

SMRITI KHANAL
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Areas of Specialization

Classical Sanskrit philosophy, Buddhist Philosophy, Philosophy of Mind

Areas of Competence

Epistemology, Moral and Political Philosophy, Philosophy of Religion

EMPLOYMENT

Princeton University, Princeton, NJ

Postdoctoral Research Associate in Philosophy and Religion, University Center for Human Values, September 2025-present

EDUCATION

Harvard University, Cambridge, MA

PhD in Philosophy, November 2025

- Presidential Scholarship
- Arthur Daniel Stillman Fellowship
- Certificates of Distinction in Teaching for Buddhist Philosophy, Elementary Sanskrit, and Intermediate Sanskrit

Dissertation: *Self-Knowledge in Classical Sanskrit Philosophy*

I examine the epistemology and metaphysics of self-knowledge in Classical Sanskrit philosophy, focusing on debates between Kumārila Bhaṭṭa and Dharmakīrti on the epistemic sources of self-knowledge, and between Vasubandhu and his Hindu and Buddhist interlocutors on the possibility of self-knowledge within Abhidharma metaphysics. I show that these seemingly distinct debates can be united under the same interpretive lens because they converge on one key idea, namely, that any adequate account of self-knowledge must not entail that subjects can self-ascribe as many experiences as there are experienceable objects and experiences that are not in fact their own.

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

Harvard University, Cambridge, MA

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

Williams College, Williamstown, MA

Bachelor of Arts in Philosophy, June 2011

Central European University, Budapest, Hungary

Certificate in Ethics of Attention, July 2024

(Competitive funding awarded by CEU)

PUBLICATIONS

(in preparation for submission; titles anonymized for review)

- Kumārila on Knowledge of Visual Experiences

- Paper on Vasubandhu's theory of memory
- Paper on Dignāga's argument for the dual-nature of experience
- Paper on Dharmakīrti's theory of experience in his PVin
- Paper on Abhidharma Buddhist metaphysics

WORKS IN PROGRESS

- The Unwholesomeness of Anger in Buddhist Ethics
- The Value of Self-knowledge
- Recollective and Meta-attentive dimensions of Attention in Buddhist Meditation
- Dharmakīrti and Abhinavagupta on the Knowledge of Other Minds

TALKS & PRESENTATIONS

Invited Talks

- "Kumārila on the Sources of Self-Knowledge." Department of Philosophy, Cornell University, March 3, 2026.
- "The Value of Self-Knowledge." Human Values Forum, Princeton University, December 1, 2025.
- "Dignāga on Self-Consciousness." Buddhist Philosophy of Consciousness Workshop, Harvard University, April 23, 2022. (Invited; unable to attend.)

Conference Presentations

- "Prajñākaragupta and Dharmakīrti on Subject–Object Duality in Experience." American Academy of Religion Annual Meeting, December 2, 2020.
- "Dharmakīrti on the Self-Presentation of Experiences." World Sanskrit Conference 2025, Kathmandu, Nepal. (Abstract accepted; unable to attend.)

Workshop and Department Presentations

- "Kumārila on the Sources of Self-Knowledge." Philosophy and Religion Working Group, Princeton Project in Philosophy and Religion, Princeton University, March 27, 2026 (*forthcoming*).
- "Kumārila and Dharmakīrti on the Epistemic Sources of Self-Knowledge." University Center for Human Values, Princeton University, November 11, 2025. (*Postdoctoral Fellows' Talk.*)
- "Vasubandhu on Persons and Their Pasts." Philosophy and Religion Working Group, Princeton Project in Philosophy and Religion, Princeton University, October 6, 2025.
- "Beyond the Bundles: Vasubandhu on Memory and Personal Identity." Metaphysics and Epistemology Workshop, Harvard University, March 7, 2024.
- "Self-Intimation of Experiences in Dharmakīrti." Metaphysics and Epistemology Workshop, Harvard University, October 12, 2023.
- "Epistemology of Self-Knowledge in Dignāga and Kumārila." Metaphysics and Epistemology Workshop, Harvard University, May 2, 2023.
- "Self-Knowledge and Self-Awareness in Dignāga's Philosophy." South Asia Across Disciplines Colloquium, Harvard University, December 2, 2021.
- "Vasubandhu's Theory of Memory." Department of South Asian Studies, Harvard University, March 5, 2020.
- "Shoemaker on Persons and Their Pasts." Department of South Asian Studies, Harvard University, February 27, 2020.

Commentaries

- Respondent for “Sticks and Stones: On What Nyāya Can Teach Us About Hate Speech and Political Correctness” (Clarisse Wells). South Asia Across Disciplines Colloquium, Harvard University, April 18, 2019.

TEACHING

Instructor of Record

- ***Mind and Meditation***, Princeton University, Spring 2026
- ***Minds and Persons in Classical Sanskrit Philosophy***, Harvard University, Fall 2023
*Plans to teach ***Self-Knowledge and Self-Deception*** at the Department of Philosophy, Ashoka University, India (Fall 2020) were disrupted due to the Covid-19 pandemic.

Teaching Fellowship (Harvard University)

**indicates received Certificate of Distinction in Teaching*

- ***Ignorance, Lies, Hogwash, and Humbug***, Fall 2021 & Spring 2023 (Robichaud)
- ***Ethics of Climate Change***, Spring 2022 (Lucas 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)

PHILOLOGICAL TRAINING

- **Collaborative Translation Project** on Prajñākaragupta’s Commentary on Dharmakīrti’s *Pramāṇavārttika* (3.190–249), July 2020–August 2021.
- **Tenth International Intensive Sanskrit Reading Retreat**, École française d’Extrême-Orient, Siem Reap, Cambodia, January 2019.
Jayanta Bhaṭṭa’s Nyāyamañjarī (ch. 7), Kālidāsa’s Raghuvamśa (ch. 12), and Cambodian Sanskrit inscriptions.
- **Reading Group on Kumārila’s Śloka-vārttika**, Nepal Sanskrit University, Balmeeki Campus, Kathmandu, Nepal, Summer 2018
Ātmavāda section of Kumārila’s Śloka-vārttika with Kashinath Nyaupane.

SERVICE

- Co-Organizer of Conference, “Attention and the Virtue of Mind and Heart”, March 2026
- Co-organizer of Working Group in Philosophy and Religion, 2025-2026, Princeton University
- Co-Founder and Facilitator of Operation Uplift, Harvard University, 2020–2022
- Graduate Student Coordinator, Harvard University, 2018-2022

COURSEWORK

- *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)
- *Memory* (Susanna Siegel)
- *Perception* (Susanna Siegel)
- *Indian Philosophy* (Parimal Patil)
- *Philosophy in Translation: French* (2 semesters, Richard Moran)
- *Advanced Philosophical Sanskrit* (Gokul Madhavan)
- *German for Reading Knowledge* (Nadine Schwakopf)
- *Elementary & Intermediate Tibetan* (Allison Aitken)
- *Self-Knowledge and Reflection* (Richard Moran) [*not taken for credit*]
- *Madhyamaka Buddhist Philosophy* (Jay Garfield) [*not taken for credit*]

Sanskrit philosophy (primary sources in Sanskrit)

- Treatise on *The Three Natures* (previously attributed to Vasubandhu)
- Dharmakīrti's *Examination of Relations*
- Abhinavagupta on Other Minds in *Recognition of the Supreme Being*
- 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)

RESEARCH LANGUAGES

- Classical Sanskrit (advanced reading and translating)
- Classical Tibetan (intermediate reading)
- French (advanced reading and speaking)
- German (basic reading)
- Hindi (advanced reading)
- Nepali (native)
- English (advanced reading, speaking, writing)

REFERENCES

Susanna Siegel, ssiegel@fas.harvard.edu
Edgar Pierce Professor of Philosophy, Harvard University

Richard Moran, moran@fas.harvard.edu
Brian D. Young Professor of Philosophy, Harvard University

Jay Garfield, jgarfield@smith.edu

Doris Silbert Professor in the Humanities and Professor of Philosophy, Logic, and Buddhist Studies, Smith College (Emeritus)

Birgit Kellner, *birgit.kellner@oeaw.ac.at*
Director of Institute for the Cultural and Intellectual History of Asia, Austrian Academy of Sciences

Alex Watson, *alex.watson@ashoka.edu.in*
Professor of Indian Philosophy, Ashoka University

Self-Knowledge in Classical Sanskrit Philosophy

When Lila looks out at a sunset, she knows both *what* she sees (the sunset) and *that* she sees it. She knows what she sees based on her visual perception. But how does she know that she sees the sunset? The answer to this question forms a central problem in the epistemology of self-knowledge within the *pramāṇa* theory framework of Classical Sanskrit philosophy

In “Dharmakīrti on the Self-Presentation of Experiences”, I argue that a widely cited argument of Dharmakīrti’s for the self-presentation of experience is best read as attacking Kumārila’s inferentialist account of self-knowledge rather than Vāṭayāyana’s inner perception theory. Dharmakīrti justifiably reads Kumārila as holding the basis of inference to one’s experience to be the object’s mere existence. His argument then centers on showing that such an inference fails to meet the basic standards of inferential warrant.

My clarification of Dharmakīrti’s argument sets the stage for understanding better the interventions made by Kumārila’s commentators, according to whom Kumārila intended for the basis of inference to be the object’s *manifestation*, not its mere existence. Kumārila’s commentators set up the puzzle as follows: the object never literally enters our minds yet it is *manifest* to us. How is that possible? The only explanation is that our experience makes it manifest. We can thus abductively infer our experience as an explanation for the object’s manifestation without directly perceiving our experience itself.

In “Kumārila on the Postulation of Experiences,” I further clarify Kumārila’s commentators’ position and Dharmakīrti’s response. I argue that the debate turns on two central contentions. The first concerns whether manifestation is a *genuine* property that gives the object new causal powers. The second concerns whether such a property can be represented in experience without the experience presenting its own relation to it. I argue that this exchange ultimately reveals a troubling convergence between Kumārila’s and Dharmakīrti’s theories.

It is often thought, however, that self-knowledge is not in fact possible within the framework of Dharmakīrti’s metaphysics, according to which persons are just bundles of dharmas (momentary qualities) and numerical identity of persons consists in causal relations between series of bundles of dharmas. Brahmanical philosophers argue that within such a framework, one person could remember and thereby know someone else’s experiences.

In “Vasubandhu on Persons and Their Memories,” I turn to Vasubandhu, Dharmakīrti’s 4th century intellectual predecessor, for the best treatment of this problem. I provide a re-reading that carefully unpacks the notion of dharma as understood by Vasubandhu and argue that Brahmanical arguments embody a misunderstanding of how dharmas are glued together in the absence of a substance. I argue that, in the end, Vasubandhu’s dharma-only metaphysics fares no better or worse than the Brahmanical one in accounting for the possibility of self-knowledge.

With these three papers, I show that history of philosophy using Sanskrit materials itself can serve as a *pramāṇa* of 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.