The role of Buddhism in America is evolving towards being more visible and pertinent in modern times. In an age where life is becoming ever more demanding, individuals are taught that they are distinct, unique, and independent; they are told that they are separate from the rest of humanity and somehow not one with the rest of nature. The western capitalist world is fueled by the idea that people should want what they don't have. Subsequently, those people should earn or buy objects to quench this desire to own more of everything. For a hypothetical-yet-unfortunately-realistic example, one can examine the routine of purchasing food. The average consumer who purchases the cheapest can of mandarin oranges they can find likely won't consider the implications of such a purchase. They probably won't think of the massive amounts of environmental harm caused by shipping that can thousands of miles to the store. Nor do they think of the canners of those oranges, living in extreme poverty, unable to support themselves. We, as Americans, are shielded so well from this type of critical thinking that its no wonder we only account for 5% of the world's population, yet consume 24% of the world's energy, 25% of the world's fossil fuels, and have built far more shopping malls than high schools (Menzel). Recently, there have been many reforming movements started in an attempt to open the eyes of as many westerners as possible to the basic fact that if our society is to be sustainable, it starts with living more mindfully. Engaged Buddhism is opening up many Americans to the realization that all beings are interconnected. Through this, it stresses the fundamental teachings of Gautama Buddha while allowing practitioners to maintain a society in which all individuals can live in peace and harmony with one another; this not only improves life for its practitioners but also for all sentient inhabitants of Earth.

The origins of Buddhism can be traced back thousands of years to 563-483 BCE, during the time of Gautama, more popularly known as Siddhartha. Gautama was a spoiled prince of present day India. All his life, he was shielded from the horrors and ills of the world. Upon embarking on a quest to see the spring flowers in bloom, worldly godlings caused four figures to appear to Gautama: one old, one diseased, one dead, and another who was dead to the world (Urubshurow 307). These figures startled Gautama so much that upon seeing the fourth, he renounced all his worldly possessions and lifestyle of wealth in an attempt to escape from dukkhathe sufferings present in the world. After many years of travel, suffering, and meditation, Gautama awoke to the Ultimate Reality of the world. He realized that as long as a human is a part of samsara, they are trapped in it. Samsara is the cycle of rebirth of a being's soul. An enlightened being can choose to escape samsara and cease their souls rebirth, thus ending a life of suffering. This is considered the ultimate goal for most Buddhists.

Buddhists see Gautama's awakening as his ascent to Buddhahood. Buddha is not a name; rather it is a type of title, similar to Dr. or President, used to denote one who has transcended the boundaries of anatta (non-self),
anicca (impermanence), and dukkha (suffering), thus escaping the cycle of samsara (Dumoulin 29). He understood the impermanence of all worldly things, the suffering inherent in possessing consciousness, and the fact that fundamentally, the self of each being is an illusion created by consciousness itself. Acceptance of these three truths can bring one to a better understanding of Engaged Buddhism.

Dukkha is a result of anatta and anicca. To understand each concepts role in the creation of Engaged Buddhism, it is necessary to examine all three, both individually as well as in relation to each other. Thich Nhat Hanh is regarded as the first to coin the term Engaged Buddhism several decades ago, and has lectured on the importance of these three truths of the world. He spoke of anatta as it relates to the importance of Engaged Buddhism when he taught, it is precisely because of its impermanence that we value life so dearly. Therefore we must know how to live each moment deeply and use it in a responsible way (Queen 52). By meditating on the implications of being a living creature, and knowing that one day, their existence will be no more, one can come to understand the concept of anatta on a more personal level. When one meditates on any government entity, they can understand that the government is impermanent; constantly in a state of change, the ruling body cannot be steadfast in any of its facets forever. The concept of anicca, impermanence, teaches the importance of being compassionate towards others and respectful of all life, as it exists in the universe. Through this concept, it becomes apparent that it benefits all beings to be compassionate towards others and to embrace what we all have to offer the world. It is from this concept of anicca that the Buddhist value of nonattachment is derived. According to the second of Hanhs 14 precepts of Engaged Buddhism, it is imperative to avoid being narrow minded and bound to present views . . . [one should] learn throughout [his or her] entire life, and . . . practice nonattachment from views in order to be open to others viewpoints (Hanh, Interbeing 17). It is when one clings to their own viewpoint as the only correct one that they are confronted with dukkha. Not only does their attachment to being right isolate them from others, it also leads to suffering on the part of the other person. No war has ever been fought on the idea that the enemy may be right rather, they are fought on the premise that their truth is the only truth. Enter: the importance for anicca, openness to learning, and an understanding of the phrase the only thing which can be certain is change.

Anatta, or non-self, is a more difficult concept to grasp, especially for westerners. In American society, a doctrine of individuality is continually taught, beginning almost as soon as a child is born. In pre-school, children are taught that what they own is theirs, and what another person owns is not theirs to use freely without permission. Throughout their development into adulthood, the concept of individuality is repeatedly reinforced. Layer upon layer of programming the ego to want what it does not currently own leads to a society of people who can never be fully satisfied. In addition, reinforcement from the media and from those in power leads individuals to blindly accept societys functioning quo. Taught to believe in absolute truths, those who do not conform to what benefits the status quo are either regarded as abnormal or odd and are often given medication to stop their hallucinations, abstract thought, selflessness, or other affliction that the American Psychology Association has determined not normal. It is a vicious cycle of the machine that society uses to ensure those at the top to remain at the top; and that those at the bottom remain at the bottom. Divisions are created amongst races, genders, social classes, sexual identities, and physical appearances. Buddhists believe that Mara, the lord of illusion, created these divisions in an attempt to trap conscious beings in the cycle of samsara. For instance, take the gender division; [Mara] might advertise the differences between a woman and a man, but any enlightened being knows for sure that the mind is free of the bodys accidental properties. Being a woman or a man is due to karma, and perhaps has relevance in the world. But as for enlightenment, wisdom has no sexual orientation and is not tied to bodily form (Urubshurow 334). By non-self, Buddha imparts the knowledge that we are not as we appear to be through our five senses.
Try to answer the following question: Where do you end, and where does the world begin? Realize that air is made up of many invisible molecules of nitrogen, oxygen, hydrogen, etc. Miniature organic machinery in your cells, upon each breath intake, utilizes these elements to function. Upon exhaling, your carbon dioxide output is absorbed by plants and becomes part of their physical structure. The vegetables you eat, previously growing in the dirt, become part of your skin, hair, and internal organs. Where do you end, and where does the next person begin? This question requires a moment of meditation in order to appreciate the intricacy of the unity in our world. It is important to understand this concept fully: we are all one. Engaged Buddhism . . . is rooted in an insight into the reciprocal interconnectedness of all existence (Queen 423). Its most fundamental tenet is that every thing is a part of everything. When looking at a plant, Buddhists try to see a bit of themselves in it. When looking at another human, they see both the differences and the similariasthe one-and-the-sameness that consumes all that makes up our universe. It is through this understanding that Engaged Buddhists see the necessity in doing good deeds for all beings in the world. The term for this, coined by Thich Nhat Hanh, is interbeing. He defines interbeing as a global network of all being and phenomena, mutually connected and contained (Queen 423). Buddhists recognize the self in everything and see everything in the self. Therefore, they are compelled to assist others who are ill, disenfranchised, and suffering. According to Hanhs fourth and fifth precepts, Engaged Buddhists should not avoid or close [their] eyes before suffering, [and should] not accumulate wealth while millions are hungry. [They should instead] live simply and share time, energy, and material resources with those who are in need (Hanh, Interbeing 17). Indeed, an Engaged Buddhist should follow these precepts because the people suffering are none other than another dimension of their own being.

It can be contended that Engaged Buddhists and Buddhists are one and the same; that the mere term Engaged Buddhist creates another delusion that must eventually be shed by humans. However, it is notable that the concept of Engaged Buddhist has caught on in the Western world. The term Engaged Buddhist refers to Buddhists who are not solely focused on living a monastic life, turning their attention only further inward so as to gain freedom from dukkha. It gives a distinction to those who are actively using the teachings of Buddha to improve the conditions of the world for all who inhabit it. One of the many goals of Engaged Buddhism is to create peace and harmony in the world. The Buddhist Peace Fellowship (BPF) is an international nonprofit organization that aims to trace the foundations of social and political concern . . . forge a language of social engagement in Buddhist terms, and report upon the myriad forms of institutionalized suffering in the world (Queen 67). The BPF distribute a widely successful journal called Turning Wheel to practitioners of peace around the globe.

Buddhists have also engaged the educational institution, which has been wildly successful in the US. Naropa Institute is a school of higher education founded in 1974 in Boulder, Colorado. Over the years, many influential Buddhist monks and educators have lectured and taught courses at Naropa. Students are taught based on the Shambhala teachings of Chogyam Trungpa Rinpoche, who was also the founder of the Institute. Rinpoches Shambhala teachings promote a path of social action that confronts the politics of domination with clarity, gentleness, love, and sanity (Queen 331). This method of learning at Naropa is called contemplative education and encourages students to actively meditate on the lessons they learn, rather than blindly accepting them. Naropa claims its goal is to foster an environment of gentleness and discipline in which to cultivate discoverers and innovators who will actively work in the world for the benefit of others (Queen 333). All degree programs require students to practice meditation. What benefit could come from such a school? The practice of meditation engages students to actively think about and digest the material they have been taught. This aspect of critical thinking and digesting of material is disappearing, and altogether absent at many schools in the US. Instead of forging their own path, students today envision an end goal, such as medical school, and are told that they must first pass through the weed out classes, which they normally do with much
disdain. Imagine a university where students were assessed on their depth of understanding rather than spitting back facts. That is Naropa’s contemplative learning strategy at its finest.

The final example of Engaged Buddhism comes from South Africa, a country with a long history of injustice, exploitation, and separateness. Skin color has been a constant dividing line for the country, and Engaged Buddhists have been trying to reform this and other social divisions for quite some time. In April of 1994, a group of monks led by Reverend Shoju Sawaguchi undertook a pilgrimage for peace in which they walked three hundred miles from Phoenix, Durban, through a region covering some of the most serious areas of violence in South Africa (Queen 447). In April 1987, Nara Greenway made another display for peace in an Engaged Buddhist way. Greenway undertook a forty-day fast in Cape Town in which she prayed for the release of children from detention without trial (Queen 448). Greenway and Sawaguchis calls for action and peace resonated throughout the Buddhist community, and still do today. They embody the concepts of anatta, anicca, and Engaged Buddhism, encouraging peace and harmony amongst all people through their outward manner of helping those in need.

There are many more embodiments of the Engaged Buddhist structure in the world today. As humans use up more of the Earth’s precious resources, hopefully there will be a more widespread awareness of the anicca that permeates all existential things. As the population of the world increases, space diminishes, and many in the developing world go hungry and get sick, hopefully the western world will embrace the concept of anatta. One day, it will become necessary for the rich to learn to live with less so that the extremely poor can live at all. Engaged Buddhism is joining the lead of many already established religious aid organizations, and is becoming a prominent force in the way humans view and treat those beings who are suffering. Through the teachings of the ancient Gautama Buddha, in addition to the modern-day advice of Thich Nhat Hanh, along with many other prominent Buddhist leaders around the world, people are learning that to embrace the dharma is a two-fold task. They must not only seek within their own soul for their salvation, but also seek to spread their positive energy upon all other beings that are, in actuality, one with each other.

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