

Anatta Means “Not Self” Rather Than “No Self”

by Thomas Razzeto infinitelymystical.com

Today I am going to talk about the word “anatta,” which in my opinion is best translated as “not self” rather than “no self,” which is fairly common. This is a very Buddhist topic and my mentor, Timothy Conway, is an expert on Buddhism so I learned this translation from him.

I think a good place to start our exploration of this subject is to consider the context in which the word “anatta” was originally used. This takes us back two and a half thousand years to texts in which we find Buddha contemplating the five components of the person – the five “skandhas.”

For the purpose of today’s talk, we don’t even need to go into the details of what those components actually are. All we really need to do is notice that Buddha is going through the process of disidentification. He considers each component individually and then for each one, he repeats three phrases, which Timothy translates from the Pali Canon as “This is not mine. This is not who I am. This is not my Self.” And Timothy clarifies that “my Self” means the “True Self.”

(Use the link at the end to hear Timothy recite the Pali text and offer an English translation.)

I think it can be helpful to add the word “fundamental.” This is not my *fundamental* Self. And this brings up a good question. What is your fundamental self? What is your true identity?

Well, as you may know from my other talks, I offer the idea that you exist fundamentally as pure awareness, the One Divine Awareness. This is what you are fundamentally. *This is all you are fundamentally.*

And yet there’s more to what you are – but none of that is essential to what you are as pure Awareness. Through the miracle of creation, this formless Awareness paradoxically arises as the form we see all around us. And this is what you are in a nonfundamental way.

To help us understand this point a little better, let’s briefly consider the metaphor of the actor and the character. This will be very quick. When the actor comes forward as the character, they are one. That’s an important point. And yet, the character is not fundamentally who the actor really is. The character is not essential to the actor since the actor can drop the role of the character at any time. The actor arising as the character is very much like God arising as creation so I hope you spend some time pondering this metaphor.

Now, let’s get back to the process of disidentification. This process is not really complete until you clearly recognize that you exist fundamentally as pure awareness. Then this wisdom deepens and you also recognize that there is only one Awareness which arises as everyone. Remarkably and paradoxically, everyone is a unique expression of this one changeless Source-Awareness. In form, we are many; in essence, we are One. The recognition of this is the process of reidentification.

So first, you disidentify from the person while clearly identifying as Source-Awareness. And then you reidentify in a profound and yet nonfundamental way as everyone, including the person you appear to be.

So you disidentify from the small and reidentify as the All.

This reidentification is the source of the deepest inspiration for kindness and compassion. You love everyone, including yourself, because everyone is fully divine in both their essence and their form. This is why every time the subject of disidentification came up in satsang with Timothy, he always made sure to also talk about this process of reidentification. This is what opens up the loving heart of enlightenment, so you see why it is so important.

Now, let's get back to the word "anatta" and this time, let's translate it as "no self," as in "no self whatsoever." And let's also completely remove the word "anatta" from the context of the process of disidentification. So now we have this simple statement: There is no self. But that's basically saying that you have no identity. And that's the same as saying you do not exist. But you know you exist. This is self-evident. The real question is: What is it that you exist as?

As you already know, I offer the idea that you exist fundamentally as pure Awareness. This Awareness is the open capacity for experience that you intuitively know yourself to be. Now, I also offer the idea that you exist in a nonfundamental way as all of creation – as everything that can be experienced. So this idea that you do not exist is merely a misunderstanding that comes about through the mistranslation of this word "anatta."

Another expression that comes about through this same mistranslation goes something like this: "there are no persons" or "the person does not exist." Well, just because the person does not exist *as your true, fundamental self* does not mean that the person does not exist. When we look around, we see many persons, so clearly they exist. I think that the true teaching is that the person exists as the character, not the actor. The person is not who you are fundamentally, that's all.

Now the last expression that I'll touch on today goes like this: There is no one here. Ah, but surely someone is here. God is here! God is the One who is arising as everyone. I love that word "everyone." Sometimes I spell it with a capital "O" in the middle to help people see that God is "in" everyOne while still being transcendent above everyOne.

When we celebrate God arising as everyOne and everything, and also celebrate this formless Source-Awareness, we celebrate the totality of Reality. This is what the Hindu tradition so wisely points to with the following two phrases. The first is "Nirguna Brahman," which means "Reality without qualities" – Source-Awareness, completely formless, completely imperceptible. And the second phrase is "Saguna Brahman," which means "Reality with qualities" – all of creation, and yet, still the same Reality. God and creation are One Reality, not two. This is why we use the word "nondual." This is the deepest core idea pointed to by our ancient nondual wisdom.

So now you see why it is so important to contemplate the word “anatta” within its original context of this process of disidentification and to correctly translate it as “not self” rather than “no self.”

So here’s the takeaway:

Your *fundamental identity* is the One Actor, this uncreated, formless Divine Essence, Source-Awareness.

Your *nonfundamental identity* is the totality of created reality: the stage, the props and all the characters. This is what you are through the process of creation.

And your *functional identity* is the combination of the One Actor and the single character (this person) you appear to be.

All of this is thoroughly divine since God is not merely infinitely intimate with all of creation, God *is* creation.

It is God who is arising as everyOne and it is God who is doing everything. How wondrous!

Well, that’ll wrap it up for today. I hope you found this helpful.

In truth, I honor your divine nature,

Thomas Razzeto
infinitelymystical.com

Written June 2017 with slight edits in October 2020.

Here is an audio clip (with still pictures added) of Timothy Conway talking about anatta:

Timothy Conway - Anatta: Not Your Fundamental Identity - Satsang Excerpt

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AZsGMI2WccA&index=4&list=PLElvzxgepyWLP9R2lmobZUvdWTrylzCH4>
10 minutes