

Tibet Oral History Project

Interview #62 – Dhondup (alias)
July 3, 2007

© 2009 Tibet Oral History Project. 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.

TIBET ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

www.TibetOralHistory.org

INTERVIEW SUMMARY SHEET

1. Interview Number: #62
2. Interviewee: Dhondup (alias)
3. Age: 69
4. Date of Birth: 1938
5. Sex: Male
6. Birthplace: Dik
7. Province: Utsang
8. Year of leaving Tibet: 1959
9. Date of Interview: July 3, 2007
10. Place of Interview: House No. 45, Old Camp No. 5, Lugsung Samdupling Settlement, Bylakuppe, Mysore District, Karnataka, India
11. Length of Interview: 1 hr 10 min
12. Interviewer: Rebecca Novick
13. Translator: Tsering Dorjee
14. Videographer: Ronny Novick
15. Transcriber: Tenzin Yangchen



Biographical Information:

Dhondup fondly recalls the beautiful landscape of his childhood village, Dik, nestled among the snow-capped mountains of Tibet's Re District. He describes a special type of grass on the plains called *jaktsa* and the life of his pastoral Tibetan farming family. Dhondup explains Tibetan farming policy, which distinguished between *telpa* 'farmers who paid taxes' and *dhuechung* 'farmers who did not.' He also describes the custom of *telpa* families sending one of their sons to become a monk at the local monastery. Dhondup explains the relationship of labor and payment between the poor and wealthy families and the legal system available to address disputes.

Since Dhondup's village was located in a remote place near the mountain pass to India, he and other villagers escaped soon after His Holiness the Dalai Lama fled to India in order to avoid the horror of the *thamzin* 'struggle sessions' the Chinese inflicted on Tibetans in other locations. Dhondup holds some Tibetan officials responsible for the sufferings of his people, explaining how the Chinese bribed them with *dhayen* 'silver coins.' Dhondup also expresses his view that the farmers were not interested in the "liberation" that the Chinese claimed to bring to Tibet.

Topics Discussed:

Farm life, nomadic life, customs, first appearance of the Chinese, life under Chinese rule, escape experiences.

TIBET ORAL HISTORY PROJECT
www.TibetOralHistory.org

Interview #62

Interviewee: Dhondup [alias]

Age: 69, Sex: M

Interviewer: Rebecca Novick

Interview Date: July 3, 2007

[Questions are asked by either interviewer or translator. In Interview #62, the interviewer directs questions to the translator, who then asks the questions of the interviewee.]

Question: Could he describe his village, what it was like in Tibet?

Interviewee #62: Our village was called Dik. It came under Re District. In our village there were no forests like in India. There were snow-capped mountains, rocky mountains and grassy mountains. On the plains, grass called *jaktsa* grew everywhere. The name of the village was Dik.

Q: What did his family do for a living?

#62: There were different types of families in Tibet. There were economically rich families as well as poor ones. The rich were wealthy with many servants. The poor worked for the rich and were paid and that was their livelihood. Most of the rich families were the farmers and the nomads. They owned yaks and sheep and also farmland. Those who were poor, compared to these days, they might possess only around an acre of land.

Q: How about your livelihood?

#62: When we were in Tibet, we owned land and sheep. It was like that. We were middle-class farmers. We did not have to work for others.

Q: The poor people had to work for the richer people, what was the arrangement of work? Did they get paid? What was the arrangement?

#62: Some of the poor worked for years and some worked periodically like in summer, autumn or spring when there was sowing or other work. They were paid for it. There was no payment like cash in India; it was in the form of grains, meat and butter.

Q: What was the feeling like between the richer people and the poorer people in your region and the middle-class farmers? What was the relationship like? Was it a good relationship?

#62: The poor families would ask the rich families, "I will come to work for you from tomorrow. Please lend me grains, meat, butter and sheep." If a sheep was given, there were

a certain number of days that one had to work. If it was grains, they had to work accordingly for it; in this way the rich families were approached by them [the poor]. They [the rich] did not tell them, "Come to me and I will give to you." They had to be approached.

Q: It was like a loan arrangement. Was there a way to address grievances if there was a complaint? Would they be able to go to the rich people? Was there a system that would address complaints against people if they were mistreated?

#62: You could be sued if you did anything against the law. For example, if you did not abide by the law and fought or did such things, you could be penalized. Each region had a leader called *Shika*. If a verdict could not be reached there, it [the case] would be taken to the district, in Tibet. Our district was Sey Zong. [To the translator] Since you are from Ghamba, you had the Ghamba Zong. Ours was the Sey Zong. The district was called Sey Rinchen Zong. If the offence was very serious, it was handed over to the district.

Q: This was whether one was rich or poor?

#62: There was no distinction between the rich and the poor.

Q: He lived near a branch of Tashi Lhunpo Gonpa, can he tell us anything about this *gonpa* 'monastery' and the activities there and the monks there?

#62: The monastery in our village was a branch of the Tashi Lhunpo Monastery. There were *telpa* 'taxpayer' families in our village. If a *telpa* family had three sons, the middle one had to be admitted into the monastery. There was no way they could not follow this [custom]. There were no ifs, ands or buts; that was a tax.

If they were not *telpa* or were poor families known as *dhuechung*, who did not pay tax or own any land, they could not join the monastery. As long as you were a *telpa* you had to put your middle son into the monastery at the Tashi Lhunpo.

Q: Where did he come in his family and his brothers and sisters, the oldest, youngest or middle?

#62: There were many children in my family. My father had many children. Perhaps there were five or six sons. As there were many sons, I was given away in marriage to a family.

Q: Where did he come in line?

#62: I was among the oldest.

Q: Was he the oldest?

#62: My father had three sons in one year.

Q: Was it from different mothers?

#62: Yes, from different mothers. When there were three sons, one was sent to be a monk, one stayed home and I was given away to be married.

Q: There were only three sons?

#62: The three sons, and my father had many younger children. The mothers were different. Since there were different mothers, there were many sons. Perhaps there were four. One was a monk of Tashi Lhunpo Monastery.

Q: It was hard to figure out who was the middle son?

#62: When the children were of the same age, who can tell who is the middle one?

Q: So none of them became monks?

[Translator to interviewer]: One of them became a monk.

Q: How old was he when he got married?

#62: I was 20 years old.

Q: Did the Penchen Lama ever come to his region? Has he ever seen him or known him coming to the region?

#62: He has never visited. His Holiness the Penchen Rinpoche did not come there. He lived at Tashi Lhunpo Monastery and did not come to the branch monasteries.

Q: Does he ever remember any visiting dignitaries coming from Lhasa or traveling through? Does he remember that happening?

#62: No, none came from Lhasa. As I told you earlier, there was the *shika* 'estate' and the leader who owned the *shika*. Whoever the *shika* belonged to, he sent a manager who took care of the *shika*. There was no one from Lhasa who came to make announcements or to speak about the workings of the government.

Q: Did he ever travel outside his village when he was young for any reason?

#62: We traveled to Shigatse and Phari and nowhere else.

Q: For what reason?

#62: Since we were farmers and nomads, we took sheep, meat and butter for sale.

Q: Was life different in these regions, Shigatse and Phari? Was life of the people different or was it pretty much the same, the standard of living?

#62: It was almost similar, Shigatse and Phari, except that they were towns and there were more business people. In general, there were the rich and the poor. The condition was the same in Tibet.

Q: How old was he when he first saw Chinese in his area?

#62: When the Chinese came to my region, I was 21 years old. It was 1959 and I was 21 years old. After occupying Lhasa, the Chinese came to my village. When they came, I was 21 and on the 15th day of the fifth Tibetan month of 1959, we fled. We escaped and the Chinese were not able to initiate a *thamzin* 'struggle session' or cause us misery. We lived close to the mountain pass. Dik and Ghamba were close to the mountain pass. From Dik you reached Ghamba, and from Ghamba to Sepo Bula. It was just one day's journey across the mountain pass if you were a single person [without load]. The Chinese arrived in 1959 and I was 21 years old.

Q: There were no Chinese at all in his region before the fall of Lhasa?

#62: No Chinese came before the fall of Lhasa. [Lhasa] was lost in 1959 and the Chinese arrived in our village and stayed at Ghamba district. Dik was close to Ghamba district, so they stayed at Dik and went to Ghamba or vice versa. They came in 1959 and we escaped in 1959.

Q: Had he ever seen any Chinese on his travels to Shigatse and Phari before that?

#62: There were Chinese in Shigatse and other places earlier. There were Chinese, but at that time they were not tormenting [the people]. In 1959, after Lhasa was occupied, they were carrying out *thamzin* in other places. They were subjecting people to *thamzin*, beating them and carrying out reformation. They were never able to bring reformation to Dik and Ghamba because we were close to the mountain pass and people just crossed over in one night, so they could not do that. The Chinese were there in Shigatse and other places earlier.

Q: He said he saw the Chinese in Shigatse and Phari not hurting people, what were they doing?

#62: The Chinese were living there and occupying the place. In general they were preparing to torment [the people]. In places like Re and Tsarong, they carried out *thamzin* and reformation. Their aim was to do the same to us but most of our people escaped because of the closeness to the mountain pass and so they could not execute it. They didn't not do it to us because they were good.

Q: What were the Chinese doing in Phari and Shigatse?

#62: They were living there, occupying the place.

Q: Were they living in the town or were they camped outside of the town?

#62: They were living everywhere. They were living in the center of the town in houses and on the outskirts in many tents.

Q: What evidence of planning did he see? He said they were planning, what evidence of planning did he see?

#62: I didn't see any of that. In 1959 His Holiness the Dalai Lama went to India and we were very anxious to get to where His Holiness was. Other than that we did not bother about what they were planning to do since we did not hold responsibilities in the government nor were we paid workers to look into that. We were more anxious to escape and did not see that.

Q: He said that he saw this before they came to his town, he saw the Chinese in Shigatse and Phari. Was this before His Holiness left, right?

[Translator to interviewer]: Yes.

Q: Before His Holiness left, when he saw the Chinese in Shigatse and Phari, what were the relations like between the Tibetans and the Chinese at that time? Was there tension in the town or was it friendly relations?

#62: The relation was that the Chinese were deceiving the Tibetans and making them construct roads, airports and giving them *dhayen* 'silver coins.' When all the roads were built, then in 1959 they waged the war in Lhasa. They didn't fight in the villages. The relation was that they were making the Tibetans work for them, making roads and giving them money. Other than that there were no relations.

Q: Was there suspicion on the part of the Tibetans about the Chinese and their intentions? Did people talk about this in private?

#62: There were not many suspicions then. At that time, no one thought that the Chinese would cause so much hardship. The truth is, the Tibetan government's nobles received *dhayen* and that was how Tibet was given away. When the officials were given money, they did not think that such things would happen in the future.

Q: Himself personally when he saw the airfields being built, what did he think was the intention? Was he concerned at all?

#62: They built an airfield at Dham. We didn't see that because it was toward Lhasa, towards the north. There was no airfield at Shigatse. They built the airfield at Dham. We were in the direction of Sikkim while that was in the north. We knew that it was built.

Q: What did he think about that? What did he think was the purpose for that?

#62: At that time, there was not much [thought] as they were deceiving [us]. They [the Chinese] said they would liberate Tibet and bring progress for the people. So everyone thought that they were going to help us and no one ever thought that they would wage a war and carry out *thamzin*.

Q: They felt that they were going to be liberated? Did they actually feel that they needed liberation?

#62: We never felt that we needed liberation because we didn't think that we would get something if there was liberation. We were the middle-class farmers. Even if we were liberated, they [the Chinese] had nothing to give us. After liberation, they were not distributing the superior items like gold and silver [belonging to the rich]. They were dividing stuff like agricultural implements, goats and sheep to the poorer people. Other than that, we did not have any expectation that we would get something if there was liberation.

Q: So he is saying that the poor people were quite welcoming of the Chinese at that time?

#62: When they [the poor] were told, "You will be liberated. You have suffered earlier and now all the properties will be equalized." there were some among us who were needy, and were appointed as leaders by the Chinese who were happy. The majority of the people did not like it because His Holiness the Dalai Lama escaped to India in 1959, people wanted to join His Holiness. They thought nothing good would come about and did not believe that they [the Chinese] could be relied on and that they would help.

Q: How did he hear about the fall of Lhasa and the flight about His Holiness? Does he remember when he actually received that news and how did he receive that news?

#62: Everybody heard that Lhasa was defeated and that His Holiness had left for India.

Q: How did you hear of that at first?

#62: We had contacts with Shigatse and other places as we lived close by. We heard immediately that Lhasa was lost and that His Holiness had escaped as there were people traveling to and fro.

Q: Does he actually remember when he personally heard the news?

#62: If we hadn't heard about the flight of His Holiness, we would have stayed put and then we would've been in a critical situation. When we heard that His Holiness had left for India, all the people then left in anxiety following His Holiness. If we hadn't heard that His Holiness had left, we would stay there and they [the Chinese] would have been at liberty to beat or subject us to *thamzin*. We heard that from the people who moved to and fro.

Q: What did he do when he heard the news? What did he think first of all and then what did he do?

#62: When we heard that His Holiness had left for India, we thought now nothing good would come about for us. He is our country's supreme head, our spiritual lama and leader. When he has left for India, we thought there was no reason [for us] to stay back. So in 1959, on the 15th day of the fifth Tibetan month, we escaped.

Q: Did he see any Chinese in his area before he left?

#62: I told you earlier that the Chinese came to Ghamba and then to our village. The Chinese came to our village and stayed at the estate. The estate [manager] had escaped and the Chinese were staying at his house. The Chinese were planning and advising [the people] that there should be reformation and appointed leaders called *U-yon*. But they [the Chinese] could not carry out the reformation because all the people had fled. They couldn't do it.

Q: Was he still there at that time?

#62: I escaped.

Q: Did he think to join the resistance? Did that ever cross his mind?

#62: The *Chushi Gangdrug* Resistance Force was in Lhoka. It didn't cross my mind to join the *Chushi Gangdrug*. It was not there [nearby].

Q: Did he ever get in trouble with the Chinese before he left?

#62: No. There was no way we got in trouble. When we were about to escape, they [the Chinese] came to Dik from Ghamba. Otherwise when we went to Shigatse, the Chinese went their way and we did our work and left. There was no way to get in trouble.

Q: Does he know what happened to the Norbu Khang, the branch of the Tashi Lhunpo? Does he know what happened there?

#62: There was nothing that happened to the branch of the Tashi Lhunpo because most of the monks lived at [the main] Tashi Lhunpo Monastery. They came to our monastery only for two months during autumn. They stayed for two months in autumn and gave teachings, but most of the time, they lived at Tashi Lhunpo Monastery. They didn't stay there [branch monastery] permanently.

Q: Can he describe the journey in leaving Tibet, what it was like?

#62: When we fled, it was from Dik. We were two or three families and drove our animals as we left Dik at that time. We left Dik at night time because the Chinese might capture us otherwise. Leaving Dik at night, we came to Gyalshong Bridge. Right there on the hill we spent one night. The next day, starting out at around dusk we crossed the Sepobhola pass and were in Indian Territory.

Q: Was Gyalshong a bridge?

#62: Yes, Gyalshong was a bridge. Close by the bridge was a hill, just like the hill we have there [gestures] and at the base of the hill, we spent a day in hiding.

Q: How big was his party?

#62: We were around eight people.

Q: Did they encounter any problems on the way?

#62: No, we didn't face any problems on the way. We spent one night there and the next day, we came through Ghamdhang at night and crossed Sepobhola.

Q: What is Sepobhola?

#62: Sepobhola is a mountain pass. For example, you [to the translator] might have heard of Gompa Lhawu, which is a part of Ghamba. If you came from Ghamdhang, there was a place called Phu Dokpo. So if you came through Dokpo, you found a route or another way through Gerchung. There were two paths. We took the route through Dokpo to Sepobhola.

At the top of Sepobhola were flags and if you crossed the pass, it was India and on the other side was Tibet. Once you crossed that, there was no one to create problems or capture you once you were in Indian Territory.

Q: Were his brothers with him?

#62: No, no. My brothers were left behind. We were three from my family, four from another and an old lady. We were eight in all. When I say "my family," though they were my family, I was living separately from them as I was given away in marriage. I was with my [immediate] family of wife and child since we were in greater danger because in Tibet we were considered among the rich families. Because of the danger of being captured by the Chinese, we fled much earlier. All my relatives were left behind in Tibet.

Q: What happened to his family, to his family back in Tibet, to his brothers and his parents?

#62: I never knew what happened to them. Our village was isolated; places like Ghamba were isolated. There were none who went there and none who came from there. There was no news. While we were living in Gangtok, for about two years they [family members] were not subjected to any hardships; they were just living there. From Gangtok, we came to the settlement and since then I never heard anything about them.

Q: Was he able to bring anything with him?

#62: I didn't bring anything from Tibet. All our sheep were left behind; all our possessions were left behind. I brought *tsampa* 'flour made from roasted barley' and some provisions, loading them on two donkeys and came away. There was no way we could bring our possessions and drive our sheep. It was just a few blankets and food to last for a few days. We had nothing else other than that.

Q: We would like to go back to his life as a nomad, as a young man. Tell him this life does not exist in exile, so young Tibetans have no idea about this kind of life. So can he describe the kind of life that it was and what he would do during the day? Maybe he can even describe like a day, an average day, what it was like?

#62: Take for example a family of five. We had sheep and farmland. Some would go to tend the sheep and produce curd and butter and thus earn a livelihood. Some cultivated the land. We did not have a lot of variety like in India. In Tibet there were grains, butter and meat. People led their life taking care of sheep and lands in Tibet.

Q: Did they change, like mix up the labor like who would do what or did the same people do the same job all the time?

#62: Those who tended the sheep were called shepherds. If a family had two sons and if I was the shepherd I would tend sheep my entire life. Those who cultivated the lands included the rest in the family.

Q: Was there anything that he really enjoyed about the work that he did?

#62: Whatever work one did was the same, whether it was tending sheep or working in the fields. Those were the main livelihoods of the people of Tibet. Being in a remote area, there was no scope for trade. The products from sheep like cheese and butter and agricultural output like grains—though it was not much—we took the cheese, butter and meat to Phari and Shigatse for sale. That was how we led our livelihood.

Q: Did he like traveling outside of the area to go to those places?

#62: I had to like to do that since those were the only things we had to sell. I had to go to sell them.

Q: Did he enjoy it?

#62: There was nothing to be happy about it. One had to do it. For example, a trader had to trade irrespective of whether he was making a profit or not. He has to sit there in his shop even if there was no one to buy his wares. There was nothing to be happy about it, but since that was the only work he has, he must do it.

Q: What did he enjoy doing in his spare time when he wasn't working?

#62: In Tibet, during the time that you did not have work to do, men wove wool and stitched *zompa* ‘traditional boots’ while women made *chupa* ‘traditional coats/dresses’. All the clothes that one wore in Tibet were made by oneself. We did not have materials to buy or ready-to-wear clothes like in India. Everything was made by oneself. The women wove woolen cloth and men spun wool to make *zompa*. Nobody sat idle. Even while walking, people kept spinning.

Q: When he said he was given as a groom to a bride, did he have any choice in the matter? Did he have any...was his opinion consulted at all? Was that just something that was arranged by his parents?

#62: I was consulted. My father said that since we had three to four sons in the family, a few would have to go out as everyone could not live at home. So I was consulted and given away.

Q: What did he think when he was told that this was an idea?

#62: If I was okay with it that was it. As there were a lot of people in the family, it was not practical for everyone to live under one roof, so I decided to do as per the way shown by my parents and left.

Q: Did he have a chance to see his bride before the wedding day?

#62: I have seen her because we were from the same village.

Q: What happened on his wedding day? Can he describe what happened?

#62: We did not have an elaborate wedding. Since we had known each other for sometime, it was just a small affair. In Tibet, we did not have elaborate weddings; such were not performed. It was a small ceremony.

Q: Was he happy that this was the woman that was chosen for him?

#62: Because I liked her, I married her. [Laughs]

Q: So is this the woman whom we met coming in?

#62: Yes.

Q: So how long has he been with her?

#62: I was 21 when I married and now I am 69 years old, so how many years has passed? It's been 48 years.

Q: How many children does he have?

#62: I have a son now. Two children died.

Q: How did they die?

#62: One was miscarried at around six months and the other died at age 5 or 6 from illness.

Q: Were any of them born in Tibet?

#62: They were born in India. Two died in India and one is living.

Q: All three were born in India?

#62: No, the living child was born in Tibet. One passed away here and the other was miscarried in Gangtok.

Q: Their son was born in Tibet. What happened when a woman would give birth? Would a doctor come to help her? Who would help her deliver the baby?

#62: No, there were no doctors. In Tibet that was never the custom. The neighbors or other women would help in the delivery

Q: And the men...were the husbands send out of the house or did he assist?

#62: The birth might take place when we were out of the house or when we were in the house. For example, if I had gone out for some work...

Q: No, did the men have to keep away from the house when the delivery was taking place?

#62: Yes, we would be outside somewhere.

Q: Are there any special prayers done? Were there any special prayers done when his baby was born?

#62: There were no prayers done when the delivery was taking place. Before the birth, we sought predictions regarding the birth and if any special prayers had to be performed. After the birth, we did not hold prayers.

Q: So was it an easy birth?

#62: It was easy.

Q: Was he happy when he had a son? Did that make him very happy?

#62: What is there to be very happy at a birth? [Laughs] [To translator] Say that I was happy.

Q: How did he get his name? They named him or did they have a lama ...?

#62: He was named by a lama.

Q: He is still a very good-looking man. Did he have a lot of girlfriends before he met his wife?

#62: How can I say that? It is possible. What is the use of saying all these things? [Laughs] It is just more talk. Of course, there were women, much more than one woman! That is so with everyone.

Q: So when boys and girls liked each other in his village, what would they do? Would they go often to the hills together or how do they...will they flirt? Would they openly show affection?

#62: It [a love affair] was not kept under wraps. If you loved someone, it does not matter if it came to the knowledge of people.

Q: His father had three sons from three different women; did all the women live together with him?

#62: The woman who came as a bride into the family had a son; a lover outside had a son and then another lover also had a son. As I told you, a man would have countless women. If one were to talk about all these things, there's no end to it. There were different mothers. One was the bride who had a son and the others lovers who had sons.

Q: So the women lived separately. He would go to visit them, his father?

#62: I did not go to visit them. Why should I when they were not my mother?

Q: No, did your father?

#62: That was only when they were in love; otherwise, his wife would quarrel with him.

Q: If the young generation of Tibetan were to listen to what he had to say, what advice would he give to them?

#62: If they would listen, my advice would be that they must know how Tibet came into being, what the country is like, what the religion is like, what the traditions are, how the costumes are worn; these things they must keep in mind and practice. That is the most important thing, if they would listen. There are those who have never seen [Tibet] and are in their mid-forties. His Holiness the Dalai Lama advises about the traditions of Tibet and the costumes are shown during the dance recitals, so it is their [the younger generation's] responsibility to keep those in mind.

Q: Does he know a lot of these songs, the traditional songs?

#62: I know the songs, but where do I sing them? I know the songs, but I am old now.

Q: Were there songs that they used to sing when they were out in the fields with the animals?

#62: Yes, there were. There were a lot of songs in Tibet.

Q: Can he just sing us a song or two?

#62: When we worked, we sang. When we did the field works, we sang. There were songs.

Q: Can he sing us a song that he remembers? It doesn't matter that his voice is not good. It's more like the feeling and the preserving of the song.

#62: No, today I cannot sing. My neighbor's mother died, so it is not right [to sing].

Q: Thank you very much. How does he feel now about...

#62: If we were far away [from here] I would sing.

Q: We understand.

END OF INTERVIEW