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Interviewer: Venerable Jue Fang

Interviewee: Caroline Ong

00:01 Venerable Jue Fang

This is Venerable Jue Fang interviewing Caroline Ong on the 22nd of May, 2024. This recording is taking place at Barrie Street, East Killara. The interview is being recorded for the State Library of New South Wales Oral History Collection and Nan Tien Temple's 30th Anniversary Oral History Project.

00:23 Venerable Jue Fang

Hello, Caroline.

00:25 Caroline Ong

Hello, Venerable.

00:26 Venerable Jue Fang

Thank you for accepting our interview. So can I just invite you to introduce yourself, including your name and your current title and your current affiliation?

00:40 Caroline Ong

Hi, hello everyone, I'm Caroline Ong. I am a CPA and currently working at a financial services institution as the head of risk compliance and governance. I have been in the organisation for the last 20 years and prior to that I worked at PwC.

00:59 Caroline Ong

Currently I head up the financial risk and as well as the capital management functions of our division and previously I was the financial controller and the senior tax manager for the organisation. Outside work, I'm very involved in volunteering and in particular at Nan Tien Temple¹ and the Buddha's Light International Association², which we always shorten it to BLIA, where I have been a volunteer for the last 24, 25 years.

01:27 Caroline Ong

I currently am the elder advisor for North-One Subchapter of the Sydney BLIA.

01:35 Venerable Jue Fang

Oh, that's very extensive. So, could you also share with us where were you born and when were you born?

¹ 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.

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>

01:41 Caroline Ong

I was born in Singapore. In 1974.

01:45 Venerable Jue Fang

Okay, and could you tell us also a bit about your family, the family that you were, you grew up in, including your family size and maybe even the language and religion?

01:57 Caroline Ong

I was born into a pretty much a Buddhist family, so my grand..., we lived with our paternal, maternal grandmother, grandparents. And so, my grandmother has been a Buddhist and she's always on the 1st and 15th day of the lunar calendar, she would actually go vegetarian.

02:16 Caroline Ong

So that was when we sort of like, you know, have a concept of what it, a...a little bit of a concept of what it means, to be, or may be a Buddhist. We also have like a Guanyin altar, like Guanyin statue at home. And so, that sort of where I have guessed the initial seeds were planted, from a Buddhist, kind of knowledge perspective.

02:45 Caroline Ong

Also, I have, a sister, a younger sister. And so, at that point in time, my parents travelled extensively when we were young. And so, we pretty much lived with my grandparents when we were younger.

03:01 Venerable Jue Fang

Ya. So, what's about your language that your family speaks?

03:05 Caroline Ong

Yup, so, in terms of language, we speak English, Mandarin, Hokkien, yeah, as dialect.

03:14 Venerable Jue Fang

Oh, okay. So, you speak quite a few languages. So, could you also share with us your experience as a child and maybe your teenage years and your university (Caroline Ong clearing throat) university life?

03:26 Caroline Ong

Yup, sure. I guess like, childhood was pretty hectic. Um, as a Singaporean kids, you know, there's always a need to do well. I went to the school that my mum attended when she was young. And so, it was a relatively close-knitted environment, and where everyone knows everyone and my mum's teachers became my teachers and many of my classmates were children of my mum's classmates.

03:55 Caroline Ong

So, like, basically, you know, you...you grew up in an environment whereby like from kindergarten, you knew each other up to year six. While there's no outward comparison anyway, not to my face, I could feel that I can't do too badly at school.

04:13 Caroline Ong

So, there are many hours of tuition, different music instrument classes like piano, violin, and then there's also like other, classes such as like the ballet, violin, calligraphy, swimming, and school was actually very busy as well, with many extra curriculum activities.

04:35 Caroline Ong

So, during school holidays, my parents would always bring us, to experience different things. So, to travel to different countries, or to learn about like different cultures and things like that. So, from young, Australia was not exactly a strange place.

04:54 Caroline Ong

Like it was not unfamiliar when we like, you know, later migrated. So, we travelled here quite often, when we were young to visit mum's friends or things like that because my mum actually, or both of my parents studied here when, in the 1960s.

05:13 Caroline Ong

Yup, so, if we didn't go away, there would be a few days of staycation in Singapore as well. So essentially, it was a pretty, I guess, like, you know, carefree to the extent that other than if you had to only look after your homework and schoolwork as well as all your curriculum activities, you don't have to worry about anything else, kind of life.

05:34 Caroline Ong

Um, so we migrated to Australia in 1988 when I was 14. And my sister and I enrolled at Killara High. So, we've never left Killara actually, like, you know, we've always lived here for the last 30 years. And then I remember that the first year, at school, in terms of everything, not just school, was difficult in terms of like homesickness and missing the extended family and friends because, like you know, it was just us and that was it. And we also had to do everything ourselves.

06:04 Caroline Ong

Like I don't know whether like, you know, if you came over, like if you came from an Asian country, you always had somebody doing things for you so you didn't have to worry about anything else. But coming over here, we actually had to be extremely independent.

06:17 Caroline Ong

Um, having to, work on, like, you know, doing your own clothes, cleaning your own clothes, going to school by yourself, as well as making sure that, you know, your homework is done. But at that point in time, there were also no emails, or Facebooks, or Instagrams, or any social media platform where people could keep in touch on and quickly.

06:46 Caroline Ong

And so, the only way was through letter writing and international calls, and that was really expensive then. So that was mainly how we kept in touch when we were younger. The upside, for me was that school was great.

07:00 Caroline Ong

Like, you know, after many many years of tuition, there were no more tuitions and that was like a shock to my system in a way. Um, classes were relatively easy. I could keep up with most of the content as there were topics that I was already familiar with.

07:16 Caroline Ong

So essentially, I went from, year seven year eight in Singapore to year ten, so I skipped a year. But like then I could still keep up in year ten. So, like I didn't do much at all in year ten at all.

07:29 Caroline Ong

Like it was just mainly just breezing through classes, cause' everything was already, like, you have, you already know the content. But, going from year ten to year eleven, there were also no streaming of students like Singapore.

07:43 Caroline Ong

So, the... that was like the huge pressure cooker that most of my Singapore classmates were facing. So, are we able to get into a good junior college in Singapore? Are we able to get into a course that they would like to do?

07:56 Caroline Ong

This was no longer something I had to worry about. It was just basically, I guess the most difficult thing was more going from year ten to year eleven, what subjects we really wanted to take. And then, we could then select whatever we wanted in terms of the list of offerings that the school had.

08:13 Caroline Ong

So, it was pretty extremely liberating. There was no extra curriculum activities either, like that was compulsory. So other than the ones that my parents ensured that we do, so we continued to learn Chinese.

08:26 Caroline Ong

And so, we had a Chinese teacher, engaged at that point in time to ensure that we still had Chinese tuition, much less to my, like both my sister and I were like, oh, we can't do this. But anyway, we had to. Um, so but it was good because thinking about it now, it had been very useful for both my sister and I to go through the Chinese class.

08:48 Caroline Ong

And for me, like you know, it's more for I could read Chinese and especially the Sutras in Chinese. And then to be able to do translation for Venerables where required. And then for my sister, she now works in Beijing. So, she's able to easily communicate with the locals. So, after some time, like, we know, we made good friends at high school and so gradually settled down and nobody no longer feeling homesick. So, I regular, but I still regularly still meet up with my high-school friends and uni-friends and just keep in touch with them.

09:20 Caroline Ong

So now with the power of internet and social media, we have reconnected with like my primary friends, my primary school friends, too. So, we also meet each other quite regularly. I went to University of Sydney and completed a Bachelor of Economics in 1991.

09:42 Caroline Ong

And after graduating, it was really hard to find a job because there was, like, there was a recession in Australia then. And so, for a graduate, that wasn't a, the most thing, the best thing to be facing. So, we decided to continue studying and completed a Master of Professional Accounting at Macquarie University.

10:04 Caroline Ong

So, university life was good as well. Um, it was carefree. We made a lot of friends, spent a lot of time at each other's place doing research, working on the assignment and things like that. So yeah, so pretty much I didn't have to work until I really had to work and find a role.

10:22 Caroline Ong

So, yeah, so my first role actually was in an accounting firm as well in Sydney.

10:29 Venerable Jue Fang

So, it seems that you had quite a happy childhood (Caroline Ong: Yup) and migrating to Australia was actually quite a happy thing for you as well.

10:36 Caroline Ong

Um, I guess, like, after a while you settled in and it was okay, like, it was a positive thing, yeah, and like you know, it was like, from a, for a Singaporean kid that had no autumn

and winter and spring, I thought that was like the best thing ever, like you get, you don't have to face humidity all day, you don't have to face the heat all year round. So, yeah, we really enjoyed the first year of, like, you know, of winter and the colder it get, the more happy we were, kind of things. So yeah, we were pretty fun then.

11:09 Venerable Jue Fang

Okay. So, you came to Australia in 1988? And then when did you start to, get to know Nan Tien, get involved in Nan Tien temple?

11:18 Caroline Ong

So in 1994, when my parents like, really migrated over. So basically between 1988 and 94 we were sort of like the parents took turn in terms of looking after us kind of thing. But in 1994, they decided to migrate, so my grandparents came as well.

11:38 Caroline Ong

So essentially, that was the first year, but like through newspaper and things, we heard that there was like, someone was building Nan Tien Temple, like the temple was being built in Wollongong and like, it was still in the process of building, but there was also a little Vihara³ at the back of Nan Tien Temple.

11:59 Caroline Ong

And so therefore, that was the first time we actually went to visit the little Vihara at Semaphore Road. Yup. That was it because I finished and then like, you know, work and everything took priority and so that was the end of like, the association.

12:18 Caroline Ong

So we went, like, we knew of a place and that was it. And then towards, I think it's like around 1998 or something, like, we also visited Parramatta Vihara for a few Dharma talks as well, because there were Dharma talks at that point in time.

12:36 Caroline Ong

So, there were a few Dharma talks and so we also attended, but like, there wasn't a lot of associations then. After that, I went to Singapore to work for two years, (coughing) sorry, at PwC. So that was the end of the association, but I didn't know that throughout this period of time, my mom also continued to, like, attend or did volunteer work as well.

13:00 Caroline Ong

So, it was only 2000 when I came back from Singapore to look after my sick grandmother that we got a lot more involved. Oh, I, myself got a lot more involved,

³ Vihara is a Buddhist monastery or temple complex that serves as a residence for monastics, a centre for education, meditation and religious practice.

right. My mom was really involved. So, she took me to the Chatswood Temple to pray for my grandmother so that she has a better health.

13:19 Caroline Ong

So, from then on, I, I met up, like, we got to meet and got to know Reverend Jue Dao. Yup.

13:30 Venerable Jue Fang

So, could you tell us more about your engagement with the Chatswood Temple?

13:34 Caroline Ong

Yup. So, in terms of Chatswood Temple, it's quite an interesting story to me anyway, cause' when I was in my 20 something, I don't expect to be so closely-knitted to religion, I guess. Because that's sort of not what people do, like, people my age were like, you know, thinking about career or their partners or whatever it is.

13:57 Caroline Ong

So, like, for me, it was a bit different. But at that point in time, because like my grandmother was sick, so we, we did that. But essentially Reverend Jue Dao, when I first met Reverend Jue Dao on the first day, I was actually in between roles, because I transitioned, I transitioned from the Singapore office, PwC office into the Sydney office.

14:21 Caroline Ong

So, I had, like, two months break in between. So, in that two months break, my mum brought me to the temple. And then in that temple, Venerable Jue Dao was asking for someone to help her fill in a TAFE college forms.

14:40 Caroline Ong

And I'm like, okay, fine. But this is the first time I met her. So okay, I thought, okay, that's, that's fine. Since I have time, I will help her complete the form. And then I realised that she was trying to pick up a course in English.

14:55 Caroline Ong

And it was an evening course. So, at that point in time in St Leon...that, that was in, the enrolment was for TAFE St Leonards. And so, Venerable asked me to go and like basically, do more research around what kind of course for her was the most suitable.

15:14 Caroline Ong

And so, I said to her, like, these are all evening courses. So, by the time she gets back to Chatswood, it'll probably be by 10 pm in the evening. So, I said to her, like, this is not really the most ideal for Venerable to be walking like dark at night and be on a train as well.

15:32 Caroline Ong

And at that point in time, there were not as many streetlights in Australia, like it's pretty dark and there's not that many Asians as well. So, so what I said to her was I offered to teach her English.

15:46 Caroline Ong

So, that was my first real affiliation or association with the temple. So, she was, like, okay, no problem. You can come every night. I'm like, no, I will do every, like few nights. So, I think it's like two or three times a week.

16:02 Caroline Ong

During the weeknight, I would be there from seven to nine to go through, like, to teach her English so that she's able to then be able to share Buddhism in a more, like you know, in a, in the local language in English and be able to like, you know, share this Dharma joy with everybody.

16:22 Caroline Ong

So, the English class was interesting because I was like, what do you want to learn? And she's like, oh, you have to teach me how to, like, you know, teach Buddhism in English. I'm like, okay, I don't even know it myself, but that's fine. I can do it.

16:36 Caroline Ong

Do you have any textbooks? So, the first book that we actually did in the first class was actually *The Pathway to Buddhahood*. So, it's called Cheng Fo Zhi Dao (成佛之道) in Chinese. And essentially that book, so there is thankfully an English version and a Chinese version. I don't know whether, like, I'm sure you all have read it. And so, we started from Chapter one and it was like, even if you know English you won't be able to actually translate it. So, it's basically self-teach, basically us teaching each other what it means because, like, you know, there will be words like "taking refuge"⁴, like, you have, like, for me who had no idea what "taking refuge" means, you actually then have to go and ask Reverend, like, what does this mean? Okay, as long as you understand what "taking refuge" this is the Chinese equivalent the San Gui Yi (三皈依) and that's it. So basically, we're like just doing word-for-word match, and so there were no structure or anything it was just more going through all the different terminologies and making sure that, like, there is a word-for-word understanding from both her side and then eventually me because I'll be asking about all the different what it means by all the different terminologies.

17:46 Caroline Ong

I think, like, in a way, I don't know if I was set up but essentially that was sort of how, like, my base of Buddhism started essentially, learning about, like, you know, "taking refuge", what all the different realms meant and things like that. So, after, like, about

⁴ Taking refuge is a form of aspiration to lead a life with Buddhism (the Triple Gem) at its core.

three months of *Pathway to Buddhahood*, I'm like, okay this is like Chapter three or four now, which was a very slow-going thing because it took so long to just go through line by line and terminology by terminology. I said I think, like, other than, like, you know, being understanding like all these, you know, matching of English and Chinese kind of terminology, you also need to string the sentences together, right? Like, you need to be able to speak properly. So, we decided to go on to do grammar classes. So yeah, so, from then on, we did books and books of grammar and vocabulary, yeah, until like, she actually left us, like, left Chatswood for another assignment.

18:48 Caroline Ong

So, during the, I think it was like eight, nine months there, we went there, I was there every pretty much every night to actually do English, but on top of that, on the weekend, I would be there at the temple as well and this was the temple before we moved so this was at 69 Albert Avenue, and it was like, on, above the railway station, so at that point in time, we actually, on Saturday mornings, as is now, we actually have the Dharma functions, so I became one of the helpers at the Dharma function.

19:30 Caroline Ong

Yup, so then eventually it got to, oh let's just, at that point in time *Merit Times*⁵ came out as well in 2000. So, *Merit Times* in the past was not electronic, it was actually newspaper version, I don't know whether you all remembered but remember we had to fold it into, like, a third and then like, you know, everyone who was a subscriber, we need to deliver by hand or people had to come to the temple. So, every week we would be folding the *Merit Times* for that week and then deliver it as well. We did a lot of things that I never thought we would do, like, I never experienced in my life. Like, things like, sending out the enlightenment congee, like, you know, and asking people if they... and then explaining what the enlightenment congee meant and also going to different shops to send out our *Merit Times* as well. So, that was one thing. And then after that, like, we, we also did quite a lot of, like, visitation to Nan Tien Temple at that point in time, so almost, like, you know, twice a month, we would be at Nan Tien Temple and then also that Venerable Man Hsin at that time was superintendent at Parramatta Vihara. So basically, we also visited Parramatta quite often as well. So, that's sort of where we sort of got to know all the Venerables at Nan Tien Temple and at Parramatta.

20:54 Venerable Jue Fang

So, I can see that you're very involved with the temples and what made you so motivated and persistent in your contribution and connection?

21:06 Caroline Ong

I think it's more the rest..., for me, like, you know, it resonates with me. I, like, you know, after reading like *The Pathway to Buddhahood*, that's also like, you know, getting to

⁵ The Merit Times, launched on April 1, 2000, by Venerable Master Hsing Yun in Taiwan, is a diverse newspaper dedicated to fostering a harmonious society, purifying minds, caring for human welfare, and promoting world peace.

understand who Venerable Master Hsing Yun⁶ is. Because at that point in time, like, I've never even heard of him.

21:24 Caroline Ong

And so, and that was the year in November, in November 2000, where we had the hymns, a Buddhist hymns⁷ thing at Opera House, which was like, a huge thing. And so, we were also selling tickets and stuff. But for me, if I didn't know what it means, it's really hard to sort of promote it.

21:44 Caroline Ong

So, I sort of took it upon myself to make sure that I learned about what it means. And so, and what his story is, and why are we doing the Buddhist hymns and things like that. So, Venerable Master's teachings, like, you know, basically the hardship that he has gone through and how he overcome all these hardships and the mental challenges that he, like, you know, how he actually overcome all the mental difficult, like the mental challenges in a way, basically, how, like, you know, how do you overcome? What is it? Like, you know, basically, how do you, when you have challenges in your life, how do you accept? How do you move on? How do you actually not even let it be an obstacle in your life? So, I found that very inspiring.

22:35 Caroline Ong

So I thought, like, you know, if I can just learn a little bit about, like, you know, what the Master is about, then, like, you know, how do I apply in my life? And at that point in time, there's also like, you know, for me, a new role at PwC back to, like, you know, all the different, you know, all the different challenges that we had at work and then my grandmother being sick, how do I actually then get over this? Like this support, like, in a way, it's more like a support to actually get through the day-to-day and making sure that I'm okay, kind of thing.

23:11 Caroline Ong

So personally, it was more that at the beginning. And then after that, like, it's more than get to the Yong Bu Tui Piao (永不退票), which is, like, you know, how do we actually get to the "never quit" kind of situation?

23:24 Caroline Ong

So yeah, in a way, like, yeah, it's because of, like, you know, the ability to then and over the years, right? Like, if you think about it, there were all these opportunities that the temple has afforded me in terms of doing all the different roles from a very, very small role like money collection to like, you know, helping at the Dharma function, to teaching English.

⁶ Born in 1927 in Jiangdu, Jiangsu Province, China, Venerable Master Hsing Yun was the founder of Fo Guang Shan (Buddha's Light Mountain) Buddhist Order and dedicated his life to propagating Humanistic Buddhism. He passed away at the age of 97, on February 5, 2023.

⁷ Sing a short hymn or song of praise.

23:49 Caroline Ong

All this has sort of enabled me to then learn a lot about myself and then be able to apply it to my work and to my friends as well and to the family. So, I think, like, in myself, I sort of, it's more of a personal growth by being able to actually get to do different things because you do all the things at BLIA and at the temple that you in your normal life would never do. Yup.

24:18 Venerable Jue Fang

So, did you meet Venerable Master Hsing Yun personally?

24:23 Caroline Ong

Yes I did. So, when we were, because at that point in time, I think in 2003, the transport authorities or the railway network people, they were trying to rebuild Chatswood Station and so our temple had to be relocated. And so Venerable Master Hsing Yun was there, as part of the relocation and to actually, like, you know, we already bought somewhere which is the current 4 Spring Street address, and so I met him when he came over to Chatswood to have a look at the place.

25:04 Venerable Jue Fang

So, can you tell us more about the encounter, what did he do or where were you at that time? What would you doing?

25:14 Caroline Ong

I was working, but like, obviously, Venerable Master Hsing Yun came, the day that he came, I took the day off because there were, like, you know, we were going to serve lunch and stuff like that, so he, he was, he was scheduled to actually come over for lunch, and so I had the honour of sitting next to him for lunch. So it was quite interesting, so he was just talking to me around, like, you know, what I do, what I'm doing, and things like that, so he asked me about like, you know, my life, and then Venerable Master, like, Venerable Master also like, he was, there are certain things that he couldn't eat because of his diabetes, he actually, like, go, okay, this is yours, from his, his bowl, he was like, oh, I can't eat this, so you can have it, and stuff like that. So yeah, so we had lunch, and then after that, we went over to the new Spring Street venue, and at that point, it was, it was a gym when we first bought it, so we needed to convert it into a temple and do a little bit of renovation to it. So Venerable Master Hsing Yun came and instructed or provided guidance around, like, you know, what needs to be done.

26:32 Caroline Ong

So, one of the things he did was, he wanted a lift to be included and put into the building, because he said that there are a lot of older people coming to the temple, and going up three floors to the Main Shrine is not actually conducive for older people, so he insisted that there needs to be a lift, so there was a lift that was done. And then

the second part was like, you know, what kind of menu. He was also instructing on the menu to be served for the tea house, and so he was like, "oh, do you think that you'll be good if we sell noodles?" I'm like, "yeah." And then he goes, "I think we should sell it for \$2." I'm like, "what? that's too cheap." And I said, "no, no, no, we can't do that. It'll be at least like \$7 or \$8 at that point in time." So, he was like, "oh, that's a bit expensive." I'm like, "but that's like market, and that we need to run it like, properly, so we need to ensure that we cover our costs anyway. And also ensure that there's also some funding for, like, the running of the temple." So essentially, he sort of agreed, but yeah, so he came and he spoke about, like, you know, what to do on the second floor, first floor, which is the library, the classrooms, the offices, and things like that, as well as the Main Shrine. So, he came and actually personally provided guidance. Yup, so that was my encounter with him. And obviously, like, he, oh, we also did, I actually took my refuge and my five precepts⁸ with, like, Venerable Master Hsing Yun presiding it. So that was the year that he actually, I don't know whether it was the last year that he did it in Australia, but that was the year that we did it, and he was there.

28:16 Venerable Jue Fang

So, that was in the year 2003. (Caroline Ong: 2000). 2000.

28:21 Caroline Ong

Oh, he came in 2000. Sorry, 2003 that was once and 2000 he came as well. (Venerable Jue Fang: Okay.)

28:26 Venerable Jue Fang

So, you had your precepts in 2000, and then 2003 was the Chatswood Temple. (Caroline Ong: Yup).

28:32 Venerable Jue Fang

Then what happens after that? Could you tell us more? Because from what I see you're very involved in the temple. Your different roles, or different events and different things that you have done with the temple.

28:45 Caroline Ong

Okay. So, I guess my...the..., I get involved in many many, like, so basically, there's the business as usual kind of thing whereby every Saturday I would be at the temple, and actually I help at the moment with the, the Dharma instruments so as part of the Dharma function. So, I'll be there every week and I'll play the bells and drums, and sometimes depending on, like, whether there are enough, like, people, conducting the service. I would also then also work on play the wooden fish. So that's sort of, like, every weekend. So, I'll be there like, you know, to actually be part of the Dharma function. So, then after that, that would be like the guidance of North-One, cause'

⁸ The Five Precepts in Buddhism are ethical guidelines for lay devotees to live by to foster moral conduct and spiritual development.

having been the president before you sort of know what you need to do and for what is required by BLIA.

29:50 Venerable Jue Fang

So, could you tell us more about BLIA, what is it about?

29:52 Caroline Ong

Okay, BLIA is Buddha's Light International Association. It is the devotee arm of the temple. So, the temple has two parts. Like, one is the Venerable monastic arm and the other side is like the arm whereby the devotees are belonged to.

30:13 Caroline Ong

So, it's basically set up in 1991 in California and it then like, you know, have like, now has memberships across the world. So, in Sydney, we actually do have a BLIA chapter. So, in that, there are different sub-chapters within the Sydney chapter as well and so Chatswood being one of them. We are the North-One branch. There are also other branches like the north, the east and west and south branches where they reside either in Parramatta or in Kogarah at the moment and of course in Wollongong. Yup.

30:57 Venerable Jue Fang

Okay. So, you are also a President of the North-One sub-chapter?

31:04 Caroline Ong

Yeah. I was in, so there was North-Two as well at that point in time in 2000, so I was president for North-Two, and North-Two is pretty much more of the younger generation, like, so people in their 20s kind of thing at that point in time. And so, I became the president there and then, like, there was four years of that, so I did, yeah, I did four years of presidency for North-Two and then after that four years of presidents for North-One, cause' we combined North-Two and North-One eventually, yup, into one North-One.

31:41 Venerable Jue Fang

So, you had eight years of presidency altogether. (Caroline Ong: Yeah). So, are you also the youngest president and the longest serving president?

31:49 Caroline Ong

I don't know about longest serving, at that point in time I was the youngest.

31:53 Venerable Jue Fang

So how did you lead your sub-chapter?

31:57 Caroline Ong

It was interesting because everyone was older than me. They had to, like, take instructions from, like, me. But then it was pretty good because like, basically, all the members were extremely supportive, I should say. Like, you know, they are like, OK, you go and attend the meetings. You go and do whatever you need. We don't want to attend meetings. You attend meetings. And then you tell us what we need. So, so I would attend the monthly BLIA meetings usually. And then just let them know what they need to do.

32:29 Caroline Ong

But in terms of the organisation, I think it was pretty good. Like, they, they sort of knew what they needed to do. But also, obviously, we needed to ensure, well, for me, my role is more of a coordination role. The coordination between BLIA Sydney, as well as the sub-chapters. Like ensuring that whatever that's required is done right. So, things like Sangha offering, like, you know, if we are preparing food for the Venerables, what does it mean, what time, whatever. But I can't, like, I can't really cook. So essentially, it was down to, like, the older members to prepare whatever they need, to think about what they need to prepare, the time to get there and stuff. But for me, to coordinate between, like for example, kitchen at Nan Tien Temple and us in North-One.

33:26 Caroline Ong

So, while I think what helped was the fact that I was also involved in the preparation. Like, if they asked me to wash vegetables or cut vegetables or do whatever, I did whatever they asked them to do. So, in a way, it sort of facilitated, the fact that I wasn't just up there as a president doing nothing. It was a president whereby like they are able to also instruct and like negotiate and get to a most optimal outcome for everybody. So, I think that that's sort of how it worked, that you know in the first few years, it was more, like, obviously the first few years, North-One, North-Two, there was not as much expectations from a North-Two perspective, because we were a lot younger.

34:13 Caroline Ong

But North-One had expectations. But then when we combined North-One and Two, that became the expectations went up. But then I already had four years of like, this is what we need to do. And then also, like being close to all the Venerables, it helped. Like, because like, you know, at the beginning, in like, you know, in the first few years, like, we were extremely close with Abbess, both Abbess Man Chien and Abbess Man Hsin, because like, yeah. And so therefore, we knew each other and we could just call and discuss things.

34:48 Caroline Ong

We, like, and things got sorted. And like, you were either given the delegation to do it or the responsibility to do it or the authority to do it. And so therefore, you just carried

out that. So, I think like, that was a formation year for all of us, in a way. Like, in terms of like, building up BLIA Sydney, as well as like, yeah, growing the members in North-One. Yup.

35:18 Venerable Jue Fang

That's very interesting. So just now you said that you started with Nan Tien maybe in the year 1994 (Caroline Ong: yup) around that. That was before, actually one year before the official opening of Nan Tien (Caroline Ong: Yup) and this year we are, they are celebrating the 30th Anniversary.

35:35 Venerable Jue Fang

So, it's almost like 31 years. Can you share with us, because I see that you have actually become director of events, for most of the major events. So, could you share with us your role and maybe even the way that you see the different events involving over the years?

35:58 Caroline Ong

Yup. I think as a start, I would like to thank, like, the temple for giving me the opportunity as well as the trust. I guess there's a huge amount of trust in there to be able to do this because over the years, like, I should start with, like, you know, my...I'll answer that question soon but I'll talk about Buddha's Birthday⁹ first, because that's sort of when it's sort of like, the testing ground for responsibility and accountability taking or delegation from the temple.

36:31 Caroline Ong

So, in terms of Buddha's Birthday, I got involved in the first year actually, like, in the first month, it was pretty much, I had no idea what was happening. I didn't even know what was Buddha's Birthday. I didn't even know where, like, in Darling Harbour it was held. So, I was just told by Venerable to meet her at 4 am on a Saturday morning and that was it. So, I got there. There were all these people moving pots and pans and food and vegetables and everything everywhere.

37:01 Caroline Ong

And I'm like, okay. So, I was just standing there and nobody knew me because I was young. That was my first month actually at Chatswood. So, nobody really knew me. And so, I was like just standing there with my hands in the pocket and try to get out of the way. Then after that, like you know, I...that was when I first met Venerable Man Chien because I actually drove her to Darling Harbour that morning. I never knew what was an Abbess, who was an Abbess, what was an Abbess, what we do with an Abbess. I didn't even know that there were different rankings in the monastic world. So basically, I'm like, okay, doesn't matter, like, you know, to me, she was an equal Venerable. And

⁹ Buddha's Birthday - Buddha Bathing Ceremony. According to legend, when the Buddha Sakyamuni was born, nine dragons rained down fragrant water to bathe the young prince. To commemorate this event, Chinese Buddhism holds a Buddha bathing ceremony on the Buddha's birthday (the eighth day of the fourth lunar month).

so, we went on and that two days of Buddha's Birthday, whereas I didn't organise anything, my first thing was to just collect money.

37:58 Caroline Ong

Like, so basically, I was at the stall behind the counter, and everyone was just chucking money at me during the busy times, and I had to give change. So, at the end of the first day, everyone complained about me to the Venerable because I was too slow in providing change, that you know, I wasn't serving the customer quickly enough. So anyway, Venerable told, was very, very compassionate. And she's like, I don't care what you say, she's going to stand there and collect money these two days and that's it. So anyway, that was my first year.

38:32 Caroline Ong

And then after that, the next year I progressed into, because I was president, I had to mend the food stall and making sure that the food store works. So, like the, all the different bits around, like, the food preparation in terms of, like, and all the cutlery utensils equipment that you need. So, you actually have to learn from scratch, how to actually set up the stall. What is the most optimal way and best, how do you say, like, the most safest optimal and like, space, saving space, place to actually hold the food stall and then be able to sell the food really quickly.

39:09 Caroline Ong

So, I did that for three years. And then like after that, I think in the fifth year, Venerable Man Hsin said, I can't do this. I can't be hiding in the food stall anymore, that I needed to move on and be like, heading up the ceremony team. I'm like, I don't even know what's happening outside. So, for the first four years, I had no idea what was happening outside the food stall. Like it has nothing to do with me. All I know was that the music was playing, somebody was dancing, end of story.

39:37 Caroline Ong

But the fifth year I had to go and find out what actually was happening. So that was when the first real assignment came in terms of like, you know, stepping out into a bigger role and stepping out across, not just be hiding in North-One, and also like, then step into BLIA Sydney, actually.

39:58 Caroline Ong

And because like, for for a ceremony role, team role, you need to actually make sure that everything is being thought through. And that's sort of, where we, sort of, I started. So about three years of ceremony, we sort of like, expanded the different things and into multicultural performances and things like that, and also while looking after my little North-One food stall because that's still like my base and my core, right. All I need to do is to make sure that all my older members are still performing what they need to perform and we are still like, counting money. I'm still counting money every year at

the end of each year, I'll go and collect money and then, like, you know, count the money and like close off the account. But I still like, you know, I had additional duties then. And it was in 2009 that the events director had to be seconded to other areas for for work and so I was asked to head up and be the next event director.

41:09 Venerable Jue Fang

So, you started the role of an events director in (Caroline Ong: 2009) 2010, 2009?

41:15 Caroline Ong

No. So 2010 was the first year, so 2009 was the last year that he did it, so like, from April, after that, like, from May, and the organising part for 2010, I became involved. Yup.

41:30 Venerable Jue Fang

Yeah, so what's the experience like and how has the Buddha's Birthday Celebration evolved under your care?

41:36 Caroline Ong

I think it was good. I hope it was good. But essentially, I learned a lot, like, about people, about managing people, about, like, myself and how to accept challenges, and how to be a bit more resilient, how to be agile. And I think like, this kind of skill set is things that you will never be able to get to if you don't do this kind of events.

42:04 Caroline Ong

So essentially, we...for me, I found that a huge challenge because the person had to leave the country in a hurry, and I had to take over all his millions of files and wade through them piece by piece to find out what exactly was done in the like, last three years kind of thing.

42:25 Caroline Ong

So, I did that. And then, so, yeah, we started organising the Buddha's Birthday and working with the Sydney Harbour Foreshore Authority at that point in time before it became Place Management New South Wales.

42:42 Caroline Ong

So, we worked with all the different coordinators and event management people at that point in time. Yup. So that's sort of how I started. In terms of challenges and barriers, I thought the form filling was very challenging because there were a lot of requirements, like, you know, to fill in all the paperwork.

43:04 Caroline Ong

The paperwork itself is not just about filling in forms, it's about the ability to connect across all of BLIA Sydney, across all of the temples, to actually get to the form. Because

you need to understand what everyone is going to be participating at, what their activities are, to be able to fill in that form.

43:27 Caroline Ong

The form includes not just the activities but also all the risk management, the food stalls, all what they're selling and like, all their equipment, electrical requirements, the water requirements and then all the marquee requirements.

43:43 Caroline Ong

So that's like, you know, that's to just get the form filled. But to actually do that, you need to then talk to all the different Venerables and the BLIA teams to actually get there. So that was one of the things that I think it made me be a lot more extroverted, to that extent. Like, basically you cannot just hide behind paperwork, you need to physically call people. There wasn't WhatsApp or anything at that point in time, so you actually have to call everybody all the time every night to just make sure that your activities, confirming activities, confirming what they're doing, confirming their requirements, just to make sure that it all happens.

44:27 Caroline Ong

So that's like one part. And then getting that, getting that, like, you know, I think the next part of challenge is like, for me, how do you actually set up the stalls? Like, you know basically, you have that, we moved from, like, the Chinese Garden forecourt into Tumbalong Park as well in between. So, we needed to find out what actually are the facilities. Where the facilities need to be like, manage and things like that. But also how do you set up stalls? Because I didn't even know like, what marquee meant and what's the difference between a marquee versus a fete stall versus, like, all the different, like, you know, terminology acronyms and stuff like that.

45:13 Caroline Ong

So, for me, I had to learn it myself and there was no one, like, who knew actually, no one in BLIA Sydney that knew how to do it. I don't know who used to do it in the past but like, when I did it, there was no one. So, I had to go and make the decision as to, all right this food stall, you sit here and stuff like that. But just the marking out of the stalls, just to make sure that it works as a whole for the whole entire ground and the event required thinking as well. (Venerable Jue Fang: Yea) So I thought that was like a huge learning curve for me in terms of how do you actually get there? How do you actually ensure that, you know, every single stall is looked after?

45:54 Caroline Ong

And then, over the years as it progress, because of, like, you know, ensuring we have public safety, ensuring community safety and ensuring that, like, you know, health and OH&S are all looked after, there were a lot more forms again. But other than the forms, we also had to make sure that on the ground, implementation actually works. So, we

actually learned all that as well. Like and then now, there's a few more people who knows a little bit more, not just me, so that there is like, you know, there is the handing down of the legacy as opposed to just me holding it.

46:36 Caroline Ong

So, I've been trying to find my replacement since the fifth year. So, I did this together for nine years, right. That's the event director for Buddha's Birthday. So, by the fifth year, I started looking for a replacement and I couldn't find one for many, many, many, many years. Until 2018, Andy said that he would be willing to put up his hand to do this. So, I sort of handed the baton, like, actually, across to him. So, in 2019, that was the first year he did that. And then we went into COVID. Yup.

47:16 Caroline Ong

But yeah, so that was like, the Buddha's Birthday stories. Like, you know, you basically, for myself, we learned how to deal with all the different, the different challenges. And obviously like, there are times where you want to really give up because especially when you are the only one filling all the forms, you are the only one facing the Foreshore Authority plus everything else. Like, you know, that's also, and then like, you know, balancing that with work as well, cause' work was extremely, I'll just, work was very busy. We were in the process of transitioning to Manila at that point in time at work as well. And so, we actually, I actually had to be in Manila to set up the whole entire Global Shared Services Centre. And so, I was there on and off. So, it was for me, it was three weeks on, three weeks off in Manila. So, three weeks in Manila, three weeks in Sydney. So, I did my Sydney things the three weeks. And then after that, like, yeah. So that was sort of how I managed the balance between like the professional life and my volunteer work. Yup.

48:33 Venerable Jue Fang

So, from our research preparing for this interview, I found that there were actually a lot of resources put in to organise the Buddha's Birthday Celebrations and it has been around like for 31 years. And apart from Sydney, actually the other temples, branch temples around the Australia, they all celebrate the Buddha's Birthday and they have all become the largest Buddha's Birthday Celebration in the state. So, can you share with us the significance of these festivals? Why is it that BLIA and the temple is willing to put in so much effort?

49:15 Caroline Ong

I think for it is, for me, like, it's more, you know, there are a couple of, I guess, points that you can think about, like, that I can think about. So, one would be the ability for the members of the public to get to know the Buddha and Buddhism.

49:34 Caroline Ong

So that's one, the propagation and maybe through like, you know, religious activities, like the Alms Round and things like that to multicultural performances. So like, there is the cultural elements as well. And so, there's an opportunity for the general public to get to know Nan Tien Temple, get to know all our different branch temples as well as not just like in Australia, all the different states in Australia, but also in New Zealand and in Christchurch, Auckland as well.

50:04 Caroline Ong

So, there's like, that kind of, like one would be the propagation. The second bit would be for the ability for, you know, to have it externally would be then not just in the temple is to make sure that, you know, people who don't really usually drop into the temple, actually know of our organisation. So and also the convenience for the older generation or people who are aging to also come to a central point in the city to be able to also bath the Buddha, and to also make a respect to actually mark the celebration as well.

50:42 Caroline Ong

And then thirdly, it is also an opportunity for the organisation to train its volunteers. So, like, you know, the Buddha's Birthday is a huge training ground, like, you know, may it be, it's in every single aspect, like personally, I've just shared my, my learnings, but for everybody else, how do you actually do food management, food preparation in the food stall? How do you actually manage all the utensils? How do you set up a stall, like internally? If you are given a three by six, kind of space, how do you make full use of it? That's like one part. And then for the performing, performance team, how do they actually get to know all the other different, you know, multicultural ethnic groups outside our own group as well?

51:28 Caroline Ong

And then for the team that is like, you know, designing the Buddha's Birthday, Buddha's bathing area, how do they actually make full use of that piece of land that they're given or that, you know, little area that they're given? How are they going to optimise that area? So, it's all about learning. And then there's also what exactly does, like, do you do to actually set up, you know for our men's group? They also had to learn from scratch what exactly how do you decorate the place?

52:01 Caroline Ong

You know, last year was the year where after COVID, we actually learned, that was the first year after COVID that we went back to Tumbalong Park and there were new members like heading up each of the team. And so, it was interesting because that was the first time that I realised how much we have gained over the last 20 years in terms of being able to provide guidance and consultation to each of the team. Like, you know, basically everyone was ringing up and go like, can you please tell us how do you set up

a stall? How do you actually decorate? What exactly do we need to be transporting? How are we transporting? What kind of forms do I need to fill? Like that kind of thing is more like a huge training ground for everyone, because for all of us, I think we all come to the temple to learn something. And this is something that, you know, we would never do in our day to day, I guess.

52:55 Venerable Jue Fang

I see that for the Buddha's Birthdays Festival, there is a theme every year. Could you share with us the themes as well? For example, this year I saw that it is co-existence and co-prosperity (Caroline Ong: Yup). Last year was something about (Caroline Ong: Sustainability), yes sustainability. So how do the themes evolved and what do you all do with the themes?

53:20 Caroline Ong

So, over the many many years, there were different themes, like you said Venerable, and essentially the themes were pretty much aligned with what was in the BLIA annual meeting. So, there would be a theme that was set for that particular year by Fo Guang Shan headquarters as well as BLIA headquarters to actually come up with themes. So different, like, over the last few years, we had, like, "Faith and Legacy". We also had "Sustainability" once, as well as like, this year, the "Co-Prosperity" theme. And each year, I think, like, we tried to exhibit that by, like, for example, like, you know, for "Faith and Legacy", how do we actually involve our younger members? How do we involve in, like, you know, getting, like the whole family involved so that there is a handing down of faith and the legacy of Buddha's Birthday? So, there's like, Mother's Day Celebration. There's also the children, the Baby Blessing and things like that, which helped the whole process. You bring all the younger generations in.

54:32 Caroline Ong

Last year, we did, the last couple of years, not last year, but we also did the sustainability piece. And so there is the SDG¹⁰, which is the Sustainable Development Goals. So, we also did quite a bit of, like, you know, a wellness stall, a wellness whole area, actually not just stall, around sustainability. And it's not just a sustainability from saving the environment. There's also like equality in women and all the different kinds of sustainability, like the sustainability. Actually, we also through, it's also a sustainability in our volunteers. Like how do we actually sustain them and allow them to continue their volunteer work? So that's one of it.

55:19 Caroline Ong

And this year, the "Co-Prosperity" was a lot more around how do we actually, like, you know, co-prosper in terms of like, in terms of challenges in our daily life as well, not

¹⁰ The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, adopted by all United Nations members in 2015, created 17 world Sustainable Development Goals. These goals are the blueprint to achieve a better and more sustainable future for all.

just from one side. So, we thought through the different themes and we tried to ensure that, you know, there is equal, everyone is in a win-win position.

55:46 Venerable Jue Fang

That's really great so, just concluding about the Buddha's Birthday Festival, is there anything that you want to add about this part that you are involved in?

56:00 Caroline Ong

I'm just thinking from a Buddha's Birthday perspective, like, you know, I would like to see the younger generation, picking up a little bit more of the baton. I mean, like, after I've done this for 20 years, so I'm like 50. So, like, you know, there's a lot of people that could be, could learn from this. I can't, I mean, like, I would not like to see me doing this at 80 and still be, like, you know, be the events director at 80, cause' otherwise then, like the faith and legacy part would not have been, you know, what do you say, realised.

56:39 Caroline Ong

And so yep, that's one part, like, you know, basically to actually find people who are willing, and volunteers who are able to actually take this on. So, I think, like, over the years, we have become a lot more smooth in our operation. We have actually got, like, you know, shared team site. We have actually, like, how do you say, like, we have actually elevated, I think, the way that we pitched our Buddha's Birthday.

57:09 Caroline Ong

So, from the early days of, like, this is just food, we have moved on to culture, and then after culture, we have moved on to education. And then we have also then moved on to, like, you know, not just all these, but also, like, how do you bring the younger generation through.

57:25 Caroline Ong

So, I think, like, it's actually, like, elevating the platform of Buddhism or Humanistic Buddhism in Australia. And you can see, like, in Sydney, we're actually doing this, like, you know, slowly, slowly.

57:38 Caroline Ong

I think, like, you know, as you think about it, it's done, it's very difficult the first year that you do it, like, you know, when you introduce a new concept, like new, when you introduce, like cultural performance, like, how was it to go and find all these performances.

57:53 Caroline Ong

And then when you introduce the education, how hard was it to just visualise what that, visualise what that means, right? Like, is it education from a youth perspective or

is it from a, like, an older adult perspective? What kind of, where, where is it that we're pitching? So, I think, like, as we progress, like this will become a lot clearer, a little bit more defined, but also more people to be involved.

58:20 Venerable Jue Fang

That's great. So, thank you very much about this and we will continue our interview later. (Caroline: Okay) Thank you.