

20241005_Interview Transcription 002

Interviewer: Venerable Jue Fang

Interviewee: Francis Wong

00:02 Venerable Jue Fang

This is Venerable Jue Fang continuing interview with Francis Wong after a short break. This is the second part to the interview.

00:10 Venerable Jue Fang

So, Francis, let me ask you the question again. What do you do as a BLIA member or BLIA executives? The more memorable parts that you have experienced?

00:26 Francis Wong

I think the most memorable part when I became the President or even Executive Director is to lead a group of members or volunteers. The reason being that because members of BLIA or volunteers of BLIA, they came from all walks of life.

00:51 Francis Wong

They have different culture, different backgrounds. It is not easy to lead. You see, in an organisation, people have a job, they have a financial reward, but working as a volunteer, we don't. We work because we have a strong belief, we have a strong faith.

01:15 Francis Wong

And I find out that leading the members to achieve a goal is not easy. So, in an organisation, you see the triangle, this CEO at the top, then directors, then managers, then the staff. I realised that I need to lead the members by leading by examples.

01:40 Francis Wong

So, I inverted the triangles, all the members are at the top level and then the executive director, then myself. I need to serve them rather than I need to give orders. So, over the time I do the work, over the time I serve them.

02:02 Francis Wong

And then it is quite, quite interesting. They realised that, ah, this is the way to do it. And automatically people join in the task. And I think over the time, this worked well. And of course, in doing so, I received a strong, strong guidance from all the guiding Venerables and Abbess.

02:29 Francis Wong

And also my wife, Margaret, also joined as a volunteer same time as me. She actually gave me a lot of comments and a lot of advice for me to do so. So even though I... even though I work as a full-time, as an employee for a company, but I still manage to have spare time to work for BLIA, and I think it is an honour to work for this company, for these organisations.

03:02 Venerable Jue Fang

Yeah. So, you served as the President...during your time as the President actually, there are a lot of important events or important milestones of the Temple and BLIA, such as the Official Opening of the Nan Tien Institute in 2015.

03:22 Venerable Jue Fang

That was also the year that our Temple has actually gone into higher education, in the aspect of higher education. That was the year that the Venerable Master last came to Australia, the last time that he came.

03:37 Venerable Jue Fang

And also, the Bridge Opening was also under your leadership as a BLIA President, the starting of the Hsing Yun Education Foundation. All these, how did you manage to lead BLIA through all these major milestones?

03:58 Francis Wong

Oh, this milestone is not the effort of a single person. It is a combined effort of the entire organisation, Nan Tien Temple, BLIA and Nan Tien Institute, etc. I think, to this point, I would like to say a true thank you to the New South Wales government.

04:28 Francis Wong

They are very supportive. I remember that we invited the Prime Minister, the then the Honourable Tony Abbott. I think he was the 28th Prime Minister of Australia. He accepted our invitation to come here for the NTI Opening Ceremony.

04:51 Francis Wong

And also, I need to say thank you to the New South Wales government, the then Premier, the greatest Berejiklian, also came here to witness the Opening. I think this is a group effort that to have this milestone achieved, is through, I think, through Buddhism.

05:21 Francis Wong

I remember that to invite the Prime Minister to come here for the Opening Ceremony, we actually went to the office of David Coleman. We asked for help. Before, we actually

wrote letters to the Prime Minister's office, but seems that we don't have any response, so we made a decision that we go through David Coleman.

05:56 Francis Wong

Before, we have a very close working relationship with David. He was so eager to help. He knows that our organisation is a charitable organisation. We're here to serve the community. He actually recognised our organisation.

06:15 Francis Wong

So, he was really, really happy and eager to help. And as a result, the Prime Minister came. Also, the Nan Tien Bridge, we seek assistance from Dr Jeff Lee. He was then the Minister of Multiculturalism.

06:34 Francis Wong

And I think Dr Jeff Lee and Gladys are a good working relationship, a very friendly colleague at the New South Wales government office. So, Dr Jeff Lee told me that, yes, the Premier will come. So, we were so relief.

06:53 Francis Wong

To organise the entire event is a group effort, the effort from Nan Tien Temple led by Abbess Man Ko, and also from BLIA perspective. I also, even though I led the organisation, but we received a lot of help, a lot of support from our members and volunteers.

07:17 Francis Wong

I remember that the entire venue was filled of all the people. They were full of joy, they were full of excitement. And when it truly, when the NTI opened and the Bridge opened, my first feeling was, we did it. We really did it.

07:39 Francis Wong

My second feeling was, I admire Venerable Master Hsing Yun for his forward-going vision. Master was a person full of wisdom. His vision is so... he can foresee 20, 30 years, what happened next.

08:05 Francis Wong

And when it opened, I was so touched. I was so touched. I needed cry. You see, Nan Tien Temple connected to NTI, the significant meaning is we connected the tradition with the modern modernisation.

08:27 Francis Wong

And as a result, people from, or tourists from the Nan Tien Temple, they come here and realise, oh, we have a NTI, and NTI opens its arms to the people wherever you want to study, you want further education at NTI.

08:45 Francis Wong

And this is the wisdom of Master Hsing Yun, through education to develop a lot of people for the society. And that was a very touching feeling.

09:01 Venerable Jue Fang

So, from our records, you also started the scouts, BLIA scouts were actually started during your term as the President. Could you tell us more about the BLIA scouts? Why did BLIA started this scouts organisation?

09:20 Francis Wong

We developed scouts. Actually, it's quite a big effort. It's really a quite big effort. On this, I need to acknowledge our then Vice President, Mr. Andy Chin. He has a lot of connections. Before, we wrote letters to the scouts' commissioners. No response.

09:47 Francis Wong

So, I approached Andy. I said, "Can you do something? Can you please assist?" And then, because of his contact, we managed to set up scouts and we managed to establish the Sydney scouts through the Buddha's Birthday Festival in 2017.

10:11 Francis Wong

I think the scouts now, the BLIA scouts now, has become the second biggest scouts in New South Wales. In particular, I think for the scouts, we have three scouts teams. One is in Parramatta, one is in Kogarah, and one is in Chatswood.

10:35 Francis Wong

I think the Kogarah scouts, in particular, has developed from few peoples now to more than a hundred. I can see that the people or the scouts, they enjoy coming to the group. And I think as a by-benefit, the parents actually love the scouts.

10:57 Francis Wong

And through bringing their kids to join the scouts, they also become volunteers and part of them become a member of BLIA. So, in scouts, we teach them Three Acts of Goodness, Four Givings. They manage to use it on a daily life.

11:17 Francis Wong

I give you an example. Some parents said to us, they said the kids never did any housework at home. But after they joined the event here, and when they went back to their home, they tried to clean up the dishes.

11:38 Francis Wong

They tried to help to do some housework. Their parents told us, we've never seen these people, our kids, do any housework. They just sit there, and they just watch TV. They just push the headphones and all these.

11:53 Francis Wong

But after they joined the scouts, I think they realised that they make friends, and they learned a lot here, and they learned good things here. So, they went back home, and then they started helping out their parents.

12:07 Francis Wong

I think this is one of the solid or biggest achievements that the parents can see.

12:15 Venerable Jue Fang

Okay, so, when you stepped down from the President's role, you were actually appointed as the Elder Advisor of BLIA Sydney. But I see that, at the same time, you actually took up a Graduate Certificate in the Nan Tien Institute.

12:31 Venerable Jue Fang

So, can you share with us the change in your role from a BLIA President and then to a student of Nan Tien Institute? From someone who supported for the building of the Nan Tien Institute, to a student enjoying education at the Nan Tien Institute.

12:54 Francis Wong

As I supported the Nan Tien Institute, so we did a lot of fundraising, so I thought, okay, I need to reap the benefit of NTI, so I became a student. I graduated from Charles Sturt University, I think, in 1996.

13:21 Francis Wong

It was a long time for me to pick up the books and start learning again. But then I picked up the book and started learning. It wasn't that difficult at all, but I found that the courses in NTI, actually, they are very practical.

13:42 Francis Wong

I learned a lot from the NTI. I remember the first subject I did was critical thinking. It actually taught us how to read, how to write, and how to analyse an article. That was good. And then other few subjects.

14:02 Francis Wong

I thought that, wow, this subject, I can actually use it on my daily life. So, I remember that the subject, it took five weeks to complete. That was quite intense. That was quite intense. But I think I keep a promise to myself, and I think I keep a promise to the Venerable who pushed me to study at NTI, and I thought, I will make it. I will make it.

14:34 Francis Wong

So, I think the driving force is to thank you, to our Master, to build NTI here. And my second thought is to thank you to Venerable, pushed me to study. And the third one is, of course, my study at NTI, actually with my wife also, Margaret Lee also studied here. So, we have a partner, we have a companion. So, we discussed a lot at home. And as a result, we did it, yeah.

15:09 Venerable Jue Fang

Okay, so, I also see that you were actually part of the media team for the Temple and BLIA for a very long time. How did you manage to do that? Were you a trained media person or, you know, what made you continue in this effort?

15:29 Francis Wong

I have an English background. I never trained as a media. And it was quite interesting that when I first started the media, the then guiding Venerable asked me to write articles in Chinese. I told her that I'm sorry I cannot write any Chinese because my education is in Chinese¹. My education is in English. My work is also in English. I cannot write. And then she said, "You can write. And I take full responsibility of your articles." And I said, "All right, I'll give it a go." And then I started writing.

16:15 Francis Wong

I didn't know what I wrote, but just wrote something. And then gradually, I learned to write. My thinking is that, even though, no matter how big your event is, no matter how active or how good your event is, without any reporting, people won't know.

16:37 Francis Wong

And without any media report, people won't know how good or how active or how solid your event is. So, I started practise, I started writing articles. And when I stepped down

¹ A slip of the tongue. Here should be "my education isn't in Chinese".

as President of South-One, that was, I think that was 2008, I picked up this role for BLIA Sydney and also for the Temple. I started writing.

17:12 Francis Wong

Then on the way, I learned a lot because writing articles, you don't just write. You need to think, and then I tried to use a lot of Buddhism in the articles so that in the way of writing, it is a help.

17:31 Francis Wong

It is a reinforcement of my Buddhism. Now I am a member of the Nan Tien Temple Media team. Because of writing articles for so many years, I can write articles just watching the video, just based on some background information, because I think that is through the experience of many many years' support from the Temple and from BLIA. But I enjoy writing.

18:10 Venerable Jue Fang

Okay, so, you have been so active in all these events or roles and jobs. Could you also share with us how has Buddhism influenced yourself personally?

18:26 Francis Wong

Buddhism has a big impact on my life. It has a big impact on my life and my family. I tell you a true story. All the events of BLIA, we try to step out and involve the community. In particular, we want to involve the government. So, when I became a President of BLIA Sydney, I tried to do that because Abbess Man Ko asked me to do a three-year's strategic planning.

19:01 Francis Wong

One of the tasks was to step out and make the community or the government recognise our organisations. So, I tried to make a lot of contacts to the local government, to the New South Wales governments. The then Minister for Multiculturalism, Dr Jeff Lee, he, through these years, he not only a Minister, but he also a good friend of us.

19:35 Francis Wong

And I can see that, because of myself practise Buddhism, I actually influenced him a lot. So, on many many occasions, throughout his speech, he promoted the Three Acts of Goodness and Four Givings for us.

19:57 Francis Wong

I remember, in one occasion, I think that's the Chinese Gathering Event, he was sitting next to me and suddenly he told me, he said, "Francis, I do not have any religions right

now, but if I do, I will become a Buddhist in the future." I looked at him, I said, "Well, Jeff, welcome to Buddhism. Thank you so much for your recognition of our organisation of Nan Tien Temple and NTI."

20:35 Francis Wong

And in the other occasions, there was a tradesman, his name is Jason, because of the King George Road upgrade, he needs to install the windows and doors to our property to isolate all the noises.

20:56 Francis Wong

There was, I think there was a three days' work. And then every day, I asked him, "Oh, Jason, do you want a coffee?" And he said, "yes." And then on the second day, "yes," he said, "yes." I think because I use Buddhism so naturally that I try to make friends with him, I try to treat him good.

21:20 Francis Wong

So, on the third day, I gave him a box of chocolate. I said, "Jason, this is not for you, this is for your kids." He opened his eyes. I think I can see that he was also touching. And then before he left, and he told me, he said, "Francis, I think Buddhism is a very good religion. I will become a Buddhist when I decided to do so." At that moment, I needed cry. I didn't know what to say. I look at him. I think he can feel that, through my eyes, he feel that I want to say thank you to him.

22:05 Francis Wong

So, I think in a broader sense, in a broader implication, I think the community gradually accepted Buddhism as general in the community. And I think this is a good trend for us. It's a good trend for the community because Buddhism is a very mild, very calm, very kind religion that people try to use it in their daily lives.

22:39 Venerable Jue Fang

Yes, so, thank you so much for your sharing with us on your personal experiences and your relationship with the Temple and the BLIA. So, last but not least, because our founder Venerable Master Hsing Yun actually passed away last year in the year 2023, and throughout his life, he has dedicated himself to making Buddhism accessible to individuals from every walk of life.

23:10 Venerable Jue Fang

So, would you also like to share with us your encounters with him? Were there any personal experiences that you had with him and or maybe even specific moments or teachings that has profoundly influenced you?

23:28 Francis Wong

Yes. I didn't have a very close contact with Venerable Master Hsing Yun. But only, I think, two occasions. One was in 2008, where the Headquarter, Executive Director Meeting was here, I was responsible to manage the service desk.

24:01 Francis Wong

And then the President, Raymond Lee, because there was an award, Raymond Lee asked me to receive the award on behalf of BLIA. So, I stood in front of Master Hsing Yun and the media took pictures. When I looked back at the picture, I thought, wow, Master Hsing Yun, he was so kind. Actually, his kindness is from his heart. I can feel it.

24:38 Francis Wong

And the other occasion was, I think in Taiwan, I was at the stage to receive a certificate. I shook hand with Master. His hand was so soft and nice. I've been with BLIA for 20 plus years. The driving force for me to keep going was Master Hsing Yun, almost always said, "Never forget one's own initial aspirations." So, every time when I face with problems, with difficulties, and I always go back to this saying. That was the momentum that keep me going.

25:27 Francis Wong

I always ask myself, why do I pick up volunteer work? No one asked me to do so. It's only me. But why I want to do so? So, I always ask myself, because I want to serve, I want to learn, I want to make this place a better place.

25:50 Venerable Jue Fang

Thank you so much. So, as we come to the end of today's interview, is there anything that you would like to add?

25:59 Francis Wong

Yes. I think Buddhism is not only impacting me, because my wife Margaret Lee, her health is not in a perfect position. So, I think we both practise Buddhism for these years. You see, as a husband and wife, sometimes we quarrel, I think this is natural, but we also tolerate each other, we respect each other.

26:45 Francis Wong

I use Buddhism a lot to take care of her and I think to that extent, I truly want and appreciate that I can learn from the organisation, I can learn from the Temple that to care for someone, I think, not only from my heart, is to be unconditional. So, all these years, we live very happy.

27:16 Francis Wong

Second thing I want to say is that, I really, truly appreciate Master Hsing Yun to build a Temple here, to build a university here, because with the Temple, we can always come to the Temple, to pray to the Buddha, we also, we always can come to the Temple to learn and to practise.

27:41 Francis Wong

Without the Temple, I think my life direction probably change a lot. I don't know what I will do in the last 20 years. But with the Temple, with BLIA, that I can use my spare time to develop others as well to develop myself.

28:03 Francis Wong

And I think the third thing I want to say is to, is really really appreciate the support from the government, because a lot of the events organised by either Nan Tien Temple or by BLIA, they are very supportive! They are very supportive!

28:25 Francis Wong

So, to that extent, I should say a sincere gratitude to all these people.

28:35 Venerable Jue Fang

Thank you very much. Thank you.

28:38 Francis Wong

Thank you, it's my pleasure.