

Tibet Oral History Project

Interview #90 – Tenzin Chokdup
July 7, 2007

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TIBET ORAL HISTORY PROJECT
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INTERVIEW SUMMARY SHEET

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| 1. Interview Number: | #90 |
| 2. Interviewee: | Tenzin Chokdup |
| 3. Age: | 45 |
| 4. Date of Birth: | 1962 |
| 5. Sex: | Male |
| 6. Birthplace: | Phenpo |
| 7. Province: | Utsang |
| 8. Year of leaving Tibet: | 1986 |
| 9. Date of Interview: | July 7, 2007 |
| 10. Place of Interview: | Sera Jey Monastery, Bylakuppe, Mysore District, Karnataka, India |
| 11. Length of Interview: | 1 hr 57 min |
| 12. Interviewer: | Rebecca Novick |
| 13. Interpreter: | Tsering Dorjee |
| 14. Videographer: | Ronny Novick |
| 15. Transcriber: | Yeshi Dolma |



Biographical Information:

Born in 1962, Tenzin Chokdup's childhood was one of unimaginable suffering under the control of the Chinese. His family was labeled as *ngadhak* 'those holding leadership positions' by the Chinese, which made them targets for the worst abuse and degradations. He recounts the horrifying methods used during *thamzin* 'struggle sessions' when people were violently beaten and degraded by ex-servants who were "brain-washed" and intimidated by the Chinese.

Tenzin Chokdup's mother died from torture while being subjected to *thamzin* and his two older brothers died of starvation after the death of their mother. From the age of 6 or 7 Tenzin Chokdup lived alone while his father was forced to work for the Chinese. With no one to care for him, he endured severe physical pain, extreme poverty, prolonged starvation, and forced labor. When his father died in 1985, Tenzin Chokdup decided to leave Tibet.

Tenzin Chokdup's main goal in life was to become a monk, which became possible in India. He now lives at Sera Jey Monastery in Bylakuppe. His most cherished and unforgettable memory is his audience with His Holiness the Dalai Lama after arriving in India.

Topics Discussed:

Childhood memories, life under Chinese rule, forced labor, Chinese oppression, brutality, *thamzin*, escape experiences, life as a refugee in India.

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Age: 45, Sex: Male

Interviewer: Rebecca Novick

Interview Date: July 7, 2007

[Questions are asked by either interviewer or interpreter. In Interview #90, the interviewer directs questions to the interpreter, who then asks the questions of the interviewee.]

Question: First of all, I would like to ask Geshe-*la* if he could tell us something about his life growing up in his village as a young boy.

Interviewee #90: First can I tell about my family? My family was called the Phenpo Changrashang. In Tibet it was a distinguished family. In 1959, when [the Chinese] segregated the people, my family was grouped among the *ngadhak*, which means those holding leadership posts. I was born in 1962. My mother and relatives died under torture during the Cultural Revolution. So as a child, I did not see my mother. My parents had three sons and a daughter; the oldest is the daughter. My two brothers died of starvation after the death of our mother. I was the youngest.

Q: Who died?

#90: My two older brothers.

Q: From the three sons, he was one?

#90: Yes. I was the youngest.

Q: Two sons died?

#90: Yes. Our family lived separately from the main Phenpo Changrashang family. My father used to be a monk and my mother a nun. They met and we were born. In my life, I have suffered a great deal when I was younger.

Q: His sister survived?

#90: Yes, she did.

Q: He was the youngest?

#90: Yes, my sister is in her fifties now.

Q: How old was he when your mother died?

#90: I was perhaps about 3 years old. I don't remember my mother. I can't recollect her face. She died during the torture sessions.

Q: So was he raised by his father?

#90: Yes, my father brought me up. After my mother died, my father was subjected to *thamzin* 'struggle sessions' for 15 years. They beat him because he came from a high-class family.

Q: Was your father imprisoned after your mother's death?

#90: No. He was not imprisoned, but subjected to the struggle sessions. My family was labeled a rebel family and a *ngadhak*, so for around fifteen years, he was subjected to *thamzin*.

Q: Did he ever see that growing up?

#90: I remember my father going through the struggle sessions. It was only from others that I heard that my [?] died from the struggle sessions. In my father's case I witnessed it.

Q: What did he think when he saw his father going through this? What went through his mind?

#90: To describe a struggle session—they put a long paper cap on my father's head and on his chest were written "Chonzin Phuntsok, a rebel who has sucked the blood and pus of the people, who has ill-treated and abused the people." Then he was given a gong, which he had to beat. Escorted by six to seven armed Chinese soldiers with red bands on their hands, he was made to go from group to group of people who were working in the fields. My father would have to proclaim in front of each group of people that he was a rebel, who had ill-treated the people during the old system. That was how they conducted the struggle sessions.

Q: What did his father tell him about the history of Tibet and the Chinese invasion of Tibet and the political situation? Did his father inform him of these things?

#90: My father has told me only about the story of our family, but not about politics.

Q: As a boy witnessing these things, what did he think about the Chinese at that time?

#90: At that time, there were no particular feelings as I was very small. When my father was undergoing the struggle sessions, I just looked at it as a child with no feelings. It was only later that you feel it. When I was younger, I suffered a great deal. I would like to know if I can talk about it.

Q: Absolutely. He can say anything he wants.

#90: It was in 1964, 1965 and 1966 that the Cultural Revolution began. We underwent the same kind of difficulties that the whole of Tibet did. The day my mother was killed by the Chinese during the struggle session, three relatives from my family were also killed. Their ribs were broken and their hair was pulled so hard that the scalp and flesh were separated. The reason they were beaten was that the ex-servants of the family were brainwashed by the Chinese, who told them, "Earlier these people have mistreated you and now they are in your hands," so they were beaten by the servants. After undergoing the struggle sessions, my mother died. In Tibet when a person died, his/her body was taken to the sky burial site. My uncle was in the service of the Reting family. My mother's body was carried by my father to the ground for sky burial. Then he came back home and woke us.

Q: Who are the two children?

#90: My older sister and myself.

Q: What did he do to the two children?

#90: The two of us were in the house. Early in the morning my father had carried my mother's body to the [sky burial] ground. Then he came back and woke us up. At that time we did not have a house. We lived in the shed for the sheep. We had made a partition from the sheep shed and lived there. Our assets and properties were sealed and not given to us, so we were living in the sheep shed.

When my father left for work, he carried my sister on his back and put me in the pocket formed by his *chupa* 'Tibetan coat.' He had to go to work at around 4 or 5 o'clock in the morning. If he was harvesting that day, my father first put my sister down and then me in the bushes. He reported earlier than the other people. We were grouped among the *ngadhak*, the ruling class. There were about seven different segregations and we were among the worst. My father would then begin harvesting and at around the time the sun rose, the other workers arrived. By then my father would have completed quite an amount of work. That's how it was. He told us that he would lay my sister in the hay and put me down beside her. At around 10 o'clock in the morning, there was a break for food. They [the Chinese] would say that there was no *tsampa* 'flour made from roasted barley' and give just a little quantity of it in a bowl. Then black tea was added to it and we had to drink that. There was hardly any *tsampa* in there and we became very lean. If you moved your body, the large amount of liquid we had consumed made a sound inside us.

[Prayer assembly session starts at the monastery. Interviewee asks an assistant to close a window of the room to reduce the resonance of prayer.]

Q: Tell him that he is telling the story so well and with such a good flow. He knows the series of events. Maybe he can just continue to tell us like this, his story. If I have some questions I will ask.

#90: So those days we had very little to eat. My father had to work from eight o'clock in the morning to eight o'clock at night for the Chinese. In addition to this, early in the morning he had to go to the hills to gather thistle and deliver them to almost all families in the village. That was a special additional duty without any pay.

Q: For what? For firewood?

#90: That was firewood for the other families. That was a special additional duty, which he had to do every day. There was such a scarcity of *tsampa* that my father would bring us tiny balls of *tsampa* from his share at work. We so much wished to eat *pa* 'dough ball made from *tsampa*,' but there was hardly any *tsampa*. So my sister added a full bowl of black tea to the little dust of *tsampa* and drank it. We drank two to three bowls until our stomach made the sloshing sound of water when we moved. If a little *tsampa* stuck to the bottom of the bowl, we licked it clean. We so much wished to eat a little solid *tsampa*, but there was none.

As we had so little to eat, we used to look for nettles and different kinds of greens that grew in the fields in springtime. We did not have any grease, oil or meat to add to that, due to which our faces bloated. There were many such cases. To talk about clothing—there was no cloth and we couldn't buy any. What we had earlier were all taken away.

My father's *chupa* was worn out; it was torn around the knee area and there were no sleeves left. He had been wearing it for 10 to 15 years. To make a patch on the holes, he would look for bits of sheep's wool that were caught on the thorns and weave it to mend the holes. His *chupa* was so threadbare that it was literally hanging on threads. We were living in the sheep shed and at night we did not have blankets to cover ourselves. So my father, sister and I slept together. We wore gunnysacks and lay on a bed of *senpa*.

Q: What is *senpa*?

#90: It is like the peel of the ear of corn. In Tibet it is called *senpa*. For example, after harvesting the grains, you have the *senpa* left. We spread that on the floor and slept with gunnysacks to cover ourselves. We were in this condition for quite a long while.

Q: What type of gunnysack was it?

#90: In Tibet we called it *gyenmo*. It was made from the hair of yak. We used them to collect dung. I must have been around six or seven years old then, when my father was sent to work at another place and my sister was sent somewhere else. From the age of 6 or 7, I was left home alone. We had a cow. I used to milk it and sometimes when my hands ached, I used to drink directly from its teats. At that time, we used to be rationed *tsampa* once in 10 days. I would receive it and divide it into parts, sending one for my father, one for my sister and kept a little for myself. At that time we had a little grain. When I was living alone, there was nobody else around who took care of me.

Q: He was six and totally alone?

#90: I was around six or seven years old since I was alone. The house had no door. I was constantly worried that my father and sister would not have enough to eat. They had to work very hard on the road and canal construction sites. I worried so much that I did not feel that I myself had scarcely anything to eat. My father and sister had to work among people and I was concerned that they would not have a continuous supply of *tsampa*. In this way, a number of years passed by.

Q: Where were they sent?

#90: They were in Phenpo, but in another part. There were upper Phenpo and lower Phenpo, a day or two's journey apart. They were on road construction sites, building drivable roads. From the age of 6 to 7 years, I worked as a cow herder of the village. There was no pay. I had to look after about 30 cows. I took them to the grazing area, which was an area between farmland and bring the cows back in the evening. The villagers gave me a little *tsampa* and a *baklep* 'bread' sometimes. I continued in this way for two to three years. At that time I was very young and while grazing the cows in the pasture, they entered the fields to eat the crops. Then the in-charge of the fieldworkers beat me and pulled my ears. They dragged me around and beat me. If they thought the cows had not eaten their fill in the evening, I would be beaten. I used to get these beatings at least two to three times a day, everyday.

Q: What were they beating with?

#90: They would beat me with whips. They pulled me by my ears and dragged me until I bled from my ears. The reason was that the cows entered the fields and had eaten the crops and the leader blamed me for not watching them well. They also blamed me when the cows did not give enough milk. I was only one person looking after 30 to 40 cows. There were fields on all the sides of the pasture. The grazing area was in the center and the cows were difficult to control. That was the reason I had to take the beatings. That was my work, looking after the animals.

I did not have enough to wear and the winters in Tibet are very cold. I did not have shoes to wear. The place where I grazed the animals was close to the hills; there were a lot of thorns and in winter my feet cracked. I just had a pair of pants and no inner pants. Due to the residue of urine and dust, the cracks deepened and I would bleed. When the sun rose, it [the cracks] stung me. I couldn't wash my hands and in the dirt the skin cracked. My clothes were so dirty that they were covered with lice. The area around my mouth developed cracks and bled. I did not have any grease to apply and so I applied the lubricants that were used in the vehicles.

In Tibet we had a type of pants for children with a slit bottom, so when you sat down, everything was revealed. When you urinated it trickled on the sides and we couldn't wash. And when the sun rose, the cracks in the feet gave a stinging pain and it bled. When I slept in the house, there was no one to look after me and I had nothing to wear at night. It was extremely cold. There used to be dirt pits filled with *senpa* and horse dung in which dogs

and pigs slept. I was so cold at night that at times, I would dig in there and sleep in the pit. Due to the process of decomposition, heat is generated and it made my body feel warm. I became blue and a lot of hair grew on my body. Besides that, in Tibet people did not go out to urinate at night but used a pot and in the morning people threw the contents in the dirt pit. I would feel the urine on my face while I slept there. I have even slept with the period blood of women on me.

Q: What is the dirt pit?

#90: In Tibet each family dug a pit in the yard to collect their waste. In it were thrown *senpa* and *teri* 'horse dung.' In winter it starts decomposing and heat is produced. Usually only dogs and pigs stayed there. But as a child, I had no one to take care of me and I slept in there.

Q: The people didn't know he was sleeping there when they threw the urine?

#90: Yes, that is right. Normally only pigs and dogs were there. If I slept at home, I didn't have blankets to wear and I was cold. I was even attacked by dogs a few times. I had to sleep with the dogs and once a dog bit me and dragged me. Such things happened. At that time there was no one who showed compassion towards me because if anyone helped me, he would be held guilty. Nobody could mix with me. As a *ngadhak*, I was like a pariah, a person of the Dalai Lama clique. I was in the worst class of people. If two or three people were together, we were not allowed to sit with them. I was the child of a reactionary; my parents were reactionaries and the family, a reactionary family. That was why we were not allowed to be in the company of others.

Q: Had his father told him about His Holiness the Dalai Lama and did he know anything about Gyalwa Rinpoche?

#90: Yes, my father told me a little. One reason for our family being categorized in the worst class was that incarnate lamas have been born in our family. Also in 1959, when people started fleeing to India, our family had given horses or helped them. My father had studied at the Tse School and he was a very learned man. When we were undergoing the difficult times, he told me what we were suffering was due to our karma from our earlier lives. Our suffering cannot be compared to that of His Holiness. He had to leave the Potala Palace and escape to a foreign land. It is nothing for us to leave our house. Moreover, you should never think about opposing the people because this is the accumulation of misdeeds in our past lives and not that of the people. In the old days, the wealthy families might have oppressed the people. This is the result of our karma. His Holiness has to live in a foreign land, our suffering is nothing. That is what my father always used to tell me. He told me to pray.

Q: He was such a little boy that this was happening and he was all alone. It was freezing and did he cry a lot at nights?

#90: Yes, I used to cry a lot. I would cry in the night. That was not all. When I was alone at night, the *Maksungma* would push the door and enter the house. They would search under the beds looking for *tsampa*. They broke the pots and beat me. It was very terrifying at night. There was nothing to do but cry. I used to cry so much that tears made cracks on my face. For one, I didn't have enough to eat and, secondly, there were no parents to take care of me.

Q: Who are the *Maksungma*? Are they Chinese soldiers?

#90: No, they are not actually Chinese soldiers. They were the people selected by the Chinese to form a sort of security group.

Q: Was there no one who showed him compassion during that time?

#90: Though there were some who were kind to me, they could give me a little *tsampa* only secretly. If they openly mingled with me, they would have to suffer the same fate as me. So they didn't dare mix with me. Later when I grew up, all the people of my village used to wonder and say, "How is it that you didn't die and grew into a man? When you were small, there was no one to feed you or cloth you and you suffered so much." Later when I turned into a man, people found it so strange.

Q: So they were surprised.

#90: Yes, they were surprised. Then when I was about 11 or 12 years old, I had to look after the horses belonging to the Chinese officers of the village administration. There were about seven horses, which were riding horses for the officers. In the daytime, I had to graze them in the pastures and in the evening feed them with husk. The trough was a partition built at the front of the horse stall and I was too small to reach it when I had to feed husk to the horses. So first I put the husk in a sack and kept it close by. I then climbed over the manger, pulled up the sack of husk and spread it for the horses to eat. When moving among the horses, I used to pass under the belly of the horses. During the summer we fed husk to the horses.

Q: He climbed over the horses to feed them husk?

#90: No, not over the horses. The horses were tied thus and there was this partition in the front and you fed husk to the horses there. I would climb on the trough, pull up a sack of husk and then feed the horses. While moving around the stable, I could pass under the bellies of the horses as I was small. In summer I took the horses to the pasture for grazing. I rode one horse and led the others, which were tied together with ropes. In summer there were hale storms and the Chinese fired canons. The horses bolted with fear, taking me with them. Sometimes I would fall and be dragged by the horses. This happened several times and I almost died.

Q: When it would hale, the Chinese would fire canons? Why would they fire canons?

#90: If there was a hale storm, the crops would be destroyed. So when it was about to hale, they fired the canons and blasted the black clouds. Then the clouds became white and it couldn't hale. That was why they have canons ready in summer. In the evening I would return with the horses and if it looked like it was going to hale, they fired the canons at the clouds. When they did that, the horses bolted.

Q: They blasted the black clouds?

#90: Yes, and the clouds became white and it couldn't hale. Once the hale falls on the ground, they cannot do anything to stop it. The area was divided for the army to fire the canons. When they did that, the horses bolted. That was during the summer. In winter, I took care of seven horses, six donkeys and 10 *dzo* 'domestic animal bred from a yak and a cow' single-handedly. I might have been about 11 or 12 years old. In the morning I took them out to graze and brought them back in the evening.

The most difficult part was cleaning their dirt. I had to take the dung outside for it to turn into manure. Another difficult part was kneading the cow dung and making small pieces to be stuck on the walls. That was used as firewood.

In winter the dung freezes and it becomes very difficult to thaw. When there was a huge quantity, it really was very difficult. My hands cracked and it became very difficult. That was the hard part in winter. At night around 11 or 12 o'clock, I had to go to feed husk to the animals. I was a small child and used to be very frightened. I had heard about ghosts and such stories and I was terrified, but I had to go, else the next day the officers would beat me. It was terrifying. If I didn't go to feed the animals at night, the next day I was beaten. In this way, I carried on for quite a long while.

Q: For how long?

#90: From age 11 or 12 until the age of 16. By then my sister had met her husband and had a child. She lived in the house and in her place I went to work on the road and canal construction job. When making the canal, we had to stand in rows, one person at a higher level than the other. The person at the lowest point dug the earth and sent up the soil and it was passed on from person to person until it reached the one at the top. As a child, I was not able to dig the mud, so I was left at the top. When the soil was passed to me I had to quickly empty it, lest it fell on the people below, for then they would throw slush on my face. It was a difficult task.

Q: Was this during road construction?

#90: No, this was when we were constructing a water channel. The water channels were built quite high, so people stood in tiers to bring up the soil. As I was small, I was not able to dig the mud, so I was left at the highest ground. The spade was big and I couldn't handle it. When the mud was passed to me, I had to quickly empty it. If not it fell back in the pit and those adults below hurled mud at me and sometimes even hit me. I had to make the

same movement and so holes developed in my hands and knees and they bled. We hardly had anything to eat. At such times, the nights were very long.

Q: Did you work at night?

#90: No, when you lay in bed, there was so much pain. At that time there was so much work to do and so little to eat. Food was very scarce. In my mind I would wish I were dead. I wished I would die soon. It was extremely cold in the winter and we had nothing to wear. The wind blew and my ears cracked, but I had to keep working. I did not have proper shoes on my feet; it was so cold. In the morning when I touched the crowbars, my hands got stuck to it. I was small and I had small hands. When my hands warmed up, there was intense pain and I would cry secretly.

[There is a break for tape change. Discontinuity in interview.]

...write my experience, but I didn't get much time to do that. Today I am really having that platform to share my experiences. I thank you very much for it.

In 1986, I had an audience with His Holiness the Dalai Lama and related my story for about an hour. He listened with rapt attention and patted me and said that I had suffered a lot. However, he consoled me saying that it was not just me alone, but the entire Tibetan population who had faced such difficulties. He advised me that I should write a book on my experiences. I feel very happy that I had the opportunity to meet His Holiness and relate my life experiences to him. But I have not been able to draft my story so far—the reason being that there are many in Tibet who suffered like me. So until now I have not done it.

Then in 1985 my father passed away. During the beatings that my father underwent, two of his ribs were broken. In later years the old illness surfaced and he died. I have omitted something. When we didn't have enough to eat, my father, who belonged to a noble family, told my sister and me about how in the early days they used to enjoy a full spread of eighteen courses. He talked about the delicious food that used to be cooked.

One day my father found a piece of bone. We never had any meat in those days. Perhaps it was a dog or a donkey's bone, which had no meat on it. Wheat flour was very scarce, but with the little that we had, my father crushed the bone and mixed it with the flour and cooked it. However, the bone pieces stuck to the flour and we could not eat it. My sister cried and told my father, "You spoke about eating eighteen courses of food, but you are not able to cook even this. Now you have wasted the flour." Then all three of us sat and cried. There was such a scarcity of food.

Q: How long was this before he died?

#90: It was around 1976. Food was very scarce then. In winter we could gather *sapo* 'nettles.' When summer began there were many different kinds of greens growing and then we mostly ate greens. We did not have any oil to add to the greens. Of course, there was no butter. Since there was no grease of any sort, eating the greens would swell our faces. Some

of our neighbors died from it. While cooking we never had tomatoes or onions or garlic. Whatever we had, like potatoes, we boiled in water and ate. But this too was never in plenty.

Q: Boiled?

#90: Yes, boiled in water. There was no oil or anything of nutritious value. We worked from 8 in the morning to 8 at night. We had a break for lunch. We drank our black tea quickly and had to hurry. In our area, there was a large yield of grains. All the harvests of the farmers were heaped in a place and then trucks arrived from China and took away all the grains. Finally, what remained were husks and dirt. No individual was allowed to keep any grain at that time. So all the grain was taken away and the people had no grain left to eat.

Then from 1978 to 1979, times became better. Grain rations were increased, salary was paid for labor and the previous term of *ngadhak* was removed. That happened due to the visit of Kungo Lobsang Samtenla [a brother of His Holiness the Dalai Lama] and other delegates [from India] to Tibet in 1970. From then the door to the outside world was opened and times became better. Then in 1986, the private properties were given back to the people and each person could earn his livelihood. There were no more struggle sessions. People led their own lives. That was in the 1980's.

Q: Did he know that Mao Tsetung died in 1979? At that time, did he know?

#90: Yes, I heard about it. I was to attend his mourning, I can remember. The general change in China and Tibet occurred after the death of Mao Tse Tung, when Ho Tu Shi came to power. The Vice Premier was called Ho Tu Shi. Mao Tse Tung died in 1976, in September 1976.

Q: Mao Tse Tung and Mao Tu Shi are the same person?

#90: Yes. After the death of Mao Tse Tung, the relaxation policy began. People had the right to work and the beatings stopped. Until then, we were being gripped by them [the Chinese]. I have spoken about my personal life. To talk about the general story about the Tibetans—in Phenpo we had many monasteries of the Jowo Kadampa Gewe Shenyi. Phenpo is surrounded by hills with a river flowing in the center. There were monasteries built on all the hills. In 1959, monks were banned, but the monasteries were not destroyed then, that's what I was told.

The Cultural Revolution began in 1964 to 1965. They started a movement called *nying-shi-tsa-tor*, which means destroying the old and starting anew. Then all the monasteries and temples were destroyed. When the monasteries were to be destroyed, the Chinese ordered the former monks and nuns of those monasteries to destroy their monasteries. They said, "You were the ones who built the monasteries, so you should destroy them. You have to do it." The Chinese were the masterminds, but it was the former monks and nuns who had to destroy their own monasteries.

Q: What happened to him after his father passed away?

#90: In 1986 my father passed away. After he died, I came to India. I escaped from there because I had no right to apply for a passport and I had no money. After my father's death, I escaped with a bag of *tsampa* and a rosary around my neck; mainly to see His Holiness the Dalai Lama. My main aim in life was to become a monk, so in 1986, I made my escape.

Q: How old was he?

#90: It was in 1986.

Q: How old was he?

#90: I was 25 years old.

Q: Why did he want to become a monk?

#90: When we were suffering in those days, my father told me how good it was to become a monk. He taught me to say the basic Buddhist prayers and about the “causes and effects of life.” There were no monks in Tibet and if I met a monk in monk's robes, I would wish “if only I could become a monk and wear such robes!” I had a deep faith in religion at that time. I did my practices like doing prostrations and saying my prayers. When I went to work, I always had a rosary in the pocket of my pants. We were not allowed to use the rosary and recite *mani* openly. The rosary was in my pocket.

Then another reason I wanted to become a monk was this. When I was working in my village, I developed a boil on my hand; the scar is still here [shows the scar on his arm]. At the Chinese hospital they said that I had to undergo a surgery. I was laid up in bed for two months. In our village there was a monk who practiced tantric and he was able to cure me. The wish to follow religion and a change in my life started from there.

Q: Did he witness any religious repressions in Tibet?

#90: In general, there was a strong repression against people practicing religion. In general, the monasteries and temples had caretakers. Outwardly they looked different, but there was no opportunity for actual religious practice. When I was there hardly any monks lived in the monasteries. There were no opportunities for religious studies. It was just opening up; the temple caretakers were there, but religious studies had not resumed. From 1959 to 1986, not many monks in red robes went to the homes of the villagers to perform rituals. Then around 1986 the number of monks gradually increased in Sera, Drepung and Gaden monasteries.

Q: Was he aware of any demonstrations going on before he left Tibet?

#90: There were never any demonstrations at that time; it had not started then. The first demonstration took place in 1987. I came here in 1986. Since 1959, since the bad times, that was the first and the strongest demonstrations that took place.

Q: And what did Tibetans at that time think about the life of Tibetans in exile? What did they think about it? What did they imagine it was like?

#90: People had a lot of hope. We hoped a lot. The Tibetans' biggest hope was that His Holiness the Dalai Lama was traveling to many European countries. We used to listen to the news on the radio everyday. There were no special restrictions to listening to the speeches of His Holiness the Dalai Lama. We used to listen to that, and when we heard about the support of the United States of America and European countries to the Tibetan cause, we had great hopes. When I was in Tibet, I had the feeling that we would regain our independence tomorrow or the day after.

Q: Can he tell us about his journey on coming out of Tibet?

#90: I used to own a bicycle at home. It took about five hours of cycling from my village to Lhasa. I rode my cycle to Lhasa and sold it there for a 100 *yuan*. With this money I traveled from Lhasa to Shigatse in a vehicle, pretending to be on pilgrimage. From Shigatse, I walked for a day, but could not reach anywhere as I had to climb over mountains and did not have any companions. As a blacklisted person earlier, I could not tell anyone of my age group, for if the Chinese came to know, I would be imprisoned or sentenced to life. So I did not tell anyone from my village or my friends. No one knew. At my village in Phenpo, I told them that I was going to Lhasa. At Lhasa I sold my cycle and then said I was going to Shigatse for pilgrimage. From Shigatse I walked one whole day. I had never taken this route before and I was alone. I could not find anything to eat or water to drink. At times I felt like I was going mad; I had different feelings.

While walking, I recited the Tara Prayers. There were many tourist vehicles passing back and forth on the road, but none would give me a lift. At night I met an old man with a donkey. He helped me stop a vehicle and I went back to Shigatse. I spent a night at Shigatse. There I met a driver around my age whose vehicle had developed a puncture in the tire. We repaired the tire and he helped me up to Dam. From Dam to cross into Nepal, I did not have a traveling permit. I met a Nyingmapa Lama. He was around 80 years old.

That [Dam] was the border between Nepal and China. There was a big bridge called Tatopani and in the middle of the bridge was a line indicating Nepal on one side and China on the other. As a landslide had occurred, vehicles were not able to pass. I carried the Nyingmapa Lama, who was 85 years old on my back and told [the border security] that I was taking him to the other side and that's how I made it. It was raining a lot and there was mud and landslides. So among the rush of people I carried the Lama on my back and crossed the bridge. That was really hard because he was a big man. I had to carry him until we were out of sight of the officials across the border. It was raining heavily. The Lama's shoes had holes in them and that made a good excuse. When the Chinese questioned me as

to where I was going, I said the teacher was in great pain and then we had no problems at the border.

Q: They didn't come after him?

#90: So that's how we could get across. Then there was the Reception Centre of the Tibetan Government after crossing over the Tatopani Bridge. The Reception Centre helped me and at Nepal, I stayed for four days at the Nyingmapa Lama's house. I felt very happy then.

Q: Was Tatopani a river?

#90: It's a bridge on a river, which has hot water. The bridge was the border between Nepal and Tibet. Then we were taken to the Reception Centre in Nepal. They asked me where I wanted to go. I said I wanted to go to Sera Monastery [in Bylakuppe, India] and they enlisted me. The Reception Centre paid for our passage from Nepal to Delhi. At that time we were among the first newcomers from Tibet and they received us very well. The Reception Centre in Delhi received us and handed us over to the Reception Centre in Dharamsala. At Dharamsala I didn't stay at the Reception Centre. I had a relative in the Tibetan Medical Centre with whom I stayed.

The next day we were given the audience with His Holiness the Dalai Lama. We were three of us; a Khampa [a person from Kham Province], an Amdowa [a person from Amdo or Dhomay Province] and myself. We were given a special audience. His Holiness on seeing us asked where we were from. My two companions were not able to talk much, so I got the opportunity to speak for an hour.

In my mind I imagined His Holiness to be sitting on a high throne, as I had never seen him in Tibet. When I first saw His Holiness, he was sitting on a low chair and he told us to prostrate and sit down. At that time it was Kugno Tenpa Samkharla who was in service. We sat down on the ground near His Holiness. He asked us what the reasons for coming there were; which part of Tibet we came from and what we were doing. I explained the events that took place [in Tibet] and the sufferings as the reasons for my coming.

Then His Holiness asked us what we wanted to do in the future; whether we wanted to go to school or become monks and that whatever it was that we decided, the Tibetan Government would take care of it. I told His Holiness that I wanted to become a monk. But His Holiness told me that for the time being I should stay there and relax and that whatever problems I had could be solved. He told us to relax and be happy.

Then His Holiness explained to us about the functioning of the Government-in-exile since 1959 until that date. I thought I didn't know much about the general circumstances in Tibet. For one, I was young and, secondly, lived in the village. To be frank, the villagers had no awareness about politics. So I spoke about my family for about an hour and a half, in a leisurely manner. His Holiness told me to stay there for the time being and he would see what the best thing for me to do was.

One of my companions wanted to join the Namgyal Datsang Monastery and the other chose to go to school. At the office they asked for my choice. I contemplated over this; I did not have any qualification to be able to serve in the Tibetan Government and the simplest thing at that time was to join the monastery. So I came to Sera Monastery.

A month later in October, His Holiness visited Sera Monastery. His Holiness had asked me to stay on in Dharamsala and had not granted me permission to leave. Then in Sera Monastery I again went to see His Holiness and this time as a monk in monk's robes—earlier I was dressed in layman's clothes. His Holiness said, "You had agreed to stay in Dharamsala, but now you are here. It is good. You should take this opportunity to receive your monk vows." He also asked me if I was having enough to eat. In Tibet I had been without food and here, irrespective of taste, we had rice and dhal to eat. I replied that I had no problems at all. His Holiness was very happy and he immediately took a thousand rupees from his table and the fruits in the tray and gave them to me.

Q: Was that the *Getsul* monk vows?

#90: There are two vows a monk has to take, first the *Getsul* vows and then the *Gelong* vows. To be able to take the *Gelong* vows, you have to be at least 20 years old. Since I was 25, I took both the *Getsul* and *Gelong* vows together. I mean, on the first day I took the *Getsul* vows and the next day the *Gelong* vows. Actually, the list for the number of monks taking the vows was already completed earlier, but my name was specially added by His Holiness.

Q: Had he told His Holiness that he wanted to become a monk when he had the audience with him?

#90: Yes, I told His Holiness. When in Dharamsala he asked me what I wanted to do, I replied that I wanted to become a monk. At that time the monasteries in south India were said to have very poor food, just rice and dhal. However, Namgyal Datsang monks had better food. Perhaps His Holiness thought I might be of some help there. He had asked me to stay in Dharamsala for the time being. His Holiness told me that to pursue a religious education, the best monasteries were Sera, Drepung and Gaden, but not to go anywhere for the time being. However, I did not have much to offer in terms of information—just about myself - and His Holiness is very busy. I did not have the confidence to seek an audience again and again. That's what I thought.

So I came to Sera Monastery and when I again saw His Holiness, he told me, "I asked you to stay in Dharamsala and you haven't. However, it is right and good that you are here. The food is poor; how are you doing? Do you face any problems?" I felt happy here because I had suffered so much in Tibet. Having related those sufferings, His Holiness showed me special concern and love. He told me, "Study well and in case of any problems in the future, you should tell me and I will help you."

Q: Is there any particular reason why he picked Sera and not Drepung or Gaden?

#90: The Lama who practiced tantric and helped cure me of the boil in Tibet was from Sera Jey Monastery. That was the reason. However, when I first arrived in Dharamsala, I received many invitations to join Sera, Gaden and Drepung Monasteries. In my mind I wanted to go to Sera Monastery and at the Reception Centre in Nepal, I had enlisted to go to Sera Monastery. I didn't want to stay in Dharamsala or anywhere else, I only had the thought of joining Sera Monastery.

Q: What happened to his sister? Is she still in Tibet?

#90: She is still in Tibet. She has three children and her husband. Now she is about 55-56 years old. I think she is doing just about okay in her livelihood, but we are not able to communicate much.

Q: He hasn't communicated?

#90: Yes, we have communicated.

Q: Can Geshe-*la* talk a little bit about what the Dharma has taught him about the suffering that he has been through in his life?

#90: The happy part of my life started after meeting His Holiness the Dalai Lama. The fruit of practicing the dharma is the happiness and a better re-birth in the next life. Those hopes enter my mind. And the sufferings under the Chinese have taught me the lesson not to desire wealth, good clothes and buildings. If such thoughts enter the mind, I remember the sheep shed that I lived in and feel so thankful that I live in a house which has a door! Such thoughts automatically enter my mind.

Q: Is there anything else he'd like to add before we stop?

#90: There is nothing special left for me to say. I do not have much to say in general about Tibet's politics because I lived my life in misery there. I did not have the chance to learn about the political situations at that time and did not have much knowledge. So my story is only about my individual experiences.

However, my personal experience is an example of the sufferings of the entire Tibetan people, some of whom have undergone much worse sufferings than I. There are many who suffered much more than I and mine is just an example. His Holiness the Dalai Lama had asked me to write down my memoirs and until now I have not done it, so today I am very happy that you have given me the opportunity to speak and share my experiences on the distress of my early life. And for what you are doing now, whether in terms of economic or political support for the cause of Tibet, the support from America, I would like to thank you very much. I request and hope that you will continue to lend your support until the truth about Tibet is revealed.

Q: We shall do whatever we can for sure.

#90: [Nods]

Q: The part of the audience, the proposed audience for these interviews is the young generation of Tibetans now growing up in exile who have never been to Tibet. What advice does he have for this young generation of Tibetans in exile?

#90: I am not able to say much as advice. But to speak from experience, earlier I served as a teacher at the Sera Jey School teaching religion. Every teacher must relate the past experiences and the suffering of the people to the younger students often. The happiness we are enjoying now is because of the grace of His Holiness the Dalai Lama, especially for those Tibetans who have come into exile. They are more inclined towards accumulating wealth, which I think is wrong. We are like guests here and we have to hope to go back eventually to our own country. So the thought of permanently staying here and concentrating on material progress should be lessened.

Those who came from Tibet around my age, almost all of them know clearly about the situation in Tibet and those should be told to the students through their parents. Especially in the schools, these experiences should be told to the students and the memories of those days recalled. Only when such memories are recalled can one feel the present happy state.

But we cannot stay contented that we are happy because we do not have our own country. Wherever we may be, if the host country asks us to leave, then we will realize that we are in a sad situation. So before that happens, we should know—where have we come from? why have we come? For example those who came from Tibet around my age—I am 45 years old now—we should share the information that we have about Tibet—that earlier we have suffered like this; things were not like what it is now; at present we are living in someone else's country; we have to go back to our country. These should be recalled time and again. I think that would be good.

Q: I have a question about that and then I think Ronny [videographer] has a question. I am interested because his experiences of Tibet were all so negative and I can't imagine he has very many happy experiences of Tibet and would he still like to go back to Tibet?

#90: If Tibet gains independence and if His Holiness the Dalai Lama were to return, I would go back to Tibet. If His Holiness does not go back to Tibet, then the thought of returning does not arise for me. Whenever I think of Tibet, I remember the old misery.

Q: Following up on that, he and his family have suffered so much under the Chinese, what are his feelings about the Chinese?

#90: Before I started my Buddhist practice, I used to get negative feelings, like confronting the Chinese and causing them harm. However, since I began my Buddhist studies 20 years back, our religion teaches about all the sentient beings. So I feel the Chinese are not to be blamed, it is our destiny and the misery is due to ignorance. Everybody aspires for happiness and people go by different ways to achieve happiness. I have erred in my earlier

thinking. I pray that we gain our independence, but at the same time I pray that even the Chinese should find happiness. So what I have suffered is over.

Since I began Buddhist studies, I never think that the Chinese should suffer like I did. Since everyone wants happiness, I hope they find happiness. I pray that the truth about Tibet will be revealed. I pray. For example, Buddhist dharma says that if you cause harm to someone in this life, the suffering will come back to you in your next life. So for those people, especially those who have caused us harm and subjected us to the struggle sessions, I pray that because they caused us suffering that they should not have to suffer on account of us. I pray for this.

Q: What were his emotions when he had his audience with His Holiness in Dharamsala? Did he laugh, did he cry, and was he frightened?

#90: When I first set my eyes on His Holiness the Dalai Lama, I couldn't see his face clearly because of the tears in my eyes. That night I couldn't sleep thinking whether it was real or it was a dream. I was so happy. It was like I had accomplished everything in my life. I was happy and for days I couldn't sleep, wondering whether this was real or a dream. I was so overcome with joy that while returning, I couldn't even walk properly. In my mind it felt like I was going to fall.

Q: Tell Geshe-*la* thank you so much for taking the time to talk to us today. We really appreciate it.

END OF INTERVIEW