conditions.[17]

Williams (1998, 206 ff.) attributes to the dGe-lugs system an additional significant argument against the conventional existence of *rang rig*, centered on the notion of a *buddha*'s non-dual awareness of its own consciousness. Garfield also engages with this claim, summarizing it as follows: such self-awareness "would be an ultimate truth, but would be a positive phenomenon" (Garfield 2006, 219). Yet, in the Prāsaṅgika Madhyamaka view, the only ultimate truth is emptiness, which is a negative phenomenon. If self-awareness truly existed, then a *buddha*'s cognitions would be ultimate and, at the same time, directed toward positive phenomena to be known – an apparent contradiction. This touches upon the limit-case of omniscience, an issue already present in the early, pre-Dignāga phases of the discourse on self-awareness. Garfield (2006, 220) swiftly rejects the argument attributed by Williams to the dGe-lugs tradition, claiming not only that such reasoning is not found in their canonical texts but also that, in his view, it constitutes a poor argument. Its weakness, he contends, is readily apparent: a *buddha* is aware of both the ultimate and the conventional; hence, the argument collapses.

Nevertheless, it is worth taking a closer look at this point to grasp fully the extent of its complexity and the challenges it presents.

17 For a passage concerning validation by valid cognition, see Tsong-kha-pa (2009, 359.17-60.4): "*tshad ma 'grub pa la gzhal bya grub pa tsam gyis mi chog par tshad ma rang las tshad ma 'grub pa gzhan dag 'dod pa ltar yin na | gzhal bya la ma ltos par tshad ma 'grub par 'gyur || de 'dod na dngos po rnams rgyu rkyen gzhan la ma ltos par rab tu grub pa 'gyur ro || zhes bkag pas gzhal bya grub pa tsam gyis tshad ma grub par shugs kyis bstan no ||*" (If it were as others [Yogācāras and Sautrāntikas] claim – that is, that *pramāṇa* is established by *pramāṇa* itself, on the grounds that it is insufficient for it to be established only through the establishment of the *prameya* – then *pramāṇa* would end up being established independently of the *prameya*. If one were to assert such a view, all objects would end up being established without depending on others, namely, causes and conditions. By refuting this position, it is implicitly shown that a *pramāṇa* is established merely through the establishment of its *prameya*). It is on the basis of this point, demonstrating the mutual dependence of *pramāṇa* and *prameya*, that Moriyama (1995, 641), for instance, explains how and why Tsong-kha-pa rejects the notion of self-awareness. In other terms, a question may arise: if it is commonly accepted that objects are validated through consciousness, would it not then be reasonable to assume that consciousness itself must likewise be validated by some form of awareness? Candrakīrti's reply is that self-awareness is not needed to certify or register the previous consciousness in the same way that an eye-consciousness is the certifier of a visual object (for textual references, see Cozort 1998, 165 fn. 27). Consciousnesses are certified simply by their activity of knowing an object, without the need to posit a two-fold movement of awareness, one towards itself (to certify itself) and the other towards the object (to certify the object).

To begin with, the dGe-lugs presentation of omniscience needs to be examined since it claims to be devoid of reflexivity. For Tsong-kha-pa, an omniscient consciousness knows an object in a manner appropriate to that object: conventional truths are known by way of dualistic appearances, whereas ultimate truths are known by way of the vanishing of dualistic appearances. Since the mind of a *buddha* is a positive, conventional phenomenon, it must be known through the appearance of subject and object as dual, that is, as distinct. However, here, the subject and the object are the same omniscient mind. How can a perfect omniscient mind know itself as different from itself, given that everything is identical to itself? Perhaps strategically, Tsong-kha-pa does not address the problem of how omniscience would know itself (Newland 1992, 201).

Among his disciples, rGyal-tshab-rje (1973, 211) suggests that a *buddha*'s mind would know itself 'implicitly' (TIB *zhugs rtogs*), without appearing to itself. He attempts to reconcile this with Tsong-kha-pa's assertion that a *buddha* does not possess any implicit knowledge by explaining that a *buddha*'s self-knowledge is implicit in the sense that, while being an implicit cognition, it is never secondary (or implicit) to other explicit realizations.[18] In this way, rGyal-tshab-rje addresses the problem by claiming that omniscience knows itself implicitly, that is to say, without any appearance of itself. mKhas-grub-rje, the other principal disciple of Tsong-kha-pa, takes a different approach: for him, a *buddha*'s mind must know itself 'explicitly', in accordance with Tsong-kha-pa's position. In order for this cognition to be non-mistaken, there can be no alternative: a *buddha*'s mind must know itself explicitly and non-dualistically. However, this solution also appears problematic: if such a view were correct, it would effectively imply the existence of something like *rang rig*, which is precisely what the Prāsaṅgika reject.[19]

The overall considerations presented by Newland at the conclusion of his inquiry into the topic of omniscience from the dGe-lugs perspective revolve around the need to find a reasonable explanation for the conceptual challanges this system encounters when addressing the *buddha* ground. According to Newland (1992, 214), the predominant dGe-lugs approach is "to speak in terms that make sense in relation to where we are now". This strategy

18 To clarify this point, Newland (1992, 200) offers the following example of a cognition that is implicit or secondary to another: the realization of the ability to hold water, which is secondary to the realization of the pot itself.

19 A later dGe-lugs scholar, 'Jam-dbyangs-bzhad-pa (1648-1721), offers a stance that is even more precarious. According to Newland's reading (1992, 206-8 and 298-9 fn. 55), it seems that this account allows a Prāsaṅgika to assert the conventional existence of *rang rig*, and this is a position that risks undermining the very foundations of the school's ontological framework.

reflects a philosophically and pedagogically calibrated method of instruction aimed at "minds enmeshed in conceptuality and a world of conventional distinctions" (Newland 1992, 216). However, the core question of how dGe-lugs scholars account for the knowledge that a *buddha*'s mind has of itself without resorting to *rang rig* seems to remain ultimately unresolved.

A consistent thread runs through the entire dGe-lugs Prāsaṅgika refutation of *rang rig*: the strict distinction between two levels of reality, the conventional and the ultimate. Their reasoning is rooted in the fundamental rejection of inherent existence, not only ultimately but even conventionally. The Prāsaṅgika approach seeks to mirror worldly conventions while avoiding any assumption of metaphysical entities at the conventional level, whose establishment would require ultimate analysis. For them, self-awareness stands in contradiction to worldly conventions and is not necessary in order to explain memory. Seeking to establish consciousness, whether through self-experience or as the object of another cognition, amounts to positing an imputed object that is neither obvious nor endorsed by everyday conventions, and which therefore demands ultimate analysis. If self-awareness were to be established at all, it would have to be through ultimate, not conventional, reasoning, that is, reasoning that pertains to the analysis of reality itself. Consequently, if *rang rig* exists, it must exist ultimately; but such ultimate existence is precisely what the Prāsaṅgika system denies.[20]

Why, then, is Tsong-kha-pa so concerned about the conventional status of *rang rig*? Mi-pham's considerations on Tsong-kha-pa's view help bring this point into focus. Actually, the doctrine of self-awareness enters Indian Buddhist thought through the Cittamātra school, and the refutation presented by Candrakīrti and Śāntideva is framed within the general criticism of this philosophical system. However, at the time of Tsong-kha-pa's formulation of Prāsaṅgika Madhyamaka, the cultural and philosophical target and its challenges change, as Garfield remarks:

20 For insightful considerations on how Tsong-kha-pa navigates the two philosophical dimensions of *pramāṇa* and Madhyamaka, see Duckworth 2015. Dreyfus (1997, 335 ff.) offers a rather critical assessment of the dGe-lugs attempt to combine these two frameworks. Nonetheless, he provides a valuable overview of the range of Tibetan positions on issues related to *rang rig*, including its possible objects, the function of the aspect (TIB *rnam pa*) and related topics. For further discussion on the dGe-lugs synthesis of *pramāṇa* and Madhyamaka, see also Dreyfus 1997; 2003; Hopkins 1983; Jinpa 2002; Newland 1992. It is also worth noting a more recent trend in contemporary scholarship that interprets the dGe-lugs ontological framework as reducible to a purely linguistic or epistemological project, thereby overlooking its deeper ontological commitments regarding the nature of phenomena. Within this semantic reading of Madhyamaka, one may include works such as Siderits 1988 and Priest, Garfield 2002, which present Madhyamaka philosophy primarily as a reflection on the limits of language and conceptual thought in accessing, knowing, and expressing reality.

> when we take Śāntarakṣita's discussion into account, the doxographic landscape changes, and we see that while for Cittamātra it is the ultimate status of reflexivity that matters, for Svātantrika reflexivity is posited *conventionally* as the mark of the mental. Given that the refutation of this position is central to Tsong-kha-pa's original formulation of the distinctiveness of Prāsaṅgika-madhyamaka, attention to the conventional status of reflexivity makes more sense. (Garfield 2006, 222; italics in the original)

On the other hand, it can also be said, according to Blumenthal, that

> dGe-lugs criticism of self-cognizing cognition seems for the most part to be aimed at the position as held by Yogācāras such as Dignāga. That view was the target for Candrakīrti's criticisms, which they follow. Almost no reference is found in dGe-lugs writings relating to the manner in which Śāntarakṣita defines the term. (Blumenthal 2004, 226; with Author's adjustments for the transliterations from Tibetan)

Regardless, the ontological project of the dGe-lugs Prāsaṅgika builds up a sophisticated synthesis of the epistemology derived from the works of Dignāga and Dharmakīrti and the anti-essentialist dialectic of Candrakīrti; within it, the ontology of the two truths forms the very core.[21]

Up to this point, numerous arguments against self-awareness, even as a merely conventional entity, have been examined. This analysis has highlighted the recurring role of the memory argument and the complexities involved in accounting for the omniscient mind's knowledge of itself. It has also shown how self-awareness functions doxographically as a criterion for differentiating among various philosophical tenets. In particular, the dGe-lugs perspective on self-awareness has been situated within the broader framework of their anti-essentialist ontological project. This project centers on their interpretation of the two truths and constitutes the core of their critique of *rang rig*.

21 For a list of the principal sources to which the dGe-lugs exegetical tradition traces the Prāsaṅgika refutation of self-awareness, such as passages from the *Ratnacūḍaparipṛcchāsūtra*, as well as works by Candrakīrti and Nāgārjuna, see Cozort 1998, 158-60.

5.2 Mi-pham: Positing Reflexive Self-Awareness Conventionally

After examining Tsong-kha-pa's position on *rang rig* and his rejection of its conventional existence, it is now essential to contrast this with Mi-pham's standpoint to have a better grasp of the broader implications of the debate. The opposition between their views has been selected in this volume as a case study to illustrate the significance of one of the most important Tibetan controversies concerning the notion of self-awareness.

In his commentary to Śāntideva's *BCA* 9, *sPyod 'jug shes rab kyi le'u'i tshig don go sla bar rnam par bshad pa nor bu ke ta ka* (Mi-pham rNam-rgyal-rgya-mtsho 1972-99e), Mi-pham[22] seeks to demonstrate that Śāntideva and, by extension, the Prāsaṅgika Madhyamikas, should not be interpreted as denying the conventional existence of self-awareness. To support this claim, he draws on references and theoretical frameworks that would be intelligible to dGe-lugs scholars. Moreover, he articulates this position in direct response to his dGe-lugs Madhyamaka critics in two specific texts: the *brGal lan nyin byed snang ba* (Mi-pham rNam-rgyal-rgya-mtsho 1972-79c), replying to Tre-bo-brag-dkar-sprul-sku Blo-bzang dPal-ldan-bstan-'dzin (1866-1927), and the *gZhan gyis brtsad pa'i lan mdor bsdus pa rigs lam rab gsal de nyid snang byed* (Mi-pham rNam-rgyal-rgya-mtsho 1969), replying to dPa'-ri Blo-bzang-rab-gsal (1840-1910).[23] Mi-pham argues that from the Prāsaṅgika point of view, and thus from the perspective of Candrakīrti and Śāntideva, self-awareness exists conventionally but does not exist on the ultimate level.

Mi-pham's theory of *rang rig* closely parallels that of Śāntarakṣita. Mi-pham presents consciousness as that which is luminosity and awareness, and as the defining feature of that which is not insentient. Furthermore, he regards consciousness as partless and unitary, aligning with Śāntarakṣita's *MAl* 16-17, as previously discussed in § 3.2.3. The following is a key passage from Mi-pham, accompanied by its English translation:

> *'di ltar gzhal bya sna tshogs pa snang ba'i yul dang | de 'dzin pa'i yul can so sor yod pa lta bu'i snang tshul gyi dbang du byas te gzung mam dang 'dzin rnam zhes bzhag kyang don la rnam par shes pa gang zhig shing rta dang rtsig pa la sogs pa bem po'i rang bzhin gsal rig dang bral ba dag las bzlog pa gsal zhing rig pa'i mtshan nyid can du rab tu skye ba ste | de ltar bem po min pa'i rang bzhin gang yin*

22 For an introduction to Mi-pham and his philosophical view, see Duckworth 2008; 2010; 2011; 2015; Garfield 2006; Kapstein 2000; Pettit 1999; Phuntsho 2005; Wangchuk 2012.

23 For the debate betweenMi-pham and dPa'-ri Blo-bzang-rab-gsal, see Viehbeck 2014.

> *pa de lta bu 'di ni bdag rang nyid shes pa'am rang rig rang gsal zhes pa yin no* ||. (Mi-pham rNam-rgyal-rgya-mtsho 1972-79a, 142.1-3)
>
> Thus, we have posited an "apprehended aspect" and an "apprehending aspect", for they concern the mode of appearance that consists in having, as separate, an object – namely, the appearances of many various objects of knowledge – and a subject which apprehends it. Nevertheless, actually, any consciousness occurs as possessing the feature of being luminous and aware, and as the opposite of those things which have the nature of matter and are devoid of luminosity and awareness – such as a chariot, a wall, and so on. Thus, what is by nature not matter is "cognition of its very own self", or "self-awareness", "self-luminosity".

Consciousness has a unitary and partless nature, where the three-fold structure of action, doer, and object is not admissible.[24] As a constitutive feature of consciousness, reflexivity is what renders experience 'experience', and one cannot doubt[25] the occurrence of an experience while it is unfolding; in the very act of knowing, one knows that one knows.

As a proponent of the conventional existence of *rang rig*, by considering the common example of the sword which is unable to cut itself, Mi-pham claims that if one were to take it to mean that there is no *rang rig* even conventionally, certain absurd consequences would follow.[26] Thus, while Mi-pham holds that the Prāsaṅgikas do not refute the conventional existence of self-awareness, he also seeks to argue the positive counterpart: that, on the conventional level, consciousness is indeed characterized by reflexivity. Thus, for him, incorporating it into the Prāsaṅgika philosophical framework

24 Mi-pham rNam-rgyal-rgya-mtsho 1972-79a, 142.3: "*gcig pa cha med rang bzhin la | gsum gyi rang bzhin mi 'thad phyir | de yi rang gis rig pa ni | bya dang byed pa'i dngos por yin* ||" (Because a unitary and partless nature is incompatible with having a three-fold nature, its own self-awareness is not a functioning entity characterized by action and agent).

25 Mi-pham rNam-rgyal-rgya-mtsho 1972-79c, 207.1: "*rang la mngon du gsal zhing the tshom med pa*" (It clearly manifests to itself and there is no doubt).

26 Mi-pham rNam-rgyal-rgya-mtsho 1972-79c, 210.1-2: "*de'i phyir ral gri'i dpe la sogs pa la bsams na ral gri rang gis rang tha snyad du gcod pa med mod kyi | de tsam gyis dpe can tha snyad du yang med mi dgos te* […] *skye med kyi dper mo gsham bu sogs bkod pa bzhin no* || *de lta min na rang blo rang gis mngon sum shes pa tha snyad du yang med par 'gyur te* […] ||" (Therefore, when considering examples such as a sword, and so on, although on a conventional level a sword does not cut itself, this alone does not imply that the thing exemplified is likewise nonexistent from a conventional perspective – just as in the case of […] objects that have not come into existence, like the child of a barren woman, and so on. If it were otherwise, then even one's own mind's direct consciousness would end up being conventionally nonexistent […]).

would serve a function analogous to that of medicine.[27] Among the various lines of thought that Mi-pham adopts to convince (dGe-lugs) Prāsaṅgikas to accept *rang rig* conventionally, one is his insistence on the definition of consciousness as luminosity and awareness, in opposition to insentience. For Mi-pham, the issue is not whether consciousness is aware of an object but rather what this means and how it is possible. Mi-pham's dGe-lugs critics share the same definition of consciousness as luminosity and awareness. However, since this is what distinguishes mind from matter, *inter alia*, consciousness makes itself known in making objects known. According to Mi-pham, what else could luminosity and awareness possibly mean in this context? Consciousness, insofar as it is consciousness, must be reflexive – as Śāntarakṣita also claims. It is important to note, then, that the definition of consciousness as luminous and aware serves as the conceptual bridge Mi-pham uses to move from the claim that Prāsaṅgikas 'do not deny' the conventional existence of *svasaṃvedana* to his own goal of making them 'positively affirm' it (Mi-pham rNam-rgyal-rgya-mtsho 1972-79a, 143-4).

In commenting on *BCA* 9.26, Mi-pham (1972-79e, 21.6-2.1) observes that

> In brief, the refutation of *svasaṃvedana* is a refutation at the ultimate level, but it is not a refutation of its conventional conception, as the mere opposite of matter.[28]

Here, there is a direct reference to Śāntarakṣita's stance. Thus, Mi-pham's claim supports a view that is explicitly detached from the Cittamātra philosophical tenet, which affirms the ultimate existence of self-awareness. Moreover, one methodological or logical criticism Mi-pham poses to the dGe-lugs scholars is that it is not correct to hold with such certitude that *svasaṃvedana* does not exist conventionally simply through the mere absence of its affirmation on the conventional level in Prāsaṅgika texts. This is especially because Prāsaṅgikas are well-known for not caring about conventional reality, being solely concerned with liberation from grasping to the true existence of phenomena. As Pettit (1999, 497-8) remarks, one of Mi-pham's arguments claims that things that are harmed by conventional valid cognition should not be posited conventionally; however, if everything that is negated ultimately is likewise not posited conventionally, then

27 Mi-pham rNam-rgyal-rgya-mtsho 1972-79c, 210.3-4: "*thal 'gyur ba'i lugs la gnod pa med par ma zad phan byed kyi sman ltar 'gyur te* ||" (Not only does it not contradict the Prāsaṅgika system, but it becomes like a beneficial medicine).

28 Mi-pham rNam-rgyal-rgya-mtsho 1972-79e, 21.6-2.1: "*mdor na rang rig pa 'gog pa ni don dam par 'gog pa yin gyi bem po las log tsam la tha snyad du rang rig par 'dogs pa'i tshul de 'gog pa ma yin te* |".

the *skandhas* and *dhātus*, for instance, would also have to be accepted as completely non-existent. Another crucial methodological critique that Mi-pham expresses is that if the reflexivity of awareness were refuted even at a conventional level, it would be akin to a permanent sound or the Creator God of the theists, both of which would be invalidated by a valid cognizer examining conventional reality. However, that is not possible for *svasaṃvedana*: it cannot be refuted by any valid cognition analyzing the conventional[29] and, actually, has many compelling supporting arguments.

In his commentary to Śāntideva's *BCA* 9, Mi-pham offers four arguments in support of the conventional existence of self-awareness, each formulated as a *reductio*, in line with the Prāsaṅgika style of debate. It is important to go through them, for they target relevant philosophical issues. They are listed and addressed by Williams (1998, 92 ff.) as follows. To deny *svasaṃvedana* in this sense would mean that one's own mind becomes an object hidden to oneself, rendering experience invalidated. This would make it impossible to distinguish between one's own mind and another's, as one would know one's own mind in the same way one perceives the minds of others. Furthermore, how could one ever confirm the existence of one's own mind if it is hidden from oneself? This raises several issues, including a critical one: without proving the existence of one's own mind, and thus the possibility of experience, inference based on experiential data would be impossible. Ultimately, without knowing one's own mind, there could be no conscious awareness of cognitive referents within the conventional domain.

Without the reflexivity of mind as a basis for all further mental activities, the whole cognitive system would collapse and the entire experiential field would lack its validation and constitutive boundaries. Garfield helps to elucidate the relevance of these arguments within a broader, global philosophical discourse on self-awareness, as reflected in the following passage:

> Mi-pham is worried that to deny the reflexivity of awareness would be to deny the immediacy of self-knowledge, privileged access, the certainty of one's own existence as a mind, and the possibility even of mediated knowledge, since one would not know anything as one's *own* representation. (Garfield 2006, 215; italics in the original)

29 Mi-pham rNam-rgyal-rgya-mtsho 1972-79c, 201.3-4: "*rtag pa'i sgra dang dbang phyug byed pa po la sogs pa bzhin du tha snyad dpyod byed kyi tshad mas gnod pa dngos su yod pa dgos na 'di la de mi srid pa'i phyir ro* ||" (Just as in the case of terms such as 'permanent' and 'omnipotent creator', and so on, if one were to posit an actual contradiction according to the standards of conventional analysis, it would not apply here because such a thing does not exist in this context).

These points are still extremely relevant and will be addressed in the final chapter (ch. 7) of the present inquiry, in the context of examining the contemporary philosophy of mind.

One crucial point that is implied in the first argument of the above list should be remarked upon. For Mi-pham, *rang rig* is the epistemological basis for all the other types of cognition. Kapstein paraphrases Mi-pham (1972-79b, 792.5-6.2) as follows:

> All that is experienced through other modes of direct perception is ascertained as direct perception through self-presentation. If that were not the case, direct perception would in effect be epistemically unfounded (*'grub mi 'gyur te*). Inference is rooted in direct perception. Direct perception is made certain by self-presentation. After arriving at this, the experience of one's own mind, with respect to which there can be no error (*ma 'khrul blo yi nyams myong*), there can be no farther proof (*sgrub byed*). (Kapstein 1993, 158)[30]

Therefore, according to Mi-pham, from the epistemological point of view, all conceptual cognitions (SKT *anumānāni*; TIB *rjes dpag*) culminate in perceptual cognitions or direct perceptions (SKT *pratyakṣāni*; TIB *mngon sum*), while all perceptual cognitions culminate in self-awareness, which is the cognition in which one's own mind is experienced as non-erroneous (TIB *ma 'khrul pa*).

The extensive interpretative work developed by Mi-pham must be situated within a broader theoretical and doxographical framework, as a detailed and sophisticated attempt to harmonize rDzogs-chen thought with more mainstream scholastic traditions. Mi-pham demonstrates particular attentiveness to the rDzogs-chen perspective, seeking to integrate it meaningfully with other strands of Indo-Tibetan Buddhist philosophy. It is important to note that in the rDzogs-chen tradition, as will become clear in the next chapter (ch. 6), the reflexivity of mind plays a crucial role. It is understood as the luminous movement of the self-recognition of one's own mind's nature. Therefore, reflexivity has to be positively affirmed conventionally so that the whole process of self-awareness and self-liberation can actually unfold. Thus, the underlying soteriological concerns play an important role in Mi-pham's project, aimed at providing a Madhyamaka account that accords with the rDzogs-chen view (Kapstein 2000, 117-18). Thus, if Tsong-kha-pa's exegetical project is aimed at providing an ontological criticism of the independent nature of self-awareness, engaging in a delicate and refined process of 'subtraction', stripping even conventional reality from self-awareness, Mi-pham's project

30 Note that here Kapstein renders *rang rig* as 'self-presentation'.

leads in the opposite direction, towards the 'addition' of conventional reality to *rang rig*. As demonstrated, the implications of this debate are deep and complicated. Here, the main elements have been outlined, enriching the range of ontological, epistemological, and doxographical reflections on the intricate and heatedly debated issue of self-awareness. This discussion also paves the way for some final considerations on the dialogue between the tradition's contributions and the contemporary inquiry into self-awareness.

6 *Rang rig* and the Soteriological Breakthrough

Summary 6.1 Gnosis and Soteriology in the rNying-ma Tradition. – 6.2 Distinctive Features of rDzogs-chen *Rang rig* in Contrast with Other Tantric and Māhāyanic Traditions. – 6.3 How *Rang rig* Makes the (Soteriological) Difference.

6.1 Gnosis and Soteriology in the rNying-ma Tradition

The pre-Dignāga Buddhist sources mentioned in the first part of this research (ch. 2) associate the idea of self-awareness primarily with soteriological concerns, mostly in relation to omniscience. Then, at the time of its technical formulation within Buddhism's epistemological turn, this notion takes on a notably epistemological orientation. In addition to the intersections between its soteriological and epistemological aspects, its ontological framework also plays a crucial role in the development of the notion of self-awareness.

This chapter aims to shed light on selected interpretations of *rang rig* that are considered representative of its key dimensions, particularly with regard to the role it plays on the path to liberation, both in terms of yogic practice and soteriological breakthrough. To this end, certain sources from the rNying-ma tradition more broadly

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and from the rDzogs-chen perspective in particular[1] will be examined as emblematic of these aspects of the discourse.

The relevance of this school for the present inquiry lies primarily in the specific gnoseological dimension it develops and with which it engages. In this chapter, the term 'gnoseology' will be employed to denote discourse on 'gnosis' (SKT *jñāna*; TIB *ye shes*), that is, the high-level mind at the stage of a *buddha* or at other advanced stages along the path to enlightenment. This stands by contrast with 'epistemology', which will refer here to the analysis of ordinary mind (SKT *citta*; TIB *sems*).[2] Gnoseology thus represents a more elevated counterpart to epistemology and, as will become evident, this terminological distinction reflects and is rooted in the philosophical framework of the rNying-ma tradition.

Davidson (2004, 235) remarks that the Indian emphasis on gnosis was amplified to develop an indigenous gnoseology, particularly by figures such as Rong-zom Chos-kyi-bzang-po (1012-1088) and other rNying-ma scholars. In fact, the rNying-ma 'spiritual culture' is typified by its focus, especially in the rDzogs-chen view, on an account of philosophy of mind in which the 'gnoseological' aspect plays a crucial role. The level of *rig pa*, or primordial gnosis (TIB *ye shes*), as opposed to that of ordinary consciousness (TIB *rnam shes* or *sems*), is the key-element of the whole system. In terms of the difference between these two dimensions, Germano and Waldron explain:

> It is a distinction between distorted and optimal experience, as well as the corresponding unconscious matrices. More typically, the focus is on the ordinary mind (*sems*) or ordinary consciousness (*rnam shes*) contrasted to pure awareness (*rig pa*) or primordial cognition (*ye shes*). The discussions are straightforward in terms of buddhology – namely, models of consciousness for Buddhas in contrast to sentient beings, or, in epistemological terms, the contrast of global, holistic, and reflexive modes of awareness to […] dualistic, and non-reflexive modes of awareness. (Germano, Waldron 2006, 53)

1 Teachings classified as rDzogs-chen are common to the rNying-ma school of Buddhism and the pre-Buddhist Bon tradition; the present volume considers only the former system of thought. For a detailed historical and philosophical overview of rNying-ma rDzogs-chen, see Germano 1994; for a study of the obscure regions in which the rDzogs-chen scriptures were created, see Van Schaik 2004b. For a systematic overview of Bon rDzogs-chen philosophy, see Rossi 1999.

2 For further clarification of this usage of the terms 'gnoseology' and 'epistemology' as well as their implications, see Wangchuk 2007, 43.

This specific tradition of Tibetan Buddhism holds particular significance for a universal philosophical discourse on consciousness, as the fundamental *sems-ye shes* distinction carries profound implications. The richness of this specifically gnoseological account has yet to be properly analyzed by modern scholarship and highlights

> the absence of any systematic appraisal of rNying-ma views on the nature of mind that traces their evolution and complex relationships with other Indian Buddhist philosophies of mind such as Cittamātra, Madhyamaka, Pramāṇavāda, and Vajrayāna. The rNying-ma views merit attention not only because of their intrinsic interest and relevance to contemporary philosophies of mind but also because they provide an invaluable key to understanding the tradition's distinctive doctrines and practices. (Higgins 2012b, 441)

Thus, at the core of the rDzogs-chen (and rNying-ma) system and as its formative element is the differentiation between dualistic mind and primordial gnosis. This distinction emerges as a key component of the entire system, deemed indispensable for understanding its philosophy and meditation practice, as well as the soteriological discourse of the path to liberation. This tight link between gnosis and soteriology becomes clear with further consideration of the implications of the *sems-ye shes* distinction.

Primordial gnosis refers to a mode of knowledge that is considered genuine and primordial by contrast with normal cognition, which is adventitious, transient, and derivative. In his "Mini-Encyclopedia of Great Perfection Terminology", Germano depicts the rDzogs-chen technical understanding of the term *rig pa* as indicating the "'aware-ing' dimension of the Universe itself in its pure undiluted intensity" (Germano 1992, 829). On the other hand, what characterizes the ordinary cognitive activity of *sems* is a "distorted derivative" (Germano 1992, 829) of that very radiation of intense awareness. It is a dualistic distortion of the dimension of *rig pa* as it is considered in the rDzogs-chen tradition, namely, "ever-present awareness in its unrestricted openness and undefiled purity" (Higgins 2013, 84). For Higgins, the *sems-ye shes* distinction is:

> first systematically presented in the seventeen Atiyoga tantras (*rgyud bcu bdun*) that make up the Heart Essence (*snying thig*) subclass of the Esoteric Guidance Class (*man ngag sde*) of rDzogs-chen teachings. These teachings often take the form of personal instructions advising the practitioner to discern within the flux of adventitious thoughts and sensations that characterize dualistic mind (*sems*) an invariant pre-representational structure of awareness known as primordial knowing, open awareness or the nature of Mind (*sems nyid*) from which this turmoil arises. The idea

> is to directly recognize (*rang ngo shes*) and become increasingly familiar with this abiding condition without confusing it with any of its derivative and distortive aspects. (Higgins 2012b, 442)

Numerous esoteric instructions (TIB *man ngag*) on distinguishing mind from primordial gnosis are preserved in rNying-ma collections – such as, for instance, the *Bai ro'i rgyud 'bum* – and constitute some of the earliest evidence of deep gnoseological works where a rich and nuanced vocabulary specifies the mode of awareness of primordial gnosis. In various formulations, this is referred to as *rig pa*, *rang rig*, *byang chub kyi sems* '*bodhicitta*', and *sems nyid* ('Mind'). By contrast, dualistic mind is understood within the rDzogs-chen gnoseological system through an integrated analysis that draws upon both Cittamātra and Madhyamaka sources.

Given this framework, what is the meaning and importance of such a structural division in relation to the path toward liberation? How does the gnoseological dimension intersect with soteriology? To address these questions and unpack the straightforward claim Higgins makes about the "rDzogs-chen philosophy of mind [as] inseparable from its distinctive soteriology" (Higgins 2012b, 443), it is necessary first to clarify how a rDzogs-chen practitioner progresses along the path to liberation.

What is, then, the soteriological model of the Great Perfection view? It has an underlying

> inclusivist schematization of the Buddhist path in terms of the progressive disclosure of primordial knowing – a clearing process (*sbyong byed*) that seamlessly integrates elements of Mahāyāna, Vajrayāna and rDzogs-chen – that lays the doctrinal and hermeneutical foundation for all the subsequent rNying-ma treatments. (Higgins 2012b, 443)

In fact, the nature of Mind, or *buddha*-nature, is available to both enlightened beings and sentient beings; however, it remains inaccessible to the latter owing to the obscuring influence of dualistic distortions. In other words, the rDzogs-chen model of enlightenment does not adopt the approach of 'abandonment and obtainment', whereby unwholesome tendencies are discarded and wholesome qualities cultivated – a model typically associated with the *sūtra* tradition. Nor does it align with the tantric dynamic of 'transformation', which emphasizes the process of converting ordinary consciousness into the enlightened one.[3] Rather, it proceeds

3 In this respect, cf. Germano's (1992, 87-8) words relating to Klong-chen-pa's thought of enlightenment.

through a dynamic of "recovery or retrieval", a process of "disclosure" (Higgins 2012b, 448) or unveiling of what is otherwise obscured and concealed beneath layers of afflictive distortions.

> On this account, the Buddhist path is construed not as a developmental process of accumulating merits and knowledge that serve as causes and conditions leading to goal-realization (as in Mahāyāna gradualist paradigm), but as a disclosive process of directly recognizing and becoming increasingly familiar with primordial knowing as the mind's objectifications and their obscuring effects subside. (Higgins 2012b, 445)

More generally, following Seyfort Ruegg, as further developed by Wangchuk (2007, 38-41), two principal soteriological approaches to attaining Buddhahood can be identified within the Mahāyāna tradition:

> what I call the 'generation model' and the 'revelation model', which, borrowing from Seyfort Ruegg [1989, 3], could also be termed the 'nurture model' and the 'nature model', respectively" (Wangchuk 2007, 39)

Whereas the former entails the two accumulations of merit and wisdom in order to 'generate' the *buddha* bodies (SKT *kāyāḥ*), the latter implies spiritual practices that 'reveal' the (*buddha*-)nature that every being already possesses. In rDzogs-chen, the latter model is adopted,[4] with the specification that it is not a gradual approach but, rather, one in which the ontological-soteriological ground (TIB *gzhi*), path (TIB *lam*) and goal (TIB *'bras bu*) are conceived as a singular point.[5]

In light of what has been discussed, the close connection between soteriology and gnoseology in the Great Perfection quickly becomes evident. In distinguishing between *sems* or *rnam shes* and *ye shes*, as seen in certain Mahāyāna and rDzogs-chen texts, gnosis is ranked higher than ordinary mind or cognition. This is clearly indicated in the Buddhist doctrine of the four types of 'reliance'

4 Cf. this very distinction depicted by Klong-chen-pa (1999e, 1169.4-1170.5) and Rong-zom-pa (1999c, 32.6-8).

5 This is an idea also proposed by Rong-zom-pa in 1999a, 94.11-13 and, more explicitly, also 201.24-202.3, where it is said: "*sangs rgyas sa'i chos thams cad kyang 'di'i gnas skabs su gzhi dang lam dang 'bras bu'i chos rnams rang bzhin bye brag tu gyur pa med de | gzhi nyid lam du byas pa yin la | 'bras bu gzhi las khyad par 'phags pa med pas | 'di ni sangs rgyas thams cad kyi gsang ba'i man ngag nges pa'i don mthar thug pa yin no zhes bstan no* ||" (Even all the phenomena of the Buddha ground, in this context, are not differentiated as ground, path, and fruition phenomena in their own nature. The ground itself is taken as the path, and the fruition is in no way superior to the ground. It is taught that this is the ultimate, definitive meaning of the secret instructions of all *buddhas*).

(SKT *pratisaraṇa*; TIB *rton pa*).[6] For a practitioner this is of utmost importance, given that the actual spiritual breakthrough is a deep cognitive event "inasmuch as a direct cognitive insight is called for, not a physiological or emotional one" (Wangchuk 2007, 43).[7] The salvific value of understanding and knowing, a hallmark of Indian philosophical thought, finds its fullest expression in rDzogs-chen. The discovery and recognition of the gnoseological dimension of *rig pa*, together with the process of becoming increasingly familiar with it, corresponds directly to soteriological praxis.

Given the close connection between the two dimensions mentioned above, it is now necessary to turn directly to the notion of *rang rig* itself. What, then, is the soteriological role it plays in the rDzogs-chen path to liberation? How is it conceived within the framework of the *sems-ye shes* distinction? The following sections will show that, in the rNying-ma tradition, the term *rang rig* is associated with the gnoseological dimension of *rig pa*. It is used synonymously with expressions such as *rang byung* (*gi*) *ye shes* 'self-occurring gnosis',[8] *rang byung rig pa* 'self-occurring awareness', and *'od gsal* 'luminosity'.[9] By further exploring the implications of the view of self-awareness and

6 See Fukuda, Ishihama 1989, nos. 1548-51, s.v. "rton pa bzhi'i ming la"; Sakaki [1916] 1987, nos. 1545-8, s.v. "rton pa bzhi'i ming la". In particular, see the fourth one: "*ye shes la rton par bya'i rnam shes la rton par mi bya ba*" (Fukuda, Ishihama 1989, no. 1551; Sakaki [1916] 1987, no. 1548; One has to rely on gnosis (*ye shes*), and not on ordinary consciousness (*rnam shes*)).

7 See for instance Rong-zom-pa (1999a, 198.5-10) and especially the passage where he claims that "it is commonly known that from the basis of the *śrāvaka* vehicle to the culmination, that is Great Perfection, when one sees the correct reality, one is liberated" ("*'di ltar nyan thas kyi theg pa nas gzhi bzung nas | rdzogs pa chen po'i mthar thug gi bar du | gang zhig yang dag pa'i don mthong na rnam par grol lo zhes thun mong du grags pa yin la* |") (Rong-zom-pa 1999c, 32.6-8).

8 On the notion of *rang byung gi ye shes* see, for instance, Almogi 2009, 206: "The notion of self-occurring gnosis (*svayaṃbhūjñāna: rang byung* [*gi*] *ye shes*) in the sense of intrinsic gnosis is central to the philosophy of the rNying-ma school, particularly in connection with the rDzogs-chen tradition. The term *svayaṃbhūjñāna* as such occurs in earlier Indian literature, although in most cases not in the sense of intrinsic gnosis, but in the original meaning of the term, namely, the 'gnosis of a self-occurring one', where *svayaṃbhū* is a term for *buddha*s and *pratyekabuddha*s, one expressive of the fact that they attain awakening without the help of others; or, along the same lines, when *svayaṃbhū* is taken as qualifying gnosis, 'autogenous gnosis', that is, gnosis that has come about independently of external influence" (square brackets in the original).

9 See Higgins 2013, 86. Davidson (2004, 236-7) notes that, in its technical use in translations from Sanskrit, *rig pa* sometimes appears as a shortened form of the more common expression 'self-awareness' (*rang gi rig pa*). On the other hand, Van Schaik 2004b suggests instead a different source for the use of the term *rig pa* in the Great Perfection texts: some of the earliest rDzogs-chen texts use '*bodhicitta*' (*byang chub kyi sems*) as a synonym for the primordially enlightened mind, and the phrase '*bodhicitta* awareness' (*byang chub kyi sems kyi rig pa*) can also be found. "Since, then, the term '*bodhicitta*' bridges the gap between the Mahāyoga *sādhana*s and the early Great Perfection texts of the Mind Series, we should seriously consider the term '*bodhicitta* awareness' as a source of the Great Perfection's 'awareness'" (Van Schaik 2004b, 16).

pointing out the specificities of certain rDzogs-chen understandings of *rang rig*, its soteriological relevance will be outlined.

6.2 Distinctive Features of rDzogs-chen *Rang rig* in Contrast with Other Tantric and Māhāyanic Traditions

In order to outline some specific aspects of the notion of *rang rig* within the Great Perfection perspective, it may be useful to consider some rDzogs-chen sources where this concept is formulated and contrasted with Yogācāra and tantric interpretations. To begin with, the complex relationship between the Yogācāra and the Great Perfection accounts cannot be described as following a unidirectional trajectory of development.[10]

> If the provenance of the rDzogs-chen *rang rig* and the extent and specifics of its indebtedness to Yogācāra conceptions of self-cognition (*svasaṃvedana*) remain far from transparent, there is plenty of evidence to suggest that rDzogs-chen scholars were inclined from early on to distinguish their own understanding of self-awareness from Yogācāra and Mahāyoga interpretations. (Higgins 2013, 93)

In fact, the Yogācāra idea of self-awareness is explicitly criticized, for instance, in a passage of the *Khu byug gi lta ba spyod pa'i 'khor lo*, taken from the collection of old *tantra*s and instructions with the title *Bai ro'i rgyud 'bum*,[11] which says:

> Followers of Cittamātra meditate on suchness, that is, experience luminous self-awareness. […] Pratyekabuddhas, followers of Cittamātra, and Mādhyamikas, in so far as they practice non-conceptual meditation, are wrong: they sink into the darkness of non-thought, the appearances stop, gnosis does not arise, and the [process of] causes and effects [involved in] arising collapses.[12]

rNying-ma scholars tend to deny any connection between rDzogs-chen and the Yogācāra-Cittamātra concept of *rang rig* (Higgins 2013, 93). Among others, Klong-chen-pa Dri-med-'od-zer (1308-64), who received

10 On this topic, see Germano, Waldron 2006; Van Schaik 2004, 78-84; 2018.

11 See also Higgins 2013, 93.

12 *Khu byug gi lta ba spyod pa'i 'khor lo* 1971, 349.2-350.1: "*sems tsam rang rig pa gsal ba nyams su myong ba'i* ji bzhin pa la bsgom* | […] *rang rgyal sems tsam dbu ma gsum mi rtog pa sgom pas skyon yin te* | *mi rtog pa'i mun thim pa dang* | *snang ba 'geg pa dang* | *ye shes mi skye ba dang* | *skye ba'i rgyu 'bras log pa'o* |" (* Author's correction of *mongs pa'i* to *myong ba'i*).

the *sNying thig* tradition and elaborated a refined philosophy based on it, explicitly distinguishes its view of *rang rig* from the Yogācāra one. He rejects the Yogācāra understanding of self-awareness as he advances toward a broader and ontological critique of its main tenet, namely, the reality of mind. This position is untenable if, according to the *sNying thig* tradition, *sems* is regarded as distorted, samsaric, and derivative. Consequently, any notion of *rang rig* as possessing true essence is totally refuted, along with the view of it as mere 'self-illumination' (TIB *rang gsal*), which is based on the model of a lamp that illuminates itself.[13] Thus, by negating any idealistic position that asserts the true reality of mind, and consequently also of self-awareness, Klong-chen-pa defends a rDzogs-chen view of *rang rig* as a process devoid of true existence, whose description is not meant

13 See Klong-chen-pa Dri-med-'od-zer (1999c, 1111.5 ff.; 1999d, 772.2-775.1). Note, in particular, the similarity between the dGe-lugs criticism of *rang rig* and the passage in 1999d, 772.4-5: "*blo rdzas gcig dus gcig la rig bya dang rig byed gnyis rdzas 'gal ba'i phyir | rang gis rang rig pa'ang mi srid de | ral gris rang gi rtse mo gcod pa'am reg par mi nus pa bzhin no |*" (Because, in a single moment of a single mental instance, the substances of the knower and the known are mutually contradictory, it is impossible for something to know itself. It is like a sword that cannot cut or touch its own tip).

to denote anything real.[14] Alongside the ontological issue central to Klong-chen-pa's argument, there is also a historical reason for his firm rejection of the Yogācāra conception of *rang rig*: the growing marginalization of Yogācāra doctrine during his time. In the period of the 'early propagation' (TIB *snga dar*) of Buddhism in Tibet, during the eighth and ninth centuries, Śāntarakṣita's presentation of Buddhist thought was dominant. His interpretation of the Madhyamaka view, known in early Tibetan doxographies as Yogācāra-Madhyamaka, was widely regarded as the highest form of Buddhist metaphysics. Then, in the period of the 'later dissemination' (TIB *phyi dar*), spanning the eleventh and twelfth centuries, Śāntarakṣita's system began to face increasing scrutiny following the translation of Candrakīrti's major works into Tibetan.[15] Largely as a result of the translation efforts

14 Klong-chen-pa Dri-med-'od-zer (1999a, 321.1-322.3): "*gang la gzung ba dang 'dzin pa med par rtogs pa'i rig pa de'i ngo bo la ni rang byung gi ye shes su tha snyad btags kyang | rang rig rang gsal lo zhes rnal 'byor sems tsam pa ltar mi 'dod de | phyi nang med pas nang gi sems su ma grub pa dang | rang gzhan med pas rang gi rig pa kho nar ma grub pa dang | gzung 'dzin yod ma myong bas de nyid dang bral bar ma grub pa dang | tshor rig gi yul na med pas myong ba gnyis med du ma grub pa dang | sems dang sems byung med pas rang gi sems su ma grub pa dang | gsal mi gsal du med pas rang gsal du ma grub pa'i phyir ro | rig ma rig las 'das pas rig pa tsam du'ang gdags su med pa 'di ni | mtha' bral yongs su rdzogs pa chen po zhes bya ste | mtshon tshig gi tha snyad rang byung gi ye shes dang | byang chub kyi sems dang | chos sku dang | dbyings lhun grub chen po dang | rig pa rang gsal rjen pa zhes brjod kyang | brda shes pa'i phyir btags pa tsam las rang ngo brjod med chen por rtogs par bya'o | de ltar ma yin par ming la don du zhen na sems tsam pa'i rang rig rang gsal gzung 'dzin gnyis med kyi shes pa dang khyad par mi rnyed do |*". In the Author's translation: "Concerning the essential nature of that awareness realized as free from perceived and perceiver: although it is labeled as 'self-occurring gnosis', it is not asserted – as some Yogācārins do – that it is 'self-cognizing' or 'self-luminous'. In fact, since there is no outside or inside [with reference to it], it is not established as an internal mind. Since there is no self or other, it is not established as uniquely one's own awareness. Since the existence of perceiver and perceived has never been experienced, it is not established as separate from that. Since it does not exist in any objective field of sense or cognition, it is not established as a non-dual experience. Since there is no mind or mental factors, it is not established as one's own mind. Because it is neither luminous nor non-luminous, it is not established as self-luminous. And because it transcends both knowing and not knowing, it is not designated as merely 'knowing'. This is what is referred to as the 'Great Perfection, free from all extremes'. Although, for the sake of illustration, we use terms such as 'self-occurring gnosis', '*bodhicitta*', '*dharmakāya*', 'the great expanse spontaneously present', and 'the naked self-luminosity of *rig pa*', these are mere labels meant for communicative purposes. One should realize its essential nature, however, as one of great ineffability. If, on the contrary, one clings to these names as the actual referent, then there is no difference from the Yogācāra school's [notion of a] consciousness that is self-aware, self-luminous, and free from the duality of perceived and perceiver". See also Van Schaik 2004, 80-4.

15 For the importance of Śāntarakṣita in Tibetan Buddhism, see Seyfort Ruegg 1981, 89; for a discussion on the introduction of Prāsaṅgika-Madhyamaka into Tibet, see Lang 1990. It should be noted here that, two centuries after sPa-tshab, Tsong-kha-pa further advanced the Prāsaṅgika view, articulating it with his own nuanced understanding. Since then, this perspective has come to represent the dominant philosophical position in Tibet: "Since the time of Tsong-kha-pa, it has been his Prāsaṅgika-Madhyamaka system to which all rival positions in Tibet have had to answer" (Blumenthal 2004, 28).

of sPa-tshab Nyi-ma-grags's (1055-?), the Prāsaṅgika-Madhyamaka view started to spread and gain prominence while Śāntarakṣita's position increasingly faced serious opposition. Therefore, at the time when Klong-chen-pa was active, the tendency to marginalize the Yogācāra view might have influenced his discourse against the Yogācāra position on *rang rig*.

To compare rDzogs-chen with other tantric interpretations of *rang rig*, Davidson's (2004, 237) observations are particularly helpful in tracing the historical development of the notion. He notes that while *svasaṃvedana* was initially established by Dignāga and Dharmakīrti as a kind of perception, later tantric traditions – most notably, it appears, within the rNying-ma school – reoriented the concept entirely, assigning it a purely gnoseological function.

> Whereas the epistemologists posited self-referential perception in all cases of the perceptual event, Vajrayāna authors focused on the perception of the awakened individual. The shift in emphasis was significant: instead of concentrating on the means of knowledge of the ordinary individual […], the Vajrācāryas concentrated on the gnostic perception of the yogin – thus, "pure awareness" – in terms of the ground of being, the soteriological path, and the goal to be realized. (Davidson 2004, 237)

Therefore, if the tantric assimilation of *rang rig* already signals a significant shift from the epistemological to the gnoseological level of discourse, one may further ask whether the rDzogs-chen view of self-awareness introduces a distinctively soteriological nuance, one that sets it apart from its broader tantric application. Are there specific features of *rang rig* as understood in rDzogs-chen that can be clearly identified? Given the wide range of perspectives within the multifaceted and diverse Great Perfection tradition, no definitive answer can be given to such general questions. Nonetheless, the following sections will offer a few reflections and preliminary considerations.

One pivotal work by gNyan dPal-dbyangs (eighth century AD), a renowned master learned in Mahāyoga *tantra*s, entitled *sGron ma drug*, includes a long text, *Thugs kyi sgron ma*,[16] that lists a few features of *rang rig*. It includes, on the one hand, gNyan dPal-dbyangs's injunctions concerning Mahāyoga, and, on the other, his portrayal of the realization of reality as unmediated, beyond any dichotomization or reification, and articulated through apophatic expressions woven throughout the text. By embodying these two tendencies, the work may be regarded as a valuable guide not only

16 For a detailed work on the main topics of the text, see Takahashi 2018.

to Mahāyoga but also to the emerging spirit of the Great Perfection view that was beginning to take shape in Tibet at that time.[17] gNyan dPal-dbyangs's recommendations allude to visions or experiences that are luminous, natural, spontaneous, and free from any reification of extremes. Furthermore, the apophatic use of language, along with the meaning it conveys, anticipates resonances with the later rDzogs-chen tradition. Alongside these apophatic formulations, the text also features passages that emphasize luminosity and primordial gnosis, thus laying the ground for the specific doctrinal and experiential features that will flourish fully in the Great Perfection discourse. *sGron ma drug* serves as a paradigm for the emergence of early rDzogs-chen scriptures, as gNyan dPal-dbyangs appears to be among the first masters to begin articulating rDzogs-chen doctrines (Karmay 2007, 68).[18] In gNyan dPal-dbyangs's *Thugs kyi sgron ma* (1999), one finds multiple descriptions of *rang rig*. To mention just a few, it is described as follows: devoid of any object and therefore devoid of the apprehending-subject ("*yul med de la 'dzin med*", gNyan dPal-dbyangs 1999, 1027.2); accomplishing all aspirations ("*smon pa kun rdzogs*", gNyan dPal-dbyangs 1999, 1027.4); the Lord of all results ("*'bras bu kun bdag*", gNyan dPal-dbyangs 1999, 1031.1) because there is nothing to be obtained ("*thob bya'i chos med*", gNyan dPal-dbyangs 1999, 1031.1); non-conceptual ("*rtog med*", gNyan dPal-dbyangs 1999, 1040.1); totally pure ("*rnam par dag*", gNyan dPal-dbyangs 1999, 1009.1); with no aspects ("*rnam pa med pa*", gNyan dPal-dbyangs 1999, 1011.5); luminous and transparent as a crystal ("*'od gsal shel ltar dag pa*", gNyan dPal-dbyangs 1999, 1011.5); and free from extremes ("*mtha'* [...] *bral*", gNyan dPal-dbyangs 1999, 1025.5). This description of *rang rig* thus reveals nuances that may be seen as resonating with both Mahāyoga and Great Perfection perspectives, without any explicit attempt by gNyan dPal-dbyangs to draw a clear distinction between the two. This approach is consistent with the broader intent of the text, which encourages drawing inspiration from Mahāyoga tantric instructions while deliberately avoiding adherence to any specific tenet system, favoring instead a direct approach that seeks to cut through conceptual reification.

17 On the relationship between Mahāyoga and rDzogs-chen, see Van Schaik 2008. In brief, the main point may be stated thus: "we find both Mahāyoga and Great Perfection being interpreted by Tibetans in the tenth century in very close association with each other. [...] Dunhuang manuscripts show that Mahāyoga was from an early stage approached through the view of Great Perfection understood as a mode (*tshul*) of Mahāyoga practice, and that the hardening of doxographical categories which separated Anuyoga and Atiyoga from Mahāyoga as vehicles per se was not itself generally accepted until at least the eleventh century" (Van Schaik 2008, 5).

18 For further discussions and references related to gNyan dPal-dbyangs's identity, see Dalton 2005; Kapstein, Dotson 2007, 266 fn. 104; Karmay 2007, 67 ff.; Van Schaik 2004b.

However, it is in the work of one of gNyan dPal-dbyangs's presumed students, gNubs-chen Sangs-rgyas Ye-shes (832-942), that *rang rig* is explicitly described in terms that distinguish between the Mahāyoga and rDzogs-chen views. Considerable uncertainty still surrounds the life and education of this important rNying-ma scholar from the formative period of Tibetan Vajrayāna as well as the dating of the *rNal 'byor mig gi bsam gtan*, more commonly known as the *bSam gtan mig sgron*, the text on which the following discussion will focus.[19] Certainly, gNubs-chen was actively involved in the translation of new texts into Tibetan, held a prominent position within subsequent Tibetan lineages and was recognized as the final recipient of tantric transmissions that laid the foundation for later rNying-ma developments (Germano 2002, 252). He is regarded as the earliest Tibetan author to offer a coherent exposition of various Buddhist doctrines (Karmay 2007, 142), and it is largely thanks to his efforts that, by the tenth century, rDzogs-chen had become established as a well-defined philosophical system. The text explored here, the *bSam gtan mig sgron*, is considered "the earliest surviving substantial exegetical work on the Great Perfection attributed explicitly to a Tibetan author" (Germano 1994, 219). It is also the *locus classicus* for the nine-vehicle classification system later adopted by the rNying-ma school, thereby offering valuable insight into early formulations of *rang rig* at the inception of the Great Perfection. In this text, *rang rig* is identified as a key notion of the Mahāyoga tradition, where all phenomena are held to be luminous self-awareness. In the same work, gNubs-chen also articulates a distinct interpretation of *rang rig* within the rDzogs-chen context, where it denotes that through which the vast and kaleidoscopic luminosity of diverse appearances is revealed.

In fact, gNubs-chen explains that, in the tantric view, suchness of phenomena is the all-pervasive luminosity of non-dual self-awareness ("*rang rig gnyis med kun tu 'od gsal ba*", gNubs-chen Sangs-rgyas Ye-shes 1974, 491.4). In other words, the insight gained through the method of Mahāyoga is a non-dual non-conceptuality ("*gnyis su med pa'i mi rtog pa*", gNubs-chen Sangs-rgyas Ye-shes 1974, 197.1-2), where non-dual suchness entails that the *dhātu* and its gnosis ("*dbyings kyi ye shes*", gNubs-chen Sangs-rgyas Ye-shes 1974, 197.2) are nothing other than mere self-awareness. This formulation characterizes the relationship between *dbyings* and its *ye shes* as reflexive: gnosis does not take *dhātu* as an object of observation. This implies that *dhātu* is not treated as an object ("*dbyings yul du byed pa'i rig*", gNubs-chen Sangs-rgyas Ye-shes 1974, 197.2) of any thematically directed gnostic cognition.

19 For a detailed examination of his life and the dating of his works, along with additional references, see Esler 2014; see also Germano 2002, 252-5; Baroetto 2010, 1: 7-15; Higgins 2013, 37; Meinhert 2003, 175-6 fn. 2.

On the other hand, as gNubs-chen explains, the rDzogs-chen view is that suchness is understood as ultimate and spontaneously perfected ("*lhun rdzogs de bzhin nyid mthar thug*", gNubs-chen Sangs-rgyas Ye-shes 1974, 491.4). In the spontaneously present[20] great non-conceptuality ("*lhun gyis grub pa'i mi rtog pa chen po*", gNubs-chen Sangs-rgyas Ye-shes 1974, 60.2-3), the whole phenomenal world is inherently, perfectly, primordially and naturally luminous in the completely pure sphere of primordial gnosis. In fact, within this dimension of spontaneity, everything is luminous or clear ("*thams cad lhun gyis grub pa'i ngang du gsal ba*", gNubs-chen Sangs-rgyas Ye-shes 1974, 293.1-2). In this primordially luminous self-awareness, which is non-established, not-moving, not contaminated, and not dwelling, what is there to meditate on or reflect upon? Nothing. All there is, is this actual absence ("*med pa'i don de nyid kho na yod*", gNubs-chen Sangs-rgyas Ye-shes 1974, 60.4-5). What is highlighted here is that, within the primordial great non-conceptuality, the manifestations are not blocked ("*snang ba bkag pa yang med*", gNubs-chen Sangs-rgyas Ye-shes 1974, 60.5). Yet, it should be borne in mind that even the notion of "non-conceptuality" is employed merely as a figurative expression ("*rtogs pa med de nyid kyang bla dwags so*", gNubs-chen Sangs-rgyas Ye-shes 1974, 60.5-6). Therefore, in view of the rDzogs-chen perspective as presented in this text,

> we may label it as the insight into "dynamic emptiness", which is in its empty aspect "nonexistence" […] beyond duality and at the same time in its luminous aspect "intrinsic awareness" (*rang rig pa*) allowing the kaleidoscope of manifestations arise. Therefore, in rDzogs-chen meditation the real issue is not simply a non-referential (*mi dmigs pa*) situation [as in Mahāyoga], but innate and luminous awareness itself. (Meinhert 2003, 189)

Thus, by contrast with the Mahāyoga tantric standpoint, gNubs-chen (gNubs-chen Sangs-rgyas Ye-shes 1974, 291.2-3) articulates what appears to be the earliest rDzogs-chen interpretation of self-awareness, centering on its innate luminosity as the horizon within which the manifold display of appearances unfolds. In opposition to any form of conceptual discrimination, he explicitly posits *rang rig* as the faculty

20 Within the tradition, the term *lhun gyis grub* 'spontaneous presence' can be found associated with the notion of the enlightened state as pre-existent and independent of any intentional effort to attain it (Van Schaik 2008, 12). It also connotes the 'absence of effort' or striving (TIB *brtsal med*). Van Schaik observes that *lhun gyis grub* appears in several *sūtra*s and tantric sources, especially within the Māyājāla *tantra* group; however, in later Tibetan literature, its meaning was overshadowed by its popular use in Great Perfection texts, where it typically refers to non-striving (12). Importantly, Van Schaik explicitly challenges Karmay's (2007, 119) claim that *lhun gyis grub* "may be considered as rDzogs-chen's own terminology".

that enables the practitioner to internalize the actuality or aim (TIB *don*) of the Great Perfection and as that which allows the effulgence of appearances to unfold.[21]

6.3 How *Rang rig* Makes the (Soteriological) Difference

The crucial soteriological function of reflexivity in rDzogs-chen is particularly evident in the philosophical perspective elaborated by Klong-chen-pa, especially as it draws upon the Seminal Heart (*sNying thig*) tradition. Within this framework, self-awareness is presented as the decisive factor that determines whether one follows a path leading to *nirvāṇa* or remains entangled in the cycle of *saṃsāra*. In other words, soteriological transformation hinges on the presence or absence of reflexivity. To grasp fully the significance of this point for the path to liberation, one must consider the broader soteriological architecture of the tradition. In this regard, Germano and Waldron offer the following characterization of *buddha*-nature:

> While presented as a cosmogonic ground which ontologically precedes cyclic existence (*saṃsāra*) and transcendence (*nirvāṇa*), […] is also explicitly located within the human interior as an ongoing, deeply unconscious dimension. This dimension is engaged in a constant efflorescence that gives rise to both *saṃsāra* and *nirvāṇa*, leading to the stock formulation of a single ontological ground leading to two paths, that is, interpretative trajectories resulting in a bifurcation of life-worlds. (Germano, Waldron, 2006, 58)

From a single 'ontological ground' (TIB *gzhi*),[22] two paths extend: one to liberation and one to *saṃsāra*. The distinction between the two conditions lies in the fact that the former is as such due to "the cognitive capacity recognizing the appearances as self" (58), that is, due to the infusion of ontological ground with reflexivity. By contrast, the latter is as such "by means of a lack of such recognition" (58). Here, 'recognition' refers precisely to the reflexive dimension involved in the manifestation of reality. To summarize the modality of liberation: "Buddha-nature is the cosmogonic ground, and the Reality Body [*dharmakāya*] is its transformation with reflexive self-awareness" (59).

21 To be sure, within the broader and still largely unexamined transformation of terminology from Mahāyoga to rDzogs-chen contexts, as Higgins (2013, 95) comments, "All this goes to show how little is yet known about the assimilation and transformation of Yogācāra ideas within Tibetan Mahāyoga and rDzogs-chen traditions".

22 For the four-fold formulation of *gzhi* offered by Klong-chen-pa, see Germano, Waldron 2006, 53 ff.; Karmay 2007, 51 ff.

This also resonates with gNubs-chen's account of the soteriological aim as something "internalized through the direct perception of self-awareness" (1974, 291.2-3). As Karmay explains, within the rDzogs-chen framework, it is indeed possible for *sems*, the ordinary mind, "to recognise its own reality again (*sems kyi chos nyid … rang gi rig pa*) from which it strayed and which it has forgotten for so long" (Karmay 2007, 175).

Here, an aspect of memory (TIB *dran pa*) or recollection is implied in what is primarily an act of recognition (TIB *rang ngo shes*) in which reflexivity plays a crucial role in enabling the recognition of appearances as self. The self-presencing or self-appearance (TIB *rang snang*) of *rig pa* may thus be characterized as follows:

> the Ground as experiencing its own self-lighting-up in full self-consciousness and self-awareness (*rang rig*) of itself, which is why an Awakened One's experience is always *rang snang* ['appearance as self'], while other living beings' experience of his/her presence is *gzhan snang* ['appearance as other'], i.e. experienced as intertwined with the illusory specter of the other. (Germano 1992, 826, s.v. "Appearances")

In the rDzogs-chen tradition, reflexivity and memory are intimately connected.[23] Depending on the context, memory may signify various forms of disclosure, such as the reflexive unveiling of the meditator's awareness upon a genuine realization of the 'introduction' (*ngo sprod*) or what Kapstein (1992, 187) refers to as "the reflexive recovery of the pristine gnosis of the ground-of-all": the noetic version of *dharmakāya*, in which awareness presents itself as *dharmakāya*. It is important to note that the only resemblance to conventional memory, understood as an intentional act directed toward the past, lies in the notion of recovery. What emerges, more generally, is that memory is rather conceived as "the mnemic engagement of the *dharmakāya* and thus standing outside of time" (Kapstein 1992, 195). Casey encapsulates this idea as follows:

> I ultimately remember (myself as) the Buddha. But if this is so, then I also ultimately remember everything – everything that matters, or, in the language of the Great Perfection, the ground

23 As for the vast topic of memory in the Great Perfection, it is worth mentioning Kapstein's (1992) thoughtful and inspiring study of the various understandings of mnemic engagement in the Great Perfection practice.

> of self-presenting awareness. Or else I remember the emptiness of everything. (Casey 1992, 290)[24]

Therefore, there is a strong contrast between the gnoseological dimension of "global, holistic, and reflexive modes of awareness" and the epistemological one, characterized by "dualistic, non-reflexive modes of awareness" (Germano, Waldron 2006, 53). The reflexivity of this process of recognition enacts the very shift from a dualistic mode of knowing to a non-dualistic mode. In this light, as Van Schaik (2004a, 56) points out, delusion arises from awareness's "nonrecognition of its own nature (rang ngo ma shes pa)", which then gives rise to dualistic conceptual elaboration. The reflexivity by which awareness recognizes itself as itself constitutes the central axis of the literature's dyadic framework, marking the soteriological distinction between *saṃsāra* and *nirvāṇa*. This is evident in the ontological pair of 'universal ground' (TIB *kun gzhi*)[25] *versus dharmakāya*, as well as the gnoseological distinction of *sems versus ye shes* (Karmay 2007, 57).

Thus, the rNying-ma literature's stock perspective holds primordial self-occurring gnosis (*rang byung ye shes*) or awareness (*rig pa*) to be empty, luminous, and cognizant, at least intransitively and pre-reflectively aware of itself. Here reflexivity enables the transition from the epistemological to the gnoseological mode of cognizing. Summarizing this general framework, it could be said that

> primordial knowing [...] is presentational (the pre-reflective occuring of experiencing itself) while dualistic mind is representational (the reflective grasping or singling out and thematic elaboration of particular instances thereof). So self-occuring primordial knowing (*rang byung gi ye shes*) is nothing other than the as yet undifferentiated taking place of appearing itself while mind consists in a complex variety of transitive (object-oriented) and reflexive (subject-oriented) differentiations within the stream of experience that thematize it in terms of self and other, 'I' and 'mine'. (Higgins [2011] 2012a, 32 fn. 3)

With regard to the importance of overcoming or clearing dualism, Klong-chen-pa's thought offers explicit guidance. As the primary systematizer of the extensive Seminal Heart (*sNying thig*) tradition, Klong-chen-pa articulates the structural foundations of the

24 Kapstein has also addressed the pivotal role of reflexivity in rDzogs-chen meditation in other works (1993; 2000), where he discusses the 'introduction' of disciples to the nature of their mind as an act of *rang rig* (according to Mi-pham's view). Cf. Griffiths 1992, where Buddhist practice is depicted as concerned with 'attention' rather than 'memory'.

25 For the conception of *kun gzhi* in rDzogs-chen and Klong-chen-pa's specific view of it, see Karmay 2007, 178 ff.; Waldron, Germano 2006, 52 ff.

rDzogs-chen view as it would come to be defined from the fourteenth century onward. In his perspective, the soteriological shift may be described as follows:

> becom[ing] aware of consciousness simpliciter to the extent that the reifying and distorting self-identifications with its contents subside. This radical *clearing of dualistic tendencies* and attendant familiarization with the implicit awareness from which they have arisen is known as the path. (Higgins [2011] 2012a, 43; italics added)

Within the Great Perfection tradition, particularly through the contributions of Klong-chen-pa and others, the *sems-ye shes* distinction undergoes various exoteric and esoteric formulations. On the exoteric side, there is a need to identify Mahāyāna and Vajrayāna sources that attest to and support this distinction. On the esoteric side, this entails identifying Mahāyāna and Vajrayāna sources that affirm and support such a distinction. On the esoteric side, moreover, a diverse *corpus* of teachings provides specific contemplative and soteriological instructions, most notably concerning practices such as *khregs chod* and *thod rgal*, the elicitation of the four gnostic lamps (*sgron ma bzhi*) and the yogic engagement with *rtsa*, *rlung*, and *thig le* (the 'channels', 'winds', and 'drops'). Despite the complexity of its historical development, the heart of the *sems-ye shes* distinction contains a transformative gnoseological and soteriological process: the clearing of dualistic tendencies. In this light, awakening entails both "de-identifying with superimpositions" and "disclosing the implicit mode of being and awareness that they conceal" (Higgins [2011] 2012a, 51). As Klong-chen-pa (1999a, 495.3-5) emphasizes, what must be clearly understood is the fundamentally distorted nature of the world and cognition in which sentient beings remain entangled:

> Moreover, from the mind [oriented toward the] apprehended [object], the absence of any apprehended object manifests as the five [sensory] objects (forms, sounds, smells, tastes, and tactile objects); from the apprehending[-aspect of the] mind, actions and their effects, along with cognitive-emotional defilements, manifest without limit. Thus, *saṃsāra* consists in grasping at an object where there is no object, and grasping at a mind where there is no mind. It appears to sentient beings like a dream, and this originated from the emergence of the mind's apprehending and apprehended aspects.[26]

26 Klong-chen-pa Dri-med-'od-zer 1999a, 495.3-5: "*de'ang gzung ba'i sems las gzung yul med pa gsal snang gzugs sgra dri ro reg lngar snang la | 'dzin pa'i sems las las dang rnam smin nyon mongs pa dpag tu med par snang ste | yul med yul du 'dzin pa dang | sems med sems su 'dzin pa'i 'khor ba sems can la rmi lam ltar snang ba sems gzung 'dzin gyi rnam par shar ba las byung ba'o |*".

In light of the framework outlined thus far, it becomes evident that while the *sems-ye shes* or *saṃsāra-nirvāṇa* distinction shapes the soteriological and philosophical core of the rNying-ma and rDzogs-chen views, equal emphasis is placed on the immanent presence of one mode or display within the other. In other words, overcoming dualistic cognition does not require reaching somewhere else but, rather, returning to the mind's own implicit ye shes, thereby directly encountering one's own *buddha*-nature, which underlies all derivative forms of distortion. Enlightenment is thus conceived as a return to the soteriological aspect of the ground (TIB *grol gzhi*); one arrives back to where one originally was, already enlightened and free from the beginning (TIB *ye grol*). This dynamic tension between the fundamental *saṃsāra-nirvāṇa* distinction, on the one hand, and their immanence, on the other – where *ye shes*, the nirvanic awareness, is immanent in and essential to all sentient beings – is already deeply rooted in the *sNying thig* tradition. It is precisely in the transition from samsaric to nirvanic awareness that the necessity of reflexivity emerges.

To bridge the gap, so to speak, within the two poles of this tension, Van Schaik (2004a, 63) observes that Rong-zom-pa explicitly uses the theory of *buddha*-nature. Indeed, he appears to be the first rDzogs-chen thinker to do so. Later, Klong-chen-pa follows Rong-zom-pa's understanding in this respect. *Buddha*-nature, in this view, is what remains when dualistic superimpositions have subsided, and corresponds to a gnoseological mode of cognizing. It is characterized by the indivisibility of gnosis and its domain (TIB *dbyings dang ye shes 'du bral med pa*), as well as by the inseparability of luminosity and emptiness (TIB *snang stong dbyer med*). However, this pivotal notion of *buddha*-nature, as well as the indivisibility of *dbyings* and *ye shes*, must be examined in light of the specific philosophical commitments of each thinker within the tradition. Given the intricacy of the issue, broad generalizations should be avoided.

An illustrative example of how the non-duality of *dbyings* and *ye shes* may be conceived within the thought of a representative figure of the tradition is provided by Rong-zom Chos-kyi-bzang-po. His interpretation is particularly worthy of consideration as the complexity of his philosophical position finds full expression in his understanding of the indivisibility of *dbyings* and *ye shes*. This is a subtle and critical point since *buddha*-nature is said to remain once all dualistic structures have entirely dissolved. Rong-zom-pa, who is identified, along with Klong-chen-pa and Mi-pham, as one of the rNying-ma's "archetypical intellectual figures" (Wangchuk [2004] 2005, 173), devoted his work to the articulation and defense of the rDzogs-chen view (Karmay 2007, 124-5). Before turning to his specific interpretation of the indivisibility of *dbyings* and *ye shes*, it is important to note that Rong-zom-pa characterizes *rang rig* as

devoid of cognitive features (TIB *shes rig gi chos*) and as primordially luminous; it is also referred to as *rang byung ye shes* (Rong-zom Chos-kyi bzang-po 1999a, 174.14-16). Regarding the equivalence between *rang rig* and *rang byung ye shes*, he states (Rong-zom Chos-kyi bzang-po 1999d, 65.20-23):

> Self-occurring gnosis, moreover, is merely the mind that is awareness of itself; other-cognitions are delusive. […] Self-awareness itself is empty of its essential nature, and therefore it is self-occurring gnosis.[27]

Moreover, in his view (Rong-zom Chos-kyi bzang-po 1999c, 117.13-15), *rang rig* is directly connected to *ye shes*:

> In any consciousness, in the very moment in which apprehended- and apprehending-aspect arise, it is established that it is merely self-awareness itself, devoid of both [those aspects]. Self-awareness itself is called 'gnosis', for it is not mistaken with respect to reality.[28]

The full complexity of Rong-zom-pa's ontological and philosophical commitments becomes especially evident in his elaboration of the indivisibility of *ye shes* and *dbyings*. As Almogi notes:

> for Rong-zom-pa, self-occurring gnosis is not a cognitive phenomenon in any sense of the term, […] whereas for Mi-pham it is the ultimate valid cognition. In view of Rong-zom-pa's rejection of any cognitive feature within self-occurring gnosis or the *dharmadhātu*, it will be worthwhile to examine how he understands the notion of the 'non-duality of the sphere and gnosis' (*dbyings dang ye shes gnyis su med pa*), which he clearly seems to profess. (Almogi 2009, 232)[29]

On the one hand, Rong-zom-pa maintains that the purified *dharmadhātu* or *tathatā* constitutes the sole content of soteriological realization. He thus denies the presence of gnosis in the *buddha* state (Rong-zom Chos-kyi bzang-po 1999d). On the other hand, he simultaneously affirms the non-duality of *dharmadhātu* and *ye shes*, asserting that the gnosis

27 Rong-zom Chos-kyi bzang-po 1999d, 65.20-23: "*rang byung gi ye shes kyang sems rang rig pa tsam yin pa dang | gzhan rig pa rnams kyang 'khrul ba yin pa'i phyir |* […] *rang rig pa nyid kyang ngo bo nyid kyis stong pa'i phyir | rang byung gi ye shes so |*".

28 Rong-zom Chos-kyi bzang-po 1999c, 117.13-15: "*shes pa gang la gzung ba dang 'dzin pa'i rnam par snang ba de'i tshe nyid na gnyis pos stong pa'i rang rig pa tsam nyid yin par grub pa'o | rang rig pa de nyid ye shes zhes bya ste | don la phyin ci log pa med pa'i phyir ro |*".

29 See, for instance, Rong-zom Chos-kyi bzang-po 1999b, 143.20 and 150.7-8.

of a *buddha* is *rang rig*: *gnyis su med pa'i ye shes*, that is, non-dualistic gnosis – the cognitive subject of *tathatā*, its gnosis (TIB *de bzhin nyid kyi ye shes*). Underlying this intricate articulation of the indivisibility of *dbyings* and *ye shes* is Rong-zom-pa's theory of manifestation and dependent origination. As he explains (1999a, 130.21-2), appearances and perceptions lack any actual basis (TIB *gzhi*), root (TIB *rtsa ba*) or *substratum* (TIB *rten*). Further, he (1999a, 132.16-18) distinguishes between samsaric phenomena as *sems rang snang* and nirvanic phenomena as *ye shes rang snang*. Finally, upon attaining buddhahood, he (1999a, 43.3-4) asserts that all residual imprints and negative propensities are exhausted, and thus all appearances come to an end. How is this cessation explained? Rong-zom-pa appeals to the principle of dependent origination: if causes and conditions are present, their results arise; if they cease, so do their results. Therefore, when a *buddha* is free from all latencies and defilements, the resultant appearances also cease. This formulation of the indivisibility of *dbyings* and *ye shes* presents a philosophical challenge that is not easily resolved. In the end, as Wangchuk (2019) suggests, it might be argued that a gnostic, non-dual cognition ultimately underlies Rong-zom-pa's position, as indicated by his usage of the phrase "*dbyings dang ye shes gnyis su myed pa'i rig pa*" ('*rig pa* in which *dbyings* and *ye shes* are not divisible', Rong-zom Chos-kyi bzang-po 1999d, 502.15).[30]

To conclude, having explored the principal dimensions of the multi-faceted understanding of self-awareness within the Indo-Tibetan Buddhist tradition, this rich doctrinal heritage may now be brought into conversation with contemporary reflections on consciousness and reflexivity, the focus of § 7.2 of this volume. In light of the growing interest in the phenomenological and first-person dimensions of experience, particularly as a response to the prevailing materialist and reductionist paradigms in the philosophy of mind, Buddhist perspectives offer a meaningful and much-needed counterbalance. Furthermore, the soteriological orientation of the Buddhist tradition calls into question the modern neglect of those aspects of experience that are regarded, within the framework of liberation, as ethically significant, wholesome or instrumental to inner awakening. These dimensions are often underrepresented or ignored in contemporary discourse. Given that the entire Indo-Tibetan philosophical project is rooted in the pursuit of liberation and that this aspiration forms its foundational rationale, its insights prompt deeper reflection on the motivations underpinning modern investigations into the nature of consciousness – investigations which have, for the most part, been severed from any soteriological concern.

30 For further studies on Rong-zom-pa's life and contributions, see Almogi 1997; 2009; Rongzom Chökyi Zangpo 2017.

Part Three: Contemporary Developments

7 Tibetan Buddhist Accounts in Dialogue with Contemporary Philosophy of Mind

Summary 7.1 The Contemporary Context: The Hard Problem of Consciousness. – 7.2 Reflectivity and Reflexivity Today: Challenges and Directions. – 7.2.1 The Inner Structure of Self-Awareness: Reflectivity, Intentionality, Temporality and Spatiality. – 7.2.2 Contemporary Philosophical and Scientific Challenges: Toward a Common Ground.

7.1 The Contemporary Context: The Hard Problem of Consciousness

The final section of this study will examine how the issue of self-awareness is currently addressed in contemporary debates within the philosophy of mind. This part of the volume aims to initiate a dialogue between the Indo-Tibetan Buddhist tradition and present-day philosophical discourse by engaging with some of the most recent perspectives while also tracing the foundational concepts upon which they are built. The objective is to explore whether and in what ways elements of the traditional accounts discussed in the preceding chapters might offer a fresh and potentially transformative cross-cultural contribution to ongoing discussions on consciousness and its reflexivity.

The issue of self-awareness is widely debated in contemporary philosophy of mind and locates itself within the complex inquiry into the nature of subjective experience. To start with an obvious but significant point: contemporary philosophical studies on the nature of awareness and its characteristics, including reflexivity, are deeply rooted in a rich tradition that traces back ultimately to ancient Greece. Subjectivity, consciousness, and experience have been fundamental

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philosophical topics for centuries. Within the materialist and reductionist frameworks that have become increasingly prominent over recent decades, the nature of consciousness has regained scholarly attention largely due to Chalmers's (1995; 1996) articulation of the "hard problem of consciousness", which has reintroduced this topic into the foreground of contemporary philosophy of mind. The problem engages ontological and epistemological dimensions, as well as the question of the validity of the first-person perspective. Despite its recent and innovative articulation, the issue itself is not new but, rather, a reformulation of the longstanding mind-body problem.[1] Chalmers presents the conundrum as follows:

What makes the hard problem hard and almost unique is that it goes beyond problems about the performance of functions. To see this, note that even when we have explained the performance of all the cognitive and behavioral functions in the vicinity of experience – perceptual discrimination, categorization, internal access, verbal report – there may still remain a further unanswered question: "*Why is the performance of these functions accompanied by experience?*" (Chalmers 1995, 202; italics in the original)

When consciousness is the phenomenon under investigation, the commonly used 'reductive explanation' (Chalmers 1995; 1996) is bound to fail. This type of explanation seeks to establish an identity between the *explanandum* and a lower-level physical phenomenon or one that is easily reducible to the physical. The reasoning proceeds from two key premises: the first defines the phenomenon in question through its functional role while the second identifies an empirically observed entity that fulfills this role. Based on the principle of the transitivity of identity, it is then inferred that the target phenomenon and its identified realizer are, in fact, one and the same. Nevertheless, when it comes to consciousness, since it cannot be functionally characterized, the reductive explanation does not work. The following main alternatives remain: either consciousness is denied altogether or it must be included in the ontological scenery as an irreducible feature of reality itself. Either way, the problem lies beyond the reach of standard reductive approaches. The range of reactions and responses to the hard problem extends from eliminativism, which denies this very issue, and reductionism in its multiple versions, to panpsychism and mind-body dualism.

Before continuing this inquiry, it is necessary to mention the distinction Chalmers makes between the 'hard' and 'easy' problems of consciousness. This division helps to give a clear definition of the nature and focus of the hard problem. The 'easy problems'

1 Levine (1983, 361) considers, "this kind of intuition about our qualitative experience seems surprisingly resistant to philosophical attempts to eliminate it. As long as it remains, the mind/body problem will remain".

include, for instance, the ability to categorize stimuli and integrate information, as well as the focus of attention, the control of behavior, and the deliberation system (Chalmers 2010, 4).[2] Although no fully satisfactory explanations of these phenomena have been provided, there are already well-established approaches for addressing them. For this reason, Chalmers (2010) refers to them as the "easy problems". To obtain a proper explanation of them through cognitive science and neuroscience might take centuries of work; nevertheless, there is reason to believe that the standard methods will succeed. These problems are easy precisely because they concern cognitive abilities and functions, which only require the specification of the mechanisms that can perform these functions for their explanation.

On the other hand, the so-called 'hard problems' are phenomena that seem to resist these usual methods.

> The really hard problem of consciousness is the problem of *experience*. When we think and perceive, there is a whir of information processing, but there is also a subjective aspect. As Nagel (1974) has put it, there is *something it is like* to be a conscious organism. This subjective aspect is experience. (Chalmers 2010, 5; italics in the original)

Emotions, sensations, the stream of conscious thought and related phenomena are all experiential states characterized by a distinctive felt quality. "Why should physical processing give rise to a rich inner life at all? It seems objectively unreasonable that it should, and yet it does" (5).

Since an organism is said to have consciousness if there is something it is like to be that organism – this being 'subject'-consciousness – the same applies to mental states. A mental state is conscious if there is something it is like to be in that state – this being 'state'-consciousness. Terms such as 'phenomenal consciousness' and 'qualia' are also used, but Chalmers prefers 'conscious experience' or simply 'experience' (Chalmers 2010, 5). Here, the phenomenal, subjective, first-person dimension takes center stage. Examining the issue of the hard problem as a whole, Majeed (2016) detects two distinct targets that would be encompassed by it: on the one hand, the explanation of the relationship between the physical and the phenomenal that arises from it and, on the other hand, the explanation of the phenomenal

2 Please note that, as Chalmers (2010, 4 fn. 1) clarifies, "The list should be understood as calling attention to the functional rather than the experiential aspects of these phenomena". The list is based on Chalmers's first work (1995) on this topic.

itself in terms of its own nature. The debates on the hard problem address one or both of these aspects.[3]

Thanks to Chalmers's formulation of the hard problem of consciousness, the split between explaining the functions and abilities of consciousness, on the one hand, and explaining experience itself, on the other, becomes subject to debate. Already prior to Chalmers, in 1983, Levine formulated the 'explanatory gap', targeting a closely related issue. In fact, as Chalmers comments,

> We know that conscious experience *does* arise when these functions are performed, but the very fact that it arises is the central mystery. There is an *explanatory gap* (a term due to Levine 1983) between the functions and experience, and we need an explanatory bridge to cross it. (Chalmers 2010, 8; italics in the original)

Why should any physical process make experience emerge?[4] This issue boasts a long and ubiquitous heritage. In 1714, for instance, continuing the reasoning he started in *Commentatio de anima brutorum* (Leibniz 1840, 463), Leibniz dedicates § 17 of his *Monadology* to the issue of the (*ante litteram*) hard problem:

> 17. Moreover, it must be confessed that perception and that which depends upon it are inexplicable on mechanical grounds, that is to say, by means of figures and motions. And supposing there were a machine, so constructed as to think, feel, and have perception, it might be conceived as increased in size, while keeping the same proportions, so that one might go into it as into a mill. That being so, we should, on examining its interior, find only parts which work one upon another, and never anything by which to explain a perception. Thus it is in a simple substance, and not in a compound or in a machine, that perception must be sought for. Further, nothing but this (namely, perceptions and their changes) can be found in a simple substance. It is also in this alone that all the internal activities of simple substances can consist. (Leibniz 1898, 227-9)

3 The literature on the hard problem is extremely rich; for a multifaceted approach to the issue, see, in particular, Shear 1997.

4 Levine explains, "Indeed, we do feel that the causal role of pain is crucial to our concept of it, and that discovering the physical mechanism by which this causal role is effected explains an important facet of what there is to be explained about pain. However, there is more to our concept of pain than its causal role, there is its qualitative character, how it feels; and what is left unexplained by the discovery of C-fiber firing is *why pain should feel the way it does*! [...] [I]t is precisely phenomenal properties – how it is for us to be in certain mental (including perceptual) states – which seem to resist physical (including functional) explanations" (Levine 1983, 357-8; italics in the original).

Interestingly, this idea has recently been reimagined, refined and modernized by Bieri (1995, 49-54) in a humorous "guided tour of the brain". In this story, explorers enter an enlarged human brain, much as one might tour a factory, hoping to discover what makes a human being a subject with experiences and an inner world. The guide is a brain scientist at the cutting edge of present-day knowledge, ready to answer all their questions. However, as the explorers persistently press philosophical inquiries, the guide eventually becomes overwhelmed and leaves them empty-handed. When it comes to exploring consciousness as the capacity for sensing, one could inquire either about the specific process that results in a particular sensing event or, in general, about the very reason for experience itself. In either case, Bieri makes it clear that those

> two questions amount to one and the same problem[.] If we knew why a particular neural process results in a particular experiential quality – so that the connection would no longer appear accidental but necessary – we would thereby know why it has to be an *experience*. (Bieri 1995, 50; italics in the original)

If today the hard problem arises within a general philosophical framework that tends towards physicalism, this does not imply that the link between the hard problem and physicalism is a necessary one. In fact, something comparable to the hard problem has also been debated in the idealist Indo-Tibetan tradition. In this regard, Arnold's (2021) attempt to read the hard problem in light of Buddhist idealism reveals that the issue of physicalism, predominant nowadays in the debate around the nature of experience, may not be central to the hard problem itself. The hard problem is not, after all, a problem just for physicalists: in its idealist version, the same point is addressed but is nevertheless independent from whether or how consciousness can emerge from the physical. For instance, Dharmakīrti's celebrated proof of rebirth is an idealist argument where he is not concerned with how to reconcile mental and physical but rather with showing that mental continuity is basic or, in other words, that the mental – and not the physical – is what ultimately exists. Moreover, following Arnold (2021), Dignāga's idealist project also gets stuck with something like the hard problem or, perhaps, an even more basic version of it: the problem of reconciling first- and third-person perspectives on mental content. Maybe, what turns out to be hard about getting subjectivity out of objectivity is not whether or how the former can emerge from the latter but, rather, trying to reconcile two different perspectives, each of them involving different temporalities. In terms of experience, what is relevant for a 'third'-person perspective identifies psychological factors as causing moments of experience, moments that must precede it. On

the other hand, especially in terms of the Cittamātra *bīja* 'seeds' theory, what is relevant for a 'first'-person perspective is the content of an experience. Being part of the experience itself, however, the mental content cannot at the same time be one of its causes, that is, a cause of the very event that contains it. Thus, Arnold argues that the main problem is how to reconcile first- and third-person perspectives on what is allegedly the same cognitive event. This implies a remarkable shift towards a different angle for approaching the hard problem, a perspective reminiscent of the difference, in actual terms, between the neural correlations of a mental state and its own phenomenological experience.

In short, this issue has turned out to be deeply affected by the multidisciplinary approach to its study, so much so that, as Metzinger remarks,

> in the present state of interdisciplinary research on consciousness the *explananda* still remain undefined: it is not at all clear *what* it is that has to be explained. Conscious experience is not a single problem, but a whole cluster of problems. (Metzinger 1995b, 7; italics in the original)

Among the wide range of issues and nuanced questions, it might be useful to observe at least a few correlations among topics: as Güzeldere usefully explains,

> the line that separates Chalmers's 'easy' and 'hard' problems is the counterpart of the line that separates 'access' and 'phenomenal' consciousness in Block, which also aligns well with the distinction between the 'causal' [that is, what consciousness does from the third-person perspective] versus 'phenomenal' [that is, how consciousness feels from the first-person perspective] characterizations of consciousness. (Güzeldere 1995, 124)[5]

Certainly, such a multifaceted approach to consciousness, with no place for transcendental concerns, establishes a framework markedly different from that of Buddhist debates, where there is broad consensus regarding the foundational role of consciousness, its basic definition, the principle of mental causation – crucial for ensuring the viability of the Buddhist path – and the soteriological process of inner transformation.

5 On the distinction between phenomenal- and access-consciousness, see Block 1997; for further discussions on this division, see Block, Flanagan, Güzeldere 1997, 355-442.

7.2 Reflectivity and Reflexivity Today: Challenges and Directions

Having laid out the context for the contemporary conversation on the nature of mind, attention now turns to how this issue is approached today, particularly in combination with self-awareness. The most relevant challenges in the current discourse will be discussed in order to envisage the most compelling directions for further investigation. To this end, this inquiry will draw upon the depth of the Indo-Tibetan Buddhist legacy alongside insights from the European phenomenological strand.

In order to frame the topic in contemporary terms, it will be useful to consider that, among the main features of the mental, Chalmers (1996, 339) identifies phenomenal "[c]onsciousness and intentionality [as] perhaps the two central phenomena in the philosophy of mind". In his view,

> neither consciousness nor intentionality is more fundamental than the other. Rather, consciousness and intentionality are intertwined, all the way down to the ground. (371)

Chalmers also observes that, in recent decades, philosophical approaches to consciousness and intentionality have increasingly diverged, relegating the connection between the two to the background. However, two emerging tendencies have sought to reestablish this link. The first grounds consciousness in intentionality, as exemplified by higher-order theories, according to which a mental state becomes conscious when it is the intentional object of a higher-order mental state that represents it. The second approach grounds intentionality in consciousness, a view often found in the phenomenological tradition, where consciousness is considered to be inherently pre-reflectively self-aware, and its intentionality is seen as rooted in this fundamental feature. In other words, these two positions outline the main avenues for explaining self-awareness from a mentalistic perspective: either by appealing to another mental state or by appealing to the structure of the state itself (Gennaro 1996). This framework will serve as the focal point of the final section of this inquiry.

It must be noted, first, that what lies behind this recent terminology is the rich European legacy on the topic of self-awareness, a tradition whose history reaches back to Aristotle (*On the Soul*, 3.2.415a16).[6] What is interesting about Aristotle's pioneering position is that he gets

6 For further perspectives outside the Asian philosophical tradition concerning self-awareness and for an analysis of Aristotle's account of the awareness of one's own mental states as intrinsic to their very nature, see Caston 2002.

close to the relational suggestion of modern higher-order theories and yet insists that the self-awareness feature is intrinsic to the conscious state, thus going against those theories. For him, all perceptions occur together with a secondary awareness of themselves.[7] Aquinas takes up the Aristotelian track and the view that consciousness of external objects has priority over the consciousness it has of itself.[8] This view was widely held by early modern thinkers who tended towards empiricism. Avicenna's discussion of primitive self-awareness, albeit less known, is in line with Augustine's claiming (*The Trinity* 10.9.12) that the mind knows itself simply by being present to itself, through a pre-reflective knowledge of itself (Augustine, *The Trinity* 10.4.6). This is the deep root of a legacy and background that brought about many further developments. Among the philosophers who wrote about self-awareness in various forms are Descartes, Kant, Locke, Leibniz and the phenomenological philosophers. Interestingly, it was in the early modern period, around the 1720s, that consciousness started to be considered as an object of inquiry in its own right, mainly interpreted as a way of relating to one's own mental states. Thus, the ongoing debate largely constitutes a continuation and updating of a longstanding historical discourse, now enriched by a crucial new dimension, namely, the exchange and fruitful interaction with philosophical traditions from diverse cultural and intellectual contexts, which are more accessible to scholars today than ever before.

Thus, as MacKenzie (2007) outlines in his thoughtful paper, the interpretations of self-awareness formulated in the European and Indian traditions generally fall into two broad typologies: one gathering the reflective theories or 'other-illumination' (SKT *paraprakāśa*) perspectives, and the other collecting the reflexive or 'self-illumination' (SKT *svaprakāśa*) theories. While their Indian and European philosophical formulations are remarkably different in arguments and formulations, there are also striking similarities, which MacKenzie focuses on in order to highlight the strengths and weaknesses of both models. For him, reflexivism is not yet "an acceptable theory of self-awareness in either its Buddhist or its Sartrean forms" (MacKenzie 2007, 60). Thus, MacKenzie finds none of the approaches he examines completely adequate to account for all the fundamental issues relating to a contemporary

7 Caston claims, "Aristotle holds that a single token perception can be about an external object *and* about itself. This sort of awareness is therefore *both* intrinsic *and* relational" (2002, 799; italics in the original). More in detail, "Aristotle rejects the notion that our perceptions, or parts of them, literally embody the qualities they are about. But he also rejects a strict intentionalist stance" (799). And concluding, "Aristotle thus attempts to do justice to the intuitions on both sides, while avoiding their respective errors; and we might well regard this as a step forward" (799).

8 For a quick overview of these and the following sources, see Thiel 2011, 6 ff.; Siewert 1998.

theory of self-awareness. However, many sources provide valuable contributions that could form the foundations of a more adequate theory. Contemporary debates have identified a range of challenges that any robust philosophical theory of self-awareness must confront. In light of recent developments in psychology, neuroscience, and related disciplines, numerous dimensions of self-awareness demand careful examination.[9] The objective here is to shed light on the central questions a contemporary framework must tackle in order to delineate the unique contributions and potential of ongoing philosophical reflection on consciousness and its reflexivity. This investigation draws upon the rich legacy of philosophical, psychological, and scientific traditions while also engaging with insights from contemplative systems rooted in other cultural and intellectual contexts.[10]

7.2.1 The Inner Structure of Self-Awareness: Reflectivity, Intentionality, Temporality and Spatiality

The first challenge for a contemporary theory of self-awareness is a methodological one, made in relation to the subjective and phenomenal character of experience. This first point targets the possibility of studying, examining and describing it without objectifying it, thereby avoiding its reification, and without being restricted to discussing it only *via negationis*.

This challenge has always posed a threat to the possibility of expressing experience within a linguistic framework, and yet a convincing theory of self-awareness must be able to tackle this difficulty. In the previous section of this work (§ 6.2), it was shown that the rDzogs-chen tradition in particular has been characterized by a wide use of apophatic expressions, hinting at a non-dual experience of reflexivity within the semantics of the kaleidoscopic luminosity of mind. Those formulations are meant to encourage going beyond reifications and conceptualizations. A recent attempt to preserve the subjective feature of experience, without excluding it from thought and description, can be found in Nagel's position (1986). His entire project left aside, of particular interest is his attempt to formulate a philosophical perspective on consciousness that respects

9 For some lists, see MacKenzie 2007, 60-1; Zahavi 1999, 38-42; 2005, 28-9; 2006, 282 ff.; 2007, 281-5.

10 See, among others, Tormen 2023 for an emphasis on the importance of engaging with contemplative traditions, Buddhist and otherwise, as a means of nourishing and advancing contemporary developments in Consciousness Studies. In particular, Tormen underscores this point in relation to the philosophical challenges posed by current technological innovation.

the subjective character of one's own and others' experience. In so far as it is a feasible way to ascribe consciousness to other beings, this approach has a slightly different orientation: Nagel's suggestion tries to rescue the other's subjectivity from one's own objectifying perspective. Nevertheless, what is at stake is indeed the intersection between subjectivity and objectivity – the issue under discussion here. If there are, in fact, other beings in the world, one has to

> conceive of experiences of which one is not the subject: experiences that are not present to oneself. To do this it is necessary to have a general conception of subjects of experience and to place oneself under it as an instance. (Nagel 1986, 20)

What is particularly noteworthy in Nagel's proposal is his notion of "the first stage of objectification of the mental". Despite the potentially misleading labels he employs, this refers to the effort to consider both one's own and others' subjective experiences "without depriving them of their character as perspectives" (Nagel 1986, 20). In order to do so, he suggests viewing experiences as events in the world, representing "an experience from outside by imagining it subjectively" (21). Nagel's attempt basically hints at a "dual aspect" theory, where one thing can have two sets of mutually irreducible and equally essential properties, that is, the mental and the physical. This is a departure from the issue here, but what is of interest is the fact that Nagel lingers on the threshold between the subjective and perspectival points of view, on the one side, and the objective one, on the other, thus seeking a way to rescue subjectivity from the thematizing gaze of the other, being the gaze of reification. Of course, this main methodological issue has a long history and is perhaps bound to find no easy solutions.

A set of additional challenges that a theory of self-awareness must address concerns the inner structure of self-awareness. Here four topics will be touched upon: the inner articulation of self-awareness in relation to the possibility of reflectivity; self-awareness in relation to the intentionality of consciousness; the inner temporal structure of self-awareness; and the 'spatial' boundaries of its framework.

Concerning the first, it must be said that reflectionism has not been decisively eliminated together with its problems, despite the wealth of non-dual accounts of self-awareness in both Asian and European traditions (cf. Gennaro 1996; 2004). The tension between reflective and reflexive articulations has traversed the Indo-Tibetan tradition in various forms, and this same dialectic is echoed in contemporary exegetical approaches to the interpretation of textual and philosophical sources. The implications of this tension, as explored in the preceding sections of this volume (particularly in § 4.1), have been examined through the lens of modern philosophical discourse.

At this juncture, it is necessary to offer a few considerations on the specific contribution of phenomenology to these issues.

If reflectivity is not banned from the philosophical discourse on self-awareness, the question arises as to how exactly pre-reflective self-awareness, being non-relational and non-dual, is thought to give rise to reflective self-awareness. Indeed, the gap between reflexive and reflective models is substantial, and any adequate theoretical framework must account for the transition from a non-dual mode of awareness to the structural and intentional 'rupture' introduced by reflective cognition (Zahavi 2007, 282). While reflexivity posits consciousness as an intrinsic feature of the mental, reflectivity considers it as an extrinsic feature. Within this last account, two distinct theories emerge: the higher-order thought (HOT) and the higher-order perception (HOP) theories. Both hold that self-awareness consists of a higher-order consciousness that takes an inner mental state as its object. While the HOT theories[11] claim that this consciousness is of the nature of thought, the HOP theories[12] consider it a perception of a mental state. However, the conceptual challenges involved in articulating the relationship between pre-reflective, non-dual self-awareness and its reflective manifestation[13] have prompted a more recent tendency to bring these two levels of mental states into closer alignment. For instance,

> Gennaro […] has argued that […] the HOT [higher-order thought] is better viewed as *intrinsic* to the target state, so that there is a complex conscious state with parts. Gennaro calls this the "wide intrinsicality view" (WIV) and he has also recently argued that Jean-Paul Sartre's theory of consciousness can be understood in this way […]. Robert Van Gulick […] has also explored the alternative that the HO state is part of the "global" conscious state. He calls such states "HOGS" (= higher-order global states) within which the lower-order state is "recruited" and becomes conscious. (Gennaro 2004, 4; italics in the original)

11 Cf. Rosenthal 1986; 1993; Carruthers 1996; 2000; Dennett 1991.

12 Armstrong 1968; 1984; Lycan 1987; 1996.

13 Van Gulick (2004, 72) claims, "Thus the transformation from unconscious to conscious state involves no change in the state itself but only the addition of a purely external and independent state which has it as its intentional object. Yet in so far as one interprets the conscious/unconscious distinction as dividing states in terms of whether they are conscious in the sense of there being 'something that it is like to be in them' it seems difficult to accept the idea that the division involves no differences in the intrinsic properties of the states themselves but only differences in purely relational facts about which other states if any are intentionally directed at them".

In fact, Van Gulick introduces the higher-order global states (HOGS) model to avoid treating the meta-intentional element as a distinct and separate state. Instead, he embeds it within the overall structure of a global state, which he describes as follows:

> [a state] into which the formerly nonconscious state is recruited and of which it itself becomes a component. Thus the distinctness principle is weakened, but not totally abandoned. Although the object state is retained as a component of the global state, it is typically altered somewhat in the process. In that respect the transition to conscious status involves some changes in the state's intrinsic properties, as well as its gaining a new systemic significance in virtue of the larger active context into which it is recruited. It's the same state, yet importantly different. Indeed, […] the question of whether it is the same state or a different state gets somewhat blurry, and the answer largely turns on how we individuate states. (Van Gulick 2006, 25)

The HOGS model is still higher-order and, therefore, reflective; however, this is the case only insofar as the transformation from nonconscious to conscious states involves a process of recruitment into an integrated organization that entails both an intentional content and a higher-order component.[14] This is also what moves Kriegel (2006) to make awareness inherent in or 'built into' experience, rescuing it from its condition of being an extra mental state to be 'added' to experience. Only in recent years have the two mental states posited by higher-order theories, which are usually thought of as independent, tended to be formulated as having some kind of "*constitutive relation*, or *internal relation*, or some other *non-contingent* relation", thereby making them not logically independent of each other (Kriegel 2006, 143; italics in the original). This is what Kriegel strategically calls "the same-order monitoring theory" (SOMT). This view permits many possible versions of part-whole relationships between the two states, the strongest being holding a mental state to be identical with its higher-order

14 For an alternative model of the relation between consciousness and self-awareness – one that combines a non-standard version of the higher-order theory of consciousness with the global neuronal workspace theory, and holds that implicit higher-order self-awareness is a pervasive feature of the globally integrative states – see Van Gulick 2022.

representation (as in the case of self-representationalism).[15] Although higher-order theories have enjoyed great popularity for two or three decades, they have recently turned out to be unsatisfactory, giving way to the alternatives mentioned above. Phenomenology offers promising alternatives to higher-order accounts, making analytical philosophy's traditional disregard of or hostility toward it counterproductive (Zahavi 2006, 293).

This recalls the debates examined in the previous sections of this volume, where the tensions between reflective and reflexive articulations of self-awareness in Buddhism were examined at various levels of the traditional and exegetical discourse. Interestingly, the contribution of phenomenology aligns closely with that of the Indo-Tibetan tradition while also offering a promising avenue for addressing this particular challenge. As Zahavi observes, drawing on Sartre's insight ([1943] 1994; 1978), reflective and pre-reflective modes of self-awareness should, in fact, be regarded as sharing a fundamental commonality:

> a certain affinity, a certain structural similarity. Otherwise, it would be impossible to explain how the prereflective cogito could ever give rise to reflection. It is a significant feature of the lived experience that it allows for reflective appropriation, and a theory of self-consciousness that can *only* account for prereflective self-consciousness is not much better than a theory that only accounts for reflective self-consciousness. (Zahavi 2006, 287-8; italics in the original)[16]

And the reason for the strong relationship between the two modes is clearly described as follows.

> In other words, reflection merely articulates the unity of unification and differentiation inherent in the prereflective lived presence: its ecstatic-centered structure of protending, presencing, retaining. (Zahavi 2006, 288)

Thus, most phenomenologists would argue that pre-reflective self-awareness must be considered as a dynamic and temporal

15 By comparing various attempts at bringing the two mental states closer together, Kriegel comments on Gennaro's wide intrinsicality by saying that what makes them "two parts of a single mental state is simply our decision to treat them as such. There is no psychologically real relation between them that unites them into a single, cohesive mental state" (Kriegel 2006, 150). Van Gulick's model and his own would provide an account, instead, where the two states "are integrated and unified through a psychologically real cognitive process of information integration" (Kriegel 2006, 150).

16 Cf. Rodríguez-Navas 2016.

self-differentiation, "a dynamic and differentiated openness to alterity" (Zahavi 1998b, 35).

This consideration leads to what has been introduced as the third challenge in this set: explaining the temporality of self-awareness, or how self-awareness can be maintained over time. In other words, it seeks to address why a past experience can be remembered as one's own. However, before proceeding, one further point should be considered: the second of the challenges mentioned earlier – the problem of intentionality. This is closely related to the issue of the transition from pre-reflective to reflective modes of awareness, as the former pertains to the inner intentionality of the mind, while the latter refers to its outer intentionality. In other words, consciousness is co-originally and simultaneously aware of itself and the world.

In the Indo-Tibetan Buddhist context, this issue arose during the discussion about the role of *ākāra*s (TIB *rnam pa*) and the problematic interaction between consciousness and its objects. In Europe, this topic has been discussed in great detail by Brentano (1995, 78-120), who specifically talks about self-awareness or, as he calls it, "inner consciousness" (*inneres Bewußtsein*). Brentano argues that the inner consciousness in question, rather than being a further mental state, is an internal feature of the primary experience. Thus, a mental state is conscious insofar as it is intentionally directed at itself, taking itself as its 'secondary' object and therefore preventing any infinite regress. At the same time, there exists another 'primary' object: that which pertains to the world; for instance, the sound that is heard while one is simultaneously aware of the act of perceiving it. Within the structure of such a conscious episode, two objects can thus be identified for one single mental state: the heard sound, which functions as the primary object, and the perception of that sound, which serves as the secondary object.[17] Interestingly, as Brentano (1995, 127-8) points out, the perception of sound and the awareness of that perception give rise to one single mental phenomenon: the apparent separation between them is a merely "conceptual" differentiation (Brentano 1995, 98).

> In the same mental phenomenon in which the sound is present to our minds we simultaneously apprehend the mental phenomenon

17 Brentano explains, "We can say that the sound is the *primary object* of the *act* of hearing, and that the act of hearing itself is the *secondary object*. Temporally they both occur at the same time, but in the nature of the case, the sound is prior. A presentation of the sound without a presentation of the act of hearing would not be inconceivable, at least *a priori*, but a presentation of the act of hearing without a presentation of the sound would be an obvious contradiction. The act of hearing appears to be directed toward sound in the most proper sense of the term, and because of this it seems to apprehend itself incidentally and as something additional" (Brentano 1995, 98; italics in the original).

> itself. What is more, we apprehend it in accordance with its dual nature insofar as it has the sound as content within it, and insofar as it has itself as content at the same time. (Brentano 1995, 98)[18]

The entire discussion bears a striking resemblance to the complex discourse on the subjective and objective aspects of cognition found in the Indo-Tibetan tradition.[19] Interestingly, in Brentano's contemporary exegesis, there is no agreement on whether to consider his view a reflexive or reflective one. Brentano's account is often cited as emblematic of the philosophical challenge of reconciling self-awareness with intentionality, the latter being what opens cognition to the world. A persistent tension throughout the history of philosophy has linked the significance of pre-reflective immediacy in self-awareness to discussions on its inner articulation, which is often conceptually analyzed in reflective terms.[20]

Thus, the first of these four challenges concerns the problem of rendering intelligible the transition from pre-reflective to reflective self-awareness. Drawing on the phenomenological account, it has been suggested that pre-reflective self-awareness should be regarded as subject to a dynamic and temporal process of self-differentiation – a view that naturally leads into the nuanced and complex topic of the temporality of self-awareness.

This relates to the Buddhist controversies on the mental function of memory which were examined in the epistemological context, first in relation to Dignāga and Dharmakīrti, and then to Tsong-kha-pa and the subsequent Tibetan tradition. MacKenzie (2017) summarizes this point by affirming that, for Buddhist reflexivists, *svasaṃvedana*

18 This is in reference to Aristotle's *On the Soul* (3.2.425b12).

19 Moreover, it is interesting to note that, similarly to Mi-pham, for instance, Brentano also takes self-awareness to play an epistemologically foundational role: "Moreover, inner perception is not merely the only kind of perception which is immediately evident; it is really the only perception in the strict sense of the word. [T]he phenomena of the so-called external perception cannot be proved true and real even by means of indirect demonstration. For this reason, anyone who in good faith has taken them for what they seem to be is being misled by the manner in which the phenomena are connected. Therefore, strictly speaking, so-called external perception is not perception. Mental phenomena, therefore, may be described as the only phenomena of which perception in the strict sense of the word is possible" (Brentano 1995, 70). This idea is comparable to some understandings of the Buddhist doctrine of self-awareness seen thus far: since inner perception is uniquely indubitable, the kind of certainty this awareness uniquely bears must be considered as somehow basic to all other types of knowledge.

20 For further discussions on Brentano's contribution to the doctrine of self-awareness, cf. the critical points made by Zahavi 1998a; Janzen 2008, 194 ff.; Montague 2017. On the topic of intentionality, see Ryle: "even though the self-intimation supposed to be inherent in any mental state or process is not described as requiring a separate act of attention, or as constituting a separate cognitive operation, still what I am conscious of in a process of inferring, say, is different from what the inferring is an apprehension of" (Ryle 2009, 144).

functions not only as the synchronic phenomenal point of view but also, following Dignāga's account, as a crucial component in the diachronic structure of access-consciousness, particularly in recollection. In this view, *svasaṃvedana* enables a later cognition to apprehend both aspects of a prior experience from within. Furthermore, as demonstrated in § 6.3, it plays a pivotal role within the soteriological framework, where the notion of memory – or, perhaps more aptly, 'presence' – serves as a key expression of the essential function of reflexivity in Tibetan rDzogs-chen practice. The issue of the inner temporality of consciousness could also be addressed by tapping into the phenomenological tradition, as Zahavi suggests (2007, 282), recalling Husserl's thoughtful notion of inner time-consciousness.[21] The first consideration to be made is about James's (1981) influence upon Husserl's thought on the structure of inner temporality, as Cobb-Stevens observes:

> I shall suggest that James' description of the "specious present" corresponds closely to what Husserl referred to as the "living present". Before developing this thesis, it will be helpful first to summarize the relevant themes from Husserl's lectures on "inner" time-consciousness. Husserl's mature writings on time-consciousness describe two closely interrelated presentations of the flow of our experiences: (i) the flow of intentional acts reflectively thematized as identities in a manifold of temporal phases (now-phase, past-phase, and coming-phase), and (ii) the "absolute" flow of unthematized experience whose phases (primal impression, retention, and protention) are the pre-reflective awareness of our acts. These two dimensions are not separate flows, but rather different modes of presentation of one and the same flow of experience. The key to their difference is the structure of reflection. Husserl points out that whereas perception, memory, and reflection explicitly posit or thematize their objects, the consciousness operative within the absolute flux precedes all objectification. (Cobb-Stevens 1998, 43)

In fact, prior to Husserl, James states:

> [The] content [of the specious present] is a constant flux, "events" dawning into its forward end as fast as they fade out of its rearward one, and each of them changing its time coefficient from "not yet" or "not quite yet" to "just gone" or "gone" as it passes by. Meanwhile, the specious present, the intuited duration, stands

21 Also Sartre (1978, 22), for his part, recognizes Husserl's point: "C'est la conscience qui s'unifie elle-même et concrètement par un jeu d'intentionnalités 'transversales' qui sont des rétentions concrètes et réelles des consciences passées".

> permanent, like the rainbow on the waterfall, with its own quality unchanged by the events that stream through it. (James 1981, 593)

A duration-block is described with a span encompassing the fading past and the arising future: it is "a saddle-back, with a certain breadth of its own" from which to look into time in both directions (James 1981, 574).

Following James, Husserl's analysis of the structure of inner time-consciousness identifies duration-blocks of protention, primal impression, and retention, which may be understood as an investigation of the self-luminous structure of inner consciousness.[22] Thus, Husserl outlines

> the various kinds of modifications of the type of lived experience, perception as such, of *retention* as still having consciousness of what has gone by as perceptual present, of having consciousness in the mode 'just-having been', of *protention* as the original foreseeing of what announces itself as 'just-coming'. (Husserl 1977, 155; italics added)

Retention and protention are automatic and involuntary processes, a two-fold temporal scene that opens up without providing new objects in the retention and protention phases but rather letting the temporal horizon of the phenomenon manifest and allowing the temporal flow of consciousness to be experienced. On the other hand, when one reflects and thematizes one's experiences in recollection and expectation, one's own acts become temporal enduring objects: a new temporal form is imposed upon them, and they are inserted or framed into a sequential timeline. Following Zahavi's (1998a) reading of Husserl's account of inner time-consciousness, such a specious present, pre-reflective yet temporally extended, can be interpreted as a means of introducing structural complexity into the immediate self-givenness of experience. This intrinsic complexity enables the pre-reflective awareness to unfold and subsequently manifest at a reflective level, thereby bridging the temporal and phenomenological gap between non-reflective immediacy and reflective articulation. Moreover, pre-reflectively, one's stream of consciousness is given as a flowing unity. Therefore, Husserl's analysis of inner time-consciousness explains not only how one is aware of extended temporal blocks but also how one can be aware of one's own stream of experiences. To put it differently, it also describes how consciousness unifies itself across time:

22 For a detailed study on the mind's luminosity in Husserl's account, see Hart 1998.

> In this way, it becomes evident that concrete perception as original consciousness (original givenness) of a temporally extended object is structured internally as itself a streaming system of momentary perceptions (so-called originary impressions). But each such momentary perception is the nuclear phase of a continuity, a continuity of momentary gradated retentions on the one side, and a horizon of what is coming on the other side: a horizon of "protention", which is disclosed to be characterized as a constantly gradated coming. This *momentary continuity of retention and protention* belonging to every originary impression undergoes a modification difficult to describe, in the flowing off of the originary impression; in any case the multiplicity of appearances of the linear stretch of time is multi-dimensional. (Husserl 1977, 154-5; italics added)

The three-fold structure of time-consciousness enables the stream of consciousness to remain unified while allowing objects to be experienced (MacKenzie 2011, 96). In claiming that Husserl distinguished two types of experiential self-givenness, a reflective and pre-reflective one, and in linking them to two sets of temporality, Zahavi (1999, 71) diverges from the general interpretation that sees Husserl equating self-awareness with reflective (that is, introspective) self-awareness. The Heidelberg School, whose main proponents are Henrich, Frank, Pothast, and Tugendhat, argues against higher-order theories and criticizes what it sees as a fundamentally reflective structure in Husserl's account.[23]

However, the topic of the inner complexity and articulation of self-awareness, which has been seen to be problematic since Dignāga's time[24] and continues to be debated in the most recent exegesis of his work, is also a difficult point for the contemporary discourse on self-awareness. Indeed, the Heidelberg School, which could be considered as one of its most remarkable protagonists,

23 Zahavi (1998a, 135) claims, "As Frank puts it, Husserl's entire investigation of consciousness is based on the tacit assumption that consciousness is conscious of something different from itself. Due to this fixation on intentionality Husserl never managed to escape the reflection theory of self-awareness. He persistently operated with a model of self-awareness based upon the subject-object dichotomy, with its entailed difference between the intending and the intended, and therefore never discovered the existence of a prereflective self-awareness". For a presentation and critique of the Heidelberg School, see Zahavi 1999; 2007. The Heidelberg School's contribution to the study of self-awareness has mainly consisted of a criticism of the reflectionist model. Their arguments are hardly satisfactory, however, in that they do not provide a positive description of the structure of pre-reflective self-awareness. For references on the Heidelberg School's critique of Husserl, see Zahavi 1999, 230 fn. 13.

24 For a discussion on how Dignāga could help read Husserl's account of temporality, see Ganeri 2012, 174-5.

struggles with this point.[25] However, the valuable insights derived from Dignāga's account of *svasaṃvedana*, along with those found in Husserl's analysis, reveal different perspectives from which to articulate the inner structure of reflexivity. This is a crucial aspect that any theory of self-awareness cannot afford to overlook.

Having examined the inner temporal structure of self-awareness, this inquiry will now briefly consider its spatial boundaries. The term 'spatial boundaries' is used metaphorically to refer to two primary dimensions of self-awareness: first, its perspectival structure; second, its relation to the (Freudian) unconscious. While the latter raises important issues, it will not be addressed in this study, as it stems largely from modern theoretical concerns and finds limited resonance within the Buddhist tradition.[26]

An adequate theory of self-awareness should be able to confront the structural issue of the minimal point of view required by experience. The question here is whether self-awareness is just the anonymous acquaintance of a single experience with itself or whether it implies a broader egocentric structure, referring either to the stream of consciousness or to the self.

Looking to the Buddhist tradition, a valuable contribution can be found in the way experience is framed by the theory of self-awareness. As claimed by MacKenzie (2017), for Buddhist reflexivism, *svasaṃvedana* is the synchronic conscious point of view within which the two aspects of experience are given. It is a minimal form of subjectivity, in the sense of a 'phenomenological dative' of manifestations, that to which phenomenal experiences are presented. This 'dative' does not entail any separate or enduring subject existing over and above the stream of the individual episodes of experience: rather, each experiential episode is its own subject. Experiences are given in a phenomenal first-person perspective, and the mind's reflexivity is, therefore, the necessary condition of any phenomenal appearance, subjective or objective. In his most recent reflections,

25 For a critical presentation of the attempts made by the Heidelberg School in order to highlight the internal complexity of self-awareness, see Zahavi 1999, 35-7.

26 Concerning this second level, that is, the problem of the unconscious, the central question is whether all experiences are necessarily characterized by a primitive, pre-reflective self-awareness (thus ruling out the existence of the unconscious), or whether the unconscious can be accommodated within a framework that maintains a basic reflexivity of consciousness. See Varela, Thompson, Rosch 1991, 48-50; Zahavi 1999, 203-20; Gennaro 2004. It has been argued (Zahavi 1999; 2006; MacKenzie 2007) that a contemporary theory of self-awareness must also engage with other complex issues such as embodiment and the socially and linguistically mediated interactions with other embodied subjectivities. These concerns, however, pertain to a broader conception of self-awareness, one that goes beyond the reflexivity inherent in each experiential moment and involves questions of personal identity (as an embodied self-engaged in relational contexts). Since such topics fall outside the scope of the present inquiry, they will not be addressed further here.

MacKenzie (2024) draws inspiration from the tradition of Dignāga and Dharmakīrti to identify a model he calls "dual-aspect reflexivism". He finds this perspective particularly useful for guiding a discussion on the relationships between self-experience, subjectivity, and consciousness. Within this framework, the phenomenal characteristic unfolds in both modes of presentation: the object-aspect presents the object, while the subject-aspect presents the experience itself. Self-awareness is thus understood as the simplest awareness of these two facets of a cognitive event, where the three – self-awareness, the object-aspect, and the subject-aspect – are not separate entities but features of a single event. Across Buddhist traditions, the various levels and forms through which a self-referential structure emerges are both extensive and intricately articulated.[27] The Buddhist reflexivist proponents concede a subjective character of experience but, for them, this does not at all necessitate positing an additionally existing subject. Rather, the subject being sought – the 'experiencer' – is nothing other than the experience itself, not an independently existing self-standing behind it. This is indeed the position advanced by Dignāga's school: the subjectivity (the being-subjectively-experienced) of experience is asserted, but a subject beyond *svasaṃvedana* is rejected. Self-awareness provides a continuous, immediate, and internal perspective on one's own stream of experience that is given to 'itself' and not to 'a self'.[28]

However, based on the considerations discussed thus far, one fundamental point emerges – clearly articulated by Zahavi (2005): consciousness entails a pre-reflective dimension of subjectivity, namely, first-person self-givenness. This means that when a subject undergoes an experience, there is no ambiguity as to who is undergoing it (Zahavi 2005, 124). However, for Zahavi, this would not be sufficient for establishing subjective experience, something

27 For further discussion, see Albahari 2006, where the Pāli Canon is interpreted as implicitly, but centrally, assuming the existence of a witness-consciousness – "a reading", as she admits, "that aligns Buddhism more closely to Advaita Vedānta than is usually acknowledged" (Albahari 2006, 2). See also Siderits, Thompson, Zahavi 2011, and, in particular, Fasching 2011; Thompson 2011; Dreyfus 2011. On the topic, see also Dreyfus, Thompson 2007.

28 In considering the Buddhist contributions to the concept of self-reference, Mackenzie (2011) describes various accounts of the tradition and particularly examines Tsong-kha-pa's suggestion of a 'minimal self' (TIB *nga tsam*). For Tsong-kha-pa, the sense of self is natural and pre-linguistic, but it is not true that each moment of consciousness is self-aware: it's a process of I-making (SKT *ahaṃkāra*) without any *svasaṃvedana* involved. Here, MacKenzie argues: "Unlike Tsong-kha-pa, I do accept the notion of *svasaṃvedana*. On my view, the minimal self (*ahaṃkāra*) emerges from the more basic inherent reflexivity of consciousness. Thus my view is closer to the Mādhyamika of Śāntarākṣita (in India) or the bKa'-brgyud and rNying-ma traditions (in Tibet)" (MacKenzie 2011, 93 fn. 21; Author's adjustments for the transliterations from Tibetan).

which requires a pole of invariance in relation to which one can determine that experiences are one's own. Dreyfus argues for a Buddhist response to Zahavi's challenge:

> This response rests on the distinction between two senses of who we are: the subject, or, rather subjectivity, that is, the continuum of momentary mental states with their first-personal self-givenness, which are central to being a person (more on this shortly), and the self, which is an illusory reification of subjectivity as being a bounded agent enduring through time, rather than a complex flow of fleeting self-specified experiences. [...] But this does not entail that there is an act-transcendent pole of identity, an entity that endures before and after the moment of experience. (Dreyfus 2011, 142)

The view Dreyfus is arguing for agrees that the person is a conceptual fiction but asserts a minimal phenomenological self-awareness in any experience, which is necessary for the attribution of such concept. One attributes personhood to oneself not only on the basis of the psycho-physical complex – as emphasized in the Abhidharma tradition – but also through the self-givenness of one's experiences, in line with the Yogācāra view, where such experiences arise as pertaining to a minimal I. Here the minimal I would be the constantly changing stream of pre-reflectively self-aware experiences.

> Hence, the experiences on the basis of which we understand ourselves as persons are not impersonal but intrinsically self-specified, and this is why they are immune to any possible doubt as to whom the subject of the experience is. (145)

In proposing a theoretical framework for the "minimal phenomenal experience" (MPE), Metzinger (2020) uses the phenomenology of "pure consciousness" in meditation as a new entry point. He investigates whether a conscious system can be aware solely of awareness itself, what kind of phenomenal character such a state might involve, and what minimal conditions would be necessary for this experience to occur, both in neurotypical humans and in any potentially conscious system. The hypothesis is that MPE is marked by the absence of self-consciousness, temporal representation, and any spatial frame of reference, and the rationale is that, in order to develop a minimal-model explanation of phenomenal consciousness, a theoretically coherent point of departure lies in those experiential states in which practitioners explicitly report an immediate apprehension of consciousness as such.

Thus, stressing the difference between the self-giveness of consciousness and the self seems to be one pivotal contribution that Buddhist philosophy can make to the contemporary discussion about

the self-identity, immediacy and privileged access to self-awareness. However, the whole issue of subjectivity and self is made ever so much more complicated in terms of the soteriological Buddhist path. For instance, the doctrine of the basic- or store-consciousness (SKT *ālaya-vijñāna*; TIB *kun gzhi rnam shes*) is formulated by the tradition in order to answer the main objection that, without a self beyond fleeting mental states, karmic latencies could not be transmitted. However, the assertion of such basic consciousness raises difficult philosophical questions, and their examination would certainly exceed the scope of the present inquiry.[29] This being said, a modern theory of self-awareness aiming at tackling the topic of subjectivity can find invaluable help in the various strands of the Buddhist tradition. Moreover, nowadays, the possibility of a convergence between the rich and complex Buddhist contribution and the European phenomenological approach is particularly promising. With respect to this, it is worth mentioning Thompson's perceptive attempt at a reconciliation of phenomenology and the Buddhist view of no-self, where the subjectivity of experience is precisely the selfhood, that is, the ipseity, of time-consciousness in the Sartrian and Husserlian phenomenological accounts:

> Here it may be possible to reconcile phenomenology and the Buddhist no-self paradigm. From a phenomenological perspective, there is no need to suppose that 'I' or 'me' corresponds to an enduring entity with an existence separate or somehow distinct from the stream of mind-body events. Rather, the 'I' picks out the stream from its own self-individuating phenomenal perspective. To use an Indian turn of phrase, we could say that the stream is fundamentally I-making (*ahaṃkāra*). (Thompson 2011, 185)

Moreover, Zahavi (2020) examines the what-it-is-like-ness of phenomenal states in terms of a what-it-is-like-for-me-ness. According to this perspective, experiential processes possess an intrinsic reflexive quality in the minimal sense that they are experienced as something for the subject. This for-me-ness implies a form of self-awareness at the level of the mental state itself rather than at the level of the subject as an enduring entity. Thus, it is clear that this matter intersects with and also questions many categories that have been adopted in the recent studies of consciousness and its reflexivity. Further research is desirable.

In conclusion, within the complexity of the topic of perspectival experience and self-reference, many possibilities of egological and non-egological structures of consciousness can indeed be conceived

29 For a philosophical interpretation of this doctrine, see Dreyfus 2011.

of and examined. The self-awareness's inner time and its spatial or perspectival boundaries, together with the possibility for reflectivity and intentionality, are all widely debated topics and no conclusive statement can be uttered. On the contrary, as Flanagan (1992, 195) aptly summarizes, current research explores a wide array of topics: self-awareness spans a *continuum* that ranges from the awareness intrinsic to subjective experience to the reflective cognition concerning the model of the self.

7.2.2 Contemporary Philosophical and Scientific Challenges: Toward a Common Ground

From the philosophical point of view, the most recent and hegemonic framework is that of naturalism; it therefore seems reasonable that, today, a theory of self-awareness must be compatible with at least some form of it. Moreover, such theories must also be capable of entering into meaningful dialogue with the latest empirical findings in the cognitive sciences. Those two sides, one philosophical and the other scientific, represent two major elements which the ongoing debate on self-awareness must deal with. With respect to that, one important (and maybe ambitious) direction for developing and deepening a discourse on self-awareness emerges from the convergence of naturalism, phenomenology, and contemplative traditions, on the one side, and neuroscience, on the other, the goal being a synthesis of phenomenology in light of cognitive science and other philosophical and contemplative traditions that focus on experience.

There have been some attempts to proceed in this direction. Coseru (2012), for instance, sees Indian Buddhist epistemology as being in continuity with the naturalistic approaches of contemporary epistemology and philosophy of mind as well as with some of the phenomenological theories of Husserl and Merleau-Ponty. Coseru, in fact, endorses a phenomenological naturalistic position to highlight "the pragmatic character of epistemic inquiry in the Buddhist tradition" (Coseru 2012, 54). Coseru considers Buddhist epistemology as an intellectual project that has been built on naturalist grounds and would benefit from further naturalization. On the other hand, however, the convergence between phenomenology and naturalism, as well as the general perspective of philosophy of mind, is not at all easy. Varela clearly states:

> The phenomenological approach starts from the irreducible nature of conscious experience. Lived experience is where we start from and where all must link back to, like a guiding thread. Most modern authors are disinclined to focus on the distinction between mental life in some general sense and experience, or

> manifest some suspicion about its status. From a phenomenological standpoint conscious experience is quite at variance with that of mental content as it figures in the Anglo-american philosophy of mind. (Varela 1996, 334)

Ganeri (2012, 218) also highlights the divergence between naturalism and phenomenology. While much of contemporary research into Buddhist philosophy of mind has been conducted within a framework of naturalization, aiming for a strict naturalist alignment with modern science, the Buddhist no-self theory is better understood as a compositional phenomenological psychology. A phenomenological standpoint is also vividly and lucidly endorsed by the uncompromising neurophenomenological attitude defended by Bitbol (2015). He stands against those strands that, although neurophenomenological, ultimately subordinate experiences to their neural correlates and formulate a physicalist hierarchy according to which neurobiological processes are more fundamental than phenomenal consciousness.

Thus, Bitbol (2015) helpfully details three main versions of the neurophenomenological approach. According to a minimal or naturalistic version of it, its role is only to contribute to the findings of a hegemonic objective neuroscience. The mild or neutral version of neurophenomenology consists of adopting a sort of uncommitted standpoint, thus placing the phenomenological description and the neurobiological processes on an equal footing. However, according to Bitbol (2008, 71), it is the fully-fledged or radical phenomenological approach of neurophenomenology to which Varela is truly committed. Varela's (1996, 344) notion of "mutual constraints" between the study of experience and its correlates entails a reciprocal transformation and enrichment. If phenomenological reports can help identify unnoticed neural patterns, then neurological findings can aid phenomenological research. Indeed, the dimension of experience and its scientific understanding "are like two legs without which we cannot walk" (Varela, Thompson, Rosch 1991, 14).

What, then, constitutes the concrete and methodological common ground shared by phenomenology, contemplative practices and traditions, naturalism and the cognitive sciences? Neurophenomenology is the field in which this convergence can take place meaningfully. Representative of this new frontier is Thompson's work *Waking, Dreaming, Being* (2014), in which he draws upon his distinctive position as both a philosopher of mind and an active participant in the ongoing dialogue between neuroscience and contemplative traditions.[30] Despite the legitimate criticism Bitbol (2015) raises regarding Thompson's tendency to

30 See also Lutz, Dunne, Davidson 2007.

regard neurobiological processes ultimately as more fundamental than phenomenal consciousness, Thompson's work is particularly effective in integrating cognitive science with Indian and Tibetan philosophical traditions to explore consciousness and the sense of self. By mapping the main states of consciousness in which the self dwells, neurophenomenology addresses various issues raised by the encounter of neuroscience and the contemplative traditions. In engaging with this multidisciplinary and innovative field – whose foundational principles are significantly informed by Indian yogic traditions, including Buddhism – Thompson investigates the nature of consciousness through a three-fold framework: awareness itself, the contents of awareness and self-experience, as approached within cognitive science (Thompson 2014, xxxiii). The sense of self in the I-making process and the consciousness thus identified are then explored by Thompson across a structure that, again coming from the Indian tradition, encompasses four different states: waking, dreaming, deep sleep and pure awareness. The central idea of this line of research is investigating the view of the self as an experiential process undergoing constant change. The author criticizes the position that he labels "neuro-nihilism", that is, the neuroscientific view of the self as just an illusion created by the brain. He suggests instead an "enactive understanding of the self" (Thompson 2014, 324) in which the self is nothing but the I-making process. The self, a dependently-arisen series of events, is thus not an entity but "a process of I-ing – an ongoing process that enacts an 'I'" (Thompson 2014, 326). This view aligns with enactivism, a contemporary approach in philosophy of mind and cognitive science that emphasizes the embodied, embedded, and interactive nature of cognition.[31] Rather than viewing the mind as processing internal representations of an external world, enactivism holds that cognition arises through dynamic interactions between an organism and its environment. It stresses the role of lived experience, sensorimotor activity, and the situated body in the generation of meaning and knowledge. In this framework, perception and consciousness are not passive receptions of data but active, participatory engagements with the world. Enactivism thus offers an alternative to both representational and strictly computational models of the mind, aligning well with phenomenological and contemplative perspectives.[32]

This framework also provides an inspiring definition of consciousness: Thompson refers to it as experience manifesting itself

31 See Varela, Thompson, Rosch 1991; Di Paolo, Rohde, De Jaegher 2010; Thompson, Stapleton 2009.

32 For recent studies proposing a theoretical model for the cognitive investigation of non-dual meditative practices, experiences, and reflexive knowing from an enactivist perspective, see Meling 2021; 2022.

across the four above-mentioned states and describes it using the three-fold framework cited. Another fundamental issue addressed extensively by Thompson concerns the essential differences between the Indian and European traditions' respective mappings of consciousness. The latter tend to focus on the presence or absence of consciousness and consider waking sensory experience as the basis for all consciousness. The former, on the other hand, consider varying levels of consciousness, ranging from the grossest to the subtlest, and regard sensory experiences as being gross and dependent on subtler ones. Despite this difference, Thompson shows a significant correspondence between the Indo-Tibetan and the scientific accounts of consciousness. In fact, there is detailed neuroscientific evidence that consciousness is made up of discrete cognitive events, as is asserted in Buddhist Abhidharma philosophy. Thus, Thompson draws attention to neuroscientific research, indicating that practices such as open awareness meditation and focused attention cultivate the brain's skill in segmenting the ongoing sensory stream into discrete instances of conscious experience. Another crucial point addressed by this field of research is the relationship between consciousness and the brain as well as issues regarding the primacy of consciousness. "Consciousness is our way of being", and it cannot be objectified as "it is that by which any object shows up for us at all" (Thompson 2014, 100).[33] Thompson refutes all the traditional positions about the mind-brain problem in favor of forging a new understanding of what 'physical' means, pointing beyond the dualistic conception of consciousness *versus* physical being.

Thompson begins to investigate various states of consciousness by presenting the hypnagogic state, the one leading up to sleep, and compares it to the dreaming state. The former is characterized as "a slackening of the sense of self", and consciousness tends to identify with what it spontaneously imagines (Thompson 2014, 122). Since the boundaries between oneself and the world are blurred in the hypnagogic state, one is not constrained within the waking ego structure. This means that one can tap into different sources of creativity and rest by becoming absorbed in the images one is examining. When one enters the dreaming state, however, the sense of self is restored and one experiences oneself as the subject of the dream world. The studies Thompson reports show how the difference between the two states is reflected in a shift in the type of waves emitted by the brain.

What happens when one is able to focus one's attention on a dream while knowing one is dreaming? This question leads to the state of

33 One of the most recent contributions emphasizing the need to consider human experience as an integral part of scientific inquiry is Frank, Gleiser, Thompson 2024.

consciousness referred to as lucid dreaming, one that neuroscientists have just begun to explore but is well-known and widely utilized, for instance, in Tibetan Buddhist contemplative practices. The study of lucid dreaming and its implications represents one of the most promising points of intersection between science and the contemplative traditions. Its link to the issue of self-awareness is significant, as it may be regarded as a specific instance of the recognition of one's own state. Therefore, studying this state of consciousness might enhance the actual knowledge of this specific and fundamental feature of consciousness. It is worth noting the methodological approach underlying the research developments Thompson discusses. It is paradigmatic of the general methodology adopted by neurophenomenology, and reveals the precious and unique contribution of the Buddhist contemplative traditions. The subjects of the experiments are meditators trained in the traditional contemplative techniques of lucid dreaming. While their physiology and brain activity are being measured in the sleep lab, they can communicate with the outside world (the lab) through prearranged eye movements. They use an 'eye-language' that allows them to communicate when their lucid dream begins and to report about specific features of the experience. Being trained, they are able to move flexibly and reliably between different states of awareness and can describe their experience vividly from moment to moment. Thanks to their training they are able to enhance the link between first- and third-person perspective and lead contemporary philosophers of mind to examine states of consciousness that have thus far been either neglected or dismissed. The studies proposed by Thompson (2014) are presented here as a suggestive and emblematic example of how different disciplines and approaches, and their respective epistemologies, can communicate and are already interacting, contributing to some of the most innovative developments in the field. Bitbol's phenomenological curiosity also goes along these lines, tapping into contemplative traditions where investigation stems from a mindful survey of the flux of lived experience, finding that each alternative state of consciousness might help tackle the problem of consciousness (2015, 108). Bitbol (2008, 71), therefore, identifies significant potential in systematically training and educating experience through a combination of first-, second-, and third-person perspectives. Thus, a fundamental way to bridge neurocognitive and Asian contemplative approaches seems to be that of promoting first-person experience transformation by training in meditative or yogic states.

The scientific and philosophical consequences of this encounter between such technological tools, on the one hand, and knowledge held by contemplative traditions, on the other, may soon prove to be remarkable. The potential of lucid dreaming is mainly discussed in the Tibetan Buddhist tradition of dream yoga. Here the highest abilities one can acquire by training – by transforming one's own

dreams and thus working with one's emotions and inner states – are said to disclose the lucid experience of seeing through the dream by dissolving it completely, releasing all imagery and merely being aware of being aware. The factor of lucidity and reflexivity involved in lucid dreaming seems thus to be trainable and have many applications. As Thompson suggests, therefore, the most common neuroscientific models of dream interpretation should be corrected since they cannot adequately explain the dream state in light of what lucid dreaming reveals. Dreaming can no longer be seen as a passive epiphenomenon of the sleep state but rather as an intentional process of the imagination. Thus, a new dream science could fruitfully combine dream yoga with psychology and neuroscience.[34]

According to this innovative approach, another state through which consciousness and its reflexivity can be investigated is deep and dreamless sleep. While most neuroscientists today think of this as a state during which consciousness fades away and vanishes, Indian and Tibetan traditions see it as possessing a subtle form of awareness and consider this state of consciousness from a completely different perspective. According to these contemplative traditions, one can actually access these deep levels of awareness through meditative training. In these states the consciousness is said to be so subtle that it becomes just a "witness consciousness", an awareness that "watches the carousel of sleeping, dreaming and waking" without participating in that spinning (Thompson 2014, 248) and without any sense of ego. Thus, moving from deep sleep to dreaming to waking is a movement "from subtler to grosser levels of consciousness and embodiment" (260). The interesting question here (232-3) is whether it makes sense to presuppose the presence of a minimal pre-reflective self-awareness during sleep and dreamless sleep. It would be a reflexivity of mind that manifests and unfolds as flowing retentions and protentions (recalling Husserls's terms). Thompson comments on "contemplative sleep science" (2014, 268) as follows: if highly experienced meditation practitioners could provide reports upon awakening from deep sleep, and their physiology and brain activity could be measured, then the neural and physical data could be combined with first-person reports, thus having new evidence that this is indeed a state of consciousness

34 Closely related to lucid dreaming are out-of-body experiences, in which one sees oneself from outside one's body while nevertheless experiencing it as one's own. These states are investigated in a similar way. Thompson presents these states as revelatory about the sense of self: in the dissociation between the body-as-object and the body-as-subject, the sense of self and self-location follows the body-as-subject, that is, the one that holds one's spatial perspective. It is true that much is still unclear about these experiences: why can they represent only some things in the environment correctly and not others? Are there specific kinds of lucid dreams? Are these experiences repeatable in a rigorously controlled experimental setting? These and many other questions are still awaiting answers.

and that it is accessible. Indeed, while deeper levels of phenomenal consciousness are typically beyond the reach of ordinary cognitive access, contemplative traditions maintain that the mind can be trained effectively to engage with these subtler layers of awareness. Thus, many aspects that cognitive science and philosophy categorize as unconscious involve subtle levels of phenomenal awareness that can be accessed potentially through meditative training.

As Bitbol suggests, "the new science should include a 'dance' of mutual definition" (2014, 267) between first-person and third-person accounts, mediated by the second-person social exchange. In conclusion, therefore, while contemplative accounts are able to cast new light on the scientific approach for studying states of consciousness, findings from neuroscientific experimental research can bring scientific accuracy and evidence to contemplative traditions. Contemplative neuroscience and neurophenomenology turn out to be innovative projects that may dramatically enrich and problematize the understanding of consciousness together with its specific features as well as that of the self. As discussed, the key challenges in the current discourse on consciousness and its reflexivity can actually be viewed as opportunities to shape the most compelling directions for future research. These challenges gain particular relevance within the broader, interdisciplinary, and cutting-edge emergent field of Contemplative Studies, which is dedicated to the exploration of contemplative practices by drawing together perspectives from the humanities, the sciences, and the social sciences. Its methodology integrates first-person experience with third-person analysis, while also recognizing the importance of second-person perspectives, that is, the intersubjective and dialogical dimension through which individuals articulate and communicate their own contemplative experience. Rather than separating the experiential dimension from scholarly inquiry, the proposed model includes the direct practice of contemplative techniques as a legitimate source of insight, alongside historical, philosophical, and scientific approaches.[35]

To conclude, although the deeper strata of phenomenal consciousness often elude ordinary cognitive access, contemplative traditions affirm that the mind can be diligently and skillfully trained to awaken to these more refined dimensions of experience. This possibility embodies not only a philosophical insight but a lived potential. It invites a reassessment of the scope of consciousness, bridging ancient introspective wisdom with contemporary philosophical and scientific inquiry, and offering a profound vision of self-awareness as both a path and a practice.

35 For an overview of the field, see Komjathy 2017. For a detailed discussion of the field's epistemology, see Roth 2006; 2008. For an interdisciplinary publication that reflects the breadth and depth of the field, see, among others, Flanagan, Clough 2024.

8 Concluding Remarks

The aim of this volume has been to examine the concept of self-awareness (SKT *svasaṃvedana*; TIB *rang rig*) as it developed in the Indo-Tibetan Buddhist tradition, particularly in terms of its potential contribution to the ongoing philosophical discourse on the topic, with the aim of enriching and deepening its related philosophical field of research.

The mind's knowing of itself is a highly technical notion in Buddhist philosophy and represents a crucial subject of debate within the tradition. However, it has not yet been fully examined by modern scholarship. Specific conceptions of *svasaṃvedana* or *rang rig* have been studied over the years, while Williams (1998) and Yao (2005) have considered this issue in the broader contexts of Tibetan Madhyamaka and pre-Dignāga Buddhist accounts, respectively. Nevertheless, there are no studies that encompass the range and complexity of this concept across the Buddhist tradition as a whole. As such, this study has aimed to offer an overview of the topic by addressing some of its principal aspects. Through an examination of the main interpretations of this Buddhist notion, it has identified, analyzed, and compared a range of philosophical accounts that underscore the relevance of self-awareness in the domains of epistemology, gnoseology, soteriology, ontology and, by extension, doxography.

Recently, several scholars have suggested placing the tradition's understanding of self-awareness in dialogue with contemporary

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exegesis and ongoing philosophical debates. In this spirit, the present work has situated the examined accounts within broader reflections on the universal problem of self-awareness, by exploring conceptual bridges between traditional views and contemporary perspectives. To this end, the methodological approach adopted here draws on a cross-cultural praxis in which each interpretation of *svasaṃvedana* or *rang rig* has been examined in light of modern readings of the topic, intertwining classical sources with current investigations into the nature of consciousness.

After a few introductory remarks, the first part of the study examined the principal Indian developments of the Buddhist notion of *svasaṃvedana*. It was initially shown how this notion emerged in certain pre-Dignāga sources within a soteriological discourse centered on the Buddha's omniscience, only later becoming an epistemological concern with the advent of Dignāga's and Dharmakīrti's philosophical project.

The following section focused on Dignāga's formulation of *svasaṃvedana*, reconsidered through the lens of various modern interpretations. Drawing on recent philological studies of *PS* and *PSV* 1.8cd-10, where *svasaṃvedana* is presented as *pramāṇaphala*, the nature and function of epistemological self-awareness were re-evaluated. For decades, the dominant view held that *svasaṃvedana*, as articulated in those passages, served to bridge the gap between externalism and internalism by functioning as the intentional (and therefore dualistic) cognizance of the objective aspect by the subjective aspect of experience. More recently, however, it has been argued that its role as *pramāṇaphala* is better understood as providing access to any experience whatsoever, that is, to the how of the appearance of any possible object. From this angle, *svasaṃvedana* still bridges the externalist-internalist divide, but in a radically different manner than previously suggested.

This section was followed by an examination of the main post-Dignāga Indian developments of the notion, with particular attention to the memory argument and other significant positions. These first two parts have thus laid the groundwork for a deeper understanding of how the Tibetan tradition assimilated and reinterpreted the notion of self-awareness.

The central part of the volume investigated the multifaceted relevance of *rang rig* within the Tibetan context. It began by examining Williams's (1998) influential manifesto, in which he outlined two principal models – reflective and reflexive – that would later serve as a basis for classifying the various Indo-Tibetan understandings of self-awareness in modern scholarship. In this reassessment of these categories, the way Williams identified the reflective model in the Tibetan passage selected for his manifesto was called into question, as was his portrayal of it as representative of a traditional

Buddhist standpoint derived from Dignāga and the Yogācāra school, and reflected in the dGe-lugs interpretation. However, it was argued that the reflective model cannot be neatly mapped onto Dignāga's formulation. Rather, it may be read as an attempt at an analytical articulation of the conceptual relationship between the inner elements of Dignāga's non-dual account of self-awareness, without implying any form of dualism. This interpretive direction appears to resonate with the dGe-lugs critique of *rang rig*. Alternatively, the reflective model might be understood as pointing to a common misreading of self-awareness, one that arises when a non-dual mental phenomenon is reinterpreted within a dualistic framework or constrained by linguistic structures.

The section then turned to examine the theme of luminosity of consciousness, a quality closely linked to self-awareness in Indo-Tibetan thought. A distinction was made between luminosity understood as *prabhāsvaratā* (TIB *'od gsal* [*ba*]) and as *prakāśatā* (TIB *gsal* [*ba*]) along with a proposal for a possible convergence between these two dimensions of meaning.

The subsequent section focused on the multidimensional controversy that arises when comparing the views of *rang rig* endorsed by Tsong-kha-pa and Mi-pham, showing how self-awareness proves to be a crucial element in their broader ontological and epistemological frameworks. Accordingly, the section explored some of the main epistemological issues implied by *rang rig*, such as memory and the validity of cognition, and examined the role of ontology in shaping interpretations of self-awareness, particularly in relation to the doctrine of the two truths.

Following this, the crucial soteriological role of *rang rig* in relation to spiritual practice and breakthrough was examined, with particular reference to rNying-ma and rDzogs-chen perspectives. It was shown that, in these traditions, salvific transformation ultimately depends on reflexivity: self-awareness – as conceived in connection with the self-manifestation of the ontological ground – marks the soteriological difference between a path leading to *nirvāṇa* and one that leads to *saṃsāra*.

The central part of the volume thus revisited the main dimensions of the philosophical notion of *rang rig* within the Tibetan tradition, always framed in relation to its Indian heritage on one side, and contemporary exegesis on the other.

The final part of this work explored how the Indo-Tibetan Buddhist tradition may contribute to a contemporary theory of self-awareness capable of addressing the challenges posed by a diverse and multidisciplinary framework. By identifying the key issues with which such a theory must engage, this section investigated the possible resonances, contributions and forms of mutual enrichment between traditional accounts and modern phenomenological approaches.

In particular, a promising common ground was outlined – one in which, in partnership with Indian and Tibetan philosophical and contemplative traditions, cognitive science and phenomenology might collaborate in exploring consciousness, reflexivity and the nature of the self. Within this context, the potentials of neurophenomenology were highlighted as a fertile framework for innovative research, capable of both enriching and problematizing our understanding of consciousness and its specific features. The aim here was to envision some of the most compelling directions for further research, directions that only a genuinely integrated project, bridging scientific and contemplative methodologies, could pursue. One particularly intriguing question raised in this context concerns the possibility of investigating minimal pre-reflective self-awareness during sleep and dreamless sleep, that is, the presence of a reflexivity of mind that persists and unfolds across different states of consciousness.

To address such questions, a promising interdisciplinary path appears to involve combining first-person experiential transformation, through meditative or yogic training, with third-person empirical methods. In this way, the rich legacy of the Indo-Tibetan Buddhist tradition, among others, proves highly relevant to contemporary phenomenological and scientific inquiries aimed at expanding the understanding of the dimensions and structures of consciousness. The full potential of this shared ground remains to be realized.

Regarding the limitations of this study, its scope has been intentionally confined to the Buddhist tradition, deliberately setting aside the broader debates between Buddhist and non-Buddhist schools within the Indian philosophical landscape. As a result, only the main elements of the Indian Buddhist tradition have been considered, primarily to prepare the ground for analyzing their Tibetan assimilation, while the valuable contributions of non-Buddhist schools to the development of *svasaṃvedana* have not been addressed.

In the Tibetan context, a limited number of emblematic accounts was selected with the aim of representing at least the principal dimensions of this rich philosophical concept, without any claim to exhaustiveness. A more comprehensive inquiry would undoubtedly need to encompass additional Tibetan perspectives and doctrinal nuances. For instance, examining the role of *rang rig* within the soteriological framework of Mahāmudrā would be particularly valuable and deserves dedicated analysis.

As for the secondary literature, as noted at the outset of this volume, the language barrier has prevented engagement with recent studies published in Chinese and Japanese, which remain outside the scope of this investigation.

This volume is the outcome of a doctoral research project completed by the Author in 2018, originally conceived as an exploration of the deeper implications of what is understood as a fundamental trait of

the nature of the mind. The inquiry continues to open up new avenues for interpretation and reflection: much remains to be explored in this field, particularly concerning the Buddhist tradition and its potential contributions to contemporary philosophical discourse. This need becomes even more pressing when viewed in relation to the neurophenomenological perspectives discussed in the final part of the study. What is presented here constitutes a preliminary contribution to this broader and demanding undertaking, engaging the transformative potential of a cross-cultural philosophical dialogue whose relevance is becoming increasingly evident and intellectually generative.

Abbreviations

BCA	*Bodhisattvacaryāvatāra*
D	sDe-dge bKa'-'gyur and bsTan-'gyur Numbers According to: Ui, H. et al. (eds) (1934). *A Complete Catalogue of the Tibetan Buddhist Canons (Bkaḥ-ḥgyur and Bstan-ḥgyur)*. Sendai: Tōhoku Imperial University.
MAl	*Madhyamakālaṃkāra*
MAv	*Madhyamakāvatāra*
MV	*ṀMahāvibhāṣā*
P	Pāli
Pe	Peking bKa'-'gyur and bsTan-'gyur Numbers According to: Suzuki, D.T.(ed.) (1985). *The Tibetan Tripitaka. Peking Edition: Catalogue & Index*. Reduced-Size Edition. Kyoto: Rinsen Book Co.
PS	*Pramāṇasamuccaya* 1
PSV	*Pramāṇasamuccayavṛtti*
PV	*Pramāṇavārttika*
PVis	*Pramāṇaviścaya*
SKT	Sanskrit
T	Taishō shinshū daizōkyō Numbers According to: Takakusu, Junjirō, and Kaigyoku Watanabe, eds. 1924-32. *Taishō shinshū daizōkyō*. 85 vols. Tokyo: Taishō Issaikyō Kankōkai.
TIB	Tibetan
TJ	*Tarkajvālā*
VV	*Vigrahavyāvartanī*

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Within the Indo-Tibetan Buddhist tradition, the concept of self-awareness (*svasaṃvedana*; *rang rig*) is understood as the mind's inherent ability to know itself. From early Indian formulations to Tibetan elaborations, the notion unfolds across epistemological, ontological, and soteriological dimensions. Its significance reaches beyond historical boundaries, engaging contemporary debates on the nature of consciousness and the conditions of experience, as well as the relationship between the mind and its objects. Readers are invited to explore these intersections and reconsider self-awareness within a wider philosophical horizon. By foregrounding the mind's capacity to be self-aware, the book brings to light a crucial yet often overlooked theme in Buddhist thought, while also underscoring its relevance for contemporary philosophical inquiry and cross-cultural dialogue.

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