

The Jade Buddha Story

Part Three: Preparing for the World Tour

We were always very enthusiastic about the idea of taking the Jade Buddha on a world tour. Put simply “If you leave the Buddha in one place, then only a few can see it - but if take the Buddha around the world it makes it so easy for billions of beings to receive the blessings of the Jade Buddha.”

We started making arrangements for the tour while we were still completing the Jade Buddha in Thailand. We had received a lot of support for the Jade Buddha from Amitabha Buddhist Centre and several individuals in Singapore and it seemed natural to Judy and me that the first showing of the Jade Buddha would be in Singapore. One of our key supporters in Singapore, Henry Lau had spoken to a very large Chinese temple about hosting the Jade Buddha and the early signs were very positive. Judy and I visited the temple with some friends of Henry Lau. We answered lots of questions and we left the meeting feeling that the temple management was keen to be associated with the Jade Buddha. The temple was very beautiful and what particularly interested me was that it had enough land to properly display the Jade Buddha and to allow for adequate car-parking. This is a rarity in Singapore where land is so expensive.

Around this time we advertised for a Jade Buddha Tour Coordinator to help us with the planning of the world tour. From a range of candidates we selected Serene Loy. Serene was a computer programmer who lived in Brisbane but, perhaps as sign of the Singapore connection, she was also a Singapore citizen.

In late 2008 a long term supporter of the Jade Buddha project and Great Stupa, Lan Nguyen called me from Adelaide. Lan said that I “MUST” meet a certain Abbot from Ho Chi Minh City who was visiting Australia. She explained that Thich Chan Tinh was the Abbot of one of Ho Chi Minh City’s largest temples and he was only in Melbourne for one more day. She added I had to go immediately if I was to meet up with the abbot. With some reservations that I might be wasting half a day of work I agreed to the meeting and drove to an address in Western Melbourne. It was not a temple but rather a suburban house with one internal wall taken out to make enough room to create a makeshift temple. I was ushered into a small room where the Abbot and an attendant waited for me.

Before I received the phone call from Lan I had not heard of Thich Chan Tinh or Hoang Phap Temple but as soon as I went into the room I was impressed by the calm but powerful energy of the monk. He explained that his temple, Hoang Phap, was well known in Vietnam for holding many major retreats and dharma events. He said that they were very experienced in hosting events for 30,000 or more people. I saw photographs of these events and was so impressed by the professionalism of their presentation.

The conversation then moved to what we were doing at the Great Stupa of Universal Compassion and the Jade Buddha for Universal Peace. Even though Thich Chan Tinh appeared to know quite a lot about both of these projects he still asked me many questions. Then after about one hour he said without hesitation “I wish to invite the Jade Buddha to come to Vietnam.” I replied that it would be very good to take the Jade Buddha to Vietnam but first we have plans to go to Singapore, Malaysia and Australia. I said “Maybe we can come to Vietnam in one or two years.” Thich Chan Tinh shook his head, smiled and

said with soft spoken firmness “I want Vietnam to be the first place for the Jade Buddha tour.” I took a few moments to reflect and then responded “If you can arrange for all the appropriate approvals then Vietnam will be the first stop on the world tour of the Jade Buddha.” We shook hands and so the world tour program was underway.

Judy and I were very happy that Vietnam was the first place on the world tour. It seemed to us to be a very good way to thank the many Vietnamese Australians who had been so kind to us over the years. And indeed most Vietnamese people in Australia and all over the world have told us how proud they are that Vietnam was chosen as the first stop on the world tour of the Jade Buddha for Universal Peace. Also in hindsight making Vietnam the first stop proved to be the most serendipitous choice because the tour and the subsequent DVD of the tour of Vietnam caused such an impression it was like a shock wave around the world. Suddenly hundreds of Vietnamese temples wanted to invite the Jade Buddha and to pay homage to the Jade Buddha and this created the momentum for a very successful world tour.

Shortly after the meeting with Thich Chan Tinh we heard news from Singapore that the temple that Henry Lau had spoken to was going cool on the idea of hosting the Jade Buddha. Serene Loy and I were in Singapore at the time. The front page of the Straits Times carried news of a national scandal involving a Buddhist monk who was accused of using funds inappropriately. This atmosphere was enough for the temple to become extremely nervous about entering into any relationship with a foreign project. It was to be another 3 years before an opportunity to show the Jade Buddha in Singapore could be arranged.

While the tour of Singapore was not to proceed as Henry Lau had wished, Judy and I had the privilege of one final meeting with him as he lay dying in a Singapore private hospital. We were able to tell Henry that the Jade Buddha was now completed and the world tour was getting underway in Vietnam. We also had the opportunity to thank Henry for his devoted support.

True to his word Thich Chan Tinh organized everything for the tour of Vietnam. He helped gain the official support and he selected the energetic and well respected Buddhist nun Su Co Hue Duc to coordinate the tour.

In February 2009 I travelled to Vietnam with Lan Nguyen, the person who had put me in touch with Thich Chan Tinh. Later on I was joined by an old friend from Brisbane, Mr Bang. Together with Su Co Hue Duc we travelled around Vietnam to visit the temples that were proposed for the Vietnam tour. My first meeting was with an official of the organization representing the Abbots of Ho Chi Minh City. This meeting was very cordial and indicated that the temples of the South of Vietnam were very keen to support the Jade Buddha tour.

From Ho Chi Minh City I travelled with Su Co Hue Duc, her cheerful disciple Diep and Lan to Danang. From Danang airport we were driven an hour or so South to the Marble Mountain area of Central Vietnam. Here we were greeted by the very happy and positive Abbot of Quan Am Temple, Thich Hue Vinh. He was always smiling and telling funny stories many of them about himself. One story I remember was about the difficulty he had attracting the attention of his attendant monks. He had a bell that he rung quite loudly to attract their attention but on one occasion he rang it several times without any response so he resorted to throwing the bell in the general direction of where his attendant should be.

Apparently this had the desired effect. It was Thich Hue Vinh's wish to host the Jade Buddha for the first showing on March 2009 to coincide with his temple's famous Quan Am festival.

Many people asked why we started the world tour in such a small place as Quan Am temple but I was delighted that this temple was chosen. It is a very famous temple in the most beautiful setting with marble mountains behind and a vast lake in front. And of course it would be a pleasure to meet Thich Hue Vinh again.

Whilst in Danang I met with the people at Asiatrans. Asiatrans had been recommended as a suitable logistics firm to transport the Jade Buddha over Vietnam. I met with Managing Director Mr Quang (Mai Van Quang) and with the help of a staff translator we made an arrangement for Asiatrans to act as our Vietnam logistics team. Later we met Ms Dung (Mai Thi Thu Dung) from Asiatrans who turned out to be Mr Quang's sister. Dung was a great help to us as she travelled with us as an official Jade Buddha team member. We also got to meet Mr Hanh (Nguyen Duc Hanh) who had the key responsibility of the Jade Buddha wherever we travelled in Vietnam.

Our next visit was to Pho Quang Monastery just out of Ho Chi Minh City. Here I had the pleasure of meeting the Abbot Thich Nhu Niem. He was already enthusiastically planning for the Jade Buddha and had ordered a massive photo of the Mahabodhi Stupa from Bodh Gaya which would be hung from one of the 5 story high buildings as the backdrop to the Jade Buddha. I could tell that Thich Nhu Niem had a strong sense of the dramatic when I saw the dragon cave that he had created out of the concrete. The most theatrical touch was the smoke which came out of the nostrils of the dragons. Thich Nhu Niem proudly explained that he had personally designed the intricate system for creating the smoke which ran on water vapour and steam.

From Pho Quang we travelled to Hoang Phap Monastery and it was a pleasure to meet up again with the Abbot Thich Chan Tinh. Of all the temples I had seen Hoang Phap was the one that was going to be the easiest for us. They are very used to organizing very large event and without any doubt they would do an excellent presentation of the Jade Buddha.

We then travelled to Dai Tong Lam at Ba Ria Vung Tao. Dai Tong Lam is a very large teaching monastery where monks from all over Vietnam came for training. At Dai Tong Lam we met with Thich Nhuan Tri about the Jade Buddha tour. Thich Nhuan Tri had a large office complete with cigarettes and alcohol for visitors. As the discussion was entirely in Vietnamese I just sat back and recited Tara mantras. It was not until our second trip to Dai Tong Lam that I had the opportunity of meeting the Abbot Thich Quang Hien.

Our final site visit was at the very remote Van An temple in Dong Thap province in the Mekong Delta region of southern Vietnam. The temple could only be reached by a narrow path, about 1.5 metres wide which ran beside a large river. All I could see were logistical nightmares. How could we get the Jade Buddha here? Even to get the Jade Buddha on to the track it needed a crane to lower it 10 metres or so from a bridge. And then how would we ever get it along the track? I did think that it may be possible to float the Jade Buddha on a large barge to the temple and then crane the Jade Buddha into place. But we would need to float the crane down there as well. In any case we decided to refer the problem to our logistics company Asiatrans. As it later turned out providing access to the Van An temple would go down

in Jade Buddha folklore as one of the most inspiring events of people power making the Jade Buddha tour a reality.

Back in Ho Chi Minh City I caught up with David Lester, an old friend from my days in Melbourne advertising. It was great to see David after many years. He took Lan and myself out to dinner at a French restaurant where judging from the reactions from the staff he was a regular. I asked David if he liked Vietnamese food and to my surprise he replied that he had tasted it once when he first came to Saigon – 5 years ago. His taste for fine Italian and French dining could apparently be easily satisfied in Saigon. David is a devout Catholic but was very keen to help the Jade Buddha tour. He recommended that I contact Mr Dinh Ba Thanh of the DatVietvac group to seek his assistance with publicity. This was one of the most valuable pieces of advice I was given as Mr Thanh proved to be a great ally in organizing media coverage.

I also caught up with the management team from a large bank in Vietnam. They took me out to a very special restaurant that turned out to specialize in wild boar. As the only vegetarian at the table I had to eat bread and butter while the others wolfed into their chunky wild boar dishes. I remember looking at one plate next to me and seeing large teeth protruding from the black flesh in the middle of the plate. Although it turned out that the bank was not able to assist the tour it was very pleasing to see a large commercial enterprise keen to be of assistance to a Buddhist project.

Wherever we went in Vietnam we were met with generous hospitality and a real enthusiasm that the Jade Buddha would visit their temple. By the time I left I felt sure that the Jade Buddha world tour would get off to a most auspicious start in Vietnam.

My only disappointment was that the Jade Buddha was not to tour the north of the country. Su Co Hue Duc had offered a tour of the Jade Buddha to some temples in the Hanoi area but had a received little interest. The general view seemed to be “We already have many Buddhas in the North of Vietnam”. Of course in time the Jade Buddha would win over the North of the country as well.

Meanwhile back in Thailand we began in earnest to prepare for the world tour. We decided that the jade “halo” that goes behind the head of the Buddha was too heavy to display. It would be impossible to find a way of safely hanging the halo behind the head of the Buddha. So we created two fiberglass halos which we would use for the world tour. The Jade Buddha sits upon an enormous block of alabaster which is being carved into a traditional Tibetan style throne that was designed by Thupten Khedup. The alabaster throne would also be far too heavy and fragile to transport around the world. And so we decided to create a faux throne which is made of a very strong steel frame with fiberglass fairings.

Wherever we go around the world people ask us “How do you shift such a large and precious statue”. This question was exercising our minds and those of Vanit’s team in Thailand. Vanit had an engineer design a steel cage which would surround the Jade Buddha. He then wrapped the steel cage in plywood and covered this in plastic sheeting. The steel cage around the Buddha remained with the Buddha for the next 18 months until it was replaced with a much simpler, lighter frame in Longbeach, California. This was how the Buddha and its throne were wrapped when they were loaded on a flatrack container for Vietnam. Later on in Sydney and a gain in Lonbeach California we created our own container to ship

the Buddha and the other items. Nevertheless by February 2009 all was in place to ship the Jade Buddha from Bangkok to the first stop on its world tour; Danang in Vietnam.

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