

Tibet Oral History Project

Interview #61 – Dhondup (alias)
July 3, 2007

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TIBET ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

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INTERVIEW SUMMARY SHEET

1. Interview Number: #61
2. Interviewee: Dhondup (alias)
3. Age: 76
4. Date of Birth: 1931
5. Sex: Male
6. Birthplace: Gyaltse
7. Province: Utsang
8. Year of leaving Tibet: 1959
9. Date of Interview: July 3, 2007
10. Place of Interview: Interviewee's residence, Old Camp No. 5, Lugsung Samdupling Settlement, Bylakuppe, Mysore District, Karnataka, India
11. Length of Interview: 0 hr 56 min
12. Interviewer: Marcella Adamski
13. Interpreter: Tenzin Yangchen
14. Videographer: Tsewang Dorjee
15. Transcriber: Tenzin Yangchen



Biographical Information:

Dhondup reminisces about his childhood days in his village of Khangmar Yulkhang when he had no responsibilities—playing games like skipping and soccer. His parents sent him to school in a nearby village to learn basic Tibetan reading and writing. This was a special privilege since there were only eight children who attended school in his entire region. As the only educated person in his village, Dhondup worked as a clerk to the regional administrator.

Though Dhondup's family avoided being subjected to *thamzin* 'struggle sessions' following the Chinese occupation of Tibet, he witnessed people in his region being subjected to them. He describes how the *Sadhak* 'wealthy landowners' were falsely accused of mistreating the poorer villagers and were beaten by them under the influence of the Chinese. Some of the *Sadhak* panicked and committed suicide to escape from the *thamzin* and imprisonment.

At the age of 28 Dhondup escaped to India along with 80 people from his region in 1959. He was in Bomdila, India during the 1962 Indo-China war and once again had to flee with his family, leaving behind their meager belongings. They later moved to the settlement in Bylakuppe.

Topics Discussed:

Childhood memories, farm life, first appearance of Chinese, life under Chinese rule, *thamzin*, escape experiences, life as a refugee in India.

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Interview #61

Interviewee: Dhondup [alias]

Age: 76, Sex: Male

Interviewer: Marcella Adamski

Interview Date: July 3, 2007

Question: Please tell us your name.

Interviewee #61: I am called Dhondup.

Q: Do you give your permission for the Tibet Oral History Project to use this interview?

#61: Yes, you can use it.

Q: We can begin by telling us where you were born. What was the name of your village?

#61: The place was called Gyalitse. I lived in the village called Khangmar Yulkhang.

Q: Where there many houses in your village? How many families?

#61: The village had only four families. There were only four families.

Q: Was it near a big city or very remote?

#61: There were other villages close by. There were a number of villages.

Q: Can you describe what the scene looked like around your village, the mountains and the land?

#61: There were mountains on all the sides and a big river flowing in the center. Higher up, there was a monastery.

Q: What was the nearest temple to your village?

#61: It was known as Shonang. It was a very nice monastery with sacred deities and a huge stupa.

Q: What made this monastery especially holy?

#61: It was very sacred and known also as Tsang Chajung Monastery. The deities were very sacred and in the temple, there were *Sangay Lekdhun* and all the holy texts like *Kangyur*.

Q: Who was the powerful deity?

#61: It was the Palden Marsol Gyalmo.

Q: Did this deity have special powers?

#61: She possessed great powers and if I were to tell you an old story—when His Holiness the Penchen Rinpoche had that thing with the government and went to China, he consulted it for advice. Such things used to be said.

Q: You mean when His Holiness the Penchen Rinpoche went to China ...

#61: Yes, there was a problem with the government at that time and the deity was said to have been consulted.

Q: What were the reasons that people would go to this monastery to pray?

#61: The reasons were to offer prayers to the deities and also to receive teachings. There was also a big monk population.

Q: Do you have any idea how many monks were there?

#61: Besides this monastery, there were about six subsidiary monasteries. There were a little over one hundred monks.

Q: In the main monastery?

#61: The main monastery was a little distance away. That was a subsidiary monastery.

Q: You mean Shonang Monastery?

#61: Yes, at Shonang Monastery there were a little over one hundred monks. The monastery had six subsidiary monasteries.

Q: Did you know anyone living in that monastery, any relations?

#61: I did not have brothers, but there were some distant relatives.

Q: In your own family, how many children did your parents have?

#61: There were four children.

Q: Where were you in it?

#61: The eldest was a daughter, then a son, I was the third and there was a fourth one.

Q: When you were a little boy, what kind of chores and work did you do for your family?

#61: When I was little, I went to school at the age of 9. I was at the school for three years and then I came back. Back home, I tended the cows, cut grass and did other chores.

Q: Tell me about the kind of farm your family had. What kind of things did they grow and what kind of animals?

#61: We grew barley, peas and *pe kang* [a plant from which oil is extracted]. These three crops grew in our region. For vegetables, there was radish and others.

Q: It sounds like you ate very well. Is that possible?

#61: Yes, we had plenty to eat.

Q: What kind of animals were on your farm?

#61: We had a horse, about five cows and around eight yaks. The yaks were used for ploughing the fields and carrying firewood.

Q: Before you went to school, did you help with chores around the family farm?

#61: At that time I was too young to help.

Q: Do you have any favorite memories of your childhood?

#61: Yes, those were happy days. We played, we skipped. We played different children's games and those were happy times. The responsibilities of livelihood were borne by our parents.

Q: Skipping, like jumping? Skipping?

#61: We played skipping and also a game with five stones called *apto*. There was also playing soccer and others.

Q: Can you tell me a little bit about your parents, what they were like, your mother and your father?

#61: My father and mother were very nice. They worked hard in earning a livelihood. They did well and we did not have any problems. We were happy then. We had enough as to send me to school.

Q: Was that unusual to have a child be able to go to school from your area?

#61: You mean in Tibet in those days?

Q: Yes.

#61: At that time it was rare. Children were rarely sent to school. It was only well-to-do parents who sent their children to school. Not every child could attend school.

Q: Why do you think your parents sent you to school?

#61: At that time there were hardly any literate people in our village. So the aim in sending me to school was that it would be beneficial to all.

Q: How did you feel about going to school when you were nine years old? Did you want to go? Were you excited?

#61: At that time, there was no feeling of not wanting to go to school. It was nice at the school. They [the teacher and his family] provided food and taught me. As I was a child, I was happy to go.

Q: Where was the school?

#61: The school was in a village called Karchang, which was a little further away from our village. It was five miles away.

Q: Did you go everyday or live in Karchang?

#61: I lived there and could come home for vacation for 10 to 15 days. Otherwise, I lived and ate there.

Q: Where did you sleep at night?

#61: We had to take our bedding and food with us. The family would cook the food and give it to us time to time. All the expenses had to be borne by us. We took our bedding with us.

Q: Was it in a family's home?

#61: It was in the school teacher's home. The food was cooked at the teacher's house and we slept there.

Q: How many students were in your class?

#61: There were not many students. It being a village, there were only about eight children.

Q: Was it eight boys?

#61: It was eight boys. There were no girls who were taught. Besides the eight boys, there were none.

Q: Can you remember what were the subjects they taught?

#61: There were not many subjects like here. It was mostly reading and handwriting. Except Tibetan, there was nothing else. There were no subjects as such.

Q: Did you go to school everyday while you were there for three years?

#61: Except on holidays, we had school everyday. In the mornings and evenings, we learned to recite the prayers and were given the basic scripture lessons. Other than that we had school everyday.

Q: Where did this teacher come from?

#61: He was from that family. It was only that family and there were no other schools as such. It was just that family. The father of the family was the teacher who taught us. There were no other teachers.

Q: Where had he been educated?

#61: He had studied in Gyangtse. He was from a wealthy family.

Q: Was he a good teacher?

#61: He was good. He had good knowledge and was loving toward us. He was good.

Q: What kind of a student were you?

#61: I was among the better students then. There was not much grammar that we learned; it was mostly handwriting.

Q: So during those three years, did you learn to read and write Tibetan?

#61: Yes, I could send letters and read them.

Q: How do you think that helped you in your future life?

#61: There was nothing extensive to be done in the village. I could help with the livelihood of the family by noting some things and for the community by reading during the meetings. I could do that, but there was nothing extensive to do.

Q: When you went back to your village?

[Interpreter to interviewer]: That's right.

Q: There was no chance for you to have more education after those three years?

#61: Then there were no opportunities except if you did some self-study yourself. There was no other chance for education. But one could study the scriptures and practice the dharma.

Q: You said that you had some spiritual teaching. What were the spiritual lessons that you learned from this teacher?

#61: He taught the basic prayer recitations, the *kyamdo*, *Dolma* and other prayer recitations. That has been very beneficial.

Q: Can you still remember them now?

#61: Yes, I recite them everyday.

Q: When you returned to your village, you had to help with the farm. Is that correct?

#61: Yes, that is right.

Q: It sounds like you were the only child that was sent to learn?

#61: My brother was also sent, the older one.

Q: I guess if both were sent that implies that your father was making a good living from his farming?

#61: The income was quite substantial from cultivating the lands.

Q: So when you came back to your village, were there any other situations that came up that you remember that were notable?

#61: There was not much change, but I was very grateful to my parents for letting me study. Since no one was educated in the village, I was able to read letters that came and also write. I also knew a little about the dharma and in my heart, I was very happy.

Q: What kind of letters was your village getting from officials?

#61: It was not particularly from the government, but the regional administration would write about holding meetings called *gyatso* for which notices had to be issued and such things.

Q: Who would you send the notices to?

#61: The villages around had to be informed to come for the meetings. If you take Bylakuppe for example, there are the New Settlement and Hunsur Settlement who would have to attend the meeting.

Q: What would be the subject of the messages or the letters?

#61: The main reason would be to notify them about the meeting that would take place and ask them to assemble at such and such time.

Q: What would be the reason for the meeting? What would the villagers be discussing?

#61: It's the same that occurs here, like constructing roads or other community projects. Such [discussions] took place.

Q: What was the hierarchy? Who was in charge of the area?

#61: There was the regional leader like we have the camp leader here. Someone like the representative [in the refugee community] who was appointed in the village called *genpo*. He was called *genpo*.

Q: He was obviously a Tibetan leader?

#61: Yes, all of them were Tibetans.

Q: How many villages were under him?

#61: There were about 15 villages like the camps here.

Q: Do you mean 15 villages or 15 families?

#61: No, 15 villages like the camps.

Q: Were you able to rule yourself, or did the Chinese have any control over you, or did the Lhasa government have any control?

#61: In those times except for being under the Tibetan [government] there were no Chinese, at that time.

Q: Were you paying taxes to the Tibetan government?

#61: We had to pay a small amount of tax.

Q: Did you ever go to Lhasa as a young man?

#61: I have never been to Lhasa.

Q: How far was your village from Lhasa? How many days walk?

#61: It takes eight days to walk.

Q: The village that you were born in, was that where your parents were born and their parents were born?

#61: Yes, that is right. That was it.

Q: Did you wish to stay in that village the rest of your life?

#61: Yes, except for living there, there was no other aim.

Q: Did you get married when you were a young man?

#61: That is right. I was married there.

Q: Can you tell us a little bit about how that happened that you got married?

#61: I was married when I was 18 years old. Then we had two children. After that we were engrossed in our lives. Then when the Chinese arrived in 1959, we escaped. Until then we lived in our village.

Q: Where did you meet your wife?

#61: Her hand was asked for in marriage.

Q: By your parents?

#61: My parents asked for her hand in marriage.

Q: When did you first see the Chinese coming into your village?

#61: When the Chinese came, it was around the year 1949.

Q: Can you describe what happened?

#61: When the Chinese first came, they were gentle and good. They were very good when they first came. They were sweet and caused no problems. They were treating us well.

Q: And then what happened?

#61: When the Chinese bought hay, they paid for it and when they needed labor, they paid. They were being very good to everyone.

Q: Were they living in your village?

#61: They lived in the village of Khangmar for a long time.

Q: What were your thoughts about why the Chinese were there all of a sudden?

#61: At the time the Chinese arrived there, they were doing things in a very nice way. Everyone was deceived and everyone thought that they were not bad because they were very nice when they came. They were kind and they did not cause any problems. If they needed transportation, they paid for it. If they stayed with a family, they paid for the grass. Then from 1959, they were not good. Until then they were good.

Q: What was the change like?

#61: Then in 1959, the turmoil began in Lhasa. It was on the 30th of March and then they [the Chinese] subjugated. They accused all the wealthy families of being rebels and confiscated their wealth and possessions. They accused them of offences that they had not committed.

Q: How was your village and your family affected?

#61: Then the situation was not good. They told the wealthy families, "You are a *Sadhak* 'land owners' and you have subjugated the poor. You are a rebel." They were imprisoned and their houses sealed. Then they were subjected to *thamzin* 'struggle session' and kept in prison. The situation was greatly altered. The people were in a panic and some committed suicide by hanging and some by jumping into the waters.

Q: Were these people you knew?

#61: Yes and I saw them with my own eyes. When the others were beaten so much, the people committed suicide with fear.

Q: Do you know what kind of abuse they suffered first?

#61: There were no other beatings. There were our people who were very poor and to whom they [the Chinese] gave a lot of money. Then the wealthy families were troubled and labeled as rebels saying that they [the poor] had suffered under them in the earlier days. The Chinese had them [the poor] on their side. They then acted according to them [the Chinese] and troubled them [the wealthy]. There was no truth and they were lying. The family's wealth was grabbed and doled out to the poor. That was how they did.

Q: Did your family have servants working with you to help do the farm work?

#61: No, we did not.

Q: So you wouldn't be considered one of the wealthy families of the village?

#61: We were not among the wealthy. We were humble farmers, so there were no accusations and we were not imprisoned or beaten.

Q: But if you were quite poor, did the Chinese offer to give you the property of the rich?

#61: They did not tell us. We were self-sufficient. They did not tell us that they would give us nor did they trouble us. We were humble and lived there [humbly].

Q: Who did get the properties of the rich?

#61: They were received by the very, very poor. The very poor got them.

Q: You said that many people committed suicide after they'd been abused and they died with fear. What kind of things happened to them before they committed suicide?

#61: It was very sudden as there was no abuse earlier. As soon as Tibet was lost in March, a state of emergency was imposed beginning around June or July. People had no freedom to talk and tell the truth. In the state of emergency, they [the Chinese] simply overpowered and seized forcefully. People were not allowed to speak and prove the truth, instead they immediately arrested them.

Q: What did you see with your own eyes?

#61: There were many wealthy people, like the *Sadhak*, owners of a lot of lands, about whom [the Chinese] said, "They [the *Sadhak*] have cultivated large areas of land, ill-treating and making things difficult for the poor, sucking their blood and pus." They [the poor] said, "We have suffered under them." On such grounds, they were beaten and accused. There was no truth at all, those were all lies.

Q: Did you also see them being hurt or abused?

#61: Yes, I saw that. They were subjected to *thamzin* 'struggle sessions' in front of all the people of the village who were told to gather. They were not beaten surreptitiously, but everyone was called to assemble. Then in front of everyone, they were falsely accused of having done this or that bad thing, though there was no truth to it. They were then beaten and imprisoned, their houses sealed and properties confiscated.

Q: Would it be possible for you to talk about what you saw in the struggle session? I don't want to cause you more suffering, but it may be important that we understand what happened.

#61: As I told you, during a *thamzin* session, there was no chance to speak the truth against the lies they [the Chinese] spoke. They [the wealthy and the influential Tibetans] were falsely accused, beaten and told, "You have not done right. You have caused much suffering to the others. You have gone against the law. You have sucked the blood and pus

of the people. You have misused your power and subjugated the people." They were beaten on these crimes. That's how they were beaten by alleging false accusations. The father of the family was imprisoned as punishment for a few months, the house sealed and the possessions seized.

Q: Were there any houses in the village where this happened?

#61: Yes, it happened. There was one called Bayul Norbu whose [house] was sealed.

Q: The people that were involved in the struggle sessions, who was beating these wealthy people?

#61: Those who were involved in beatings happened like this: It was people from the Tibetan community. It was not the Chinese who did the beating. They were very poor and bad Tibetans who were misled by the Chinese saying, "Earlier you have worked for this family. They have mistreated you a lot, so you must bring up suggestions and *thamzin* them."

When they [the poor] were given wealth, our own people did it. The main reason they did the beating was that they were misled by the Chinese; otherwise, they would not have done it. That was how it happened.

Q: What do you remember feeling when you saw this going on? What did you feel in your heart?

#61: The feeling I had was that whatever it was, sooner or later they [the Chinese] were not going to do anything good. I was afraid and the only thought I had was that I should escape. His Holiness the Dalai Lama had already left and except for the thought of escaping to India, I had no other feelings.

Q: You were about 28 years old?

#61: I was 28 or nearly 29. It was in 1959...I was 28 then. We escaped in December, at the end of 1959.

Q: Who was in the party?

#61: We were many people when we escaped. There were about 80 people. We all escaped together.

Q: Where were they coming from?

#61: They were from our village and the surrounding villages.

Q: Who in your family went with you?

#61: My whole family was together. Every family of the village was there.

Q: So that included your mother?

#61: Yes, and all the four families of our village were there. There were many families of the surrounding villages, which were all close by.

Q: How old were your children around then?

#61: I think the children were aged around 7 and 9 at that time.

Q: Do you remember what you felt like when you were leaving this beautiful village where you had lived for generations?

#61: The feeling I had was that His Holiness the Dalai Lama was in India and we would regain independence in a year or two and then we would all return. I never felt that we would live permanently in India.

Q: Did you take your animals with you?

#61: Yes, we took few of our animals.

Q: Can you tell me about the journey? Was it very long, very difficult? What was it like?

#61: We had quite a difficult time. We left home when night fell and traversed through the region. We spent the night at a place and then the following day we reached Bhutan.

Q: It sounds like it was only a few days then?

#61: It was two days' journey to Bhutan.

Q: Where did you go next?

#61: From Bhutan, we came to Buxa in India, then from Buxa to Missamari. We stayed for sometime at Missamari and then we were sent to Bomdila for road construction work. There was a conflict in Bomdila sometime in the 1960's between China [and India] then we fled from there.

Q: How different was the weather from where you had been growing up in your beautiful valley?

#61: In the place called Missamari many people died. Many Tibetans died.

Q: Was it due to the heat?

#61: They died from the heat and the water was also not good. I was feeling very sad. Because of the heat in Missamari, we went to Bomdila for road construction. When we reached Bomdila, compared to Missamari, it wasn't that hot, but it was difficult in the land of the Monpas. It rained a lot in that place and we were engaged in the construction of roads everyday and it was extremely difficult. At that time, I imagined my village and missed Tibet. When we escaped from Bomdila, it was very difficult. We had to once again leave the little possessions that we had.

Q: Where did you go from Bomdila?

#61: We escaped to the plains of India from Bomdila.

Q: Which was the place?

#61: We came through Tezpur and then to Pathankot and Mandi in Punjab.

Q: Why did you have to leave everything?

#61: There was a war that took place there [Bomdila] and it was said that the Chinese were arriving. All the Indian soldiers were fleeing. All of them fled in many trucks and we also had to flee in fear. The Indians put the fear in us and urged us to flee. We could not carry our things and there was nowhere to keep them, so we had to discard them.

Q: Were you frightened? The women, children and you, were you frightened of being arrested by the Chinese?

#61: We were scared and in panic day and night. We got on Indian army vehicles or any vehicles that we could find to get away.

Q: So the Indians were helping you escape?

#61: They were helping us by taking us in their vehicles. They send us in army vehicles to the plains of India. It was good. They could take a lot of people. The Indians were very good. They helped bring all the people and did not charge us anything.

Q: You went to the Punjab?

#61: Then we went for road construction to Mandi in Punjab. We stayed there to do road construction.

Q: What happened when you escaped from the Chinese? Did you stay long in Mandi?

#61: We were in Mandi for about a year.

Q: With your whole family?

#61: We were together.

Q: And then what happened?

#61: Then people were enlisted for the settlements and were being sent to the settlements. From there we came to the settlement. It was in 1967 or 1968 that we came to the settlement [in Bylakuppe].

Q: That was a long time traveling from 1959 to 1967.

#61: Yes, we moved that many places.

Q: You were a farmer, but you had to act like a nomad.

#61: [Laughs] It was not out of love [for traveling], but we were forced to do so. We had to escape. We couldn't stay in Bomdila.

Q: What did you feel about the Chinese when this was happening?

#61: I do feel [against] the Chinese, but there is nothing to do about it. I feel that it was extremely bad the way they made us suffer, but there is nothing much to do about it.

Q: What feelings do you have these days after many years toward the Chinese?

#61: My feeling toward the Chinese is that Tibet should regain independence and, as per His Holiness the Dalai Lama's wish, the middle way should be adopted. Other than that there is nothing else.

Q: What are your feelings about the Chinese?

#61: I consider them as very bad. [Laughs]

Q: Would you go back to Tibet if Tibet was free?

#61: If we get independence, I am going back.

Q: Where would you go?

#61: Actually one should go back to one's village, but we have to see what the government's plans are. It is difficult for one to say where one wishes to go, but we have to abide by that [government's decisions].

Q: What advice or message would you like to give the next generation of Tibetans wherever they are living?

#61: Everybody knows that the Chinese are bad. All Tibetans must work hard toward the cause of Tibet to rule our country ourselves. They must unite and work together and make an effort to bring about an outcome. This is what I think.

Q: Do you have anything else that you would like to tell us. We are about to end the interview and if there is anything that you would like to add to what you have been talking about?

#61: There is nothing else that has been left out. This is about it.

Q: What was it like for you to do this interview and remember your family history and country?

#61: I hope that His Holiness the Dalai Lama will live long and that the truth about Tibet will triumph. I hope that with the support from foreign organizations, Tibet will be able to rule herself.

Q: I hope that you do.

#61: Thank you. That [independence] is the best and what we are waiting for.

END OF INTERVIEW