Abstract The concept of “self-awareness” (vāsāṃvedana) enters Buddhist epistemological discourse in the Pramāṇasamuccaya and -vṛtti by Dignāga (ca. 480–540), the founder of the Buddhist logico-epistemological tradition. Though some of the key passages have already been dealt with in various publications, no attempt has been made to comprehensively examine all of them as a whole. A close reading is here proposed to make up for this deficit. In connection with a particularly difficult passage (PS(V) 1.8cd-10) that presents the means of valid cognition and its result (pramāṇa/pramāṇaphala), a new interpretation is suggested, inspired by the commentary of Jinendrabuddhi. This interpretation highlights an aspect of self-awareness that has hitherto not been claimed for Dignāga: self-awareness offers essentially subjective access to one’s own mental states and factors.

Keywords Svāsāṃvitti · Self-awareness · Dignāga · Dharmakīrti

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The concept of self-awareness was introduced into the South Asian pramāṇa discourse by the Buddhist epistemologist and logician Dignāga (ca. 480–540). As defined by his prominent successor Dharmakīrti (ca. 600–660), “self-awareness” (svasamvedana) refers to the idea that all mental states and the factors like passion or feelings that accompany them are aware of themselves. This Buddhist position is typically articulated in tandem with the claim that this awareness is not due to a subsequent mental state, as this would produce an infinite regress. Self-awareness is therefore innate to mental states; it is a dimension or aspect of sense-perception, inference, and other classes of mental states. The Buddhist account of self-awareness was criticized from the Brahminical side, by representatives of the Bhāṭṭa-Mīmāṃsā and of Nyāya. Prabhakara-Mīmāṃsākas as well as Śaivas, on the other hand, adapted and appropriated self-awareness within their own philosophical frameworks. In Buddhism itself, the status of self-awareness was debated among later Mādhyamikas, a phenomenon that speaks of the latter school’s complex relationship with the pramāṇa enterprise.

In this paper, I am going to take a fresh look at Dignāga’s exposition of self-awareness in the chapter on perception (pratyakṣa) of his seminal work, the Pramāṇasamuccaya together with its auto-commentary, the Pramāṇasamuccayavṛtti, which I will refer to jointly as PS(V). One relevant passage (PS(V) 1.8cd-10) has recently attracted considerable attention. The papers by Shinya Moriyama and Dan Arnold in this volume show not only how much food for thought this brief passage offers, but also demonstrate just how differently it can be (and historically was) interpreted. However, to my knowledge no attempt has been made so far to reflect comprehensively on Dignāga’s pithy statements and dense arguments about self-awareness. In trying precisely this, I hope to lay a foundation for a better understanding not only of Dignāga’s arguments, but also of what later interpreters, notably Dharmakīrti, made of them or, at the very least, to highlight points that demand further attention. While I shall also make some philosophical observations, I am for the time being not aiming at a philosophical characterization or an elaboration of Dignāga’s position, as Dan Arnold so impressively offers in this volume. Nevertheless, some of the points I make are in agreement with components of Arnold’s account, as he also highlights.

The second main reason for re-reading Dignāga’s PS(V) concerns the philological basis. Earlier studies could only access the PS(V), lost in its original language Sanskrit, via two Tibetan translations that are widely divergent and problematic, as well as a rather limited number of Sanskrit fragments; fragments of the PS(V)’s chapter on perception were assembled by Masaaki Hattori in his groundbreaking study Dignāga, On Perception (1968). The philological situation has improved dramatically from 40 years ago, as in 2005 Ernst Steinkellner, Helmut Krasser and Horst Lasic published critical and

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1 See Yao (2005) for an attempt to find possible precursors and sources in earlier Buddhist thought for Dignāga’s notion of svasamvedana.
2 See NB 1.10: sarvacitacaitītānām ātmasamvedanam.
3 Other recent accounts of this passage can be found in Arnold (2005a, 2008), Chu (2006), and Kataoka (2009).