

# **Tibet Oral History Project**

Interview #69 – Lhakpa Tsering  
July 4, 2007

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# TIBET ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

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## INTERVIEW SUMMARY SHEET

1. Interview Number: #69
2. Interviewee: Lhakpa Tsering
3. Age: 72
4. Date of Birth: 1935
5. Sex: Male
6. Birthplace: Shari
7. Province: Utsang
8. Year of leaving Tibet: 1960
9. Date of Interview: July 4, 2007
10. Place of Interview: House No. 96, Old Camp No. 6, Lugsung Samdupling Settlement, Bylakuppe, Mysore District, Karnataka, India
11. Length of Interview: 1 hr 5 min
12. Interviewer: Martin Newman
13. Interpreter: Lhakpa Tsering
14. Videographer: Jeff Loda
15. Translator: Tenzin Yangchen

### **Biographical Information:**

Lhakpa Tsering's family engaged in farming and transportation work in Domo. He talks about childhood memories, such as playing a game of bows and arrows with his friends, and transporting goods on mules between Phari and Kalimpong.

Lhakpa Tsering recalls the Chinese arrived in his village when he was 13 years old and then "everything was in chaos and they caused misery." He describes the numerous hardships imposed on the Tibetan people, including the daily arrest of 15 to 20 people from his village without any specific reason. To avoid being arrested, he and other young men hid themselves in the hills for a week.

After the Dalai Lama left for India in 1959, the Chinese suspected that many Tibetans, such as Lhakpa Tsering, might flee and they began making more arrests. Lhakpa Tsering and his wife were kept in prison for six months and then released with a strict warning that "if you are caught [fleeing], you'll never leave the prison." He and four others escaped to India in 1960. He says, "Though life was difficult working as road construction workers, we were happy because there was no fear of being captured."

### **Topics Discussed:**

Childhood memories, farm life, religious festivals, trade, life under Chinese rule, Chinese oppression, imprisonment, escape experiences, life as a refugee in India.

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**Interview #69**

**Interviewee: Lhakpa Tsering**

**Age: 72, Sex: Male**

**Interviewer: Martin Newman**

**Interview Date: July 4, 2007**

Question: Hello.

**Interviewee #69: [Nods]**

Q: Please tell us your name.

**#69: Lhakpa Tsering.**

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

**#69: That is fine.**

Q: Thank you for offering to share your story with us.

**#69: [Nods]**

Q: His Holiness the Dalai Lama requested that we record your experiences so that we can share your memory with Tibetans for generations to come.

**#69: [Nods]**

Q: And also inform the world community and the next generation of Chinese about the true history, culture and beliefs of the Tibetan people.

**#69: [Nods]**

Q: During this interview, if you wish to take a break or stop at any time, please let me know.

**#69: Okay.**

Q: If you do not wish to answer a question or discuss something let me know.

**#69: Okay.**

Q: If this were shown in Tibet or China, would this be a problem for you?

**#69: There is no problem. I am grateful to the foreigners for supporting us. The Chinese, being a powerful nation, invaded a small country. If I am lying, that is not good. I was 13 years old when the Chinese arrived in Tibet.**

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

**#69: [Nods]**

Q: To begin, I'd like to know something about your life in Tibet before the Chinese came. Perhaps you can start by telling me where you were born?

**#69: Domo Rinchen Wang. It is close to India.**

Q: Which part of India does it lie close to?

**#69: To Sikkim.**

Q: How many people were in your family there?

**#69: There were six members in the family: two parents, three brothers and a sister.**

Q: What did your parents do for work?

**#69: We were farmers and also transporters, transporting goods to Kalimpong and Phari on mules.**

Q: What kind of grains did you farm?

**#69: We cultivated wheat, potatoes and grains.**

Q: Did you attend school or go to a monastery when you were a child?

**#69: There were no schools then and I was not a monk.**

Q: As a child did you help your family on the farm the animals and crops?

**#69: When I was a child there were no schools, so I had to help with the farming.**

Q: When you were not working, were there special games that you played?

**#69: I didn't play any games.**

Q: Did you ever go into the village with your friends and get into trouble?

**#69: When I roamed with my friends, we used to play a game with bow and arrows made of bamboo. We placed small bets and shot arrows.**

Q: What did you shoot at?

**#69: The arrows were shot at a target, which was a black spot. It was to test the aim of a person and the bet was one currency unit. I didn't play any other games except that.**

Q: I knew you were doing something to get into trouble.

**#69: That was just a game.**

Q: Were you a good shot?

**#69: I was quite good.**

Q: Did you live in a house or in a tent? How did you live?

**#69: There was no cement then. The walls of the houses were made of beaten earth. They were very wide and the roofs were covered with flat wood.**

Q: How would you describe your parents? Were they happy people?

**#69: Until the Chinese arrived, we were happy. Those who were farmers engaged in farming and the muleteers went with the mules. Once the Chinese arrived, everything became chaotic and they caused us misery. Until the Chinese arrived, we were happy.**

Q: Your parents were unhappy once the Chinese came?

**#69: How could they be happy when the Chinese arrived? If [the Chinese thought] what one spoke was not right, he was captured. Once someone was captured, no one knew where he was taken, whether to Lhasa or wherever.**

Q: Before the Chinese came, did you have many visitors to your house? Did many relatives come and stay with you?

**#69: Some relatives came home and we went to trade in Kalimpong and Phari and also on transportation with mules. The younger ones who could not drive the mules stayed back to farm the lands.**

Q: Your family used to go across the border to deliver goods and then come back?

**#69: Passports were not required to go across into India then. After the Chinese came, passports were made.**

Q: When you were a child, did any performers ever come to your village; storytellers or magicians?

**#69: There were no magicians in Tibet. During *Losar* ‘Tibetan New Year’ everyone assembled and sang songs. Otherwise, there was no time to sit and sing songs. We had to work.**

Q: Were there holidays that you celebrated that you remember?

**#69: The fourth month of the Tibetan lunar calendar, known as *Saka Dawa*, is holy. It is considered a sin to till the fields during the festival day. So we offered prayers and sang and enjoyed ourselves. The day was the 15th day of the fourth month. There was not much free time because we had to work.**

Q: Since you didn't go to school and you weren't in a monastery, how did you learn about the dharma?

**#69: There is a monastery in my village. Dharma is not just reading the scriptures. The lamas give teachings about this life and the next. The lamas tell us about sin and that killing animals is a sin. They advise us to abstain from killing animals and committing sins. We practice that. If one joins a monastery, he will know more, but I did not join the monastery.**

Q: When did things start to change for you in your life?

**#69: That happened when the Chinese arrived. The Chinese started to inflict misery in 1959, but they had arrived earlier. I was 13 years old when the Chinese came.**

Q: What happened around you that told you that things were going to be different?

**#69: The Chinese arrived and China was a powerful nation. The people of Tibet were not bad people and practiced the dharma. The monks in the monasteries practiced the dharma and the laypeople cultivated the lands. Everyone lived happily. Once the Chinese came, they took away half the products of our hard work and left the people hungry. Even a word spoken wrongly landed a person in prison. People could not relax.**

Q: Did you see people getting arrested yourself?

**#69: Yes, I saw that. When I went to the town called Rinchen Wang, I saw a line of people with their hands tied at the back with chains. I was 23 years old then.**

Q: Did you have any understanding why they were handcuffed?

**#69: The reason they were handcuffed was because they [the Chinese] feared that they [those in handcuffs] might revolt against them during the turmoil. They were the influential people and there was no reason why they should be captured; it was just by**

**force. They [the Chinese] planned to take away all the possessions of the rich. The Chinese never had intentions to do anything good for Tibet. Unlike foreign countries such as the United States and the English who think of their subjects, the Chinese had no other intention but to cause misery to the Tibetans and finish them off, so that they could occupy their land. That was the reason they were arrested.**

Q: Did they take possessions from your family?

**#69: We were not a rich family. We were middle class. They did not take possessions from me. I don't know about Lhasa, however in and around Domo, the possessions of all the rich were seized.**

Q: What else did you see at this time?

**#69: A whole army arrived in the village and they forcefully took away all the good things from the homes. They said that the grains had to be given to the [Chinese] government. They took away grains based on the area of cultivation. At that time I was 23 years old when the Chinese forced and captured people without any reason. When many people were captured, we fled into the hills for about seven days. We'd come home to eat during the day and hid in the hills at night for seven days.**

Q: You, yourself, or you whole family?

**#69: No, not the whole family. We were the young men who feared capture and we fled in a group. It was not the whole family.**

Q: Did your parents tell you to do that or did you go by yourselves?

**#69: We [young men] discussed among ourselves that the Chinese were capturing people; that daily 15 or 20 people were being arrested. At the time when the Chinese started capturing people, we had no thought about escaping to India. Gradually, when more and more people were captured and we despaired that people were imprisoned in various jails, we thought it was better to escape to India. His Holiness the Dalai Lama had already left and we thought we should also flee. We did not want to undergo the misery and escaped to India.**

Q: What did you eat when you were seven days in the mountains?

**#69: In the daytime, we found out who had been arrested in a village, whether the Chinese soldiers were arriving or not. We hid in the mountains and when night fell, we came home, took some food and hid in the hills.**

Q: What did you sleep in? Did you sleep outside under the trees or what did you sleep in?

**#69: We slept under the trees or in caves. We slept where it was warm under the rocks as the weather was very cold. We had on thick clothes and made a fire. There was firewood in**

**my region. We gathered firewood and made fire in the night. We were hiding in the hills for fear of being captured. We went to see if the Chinese soldiers had come to our homes and if there were none, we ate our food. If there were soldiers around, we immediately ran to the hills to hide.**

Q: Why did you come back after seven days? Did the Chinese leave or was something different?

**#69: The Chinese lived in camps in the bigger towns. They [received orders from their authorities that such a person in such a village should be arrested and if they didn't come, there was no danger for us if we went home. However, we had to be careful because you were finished if you were caught as no reason was required [for a capture].**

Q: You were seven days in the mountains, had the Chinese left when you went back home?

**#69: Take for example, if the Chinese were camped at Kushalnagar [a town about four miles away from interviewee's residence], they would come to take a survey in this area looking for a person to arrest or who the influential person was. When they came for such arrests, we ran away. That was the time we stayed away for seven days.**

Q: Where did you go after hiding for seven days?

**#69: After the Chinese had arrested and imprisoned all the influential people, there was a lull and during this time we came down [to the village]. I continued to do my work, but in my mind I felt that I should escape to India because it was certain that one day I would face arrest.**

Q: Then what happened?

**#69: Then in 1959, His Holiness the Dalai Lama left for India followed by masses of people everyday. The Chinese treatment became worse and worse and there was no way I could live there. To face arrest, one need not revolt against them. Without any reason and even if they did not like what they saw, they arrested. One needn't particularly fight them with a gun or a sword. If a Chinese saw something he did not like in me, he would keep it in his mind to capture me someday. I couldn't live under such circumstances.**

Q: How old were you in 1959?

**#69: I was perhaps 24 years old.**

Q: So between the age of 13 and 24, it was fairly peaceful in your life except for that time when the Chinese came and took people's possessions.

**#69: Before that we were happy. Those who were muleteers went with the mules, the farmers worked in the fields and the monks practiced dharma in the monasteries. Everyone was happy. We did not have any enemies. India allowed [exported] provisions that Tibet needed and wool from Tibetan sheep was sold to the Indians. From India we**

**brought sugar and rice—*tsampa* ‘flour made from roasted barley’ we had in plenty. Everything was fine. Passports were not necessary. Once the Chinese arrived, passports were needed, even to go to India.**

Q: I am asking about the time when after the Chinese came and you went up to the forest and then you came back. And then it was peaceful for a period after you came back? How long was it peaceful for?

**#69: There was no peace, but a lull after they had arrested the ones they suspected, the rich and the influential people. The soldiers kept watch over us though we did not revolt. We couldn't revolt nor were there people to revolt. However, the soldiers and officials—those officials were dressed in blue that were not the soldiers—they came to see what we were up to and kept a watch over us. They arrested anyone they suspected.**

Q: And then what happened that made things worse?

**#69: The reason that things became worse was that they [the Chinese] were a powerful country while Tibet did not have an army. Unlike other nations, she did not have airplanes in the sky; she did not have vehicles on the ground and, except for those who practiced the dharma like His Holiness the Dalai Lama, we did not have an army ready like other countries. They freely did what they wanted to, being a powerful country, and oppressed a small country in order to occupy it. They oppressed and captured the people so that no one could revolt.**

Q: So when did you decide to escape?

**#69: I escaped in the year 1960. I couldn't manage to flee in 1959 because the Chinese had stationed troops at the border areas of India. I took the route on the Bhutanese border, traveling through the forests and down to a big bridge located between Domo and Bhutan. I reached there in the night and spent the night there.**

Q: Did you attempt to escape in 1959 and fail?

**#69: I didn't try, but I thought of escaping in 1959. Then I was captured and put in prison by the Chinese. There were five people: me, my wife and three others, who now live in Kollegal Tibetan Settlement, were arrested.**

Q: Can you tell me more about that first attempt where you were captured?

**#69: They [the Chinese] said that they had some advice for me and then arrested me. I had no idea that they were going to arrest me because I had not revolted against them, or done anything to them. I thought I was called so that they might advise me not to go to a foreign country and that they [the Chinese] would treat us well. However, when I reached there, they arrested me and put me in jail for six months.**

Q: Did you already start to escape when they caught you? Or why did they put you in jail?

**#69: I was at home and not on the run. They [the Chinese] suspected that I might flee and so they arrested me.**

Q: Why did they think that you might escape?

**#69: They suspected because at that time when they came everyone was escaping. In 1959, after His Holiness the Dalai Lama had left, when everyone was fleeing, they thought we might also escape and not remain there, so they came to capture us. They arrested many people.**

Q: By that time, were you married?

**#69: It was one year since I had married my wife. She is the one who is here.**

Q: Did you have any children?

**#69: We didn't have children then.**

Q: How did you meet your wife?

**#69: I met my wife in our village. We were neighbors.**

Q: Was it an arranged marriage?

**#69: It was a love marriage.**

Q: How were you able to do a love marriage? Wasn't it the tradition to have an arranged marriage?

**#69: That was the tradition where parents sent a person across to seek the hand of a girl in marriage. There would be a celebration.**

Q: How did you have a love marriage?

**#69: We had a love marriage.**

Q: What did your parents think of that?

**#69: At that time my mother had already passed away. My father didn't say anything. The Chinese had come and people were not happy then. There was no time to say that that was good or bad. The village had been turned unhappy. We couldn't sleep at night wondering what might happen and how the Chinese had brought about sadness in the country.**

Q: You were arrested for six months and your wife and your family. What happened when they put you in jail? What was that like?

**#69: When we were put in jail, they did not cause any hardship, however the food was bad. They gave us some *tsampa* and salt tea and asked, "What is the reason for wanting to go to India?" To this I replied, "Earlier we were very happy. When the powerful Chinese arrived, instead of doing us well, you make things worse." That was all I said.**

Q: How did they know you wanted to escape? You hadn't done anything.

**#69: They knew that we wished to escape. I just told you. They suspected that we might leave because the situation was like that. The *Chushi Gangdrug* Force was fighting at that time.**

Q: Why did they arrest you?

**#69: Because I was going to escape and they knew that. They arrested me because they knew that I was going to flee to India. I told the Chinese, "I have no intention of going. I will not go to India leaving behind the house and land of my parents and generations before them. If I go to India, I have to do hard labor because I have no education. I will not be able to earn a livelihood. In my village I can work on my land and eat. I have no intention of leaving." Then all five of us were released and we stayed for another year. We escaped in 1960.**

Q: When you were in jail, were you separated from your wife?

**#69: We were separated. The three women and the two men were put in separate jails. We were imprisoned separately. They [the Chinese] came to check at night.**

Q: Were you able to speak with her for six months?

**#69: They won't allow us to speak.**

Q: Why did they let you go?

**#69: They told us they'd release us if we had no intention of going to India. They said, "If you attempt to go to India and you are caught, you'll never leave the prison." I told them, "I have no intention of going. I have no intention of escaping leaving behind the house and land of my parents and forefathers." They said, "You won't be going?" I replied, "No, I am not going."**

Q: You told them a very good story.

**#69: I had to talk that way. It [China] was an evil country unlike any other country. It was a Communist country and if you spoke harshly, there was no way out. There was no way out because before my very eyes, three monks of Kagyu Monastery were taken to a prison in Chamdo where they died.**

Q: Were they killed?

**#69: They were killed in prison.**

Q: Who did you hear that from?

**#69: That was announced to indicate that that was what would happen to us if we were not good. They [the Chinese] announced it and said, "Behave well. If you don't behave well, that is the only way you will have." Later one monk from the four managed to escape and he told us that they died in the prison in Chamdo.**

Q: So you were released and then what happened?

**#69: I went home and stayed for one year cultivating the land.**

Q: Then what happened?

**#69: I cultivated wheat and barley and lived submissively for one year. Then one night—leaving all the grain as there was no way we could sell them—at around 7 o'clock, we left for the hills. The border of Bhutan was close to our region, and following that route we came to Nathula in India. It was a night's journey.**

Q: With your wife?

**#69: Yes, we were five people. There were my wife, her older sister, the sister's husband who now lives in Kollegal [Tibetan settlement] and his mother. We were five people.**

Q: How long did it take you to reach...was it a smooth escape or were there problems?

**#69: We faced some difficulties as we were stranded for one night during the journey. When we reached Kubu, there was a police station at Nathula. An officer asked us, "Do you have anything to eat?" "Yes, we have *tsampa* and meat," we said. He said that Pandit Nehru-ji [the then Prime Minister of India] has said that the refugees of His Holiness the Dalai Lama were to be provided with *dhal* [lentils], rice, onions and oil. We stayed there for one night. We were issued permits to travel. The police said, "Your people arrive with nothing to eat and so they are given rice, dhal, oil and onions."**

Q: Then where did you go?

**#69: Then we received travel permits and stayed in Sikkim for four years.**

Q: With your family?

**#69: The five of us were together.**

Q: Was it a hard adjustment for you at Sikkim in terms of the weather and such?

**#69: We had to work as coolies because we did not have education.**

Q: Did you face problems with the weather?

**#69: The weather was rainy in summer, but the winters were better. We didn't face many problems.**

Q: What did your wife do?

**#69: My wife also worked as a coolie at road construction. At that time the roads to Nathula and Lachen were not good and the Indian government was building roads there. So we broke stones and built roads. Other than that we couldn't get any other jobs. However, we were happy because there was no fear of being captured.**

Q: Then where did you go from Sikkim?

**#69: We were four years in Sikkim.**

Q: Did you have children now?

**#69: We had one child, but it was a difficult delivery and she had to go to the hospital.**

Q: Where did you go from Sikkim?

**#69: At Sikkim we were told that settlements were set up and that we had to go to the settlements. So we came here.**

Q: You got here with your wife? And how many children were there at that time?

**#69: Once again she had a difficult delivery and had to go to the hospital in Madikeri [20 miles from Bylakuppe] to help with the birth. At present I have two children, a son and a daughter.**

Q: What was it like when you arrived here?

**#69: When we first arrived here, the area was a jungle. There were elephants in the jungle. However, there was no one capturing us. Pandit Nehru and other countries provided help for us in the form of clothing, food and other needs. There was one person named Mr. Luthi who was from England or somewhere and we cleared the forests using bulldozers. We gathered the fallen wood and felt happy.**

Q: And you've been here ever since?

**#69: That is right.**

Q: You had more children?

**#69: I have a son and a daughter.**

Q: Your wife has been happy here too?

**#69: Yes, there's no one causing misery for us. All the countries have been very helpful to us, so we did not suffer. If I had lived in Tibet, I would have been caught one day. I would have either died from starvation or been caught by the Chinese.**

Q: What are your feelings towards the Chinese today?

**#69: [Shakes his head] Ha, the Chinese! At that time we did not know about the United States, England or Germany. Now when I learn about the United States, England, Belgium and Switzerland, I realize that the Chinese were very bad. They never cared for their people. They tried to cause as much misery as possible to the citizens. The other countries are good with their people.**

**Take for example India. They provide land to the landless, build roads where there are no roads, provide water where there is no water and electricity where there is no electricity. It was not like that for us. Leave aside providing help, they [the Chinese] tried to capture as many people as possible and cause as much misery as they could. Half of the food, which we had worked for was taken away!**

Q: So you don't like the Chinese?

**#69: No, I don't like them. How can I like them? In the present age, next to the United States, China is the most powerful nation. Their population is more than the Indians. Such a powerful country is oppressing a small nation. Can anyone like them? We fled here because they caused us misery, else we would have lived in the land of our forefathers. They arrived, caused us misery and we had to escape to India. Now Tibetans are working and happily living in the United States, Belgium, Switzerland, Germany and everywhere.**

Q: What do you miss about Tibet?

**#69: I do miss Tibet. That is my country in which lived many generations of my family. Even now those in Tibet are not left in peace. How many people are there in the prisons in Lhasa and elsewhere? We have escaped to India and still they do not allow His Holiness the Dalai Lama to visit certain countries. Such is their handiwork.**

Q: If you could go back, what would you do?

**#69: If I could go back to Tibet now, what work could I do? I am now 72 years old. I feel if the Chinese would give Tibet back to us with the help of other powerful countries and the United Nations Organization without having to fight a war, we would see happiness.**

Q: If you were back in Tibet, what would you do?

**#69: I would not be able to do anything if I were back in Tibet. I am 72 years old. I will not be able to do anything. What can I do? Here I cultivate corn in my field.**

Q: I think you are 72 years young.

**#69: [Laughs] During corn cultivation, we have to transport bags of fertilizers to the field. Earlier I could lift bags [each weighing 50 kilograms] and put them on the tractor, but now-a-days I can't even lift one bag. That is because if one has money and is leading a comfortable life, even at 72 he will not have aged, as he is happy. However, one who is a farmer and who has suffered and is not happy, ages faster.**

Q: What advice would you give to the younger generation of Tibetans?

**#69: The Tibetan government, His Holiness the Dalai Lama and all the lamas advise us to do well. Many foreign countries extend help with education. The Indian government is paying salary to the teachers in hundreds of thousands of *rupees*. The lamas and the Tibetan government tell us that Tibet will regain independence with the support from other countries and without having to go to war for world peace. When we get our independence, one must work hard. We can go abroad carrying our country's passport. Study hard. Many countries are supporting us. Do not drink and smoke. Do your work well and be cordial with everyone where ever you go in the world. That is the advice from the higher-ups.**

Q: Thank you very much for sharing your story. Please accept this gift in gratitude for sharing your story with us for future generations of Tibetans.

**#69: [Gets up to bow]**

END OF INTERVIEW