

## 20240522\_Interview Transcription 002

Interviewer: Venerable Jue Fang

Interviewee: Caroline Ong

### 00:01 Venerable Jue Fang

This is Venerable Jue Fang continuing the interview with Caroline Ong after a quick break. This is part two of the interview. Thank you, Caroline, for coming back to this interview.

### 00:14 Caroline Ong

Thank you, Venerable.

### 00:16 Venerable Jue Fang

Okay, so we were talking about the Buddha's Birthday Celebrations that you were involved in, and I understand that you have also been part of the events director for many other major events in Nan Tien Temple. So, one of them is the Triple Platform Ordination<sup>1</sup> that was held in the year 2004. So that's about 20 years ago. Could you share with us what happened then?

### 00:46 Caroline Ong

The Triple Platform Ordination was a huge event, I guess, in Nan Tien Temple and that commemorated the 10<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of Nan Tien Temple. And so, in that year, we spent a whole year planning on how we're going to be working, to meet the needs of all the Venerables to come for the ordination.

### 01:14 Caroline Ong

The process itself, the transportation, accommodation, and all the different ancillary requirements to have the event. So as a full team of BLIA as well as the temple, we have been planning this pretty much on a weekly basis to get it done.

### 01:35 Caroline Ong

We were all extremely excited to be welcoming all the, all the Venerables around the world who is here for the ordination. It is a hugely courageous and life-changing moment for each of them. And we would like them to essentially take this moment to actually have a proper, like, you know, to not be worried about anything but the ordination and focus on themselves.

### 02:04 Caroline Ong

So, we wanted to make sure it all went as smoothly as possible. So, when we heard that there was going to be like 200 Venerables coming for the ordination, we were like,

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<sup>1</sup> The ordination ceremony, also known as "taking the precepts," is a unique Buddhist ritual that is an essential part of monastic life. It involves being tonsured (having one's hair and beard shaved off as a symbol of renouncing secular life) and receiving the precepts (accepting the Buddhist monastic code of conduct).

the whole temple and both devotee and the monastics, part of the temple were all very excited, I guess, like, you know, to see so many young people and it leads to the future of the propagation of Buddhism across the world.

#### **02:41 Caroline Ong**

These 200 people carried the seeds and hope for the next generation of Dharma propagation. So, we just thought, it was something that we really needed to do. And for me, it was something that I really needed to do. So, I wanted to make sure that, you know, there is a future for Buddhism, maybe in Australia or anywhere else in the world, and that we are not going to be regressing to somewhere where, and then, like, Buddhism is dying off.

#### **03:12 Caroline Ong**

So, this was one of the, like, you know, opportunity for all of us to be able to contribute to the process. So that was how we felt at that point of time. And when, like, you know, I myself was involved in the transportation part, in the transportation group, so involved in, actually, picking up all the Venerables who arrived from overseas as well as sending them off, as well as, like, you know, arranging all the travel and like, visits to, like, areas in New South Wales, others, like, the holiday destination in New South Wales, so that they also get to know and understand the Australian culture and so that they also feel like they are being welcomed. Yup.

#### **04:01 Venerable Jue Fang**

So, what was the experience like?

#### **04:05 Caroline Ong**

It was a, it was a very touching whole process, the whole process was very touching from day one to, like, the last day, because essentially, when you see the Venerables from, who have just graduated from, like, you know, like the Monastic University, Tsung Lin University<sup>2</sup> to actually like, you know, for all of them to be queued up at the airport so neatly and with the same suitcases, the same kind of like, sect shawls and they're all so, like, formal. It was actually extremely touching, and like, you know, basically a lot of people, even the security, what's the dog called? Like the (Venerable Jue Fang: the patrol dog?) the patrol dogs. Yeah, they were also, like, you know, looking at the process. So yeah, it was just extremely touching to, like, you know, the Venerables having the session each day, the ordination, like, you know, where you have to go through the first platform, the second platform and the third platform. And like, you know, like seeing them during mealtime or when they were queuing up to go into all the different sessions, was also touching, because it was just more the way that

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<sup>2</sup> Founded by Venerable Master Hsing Yun, it serves as the foundational core for Buddhist education and the cultivation of monastic talent. With the motto of "Compassion, Wisdom, Vow and Practice," the university comprises an International Department and a Specialised Studies Department, aiming to cultivate outstanding international Dharma propagation talents as well as professionals in Buddhist culture, education, charity and propagation.

everyone was so, like, so together I guess, like, it was just, yeah, it was just very touching. Yup.

**05:43 Venerable Jue Fang**

So, you actually organised more events after that.

**05:47 Caroline Ong**

Yeah, so I actually did a couple of Oceania conferences. I've also done the opening of the Nan Tien Institute<sup>3</sup>, as well as the opening ceremony for the Nan Tien Bridge<sup>4</sup> itself. (Venerable Jue Fang: Yeah). So, I somehow rather became the pseudo kind of event director for most of these events. Yup.

**06:12 Venerable Jue Fang**

Okay. So, I see that currently, you are the Chair of the Audit and Risk Committee of the Nan Tien Institute. Could you tell us how did you get into this role and what does, what do you do in this?

**06:27 Caroline Ong**

So, Nan Tien Institute has been part and parcel of, like, I think my life since 2002 or 3, when we knew that we were going to be building NTI. Like, you know, my mum has been involved in this whole, like, the construction of the institute, and then so somehow rather, like, the family would get involved as well, and we hear about the progress, we hear about, like, you know, where it's at and the building of it.

**06:55 Caroline Ong**

So, it somehow rather became part and parcel of me, like, in terms of, like, the growth of, like, NTI. So, when the institute was built, the infrastructure is there, the hardware is there, but, like, now we need to have the software to run the Institute. And so, one of the things that was a little bit lacking at that point in time was the governance and how we gonna run it, and the risk management around it as well, and obviously the running of the finance.

**07:33 Caroline Ong**

So, with my background that I had from my professional life, I could offer some help or guidance or support in this whole process, so I did. So, essentially, in a session, we decided that, like, you know, in order to ensure that finances and the governance around policies and things like that were managed properly, we decided that there need to be an audit or a risk committee of some sort so that there is an oversight process, oversight as well as monitoring, right, like, in terms of the whole entire process.

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<sup>3</sup> 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/>

<sup>4</sup> The Nan Tien Bridge, after 17 years of planning and construction, was completed and put into use on July 28, 2018. It serves as both a physical and symbolic link, bringing Buddhist culture to Wollongong and its students and fostering a lasting impact.

**08:16 Caroline Ong**

So, and therefore, the audit and risk committee was formed for NTI. And then when we were looking for relevant, appropriate people with the right skill sets to be able to do this role, we just thought maybe I'll just step in for a little while to actually hold the fort and then until we find the right people and then to continue the baton. So, yup, so that's sort of how I got involved.

**08:47 Venerable Jue Fang**

So, you actually a very dedicated member of BLIA and how do you manage to balance your professional life, personal life and as a volunteer and also your religious commitment?

**09:02 Caroline Ong**

So, it's a fine balance and I mean like everyone has 24 hours in their day but Venerable Master Hsing Yun says that, you know, basically, if you make use of each and every minute and second fully, you can, like, multiply that by a couple of times, and so like, you know, basically, he led a life of like 300 years as opposed to his 100 years. So essentially, how do we expand and make full use of our time properly? So, for me, I took that kind of advice and thought about like, what I could do, like, you know, during my day that I could like then sort of slot in most of the time. So, you know, there's a fine balance but like during the day it's just more work, and then in the evenings, we actually do BLIA or temple stuff, and then on the weekend, like, you know, you leave one day for the family but there's also like, one day for the temple as well.

**10:04 Caroline Ong**

So, that's sort of like, how I sort of balance at the moment. Obviously, it's not 100% like, the right kind of proportion, but we sort of balance it out because in some parts of, like, you know, work life you do have a bit of flexibility. In some part of temple life, you have a bit of flexibility, so therefore, if you like, sort of, if you can align all the flexibility together, you would be able to then, sort of manage as much as possible the temple, NTI, family and work. Yup.

**10:39 Caroline Ong**

So, that's sort of how I managed it. It's actually a very fine life.

**10:45 Venerable Jue Fang**

Yeah, that needs a lot of wisdom as well, it's not easy to manage.

**10:47 Caroline Ong**

Actually, that's quite an interesting thought as well, like, you know, basically, I think as, we do more and more, like, you know, events, or more and more contribution, you sort of get that wisdom, I'm not sure that I do have a lot of it, but like that sort of comes with, it sort of grows.

**11:08 Caroline Ong**

As you meet more and more challenges, your sort of wisdom, sort of guts, is a catalyst, it's like, it becomes like, you know, your wisdom sort of grows a little bit more. So, and then you also feel that it's not just me who is actually doing all this work, it's actually everyone doing the work. I'm just there as a facilitator, but it's actually like both them, like the Reverends, the monastics as well as BLIA, right.

**11:40 Caroline Ong**

And the Reverends actually do a lot of the work that we don't see, and we only see it when somebody leaves, and then there's a huge gaping hole around, like, what does not get done, and we're like, opps, that's sort of when we realise how much the Venerables here contribute to, like, you know, all the work that we don't see that they do.

**12:06 Venerable Jue Fang**

Okay. So, as we come to almost the end of today's interview, is there anything else that you would like to add?

**12:13 Caroline Ong**

Yup. So, for me, first of all, a couple of things like, first of all, I would just like want to acknowledge the contribution of all the Venerables, who has been silently contributing to Nan Tien Temple in the last 30 years. Like, you know, we don't see a lot of them because sometimes they are in the office, sometimes they're in the kitchen, sometimes they're like, you know, anywhere. But we just wanted, I just want to acknowledge that because without them, it would be difficult for Nan Tien Temple to have reached this milestone. Yeah. So that's what I want to say first. So, thank you very, very much, like, you know, for being here and for being courageous enough to come overseas, live in a foreign country, contribute to the foreign community, of community that it's totally has no affiliation with you before. But, you know, you're here to serve and look after the community. So yup, thank you.

**13:19 Caroline Ong**

And secondly, I just wanted to, like, you know, like, just want to say that essentially, we're all, as Australia is now like, you know, in an aging population. So, there's also a need for all of us to think about the sustainability of our...how to actually continue the legacy and faith of our religion. Like, so it's not just Buddhism, it's everywhere we have the same kind of problem. We have an aging population, aging population of monastics, and aging population of devotees and like, believers. And so, how do we actually have a sustainable, like, you know, how does this, how does the whole like propagation of like, Buddhism actually become sustainable? How do we make it sustainable? How do we actually build in more resilience, more agility into the whole process so that this thing, this whole, you know, propagation process is like, easier, and that it's, you know,

as we have more and more<sup>5</sup>, less and less Venerables, like, or Venerables that are aging, how do we then get the right balance between drawing out the kind of value add stuff from the Venerables as in like, teaching the Dharma, right. Like, their whole life is about teaching the Dharma and ensuring that all of us have a better and peaceful and, you know, a more happy life. How do we actually balance that against, like, you know, what they're doing in terms of the manual work, which may could or could not, which could have been replaced by like either someone else doing it or something like that.

**15:20 Caroline Ong**

Essentially, all I'm saying is that, like, how do we find the right skill sets and capability? Maybe in a more, like, you know, commercial world is the talent retention, as well as the succession planning in terms of how we gonna get to this whole process, so that, you know, we continue to have Venerables engaging with the community, serving the community to the best of their ability, but still sustaining the temple.

**15:51 Venerable Jue Fang**

So, anything else to add?

**15:51 Caroline Ong**

So, yeah, not really, but I just wanted to, you know, like, essentially in an NTI situation, as well as like, Nan Tien Temple, what we are all about is to make sure that we enhance, like, we bring about, you know, peace, truth, beauty for our community, right? And the general population and the general public. So, I hope that we continue to do that and continue to have the ability to do that. But yup, thank you so much, Venerable, for actually being here to do this, and like, you know, to actually like help with the community, help with and be the silent contributor to this whole thing in the last 30 years.

**16:41 Caroline Ong**

Thank you.

**16:42 Venerable Jue Fang**

Thank you.

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<sup>5</sup> A slip of the tongue. Here should be "less and less".