

SMRITI KHANAL
smritikhanal@g.harvard.edu

Areas of Specialization

Classical Sanskrit philosophy, Buddhist philosophy, Contemporary philosophy of mind

Areas of Competence

Ethics, Political philosophy, Epistemology

Dissertation: *Self-Knowledge in Classical Sanskrit Philosophy*

My dissertation addresses self-knowledge in classical Sanskrit philosophy. I focus on two key debates: one between the 6th century philosophers Dharmakīrti and Kumāriila on knowledge of one's own experiences, and another between the 4th century philosopher Vasubandhu and his Hindu interlocutors on memory and personal identity. I show that these seemingly distinct debates converge on the question of how to restrict experiences that can be known by a subject as their own, and can thus be unified under a single interpretive lens. With this lens, shaped both by analytic philosophy and philology, I illuminate debates that prefigure and are continuous with contemporary discussions on self-knowledge, highlighting the sheer depth and enduring cross-cultural significance of this topic.

Committee: Susanna Siegel, Dick Moran, Jay Garfield, and Birgit Kellner

EDUCATION

Harvard University, Cambridge, MA

Ph.D. candidate, Departments of Philosophy and South Asian Studies, Degree expected May 2025

- Presidential Scholarship, Harvard University, awarded through South Asian Studies
- Dissertation Completion Fellowship, Graduate School of Arts and Sciences, Harvard University
- Arthur Daniel Stillman Fellowship, Harvard University

Harvard University, Cambridge, MA

Master of Theological Studies (South Asian Religions), HDS, 2014

Williams College, Williamstown, MA

Bachelor of Arts in Philosophy, 2011

Central European University, Budapest, Hungary

Certificate in Ethics of Attention, July 1–7, 2024

AWARDS AND FELLOWSHIPS

- **Harvard Philosophy Department Research Fellowship**
Supported participation in *Ethics of Attention* seminar at CEU Summer University, Budapest, July 2024
 - **CEU Summer University Grant**
Supported participation in *Ethics of Attention* seminar at CEU Summer University, Budapest, July 2024
 - **Harvard Philosophy Department Fellowship**
Supported research during Spring 2024
 - **Professional Development Funding, GSAS, Harvard University**
 - Supported attendance at *Conceptuality and Nonconceptuality in Buddhist Philosophy* workshop, UC Berkeley (March 2018)
 - Supported participation at the *Tenth International Intensive Sanskrit Reading Retreat*, L'École française d'Extrême-Orient (EFEO), Siem Reap, Cambodia (January 2019)
 - **Certificates of Distinction in Teaching**
 - Phil 192: Buddhist Philosophy (Fall 2019)
 - Sanskrit 102 (Spring 2021)
 - Sanskrit 101 (Fall 2018)
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TEACHING

Primary Instructor

- *Minds and Persons in Classical Sanskrit Philosophy*, Fall 2023
- Plans to teach *Self-Knowledge and Self-Deception* at the Department of Philosophy of Ashoka University, India (Fall 2020) were disrupted due to the COVID-19 pandemic

Teaching Fellow

- *Ignorance, Lies, Hogwash, and Humbug*, Fall 2021 & Spring 2023 (Robichaud)
 - *Ethics of Climate Change*, Spring 2022 (Stanczyk)
 - *Indian Philosophy*, Spring 2020 (Patil)
 - *Buddhist Philosophy*, Fall 2019 (Patil)
 - *Advanced Philosophical Sanskrit*, Fall 2017 (Venkatkrishnan)
 - *Elementary Sanskrit*, AY 2018–2019 (Venkatkrishnan), Spring 2020 (Hawley)
 - *Intermediate Sanskrit*, Spring 2018 (Venkatkrishnan), Fall 2019 & Spring 2021 (Hawley)
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PRESENTATIONS

Buddhist Philosophy of Consciousness Workshop, Harvard University

Invited to present (declined due to injury)

April 23, 2022

American Academy of Religion Conference

Panelist in the Yogācāra Studies Unit

“Prajñākaragupta and Dharmakīrti on Subject-Object Duality in Experience”

December 2, 2020

South Asian Studies Graduate Colloquium, Harvard University

“Self-Knowledge and Self-Awareness in Dignāgīan Buddhist Philosophy”

December 2, 2021

South Asia Across Disciplines Colloquium, Harvard University

Respondent for “Sticks and Stones: On What Nyāya Can Teach Us About Hate Speech and Political Correctness” by Clarisse Wells

April 18, 2019

Metaphysics and Epistemology Workshop (Department of Philosophy, Harvard University)

- “Postulation and Apprehendedness in Kumāriḷa’s Ślokaḷvārttika”, May 2, 2023
- “Dharmakīrti on Self-Presentation of Experiences”, October 12, 2023
- “Beyond the Bundles: Vasubandhu on Tropes and Split Cases”, March 7, 2024

Sanskrit Seminar (Department of South Asian Studies, Harvard University)

- “Shoemaker on Persons and Their Pasts”, February 27, 2020
- “Vasubandhu on Memory and Quasi-Memory”, March 5, 2020

RESEARCH PROJECTS

Translation of Prajñākaragupta's commentary on Dharmakīrti's

***Pramāṇavārttika* 3.190–238**

July 2020–August 2021 (currently on hiatus)

- Collaborated with Davey Tomlinson, Cat Prueitt, and Nilanjan Das to translate Prajñākaragupta's commentary to select verses of Dharmakīrti's *Pramāṇavārttika*

SANSKRIT LANGUAGE WORKSHOPS

L'École française d'Extrême-Orient (EFEO)

Tenth International Intensive Sanskrit Reading Retreat, January 2019, Siem Reap, Cambodia

- Readings included passages from the 7th chapter of *Jayanta Bhaṭṭa's Nyāyamañjarī* (led by Alex Watson), the 12th chapter of *Raghuvamśa* (led by Csaba Dezso), and selections of Cambodian inscriptions in Sanskrit (led by Dominic Goodall)

Nepal Sanskrit University, Balmeeki Campus

Pre-Dissertation Research, Summer 2018, Kathmandu, Nepal

- Read select passages from the *Ātmavāda* section of Kumārila's *Ślokavārtikka* with Kashinath Nyaupane
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LEADERSHIP

Department Graduate Student Organization for South Asian Studies

Graduate Student Coordinator, 2018–2020

- Organized monthly graduate student meetings and collaborated with co-president to improve student experience
- Organized and facilitated critical readings in South Asian Studies (co-organized with Iris Yellum and Divya Chandramouli)

Co-Founder and Facilitator of Operation Uplift

Professional Development and Peer-Mentorship Program, 2020–2022

- Organized “fireside” interviews with scholars in South Asian studies and Asian philosophy
 - Organized professional development sessions on research methods and tools
 - Organized and facilitated the first ever discussion on caste, race, and language pedagogy
 - Resources available at: [SAS Graduate Resources](#) and [Operation Uplift](#)
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COURSEWORK

Contemporary Analytic Philosophy

- Self-Knowledge (Alex Byrne, MIT)
- Buddhist Philosophy (Parimal Patil)
- Race and Social Justice (Tommie Shelby)
- Self-Knowledge and Self-Consciousness (Matthew Boyle)
- Aristotle (Jacob Rosen)
- Deductive Logic (Warren Goldfarb)
- Indian and Tibetan Yogācāra (Jay Garfield, HDS)
- Memory (Susanna Siegel)
- Perception (Susanna Siegel)
- Indian Philosophy (Parimal Patil)
- Philosophy in Translation: French (2 semesters, Richard Moran)
- Self-Knowledge and Reflection (Richard Moran) [not taken for credit]

Sanskrit Philosophy

- Treatise on *The Three Natures* (previously attributed to Vasubandhu)
- Dharmakīrti's *Examination of Relations*
- Passages from Abhinavagupta's *IPVV* on Other Minds
- Ratnakīrti's *Refutation of Other Minds*
- Aśoka Paṇḍita's *Refutation of Wholes*
- Jayanta Bhaṭṭa's *Blossoms of Reasoning*
- Mokṣākaragupta's *Language of Reasoning* (chapter on perception)

Language Classes

- Advanced Philosophical Sanskrit (Gokul Madhavan, Harvard)
 - German for Reading Knowledge (Nadine Schwakopf, Harvard)
 - Elementary & Intermediate Tibetan (Allison Aitken, Harvard)
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Reading groups

- Selections from Dharmottara's *Drops of Reasoning* (Pradeep Gokhale)
 - Selections from Bhāsarvajña's *Ornament of Reason* (Tyler Neill)
 - Select commentaries on the *Śūnyavāda* section of Kumārila's *Ślokavārttika* (Dan Arnold)
 - Ratnakīrti's chapter on *Unity in Diversity* (Davey Tomlinson)
 - Commentaries on the Perception and *Śūnyavāda* chapters of Kumārila's *Ślokavārttika* (Nilanjan Das)
 - Maṇḍana Miśra's *Establishment of Brahman* (Anand Venkatkrishnan)
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LANGUAGES

- Sanskrit (full professional competency)
 - Classical Tibetan (intermediate reading)
 - French (advanced reading and speaking)
 - German (basic reading)
 - Hindi (advanced reading)
 - Nepali (native)
 - English (bilingual proficiency)
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Self-Knowledge in Classical Sanskrit Philosophy

When Lila looks out at a sunset, she knows both *what* she sees, a sunset, and *that* she sees it. She knows what she sees based on her visual perception. When asked, “how do you know there is a sunset?” she can immediately respond, “because I see it.” But how does she know that she sees the sunset? In response to this latter question, Lila cannot just point out that she sees the sunset. She would need to explain how she knows that she sees it. The answer to this question forms a central problem in the epistemology of self-knowledge. In classical Sanskrit philosophy, theories of self-knowledge naturally arise from reflection on *pramāṇas*, epistemic sources that sustain knowledge, reflection, remembering, and understanding. In three linked essays, I explore 4th to 10th century debates on how we know our experiences. Using analytical and philological methods, I demonstrate that incorporating classical Sanskrit voices into contemporary discussions benefits our understanding of self-knowledge.

“Dharmakīrti on the Self-presentation of Experiences” concerns the arguments of the Buddhist philosopher Dharmakīrti (c. 6th century). He argues that Lila’s perception has both a self-indexed content (“sunset”) and object-indexed content (“this is an experience of sunset”) and that the former grounds her self-knowledge. Against a traditional reading that has him targeting Nyāya philosophers’ higher order perception theory (*anuvyavasāya*) of self-knowledge, I show that his foil is, in fact, the Mīmāṃsā philosopher Kumārila (c. 6th century). In this connection, I show that Kumārila’s view resembles contemporary transparency accounts wherein self-knowledge is based directly on the object-indexed content. I show that Dharmakīrti’s critiques of Kumārila’s view are perspicuous and prefigure the sorts of considerations that partly turned Fred Dretske, for example, into a skeptic about self-knowledge.

“Kumārila on the Postulation of Experiences” addresses a refinement proposed by his 10th century commentators. They argue that the object-indexed content includes the object’s apprehendedness (*jñātatā*) or manifestation (*vyakti*). Kumārila’s commentators set up the following puzzle. The sunset never literally enters Lila’s mind, yet it is *manifest* to her. How is that possible? The only reasonable answer is that her experience makes it manifest. Lila can thus posit her experience to resolve the puzzle of apprehendedness without antecedently perceiving her experience in any way. There are different ways of interpreting this view. I reconstruct and defend Dharmakīrti’s argument against it.

My dissertation also addresses a problem in the metaphysics of self-knowledge. If Lila knows she presently sees the sunset, it seems that she needs to have persisted from the moment she experiences the sunset to the moment she self-ascribes this experience. If Lila remembers seeing the sunset 35 years later, it seems she needs to have persisted for at least that long. The Buddhists hold that experiences can’t have any persisting substratum, presenting them with an additional burden of explaining how self-knowledge is possible. I address the best solution offered to this problem by Vasubandhu (c. 4th century), an intellectual predecessor of Dharmakīrti.

In “Vasubandhu on Persons and their Memories,” I show that Vasubandhu is not as radical as his rhetoric against the notion of an eternal self-substance (*ātman*) might initially suggest. He argues that self-knowledge of past experiences requires a present experience to be (i) an analog (*anurūpa*) of a past experience and (ii) causally connected to the past experience via mental imprints (*samskāras*), “whose force is not destroyed by the peculiarities of the body, grief, distraction, etc.” I show that this theory of memory exemplifies a key insight from Sydney Shoemaker’s “Persons and their Pasts” and that his metaphysics has the resources to sidestep traditional problems that are typically addressed in discussions on personal identity.

With these three papers, I show that history of philosophy using Sanskrit materials itself can serve as a *pramāṇa* for our own self-understanding. We learn that the problems of self-knowledge, for example, can be situated within the framework of epistemic sources in a way that is distinct yet complementary to how self-knowledge has been framed in western rationalist traditions, giving us deeper insight into our own tradition by viewing it from a sufficient hermeneutical distance, and enriching it with resources from elsewhere.