

Self-Awareness and the Integration of Pramāṇa and Madhyamaka

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Buddhist theories of mind pivot between two distinct interpretative strands: (1) an epistemological tradition in which the mind, or the mental, is the foundation for valid knowledge and (2) a tradition of deconstruction, in which there is no privileged vantage point for truth claims. The contested status of these two strands is evident in the debates surrounding the relationship between epistemology (pramāṇa) and Madhyamaka that extend from India to Tibet. The paper will focus on two exemplars of these approaches in Tibet, those of Śākya Chokden (shākya mchog ldan, 1428–1507) and Tsongkhapa (tsong kha pa blo bzang grags pa, 1357–1419).

Three Types of ‘Self-Awareness’

Self-awareness (*svasamvedana*) is the linchpin of a system of Buddhist epistemology (*pramāṇa*) formulated by Dignāga in the sixth century and developed by Dharmakīrti in the seventh. In their systems, self-awareness not only is the foundation of knowledge, but the pinnacle of knowledge. The English term ‘self-awareness’ also plays an important role in modern phenomenology, and has come to carry a number of different connotations, including the awareness of a self, the quality of subjective consciousness in an awareness of an object, and the structure of intentionality. The awareness of a *self* (at least a self that is understood as an object) is of course denied by Buddhists across India and Tibet. In contrast to this egological self, a second meaning, as the quality of subjectivity, can also refer to the feature of awareness that is embedded in awareness of an object. Self-awareness in this case is first-personal access to experience—the quality of being aware *as an experiential subject* when aware of something. This is the self-awareness commonly claimed by modern phenomenologists.

A third meaning of self-awareness implicates not only the subjective mode of experience, but the structure of reality as well. This interpretation can be seen in

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the Yogācāra tradition of Dignāga (1957) and Dharmakīrti (1957b), which describes self-awareness as the way that the mind presents itself in the phenomenal features (*ākāra*) of an object and a subject. In this third sense, self-awareness is not only the means by which experience arises but also its content: 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, nondual) even though it presents itself as a duality of subjects and objects.

All three of these interpretations of self-awareness are related. The first (self-awareness as the awareness of self), while explicitly denied by Buddhists, is, according to some thinkers, implicated by the latter two.¹ Indeed, the relationship between a mistaken sense of self and the second and third types of self-awareness (namely, subjectivity and absolute idealism) is a topic around which there is a lot of debate and there is much at stake. The second meaning—self-awareness as the subjective feel of a cognition—can be considered to be a self, a subtle self or minimal self as the bare sense of being a subject of experience. The third sense of self-awareness, as the structure of reality, can be identified with the self, too, albeit a cosmic self, in the sense of the self as universe or a boundless, ecological self. Of course this is not a self among others, but is an all-embracing unity, the source and substance of everything. Thus, we can see three types of self-awareness (SA):

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).

Are any of these forms of self-awareness compatible with Madhyamaka? Certainly the first type, an egological view (self-awareness as *awareness of self*), is something Mādhyamikas explicitly negate, but what about the second or third? The fact that self-awareness implicates an ultimate ground, or a mistaken notion of self, has been argued by Tsongkhapa, and is the reason why he denies it. Yet the meaning of self-awareness is complex, and theorists in India and Tibet have come down on a range of views on this key topic.

Self-Awareness and Pramāṇa

Two main ways that self-awareness has been represented can be clarified as the difference between a *reflective* self-awareness and a *prereflective* self-awareness.

While a reflective quality of mind is tied to an intentional, transitive structure, a prereflective one is not. A reflective self-awareness is the object of another cognition, a higher-order thought or perception, such as what we see in the works of David Armstrong and David Rosenthal.² That is, reflective self-awareness is a second-order awareness or introspective cognition. Thus, reflective self-awareness has the structure of the first type of self-awareness (awareness of self)—as a directed, intentional consciousness, an *awareness of* something. Prereflective self-awareness, however, is a different story. It is held to be an intransitive cognition without a direct object, not an *awareness of* something. Thus, self-awareness is not known like any other cognized object. Such a view of self-awareness, as part in parcel with awareness itself, is represented in the phenomenological tradition of Edmund Husserl, and in the works of Jean-Paul Sartre, and recently explicated by Dan Zahavi.³ It is also a view shared by Buddhists like Śāntarakṣita and Śākya Chokden.⁴

Since phenomenologists typically argue that the quality of self-awareness is an intrinsic property of awareness, self-awareness is primary and foundational; it serves being a ground for undeniable knowledge. It is precisely because self-awareness is presumed to have this feature—as an intrinsic property of awareness with a unique status among kinds of knowledge—that it is rejected by Tsongkhapa. Tsongkhapa consistently refused to privilege the mind's access to itself over its access to objects. He put self-awareness on par with object-awareness—and for him, all such cognitions are only conceptual constructions.

The third meaning of self-awareness, the dual-aspected nature of self-awareness (not simply the subjective aspect) 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 (1957) and Dharmakīrti (1957a) outlined subjective and objective features of self-awareness. In his *Pramāṇaviniścaya*, Dharmakīrti (1957a) claimed that 'What is experienced by cognition is not different [from it].'⁵ Self-awareness in this case is thus both the means and content of knowledge, similar to Spinoza's notion of substance, which he defined as: '... that which is in itself and is conceived through itself ...' (2002, definition 3, p. 217). 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,⁶ like Dharmakīrti (1957b).⁷

A modified version of this third type of self-awareness, as the ultimate substance or truth, is found in the works of Śākya Chokden. In the way that for Spinoza, mind and matter are nothing but attributes of the one (infinite) substance of God,⁸ Śākya Chokden claims that the only thing that is real is self-awareness, and that this self-awareness is the ultimate reality—the real ground for the unreal subject-object presentation of duality. Yet the self-awareness that Śākya Chokden claims to be real is exclusively a nondual awareness, not ordinary self-awareness, for he denies the reality of any awareness that perceives duality.⁹ Real self-awareness for him is of another order than ordinary cognitions.

Śākya Chokden thus creates a third category for self-awareness, beyond cognitions structured within a dualistic subjectivity and objectivity. His self-awareness is thus a kind

of supermind, or gnosis (*ye shes*), as opposed to ordinary consciousness (*rnam shes*). Self-awareness for Śākya Chokden is *sui generis*, like Spinoza's substance (a.k.a. God). Yet in contrast to Spinoza, Śākya Chokden describes the ultimate in a way that resembles the phenomenality of the dualistic mind. That is, he describes ultimate gnosis in the way that he depicts ordinary self-awareness; he describes this ultimate self-awareness as the 'phenomenal feature of an apprehender' (*'dzin rnam, grāhakākāra*),¹⁰ and similarly characterizes it as internal, 'inward looking' (*kha nang lta*), as opposed to outward looking.¹¹ In this way, he draws on the unique quality of subjectivity in *prereflective self-awareness*, the second type of (ordinary) self-awareness, as an analogue for ultimate self-awareness, the third type. Thus, the way a unique status is given to subjectivity in the immediacy of first personal perception parallels the status of self-awareness as gnosis—an ultimate, incontrovertible truth.

Śākya Chokden, with the idealists, does not postulate a metaphysical notion of matter independent of experiential reality. Since the 'stuff' of the world for him is cognitive, and structurally similar to ordinary self-awareness, the primary material of the world is not completely opaque to cognition, unlike a physicalist's posit of a mysterious thing called 'matter'. Śākya Chokden also claims that nondual self-awareness is the transcendental condition for a dualistic mind. He says, 'Without primordial gnosis, adventitious consciousness does not arise as distorted appearances. Nevertheless, we do not claim that it is possible for a common ground of the two.'¹² He draws on a distinction between gnosis (*ye shes*) and consciousness (*rnam shes*) similar to one we find made in the distinction between pantheism and *panentheism* ('all is God' vs. 'all is in God')—a distinction that collapses God into nature on the one hand and maintains a transcendent status of the divine on the other. Without the theological language, we can draw out Śākya Chokden's distinction by distinguishing between the panpsychism of his (True-Aspectarian) Yogācāra (which collapses matter into mind) and the *panenpsychism* of his (False-Aspectarian) Madhyamaka (which denies both ordinary mind and matter, but claims an absolute idealism such that everything takes place by means of a transcendent, mind-like substance).¹³

This type of self-awareness is negated by Mādhyamikas like Candrakīrti and Tsongkhapa because it is seen as representing a form of subjective idealism, with an internal mind as an independent substance, which contradicts the Buddhist doctrine of interdependence. Yet Śākya Chokden ultimately denies the subjective idealist claim to the reality of an internal mind as opposed to an external world because he denies the reality of all dualistic cognitions. Since he agrees with the Madhyamaka position that nothing taken as an object sustains ontological analysis (including this ultimate gnosis), he claims that the reality of self-awareness is of a different order than truths that result from these kinds of analyses.¹⁴ Tsongkhapa rejects this claim; for him nothing, not even emptiness, is of a different order of analysis. Thus, Śākya Chokden parts ways with Tsongkhapa's Madhyamaka by maintaining a special status for nondual self-awareness—which is a pure 'subject' without an object—as the only thing that is ultimately real.¹⁵

Madhyamaka and Conventional Grounds

In contrast to Śākya Chokden, whose characterization of self-awareness reflects the principal role of phenomenology in his system, Madhyamaka is primary in Tsongkhapa's interpretation. That is, Tsongkhapa privileges Madhyamaka over *pramāṇa* (or ontology over phenomenology). To see how this is the case, we will look at the way he outlines the contours of epistemology.

An important part of Tsongkhapa's integration of *pramāṇa* and Madhyamaka is his delineation of three ways to knowledge. The first is to apprehend phenomena while falsely attributing intrinsic nature to them; the second is to apprehend phenomena while knowing that they are like illusions, lacking intrinsic nature despite appearing to have them; and the third is to apprehend phenomena without discriminating them one way or the other as intrinsically existent or not.¹⁶ The first way is false knowledge and the second way is correct knowledge (or in other words, the respective domains of invalid and valid cognitions). Nevertheless, it is the third domain, of what is neither correctly nor incorrectly apprehended, that Tsongkhapa carves out a space to develop his distinctive epistemology, albeit ironically, an epistemology based on neither valid nor invalid knowledge.

In this unreflective stance of conventional truth, Tsongkhapa attempts to create a space for a non-invasive epistemology, that is, an epistemology that purportedly has no ontological commitments. To do so, he outlines one of his criteria for conventional truth as that which is immune to ontological reasoning:

We hold that what exists conventionally is: (1) renowned to a conventional cognition [i.e., consensus], (2) not invalidated by another conventional valid cognition knowing it to be that way, and (3) not invalidated by reason that correctly analyzes its [ontological] reality, that is, whether it intrinsically exists or not.¹⁷

Yet Tsongkhapa collapses the distinction between conventional fact and ultimate fiction when he qualifies conventional truths with the ontologically rich term 'mere' (*tsam*)—in the way he distinguishes, for instance, the 'mere self' (*bdag tsam*) from an 'intrinsically existent [self]' (*rang bzhin gyis yod pa'i bdag*). Tsongkhapa claims: "The merely conventionally posited term *mere* excludes real intrinsic existence, but not valid establishment."¹⁸ Furthermore, he states:

There are two senses of 'self': (1) one that is conceived with a nature that is essentially real and (2) one that is held in mind with the mere thought 'I am'. The former is an object of negation by reasoning and the latter is not negated, for it is maintained to be conventionally real.¹⁹

Thus, he maintains that the ontologically neutral apprehension of a 'mere self' looks a lot like the ontologically reified one that is perceived to be intrinsically existent, even though the latter is a fundamentally mistaken perception. That is, the ontologically neutral 'mere self' is what turns out in the end to be a correct perception, the second category of knowledge, as the appearance of a self without intrinsic existence.

Yet an ontologically neutral phenomenon like a 'mere self' for him is supplanted by the ontologically rich 'mere self' that lacks intrinsic existence, and thus he

pivots between two meanings of ‘mere’ (*rtsam*): from ‘a mere self’ (without any ontological commitment about it) to ‘a mere self’ (with the ontological commitment that it has no intrinsic nature).²⁰ This shift is effectively on par with the move made by Śākya Chokden, who slides from conventional to ultimate truth, or from ordinary self-awareness to ultimate self-awareness, by claiming that they share the same features (e.g. ‘inward looking’), and that only the latter is real. Tsongkhapa, too, claims that an unreflective stance on reality shares the same features with conventional truth, and it is the latter that is what is real for him *conventionally*—the only way he affirms something to be real. Thus, in a way that mirrors the way that Śākya Chokden’s interpretation flirts with subjective idealism, Tsongkhapa’s flirts with naïve realism.

The role that self-awareness plays for Śākya Chokden is paralleled in Tsongkhapa’s shifty third category, where something is neither correct nor incorrect. In both cases of self-awareness (for Śākya Chokden) and the unreflective stance (for Tsongkhapa), this category of truth becomes an incontrovertible ‘foundation’. While Tsongkhapa evokes an unreflective stance of common sense to avoid unwanted foundational assumptions of epistemology, like self-awareness, he reinserts the conventional as foundational in the same breath.

Moreover, we can see how a third category for both Śākya Chokden and Tsongkhapa not only serves as a foundation, but the *pramāṇa-phala*,²¹ the ‘result of valid cognition,’ or end of their epistemology. For Tsongkhapa, common sense is the starting point and end of his philosophy, as it is the nature of the conventional (and by implication, ultimate) truth. For Śākya Chokden, self-awareness is the foundation of his philosophy: it is the starting point of epistemology, in that it is the transcendental condition for experience, and it is the end, too. This is because gnosis, as a supermind, is the only thing that is real in the end.

Conclusion

To conclude, both Śākya Chokden and Tsongkhapa claim to integrate Madhyamaka and *pramāṇa*, but the ways they do so are quite distinct. Their theories reveal the distinctive foundations of *pramāṇa* and Madhyamaka upon which their systems are built. Following Dharmakīrti, Śākya Chokden represents the Buddhist epistemological tradition of *pramāṇa*, and affirms self-awareness as the only valid cognition in the end. In contrast, Tsongkhapa follows Candrakīrti in denying self-awareness. He does not build his system upon *pramāṇa* or phenomenology, but rather his system is driven by the critical ontology of Madhyamaka.

We have seen how Tsongkhapa attempts to integrate *pramāṇa* and Madhyamaka by introducing a third alternative to the dichotomy of valid and invalid—an unreflective stance. Śākya Chokden tries to integrate *pramāṇa* and Madhyamaka, too, by delineating the respective claims of the traditions into different registers of truth, and by inserting a third category of truth, ultimate self-awareness, beyond the duality of subject and object.

Despite their differences, Tsongkhapa's and Śākya Chokden's theories can both be seen as attempts to articulate nonduality from different vantage points: respectively from the outside and inside, or as many and as one. While Tsongkhapa lays out a nondual *substructure* by evoking the primordality (or primacy) of the unreflective stance, and by claiming that there is no mind without an object just as there is no object without a mind, Śākya Chokden collapses the dichotomy of mind and matter in another way: by sublating both mind and matter to a nondual *superstructure*, primordial gnosis. Tsongkhapa starts from a standpoint of Madhyamaka, a project that purports to not partake in metaphysics. By collapsing the ontological distinction between two truths, he gives a pluralistic ontological account of nonduality: nothing more than the (conventional) world. In contrast, Śākya Chokden offers a view of nonduality from a point of departure in *pramāṇa*, with ultimate self-awareness.

Yet the way Śākya Chokden positions self-awareness as a third category that is neither an ordinary subject nor an object creates a philosophical problem as to how this supermind relates to the ordinary world of minds and objects, which is another iteration of the mind–body duality problem, writ large. Tsongkhapa skirts this issue by not taking up with the nature of mind or matter in this way, but by turning to the two truths of Madhyamaka—ontological deconstruction and unreflective convention—as a solution.

Does Śākya Chokden, in attempt to solve a philosophical problem of duality by explicitly denying external realism and subjective idealism, only defer this problem by claiming a transcendent ground (i.e., *panenpsychism*) rather than simply a common ground for both? That is, despite Śākya Chokden's explicit claims to nonduality, implicitly, does he not leave duality in place? The anti-foundationalist proposal of Tsongkhapa's Madhyamaka offers an immanently realist alternative to Śākya Chokden's nonduality framed within an absolute idealism. That is, by unrelentingly affirming the duality of external objects and internal minds, Tsongkhapa implicitly collapses this duality, too, as an ultimate structure of the world. He does so by showing that internality cannot exist without externality, and thus that the notions of an internal mind and external matter are both co-constituting, conceptual constructions.

Disclosure Statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

Notes

- [1] Buddhists like Tsongkhapa, as well as non-Buddhists like Rāmakanṭha Bhaṭṭa, argue that accepting self-awareness implicates accepting a self. For Tsongkhapa's position, see note 19 below; for Rāmakanṭha Bhaṭṭa's position, see Watson (2006).
- [2] See Armstrong (1968) and Rosenthal (2005).
- [3] See Zahavi (2005, pp. 20–22).

- [4] Śāntarakṣita (1957), *Madhyamakālaṃkāra* v. 16–17; also TS 1999–2000: ‘Consciousness is the opposite of matter; this immateriality is nothing but its self-awareness. Being singular without parts, it cannot be divided into three [the knower, the known, and the knowing]. This self-awareness is not constituted by action and agent.’ Tibetan and Sanskrit editions in Ichigo (1985, p. 70). Śākya Chokden’s view on self-awareness will be treated below in notes 10 and 11.
- [5] Dharmakīrti (1957a), *Pramāṇaviniścaya* 1.38a: *nānyo ’nubhāvvyo buddhyāsti*. See Keira (2004, p. 40n75). See also, Dharmakīrti (1957b), *Pramāṇavartikka*, II. 388–390; English trans. in Matilal (1974, pp. 159–160).
- [6] Spinoza claimed that ‘If things have nothing in common with one another, one cannot be the cause of the other’ (2002, Proposition 3; p. 218). Also, he adds that ‘although two attributes be conceived as really distinct, that is, one without the help of the other, still we cannot deduce therefrom that they constitute two entities, or two different substances’ (2002, Scholium to Proposition 10; p. 221).
- [7] See Dharmakīrti (1957b) on self-awareness, in *Pramāṇavartikka* III. 326–327; and on causes ‘of the same type’ (*sajāti*), in *Pramāṇavartikka* II. 36. See also Arnold (2012, p. 33).
- [8] Spinoza states in Proposition 15 of the *Ethics*: ‘Whatever is, is in God, and nothing can be or be conceived without God’ (2002, p. 224).
- [9] Śākya Chokden (1975a, pp. 477–478). See also Komarovski (2011, pp. 163–164).
- [10] It has been suggested that ordinary self-awareness resembles this gnosis, in the sense that ‘analogical luminous clarity’ (*dpe’i ’od gsal*) resembles ‘actual luminous clarity’ (*don gyi ’od gsal*). See Dreyfus, “Would the True Prāsaṅgika Please Stand,” (2003, p. 346n33).
- [11] Śākya Chokden (1975d, p. 122). See also Komarovski (2011, p. 249).
- [12] Śākya Chokden (1975d, p. 121). See also, Komarovski (2011, pp. 239–240).
- [13] Śākya Chokden (1975b, p. 364). See also, Komarovski (2011, pp. 157–159).
- [14] Śākya Chokden (1975c, p. 23). See also Komarovski (2011, pp. 220–225; p. 241).
- [15] Śākya Chokden says ‘The gnosis that is the basic nature of reality is truly real.’ Chokden (1975c, p. 118): (*chos kyi dbyings kyi ye shes bden par grub*).
- [16] Tsongkhapa (1998, p. 144), Tsongkhapa (1995, pp. 703–704); English trans. in Cutler (ed.), p. 259.
- [17] Tsongkhapa (1995, p. 627); English trans. in Cutler (ed.), p. 178.
- [18] Tsongkhapa (2006, p. 39): *thad snyad kyi dbang gis bzhaḡ pa rtsam zhes pa’i rtsam gyi sgras kyang don rang gi ngo bor yod pa bcod kyi/tshad mas grub pa mi bcod do*.
- [19] Tsongkhapa (1995, p. 663); see Jinpa (2002, p. 71).
- [20] For a further discussion of Tsongkhapa’s ‘mere’ (*rtsam*), see Tsongkhapa (2006, p. 39); trans. in Garfield, *Ocean of Reasoning*, p. 39.
- [21] Dignāga (1957) calls self-awareness the *pramāṇa-phala* in *Pramāṇasamuccaya* I. 9–10; English trans. in Hattori (1968, pp. 28–29). See also, Dharmakīrti (1957b), *Pramāṇavartikka* III. 357.

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