

Tibet Oral History Project

Interview #3 – Jampa Tashi
June 25, 2007

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TIBET ORAL HISTORY PROJECT
www.TibetOralHistory.org

INTERVIEW SUMMARY SHEET

1. Interview Number: #3
2. Interviewee: Jampa Tashi
3. Age: 83
4. Date of Birth: 1924
5. Sex: Male
6. Birthplace: Repa Lungpa
7. Province: Dhotoe (Kham)
8. Year of leaving Tibet: 1959
9. Date of Interview: June 25, 2007
10. Place of Interview: Home for the Aged and Disabled, Lugsung Samdupling Settlement, Bylakuppe, Mysore District, Karnataka, India
11. Length of Interview: 1 hr 4 min
12. Interviewer: Rebecca Novick
13. Interpreter: Tsering Dorjee
14. Videographer: Ronny Novick
15. Transcriber: Tenzin Yangchen



Biographical Information:

Jampa Tashi is from Markham in eastern Tibet. He became a monk at the insistence of his parents and enrolled in a monastery in his village. Later, he left the monastery, went to Central Tibet and engaged in business until the Chinese occupation of Lhasa in 1959.

Jampa Tashi personally witnessed the events at Norbulingka in Lhasa on March 10, 1959 when the Chinese used artillery shells to suppress the Tibetan uprising. He was one of the volunteers who gathered to guard His Holiness the Dalai Lama. He saw the dead bodies of men and horses lying around Norbulingka during the uprising. On his escape to India he joined up with a group of *Chushi Gangdrug* guerrillas.

In India Jampa Tashi was sent to Simla to work on road construction. Life was hard and the climate was harsh. Later, he came to Bylakuppe when the settlement project started. Initially, life was very difficult as the place was a thick jungle. He and other Tibetans cleared the jungle, built roads and made a place for other Tibetan refugees who followed.

Topics Discussed:

Monastic life, invasion by Chinese army, Norbulingka, March 10th Uprising, Dalai Lama's escape, Chushi Gangdrug guerrillas, life as a refugee in India.

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Age: 83, Sex: Male

Interviewer: Rebecca Novick

Interview Date: June 25, 2007

[Questions are asked by either interviewer or interpreter. In Interview #3, the interviewer directs questions to the interpreter, who then asks the questions of the interviewee.]

Question: First of all, Jampa-*la*, thank you so much for sharing your experiences with this project, the Tibet Oral History Project. First of all, thank him.

Interviewee #3: Okay.

Q: If he wants to take a break anytime or stop for any reason just let us know, during the interview.

#3: Okay.

[Interviewee says he is unable to hear well and so chairs are moved closer. The beginning part of the interview is repeated.]

Q: And if there is anything that he doesn't want to answer, or a subject he doesn't want to discuss, that's perfectly fine.

#3: Okay.

Q: Can you hear me?

#3: Yes, ask me questions and I will answer.

Q: So if you can ask Jampa-*la*, first of all, to describe what his childhood was like in Tibet growing up.

#3: When I was small, I lived in Markham. I became a monk when I was small and came to central Tibet. Then I was engaged in trading until the time we lost our country. Until 1959, I was there and when we lost our country, I escaped. Other than that, I do not have much to tell you.

Q: Okay. So we want to go into and ask him more details about all of those parts. Let's go back to his childhood growing up, what were some of his most vivid memories of his childhood, maybe life as a monk when he first joined the monastery or just describe his family life, maybe.

#3: My family was called Heba Lungpa Tsang in Markham. The name of the family was Heba Lungpa Tsang.

Q: How many members were there?

#3: We were four brothers. I came to central Tibet when I was very small, so I do not have much to say. They are all dead.

Q: When he became a monk, was that his idea? Did he want to become a monk?

#3: My parents made me a monk. When I was small, they made me a monk.

Q: Why did the parents want him to become a monk? What monastery did he join?

#3: In my village there was a monastery called Woeser Gonpa. In Sera Monastery, it comes under the Tsawa Khangtsen and Woeser Lama. I became a monk at the Woeser Gonpa. Then I came to the monastery in central Tibet. I left monkhood and engaged myself in business until we lost our country. Then I fled to India in 1959 when the Chinese forcefully occupied our country. I do not have much to say.

Q: Why did your parents make you a monk?

#3: Monk? They made me a monk to do religious practice, you know that. In order for me to do religious practice, they made me a monk.

Q: He has met the reincarnation of Woeser Lama?

#3: Yes.

Q: The Woeser Tulku here is the reincarnation of the Woeser Tulku of your village monastery?

#3: Yes. He is the reincarnation of the previous Lama. He is a very holy Lama. He is in Sera's Tsawa Khangtsen. That was my monastery and he is my Lama.

Q: Have you met the Woeser Rinpoche?

#3: Of course. Woeser Rinpoche and I come from the same village. I go to see him often.

Q: How old is he now, Woeser Rinpoche?

#3: I don't know how old he is. He escaped from Tibet later. He was imprisoned by the Chinese and suffered a lot. He escaped later. I don't know his age.

Q: Before we ask the next question, if you could explain to Jampa-*la* that we definitely want to hear as much detail as possible because we really want to hear his experiences, so that future generation of Tibetans can hear them. So we want as much, this is like history and so we want as much of his story as possible. So the young people know what it was like in Tibet.

#3: I don't have much to say, what do I do? [Laughs]

Q: Okay. That's okay. So if you could just ask him; does he remember about his life in the monastery in those years? Can he describe what daily life was like in the monastery for him?

#3: I became a monk in the monastery when I was small. My parents provided my food and clothing. Then I came to Sera and took my *gelong* 'monk vows'. This is about it; there is nothing more I have to say.

Q: How old was he when he went to *Sera*?

#3: I was 12 years old. You mean when I came to Tibet?

Q: By Tibet, do you mean Lhasa?

#3: Yes, Lhasa.

Q: How old were you when you came to Lhasa?

#3: I was 12 years old.

Q: How did he get there?

#3: From my village? I came walking.

Q: How long did it take?

#3: It took about three months.

Q: A long way. Was it a dangerous journey?

#3: No, nothing. I didn't face any dangers on the way.

Q: No problem. So what was it like when he got to Sera? What did he think about Sera Monastery?

#3: In Sera, I stayed in the Khangtsen doing my religious practice. Then in 1959, we lost our country and together with His Holiness the Dalai Lama I escaped to India.

Q: How did he hear the news?

#3: The Chinese had come to Tibet a long time back. Even when I was in my village, the Chinese had already come there. My region was already lost to the Chinese; they had occupied it. Lhasa was lost in 1959. His Holiness the Dalai Lama fled. In 1959 the Chinese invaded and Tibet was lost. Then I escaped and that is all I have to say.

Q: What did he notice about when the Chinese arrived? What change did he notice in his life? And the life around him when the Chinese arrived?

#3: At that time the Chinese were not inflicting any suffering; they were very good. When they first came, the Chinese did not cause any harm to the people. It was only when Lhasa was lost that they were ruthless, imposed suffering, killed and tortured. All these they did after Tibet was lost. Initially they were very good. They were deceiving us. Then when the country was lost, they did all these. That's what I heard; I didn't see it as I had escaped. I have nothing to say.

There may be many other older people in the Home for the Aged who have more experiences than me. There are those who have undergone *thamzin* 'struggle sessions' and who have been in prison. They had been made to work, undergone *thamzin* and imprisoned by the Chinese. There are many such people here and they would know.

Q: How did he find out about the torture? How did he learn about that?

#3: We have people here who have undergone *thamzin*. I have only heard about it and not seen it. I didn't see, but heard later after I had escaped that the Chinese tormented, subjected *thamzin*, confiscated the wealth of the rich, dismantled the religious icons, destroyed monasteries and killed. We have people here who were in prison.

Q: What happened to his family back in Kham?

#3: We have someone here called Jola and others, who have faced *thamzin* and been forced to work by the Chinese and escaped. There are people in the Home for the Aged who have suffered under the Chinese and then escaped. I was not there. I do not know.

Q: What happened to his family back in Kham?

#3: When the Chinese first came, they were very good. They didn't do anything to my family. There was no *thamzin* and no suffering.

Q: They were all able to come here?

#3: No, they didn't come here. They are all dead, in my village in Tibet. They were all old. I am 83 years old and I was the youngest. Among the children, I was the youngest. They are all dead. All my siblings are dead. Last year, a son of my sibling came here to see me. That

was during the *Kalachakra* by His Holiness the Dalai Lama that I saw some of them. My siblings are dead, I don't know if they were subjected to *thamzin* by the Chinese or not.

Q: He wasn't in touch with them after he left?

#3: No, I couldn't go back after I escaped to India.

Q: You had no contact?

#3: No, but some relatives came to see me. During the *Kalachakra*, sons of my siblings came to see me. They were kind to me. They have gone back.

Q: When was that?

#3: The year of the *Kalachakra*. Then they came to Sera Monastery and met me. Earlier during the *Kalachakra* in Gangtok, I saw them. They came to see me twice. They said that the Chinese were not causing them any suffering in Tibet. If one remained silent, they did not do anything. If one indulged in pro-independence movements, then they would be put in prison. If one just lived quietly earning a living, the Chinese did not say anything. I asked them. Now everybody knows.

Q: Going back to before he left Tibet, so he escaped in 1959 after March 10. Does he recall any of the events leading up to March 10, 1959? Does he remember any of those events in Lhasa?

#3: That was the time when the *Monlam* 'prayer festival' was going on.

Q: Not the *Monlam*?

#3: March 10, yes, that was during the *Monlam*. That was when we lost our country. The Chinese immediately suppressed by using artillery shells. They were planning to take His Holiness the Dalai Lama to China. They were trying to deceive His Holiness by extending an invitation. His Holiness had people who told him and they [the Chinese] couldn't capture him. So His Holiness escaped and I did the same.

Q: At that time you were there?

#3: Yes, I was in Lhasa, in Norbulingka where I was a security guard. I was a guard for His Holiness. For about eight to nine days, letters came from the Chinese and letters went back to the Chinese. They were unable to invite His Holiness the Dalai Lama. The population surrounded the Palace and prevented a meeting of His Holiness and the Chinese. They didn't succeed in inviting His Holiness and then I escaped from Norbulingka. I was right at Norbulingka when His Holiness escaped. I was a guard for His Holiness.

Q: He was a bodyguard even though he was a monk? He was still a monk?

#3: I was not a monk.

Q: Why did he leave the monkhood?

#3: Why I left the monkhood? [Laughs] I couldn't keep my monk vows. [Laughs] What a question!

Q: Why? He couldn't go for religious studies?

#3: I couldn't. I couldn't continue to be a monk.

Q: What was the reason?

#3: I became a layman and engaged in business.

Q: Did he mean that he wasn't very good being a monk? He didn't understand his studies?

#3: A monk has to practice religion and I couldn't do that. So I became a trader.

Q: So how did he come to be His Holiness' bodyguard? How did that come about?

#3: His Holiness' bodyguard? I was not a bodyguard. All the people gathered to guard His Holiness. The bodyguards were separate. There were the *Kusung Dapon* and *Drapchi*; 500 *Kusung* and 500 *Drapchi* soldiers to protect His Holiness. When the Chinese wanted to invite His Holiness, all of us common people gathered to prevent His Holiness from going. I was among the people. We were there voluntarily.

Q: Did he have any experience in fighting or combat before?

#3: No, nothing at all.

Q: There were days at Norbulingka *a* when he was the bodyguard of His Holiness, what does he remember? Did he see His Holiness many times during that period? What does he remember about His Holiness, so young back then? Does he have any memories of seeing His Holiness?

#3: I have seen His Holiness, but it was not possible to go near him. I have seen him, but do not have any other experience. I have seen His Holiness while in Tibet.

Q: What was it like when...was he surprised when people started surrounding the Norbulingka? What was that like? Can he describe what that was like?

#3: The Norbulingka was surrounded for about a week and then the Chinese used force. After that I didn't stay long but fled. In Tibet, there were not many opportunities to see His Holiness the Dalai Lama. He was protected by the guards.

Q: Norbulingka was surrounded for about a week?

#3: His Holiness the Dalai Lama was not allowed to be taken away. The Chinese wanted to invite him and the Tibetans didn't let that happen. If they had managed to invite him, they would have taken His Holiness to China. That was how His Holiness was able to escape. The Tibetan people did not allow him to be taken away. I do not have much to say.

Q: So did he witness the shelling of the Norbulingka after His Holiness left?

#3: The shelling went on for a day and a night. I fled through the shelling. On my escape I saw with my own eyes many dead bodies of men and horses lying around. Norbulingka was shelled, men and horses were killed, thousands of men were killed and I made my escape through all this. I have seen it all. It was just shelling; we could not see any Chinese. The shells were coming from the skies and killing countless people. His Holiness the Dalai Lama had fled earlier. I escaped straight from Norbulingka.

Q: When he escaped was he by himself or was he with other people?

#3: There were many people with me.

Q: A large group?

#3: There were many people.

Q: How did they know where to go? How did they escape? Was it night?

#3: Then we came into Bhutan, from Bhutan to India. There were many with us, soldiers and central Tibetans. The Bhutanese stopped us there until His Holiness the Dalai Lama reached India and sent word. His Holiness asked them to let all the escapees into India and then we were allowed to go. We gave up our arms to the Bhutanese and came to India. First we came to Buxa. Then I went on road construction.

Q: Did he encounter any Chinese on the way on his journey to escape?

#3: Yes, I saw them. On my escape journey, we came together. If I tell you all these, you won't understand. First, I came from Norbulingka to Changthang, from Changthang to Pedhe, from Pedhe to Namgang Tse. Then I came along with the *Chushi Gangdrug* guerillas, with the *Chushi Gangdrug* guerillas to Talung, and from Talung to Dhowa Zong. The Chinese had already come to Dhowa Zong. Then, to Senga Guthok, and from Segu Guthok to Bhutan. After crossing over Mila Kachung we were in Hathi, in Indian Territory. Then we were in India.

Q: So they met up on the way? How did he meet them?

#3: We were together. There were many from my village that joined the *Chushi Gangdrug*. I came from Norbulingka and met the *Chushi Gangdrug* guerrillas and we came together.

Q: So the *Chushi Gangdrug*, did they have to organize the escape? Did they have to organize the party?

#3: When we escaped there was no one who organized it. All of us were escapees. On the way the Bhutanese gave us food until we reached Indian Territory. There was no one organizing; we were escaping.

Q: Nobody knew where they were going? So were they traveling by day and by night, or just by night? How were they traveling?

#3: We walked day and night.

Q: Did they see any Chinese on the way, or did they see any fighting or anything?

#3: Yes, I saw Chinese on the way.

Q: Can he say more about that?

#3: Yes.

Q: So did everybody in the group...

#3: When we were escaping, the Chinese were pursuing us. That's how we were coming together. On the way we lost many men. The Chinese and we were coming together, with us ahead.

Q: The Chinese were chasing you?

#3: Yes, they were chasing us.

Q: Did you fight on the way?

#3: The Chinese blocked our way. We did not actually fight the Chinese. They had the upper hand.

Q: You did not fight the Chinese?

#3: No, we did not fight.

Q: They killed people?

#3: Yes, they did. They have killed.

Q: He didn't engage in any fighting himself?

#3: No. There are people who have fought the Chinese. In the Home for the Aged here, there are some Drapchi soldiers and some who have been in prison. There are others who have undergone *thamzin*. Jola is here. He had to work under the Chinese. There are many who lived under the Chinese. Some even remained working for the Chinese for four to five years after Tibet was lost.

Q: What does he remember the most about that journey into Bhutan? What were his most vivid memories about that journey?

#3: No, I don't have anything. Then we escaped and reached Buxa. From Buxa, I went to Missamari for six to seven months. From Missamari, people were sent to various road construction sites and settlements. I spent many years on a road crew and then His Holiness started the settlements. I was in the first batch to come to the settlement, in camp number one.

Q: How long was he in Buxa?

#3: I stayed six months in Buxa, and then around six months in Missamari.

Q: Can we go back to Buxa for a moment?

#3: I went on road construction work to Simla, and from the road construction site to the settlement.

Q: We are just backing up a little bit. He's moving a little too fast for me. We are very interested and we would like to spend a little bit more time in a little bit more detail. If he could tell us what was Buxa like? Can he describe what that was like?

#3: I escaped and came to Buxa. The Indian government provided us with food and clothing. We had nothing when we came from Tibet; not even a cup. With the grace of His Holiness the Dalai Lama, the Indian government gave us food and clothing in Buxa. In Missamari, it was the Indian government. At the road construction site, it was the Indian government. The settlement was set up by the Indian government and we went there. That is all I have to say.

Q: What was it like? Can he describe it? What were the conditions like? Was the food good? There were a lot of high Lamas? Did they do practice? Was it difficult weather conditions? Was it difficult there with the climate? I hear a lot of people died in Buxa.

#3: In Buxa the food was good. It was very hot. Many people died in Missamari due to the heat. Everyday eight to nine Tibetan people died. All the Tibetans had gathered here, all those who had escaped.

Q: That's near to Buxa?

[Interpreter to interviewer] Near to Buxa.

Q: Did he contract any illnesses during that time?

#3: No, I was not sick.

Q: What did he think about? When he was going to go back to Tibet? Like, how long did he think he would be in India for, in his mind?

#3: I didn't think I would stay long in India. I thought Tibet would regain independence and we would go back to Tibet. I never thought in my mind that I would have to stay this long, never.

Q: When he went to Simla, how old was he at this point?

#3: I was 35 years old.

Q: That's when he went to work on the road crew?

#3: Yes.

Q: What was an average day like, working on the roads? What was a normal day in doing that kind of work? What was it like?

#3: I did not face any problems working on road construction. They gave us a salary and it was good. During the dynamite blasts, there was some danger to our lives, so His Holiness sent us to the settlements. Then the camps were set up, camp one, two, three, four and so on. I do not have much to say after coming to the settlement.

Q: Was it dangerous because of rock slides? What was the danger?

#3: Because of the grenade blasting the rocks.

Q: Can he describe a little bit about the work, exactly what the work was?

#3: Work? We made roads.

Q: What was the work?

#3: What work we did? We had to blast the rocks with dynamite. The rocks were blasted with dynamite. That's road construction. We had to build roads where there were no roads.

Q: Did you use the chisel?

#3: Yes, one person held the chisel and another hammered, making a hole in the rock. Then the hole was filled with dynamite and lit. The rock gets blasted, that's how hard we worked.

Q: Was it very tiring work?

#3: Yes, it was very hard work.

Q: Were people killed in the rock slides?

#3: Yes, it happened in some places, but not where we were.

Q: Has he ever gone back and driven on the roads that he helped to build?

#3: When the road was built, then the vehicles can readily pass on it.

Q: Has he been on those roads?

#3: No, I haven't.

Q: How many years did he spend on the road crew?

#3: I worked for about seven years.

Q: How did that come to an end? What was the reason that he stopped working?

#3: The reason I stopped work on the road crew was the difficult work. If you are here today, the next day you were there and the third, you had to go to another place. There was no proper house to stay in. We lived in tents in the rain and wind. The work was hard and there was danger to one's life which is why His Holiness started the settlements. It was very difficult doing the road construction with the dynamite.

Q: Where did he decide to go to?

#3: From the road crew, I came to the settlement.

Q: Which settlement?

#3: Camp Number 1.

Q: Right here in Bylakuppe?

[Interpreter to interviewer] Right here in Bylakuppe.

Q: So what was it like in Bylakuppe all that time ago? Did it look very different from today?

#3: When we first arrived at the settlement from the road construction site, we cleared the forest and built roads for the Indian government. We cut the trees for the other camps, like numbers one, two, three. When we first came here, everything was a jungle. We cut the trees and built the road for a salary of two rupees per day. Then I joined the army.

Q: Was it very different here from the way it is today? How was it different from now?

[Interpreter to interviewer] You mean Bylakuppe itself?

Q: Yes.

#3: The difference is immense. These days there's happiness. When we first came, it was a jungle and there were no roads and elephants roamed the forest. Then I went to the army and was there for seven to eight years.

Q: Please describe the difference between then and now.

#3: There is a difference. The difference is these days there's happiness. Whether it is livelihood or anything else, by the grace of His Holiness the Dalai Lama, everything is extremely good in the settlement. Initially there was hardly any livelihood. We worked for two rupees a day. After settling here, I'm happy.

Q: So it was very difficult for him. He came from a road crew and then he came here and he also had to do hard labor here. So was life difficult for him during that time in the early days?

#3: I did not face any difficulties. After the settlement was set up, by the grace of His Holiness the Dalai Lama, I was happy. I never thought that I would stay this long; that if we planted a tree, I never thought that I would be here to eat its fruit. I thought we would go back and never thought we'd have to stay so long.

Q: So they didn't plant any fruits because they thought it was temporary.

[Interpreter to interviewer] Yes. The problem is he doesn't remember much.

Q: Yes, I understand. I don't remember much either. Tell Pala we really appreciate talking to him. Tell him again, thank you. And make sure he is not too tired or anything. Tell him we are very interested what life was like in Tibet, you know before. So this is very interesting for us.

#3: Thank you. Tashi Delek.

Q: So was he very happy when he heard about the reincarnation of his Lama here?

#3: Yes, I was happy. Rinpoche escaped and came later.

Q: Did he get married? Did Pala get married?

#3: No, I am single. I am happy. The only suffering in my mind is our not gaining independence. Otherwise I am happy.

Q: The only suffering is not gaining independence, but otherwise you are happy?

#3: Yes. My worry is not being able to go back to Tibet if we do not get our independence. That is the only suffering. I have no worry over my livelihood. My suffering is Tibet not getting its independence back from the Chinese.

Q: Does he have any other memories that he could share with us about being in Tibet? We are really very interested in life in Tibet before the Chinese came. Does he have any memories about what life was like in Tibet before the Chinese came?

Q: [Voice of videographer] Before that, could we just ask him since he did seem a tiny little emotional out there, maybe, if we could just ask him; if Tibet was free tomorrow, would you go back; would you stay here? I just like to hear it and then we'll go to the next question.

#3: To Tibet? If we got independence?

Q: Yes, would you go back to Tibet?

#3: Of course, I would go back, if it becomes independent.

Q: Could you ask him about if he has any memories at all about life in Tibet before the Chinese came?

#3: I don't have anything to say.

Q: When he thinks of Tibet now, what does he think about?

#3: I think of Tibet in my mind. I think if only I could go back to Tibet. If only Tibet could become free. I hope for His Holiness' long life. If only Tibet could be free, I have only that thought in my mind.

Q: Does he think about that everyday?

#3: I always think of going back to Tibet and for the long life of His Holiness the Dalai Lama. I always think of that. Except for that, I have no worries. That is my worry and now I am old. I worry that I may never see Tibet.

Q: What would he say to the new generation of Tibetans? What advice would he give to them if they were to ask him advice from the new generation?

#3: To the future generation, we have to pray to His Holiness the Dalai Lama to be able to go back to Tibet. That is the thought of the older generation.

Q: What advice?

#3: They may become highly educated and forget Tibet. I worry that they might not go back to Tibet.

Q: So he thinks that they maybe are not interested in going back to Tibet? Is that what he means?

[Interpreter to interviewer] Yes.

Q: That they are not interested?

[Interpreter to interviewer] Since they are well educated now, they might do some job over here and stay here.

Q: So he thinks they should ...

[Interpreter to interviewer] ...go to Tibet and think about Tibet.

#3: They are young and become highly educated. They go abroad and find happiness. They might forget Tibet. I worry about that. They should not forget Tibet and it would be good if they thought about Tibet. They may forget Tibet because they are happy. They go abroad and they are young. They do not know what Tibet is like. I worry about that. I have nothing else to say.

Q: Is there anything else that Pala would like to say; would like to share with us? Any other experiences that we left out?

#3: I do not.

Q: [Interpreter] I was born in India and do not know anything about Tibet; if I were to ask you something about Tibet, what would you like to tell?

#3: I would advise you that you have to go to Tibet and not to stay like this. Think about Tibet. Think about Tibet's independence, this is my advice.

Q: Can you say something about Tibet?

#3: I have nothing to say.

Q: Thank you so much and ask him; do we have your permission to use your story for the Tibet Oral History Project?

#3: Yes, I would like that.

Q: And one more question; if this was shown in China or Tibet, would it be a problem for him?

#3: There would be no problem.

Q: Thank you very much. Tell him thank you so much for guarding His Holiness. Tell him we have a small gift for him from the Project.

END OF INTERVIEW