

What does “all dhammas are no-self” mean, what kind of self does Buddhism accept, what kind does it not accept? What is the spiritual point of the teaching, and to what extent does the effectiveness of contemplating things as no-self depend on some kind of self idea?

Introduction

This paper will aim to examine the Buddhist philosophy of no-self and investigate what it actually means, the concepts significance to Buddhism and how its philosophy is and was used. The discussion will begin with describing the reason why “all dhammas are no-self” in regards to no-self being the core philosophy of Buddhism. This will be followed by giving an actual definition to the word no-self.

The next part of the paper will answer the question of, how can there be no-self when there appears to be a self. This question will be answered by using the analytical methods within the *Gelug* school of Tibetan Buddhism. Following this is a discussion about whether Buddha-nature is the same as no-self or a different concept altogether. To answer the question of, what kind of self exists, this paper has focused on the teachings of the Dalai Lama, and in regards to the point behind the spiritual teaching of emptiness and no-self, the analysis has taken a multi school approach by giving different answers according to different Buddhist sects.

All dhammas are no-self

Ajahn Brahm's (2005) writing on the idea that “all dhammas are no-self:”

“All conditioned things are impermanent. All conditioned things are suffering. All dhammas (all things conditioned and unconditioned) are no-self. These are the three basic factors of all existence.....It is in order to penetrate these truths we practice the Noble Eightfold Path. We equip our minds with power through the abandoning of the five hindrances; then we can actually uncover these truths by experiencing the deep states of meditation.....What is impermanent, subject to change, is suffering, and that by its very nature cannot be taken to be 'me', 'mine', or a 'self'. Whatever is taken to be a self will cause suffering (SN 22, 59). In fact, the permanent happiness of a self is impossible.”

It is commonly said in Theravada Buddhism that the essence of Buddhism is the idea of no-self (Brahmali, 2017), hence it is also said all dhammas are no-self, for nearly all teachings no matter what, in the end relate to the concept of no-self. In Chinese Mahayana Buddhism, the idea of no-self though is hardly ever mentioned as the essence of their teaching revolves almost entirely around the idea Buddha-nature. The difference between these two concepts is discussed below. In Vajrayana Buddhism, there appears to be an interconnection between the ideas of *suññatā*, no-self, *svabhāva* and impermanence.

What is the definition of no-self and what does it actually mean?

The term *anattā* and its translation has been the subject of much debate. Ajahn Sujato (2017) says that, “not self”, “no self”, “no soul” are acceptable translations. There was an online poll on Sutta Central (Brahmali, 2017) asking the question how to translate no-self, three versions were given:

- 1.without soul
- 2.without self
- 3.none of the above

47% of the votes were for “without soul,” 37% for “without self” and 16% for none of the above.

Thanissaro Bhikkhu (2013) says, “*the no-self teaching is not a doctrine of no-self, but a not-self strategy for shedding suffering.*”

In Chinese no-self is written 无我 which means “no/without self” (Chinese scholars clearly didn’t see the meaning as no/without a soul). In the Mahayana tradition it is said, the nature of all aggregates are intrinsically empty of independent existence. *Nagarjuna* denied there is anything called a self-nature as well as other-nature, emphasising true knowledge to be comprehending emptiness (Kalupahana, 1996).

The early Mahayana Buddhist texts link their discussion of emptiness (*suññatā*) to no-self and *nibbāna*. They do so, states Mun-Keat Choong (1999), in three ways: first, in the common sense of a monk's meditative state of emptiness; second, with the main sense of no-self or “everything in the world is empty of self;” third, with the ultimate sense of *nibbāna* or realisation of emptiness and thus an end to rebirth cycles of suffering. The no-self doctrine is another aspect of *suññatā*, its realisation is the nature of the *nibbāna* state and an end to rebirths (Billington, 2002).

Ajahn Brahm (2005) in his writings on no-self said:

“I’ll always remember his reply (Ajahn Chah). As he walked off it was like a profound teaching that he had just shared with me. What he was actually saying here by his teaching, ‘Mai me arai’ was, there is nothing, just emptiness, no-self. This is a powerful teaching because in our world we always want to have something. We always want to grab on to something, and to say ‘there is something.’ But actually, there is nothing.”

The earliest mention by Buddha of no-self is the *Anattā-lakkhana Sutta*: The Discourse on The No-self Characteristic. It is in this discourse that we get an idea of what Buddha meant by no-self. The key points are as follows:

- There are 5 *khandas* which means there are five bundles that constitute and completely explain a sentient beings mental and physical existence.
- The five bundles, aggregates or heaps are: form (*rūpa*), sensations (feelings, received from form) (*vedana*), perceptions (*samjā*), mental activity or formations (*sankhara*), and consciousness (*vijñāna*).
- The *khandas* demonstrate that they are each in themselves impermanent (*anicca*), subject to suffering (*dukkha*) and thus unfit for identification with a self.

In the Theravada tradition, suffering arises when one identifies with or clings to a bundle. This suffering is extinguished by relinquishing attachments to aggregates.

How can there be no-self when there appears to be a self?

Peter Harvey (1995, p.54) said, the *suttas* criticise notions of an eternal, unchanging self as baseless, they see an enlightened being as one whose empirical self is highly developed. This is paradoxical, states Harvey (1995, p.111), in that “the self-like *nibbāna* state” is a mature self that knows “everything as selfless.”

In Theravada Buddhism with regards to the idea of no-self, the mango tree analogy is sometimes given; the idea of rebirth is but a “process.” A B C D E F, when there is B, A is extinguished etc. (Brahm, 2017)

The problem is that past lives can be remembered, pointing towards “personal” memory/memories that are passed on. Or there are institutions such as the Dalai Lama of which we are now at the “14th” Dalai Lama, again a very “personal” or “self” memory that seems to be passed on. It appears as though “B” does not extinguish “A”, hence there is a form of “self” that goes forth. This comes across as a contradiction? The idea of no-self as a core concept in Buddhism but then there is the idea of rebirth where “a self” is reborn hundreds of thousands of times.

Ajahn Bramali (2017) said:

“We have a 'personal' history in this life, and this is pretty much the same as the 'personal' history that goes across lifetimes. The 'you' of today is not the same as the 'you' of last year, let alone the 'you' of ten years ago. And yet there is a connection. That connection is your habits and the sense of continuity that results from these. There is change and continuity working together, but there is no ever-present essential core. It is exactly the same across lives, except that there is 'jump' in your experiences as you cross from one life to the next. If you could recall your past lives, it would feel like you were there in the past lives, just as it feels that you were there ten years ago in this life.”

In Tibetan Buddhism (*Gelug* tradition) an actual framework is given to prove there is no-self. This framework is based on the analysis of whether or not this “I” truly exists and if it does, where?

The framework and reasoning behind it is summed up below (Wangchen, 1987, pp. 201-211):

(A) Reflecting on whether an inherently existing self exists among the aggregates
(Wangchen, 1987, pp. 206)

If you were to say, “I am walking,” here the “I” appears to be the same as the feet as they are moving. This is the same with, “I am looking,” “I am hearing” and “I am thinking.” The “I” is the same as the eyes, ears and mind. If you say, “this body,” “this mind,” now they appear separate to the “I.” Already the “I” can be seen as being both separate from the aggregates and also existing among the aggregates, is this not the case?

Here the issue arises, if the “I” exists among the aggregates then there needs to be many “I’s,” one for each. In other words, there are multiple selves. This “I” could also be broken down into many more, as there are many types of consciousness, many fingers and many organs. If the “I” exists among the aggregates then there are 1000’s of selves that exist. This individual “I” shows up most commonly in the form of mine when something is wrong. “My” spleen is sick.

This brings us to the conclusion that everything is mutually dependent on each other. For a self to exist does it not need to be independent? Most westerners would argue, that the mind is the self. The issue is that the mind is created by many factors such as, DNA, tendencies, life experiences, education and conditioning to name a few. The mind is clearly not the self as it is dependent on so many factors and is constantly changing from moment to moment depending on what one is experiencing.

(B) Reflecting on whether the inherently existence self exists separately from them
(Wangchen, 1987, pp. 209)

The next assumption would be that “I” am the sum of the parts. The issue here is that a true self would of course need to exist without dependency on something, for if there is dependency than there is change and if there is constant change then how can something be called “I?” This means that the “I”

should be connected to the aggregates, but the aggregates include 1000's of "I", so once again the same question arises, where is the "I"?

Here we can come to the conclusion that the "I" neither exists among the aggregates or separate from them.

(C)Conclusive reasoning
(Wangchen, 1987, pp. 209)

The conclusive reasoning is, if the "I" neither exists among the aggregates or exists separately from them, then the "I" cannot exist at all.

The key is that since the beginning of time the mind has been grasping at this "I" and has been unable to let it go. Once one realises that there is no "I" it is said that some may fall into the view of nihilism. It appears as though *Lama Tsonghkapa* initially went through this but after deep meditation came to realise the following:

"Gaining the pure realisation of emptiness is not only a matter of being able to negate the inherent existence of the self. It is just as important to maintain the existence of the "I" at the conventional "I"
(Wangchen, 1987, pp. 211).

This idea of having a conventional self is further discussed below under the section, *what kind of self does Buddhism accept and what kind does it not accept.*

Buddha-nature versus no-self

What is the essence of Buddhism? This question tends to be answered differently according to which school of Buddhism is answering the question. Ajahn Brahmali (2017) says, the essence of Buddhism is the idea of no-self. Venerable Jue Ru (2017) says the essence of Buddhism is Buddha-nature. As a general rule of thumb Theravada Buddhism says the core of Buddhism is the no-self while Mahayana tends to say it is Buddha-nature.

How can the essence of a religion be different in different schools? Or are they actually one in the same and therefore just a different angle on the same concept? These philosophical questions certainly do cause much debate and discussion for Theravada denies the existence of Buddha-nature as they see it as a form of self. While Mahayana Buddhism finds it difficult to accept that Buddha-nature is not the core philosophy of Theravada.

The author would argue that they are one in the same. This statement could be seen as very controversial because many would simply disagree with it. The reasoning behind the statement is as follows:

- Taking the definition of no-self according to Ajhan Brahmali (2017): "the absence of any permanent essence."
- Using the definition of Buddha-nature according to Venerable Jue Ru (2017), Buddha-nature: "pure awareness (and that this pure awareness is always present)."

If we compare these one could say that Buddha-nature is always present on all levels of attainment, and has always been there. The same can be said for no-self. Both hint towards some form of an emptiness/nothingness for if there is no-self than what is there? If Buddha-nature is only pure

awareness than what else is there?

Ajahn Brahm (2005) in his writings on no-self confirms what the idea of no-self is. *“What he (Ajahn Chah) was actually saying here by his teaching, 'Mai me arai' was, there is nothing, just emptiness, no-self.”*

The key words above are nothing and emptiness, the same as pure awareness, a nothingness and emptiness. It is therefore no surprise that within Tibetan Buddhism the idea of both emptiness and no-self are interconnected. For further information, one can look at *Nagarjuna* and the Dalai Lama's contemplation on *Nagarjuna's* teachings.

What kind of self does Buddhism accept, what kind does it not accept?

This question has probably plagued many Buddhists over the centuries. It is quite common that Buddhist schools have accused each other of believing in a self. For example, Theravadins have accused the Mahayana Buddhists of believing in a self with the idea of a Buddha-nature. The *Madakhas* have accused the *Yogacara's* of believing in a self with the mind-only view. Then the Mahayana's accuse the Theravadians of being selfish for their path does not include the *bodhisattva* way. These accusations tend not to be in books or in public lectures but come across subtly in private conversations. One may also ask, if there is karma and karma determines rebirth, is there not a continuation of a certain self?

The Dalai Lama (2010) says:

“Although Buddhist schools accept rebirth, they hold that there is no solid self. For Buddhists, the main topic of training is emptiness or selflessness, which means the absence of a permanent, unitary and independent self or, more subtly, the absence of inherent existence either in living beings or in other phenomenon.”

Therefore, is there a Dalai Lama? Yes. When he writes “I” in his books, yes, he is referring to himself. So, yes there is a self. But this self is illusionary in that it is not permanent, it is not permanent because it is subject to change and it is not unitary because it is dependent on many factors.

What is the difference between the 1st and 14th Dalai Lama, are they the same person? Yes, in that there has been a stream of continuity, no in that he is completely different to who he was before. The Theravadins use the mango tree analogy. Is the tree that was born from the seed of the previous tree, the same? Yes, in that there is continuity between a 1000 generations of mango trees, no in that it is different, not the same tree.

Another way to look at this; a Chinese Mahayana view; until you have a pure awareness, you have defilements in your mind. These defilements cause you karma which cause you rebirth. When you have these defilements, you have a self to some degree. When you have rid yourself of these defilements you are now pure, without any karma and therefore a Buddha. The irony here is that the Buddha (nature) was and has always been there.

What is the spiritual point of the teaching on no-self?

Emptiness and no-self, together these teachings appear to provide the essence of what Buddhism is. These concepts are heavily blended together with one another. Each school though has a slightly different take on them.

Theravada Thai Forest:

Ajahn Brahmali (2018) said: *“The basic meaning of suññatā is that the five khandhas are empty of a self. In this sense, it is more or less equivalent to anattā.”*

“Here is a description that is commonly referred to:”

“Then the Venerable Ānanda approached the Blessed One ... and said to him: ‘Venerable sir, it is said, ‘Empty is the world, empty is the world.’ In what way, venerable sir, is it said, ‘Empty is the world?’ It is, Ānanda, because it is empty of self and of what belongs to self that it is said, ‘Empty is the world.’ And what is empty of self and of what belongs to self? The eye, Ānanda, is empty of self and of what belongs to self. Forms are empty of self and of what belongs to self. Eye-consciousness is empty of self and of what belongs to self. Eye-contact is empty of self and of what belongs to self.... Whatever feeling arises with mind-contact as condition—whether pleasant or painful or neither-painful-nor-pleasant—that too is empty of self and of what belongs to self. It is, Ānanda, because it is empty of self and of what belongs to self that it is said, ‘Empty is the world.’” (from SN 35.85)

“That emptiness (or “voidness”) and non-self are closely related can also be seen from the standard description of insight into the five khandhas: Whatever exists therein of material form, feeling, perception, formations, and consciousness, he sees those states as impermanent, as suffering, as a disease, as a tumour, as a barb, as a calamity, as an affliction, as alien, as disintegrating, as void, as not self (from MN 64).”

“And here is a definition of emptiness liberation (here called ‘deliverance of mind through voidness’):”

“And what, friend, is the deliverance of mind through voidness? Here a bhikkhu, gone to the forest or to the root of a tree or to an empty hut, reflects thus: ‘This is void of a self or of what belongs to a self.’ This is called the deliverance of mind through voidness (from MN 43).”

“This latter use refers to a specific meditative attainment where you perceive things as empty. Whether this is equivalent to the full realisation of anattā is uncertain, and may well depend on the depth of the attainment.”

“Suññatā can also refer to the relative emptiness of personal experience, especially as one reaches ever deeper levels in meditation. This is exemplified by MN 121, the Shorter Discourse on Emptiness. This can be understood as a gradual uncovering non-self, until you get the final insight that everything is non-self. So here, too, the connection to the idea of anattā is a close one.”

“MN 122 concerns suññatā as a meditative attainment. Here the connection to full insight into anattā is closer than in MN 121. It is not entirely unambiguous, but it may well be that the emptiness here described as a meditative attainment is the same as the full insight into anattā.”

Chinese Mahayana and Zen Buddhism:

Venerable Jue Ru (2017) said: *“The essence of Buddhism is Buddha-nature which is always present. It is also called, Pure Awareness.”* Here once again we find a similar idea to no-self/emptiness.

Zen Buddhism also follows suit, Shodo Harada’s students wrote a book called, *“Morning Dewdrops of the Mind: Teaching of a Contemporary Zen Master. (Harada, 1993)”* The book was developed from the newsletters that Shodo Harada Roshi wrote to his foreign students who were not in Japan anymore. The newsletters began in 1988 and finished in 1992. It is evident that each newsletter covers

certain contemporary issues of that year, whereby Shodo Harada Roshi gives his take on these issues from a Zen perspective. Each newsletter though has the same core theme within it. The theme is Buddha-nature and emptiness.

Tibetan Buddhism (Gelug approach):

Nāgārjuna's major thematic focus is the concept of *suññatā*. This is confirmed by the Dalai Lama in his lecture series: *Śāntideva's* Guide (Dalai Lama, 2010). For *Nāgārjuna*, it is not merely sentient beings that are “selfless” but all *dhammas* are without any *svabhāva* and therefore without any underlying essence.

The Dalai Lama (2010) has a unique definition of *suññatā*. He says it does not mean zero but instead that it is something which is there but what is there has no independent absolute existence as everything is always changing and therefore dependent on something.

Here we have the idea of no-self and *suññatā* intermixing and fitting together quite nicely. The key here as explained by the Dalai Lama (2010) is that there are two types of “I”. I as in a mere “I”, “I am Shaun,” he says this is an acceptable “I.” A solid “I” though is incorrect as there is no independent “I”, no independent self. According to the Dalai Lama how can something exist inherently of itself when it is always dependent on something. All things arise dependently and therefore not by themselves but by depending on conditions leading to their coming into existence. There is clearly a strong connection between *suññatā*, no-self, *svabhāva* and the idea of impermanence.

As part of his analysis on the emptiness of phenomena in the *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā*, *Nāgārjuna* critiques *svabhāva* in several different ways. He discusses the problems of positing any sort of inherent essence to causation, movement, change and personal identity. *Nāgārjuna's* logical analysis is based on four basic propositions (Dumoulin, 1998):

1. All things (*dhamma*) exist: affirmation of being, negation of non-being
2. All things (*dhamma*) do not exist: affirmation of non-being, negation of being
3. All things (*dhamma*) both exist and do not exist: both affirmation and negation
4. All things (*dhamma*) neither exist nor do not exist: neither affirmation nor negation

Tibetan Buddhism (Yogacara approach):

The world is made up by the way you see it with your mind and therefore to some degree, everything is like an illusion. A lack of subject-object duality though (a real lack of subject-object, not an imagined one) is therefore like an emptiness in that there is no-self attached to it and reality is just what it is.

Here one can see this constant push in all schools of Buddhism towards the idea that there is no-self. The essence of this idea can be summed by *Śāntideva* (BCA. 8.134).

“Whatever harms are in the world, whatever dangers and sufferings are in the world- all of these arise from grasping at the self; what good is this great demon for me.”

In a short Q&A with the Dalai Lama (2018), a woman asked what is the cause of negative emotions? The Dalai Lama explains that too much focus on I, I, I, my, my, my and ignorance are the main causes. In Chinese Mahayana Buddhism and Zen Buddhism, it seems as though the idea of no-self is rarely discussed. But if there is an idea of pure awareness, completely clean, pure, empty with no markings on it, no defilements, then can this too be considered as a form of no-self? The entire idea of *bodhicitta* also appears to resolve around “you” and NOT “me.”

The question arises, if Chinese and Japanese Mahayana rely on Buddha-nature as a pure and undefiled emptiness and Tibetan Buddhism (*Gelug*) on ridding oneself of this great demon (the self), where does the Theravadin Buddhist idea of no-self fit in, what's is the point of its spiritual teaching?

Ajahn Brahmali (2018) said:

“Well, the point is to see through the illusion of the sense of self. That is what awakening is all about. But it is also part of the path, in the sense that you contemplate this and in fact abandon the sense of self in stages. Through meditation practice you can see that the body is not self, and as you go deeper that the will is not self. In this way, you can whittle away at the five khandhas, until one day you make the big breakthrough by seeing them all as non-self. So, it's both a tool and a result.”

In a book written by Jeffery Hopkins (2016) but based on the Dalai Lama's oral teaching he describes the following:

“I have great interest in the statement by many wise persons in all orders of Tibetan Buddhism that their systems come down to the same final principle.”

Hopkins (2016) goes on to describe the names given to this basic principle:

- Fundamental innate wisdom of clear light
- Fundamental innate mind of clear light
- Space-diamond pervading space
- Jewel mind
- Ordinary consciousness
- Innermost awareness
- Diamond mind of clear light.

Hopkins (2016) explains that everything, without exception, is complete in the continuum of “innermost awareness” and that inner awareness is naturally arisen since it has always been and will always be.

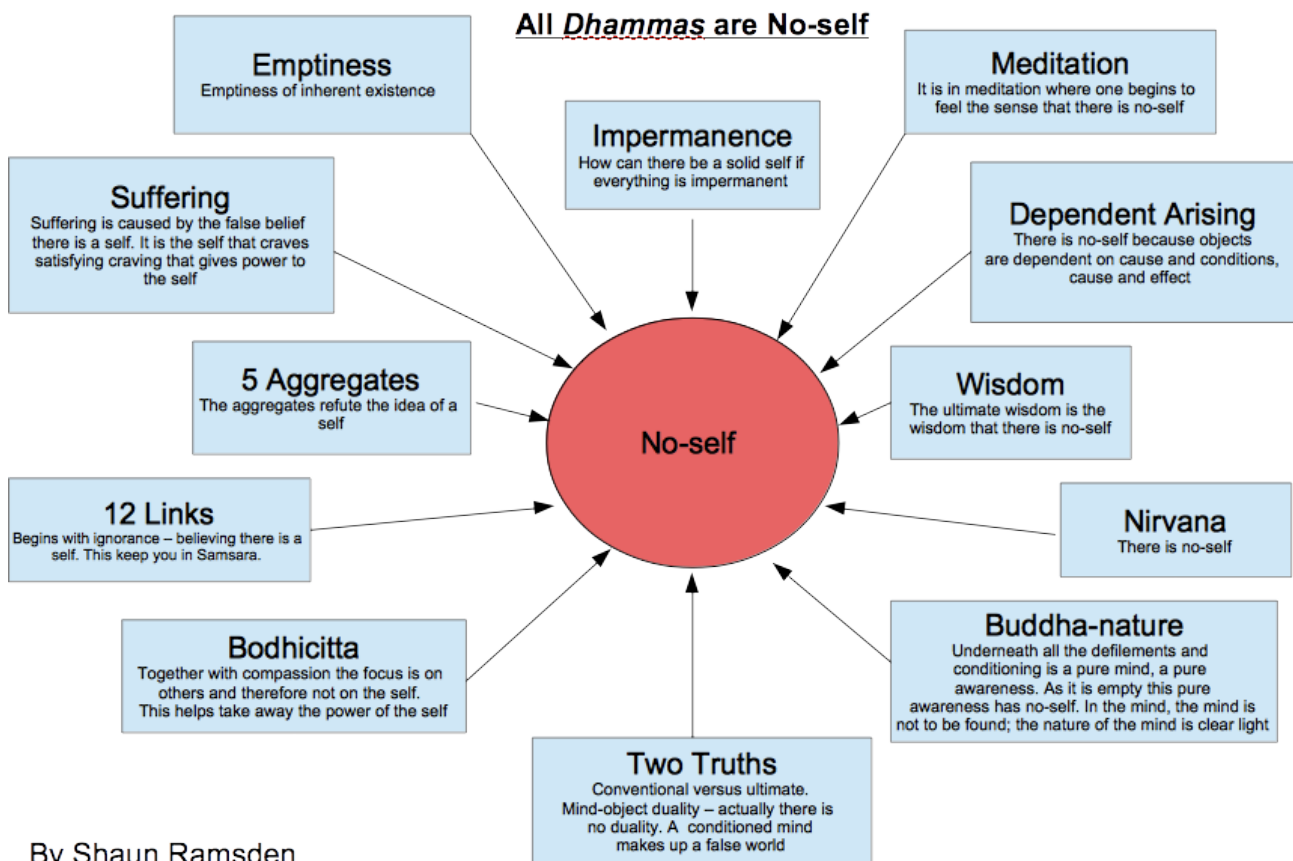
Conclusion

What does “all dhammas are no-self” actually mean? What kind of self does Buddhism accept and what kind does it not accept? What is the spiritual point of the teaching, and to what extent does the effectiveness of contemplating things as no-self depend on some kind of self-idea? In many ways, these are all one in the same question as to answer one of them, the writer needs to answer all of them. The Tibetan *Gelug* approach to answering these questions seems quite similar to the Theravadin Thai Forest approach, while Chinese *Chan* and Japanese *Zen* appear to be much closer to each other in their approach.

At its essence, the answer to these questions are at the heart of Buddhism as no-self is arguably its core philosophy, with Buddha-nature having a similar meaning, hence it is also a core philosophy. There is clearly a solid connection between *suññatā*, no-self, *svabhāva* and the idea of impermanence. “All dhammas are no-self” because most Buddhist teaching are based on the teaching of no-self. This includes, emptiness, suffering, five aggregates, twelve links, impermanence, meditation, dependent arising, wisdom, *nibbāna*, two truths and *bodhicitta*. The idea of freeing oneself of self-grasping is beautifully summed up by *Śāntideva*. He says that all suffering arises from grasping at the self.

This idea of no-self is a technique for enlightenment as much as it is an attainable achievement. Some may call this attainable achievement *nibbāna*. The Tibetan *Gelug* school has a clear framework which is used to analyse the idea of a self and prove to the one doing the analysis that there is actually no-self to be found. If one were to take the Dalai Lama’s teaching on self, it is clear that he does not deny a “conventional self” but instead denies a self that is permanent and independent.

To sum up and conclude the idea of no-self and the questions answered in this paper, please see below:



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