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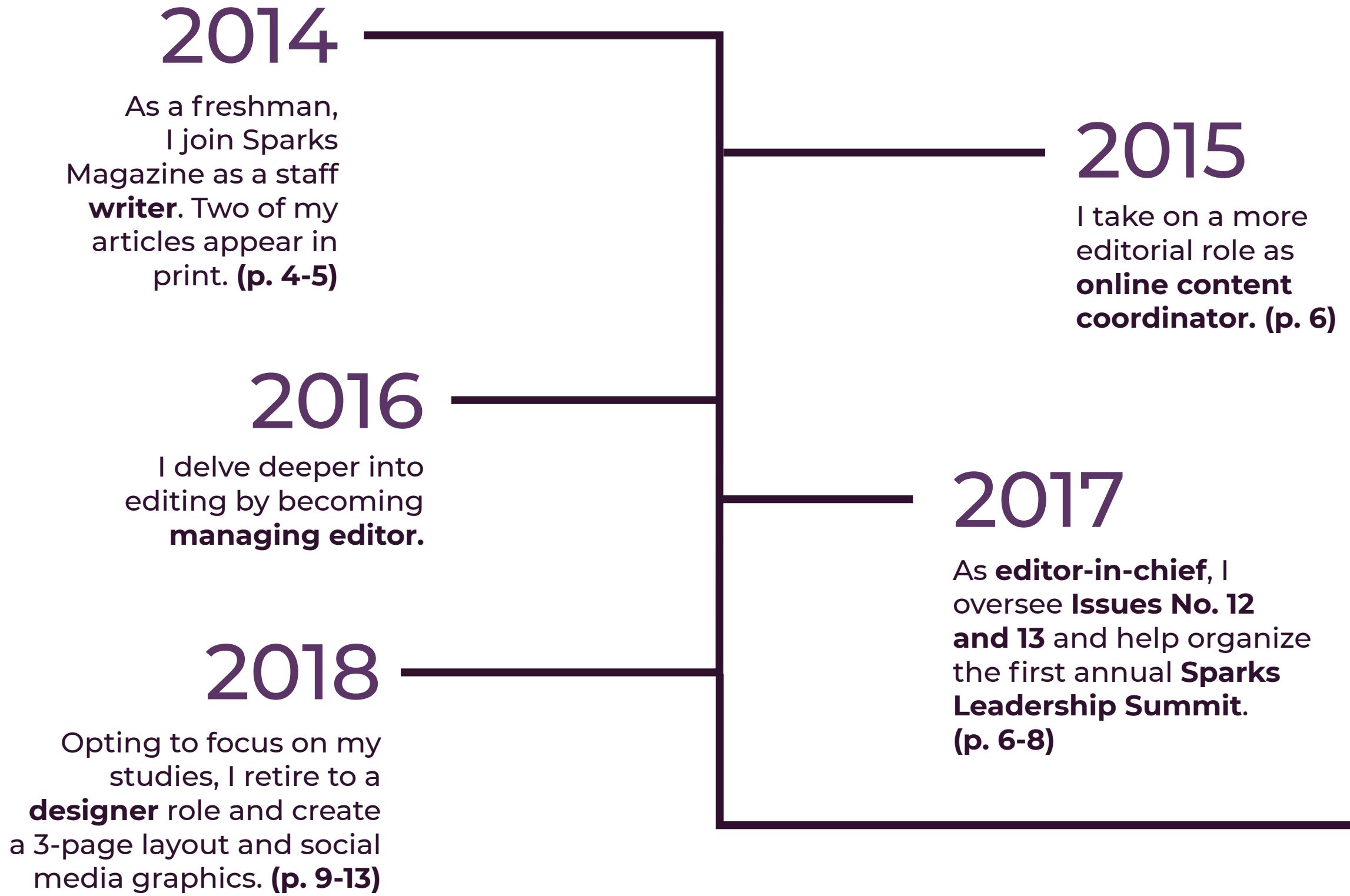
Portfolio  
for  
Thalia Su

# Timeline

## What is Sparks?

“The mission of Sparks Magazine is to provide a mixed-media platform to create content to engage in, develop and understand the Asian and Pacific Islander American experience.”

-Mission Statement





Major Decisions  
No. 7

With a Single Stroke  
No. 8



# Online Content Editor

Articles Published\*:

Top 5 Asian designers

featured at New York

Fashion Week

The Lowland

\*Not including articles I edited and articles that were lost in the transition to a renovated website.

## Sparks Leadership Summit

By communicating with the staff, student government of UCF, and other branches of Sparks, I helped bring the 1st Sparks Leadership Summit to UCF, an event that offered job resources and workshops to career-oriented students.

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refugee

PTELS & POTIONS

*exploring preference for  
Eastern, Western medicine*

REFLECTIONS  
FROM REFUGEES

*Asian American authors add their  
voices to literary canon*

DEFINING DISTINCTIONS  
*the brown-yellow dichotomy between Asians*



# Can't Buy Buddhism

*The impact of non-Asian peoples in Buddhism*



The melting pot versus tossed salad dichotomy of United States of America has been an ongoing theme for decades. Some have argued for the melting pot, saying the United States has one uniform culture based off of many cultures, whereas others have deemed it a "tossed salad" due to its heterogeneous diversity of people and cultures. Many have also argued that it's both. America does not have one set culture, due to the fact that this country has a broad history of immigration, and with said immigrants, there's the introduction of different cultural importances such as foods, art, and music, as well as a huge defining factor of many cultures: religion. With the introduction of different religions because of immigration, specifically eastern religions coming into the west, there was and still is a large influx of western individuals who practice Asian religions. For example, as of 2017, 1 percent of the U.S. population identified as Buddhist.

The introduction of Buddhist religion dates back to around the 19th century with the wave of Chinese immigrants in the West Coast, as well as Japanese immigrants. The first wave of non-Asian Buddhists started in the 1960s.

Dr. Ann Gleig, a professor of Philosophy with a focus on Asian religions at the University of Central Florida explained, "Historically, the first big wave of non-Asian Americans practicing Buddhism occurred in the 1960s, and it was the time of the counterculture and so a lot of especially young people in their 20s/college students were experiencing a disillusionment and a kind of cynicism towards American society and really turned away from Christianity and Judaism, especially with Christianity as a dominant religion. I think they were really looking for an alternative and around that time we have the second wave of Asian Buddhists coming to the U.S." After 1965 because there was an Asian Immigration Act that had excluded Asians from coming to America, but it was lifted in 1965. Several Asian Buddhist teachers took up residence in New York, San Fran, big centers of the counterculture, and these young Americans found them romantic. Given this historical background, it's easy

BY Valentina Velasquez

PHOTOGRAPHY/Jordan Rich

DESIGN/Thalia Su



to see why so many people take such an interest in Buddhism". Dr. Gleig then elaborated that "Buddhism, especially, has been presented in America as a very rational, scientific religion. In fact, some people say Buddhism isn't a religion, it's a philosophy. A lot of non-Asians who might be disillusioned/feel like science has challenged some of the metaphysical beliefs of Abrahamic religions, see that, even though Buddhism has a lot of its own metaphysical beliefs, it's been presented in the public eye as a kind of scientific religion."

Fast-forward to fifty-three years later and it's clear to see the impact of both the first wave of Buddhism with Chinese and Japanese immigrants in the 19th century, and the second wave with the lift of the Asian Immigration Act and the counterculture of the 1960s. When looking at age distribution, the highest percentage of Buddhist practitioners here in the U.S. ranges from 18-29 years of age. This puts many self-identified Buddhists in the college-age demographic.

One of these many young individuals is Anna Rahr, a Sociology major at the University of Central Florida. Rahr said she was a bit hesitant to start practicing in the philosophy. "I didn't want to, my sister-in-law is Buddhist and before she and my brother got married, we all lived within a block of each other in New York. I have a hard time meeting people/making friends, she suggested I go to this meeting with her and I was not about it, I really did not want to go."

Dorothy Christopher, a young leader of a lait Buddhist organization, does not identify as Asian, nor did she convert to Buddhism. "I was born into the practice, my mom was raised Jewish and my dad was raised Greek Orthodox, and through their own independent journey, they found Buddhism in the 70s in New York City," said Christopher. Christopher describes her connection to Buddhism as "having no other choice," being that she was raised into it, but she's still very true to her beliefs, Christopher's youth really helped shape her as a leader and as a person." "Growing up Buddhist, I was always

taught that I'm pretty much in the driver's seat of my own happiness. I hold the key and the answer to any of my deepest, burning questions are within myself. I have all of the answers and I don't need to ever seek outside of myself for absolute happiness."

There are, however, some dangers between Buddhism and the United States that are reflective of much larger racial and transitional systemic issues, which mainly stems from common misconceptions due to the misrepresentation of Buddhism in western media. Some of the most common misconceptions, as described by Dr. Gleig, are the following:

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-DOROTHY CHRISTOPHER

All Buddhists meditate: "Meditation has been a kind of elite practice in Buddhism, only for the Monastics, only for some Monastics. There's a lot of Buddhist monastics who don't meditate, they focus on scholarship or they focus on ritual practices instead." Dr. Gleig then elaborated on the introduction of meditation to the lait people during the colonization era in Asia.

All Buddhists are vegetarians: "Now, the Buddha said 'you must eat whatever is put in the bowl, the only exception is if you know that a villager has killed an animal just to put it in your bowl. You can't participate in a direct killing of an animal." Meat serves an important role in many Asian cultures, this contributes to the debunking that all Buddhists are vegetarian. While there are some communities that do participate in vegetarianism, it's wrong to generalize and group other communities together with this belief.

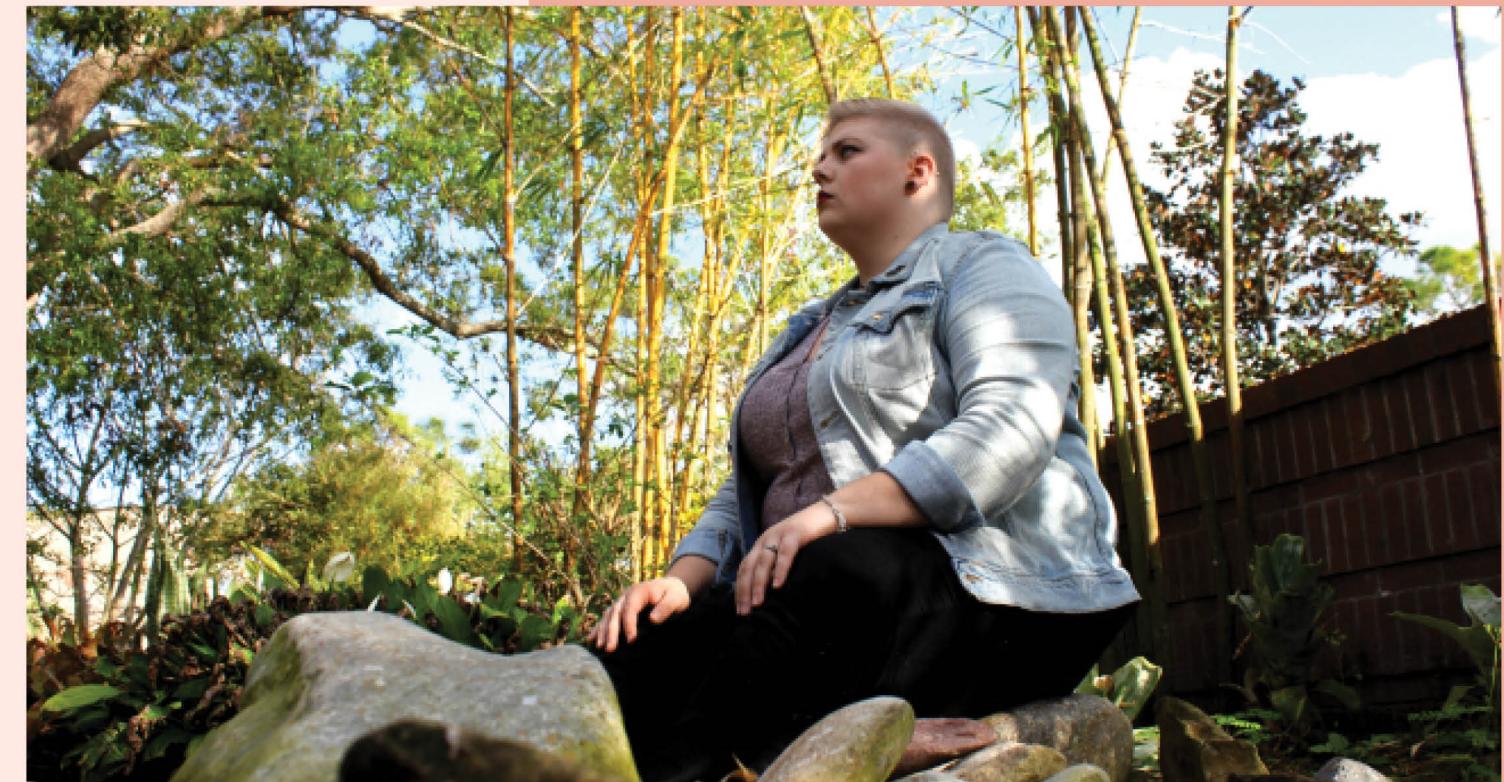
The third and final misconception Dr. Gleig

mentioned is the idea that all Buddhists are pacifists and that Buddhism does not have a violent past. Dr. Gleig used the example of Myanmar and the ethnic cleansing of the Rohingya Muslim population: "That, unfortunately, is not true and it's something quite shameful that's happening now, that's a great tragedy and I think it's really important to destabilize and challenge these romantic ideas of Buddhists. All religions, unfortunately, have violence in their history."

The media is the main factor in presenting these stereotypes and misinforming the public about different aspects of Buddhism. "There is a strong sense of romantic "orientalism" that borders on fetishism when it comes to Eastern cultural practices," Dr. Gleig stated. "There are two ways in which Asian religions and philosophies have been represented, one is that they've been very romanticized, so they've been constructed in a very 'orientalist' way: 'the romantic east', 'the orient', 'the mysterious orient', and we can trace that back to colonialism, we call it the 'romantic lineage'. Asian religions, especially with Buddhism, as a scientific religion/an empirical religion/a rational philosophy, and not as a real religion.

We call that the enlightenment lineage because it really Buddhism shaped through the lense of the western enlightenment." Here is where we need a clear analysis and recognition on how orientalism is part of the popularity

One of western media's worst offenses when it comes to representing eastern religions is the whitewashing of religious and cultural practices. One example of this is the mindfulness movement, a movement focused on meditation." Dr. Gleig explained, "Mindfulness is historically a form of Buddhist meditation, but it's become separated and decontextualized from Buddhism, so now a lot of people even practice mindfulness and have no idea that it was ever connected to Buddhism." Mindfulness began being seen as a trend, versus an actual religious practice and eventually gained some rather controversial recognition from Time Magazine. "Time Magazine had two covers on mindfulness about ten years apart. One was on meditation and then one was



on mindfulness and both of the covers featured a white, blonde, blue-eyed, skinny woman meditating, and that was the face of mindfulness," said Gleig.

This has become a huge concern because of the erasure of Asian Americans in the history of Buddhism. Western media has an infamy when it comes to Eastern narratives being completely erased in the North American timeline. Dr. Gleig gave the example of Pure Land Buddhism, a type of devotional Buddhism brought by Japanese immigrants during the Gold Rush in the 19th century which later became The Buddhist Churches of America. The large influx of non-Asian Buddhist practices overshadowed The Buddhist Churches of America, and now few people even know about them, and less history textbooks will tell people about them. Dr. Gleig states "[Japanese immigrants and Japanese Americans] practiced Buddhism when they were interned in internment camps, they kept Buddhism alive when they practiced it in the internment camps. Most people don't know about them because mostly the white Buddhists have gotten all the limelight." Historic and cultural erasure is a harsh reality faced by many communities, and it's important that young people bring these stories to light. Not only is erasure disrespectful to said communities, it's also dan-

gerous. Although Buddhism continues to flourish as an alternative to Christianity because of its values, it is because of this exotic, orientalized fascination people associate with the religion, which has been influenced by racial relations.

However, the expansion of Buddhism has also prompted some global recognition; "Buddhism started in India and, as it spread, it made its way up north and reached Tibet. Fast-forward to the 1950s when China occupied Tibet and caused Tibetan Buddhists to flee." Dr. Gleig recounts,

"Tibetan Buddhism in in the diaspora; a lot of Tibetan buddhists had to flee Tibet because of the Chinese occupation of Buddhism in the late 1950s. The biggest Tibetan community is in India and Nepal as refugees. Western interest in Tibetan buddhism has had a positive impact on Tibetan Buddhists in exile because it has really raised a lot of awareness about their plight." As westerners, many of us have privilege, especially if we are from groups that benefit from society, it's important we recognize our privileges in the name of transnational activism. Those who have helped bring the plight of Tibetan Buddhists to light are prime examples of using your privilege to elevate marginalized voices and raise awareness of injustices on a local, national, and international scale.

"We're in a cultural moment now with Buddhism in America where there is more dialogue about racism in American Buddhism and cultural appropriation in Buddhism," said Gleig.

Anna Rahr has an optimistic outlook on the impact of Buddhism, "I feel like it helps really give me focus, but it is mainly through mental health that it helps. I think that it helps give me a direction and it helps me feel more confident in my decisions and the path that I want to take for my future. Through this I am getting better at my interpersonal relationships and skills," Anna said.

A lot of Buddhism's core values come from improving yourself and loving yourself unconditionally, so you can better serve your community and help others learn and grow the way you did. As a leader of a lait Buddhist organization, Dorothy Christopher wants Buddhism to help and empower others the way it helped and empowered her: "There's a lot of hopelessness in our society, especially right now and I just want anyone that attends a Buddhist activity to leave feeling truly empowered and inspired to take control of their own happiness."

While it's clear that Buddhism and Buddhist teachings can have transformational values on society, it's important to have a critical eye on the idea of treating said practice as a commodity.



# Social Media

For UCF's release party, I was tasked with creating social media graphics with a quick turn-around time. Assets such as the graphics and logo were provided to me, and I put elements together using Photoshop.

Top: Digital banner  
Right: Print flyer  
Far Right: Digital profile graphic



## Issue 14 Release Party

Free food & performances!

Fri. April 6, 6:30 PM

Barbara Ying Center



