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Interviewer: Venerable Jue Fang

Interviewee: Venerable Yi Lai

00:00 Venerable Jue Fang

This is Venerable Jue Fang interviewing Venerable Yi Lai on the 11th of March 2024. This recording is taking place at Taiwan Kaohsiung Fo Guang Shan, 153 Xintian Road, Dashu. 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.

0:52 Venerable Jue Fang

Auspicious Greetings, Venerable Yi Lai. (Venerable Yi Lai: Yes.) Thank you for accepting our interview. Could you please introduce yourself briefly, including your current position?

01:03 Venerable Yi Lai

Sure. Currently, I am serving as the director of the Fo Guang Shan Charity Council and the deputy secretary-general of the Buddha's Light International Association (BLIA) in Northeast Asia, engaging in Dharma propagation. In 1946, I was born in Yilan County, in the northeast corner of Taiwan. My secular surname is Wu, and my given name is Sumei. We have eleven siblings, and I am the ninth kid. Venerable Tzu Jung, who is the fifth in the birth order, has one older brother, two younger brothers, three older sisters and four younger sisters. So, I am followed by three younger sisters. Our family is a harmonious and joyful one. During the time of World War II, my parents often had to flee to the countryside during the day. I was born after the War, so I did not experience that period, but I heard them talk about it. My father, although a farmer, had some knowledge of traditional Chinese medicine. Often, he would treat sick neighbours who would come to our home. My mother also embraced generosity and compassion. Since our family farmed, we had fields. During the Chinese New Year and festivals, she would give away rice and other supplies to the needy in our neighbourhood.

02:26 Venerable Yi Lai

Growing up in such a family, I was influenced by compassion and generosity from a young age. Additionally, a more fortuitous connection was that Venerable Master Hsing Yun came to propagate the Dharma in Yilan. In addition to youth groups, he also organised children's classes. At that time, for a candy or a cookie, we would join in the excitement of any activity at Lei Yin Temple. Because the temple was in our neighbourhood, we would often go over there to play. Gradually, we established a connection with the temple. Then, seeing Venerable Master Hsing Yun, I felt he was majestic and towering, like a mountain, giving us a sense of tranquillity. This could be considered the initial encounter with a temple, a monastic, and a stable state of mind that the encounter brought, which was the beginning of my faith.

03:24 Venerable Yi Lai

Furthermore, each of my siblings, under our parents' guidance, pursued various paths in life. My eldest brother served as a captain of an oceangoing freighter, spending most of his time overseas. My other older brother worked in agriculture, even farmed in Africa. My second oldest brother worked in a medical laboratory at the 'Veterans General Hospital'. My sisters worked in various fields, some in the military and others in domestic service. Then, I remember when Venerable Tzu Jung was 18, my mother advised her to pray to the Buddha and take good care of her health. Venerable Master Hsing Yun was good at delivering Dharma talks. So because Venerable Tzu Jung often went to the temple, we younger siblings would follow, thus establishing a direction of faith with the temple.

04:17 Venerable Jue Fang

That's great, thank you. May I ask how you eventually become ordained as a nun? And was "Yi Lai" the Dharma name given to you by Venerable Master Hsing Yun?

04:26 Venerable Yi Lai

Yes. For my monastic ordination, firstly, I am deeply grateful to Venerable Master Hsing Yun. Once, when I returned to Fo Guang Shan for a pilgrimage, the Venerable Master saw me and said, "Wu Sumei, come here, Sumei. You studied education, didn't you? Fo Guang Shan Da Ci Children's Home is in need of a teacher to guide the kids. Can you come to help me care for these children? Venerable Tzu Jung is too busy to take care of them."

04:56 Venerable Yi Lai

Because of the Venerable Master's words, I challenged myself to find out how much I could contribute to guiding these children. Therefore, it was due to the Venerable Master's influence and the opportunity he provided that I began to guide the children. The Venerable Master also instructed us to care for the children at the Children's Home with dignity; these children are the princes and princesses of Fo Guang Shan, and they shall go to school in neat dress and high spirits every day.

05:25 Venerable Yi Lai

Secondly, we should not complain about poverty. We shall ensure that these children have a happy and joyful life, a carefree childhood with artistic experiences. So, due to Venerable Master Hsing Yun providing us with such a direction, I took the opportunity to take on this responsibility.

05:45 Venerable Yi Lai

Under the Venerable Master's guidance, I spent ten years at the Fo Guang Shan Da Ci Children's Home before realising that Dharma propagation is not limited to children. There was more I could do. It just so happened that the Hsi Lai Temple in the United

States was holding the Triple Platform Full Ordination Ceremony¹, and so I went to Hsi Lai Temple to become ordained.

06:10 Venerable Yi Lai

"Yi Lai", these two characters are the Dharma name given to me by Venerable Master Hsing Yun. The Venerable Master said, "The Dharma name I give you, Yi Lai, Yi Lai, when people call you, you shall go". So, I believe that with the name "Yi Lai" given to me, I will engage wholeheartedly in Dharma propagation to guide sentient beings.

06:29 Venerable Jue Fang

Then, after you received ordination at Hsi Lai Temple, what kind of Dharma propagation did you engage in?

06:38 Venerable Yi Lai

We still adhered to the four objectives of Fo Guang Shan. Especially at that time, the Venerable Master was constantly spreading the Dharma overseas. Once we were having the Fo Guang Shan Board of Directors meeting, the Venerable Master saw me and said, "We already have Buddha's Light International Association (BLIA) established in various countries, such as Australia and the United States, to propagate Humanistic Buddhism. There is not yet a community in South Africa. Your brother is in the South African agricultural mission. Would you go to South Africa first to see if there is an opportunity to promote Humanistic Buddhism in Africa?"

07:13 Venerable Yi Lai

I was serving as the Abbess of the Pu Xian Temple at the time, because of the Venerable Master's words, I travelled to South Africa for exploration. My first stop was Newcastle, where many Taiwanese people were involved in cultivating and making sweaters. Therefore, I established some affinities there, and later, I started to spread the Dharma in South Africa.

07:39 Venerable Jue Fang

Then what was the cause you went to Australia from South Africa?

07:43 Venerable Yi Lai

So, I remembered, during that time, propagating the Dharma in South Africa needed a great deal of help. One year, when going back to Fo Guang Shan to attend the BLIA Conference, I wanted to recruit more Dharma brothers to sustain the propagation efforts in South Africa.

¹ 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).

08:03 Venerable Yi Lai

When I was about to return to South Africa, just on October 31, 1993, the Chung Tian Temple was about to have its inauguration ceremony. Then I asked the Venerable Master, "Master, I haven't been to Australia yet. Can I go to attend the inauguration ceremony before returning to South Africa?" The Venerable Master said, "Yes, let's go together." With such an opportunity, I visited Chung Tian Temple in Australia for the first time. When I saw what a dignified Dharma place Chung Tian Temple was, I was really touched because we all know that establishing a temple overseas is not easy. So the solemnity of the ceremony deeply moved the local people.

08:43 Venerable Yi Lai

That evening, during the "Heart-to-Heart Connection" gathering, Venerable Master Hsing Yun said, "Our infrastructure has been completed, and now we shall begin to do the Dharma propagation". Then the Venerable Master saw me and said, "Yi Lai, you don't need to go to South Africa anymore. The time has come for Dharma propagation here. You stay here". We always follow the Venerable Master's teachings and act accordingly, so I stayed. I remember it clearly; on February 7, 1994, I arrived in Australia from South Africa and began to engage in Dharma propagation at the Chung Tian Temple.

09:26 Venerable Jue Fang

So, Fo Guang Shan has been propagating the Dharma in Australia for nearly thirty years. The Buddha's Birthday Festival is also a significant aspect of Dharma propagation, particularly at Chung Tian Temple or Nan Tien Temple. Could you please talk about what kind of impact this Buddha's Birthday Festival has on the development of the localisation of Buddhism?

09:51 Venerable Yi Lai

I remember when I was about to go to Australia for propagating the Dharma, I sought guidance from Venerable Master Hsing Yun, "How should I propagate the Dharma in Western countries where the majority follow Catholicism and Christianity?" The Venerable Master gave me a brief advice, saying, "You have to go out and get to know the local culture and education. You should integrate with their society to promote Humanistic Buddhism. You cannot simply close yourself off, merely waiting for others to come and chant sutras and recite the Buddha's name".

10:21 Venerable Yi Lai

So, I kept reflecting on the Venerable Master's words and thinking how I could venture out. At that time, to my understanding, Nan Tien Temple began hosting the Buddha's Birthday Festival at Darling Harbour around 1995. At that time, I thought that if Darling Harbour could be used to host the Buddha's Birthday Festival, Chung Tian Temple should also learn to venture out. So, in 1997, by the Venerable Master's words on

bringing the Buddha's Birthday Festival out, we organised the celebration at South Bank.

11:03 Venerable Yi Lai

As I remember, when we proposed this event to the government, the city council was very interested as they were promoting multicultural harmony and highly valued our Buddha's Birthday Festival. They sent representatives from five departments, including the Tourism Bureau and the Local Community Affairs Department, to collaborate with us in designing the event.

11:30 Venerable Yi Lai

At the meeting, they asked, "How many people do you expect to attend this event?" At that time, we were uncertain. But we casually estimated, "Perhaps around 10,000". Upon hearing this, they responded, "10,000 is quite a significant number! Do you think you can handle it in such a short time?" I might have been blessed by the Buddha at that moment, as I boldly replied, "We will do our utmost and make every effort to mobilise and carry out the event well."

12:00 Venerable Yi Lai

The secretary to the mayor told us, "Great, we will support you. Just proceed with your plans, and if you need any assistance, we will be there to help. We won't interfere in the process."

12:17 Venerable Yi Lai

We were deeply moved by their trust and grateful for the blessing of the Buddhas and bodhisattvas. When the event concluded, the newspaper reported the next day that we had 15,000 attendees. Wow! I feel that all of this was due to the Venerable Master's wisdom and the Buddha's blessings, allowing us to demonstrate our capability and make a significant impact.

12:44 Venerable Yi Lai

As we continued on this path, in the process of Buddha's Birthday Festival first and foremost, we were deeply grateful for the government's efforts in promoting multicultural integration. So, I brought together dances from various ethnic groups and invited local religious representatives to offer blessings and prayers. By combining local resources with the government's promotional policies, we truly had a concerted effort from all sectors of the community. Internally, I spoke to the Chinese communities, and despite whichever region they were from, I emphasised the same key message: that we must be accountable to our descendants. By helping the local people gain a better understanding of our people, our culture and Buddhism, we can reduce discrimination. Through united efforts to benefit Australia, we demonstrated the compassion of the Chinese community, unveiling the Buddha's wisdom and love for this land. Unexpectedly, this approach united the Chinese community. Externally, we invited

other ethnic groups to showcase their dances and welcomed people from different faiths to join us in prayers. We were moved to see that we were on the right path and doing the right thing, by following the Venerable Master's advice to reach out.

14:14 Venerable Yi Lai

In the second stage, as we aimed to integrate our activities with local education, we sent letters to various schools, inviting them to experience Oriental cultural activities such as calligraphy, diablo, lion dance, and other traditional elements.

14:34 Venerable Yi Lai

Some schools that interacted with us defined our activities as "cultural excursions" after they visited us. So, we gradually integrated these activities into school programs. We believe that over the years, the Buddha's Birthday Festival has made us visible to the locals. The city councillors even provided a document expressing their interest in investigating whether there is any function for the continuation of this event.

15:10 Venerable Yi Lai

I remember that they allocated us a budget of \$20,000 to conduct a survey. The results showed that 95% of the respondents supported the continuation of this beneficial event, with the remaining 5% being tourists who attended for fun.

15:30 Venerable Yi Lai

When the mayor and city councillor(s), Kevin, visited Taiwan, they came to meet Venerable Master Hsing Yun at Fo Guang Shan. He mentioned that our Buddha's Birthday Festival was very successful, being one of the three major local events, alongside New Year's Day and Christmas. They acknowledged the significant role it played in promoting social and ethnic harmony and expressed the government's full support for our efforts. They hoped that the Venerable Master would encourage us, his disciples, to continue our efforts.

16:08 Venerable Yi Lai

Through their report to the Venerable Master, we felt affirmed and acknowledged, especially in 2010, during the 10th Anniversary Celebration, when the Governor came to host the event. He said, "You are helping me to implement our government's policy of promoting multiculturalism. I am very grateful to Buddhism for bringing peace to people's minds and bringing the various ethnic communities together". I believe this is all due to the guidance of Venerable Master Hsing Yun's wisdom, which taught us how to reach out and localise.

16:55 Venerable Jue Fang

Thank you. In 2001, you were honoured by being listed among the Australian Federal Centenary Heroes, and in 2003, you received the Australian Federal Centenary Medal, becoming the only Chinese recipient at that time. Your exceptional wisdom has been

dedicated to the advancement of cultural and educational endeavours, and you have also facilitated harmonious integration among various ethnic groups in Australia with remarkable and illustrious achievements. Your contributions to Australian society have been recognised and affirmed by the community. Could you share with us the process of receiving this centenary medal and your feelings about it?

17:40 Venerable Yi Lai

Thank you. I believe that being the only Chinese recipient at that time to receive the Centenary Medal on the Heroes List was a collective effort, a glory for the Fo Guang people, and a recognition of Humanistic Buddhism. I remember during a Buddhist wedding ceremony² where a Westerner, who was our city council speaker at that time, attended the ceremony as a friend of the couple getting married. After the ceremony, he was deeply moved to see how Buddhism not only helped settle the immigrants but also brought together people from different ethnic backgrounds, enriching Australian culture.

18:36 Venerable Yi Lai

He was very touched. I remember that perhaps the nomination for the heroes list came from the council speaker and others. They were deeply affirmative, saying that they did not expect that promoting Buddhism, Humanistic Buddhism, could have such a significant impact on local education, allowing their children to learn more about Oriental culture and beliefs, thus playing a significant role in stabilising the society.

19:08 Venerable Yi Lai

So, I believe this honour should be attributed to the wisdom and compassionate guidance of the Venerable Master. We all received recognition, so this glory belongs to everyone. I also deeply feel that the Australian government has provided us with ample opportunities to make a difference. We are grateful for the opportunity and take pride in Australia. The Venerable Master repeatedly instructed us on how to be localised. I believe step by step; we will inevitably be accepted.

19:50 Venerable Jue Fang

In 2001, the Australian government donated a piece of land for the establishment of Nan Tien Institute at a symbolic one Australian dollar. At that time, this land had been a landfill for decades, presenting a significant challenge for the Institute's development. As the Abbess of Nan Tien Temple at the time, you were fully responsible for overseeing the entire land preparation project. Could you please share the important experience of transforming wasteland into a valuable asset?

² Buddhist wedding ceremony is held in front of the Buddha by Buddhist believers, blessed and sworn in by eminent monks. The bride and groom share a common belief and commitment and are united in the Buddha's fate.

20:27 Venerable Yi Lai

I remember, in 2006, receiving an unexpected call from the Venerable Master. He said, "Yi Lai, you have spent quite some time in Queensland. I need you to go to Nan Tien Temple because Nan Tien Institute needs to be built soon". I thought to myself, Master, I don't know anything about construction. I don't know what to do. The Venerable Master then said, "We have signed an agreement, and if we do not break ground within ten years, the government will reclaim the land. It's urgent. Due to personnel adjustments, it would be best if you could go there and help start the construction process".

21:09 Venerable Yi Lai

Because of the Venerable Master's words, I went to Nan Tien Temple. In Nan Tien Temple, I hadn't been extensively involved with the institute before and was not very familiar with construction, so I vividly remember that I quickly reached out to Venerable Miao You for assistance. I asked her to arrange a meeting to meet the Chancellor of the University of Wollongong. I wanted to first get acquainted with the local community and let them know that we were about to start construction, and I sought their guidance. I visited the Chancellor, who was very amiable and warmly welcomed us. During our meeting, he shared insights into educational policies in Australia and advised us on how we should showcase our unique strengths, using Buddhism as the main theme to present something that others do not have. This initial interaction made us feel that the principal is truly wonderful, as he has been so helpful in guiding us. However, unexpectedly, he retired the following year, marking the first challenge we encountered.

22:11 Venerable Yi Lai

Secondly, we slowly began to engage with the government and educational institutions and figure out how to interact with them. However, the biggest challenge we encountered was land preparation. At that time, there was a case in Wollongong involving collusion between politicians and businesses, leading to the dissolution of the city council. Even the government suspected that our land had been bought through underhand means, so we were questioned twice. Venerable Miao You also went there to sign documents, stating, "No, you can see all our certificates; this is purely for development purposes to revitalise Wollongong. We have not discussed money matters with regard to this project with anyone".

23:09 Venerable Yi Lai

The biggest difficulty was that since the city council was dissolved, the state government appointed three executives to work separately. So we first needed a land development permit to begin construction. When we made inquiries, we encountered many obstacles. Everyone was trying to protect themselves and divided into factions, saying they didn't know about this or that, so it was very challenging. Without a permit, we couldn't proceed. I reported back to the Venerable Master about the numerous

difficulties and the suspicions surrounding us, as everyone was trying to protect themselves. But without a land development permit, we could do nothing.

23:52 Venerable Yi Lai

I consulted with the Venerable Master, saying, "Can I be more resolute and say we will return the land to you? But we have raised funds from devotees and spent over two million. And the government should compensate us as I cannot deceive our devotees". The Venerable Master responded, "Alright, you can talk to them in that manner". So, upon returning, I discussed it with Cecilia Mun and others. They went to the city council and tested them with this statement. Surprisingly, these words really had a significant impact, and soon after, they restored the conditions and agreed to allow development on the land.

24:33 Venerable Yi Lai

So, sometimes, when confronted with certain difficulties, we must find ways to overcome them. While land development was proceeding, we also had to work with the Department of Education regarding the administrative regulations for future establishment. These works were done simultaneously. On the one hand, there was land development work, and on the other, there were negotiations with officials. During land preparation, we discovered that this land was a garbage dump which should have been left to decompose naturally. But since we were going to build an institute on it, we had to invest a lot of money in land remediation.

25:13 Venerable Yi Lai

By the time the engineer had dealt with the design and land remediation, it had already cost nearly a million. He mentioned, "You've made significant contributions to the local area. Normally, a garbage dump like this would be transformed into a natural park to allow the garbage to decompose naturally. However, since you've acquired it to build an institute, you'll need to invest a lot of money in land development". That was the situation at the time.

25:39 Venerable Yi Lai

In addition, regarding the discussions with the Department of Education, after the initial introduction, we were told we needed to make a project proposal plan. But we didn't know how to do this, and many people provided us with introductions and suggested we should pay around \$200,000 for it. I happened to be in the United States at the time, so I reported this to the Venerable Master. He said, "It's appropriate to hire someone to do the proposal since we can't do it ourselves, but \$200,000 is too much; you must be careful". The Venerable Master's words alerted us, and I quickly told Venerable Miao You that "you should seek more advice and not immediately agree to anything. It's not that simple".

26:21 Venerable Yi Lai

At that time, Venerable Miao You often going out to teach meditation, and the students were all Westerners. It was under such fortunate circumstances that a professor introduced himself to us. After an introduction, he offered to help us write the project proposal. With his guidance, the proposal was completed, and we only had to pay him \$20,000 to \$30,000. So, thanks to the Venerable Master's wisdom and guidance, we did not waste any money. So with the help of some introductions and the professor's guidance, we submitted the proposal.

27:00 Venerable Yi Lai

At that time, the Department of Education seemed to have organised a committee to inspect Nan Tien Temple. Following the inspection, they gave us a lot of confidence, saying, "Nan Tien Temple has its classrooms, computers, and ample space being already well-equipped. There's no need to wait until the entire construction is completed to start". With their words, "You could slowly construct the institute. But you can start with the research institute right away. There is no need to wait". Wow! We were so thrilled to hear this news, which meant we could start the institute at the original site of Nan Tien Temple.

27:43 Venerable Yi Lai

I remember that at that time, Venerable Dr. Hui Kai also came to give a Dharma talk and had some knowledge about the education sector; for this, we were very grateful, in 2011, we officially launched the institute, focusing on Applied Buddhist Studies. At that time, Venerable Man Ko arrived as well. The launch of the institute boosted our confidence. Although there were difficulties in land development, we overcame one challenge after another, and the land development was eventually completed. The circumstances at the time seemed to be like this.

28:26 Venerable Jue Fang

As you mentioned, Nan Tien Institute commenced its educational journey in 2011, and at that time, you were the Chief Abbess of Fo Guang Shan in Australia and New Zealand. So, you witnessed and contributed to this historic moment when Fo Guang Shan began offering higher education in Australia. Could you share with us the scene of the commencement of Nan Tien Institute and your feelings at that time?

28:58 Venerable Yi Lai

I think the most important thing is to fulfil Venerable Master Hsing Yun's ideals and wishes. Although we all know that in Australia, universities are predominantly public, there is only one private university, which is a Catholic one in Western Australia. And then Nan Tien Temple was determined to establish Nan Tien Institute. It was the Venerable Master's aspiration to engage in education. How to bring Buddhist education out into the society? As his disciples, our foremost responsibility is to fulfil Venerable Master Hsing Yun's wish. During that time, the Venerable Master often

mentioned that we should explore the field of arts. In fact, the arts encompass a vast spectrum. How could we address the local needs of Wollongong? How do we present the strong focus on education in Humanistic Buddhism? I felt deeply that everyone has their own stage, and the ideal is that, I believe, that we shall all turn the Venerable Master's ideal into our own shared vision, working together to achieve it. So, I am immensely grateful.

30:09 Venerable Yi Lai

Beginning with the first Abbess Venerable Tzu Jung, Venerable Man Chien, and Venerable Man Hsin, followed by me and then Venerable Man Ko, everyone has contributed to the realisation of this ideal at their respective stages, from the completion of Nan Tien Temple to the establishment of Nan Tien Institute. I believe this is our collective creation, a result of our joint efforts to fulfil Venerable Master's aspiration. I am grateful to have been a part of this journey.