

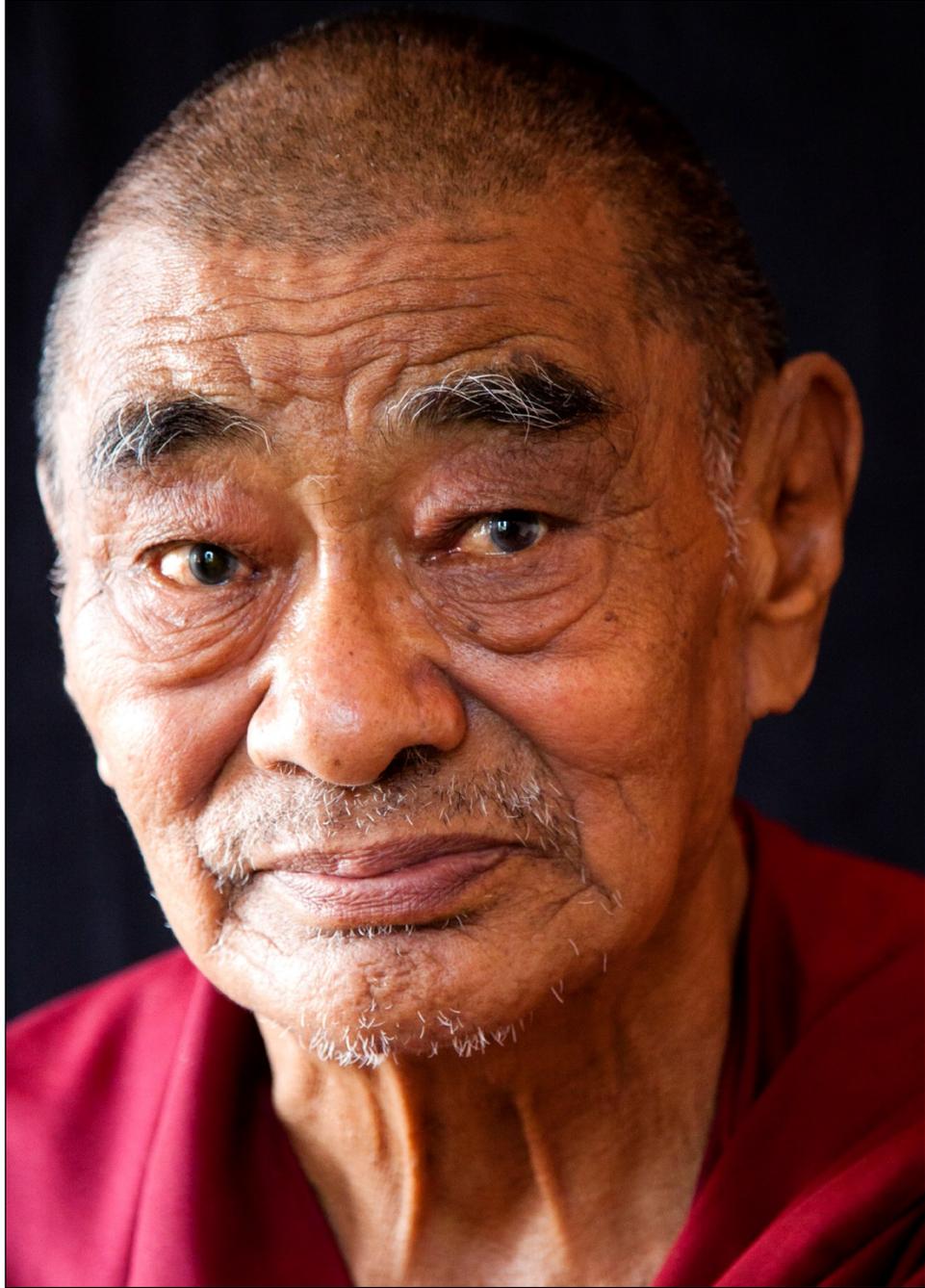
Tibet Oral History Project

**Interview #21B – Ngawang Soepa (alias)
January 3, 2014**

The Tibet Oral History Project serves as a repository for the memories, testimonies and opinions of elderly Tibetan refugees. The oral history process records the words spoken by interviewees in response to questions from an interviewer. The interviewees' statements should not be considered verified or complete accounts of events and the Tibet Oral History Project expressly disclaims any liability for the inaccuracy of any information provided by the interviewees. The interviewees' statements do not necessarily represent the views of the Tibet Oral History Project or any of its officers, contractors or volunteers.

This translation and transcript is provided for individual research purposes only. For all other uses, including publication, reproduction and quotation beyond fair use, permission must be obtained in writing from: Tibet Oral History Project, P.O. Box 6464, Moraga, CA 94570-6464, United States.

Copyright © 2015 Tibet Oral History Project.



TIBET ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

www.TibetOralHistory.org

INTERVIEW SUMMARY SHEET

1. Interview Number: #21B
2. Interviewee: Ngawang Soepa (alias)
3. Age: 80
4. Date of Birth: 1933
5. Sex: Male
6. Birthplace: Khyakta
7. Province: Utsang
8. Year of leaving Tibet: 1959
9. Date of Interview: January 3, 2014
10. Place of Interview: Private house, Old Camp 4, Bylakuppe, Mysore District, Karnataka, India
11. Length of Interview: 1 hr 07 min
12. Interviewer: Marcella Adamski
13. Interpreter: Tenzin Yangchen
14. Videographer: Pema Tashi
15. Translator: Tenzin Yangchen

Biographical Information:

Ngawang Soepa was born in Khyakta and was the eldest child of a nomadic family. He gives a detailed account of the process of gathering salt, which his family did in the spring and summer. They used yaks to transport bags of salt which were then bartered for grains from the farmers. Salt was mainly used to improve the health of the yaks. Ngawang Soepa also gives an account of *bitho* that is gathered from frozen lakes and bartered for grains. *Bitho* is described as a substance used in the preparation of tea to bring out its rich color.

Ngawang Soepa wished to become a monk, like his uncles. He was induction into the Sera Monastery and describes the activities of the monks in the monastery. He talks about seeing the Chinese for the first time—mainly young men with limited weapons. Then they gradually settled in the Tibet and transported cannons in trucks.

Ngawang Soepa witnessed the Chinese attack on Lhasa and Sera Monastery. He narrates the circumstances that led him to flee Sera Monastery back to his village and fear of the Chinese once again forced him to flee to India. He recounts life in Buxar, India where monks of all sects of Tibetan Buddhism studied the scriptures.

Topics Discussed:

Utsang, childhood memories, nomadic life, trade, monastic life, first appearance of Chinese, escape experiences.

TIBET ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

www.TibetOralHistory.org

Interview #21B

Interviewee: Ngawang Soepa [alias]

Age: 80, Sex: Male

Interviewer: Marcella Adamski

Interview Date: January 3, 2014

Question: *Geshe-la* ‘Buddhist monk with philosophy degree’ His Holiness the Dalai Lama asked us to record your experiences, so that we can share your memories with many generations of Tibetans, the Chinese and the rest of the world. Your memories will help us to document the true history, culture and beliefs of the Tibetan people. Do you give your permission for the Tibet Oral History Project to use this interview?

Interview #21B: Yes.

Q: Thank you. Thank you for offering to share your story with us. During this interview if you wish to take a break or stop at anytime, please let me know. If you do not wish to answer a question or talk about something, please let me know.

00:01:50

#21B: Okay.

Q: We are honored to record your story and appreciate your participation in this project.

#21B: Okay.

Q: Can you please tell us how old you are and where you were born, *Geshe-la*?

#21B: [I] am 80 years old.

Q: What’s the name of your birthplace?

#21B: Khyakta.

Q: How many people were in your family?

#21B: [Speaks before translation] It is Khyakta.

Q: How many members were there in your family when you were small?

#21B: There were seven or eight family members.

Q: Where were you in the order of children that were born?

#21B: I am the oldest.

Q: For a living, what did your family do to earn a livelihood?

00:03:15

#21B: [The family] earned a living from nomadic work.

Q: When you were nomads, was it only dealing with herding animals or were you also engaged in accumulating salt or goods or anything like that?

#21B: [We] went to gather salt using the animals. [We] went to the north to get salt and then after a few months left for U where the salt was sold to farmers. Then grains must be purchased.

Q: Can you describe the process of how you gathered the salt because salt is very heavy and how did you transport it?

#21B: Okay. The trip to gather salt took around two months. The salt is found like sand in the depth of the lake. Four men with small strips of yak leather entered the water to gather the salt that lay like sand at the bottom of the lake into the strips of leather. [They] carried [the salt] out of the lake and created a pile.

Q: And what?

[Interpreter to interviewer]: Piled.

[Interviewer to interpreter]: Piled up.

[Interpreter to interviewer]: Piled into a heap.

[Interviewer to interpreter]: Two months.

Q: And how many...four men did the gathering...how many animals were there to transport and how many bags of salt did you carry to U?

00:06:29

#21B: [Speaks before question is translated] The salt was heaped that dried completely in a day.

Q: In one [day]?

#21B: The salt dried completely in one day.

Q: The salt was then transported on animals...

#21B: Yes, and there were bags ready. Each person drove around 35 yaks.

Q: Was [the salt] loaded on yaks?

#21B: Yes.

Q: Packed in bags and loaded on yaks?

#21B: Yes, loaded on yaks.

Q: How many men were there, *Geshe-la*?

#21B: There would be eight, nine or 10. If this number were from one village, there would be a similar number from another village.

Q: To the same spot?

#21B: Yes.

Q: Was there like a month or a day in the month when...you know, days in the month when many people would gather and what season was that? People were coming from all different villages in different caravans and then all gather at the same time to help? What season was that?

00:08:43

#21B: [Speaks before question is translated] It was not just one gathering spot, but many salt lakes that were called *tsa tso* 'salt lake.'

Q: Was there a particular day or month when salt was gathered like we sow crops here?

#21B: One expedition took place in spring and one in summer. It was not possible to go in winter because of the intense cold.

Q: It took two months to get there from your land. So was the journey difficult? Was it over many mountains or just lots of distance?

#21B: It was the distance. The road was good, very good.

Q: There wasn't any road but the [pathway] was good?

#21B: Good.

Q: When you said you took them to U, what country is that or what area is that?

00:10:23

#21B: U is in the southwest direction of our region, the southwest direction where the farmers were. [The salt] was taken to where there were the farmers. The farmers required salt and we required grains. So grains and salt was exchanged.

One does not say [the salt] is taken to U because we come under U. We are in the north but part of U, Utsang.

Q: What is the name of the area where the farmers were?

#21B: There were many areas like Phenpo, Lhoka. Phenpo is close while Lhoka is further away. Likewise, there were farmers in Tsang and everywhere.

Q: Was salt taken to these places?

#21B: Yes. We went to a place called Bhalang after crossing the Tsangpo River of Lhasa.

Q: Bhalang?

#21B: Bhalang in Dechen District.

Q: To sell salt?

#21B: Yes.

Q: [You] didn't go to Phenpo and Lhoka?

#21B: That was beyond Phenpo but before reaching Lhoka. [Bhalang] is located between Phenpo and Lhoka.

Q: How many...like an average family, how many sacks of salt would they use, say a year? What did they use them for? What was the salt needed for in everyday life, all the reasons you can think of?

00:12:47

#21B: It was not just a sack but quite a heavy sack, maybe around 30 kilograms. That is one part of a pair of sacks. Each yak was loaded with two of such.

Q: How many such sacks did one family use in a year?

#21B: For instance, mine is a middle class family that transported around 25-30 sacks.

Q: [You] mean transported, right?

#21B: Yes.

Q: What was salt used for, *Geshe-la*?

#21B: Salt and grains were bartered.

Q: No. Generally what did a family use the salt for?

#21B: A little bit is used in food at home. Other than that the rest was transported to exchange for grains.

Q: Were there other... When people traded the salt for grains, the people that bought the salt or used the salt, what did they use it for besides seasoning food? Were there any other uses?

00:15:05

#21B: What [I] heard they did was that besides seasoning food, the big farmers fed it to the *dzo* ‘animal bred between a yak and a cow’ during summer. The rich families also had *rupa* in the distance. *Rupa* means nomads who fed [the salt] to yaks.

Q: What was the reason for that? Do you know?

#21B: We must load the salt on yaks because there were no vehicles. Since hauling is difficult, the yaks were loaded and used for transportation. On the way to buy grains [we] took salt and returned with all the yaks fully loaded with grains.

Q: That’s one thing, *Geshe-la*. Some farmers fed salt to their yaks and *dzo*, why is that so?

#21B: The yaks and *dzo* [grazed] very far away. Yaks and *dzo* like salt very much. It is said that feeding salt make the yaks healthy. And then there is a lake in our village. Something called *bitho* grows in this lake. [I] realize that *bitho* is the dishwashing [soap] called Vim that we have here these days. The smell is the same.

Q: Say the Tibetan name of that again.

00:18:22

#21B: *Bitho*. We call it *bitho*.

Q: Is there an English translation for that, *bitho*? Is it like a cleanser or borax?

#21B: We called it *bitho* and used it to wash clothes.

Q: Isn’t it borax?

#21B: No, it is not.

Q: Okay, so let’s continue. *Geshe-la*, did you actually go on these journeys to gather salt yourself and how old were you when you started to go if you did go?

#21B: I have not been. It is far away and only adults can make the journey.

Q: When the others came back from the journey, what kinds of things did they bring with them that the family needed? Can you name what they brought?

[Interpreter to interviewer]: You mean after bartering the salt?

Q: After bartering, what did they get?

#21B: Major part of it was grains. It was grains. It was grains. In order to purchase grains, besides salt, meat and butter were given. In the case of [bartering] *bitho*, it was not like salt. One did not get an equal number of sacks like that of salt and grains. *Bitho* is a little bit cheaper.

Q: Cheaper?

00:20:42

#21B: If one had two sacks of *bitho*...No, if one wanted two sacks of grains, one must give three sacks of *bitho*.

Q: Okay, now...

#21B: The gathering of *bitho* is different, unlike salt.

Q: How does one gather it?

#21B: *Bitho* can be gathered only during winter. Lakes freeze in winter. The weather turns cold and the lakes freeze. Once the water has frozen and if it snows a little bit, after a few days all of it turns into *bitho*.

One went there with flat wooden boards called *yakpa*. The wooden boards are fixed with handles and then the *bitho* is swept into tiny piles. Then it is poured into sacks and once filled, the mouths are closed and transported. *Bitho* is found close by and it is easy [to gather]. [The work] was not very difficult.

Q: Did it have any taste?

00:23:24

#21B: It does not have much taste. The use of *bitho* is mandatory in tea. Tea does not have color without *bitho*. Adding a lot of *bitho* will turn [tea] totally red. It is to bring out the color of tea. It is used in tea.

Q: When you were growing up, say until you were 16, was there enough food in your family for your family to eat and for the village that you lived in? Were people healthy and was there enough food or were there problems with nutrition and health?

#21B: [We] had enough. What was needed to last were grains because grains must be [procured] from a great distance. Being nomads, a large quantity of meat, yogurt and milk was consumed. Our animals produced these. [We] required enough stock of grains to last. Some poor families in our village faced shortage of grains during summer.

Q: *Geshe-la*, what kind of a boy were you? Were you very active, quiet or studious? What kind of a child or young teenager were you?

#21B: There was not any studying for me. [Being] a nomad I went to graze calves, sheep and such. It was like that.

Q: Did you have time for any kind of play or activities that children like?

00:27:00

#21B: You did find a little time. When you are very small, then there is no need to graze animals and you played and wandered about.

Q: Did you stay with your family as a nomad your whole life or did you leave at some point?

#21B: When it snowed in wintertime, the nomads moved down where there was *nama*. I have gone on such [trips].

Q: Where did [you] go?

#21B: *Nama* is a kind of long sturdy grass. [We] moved to lower ground where such grew. When it snowed one must move to such [places].

Q: Did you want to be a nomad your whole life?

#21B: Yes, yes. If one did not become a monk, one must remain a nomad.

Q: But did you want to be a monk or did you want to stay a nomad?

00:29:04

#21B: [I] wanted to become a monk. I am the oldest among the children and the only boy. My mother's father refused to send me to become a monk but I insisted and became a monk.

Q: *Geshe-la*, why did you want to become a monk?

#21B: I see...Okay. There were many monks in my village like my maternal uncles, maternal uncles. Since they were there [I] had a greater desire to become a monk.

Q: Before you became a monk, what was your idea about what monkhood was like?

#21B: The maternal uncles were monks and they returned during summertime. Looking at them I wished to become a monk.

Q: So what happened then?

#21B: Yes?

Q: So what happened then?

#21B: What?

Q: Looking at the maternal uncles when they came home you wanted to become a monk. What happened after that?

#21B: Then when [I] expressed that I wanted to become a monk, [I] was sent to become one.

Q: Where did you go, *Geshe-la*?

#21B: To Sera [Monastery].

Q: Who took care of you and guided you when you went to Sera Monastery?

00:32:19

#21B: From the three or four maternal uncles in Sera Monastery, one became my teacher.

Q: At Sera?

#21B: Yes.

Q: You were aged 16 when that happened and that would have been in 1950. So what was life like in Sera Monastery in the 1950s?

#21B: There were many monks in Sera Monastery. There were many monks during the *daja* ‘prayer assembly of one section of monastery with tea served’ and *mangja* ‘prayer assembly of entire monk community with tea served.’ Then there is one called *choera* ‘debate session’ which we, the new ones could not attend. Before giving certain examinations...one could attend *choera* only after giving certain scripture examinations. And then one began regular classes after attaining *choera* status, while there were no classes before that.

Q: What did the new monks do if they were not learning the scriptures?

00:34:52

#21B: One must study and memorize the scriptures. It was just memorizing and studying the scriptures.

Q: [You] mean studying and memorizing?

#21B: Yes.

Q: Studying? Both?

#21B: Yes. One must recite the scriptures and that was taught.

Q: First is recitation?

#21B: Yes.

Q: You said there were no schools in your village. So if you joined as a monk, you just began memorizing. Did you ever learn to write or read?

#21B: Yes, [I] did.

Q: What kind of a student were you, *Geshe-la*? Did things come easily? Did you have to work hard? In your class were you in the middle, the top? Where were you?

#21B: [I] was in the middle.

Q: Did you find studying very difficult or did you learn easily?

#21B: It was not very difficult. When [I] recited at night the large portion of texts [I] had memorized, [I] could not finish recitation even after everyone had gone to sleep. Even after everyone had fallen asleep, [I] could not finish my recitation of the scriptures.

Q: Do [you] mean reciting and memorizing?

00:37:25

#21B: After memorizing the text, you sit in the dark and recite what you have memorized.

Q: You sound like you were a very dedicated student with a lot of ardor for the scriptures.

#21B: Yes, [I] had a good desire [to learn]. There were some monks that recite the whole night and many that recited until daybreak. Only once or twice did I recite until daybreak. Monks chanted [the whole night] on the 15th day or 30th day [of the lunar months].

Q: What happened in your monastery in the '50s besides you were studying the scriptures and learning to read and write? Were there any other changes or things going on in the monastery during the 1950s that you were aware of inside or outside the monastery?

#21B: In the monastery?

Q: What changes did you see whether in the monastery or outside?

00:40:11

#21B: [I] was not aware of any changes. [I] focused on studying the scriptures.

Q: And then when did things begin to change that you had to notice?

#21B: There was not much change within the monastery. The same practice continued.

Q: So did you stay in the monastery your whole...did you ever leave the monastery in Lhasa, at Sera?

#21B: Yes, [I] wonder what year in the '50s it was that the Chinese appeared? The Chinese appeared. When the Chinese first arrived they were not powerful. The majority of them

were on foot and did not carry much arms. Then a year later [they] arrived driving camels. They brought many things on the camels. Then the number of Chinese grew. They took apart small jeeps and brought the parts on camels that were then re-assembled in Lhasa. [The jeeps] could be seen about transporting things.

Q: When the Chinese were coming like that on camels and some on foot and then later jeeps, did you see any of these with your own eyes? Can you describe what you saw?

#21B: Yes, [I] did. [I] saw that.

Q: Can you please describe what it was like when they arrived?

00:44:03

#21B: Most of them looked like children but were soldiers. [They] were like children and young in age. There were a few older people. Later, during the time [they] came driving camels; there was a mixture of many young and older people.

Q: What did you think in your head and what did you feel in your heart when you saw these strangers coming into your land?

#21B: The older people remarked, “The Chinese initially come nicely, construct houses and settle on the land and later will attack.”

Q: Did you have any feelings when you saw the Chinese?

#21B: Feeling...After a great number of Chinese arrived, [they] later constructed roads. Constructed roads and initially cut trees in Kongpo and transported to Lhasa on horse and mule carts for constructing houses.

Q: When did your life change in the monastery? Did you just continue to go on and was there any events or circumstances that changed?

00:47:11

#21B: That occurred later when [the Chinese] attacked. The attack took place. The Chinese had done a lot of preparation. I went to the region where we used to trade, where grains were bought and one evening around 50-60 big trucks arrived. All of these had cannons attached, were trailing cannons.

Q: How close was that village to Lhasa?

#21B: One could just about reach Lhasa in a day.

Q: Were you going there for a special reason?

#21B: Yes?

Q: What was the reason for your going to that village?

#21B: We required grains for food in the monastery and [I] went to buy it.

Q: When you saw that, *Geshe-la*, were you worried about why they had artillery and did you come back and tell anybody what you saw?

#21B: [I] did tell.

Q: Were you worried?

00:49:58

#21B: [I] was very worried. [I] thought [the Chinese] will do nothing good.

Q: What was their response and who did you tell?

#21B: Everyone in the monastery, irrespective of age spoke such things.

Q: What would they have thought on hearing such things?

#21B: What would they have thought...would have perhaps thought that nothing good will be done.

Q: So tell us what does happen to you? I'd like to hear the significant changes in Lhasa through your own eyes? From your own experiences, what did you see? What did you hear that happened with all this artillery, for instance?

#21B: After that I witnessed the attack.

Q: Where, *Geshe-la*?

#21B: At Sera, at Lhasa.

Q: Both Sera and Lhasa?

#21B: Yes, in Lhasa.

Q: In Lhasa?

#21B: Yes, the onslaught first took place in Lhasa.

Q: And later it happened in Sera?

#21B: Yes.

Q: And what did you do?

00:52:20

#21B: There was nothing else to do. There were people moving about and [I] joined them and remained.

Q: Where did you go? Did you remain in the monastery?

#21B: Yes, in the monastery.

Q: How long did you remain in the monastery after the attack in Lhasa?

#21B: Lhasa was attacked one night. The next day [I] remained in the monastery and fled that night.

Q: How many people were in the group you fled with?

#21B: While leaving the monastery there was my teacher who is the maternal uncle. There were the two of us and [I] do not think there was anyone else. It was impossible to remain in the monastery as there was shelling from every direction.

Q: Can you tell us something about the journey with you that you took with your uncle and escaping from Tibet? How was it? Was it difficult? How long did it take?

00:54:53

#21B: [We] brought *tsampa* and foodstuffs for the journey. So [we] did not face many problems. However, [we] had to carry the foodstuffs. When [we] reached Phenpo, airplanes flew and fired many times, fired gunshots and dropped bombs.

Q: At Phenpo?

#21B: Yes.

Q: Did you see any people wounded or killed from those bombs?

#21B: [I] did not see any.

Q: When you got to India, where did you go? You went to Phenpo and then where? What happened next?

#21B: From Phenpo [we] reached Reting. The tutor of the Reting Rinpoche was a relative of my grandfather. [We] stayed a few days in Reting and then returned to the north.

Q: And then? Where did you arrive next?

#21B: From Reting [we] went to the north, to [my] village.

[Interviewer to interpreter]: Wasn't that back in Tibet?

[Interpreter to interviewer]: Yeah, Lhasa to north, to the village.

[Interviewer to interpreter]: Oh, he went back to the village.

[Interpreter to interviewer]: Right.

[Interviewer to interpreter]: Okay.

Q: And what was your village like when you got there?

00:58:06

#21B: In the north they had no way of knowing and things were as usual. Around a month later the leaders of our village were called away to Dham.

Q: Dham?

#21B: Yes. When the leaders returned they said that they had been instructed to bring the monks that had returned after the attack to the Chinese. “If they [monks] report now there will be no problems. This is just to present oneself and that is it. If [they] do not come, there is no way but to fall into our hands. Then there will be problems,” they [Chinese] had said.

Q: So what happened, *Geshe-la*?

#21B: Then we said that we would report and left home.

Q: To the Chinese?

#21B: Yes. When [we] were a day short of reaching the Chinese, we fled. We did not report to the Chinese.

Q: Why did you flee instead of going to the Chinese?

01:00:34

#21B: Thinking that the Chinese would cause suffering by going there, [we] fled.

Q: Where did you go?

#21B: Then [we] left from the north.

Q: Towards which place did [you] go?

#21B: [I] met many people that were fleeing from the north and we fled together.

Q: To which place did you go?

#21B: [We] went northwards. Then my maternal uncle said, “If we travel like this, [we] will not get to see His Holiness the Dalai Lama.” And then [we] returned.

Q: To Tibet?

#21B: Not to Tibet. [We] turned towards India. Initially...

Q: Initially when [you] fled towards the north, [you] were not coming to India? Were [you] fleeing up north?

#21B: The co-travellers had colleagues in the north that they were going to meet. Then my maternal uncle said that by traveling in this direction, [we] would not see His Holiness and the initial hope was to see His Holiness. So we came away.

Q: Towards India?

#21B: Yes.

Q: And did you get to see the Dalai Lama?

01:02:57

#21B: Yes, [we] got the chance to see [him].

Q: How long after... You escaped in, I guess 1959 and you were 25. So when did you... How old were you when you saw the Dalai Lama?

#21B: Perhaps it was that winter that [we] saw His Holiness.

Q: Where?

#21B: Dharamsala.

Q: *Geshe-la*, maybe just before we wrap up you can tell me, did you continue to stay in the monastery and where did you continue to be a monk?

#21B: After coming to India, perhaps it was a year that [I] spent in Dharamsala. And then [I] went to Buxar.

Q: What did [you] do in Buxar?

#21B: Those from the monasteries that were engaged in studying the scriptures were living in Buxar. There were monks from all the sects [of Tibetan Buddhism] Gelug, Nyingma, Sakya.

Q: And then, *Geshe-la*? What did you do after studying the scriptures in Buxar?

01:05:22

#21B: Then [I] came here to Mysore.

Q: Came to Mysore?

#21B: Yes.

Q: Mysore? [You] mean Bylakuppe?

#21B: Right.

Q: *Geshe-la*, what kinds of prayers do you have or wishes do you have for the Tibetan people?

#21B: [I] pray that [we] have *shije nyamzom* in the future.

Q: What does *shije nyamzom* mean?

#21B: It means that those people living in Tibet and we in exile should be able to live together.

Q: Thank you, *Geshe-la*, that's a very good and very important prayer and I want to thank you for sharing your story with us.

#21B: Okay.

END OF INTERVIEW