

## Interview with the Venerable Sik Yin Kit

By Gaëlle Boscals de Réals

The Venerable Sik Yin Kit, also known as Sister Jessie, is the head Nun of the Po Lam Buddhist Association. Po Lam monastery was established in 1994 in Chilliwack, an hour away from Vancouver. At the time, Venerable Yin Kit had been sent to Canada by her teacher, Venerable Sing Yat, to make the Dharma available. She is known for her work with prisoners as a volunteer meditation teacher. In the following interview, the Venerable Yin Kit and her disciple Eva opened up about building up a monastic community and living the Dharma in Canada.

**G:** Why did you choose Vancouver and why in particular Chilliwack?

**VYK:** Yes, actually many people are curious about this. It's from my teacher Venerable Sing Yat. When he asked us to come to a particular place I said 'Why here? Why Vancouver?' I went to university in London, Ontario, many years ago in the 70s, and I didn't really want to come to Canada, I was quite happy at the time in Hong Kong! But well, he's my teacher and he said: 'You go and have a look at the land.' I said: 'Ok, if you want me to go look at something, you need to give me something to look for, give me some conditions! What criteria do you want?' He said: 'Well criteria are: it has to have a house so you can move in and have a little community, a monastic center. Then it needs land so you can grow your own vegetables so you don't solely rely on the lay community.' Also, he said: 'It has to be one hour away from Vancouver. If you need to go out to teach it's only one hour. It has to be big enough so that if in the future you develop you can do it.' [...] We found this property that had been on the market for two-three years and no one wanted it!

And I asked him why Vancouver? I think in his mind Vancouver is the bigger Vancouver. And he said: 'Vancouver, that area, that place is very clean.' Not physical clean but I think he felt the energy was very clean, and purer, and the people there were simpler. That kind of pure energy to support the monastic sangha is very crucial, especially when you're starting fresh. And we didn't know anybody, and this really was a secluded place.'

**G:** So, you arrived and then how did it go, how did it grow?

**VYK:** It was difficult in the beginning. Even now, though it's different difficulties, right? It was difficult because we did not have any support, we had no lay community and Chilliwack is so called a 'Bible Belt'. When I first came, I went to buy bedding and get to familiarize myself with the town. And the first thing that came to my mind once I was stopping at a red light was: Wow, church, church, church, church. And I thought to myself: Wow so many churches! And then, when I went to buy beddings, people were looking at me like... like E.T. from outer space, and they asked me: 'What are you doing here?' I said: 'I'm a Buddhist nun.' 'Buddhist nun?' I said: 'Yeah', 'So what are you doing here? You're trying to convert us?' I said: 'No nononono, my teacher said this is a wonderful place, you people are wonderful people and he said this place would support our practice to become a better person.' And you could see their faces soften, melt. [...] I was just telling the truth and people saw. We made good friends with our Mayor, who is a woman and a pastor. I have good friends who are Christians, Catholics, Atheists, and they come and we have tea and there's no problem.'

**G:** You mentioned finding a new way to practice here, I was wondering what this means? What does it mean to be a Buddhist in Canada?

**VYK:** When I was in Hong Kong, well... all of us are independent entities so we should all have our own practices. But at the time I was a baby in my monastic life! I'd just become a monastic and I needed to

adjust to this life and find a practice that would suit me and at the time I still couldn't find it. So, I followed everybody's flow, you know, Pure Land Buddhism and chanting and blah blah blah, and all that, which didn't cut with me! But I did not want *to not* have a practice, so I grappled with one. And when I came here and looked around I said: 'Hmm, this doesn't work here.' Because everything is in Chinese, right? The chanting is in Chinese, the literature is in Chinese and everything. Some are in English, but still, I thought: 'Come on, how can they translate it like that!' It's like Google translate and how can people comprehend that, and it's too abstract! The Mahayana teaching is too abstract for these people, it was too abstract for me to comprehend! And I thought, this is such a good place, it's so quiet and spacious and it's so secluded, so I thought: Meditation. Because I always liked meditation, but I just didn't get a chance to learn meditation techniques. [...] So I thought, okay let me try the traditional meditation techniques, let me turn to Vipassana.

**G:** You mentioned issues with the translation, and a lot of the texts are in Chinese, so what can the rest of the non-Chinese speaking sangha do? What would you advise someone to do in order to fully comprehend?

**VYK:** I would advise English speakers to go back to the Theravada tradition and start from there. And you know, the collected discourses, these are wonderful teachings. And after they build up some very strong foundation from those teachings, they will have an idea. Let them clear their head and let them study on their own and brainstorm with each other, and then I'd start to teach the Mahayana. The first Mahayana we did was the Heart Sutra which was very difficult and the Sutra of the Fortitude. Then we started reading the Lotus Sutra. I did it for an annual chanting ceremony that we have, every year for seven days. We read together: we read our Chinese, and they read their English. We read together; we don't chant. Everyone immerses themselves into reading the sutra, and then we said: Wow! Eva do you want to say a bit about your experience?

**E:** It was fantastic not just for the English speakers but for the people who spoke Cantonese because for the English we would always take ten to fifteen minutes to finish. It was always much longer. But everybody would read it out loud on their own, so all the Cantonese would die out and then there would fifteen minutes of English at the end. And some of the comments from the people who were Cantonese speakers were: 'Wow, you know I heard you reciting it after I finished and I learned something different just from hearing the English.' Of course, this came after but this kind of cooperation is so... serendipitous, it was beautiful.

**VYK:** We did this every year for three years after that. And you know, I always wanted to find a practice that was inclusive. Not just for the Cantonese, not just for the English-speaking people. And through that reading of the Lotus Sutra, we found that. That cooperation, that harmony. It was so beautiful.

**G:** Since you've been here for a long time, did you see any changes since you arrived? How do you see the Dharma transforming around Vancouver in the future?

**VYK:** Oh yeah, a lot of changes. People are more open now, more receptive and in Chilliwack, people are more open, most of them. I have seen a lot of growth, but one thing I really would like to see is for people who come to Canada and set up a Dharma place, any Dharma place, they need to understand the culture here. They need to find a way that is suitable for people here to learn the Dharma, not just host our own views of the Dharma. Like, if I had not looked for a local way to spread the Dharma, I would have continued with the Chinese text. I always say: we should not impose our own, because in the Buddhist teaching there is a lot of influence from the cultural aspect. We should not impose that onto wherever we go. So, this is why in the beginning I was struggling to find a suitable practice for people here, because I do not want to convert them from being an English-speaking people with a kind of Western culture into

being Chinese and reading all this literature in Chinese, which they don't understand and don't have a clue and only hear the syllable and the pronunciation. So, I said: this is not right, we need to find a way the Dharma could reach them.

**G:** Then, if you boil down the practice to the core, if you shed the cultural aspect and you keep something, what is it?

**VYK:** That's a very good question, and I think: service. Service, serve humanity. That's because if you want to serve humanity you have to come from a mind that has wisdom and compassion, otherwise, you will constantly fall back onto trying to control, or fall back on yourself. It relies on a really strong mind of selflessness and compassion.

**G:** What would you advise the practitioners of the Sakyadhita movement?

**VYK:** I think women now have a lot of strength and can do good stuff for humanity and with the support of the Dharma and the cultivation of wisdom and compassion, which the Dharma taught us to do, if we practice this correctly, I think women could really help to spread the Dharma. And I think people need to remember a few aspects: first thing is one's own practice, and that practice helps them understand their standpoint, their mindset, and also helps them to actually support and protect the monastic sangha. Why is supporting and protecting the monastic sangha so crucial? Because the Buddha taught us to. If it is not important, why would he set up a Sangha? If people don't have a strong practice and don't hold a point of view, then the protection will be really minimal. And providing means you support the sangha financially, physically, materially, whatever way that you can. And then when these two aspects are very strong then we would start to be strong and grounded and ready to serve. When we serve we are actually propagating the Dharma. Because people look at you, you are a role model, you exemplify the Dharma. People at first might be: I don't want to learn the Dharma. But then they might say: oh, wow learning Dharma could change someone to be such a good person. So, this is what I want women to hear.

**G:** Going back to finding one's practice, how does one do that? Especially since everyone has their own background?

**VYK:** Yeah, and their own upbringing, their own karma, ... you know what? I think everybody has the ability to know their own practice, but the question is whether their mind is quiet enough to ask: is this practice really fitting me? And you can also check it with your daily life behaviors. When you are challenged with difficulties, difficult people and situations, can you fall back onto your practice? Can you use it to change your point of view, and behaviors? Would that practice be strong enough to support you in times of difficulty? I think you can check on yourself, and if you can fall back on it, it becomes a strong part of you, and you find peace, you find comfort, you find it very embracing, and most importantly you find happiness. Sukha, not just happiness, you find Sukha, you know? Every time I come back from meditation, I feel lighter, you know? Then, this is the practice for me! Also, it is very important that you have a teacher that you can trust in, confide in, so that you can honestly discuss your difficulties. And he or she should not have her own idea imposed onto you. They have to be very open-minded.'

**G:** Is there anything else, anything you wanted to go back to, a particular message or anything?

**VYK:** I really would like people to appreciate life, especially human life, and especially human life with Dharma teachings. Because this is a very rare opportunity, to be born as a human being, and it's even rarer to be born as a human being and be able to encounter the Dharma teachings. This is so rare, and people should be more focused on using that Dharma to change their own lives and the lives of others. Not by force, not by control, not by war, but by compassion and understanding. And give those wonderful

gifts of Dharma to people, rather than, you know, Christmas gifts! Because that is the highest gift you can give to one. It can nurture them, not just in this lifetime but for many lifetimes to come.

By Gaëlle Boscals de Réals

Gaëlle Boscals de Réals is a first-year Master's student in the Department of East Asian Studies at McGill University in Montreal. She is working on Chinese spirituality in Mainland China and Taiwan more precisely. Her research project focuses on non-institutional forms of spiritual experience in rural settings, as well as transmission of knowledge. She did her undergraduate studies at McGill, with a major in Anthropology and a minor in East Asian Cultural Studies. This led her to lean into a more ethnographic approach to her research.