

## Anatta

A Dharma Talk at the Pine Street Sangha by [Nelly Kaufer](#), Lead Teacher Pine Street Sangha

The topic of *anatta* is a difficult topic to talk about without creating misconceptions or reducing meaning. The common translation of *anatta* as “no self” is misleading. Although a mouthful, let’s consider *anatta* as “no enduring, unchanging self.” Our sense of self, who we are, is fluid. It changes over time and in different situations.

I’m going to tie this talk on *anatta* to my Vipassana practice, which is also a complex topic, too easily reduced in meaning. I give this talk with much respect for the Vipassana teachings and teachers because as I go through deeper learning and unlearning, the more respect I have for my early learning.

During a course in graduate school in the 1980’s, I was leading a guided meditation on the body, scanning the body - which is one of the common practices I was taught. I went through the body - be aware of the foot, the thigh, the knee - and so on. Afterwards, my teacher said to me, “Why did you say ‘the’ foot instead of ‘your’ or ‘my’ foot?”

When she questioned me I responded, “Uh, I don’t know.” I didn’t have a clue because I was just mimicking the instructions I was given. I had never really thought about why I was given the instructions this way or why I was repeating them this way. Then she said, in psychotherapeutic language, “Oh, is that dis-identification?” And I said “Yes, that’s what it is!” But as I’ve thought about it more, it almost feels like a trick. If I don’t call it “my foot then I won’t be so identified with it. I will somehow know more about *anatta* by changing a pronoun.

Back then, I was really terrified when I heard about *anatta*. I was young and I didn’t know what it meant, but when translated as “no self” it seemed to mean there was no ground under me. I was going to go into free-fall and somehow that was supposed to be good. I was really scared. Part of what I did with that terror was I clung to the instructions. I did not want to free fall so I clung onto the object of meditation, whatever it was at the moment.

At that developmental age, I needed to develop my sense of self. I was onto something when I was afraid; there was something that I needed to develop, not dissolve. About that time, there was an article saying you had to be somebody before you could be nobody. Then there was a rebuttal to that article and a rebuttal to the rebuttal! I was not alone; people were wrestling with this concept.

At that time, I did a lot of retreats - and still do. One thing that happens on retreat is that the conditions change. You’re on a different schedule, you meditate more often, you eat different food, sleep in a different bed. You’re in different roles. In some Vipassana retreats it can get more severe; you are asked to not do things you usually do like read or write. As conditions shift on retreat, you can catch a glimpse of the fluidity of our sense of self.

*Anatta* is a Pali word. It really doesn't mean no-self in the way in which I was afraid. A better translation is that there is no unchanging essence or soul. Our sense of self isn't stable, isn't always the same. It's not in free-fall, but it is shifting and changing under different conditions.

On the other hand, sometimes people feel like nothing is changing. It's always the same. When this is your perception, watch for more subtle changes. Especially, notice if how you regard the experience changes. Maybe you become a bit more accepting or tolerant. Or maybe you pick up something a little different or new that allows you to think differently about this experience. But you will have to stay with it and see if my prediction turns out to be true.

So, back to this misconception that no-self is about there being no ground, that things are completely groundless. What I know to be true is that we exist on shifting sands. Things are moving and we have to deal with that and still stand on our feet. We become able to stand on those shifting sands, not feel destroyed or annihilated by them, but be able to stand and respond, take some actions when needed.

Rather than realizing a terrifying no-self, what we're doing is developing a more flexible sense of self. We need a sense of self to maneuver in the world. As that sense of self becomes more flexible, we become better able to respond to the shifting sands and conditions of our lives, of our existence. This kind of progress, or development, comes from a deeper understanding of *anatta*. Hopefully, this more flexible sense of self has certain qualities about it - a little kinder, a little wiser.