

# Struggling with Anattā

Noirin Sheahan · Noirin's Essays · 2 min read

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Struggling with Anatta.

The idea of anatta (often translated as „not-self“) used to fascinate me – inspiring a lovely image of an expanded mind which covered the whole universe. Some texts mentioned fear – but I just knew I wouldn’t be afraid ... until I caught a brief glimpse and realised, to my horror, that the expanded mind didn’t include me – that “I” was left behind for that brief moment and that “I” would always be left behind in the experience of anatta. It was so obvious – the words not-self said it plainly – but I skipped over this till the moment of insight.

Now I don’t often think about anatta ... there are no nice images to entice me and thoughts fade into vagueness. It’s a relief if my mind simply relaxes, gives up on the question. I feel the breath going in and out, and am relieved to know that the whole system functions, that life happens, even though it’s all beyond my understanding.

But in deep meditation I still fight hard against this truth. I may be experiencing the rising and falling of the breath, with thoughts and emotions coming and going, and forget myself within the flow of experience. But if there comes a sense of something strange and new, then a strong sense of “me” emerges, straining to master the situation. On the out-breath, I feel myself daring to relax, wondering “what is it that I am experiencing?” I can feel various sensations – softness or heat in various tissues perhaps – these are comforting, suggesting there is nothing to be afraid of. But there is usually tension as well in other tissues, and a scary gap opens up between „me“ (where it’s all soft and warm and safe and known) and „that“ (whatever lurks in the vague, unexplored, seemingly uninhabitable tension). It feels as if I must die to cross that gap into the unknown. Having been at this juncture so often, I can encourage myself the only thing to die will be fear. But I have to let go of these thoughts and memories in order to relax completely into the felt sense of my present experience.

Fear wins and I snatch at the next in-breath, tensing and gasping in an effort to hold on to all I know, to prevent myself dissolving into the unknown. This effort in turn becomes unbearable and the wish to relax and trust persuades me to breathe out again. The struggle continues until somehow fear dissolves and my senses can explore what was previously beyond my comfort zone. To my surprise I find I recognise a newfound depth of friendliness and ease within myself – as if it were a place I once inhabited within my psyche but had long forgotten. Although I would love to hold onto this experience forever, I find I must forgo all temptation to interfere. Friendliness cannot be imprisoned and any attempt to control obliterates ease.

The truth of anatta sinks in a little deeper as I learn that I am not in control of what I most value within myself. At my best, I am beyond my own understanding and control. As Mary Oliver says in the last

lines of her poem “Sleeping in the Forest”:

All night I rose and fell, as if in water,  
grappling with a luminous doom. By morning  
I had vanished at least a dozen times  
into something better.

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