

20240604_Interview Transcription

Interviewer: Venerable Jue Fang

Interviewee: Gordon Bradbery

00:04 Venerable Jue Fang

This is Venerable Jue Fang interviewing the Lord Mayor of the Wollongong City Council, the Reverend Gordon Alfred Bradbery AM on the 4th of June 2024. This recording is taking place at Wollongong City Council, 41 Burelli Street, Wollongong, New South Wales, 2000. The interview is being recorded for the State Library of New South Wales Oral History Collection and the Nan Tien Temple's 30th Anniversary Oral History Project.

00:41 Venerable Jue Fang

Dear Lord Mayor, Good afternoon. (Gordon Bradbery: Good afternoon.) Thank you for accepting our interview. (Gordon Bradbery: It's a great honour.) Yeah, thank you so much. So, could we invite you to have a short introduction about yourself, including your name, current and past positions?

00:58 Gordon Bradbery

Well, my full name is Gordon Alfred Bradbery. I was born in Tamworth, New South Wales, and I've reached the grand age of 73 years. I've been in the position of Lord Mayor of Wollongong for the past 13 years, um, and I will be concluding my tenure this coming September.

01:16 Gordon Bradbery

Um, as prior to that, I was elected in the September of 2011, and I was the Uniting Church Minister, and as such, in Wollongong, I was Administrator as well of Wollongong Mission at the Uniting Church in Australia.

01:32 Gordon Bradbery

That consisted of responsibilities in aged care, working with the street people, people who are homeless, people with mental health problems, as well as being a Chair of Lifeline for South Coast, and quite a few other responsibilities in terms of community engagement and community inclusion, and more specifically, um, multicultural and interfaith dialogue.

01:58 Venerable Jue Fang

So, you have done a lot for the city. So, can I ask you how and when did you first come into contact with the Nan Tien temple¹ and what was your first impression then?

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.

02:09 Gordon Bradbery

My first contact with the Nan Tien Temple actually was well before I even came to Wollongong, inasmuch I conducted a wedding of the building contractor's son, who, um, at the time, I was at Jannali Uniting Church and I conducted this wedding and found out that he was the son of the building contractor and got a lot of details and background information about the temple.

02:39 Gordon Bradbery

So, that was my first experience of the temple and my knowledge of it. And then, of course, when I came to Wollongong, it was, um, then near its or just being completed. And also, there was a bit of controversy over the access way past the crematorium and memorial gardens that the council owned. And it was interesting, an interesting debate in the community especially. Um, as I said, the access and moving and people going in and out of that side under the pagoda tower or the entrance way.

03:13 Gordon Bradbery

So, yeah, there was an interesting reaction by certain so-called Christian groups about that. But I can't quite recall the exact day that I stepped into the temple space, but I was always very impressed by its structure, its beauty and the serenity of the location.

03:32 Gordon Bradbery

Also, the magnificence of the building itself always was something that was all inspiring, but the same time, from my point of view, it was enlightening because it reflected the nature of Wollongong and inasmuch that it's a multicultural city and there are diverse religious and faith traditions.

03:52 Venerable Jue Fang

Yes, so over the past 30 years, I think you have witnessed the growth of Nan Tien Temple and especially in your capacity as the Lord Mayor in the last 12² years, you have witnessed almost all the significant milestones of Nan Tien.

04:08 Venerable Jue Fang

So, including the first Graduation Ceremony of Nan Tien Institute³ in 2013, the official Opening of the Institute in 2015, the official Opening of the Nan Tien Bridge⁴ in 2018. So, could you share with us some of your thoughts about them?

² A slip of the tongue. It should be 13 years.

³ 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/>

⁴ 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.

04:25 Gordon Bradbery

Well, the site was originally gifted by the city to the Nan Tien, um, Fo Guang Shan⁵, um, community. So the, as far as I was concerned, it was a great addition to the cultural and religious life of the city, the spiritual life of the city.

04:47 Gordon Bradbery

But it was also a transformation of what was a very bland part of the city. And not only the temple, but ultimately, the Institute and the Bridge connecting the two were major pieces of infrastructure that added to the vitality.

05:05 Gordon Bradbery

And as I've already highlighted, the cultural and interfaith, faith traditions of the community. So, yeah, it's been a marvellous addition to Wollongong and not only that, to attract the large number of visitors who come, um, especially on occasions like Buddha's Birthday, um, the Chinese New Year, those sorts of events also bring large numbers of people to Wollongong.

05:34 Gordon Bradbery

So, it's certainly put Wollongong on the map, and in that respect, I'm very grateful. But it's a wonderful way of doing so, inasmuch that it's a very positive contribution. It's always been a positive addition to our social infrastructure.

05:50 Venerable Jue Fang

Yes, and recently, the Nan Tien Temple was recently named the heritage of New South Wales. Could you share with us your thoughts about this and also, the city council's role in this process?

06:03 Gordon Bradbery

Well, for a start, the heritage isn't just about the old buildings, it's about buildings of significance in terms of representing a style of architecture or a particular social or religious or cultural traditions and so on.

06:21 Gordon Bradbery

So, it adds, it has added to the diversity of the history and understanding of this city. And so in that respect, the temple might only be 30 years old, but it also represents a moment in the life of the city, um, which, from my perspective, highlights the diversity of the community.

06:49 Gordon Bradbery

In lots of ways, there are other traditions in our city, but it added one more dimension, um, and a unique dimension, to our understanding of the human condition and

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.

opportunities for not only religious practice and faith practice but also in terms of education.

07:10 Gordon Bradbery

So, its contribution has been recognised as part of our heritage, part of the story of Wollongong, part of the life of the city and more specifically, its people. So, in that respect, um, yes, we talk about heritage, but it will be certainly celebrating the Nan Tien Temple in another, hopefully, 130 years' time as a part of the greatest contribution or one of the great contributions to the life of the city.

07:44 Venerable Jue Fang

Yes, thank you very much. And we see that the Wollongong City Council has also given some awards to the temple, including an Honorary Citizen to the founder Venerable Master Hsing Yun⁶ and the Australian of the Year Award to the Abbess Man Ko in the year 2019. So, could you share with us the significance of these awards to individuals from the temple?

08:12 Gordon Bradbery

Well, the opportunity to recognise outstanding contributions of individuals to the life of the city, um, is a mechanism or a means by which the city honours those people who have been instrumental in not only the facilitation of the temple and its activities, but also it's more than just about the temple, it's about the enrichment of the city, it's about people who have gone beyond their normal everyday sphere of influence and made a contribution to the happiness and well-being of many others, other than just their immediate organisation or in this particular circumstance, just the temple.

09:01 Gordon Bradbery

It wasn't just, as I would say, a "holy huddle". It is more, in terms of its contribution to enriching other lives, well beyond the precinct of the temple. And its influence has been felt far and wide, especially in the rise of studies, Buddhist studies, um, its contribution in terms of people finding Buddhist precepts as a guide to their living and their morality, but also things like mindfulness in terms of people's mental health and the respect for dietary and religious practices, which has been reinforced by the building as a reminder of what Buddhism stands for, in terms of living in harmony with not only people and the community but also with the environment and our place in the universe.

09:57 Venerable Jue Fang

You have been to the temple so many times, including the Institute, is there any moment or any significant event that really stands out to you?

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.

10:09 Gordon Bradbery

Um, I think that there have been quite a few moments and sitting in the main shrine has been an opportunity for me to reflect and meditate just for my own personal enrichment. But I think the greatest contribution is actually and reminded me of things far more symbolic and powerful and that is the bridge that links the Nan Tien Temple and the Institute, inasmuch that it also is a symbol of what the Temple has done and the Institute has done and that is, created a bridge to the city and to other people. So, it's not just a physical bridge, it reminded me of what can happen with people of goodwill.

10:56 Venerable Jue Fang

Thank you. So, the Wollongong City Council has been in the partnership with Nan Tien Temple over so many years and the temple was actually invited by the council to be started. So, how would you look into the, looking forward, how would you envisage the future role that the Nan Tien Temple would play in the development of Wollongong?

11:21 Gordon Bradbery

Well, I think I've already spoken of that what has achieved, and all I wanted to do is to continue doing what it's done so well over the past 30 years, and that is, to represent, um, Buddhism in our city and their diverse ways of being in Buddhist practice.

11:38 Gordon Bradbery

I realise that, um, but it's a unique, a unique expression of Buddhism. Um, and it's contribution in terms of more insights into human well-being, health and spirituality. And in other words, just continue to do what it's so good at, and mainly represent those practices that bring enrichment and peace and prosperity to human beings, and most specifically, to our city.

12:10 Venerable Jue Fang

Thank you very much. So, is there anything else that you would like to add to this interview?

12:15 Gordon Bradbery

No. I'll leave it at that. I think I've covered all bases.

12:18 Venerable Jue Fang

Thank you. Thank you very much.

12:20 Gordon Bradbery

Yeah. No Problem.