

# “Self-awareness” (Svasaṃvedana) as the Ultimate Result of Valid Cognition in the Pramāṇa System

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The nature of pramāṇa system, outlined by Dignāga (c. 480-540 CE) and further elaborated upon by Dharmakīrti (c. 600-660 CE), is an important part of the Buddhist logico-epistemological tradition. Within this pramāṇa system, self-awareness (svasaṃvedana) is considered a hallmark of the access to the mental states and factors. However, some of the key research often focuses on interpreting the valid cognition system and self-awareness separately, lacking specific descriptions of their interrelationship. This paper argues that self-awareness is not merely a byproduct of valid cognition but is intimately connected to it. Specifically, I posit that self-awareness should be regarded as the ultimate result of valid cognition within the Pramāṇa system.

*Keywords:* self-awareness, valid cognition, Buddhist epistemology, dual appearance

## Introduction

The concept of self-awareness (svasaṃvedana) is pivotal within the framework of Buddhist epistemology, particularly in the Pramāṇa system. Dignāga and Dharmakīrti discuss the definition and characteristics of valid cognition (pramāṇa). And Dignāga’s concept of self-awareness, moving away from earlier interpretations that focused primarily on the external or internal nature of intentional objects, instead, it emphasizes self-awareness as a crucial result of valid cognition (pramāṇa-phala) that offers subjective insight into mental states, thereby enriching the discussion within Buddhist epistemology. This article explores the intricate relationship between self-awareness and valid cognition (pramāṇa), arguing that self-awareness is the ultimate result of valid cognition itself.

## The Nature of Valid Cognition

According to Dignāga, there are two forms of valid cognition: perception (pratyakṣa) and inference (anumāna), which correspond to the particular and universal aspects of objects (T 1628:3b) (Junjirō & Kaigyoku, 1934). Perception is considered the most immediate and direct means of valid cognition, defined as being free from conceptual construction (PS I.3c) (*Pramāṇasamuccaya* of Dignāga, 1968). Dharmakīrti further categorizes perception by adding the term “non-erroneous” (abhrānta) to its definition. He classifies perception into four categories: sense perception, mental perception, self-awareness of all mental activities, and yogic perception (NB i.7-11) (Nyāyabindu of Dharmakīrti, 1971). In this context, self-awareness is regarded as a form of perception. However, some modern scholars do not accept self-awareness as an independent category within

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perception; Kito (1968, p. 27) compresses it into a second type of mental perception. Nagatomi (1979, p. 254) refines this view by discussing the dual appearance of cognition. Conversely, Yao (2004) argues that self-awareness should be categorized as a separate type of perception. Here, we adopt the perspective that Dignāga considers self-awareness to be a form of perception but does not intend to provide a specific categorization of perceptions.

Here it seems we can consider self-awareness as a means of valid cognition. We categorize self-awareness as a type of perception, and since perception is classified as a means of valid cognition (pramāṇa), we can infer that self-awareness also qualifies as a means of valid cognition. However, this interpretation appears somewhat inconsistent with Dignāga's pramāṇa system. In this system, pramāṇa refers to the means by which knowledge or understanding is acquired, while pramāṇa-phala denotes the outcomes or accomplishments achieved through effective cognition, particularly concerning the reflexivity of awareness. In this context, self-awareness is viewed more as a result of valid cognition rather than a means.

A significant aspect of the discourse on pramāṇa is the definition of means of valid cognition (pramāṇa). Dharmakīrti, based on a pragmatic perspective, understands valid cognition as cognition that is consistent with reality and effective in practice. But Dignāga does not provide a precise definition of pramāṇa. Thus we cannot determine the particular nature or value of self-awareness within this framework. But based on Dignāga's overview of the dual appearance of cognition, we can further understand self-awareness in terms of its awareness of the external world and its reflection on itself, thus further supporting and proving our proposition

### Self-awareness and Dual Appearance

Dual appearance refers to the idea that mental states can be understood in two distinct appearances: as they are experienced internally as its own appearance (svābhāsa) and as they relate to external objects or phenomena as its object-appearance (viṣayābhāsa). Dignāga introduces self-awareness as a third component in this framework. The relationship between the three is that the former has the latter, but not vice versa. Together, they constitute the entirety of the mind. However, the dGe lugs school equates self-awareness with the self-appearance of cognition (Williams, 1998, p. 5). While self-awareness does entail some form of self-appearance, it is not exactly equivalent to it. Consciousness may involve an understanding of its own characteristics during self-perception, but this understanding differs from merely recognizing those characteristics. Regarding the object-cognition aspect and subjective aspect, Paul Hoornaert (2000, p. 102) points out that prior to Dignāga, the doctrine of duality stands in the soteriological purpose. Dignāga argued that this is not an appearance of duality as the ultimately mistaken, but two very different appearances (PSV 1.11) (*Pramāṇasamuccayavṛtti* of Dignāga, 1968). Such a distinction facilitates a better understanding of the dual appearance (ābhāsa) of consciousness and enhances our comprehension of the dual aspects of self-awareness.

Returning to self-awareness, cognition can be understood in two distinct forms: object-cognition and cognition of object-cognition. The former is considered first-level consciousness, while the latter is regarded as second-level consciousness. Both forms of cognition provide a coherent explanation for how individuals perceive their experiences, thereby reinforcing the necessity of dual appearances of self-awareness in understanding cognition. Based on this distinction, we can acknowledge a threefold division of cognition: self-cognition, subject-appearance, and object-appearance. These correspond to the result of cognition (phala), the means of cognition (pramāṇa), and the object of cognition (prameya), respectively. The self-awareness aspect can be

viewed as the ability of cognition to reflect on its own activities. It not only recognizes external objects (the object-appearance aspect) but also becomes aware of its own cognitive functions (the subject-appearance aspect). This ability allows cognition to engage in a process that goes beyond merely perceiving the external world; it can also reflect on and confirm its own state of cognition.

The second argument emphasizes the important role of memory in cognition. When cognition arises, the object of perception from the previous moment has already disappeared. Furthermore, memory cannot possess the same object-form as a prior cognition because they refer to different objects at different times. The final argument focuses on memory itself, suggesting that the form of cognition is established through subsequent memory.

Additionally, we can confirm that self-awareness can also be aware of itself due to subsequent memory. If we wish to remember either perceptual or conceptual aspects, we must have experienced them beforehand. Cognitions can be experienced in two ways: on one hand, they can be experienced as distinct from the original cognition; on the other hand, a cognition can be aware of itself without necessitating an external cognitive process. Through the infinite regress argument, Dignāga posits that cognition acts as self-experiencing. Williams (1996, p. 10) notes that when we recall past experiences, self-awareness is remembered, although he omits the second step in this process. Arnold, Wormald, Sim, Rudd, and Dwek (2007, p. 18) strongly support this idea, which parallels contemporary critiques of higher-order theories of consciousness. Self-awareness occurs alongside the perception of an object and is neither reflective nor introspective. However, not everything perceived can be remembered. According to PS, self-awareness is an intrinsic characteristic of all mental states, suggesting that theories regarding memory may be flawed. During this process, we must recognize that self-cognition serves as a means for the subject to experience the object; yet it remains reflexive because it involves only a single mind.

### **The Ultimate Result of Cognition**

As we refer to present self-awareness as the ultimate result of valid cognition, we must discuss the relationship between means and results. There is a notable emphasis on the technical discussions surrounding these concepts in South Asia. Arunachalam and Bandyopadhyay (1979) provide a general overview of the debate, while Dunne, Cosgrove, Shepherd, Aynsley-Green, and Lindley (2004) address some fundamental issues involved. Returning to Dignāga (PSV 1.19c), instead of relying on grammatical analysis, he focuses on the problematic implications of such distinctions. He asserts that whether discussing inference or perception, the means (methods of valid cognition) and results (knowledge obtained through these methods) are consistent with each other, aligning with Dharmakīrti's view.

Why self-awareness can be regarded as the ultimate result of valid cognition in the Pramāṇa system can be explained in part by the writings of Dignāga.

PSV: To explain: cognition arises with two appearances, with its own and with that of the object. The self-awareness of that [cognition] with both appearances is the result.

Why is self-awareness the result of effective cognition?

PS 1.9b: Because the determination of the object [that is to be validly cognised] conforms to it.

PSV: [Self-awareness is the result] because when the object is [everything], cognition right down to the object (savis: ayam), then one cognises the object as desirable or undesirable in conformity with self-awareness, when, on the other hand, the object to be validly cognised is just the external object.

Self-awareness plays a crucial role in identifying and determining the objects we wish to perceive. This certainty aligns with the characteristics of self-awareness itself. In other words, self-awareness is not merely an awareness of one's own mental state; it also ensures that we can accurately identify and understand external objects during the cognitive process, thereby validating our cognition. When we engage with everything around us, our cognition encompasses all the attributes of these objects, allowing us to judge whether they are worth pursuing or should be avoided based on our self-awareness. Thus, self-awareness enables a more comprehensive understanding and evaluation of objects throughout the cognitive process. The results of such valid cognition not only involve perceiving the external world but are also closely tied to how we interpret and assess these perceptions. Here, self-awareness can become the ultimate result of valid cognition.

### Conclusion

Dignāga's diverse expressions of self-awareness can be summarized by a common point: it is a non-conceptual and immediate model of awareness that allows individuals to perceive the subjective appearance of their mental content. Based on these characteristics, it can provide an access to valid cognition about how an object is subjectively presented. This allows us to fully comprehend the results of valid cognition, both in terms of the object to which consciousness is directed and in terms of mental associations. Such an understanding is equally applicable to both externalism and internalism advocated. Therefore, we regard self-awareness as the ultimate result of the valid cognition. However, due to the current limited amount of source texts, the interpretation of the content discussed based on PS (V) 1.8cd-10 still lacks evidence from source texts. Interpretation of this discourse still needs to uncover more support from the original text.

### Abbreviations

NB: *Nyāyabindu* of Dharmakīrti

PSV: *Pramāṇasamuccayavṛtti* of Dignāga

PS: *Pramāṇasamuccaya* of Dignāga

T: *Taishō shinshū daizōkyō* 大正新脩大藏經

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