

20240222_Interview Transcription

Interviewer: Venerable Jue Fang

Interviewee: Raymond Lee

00:04 Venerable Jue Fang

This is Venerable Jue Fang interviewing Raymond Lee on the 20th of February 2024¹. This recording is taking place at 231 Nolan Street, Unanderra, New South Wales, Nan Tien Institute. The interview is being recorded for the State Library of New South Wales Oral History Collection.

00:29 Venerable Jue Fang

Hi Raymond, thank you for accepting our interview. So could you tell us a bit about yourself?

00:41 Raymond Lee

Okay, well, my name is Raymond Lee and of course, I have a Chinese name, but probably doesn't mean anything to the people who is interested in this interview and current currently I am the elder advisor of of Buddhist Light International Association² and also I'm also the Company Secretary for the Hsing Yun Education Foundation³. So I think that's probably will be sufficient for the interview I think.

01:22 Venerable Jue Fang

Yeah. Thank you. I understand that you were actually born in Hong Kong and you came to Australia. Could you tell us a bit about yourself in this area?

01:31 Raymond Lee

Okay, I was born in Hong Kong amongst a family of six brothers and five sisters and we, at that time until I became aware of things around you we always lived in a fairly crowded area, crowded house, it's not big, but because at that time that's the usual sort of condition that we live in, and I sort of gone through my second, my primary education in a Protestant faith primary school and at the time when I was about the sixth class, I think it's at the impulse of the moment I was thinking well maybe after so many years in a Protestant school, I may try to get baptised but then thankfully I did not because at that time I didn't know much about religion and I mean and and the meaning of being baptised etc. and then later on in secondary school I enrolled and had about three years in a

¹ A slip of the tongue, actual interview date: 22nd of February 2024.

² Abbreviated as BLIA, this is an organisation organised by Buddhist devotees. On May 16, 1992, the BLIA World Headquarters was established in Los Angeles, US. Now, BLIA have been successively established in more than a hundred countries and regions across five continents to promote Humanistic Buddhism and spread joy all over the world. <https://www.nantien.org.au/en/about-us/blia>

³ Abbreviation: HYEAF, founded by Venerable Master Hsing Yun, this foundation seeks to enrich individuals and communities in multicultural Australia with Humanistic Buddhism's wisdom and values and to ensure equal access to education as well as enable the continuous development of the Nan Tien Institute. <https://hsingyunef.org.au/>

Catholic school in Hong Kong. That's when I was about 15 and I've decided then maybe I should change my environment because in a big family, you probably not getting the the amount of attention or care in a family like ours, and I should consider trying to consider going somewhere and then start anew. And that's when I've decided to come to Australia because at that time the popular education educational destination is either the US or the UK, and neither of them does in sort of give me any sort of inspiration. But Australia is a fairly new country, and I'm willing to take a chance and come over to Sydney.

03:56 Raymond Lee

And so once I've got into Sydney, I've got enrolled in a private coaching school for about six months, finished what, at that time, they called the intermediate class, which is the equivalent of a year nine, nowadays.

04:16 Raymond Lee

And then, and then I moved into a new area where I enrolled and studied in another Catholic school. And this then, when I sort of finished it and then applied for an engineering course in the University of New South Wales.

04:38 Raymond Lee

Thereof, my course is the civil engineering, and I finished it and then worked in the public works department for about a year. Then I enrolled back into the University of New South Wales and enrolled into a Master degree.

04:57 Raymond Lee

And at that time, by that time, I would say, my family decided to migrate to Australia because I was the first one in Australia and then my parents came over the next year and decided they liked the environment.

05:13 Raymond Lee

And then they worked a way because at that time, it's still very hard to migrate to Australia. And then they successfully migrated to Australia in '72. And after a short period of time, because my father is a business person, and he can't be away for too long.

05:33 Raymond Lee

So he and my mother, this would have needed to go back to Hong Kong to continue and conduct the business. And at that time, all the brothers, most of the brothers and sisters anyway, came over to Australia and there's no one in Hong Kong.

05:50 Raymond Lee

So they asked me whether I can join them. And me, being single at that time, and probably didn't find it too hard to accept. So I moved back to Australia, to Hong Kong with them. And there I've worked in, firstly in a land developers firm overseeing the construction of big major housing project.

06:21 Raymond Lee

Ended up with about 40 blocks of residential building. And then, later on, I've been asked by my father to join, with the Hong Kong local bank, again, to oversee the building of their headquarter, which was finished.

06:42 Raymond Lee

And then I decided it's about time that I should start my professional career basically as an engineer. But because of my disposition, my interest, I find that I'm more akin to working in an architect's office.

07:02 Raymond Lee

So I worked partially as an architect. At that time, Hong Kong's building system is that, they would allow either an engineer, an architect, or a building surveyor to become, what they call an authorised person, to be able to sort of submit plans and get approvals, etc.

07:24 Raymond Lee

And in a sense that I was lucky to go through the whole process from developing virgin land into a blocks of building sites and buildings finalised, finally buildings. And that's when, that took me until about 1986.

07:47 Raymond Lee

I got married in 1976. So back in '86, I've decided to move back to Sydney because all the while, Sydney is my ideal location for my life and also it fits in with my lifestyle being less crowded, more, let's say, or less attachment to entertainment, let's say, as in Hong Kong.

08:18 Raymond Lee

I'm a little, basically, a fairly quiet person. I don't like to go out and enjoy the life, the nightlife. So, back in '86, then I moved back to Australia with the family, with my own family. And at that time, I may be a little bit worried about what kind of job will I be able to secure.

08:39 Raymond Lee

But maybe Buddha, before even I accepted Buddhism, looked upon me kindly (laughing). A month after moving into my new place in in Sydney, I was doing some gardening work

in the front yard. A person appeared suddenly in front of me and said, would you be interested in buying some insurance?

09:06 Raymond Lee

And I looked at him and said, look, I'm not being rude, but I've just came over to Australia and I'm still looking for a job. And he said, oh, don't worry. I know someone who's working or someone who's partnered to an engineering consultant firm.

09:29 Raymond Lee

Would you be interested? I said, oh, yes. And he said, I will arrange an interview for you. I said, oh, yeah, yeah, yeah. Because, I mean, he looks like a typical salesperson to me. I said, he probably saying it to appease me.

09:46 Raymond Lee

But lo and behold, two days later, I got a call from this engineering firm, and and with an appointment, an interview, and I was accepted into the company, which I worked, being the one and only company I worked in Australia until my retirement.

10:09 Raymond Lee

And it's during that process, that time, then, as I said, in 1991, my first contact was with Venerable Manko and Venerable Yong Dong. And through them, they have made certain arrangement to help Florence through her difficult periods.

10:38 Raymond Lee

And that's the start of my Buddhism relationship.

10:46 Venerable Jue Fang

That's very interesting. May I know which year were you born in and when did you come to Australia?

10:51 Raymond Lee

1947 and I came to Australia in 1962.

10:56 Venerable Jue Fang

Then returned to Hong Kong in 1972.

10:59 Raymond Lee

And back here in '86.

11:04 Venerable Jue Fang

Okay, so that's a very long time and you have witnessed some significant changes in Australia as well. (Raymond Lee: Oh yes, yes.) Could you share with us what was Australia like when you first came, the second time you came and how is it like today?

11:19 Raymond Lee

Okay, well, back in 66, Australia is still running the so-called White Australian policy. We don't have many sort of Asian in the society, and what we have is a very small Chinatown, right in where the Chinatown is, and every weekend or so, I would probably take a train and go into the city to buy some Chinese foodstuff, etc., and otherwise I mean living week in and week out I would probably be going to restaurants because I'm not a cook, I'm not a good cook anyway, not a cook anyway, and they still have what they call a chop suey, which you can never find in Hong Kong or in China.

12:18 Raymond Lee

It's a creation by the Western world. But still, lifestyle in in on that time is good despite the White Australian policy, the local people are very nice. That's why the, after spending a few months in Australia, I've already decided this is the place I want to be.

12:43 Raymond Lee

And comparing to Hong Kong, it's running at a very slow pace, which suits me, and it's still not, Sydney is the main city in Australia, but it's not cosmopolitan style. It's still a fairly, comparatively, fairly sort of laid-back city.

13:05 Raymond Lee

So that's how I find it, and I find it, well, that suits my character. And then when I went back to Hong Kong '72, I felt the rush, the pressure, etc., although I'm not really bothered by it, but I still sort of misses Australia.

13:27 Raymond Lee

And when, finally, when I decided, and when I first returned to Hong Kong, I was thinking, I'll be back in two years. And the next two years, I'll be back in two years, instead of drawing on and on and on, until at such time as '86, when my two children, they're about six, seven years old, I think they've learned the basic Chinese language, have a bit of knowledge about the writing.

13:58 Raymond Lee

And I think it should be time for them if they're going to be sort of brought up in Australia. It should be the right time, because if you get a little bit any older, there may be some kind of cultural crush or clash.

14:14 Raymond Lee

And I think, I hope that they can be brought up in the Australian environment and totally embrace the Australian culture, Australian language, Australian education. And that's why we left Hong Kong in '86. And I think that was a good decision for me and Florence.

14:37 Raymond Lee

And they grew up without any problem with the, with the local Australian kids, etc. And and they're basically very happy. But they also sort of be happy when they got back to Hong Kong from time to time to enjoy the food, etc.

14:58 Raymond Lee

So yeah, it's something that we have planned for years and then until '86. And when, and when we, probably I don't didn't find any major difference between Australia then, and then Australia when we moved back, because we've been able to come back to Australia every year or second year, and then become accustomed to the changes.

15:30 Raymond Lee

But you can see the change that already taking place back in '86. Australia is now sort of waking up to be a cosmopolitan city. And, and throughout the 1980s, 1990s, the 2000s, 2010, etc., you can see the major changes taking place because Australia now is sort of embracing what the world can offer.

15:58 Raymond Lee

And some very basic indication is that we can find lots of Asian restaurants nowadays. Most Australians now, they're, they used to order spicy food, which, at the moment, I'm still a little bit wary about.

16:19 Raymond Lee

So they're, they totally sort of multicultural, and and and before that, like back in the 60s, I was aware of the immigrants from Italy, from Greece, and then as time goes on, we became aware of immigrants from maybe Lebanon, and then back in the time when John Howard was the Prime Minister, and he started relax the policy, immigration policy with China, and you can see the influx of Chinese immigration into Sydney, into Australia.

17:04 Raymond Lee

Before 2000, or even 2010, the Chinese population is probably mostly Taiwanese and Hong Kong people, but nowadays it's all changed.

17:20 Venerable Jue Fang

So could you share with us, because just now you mentioned that you got to know Nan Tien Temple⁴ Fo Guang Shan⁵ in the year 1991, so it has been almost 35, 34 years. Could you share with us your experience throughout this time and do you see yourself as religious?

17:40 Venerable Jue Fang

Because from your biography I see that you are quite an intellectual Buddhist. You do translation for Buddhism, you teach, you are a lay Dharma teacher, certified. You know, so how would you, how would you see religion, and what's faith to you?

17:58 Raymond Lee

Well, I don't know whether I should say that, because I'm not your typical Buddhist. I believe in Buddhism. I believe in Humanistic Buddhism. But probably I would spend less time in recitation of sutra, less time in participating in certain services, only not because I don't believe in the faith.

18:28 Raymond Lee

I totally accept the faith. It's just that, in me, I'm sort of less inclined to sort of do all that. But I would rather do more like, as you said, translation. Because through translation, I can start looking for deeper meaning.

18:49 Raymond Lee

I have to go to consult Chinese texts, the original sutra, etc., to become, to convince myself my translation fits the purpose, fits the actual meaning. In a way, in that way, I believe that I will learn about Buddhism in my own pace, in my own way.

19:15 Raymond Lee

And also, to me, I think Buddhism is more than just joining in sutra, joining in services, joining in recitation. You have to get the real meaning. And you have to know that Buddhism is not an instant salvation.

19:34 Raymond Lee

It's not an instant liberation. To normal, mundane people or lay persons like me, myself, I believe (clear throat) excuse me, I believe Buddhism is, to me, it's a gradual realisation, a gradual development of insights to be able to sort of, bring me from existing level to a further level and a further level and a further level.

⁴ Nan Tien Temple, located in Berkeley, New South Wales, is one of the branch temples of Fo Guang Shan. It is the largest Buddhist temple in the southern hemisphere and has served as a significant cultural bridge and tourist attraction since its opening in October 1995.

⁵ Founded in 1967 by Venerable Master Hsing Yun, Fo Guang Shan is a global Buddhist Order headquartered in Kaohsiung, Taiwan, with over 300 branch monasteries around the world.

20:07 Raymond Lee

And without this sort of, to me, my approach really is to understand through reading and getting the true meaning. And the second level is the faith, yes, I have the faith. And then hearing, I do it through reading, I do it through talking to the Venerables, talking to my Dharma brothers, sisters.

20:36 Raymond Lee

And through them, I would try to sort of, realise where I'm missing and where I should sort of spend more time, more effort into it. And then the final step really is to practise it. And I, I realise that my favourite way of doing the practice is just to be myself, to apply Buddhism through myself and then try to let other people see me as I am, to see me as an indication that I am learning Buddhism.

21:20 Raymond Lee

I am a Buddhist. I'm not trying to pretend that I'm a very righteous person, etc. I'm just doing what I am, feel I'm comfortable with.

21:32 Venerable Jue Fang

So you mentioned about Humanistic Buddhism. May I know what is Humanistic Buddhism?

21:38 Raymond Lee

Well, just as I said just now, Humanistic Buddhism is a way, probably, first of all, you have to understand Buddhism, and then understanding it may, could only take you so far. And Humanistic Buddhism is something that will take you beyond learning, about through different books, different sutras, etc.

22:06 Raymond Lee

What you do then is basically, you apply what you learn to try to sort of help others to understand. Not, not, you don't tell them this, that I'm letting you know about Buddhism. To me I think I'm learning Buddhism because it is a way of life, it's a way to understand what we should be doing, how we should conduct ourselves, how to understand and realise the truth in our lifetime, what we should be doing, how we can sort of benefit others through benefiting ourselves.

22:53 Raymond Lee

And in a way then, you don't have to be a Buddhist to be my friend, to be my best friend, but I've been with my my my boss, with the firm, I've been still, was in touch with him, and I've been taking him to various major events, and going over to visiting different Buddhist sites in the world, and he he definitely enjoyed it.

23:28 Raymond Lee

And I do believe he has a very, very sort of clear direction in his lifestyle, and it's very, very similar, very akin to Buddhism itself, and that's why I've been able to sort of keep the friendship for such a long time.

23:49 Venerable Jue Fang

So could you also share with us your involvement with BLIA, your role, what is BLIA and how do you see BLIA in Australia?

24:01 Raymond Lee

Okay. BLIA, it started in 1992, I think. It first started in Hsi Lai Temple⁶ in the United States, Los Angeles. And then 1992, then Master⁷ decided to visit different parts of the world, including Australia, Sydney, Australia.

24:29 Raymond Lee

And then he also then decided to establish a chapter in Sydney. And at that time, we have a group of people, very devoted and therefore rightly called the devotees. They supported the idea that they should establish BLIA in Australia.

24:54 Raymond Lee

And they believed that at that time, that there are quite a few Buddhist devotees and with, and some, and most, and a lot of them have connections with the Fo Guang Shan. And they overjoyed when the Master decided to establish the association in Sydney.

25:19 Raymond Lee

And at the same time, he also indicated he will be building the Nan Tien Temple. And that's why when, with the BLIA, that will provide a very, very important vehicle to proceed. Although we we we have the Venerables at that time in Sydney, but there are only probably about two, three of them.

25:48 Raymond Lee

And clearly, they sort of be underhanded, insufficient time to manage it. Although at the time, Abbess Manko was in Sydney, and she is the one who is doing the direction for the construction of the Nan Tien Temple.

26:14 Raymond Lee

So I think, yes, it provided us with an opportunity to serve Buddhism. It provided us with the opportunity to be able to connect with like-minded persons, and most of them very

⁶ Hsi Lai Temple serves as the North American Regional Headquarters of Fo Guang Shan. It was built by Venerable Master Hsing Yun to propagate Humanistic Buddhism and to create a Pure Land here on earth. <http://www.hsilai.org/en/>

⁷ Here refers to Venerable Master Hsing Yun.

devoted Buddhists. And then it also provided an opportunity for us to develop our own skills in assisting with the, first of all, the creation of the association in attracting Buddhists from all around Sydney into Parramatta.

27:00 Raymond Lee

At the time, we only have one establishment, which is the Parramatta Vihara⁸. And clearly, it's that there are so many Buddhists in Sydney who would welcome and gladly join the Fo Guang Shan family, and some of them ended up with taking part in the Buddhist Light International Association.

27:28 Raymond Lee

So it's just tradition, culture, etc., to take a part of it. Because initially, there were a lot of Taiwanese with probably another group of Hong Kong devotees joining in. And we probably had a number not more than 100 at that time, but memberships grew.

28:06 Venerable Jue Fang

So you mentioned that your whole family was actually involved with BLIA and the temple, could you share with us, especially Florence I'm sure, you said that she was a major influence, she has influenced you.

28:21 Raymond Lee

She is a major influence, but she would try to get me to come to the Vihara, to Parramatta, even though I only stand outside or stood outside, for a while. She's a very sort of dedicated person at that time because the notion of BLIA is still new, not many people joined at the beginning, and she would sort of take up regular duties.

28:58 Raymond Lee

She may probably try to do some cooking, even washing the toilets, but most of the time she would spend, maybe five days a week, in the temple, at the reception, where she would receive old devotees and newcomers and try to lead them.

29:27 Raymond Lee

And that's why she, even up till now, whenever we went to the Vihara, they are still old devotees, who will still recognise her and happily see her, and they probably aged about over 80s. And then later on, she would try to get my two sons involved, but gradually she would probably try, initially she would arrange the very first overseas trip from Sydney BLIA to Taiwan Fo Guang Shan in Kaohsiung to participate in the youth group.

⁸ Vihara is a Buddhist monastery or temple complex that serves as a residence for monastics, a centre for education, meditation and religious practice.

30:11 Raymond Lee

And it's a funny thing though, on their first trip, two boys, probably not more than 10 years old, they lost their luggage, or they lost their luggage (laughing). And no one's receiving them at the airport. And that's a little worry, but things worked out.

30:33 Raymond Lee

And then one day, the Abbess, or the superintendent, Venerable Yong Dong, went and talked to Florence and said, Florence, did you tell your sons to take refuge? She said, no. She said, I didn't, I didn't, I didn't ask them to do it.

30:56 Raymond Lee

Well, they filled up the form and have taken refuge (laughing). So at that time I'm, still sort of, very too-minded about really sort of going into the Vihara. But I can recall though, one of the Venerable Yi Lv, I don't know whether you know her or not, she's a very, very kind person.

31:26 Raymond Lee

And this is when I started to sort of relate myself with the temple or the Vihara. And gradually, I was overcome by her compassion, her kindness, her smiling face, and the way she treated people. And then that's when I decided, okay, I might, I probably (clear throat) should learn a bit more.

32:01 Raymond Lee

And finally then I decided to take the refuge and the five precepts⁹. But the one, the main thing that causes me to sort of cause me to take the final step is that I realised that Buddhism is beneficial to me. At the time, I was a little bit grumpy, a bit of a grumpy person.

32:27 Raymond Lee

And I don't want to talk to many people. And then I started reading a little bit about Buddhism. And what touches me is that Buddhism teaches letting go. And at the time before that, I was sort of harbouring a lot of things and never let go and then keep thinking about bad situations, etc.

32:55 Raymond Lee

And then I realised the benefit of letting go. And then I said, okay, I'll give it a try. And, you know, I find it, oh, it works. It works. I find it, I'm more relaxed. And gradually, I become more happy. I'm more open to people.

⁹ The Five Precepts in Buddhism are ethical guidelines for lay devotees to live by to foster moral conduct and spiritual development.

33:18 Raymond Lee

I can talk to people around me, rather than shutting out. And as time goes on, I sort of, start approaching strangers, which would never happen before Buddhism. Yeah, this is one of the most important benchmarks for my life.

33:43 Venerable Jue Fang

So what have you done in BLIA?

33:45 Raymond Lee

What have I done?

33:46 Venerable Jue Fang

Yeah. (Raymond laughing) Everything.

33:50 Raymond Lee

Okay, well, initially when I walked into the Vihara and become a member, which tried to volunteer in kitchen duties and would try to volunteer for toilet duties. I say, oh, that's enough, I'm doing my bit, I'm volunteering.

34:16 Raymond Lee

And that's very very different from myself many, many, many, a few years ago. And then, before before long, I was asked to join the BLIA, you know, I know nothing about BLIA, but then at that time I've changed, I've already had a change in attitude, I said, I'll try anything.

34:40 Raymond Lee

So I said, okay. And since Florence was already a member, so I said, okay, I'll become a member as well. And that's when then one day she came home and tell me that I'm the treasurer (laughing). And that started my nine years of being a treasurer for BLIA, and that's when I think, I can tell, start learning about what is a proven and lost account, what's a balance sheet, etc.

35:14 Raymond Lee

And then, as we progresses, in 1994 or in 1992, the Master decided to build the Nan Tien Temple, and that's when we started seeing things happening. And the most important phase really started in 1994 to 95, with the building of the temple, and also then we will have the general director's meeting in 1995 in conjunction with the opening of the temple itself.

35:53 Raymond Lee

And that's when we started handling a big amount of contribution, a big amount of spending, etc., and for poor old me, I never handled so much money, and I just have to learn to, sort of, survive and accept it.

36:17 Raymond Lee

And luckily, things gone fairly smoothly, and we've been able to end up with a surplus of, I think about 100,000, 150,000, which later on was spent in donating to the, the flooding in, flood relief in in Philippines.

36:46 Raymond Lee

So I continue working as a treasurer, sort of happily doing that now that I'm used to it, until 2001, end of 2001 when I was invited as the MC for general members meeting. And I got elected as the, as the president.

37:13 Raymond Lee

Initially I did not know what to do. My Chinese is regressing. My knowledge about managing in an association is zero and I just have to learn. And luckily, at the time, I've got some people from, I think mostly from Hong Kong.

37:38 Raymond Lee

They provided a lot of support and continue to sort of work towards it. And after working for 2002, I decided that well, the association probably provided some kind of support or much support to the temple.

37:59 Raymond Lee

But BLIA have to sort of establish itself as well. So when the idea came to me is that, we should consider focusing on the environment. And first of all, we've joined the local councils in tree planting around the Parramatta area.

38:23 Raymond Lee

And I can recall that those areas, it's called Duck Creek. And we planted many trees probably for about two or three years. And we stopped doing it. I don't know why, but we stopped doing it. But then we sort of also participating in Clean Australia¹⁰ gathering.

¹⁰ Clean Up Australia is an environmental organisation focusing on waste management and sustainability. It hosts an annual Clean Up Australia Day, mobilising volunteers nationwide to clean and preserve natural and public spaces. <https://www.cleanup.org.au/cleanupaustaliaday>

38:44 Raymond Lee

And then it sort of started with the Parramatta Vihara. But next year, when we have the other centres like, in the city, and other different, when other different sub-chapters were established, we would just do that.

39:06 Raymond Lee

And I believe Sydney is a very progressive association then. And we probably are the first BLIA association that started this environmental thing, although it didn't catch the attention of the headquarter until a few years later.

39:28 Raymond Lee

And then afterwards, then we're looking at the building of another temple in Auckland. That's when the then Abbess Manshin, she has to travel frequently to Auckland to oversee the construction of the temple, leaving me as the president alone, defenceless (laughing).

39:59 Raymond Lee

And from time to time, I did get into trouble with the other Venerable, because I have my own ideas and they have their own ideas. But it all came good. All the Venerables that I have run in with a lot of times, they ended up accepting me as their favourite president at the time.

40:29 Raymond Lee

Because, I mean, although I try to practise letting go, etc., I'm still a stubborn person. And if I think things are right, I'll maintain my belief and I'll just do that. So my term for presidency stopped in 2007.

40:51 Raymond Lee

And in 2008, etc., it continued on until I was inducted as the elder advisor when we had this, or just before the directors' conference in Paris. And then I continue on but in the meantime 2017, I was asked to be part of the Hsing Yun Education Foundation, probably from from that from its inception isn't it? in 2017 (Venerable Juefang: 2016) 16, okay, and I don't think I regret being part of that because, I mean, like being the president, I get to learn a lot of new things.

41:42 Raymond Lee

In here, being the general manager, together with Venerable Jue Fang, I'm able to sort of have constant touch with the our legal advisors, learn a lot more about the government regulations and about the charity organisation etc.. And then later on, I was introduced and asked to be part of the scholarship committee. And then subsequently when they, when we have sufficient fund, a surplus fund and then we, the foundation established a

committee called the Investment Advisory Committee. Although I'm not part of it but I've been asked to participate in its meeting and be able to sort of contribute whenever I can about my personal view on the financial situation of, internationally and in Australia, which is all very good because I mean, I learn as I go, and I'm sort of happy that I'm also of of the things that I've learned and accumulate in this time. And as I mentioned probably then, I can't remember exactly when I've been approached and asked whether I'm interested to become a lay Dharma lecturer, and I did mention that my mandarin Chinese is probably rudimentary, can be understood, but anything be beyond conversational Mandarin probably will be, we need to translate in English later on to the person that talking to me. But, at that time I think, Reverend Ru Yi said no, no, no, we have lay Dharma teachers in English as well.

43:55 Raymond Lee

I said, oh, okay, then I was more at ease at that time then I said, okay, I'll I'll participate in its evaluation and if I'm accepted and then I'm happy to be become one. And then later on, we established the Elder Advisory Committee and I think we were able to sort of elect the general elder advisor in in every year I think, and I was elected and served as the general elder advisor for two years. And this last year, we have an election, but that this particular election is different from the previous one because we are now accepting nomination for the subchapter elder advisors and I was lucky enough to be on a co-, shared the second-largest votes with someone else, and then I actually thought that, well, we'd better give it to the elected person who is from the sub-chapter to have, to experience what it's like to be in the committee.

45:27 Raymond Lee

I think I've served my terms and I believe we should open the, since the sub-chapter was accepted this year, then we should open this opportunity to them rather than me trying to hog the position. So, at the meeting, I've sort of meant, I suggested that the person who shared the same number of votes should participate in the, as the deputy general, elder advisor, and he gladly accepted it, and I'm very happy about it.

46:08 Raymond Lee

So that's it, that's my involvement with the BLIA and other organisations.

46:15 Venerable Jue Fang

So it's been about 35 years, around 34, 35 years. And you have served, I think, in most of the major roles, presidents, company secretaries, treasurer, lay Dharma teachers, so in all these major roles.

46:34 Venerable Jue Fang

So what would you see, how have you observed about the perception of the broader Australian communities? So what have you observed about the changes in the broader Australian community's perception of Buddhism and Asian culture through BLIA and all these temple activities over the years?

47:01 Raymond Lee

I think, throughout those years, we have been trying to attract local population to participate, to accept Buddhism as a major religion. I mean, we know that Buddhism is probably one of the second or third largest religion other than the Christian faith in Australia, but most of these would have been composed of Asians, whether it's Vietnamese, Taiwanese, Hong Kong, Chinese, and many other parts of Southeast Asia.

47:44 Raymond Lee

If you start looking at the number of local Australians that would consider themselves as a Buddhist, I think there are far quite few in numbers. Although we should not, I don't think, we should not make any significant distinctions between becoming a Buddhist or understanding Buddhism and accepting and embracing it, I think we still should hold an open mind, open heart to that.

48:24 Raymond Lee

Because, to me, it's difficult for a country like Australia, which is predominantly Christian, to, sort of, irrevocably embrace an Asian religion. But to be able to expose them to Buddhism is the very first step we should make, because I believe that, in rebirth, and by planting seeds in their mind about Buddhism and if they accept it, if they find it beneficial, so when they return to the world again in their rebirth, they would be more open and there would be more acceptance to the Buddhism faith. So I don't think we should limit our vision into the immediate results.

49:35 Raymond Lee

We should sort of open our vision, not just in this life, but in later lives. And I'm glad that Australia is touting itself as a multicultural country. And to me, I believe it's successfully done what it's saying by being multicultural.

50:08 Raymond Lee

It's completely different from the policies, the government policies anyway. I mean, the people are ridiculously friendly, even back in the 1960s. The people are more open, they're more exposed to international culture.

50:34 Raymond Lee

Unlike some major countries, some of them are sort of cocooned and doesn't even know anything that goes beyond 100 miles away from their home. And we're lucky in that. And because of the nature of the people, they readily accept friendship and readily extend the friendship.

51:02 Raymond Lee

And for BLIA, I think we're still sort of struggling a bit by bit attracting Australian-born and of Western origin. You can tell it from our membership. It's still sort of stagnant if we start looking for local Western faces.

51:25 Raymond Lee

But for Nan Tien Temple, I think we have successfully opened up. And they have the right direction, I think. They don't try to sort of extend ourselves. We're doing it locally, and through the local population, then would it passed around.

51:44 Raymond Lee

And the neighbourhood campaign, etc., I think, to me, is very successful.

51:53 Venerable Jue Fang

So you have been through with the temple for more than 30 years. What is your vision for the temple into the future?

52:01 Raymond Lee

The temple, I think it has progressed and changed. The strategy changed. Initially, it's more like catering for the local, sorry, catering for the Asian population, although when it first started, it also tried to promote itself as a tourist location.

52:32 Raymond Lee

But I think as time went on, it start recognising, I think, the value of establishing relationships in the neighbourhood. And in that sense, it's successful. And also, it's opened up to the local schools, getting this, I don't know whether it's by invitation or the school applied, getting students to visit.

53:01 Raymond Lee

And that went on for at least 20 years. And this 20 years, the students would have grown up. And they would have an appreciation of what the temple is like, what the temple is trying to do. And this is a very successful way of introducing the temple and Buddhism to the general public.

53:25 Raymond Lee

And in the future, I think we should continue doing that. I'm not sure, I'm not a visionary. But I believe that the temple is under capable hands. And there will be new ideas, and there will be new attempts to sort of open up the temple to not just the neighbourhood, but to the general public in Sydney.

53:57 Raymond Lee

And our activities while, I mean, we're brilliant. Like this year's New Year's Day, I never see so many people except the day when the temple opened up in 1995. But this year, everyone's, you can feel the atmosphere.

54:19 Raymond Lee

They're here for the events, they're here for the happiness, for the joy that they enjoy. But then at the same time, I think they also doesn't make any distinction by saying that this is a religious location.

54:40 Raymond Lee

They're accepting it as a part of their lifestyle, which is very important. And to feel that the temple is full of life, I think that's something that I'm very happy about on the day.

55:00 Venerable Jue Fang

So we know that the Venerable Master Hsing Yun, the founder of Nan Tien Temple, BLIA, Hsing Yun Foundation and also NTI¹¹ passed away last year. (Raymond Lee: Yes.) So two days later, this is also his first anniversary, his death anniversary.

55:16 Venerable Jue Fang

Could you recollect some of your encounters with the Venerable Master? So are there specific moments or incidents or maybe some of his teachings that has really left a lasting impact on you?

55:32 Raymond Lee

Well, I, not being a Taiwanese, my direct association with the Master probably is not as many as the Taiwanese devotees. My first encounter with him is back in 1991 or '92 when he first visited Sydney. We were in the, at the Vihara somewhere around here, I think, at the Jingshe¹², and we spent some time listening to his talk, and we even took some photos with him, and at that time everyone was so proud.

¹¹ Nan Tien Institute (NTI), founded by Venerable Master Hsing Yun, is the first higher education institution in Australia that combines centuries of Buddhist wisdom with modern holistic studies. <https://www.nantien.edu.au/>

¹² Jingshe (精舍) is a term in Chinese that refers to a Buddhist monastery or retreat, similar to the concept of a Vihara in Sanskrit.

56:15 Raymond Lee

Yes, I have taken a photo with the grand Master and took it as a privilege, as an honour. So I've taken the attitude too, so I was happy to see myself standing next to him, and he's such a big tall person, so he's very imposing, but his impact on me didn't really sort of mature and was developed until I start reading and watching his Dharma services and talks.

56:57 Raymond Lee

You know, he has, every year he has either has the general members meeting or the director's conference and each year he has a theme talk. And I looked through the list from time to time, and I was involved in translating some of it as well, and that's why I start to appreciate and realise that he is not your normal Buddhist monk.

57:24 Raymond Lee

He's got visions, he's got a direction, and most of all, he has taken a very, very great vow. That's how I came to respect him, and even though I haven't sort of come across him personally, the time that I talked to him personally was on probably about 30 seconds, and that was about the building of the bridge across from the temple to NTI.

57:59 Raymond Lee

But nevertheless, this direct contact doesn't sort of mean as much as what I can gather from his teachings, from his talks. He has talked in Hong Kong, and then he has talk at different locations, and although I have not been able to participate in every one of them or most of them, but I've been able to catch up whenever I can, and particularly with the advent of the YouTube, I then start looking back, and looking at different topics. And I must say I've benefited by learning about letting go, but then in addition to that, I've been learning about coexistence, equality, about the environment, beneficial to others, etc., etc., because each of his topic is really a lesson to how to conduct yourself, how to look at the world, how to realise the truth, and sort of, as you read, you sort of gain more benefit, and you know, I may not be a good person to see in a service, but I'm I was happy to be able to benefit through his other activities.

59:51 Venerable Jue Fang

Thank you very much, Raymond, so I think it's been very enlightening for us to have this interview with you, especially from your perspective as an immigrant into Australia, someone who really lives and loves Australia and also your connection with Buddhism and also your contribution through BLIA and the temple. So is there anything else that you would like to add to this interview?

01:00:20 Raymond Lee

Mmm, no, I think I did put it in my biography that all of which I'm enjoying, all of which I've been sort of benefiting, I have to thank Florence, my wife, and I sincerely talked about it not because of her introduction of Buddhism to me personally, but throughout the many years, the 31 years when we were involved.

01:00:55 Raymond Lee

When I'm an unwilling treasurer, she always encouraged me. When I'm an unwilling president, she's always making things easy for me. She's always provided the support. And then in later years, she's always sort of trying to make things happening in a more easy and acceptable way to me, like today or any other day when we travel to Nan Tien Temple, when we probably is not getting any younger.

01:01:37 Raymond Lee

She always realised that to drive such a distance, probably better to go two person at the same time, so that we can share the driving. So I mean, it's all little things, but it all adds up.

01:01:59 Venerable Jue Fang

Thank you very much, Raymond. We are very grateful to you and Florence.

01:02:02 Raymond Lee

And I am very happy to be able to participate. Thank you.