

# **Tibet Oral History Project**

**Interview #2C – Ngawang Dakpa, Geshe  
April 26, 2013**

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# TIBET ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

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## INTERVIEW SUMMARY SHEET

1. Interview Number: #2C
2. Interviewee: Ngawang Dakpa, Geshe
3. Age: 80
4. Date of Birth: 1933
5. Sex: Male
6. Birthplace: Nagchu
7. Province: Utsang
8. Year of leaving Tibet: 1959
9. Date of Interview: April 26, 2013
10. Place of Interview: Tse Chen Ling, San Francisco, California, USA
11. Length of Interview: 2 hr 39 min
12. Interviewer: Marcella Adamski
13. Interpreter: Nyima Tsam
14. Videographer: Tony Sondag
15. Translator: Tenzin Yangchen

### **Biographical Information:**

Geshe Ngawang Dakpa was born in Nagchukha into a nomadic family. The family reared yak, goats and sheep, but did not need to move often. Geshe Ngawang Dakpa reveals that he was a naughty child who broke his toys and hid from his parents.

Geshe Ngawang Dakpa recalls how he was inducted into monkhood at the age of 10. He explains the process of memorizing scriptures and the desire he had to study Tibetan medicine and astrology. He describes the types of astrology and the uses of these astrological calculations in everyday life of the Tibetans.

Geshe Ngawang Dakpa was praised as one of the top students and longed to go to Sera Monastery near Lhasa for further studies. He was finally permitted to enroll in Sera in 1954 and was given the opportunity to participate in philosophical debates. He describes how the debates are conducted between monks.

Geshe Ngawang Dakpa describes his experience of the turmoil in Lhasa in 1959 as a result of the Chinese occupation. Many monks left Sera Monastery to collect guns and defend themselves against Chinese attacks. Geshe Ngawang Dakpa witnessed the shelling of the Norbulingka and Potala Palaces, the smoke and dust rising around the city, and monks and laypeople fleeing.

### **Topics Discussed:**

Utsang, childhood memories, nomadic life, monastic life, Buddhist beliefs, astrology, Norbulingka, March 10<sup>th</sup> Uprising, resistance.

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## Interview #2C

**Interviewee: Ngawang Dakpa, Geshe**

**Age: 80, Sex: Male**

**Interviewer: Marcella Adamski**

**Interview Date: April 26, 2013**

Question: *Geshe-la* ‘respectful term for a monk with Buddhist philosophy degree,’ please tell us your full name.

00:00:21

**Interviewee #2C: Ngawang Dakpa.**

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

**#2C: Yes, that is okay.**

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

00:01:51

**#2C: That is okay. [I] will talk about whatever [I] know.**

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

**#2C: That is fine.**

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

**#2C: That is fine.**

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

**#2C: That will depend upon the question and the content.**

Q: I understand and we will ask the same question at the end of the interview in case you have some reservations.

00:03:22

**#2C: Okay.**

Q: *Geshe-la*, would you like some tea or something?

**#2C: [Sips tea]**

Q: *Geshe-la*, I would like to begin by asking where were you born in Tibet and who was in your family?

[Interpreter interprets as: *Geshe-la*, firstly please talk about where [you] were born in Tibet, how and who was in the family?]

**#2C: I was born in the eastern part of the town of Nagchukha that lies in the north of Lhasa in Tibet into a nomadic family called Othok. [I] was born like everyone else. [Smiles] When I could remember, there were my parents, a grandmother, an older brother and three sisters. In all there were eight members in the family including me. [We] were nomads.**

**Nagchu is a town. It is extensive, the [place] called Nagchukha.**

Q: If you had a nomadic life, did you travel far from your home during the year?

**#2C: Normally there was not need for much travelling. There were the animals, most importantly the *dri* ‘female yak’ and yaks. Then there were goats and sheep that were reared. [Our] livelihood depended on that. In addition to that there were *thayeng* [?]. Because it was a nomadic site, there were no donkeys, cows or such kinds. There were no pigs or such kinds.**

Q: *Geshe-la*, do you have any memories of yourself as a little boy, maybe under 10 years old? Can you recall any stories or activities that you did when you were little?

00:08:08

**#2C: In general we were five siblings, five siblings. I was the naughtiest among the five. So [I] threw tantrums and showed anger at the parents. Sometimes [I] fled and did things like that.**

**Sometimes the parents scolded and [I] fled from home. When it grew dark, instead of returning home [I] hid in alcoves. Then the parents feared the child was lost and went in search everywhere. Then [I] would emerge. [I] did such things.**

**[I] threw tantrums demanding playthings from the parents. Once given, [I] would play with these and break them.**

Q: You were a mischievous little boy.

[Interpreter laughs]

**#2C: [To interpreter] What did [the interviewer] say?**

[Interpreter to Interviewee]: That [you] were mischievous.

**#2C: That is right. [I] was the worst behaved among the siblings, the worst one. However, parents are such that [they] loved me. [I] was the fourth among five siblings.**

Q: *Geshe-la*, can you tell us any memories you have of what your mother was like and what your father was like? It was a long time ago but I wonder if you have any memories that you hold?

00:11:23

**#2C: Both parents were soft-tempered and gentle. I have never seen or remember them arguing or being angry with each other in my life. It was like that but father passed away when I was 11 years old.**

Q: *Geshe-la*, what caused his death?

**#2C: Initially, it seemed like a cold and later [he] developed water retention in the body and passed away.**

Q: You were 11 years old. How did the family survive when you were so young?

**#2C: Mother bore the main responsibility of survival. Mother took care of it. Besides her, there was a brother of father, a paternal uncle who was a monk. He took good care [of us].**

Q: *Geshe-la*, can you describe the scenery around your village, your small village and how many people lived there?

00:14:13

**#2C: Generally there were few families. There were four families in the village where my home was based. If one walked a distance of 5-6 [?] there were another three to four families. In general the population was less. There were not many families.**

Q: What was the nearest *gonpa* or monastery to your village?

**#2C: Monastery?**

Q: Yes, monastery.

**#2C: The nearest monastery was located in the village called Othok. The monastery was called Tharpaling and the sect followed was Geluk. It was a branch of the Sera Je [Monastery]. That was the nearest monastery.**

Q: And was it like a day's ride or walk? How long to walk there or get there?

00:16:29

**#2C: Walking from my home, one would reach it in around two and half hours. It was not very far.**

**However, there was a hill in between and it was a difficult walk. You could not view the monastery from home.**

Q: You said your family was nomads. Was your childhood, say up to 11—did you have sufficient food and housing? Was it comfortable or were conditions difficult for you?

**#2C: When father was alive there were no particular problems in [our] livelihood. The family was not a wealthy one. However, there were no problems with food.**

Q: *Geshe-la*, were there any favorite foods that you remember from your childhood that tasted delicious to you?

00:19:06

**#2C: The most delicious items for the nomads were curds and milk. [We] used curds and milk.**

Q: When the family moved the herds to new grazing, when you were a little boy did you go with the family to take the herds to different grazing locations?

**#2C: Generally for the nomads, if the animals did not have grass to eat, if the grass in a certain area was depleted, the animals must be moved to where there was grass available.**

**There were two categories of migration. There was one type where a nomad moved with everything, including the *ba* or tent. They migrated with everything to a location with good grass, which was one kind. In some families, half the family remained in the usual spot while some of the members took the flock to a place with good grass. There were some that followed this.**

**I can recall the entire family moving three times.**

**During such times even the brooms in the home must be taken along, as there was no place to keep them.**

Q: And you put it on yaks to carry it?

00:22:42

**#2C: Yes, loaded on yaks and then moved.**

Q: Was that fun for a young boy to move like that?

**#2C: One felt happy when one arrived at a new place.**

Q: *Geshe-la*, when you were a young boy, did you have any dreams or wishes of what you wanted to do when you became a grown man?

**#2C: One did not have any particular aim at a very young age. One just played and whiled away the time in such ways. There was no thought of what one would do when older.**

**[I] would be so engrossed in playing that [I] could not stop when the parents called [me] for meals. That was how one whiled away time.**

Q: Single minded attention...for play.

00:25:14

**#2C: Yes, it was like that. There were me and boys of my age related [to me]. When [I] found such a companion, one did not realize the passage of time.**

Q: *Geshe-la*, when did your childhood change? Were there any significant events that happened when you were 10 and 11?

**#2C: [I] was taken to the monastery at the age of 10 and made a monk. During [my] stay at the monastery, there was the brother of father, the paternal uncle I spoke of earlier and also another one. They took care of me at the monastery.**

**At the monastery one had to study the rites and rituals. And [I] studied such.**

**It was the parents that took [me] to the monastery to become a monk and not I that joined the monastery because I believed life as a monk would be good and happy.**

**When I first arrived at the monastery, there were many monks. The monastery consisted of 260-270 monks, all of whom [I] did not know. There was fear that they might beat [me].**

Q: You were new in a new place.

00:28:53

**#2C: And then my temperament changed. [I] became less active.**

[Interpreter interprets as: So what I used to be little bit sort of subsided.]

[Interviewer to interpreter]: Excited? Nervous?

[Interpreter to interviewer]: Subsided. You know what I used to be...

Q: Subsided. The way I used to behave changed. I became quieter.

00:29:16

**#2C: Now one had to study.**

Q: Not so mischievous.

*Geshe-la*, what is your understanding of why did your parents choose you to become a monk? Why did they make that decision?



**#2C: Generally every Tibetan believes that if a boy could become a monk, [he] has been left at the best place. Likewise it was so in my region. If your son could be left at the monastery to become a monk and remained one, the feeling was one of having done an exceptionally good thing and the belief that the result would be good. Therefore, it must have been based on that that [I] was left [at the monastery].**

**It seems there are two reasons to look at it. One being that becoming a monk meant your livelihood became easier. It was an easy [life] to lead; that seems to be one of the reasons. The other was that everyone was highly devout. Becoming a monk and practicing the dharma would benefit yourself and others, and bring benefit in this life and the next. Those thoughts were there, it seems. Whatever it may be, [Tibetans] loved becoming monks.**

Q: Initially when your parents selected you, were you happy to go or were you excited or afraid to go and leave your family? What was your initial memory?

00:33:14

**#2C: There was not any special [feelings] like [I] will be left at the monastery and it will be hard. [I] have no memories of not wishing to leave. I do not recall feeling excited about going to the monastery. It was sort of hazy and ultimately [I] was left at the monastery.**

Q: Did you come back home and see your family from time to time?

**#2C: Yes, [I] did. After staying long at the monastery, it was a joy to return home because there was relaxation. [I] felt happy.**

**However, one had to study. “During your time at home...” One would be given a scripture portion like this [makes a gap of 12 inches between hands] “...see that [you] are able to recite it from memory when [you] return to the monastery later.” And one must do this accordingly.**

**However, generally I did not face problem memorizing. [I] am one who can memorize quickly but sometimes [I] would be lazy and there were times when [I] could not memorize the entire portion at the time of returning.**

00:36:12

**Once it was time to return to the monastery and [I] had been unable to memorize the given portion. However, [I] had to return and mother accompanied me to the monastery. [I] did not want to go to the monastery for [I] had not done the memorizing. Midway [I] said that I had stomach ache. [I] wailed and [indicates pressing on] stomach and almost fell. [Mother] did her best and finally said, “Shall [we] go back home?” [I] replied, “Yes, that would be better.” So [we] returned home midway. Once back home, [mother] made [me] lie down. [I] lay for a short while but could not fall asleep. So [I] got up because [I] was not sick in any way. Such a thing happened.**

Q: What did you like about the monastery and what was difficult for you, *geshe-la*, as a child?

**#2C: Rules in the monastery were strict. There were two abbots, a senior and junior who saw to the upkeep of the rules. Then there were two chant leaders, and disciplinarians, who were also two in number. There was a risk of receiving an immediate beating if one played around. Therefore, when one attended the prayer assembly, it was necessary to remain upright without moving the whole day. So, one was worried about receiving a beating.**

Q: Would you get hit?

00:41:02

**#2C: Yes, [they] would hit. One was not allowed to talk, sleep or look here and there like this [moves head left to right] but sit upright, like a statue of the Buddha. [Laughs]**

**It was not so severe in the larger monasteries. It was more relaxed in the large monasteries like Sera, Drepung and Gaden. They did not have such strict regulations.**

Q: This was in Othok, the monastery?

**#2C: Yes. Othok is a Mongolian term. It means nomad.**

Q: That was the name of the monastery or where the monastery was...?

[Interpreter to interviewer]: ...where the monastery was located.

Q: And the name of the monastery again, please?

**#2C: Tharpaling.**

Q: *Geshe-la*, besides memorizing scriptures were you taught anything about the Buddha dharma that you now maybe want to teach young people or Westerners yourself? Were you given those kinds of teachings or was it mostly memorization and ritual?

00:43:31

**#2C: Initially, it was necessary to learn to write and read. After mastering it, one had to memorize the many chants and rituals that were usually performed in the monastery. These had to be chanted from memory and not read from the scriptures during prayer assemblies at the monastery. So it was mainly for this purpose.**

**The normal course was that after you became a senior monk, new little ones joined the monastery and you teach them in turn. Initially you studied and memorized mainly because these must be chanted in the monastery. [The memorized portion] must be used and it was for that purpose.**

Q: What were some of the first understandings that you had as a young boy about the teachings of the Buddha dharma, not the rituals necessarily and not the text, the actual teachings of the Buddha? Was there a time that you began to understand them?

**#2C: [I] completed the mandatory memorization of scripture of the monastery in three years. I was very young; perhaps 13 or 14 years old at the time I completed this. All the monks of the monastery exclaimed that [I] had an excellent memory and made it well-known that [I] was highly accomplished. [Laughs]**

**[I] had completed all the memorization. [I] was not one that forgot soon after memorization. [I] was one that had a very steady [memory]. So [I] stood first among the monks. Therefore, they made it famous and praised [me].**

00:47:40

**Subsequently, there was a monastery in the large town of Nagchukha called Shapten Gon. The monastery at Nagchu had a lama named Samten Rinpoche. He gave many teachings. A few of us monks left to receive teachings. There was a monk of our monastery known as Dugyang who had stayed for a short while at Sera [Monastery]. He could not chant any prayers and was considered one among those that knew nothing. When [we] were receiving teaching together...While the discourse was being given, he could understand a bit having been at Sera and studied the debate scriptures a little. I could not understand a word of the teachings. Dugyang could follow a little and made some jottings. Therefore, due to this [I] realized that [I] had gone wrong and should go to Sera to study.**

**In addition, I had two relatives who were lamas. They returned to the monastery after a few years in Sera. Later the senior one did not go back to Sera and he talked about the education available in Sera, how good it was to study there and so on. So [I] felt a great desire to go.**

00:53:26

**So [I] had a great desire to go to Sera to study. The younger relative was there [at Sera Monastery] but the teachers would not allow [me] to leave. A long time elapsed in this way. [I] had two paternal uncles [who did not permit me to go].**

**The reason for not letting [me] go was that there were monks from [Tharpaling] monastery who went to Sera but returned without having done any studies and having roamed around and fallen in debts. [I] was not allowed to go fearing such consequences.**

Q: To go to Sera Jey would mean that you would have to go to Lhasa, right? And this would be a big city with many temptations, opportunities, distractions. Is that part of the reason they were afraid to let you go?

00:55:41

**#2C: It cannot be that. Mainly perhaps [they] believed if one were sent at a young age, survival would be difficult. One would not be able to utilize the things that may be sent [from home]. Perhaps it was the thought that [I] would face difficulties similar to what the others had undergone. That was one and secondly, having been brought up in a happy environment from a young age, [they] did not want to let [me] go.**

Q: Were you considered above average student at your monastery when you were young because you could memorize and retain so much?

**#2C: [I] was the excellent one among the best. They considered [me] of great importance. [I] was always seated beside the chant leader to accompany him. It was mandatory [for me] to sit beside the chant leader.**

**It was not just the memorization part but other lessons like creating sand mandalas, playing ritual objects, singing the chant tunes; there were many to be learned. [I] was supposed to have studied and accomplished all of that.**

Q: Did [you] learn to blow the long horn?

00:59:00

**#2C: [I] could not blow the long horn. [I] did not learn that.**

**Then there was the making of ritual dough offerings. [I] used to let that fall upon whoever was [my] companion. So I could not learn the creation of ritual dough offerings well. There are many kinds of shapes that are created.**

**While I did the chanting part, they did the job of creating the ritual dough offerings. [I] did not handle that part and so did not become good at that.**

Q: *Geshe-la*, I'm very interested in understanding what was it in your heart that wanted to go to Sera Jey because you said, "I understood the ritual was not what I wanted. I wanted something else". What was the something else you were hoping to learn?

**#2C: Mainly while at the local monastery, [I] had a great desire to study medicine. However, due to the lack of medical teachers, medicines and scriptures [I] could not learn medicine in this lifetime.**

01:02:03

**In the medical [studies], there are four ways of diagnosing an illness: checking the pulse, urine analysis, observing the patient's face and asking questions. There is a lesson in the scriptures called *tsadho chundho*, which is about checking the pulse and analyzing the urine. [I] memorized them and did make preparations but the facilities were lacking and now [I] have forgotten everything.**

**Then about astrology, there was a good teacher for astrology and [I] got the opportunity to study it.**

Q: Was that at your local monastery or Sera Jey?

**#2C: Local.**

Q: Can you talk to us a little bit about Tibetan astrology and why it's important?

01:04:54

**#2C: One can say that there are four sections in Tibetan astrology. It is fine to assume that.**

Astrology originated from China from the time of the Tibetan King Songtsen Gampo in the 7<sup>th</sup> century. It is called *jungtsi*, as it is based on the five *jungwa* ‘elements.’ In the common language it is called *nagtsi* ‘black astrology’ because its origin is *Gyanag* ‘China.’ Well, there is such a section.

There is also the 12-year cycle and the eight *parkha*.

Q: What’s *parkha*?

#2C: It means the eight drawings.

Q: What’s the *parkha*? [I] don’t understand.

#2C: It means the eight drawings.

*Parkha* is a drawing, which consists of deities and elements that can be differentiated.

Well, so there is such a tradition. There is not much to draw for scientific investigations.

Though there is nothing black in astrology, it is called so because it originated from China.

Q: *Geshe-la*, what role... Why was astrology so important within Tibetan Buddhism? What was it used for?

#2C: [I] will talk about the others first.

There is another [part of astrology] that originated from India called *dhukhor shitsi* ‘four Kalachakra astrology.’

01:08:34

Calculations are drawn based on the movement of the solar system of the sky.

These days it can compete with the scientific methods. There is not much difference in the calculations. The scientists say so.

There is another type of astrology from India known as *yangshartsi* that the Hindus use. It is called *yangshar*, *yang* meaning ‘*yang* and *sargye* [?].’ It is that kind of *yang*.

Q: [I] don’t understand this well.

01:09:38

#2C: It is known as *saravadha*...*yang*, *shar*, *nup*...for example, the sun rises in the east and sets in the west.

Q: Oh, the directions...

**#2C: The calculations are based on the directions of the rising and setting [sun].**

**There are the 12 *khim* signs. Is it not 12 *khim* signs? What is *khim* [in English]?**

[Interpreter to Interviewee]: Is it *khimitsang* ‘family’? I see. Okay. That’s the zodiac sign.

**#2C: It is similar to making divinations based on the nine planets in the zodiac. It is not in line with science. It is like making divinations.**

01:11:21

**It seems this is found in the West. It is there in Italy.**

**These days there is one type of astrology in China. This ancient astrology and the one that originated in the West combined and this was prevalent in Tibet.**

**It contained the calculations based on the Kalachakra and the movement of the solar system.**

01:12:21

**Besides that the elders of Tibet knew from experience the particular changes that took place during summer, winter, autumn or spring, like the length of daylight and the signs that came with different times. There are many different calculations.**

**For example, at one particular point of time the frogs croak. [The elders knew] when that time came. At a certain time all the fish swim towards the snowy mountains. [The elders knew] when [the fish] would swim there. During a certain time *pingyurma* ‘kites’ and such migrated to Tibet. [The elders] knew when the time arrived. Likewise, there are numerous calculations, which the elders reveal from experience. There are many categories of calculations like these.**

Q: What’s *pingyurma*?

**#2C: There is something called *pingyurma* here. [Laughs]**

Q: Is it a bird?

**#2C: [It is found] here.**

01:14:49

**Now about the question you asked earlier. The *nagtsi* that originated from China is used during the birth of a child. Calculations are done to find the child’s fortune, the length of its life and such from the astrology that came from China. [To interpreter] She [interviewer] asked what it is used for.**

**Then if a boy and girl were going to be newly married, there is a calculation called *paktsi* to know whether they would be compatible or not.**

At the time of sickness, there is one called *naytsi* that could predict what the illness was, what harmful beings *dhon* had caused it and what prayers and rituals must be performed.

01:17:00

And then there is a computation that could foretell what the fortunes of a person would be in a year and whether there were any obstacles that would hinder [his] life. That is called *kirts* and [the calculation] covered one year.

That is four, right?

Q: Yes.

#2C: The other is *shitsi* that is used when a person died.

It is to find out what harmful beings had caused it, who had cut off the life, whether the lifeline had ended or not and when the body should be taken out [of the house]; it pertained to such. And also where [the deceased] would take rebirth and what prayers and meritorious deeds must be observed.

01:19:03

So, in this way there are five principal parts in astrology. There are five main parts that are computed. The main five are the ones [I] have spoken about now. In addition there are many minor ones that will be too much to talk about, like divination. Then there is the most common one of studying *sakye* that is a part of *nagtsi*.

Q: What's *sashe*?

#2C: To study *sakye*, right? Feng shui? What is it called? If one is building a house, it is to study if the site is suitable.

Q: To find out if the site is suitable?

#2C: Yes, to find out the site's constitution. The Chinese consider this as very important.

01:20:50

*Karts*, as in the Kalachakra astrology, is mainly based on the movement of the sun and solar system. What it is used for is... There are four seasons, summer, autumn, winter and spring. The scientists say that the earth revolves around the sun. The astrologers that compute *karts* say that the sun revolves around the earth. Whatever it may be the changes of the four seasons occur due to that. Therefore, based on that the farmer decides when to sow the land, when to channel water, when to fertilize; it is used for such purposes.

Ultimately the calculations that result into a year [as the standard] are similar. Then there are predictions if there will be rainfall or not, and whether there will be snow during winter or not.

Q: *Geshe-la*...

01:22:56

**#2C: [I] will add one more thing. These days a great many questions are asked about finding the best days to perform a job in accordance with both the *kartsi* and *nagtsi*.**

Q: Is it day by day?

**#2C: Yes, to find the good and bad days in order to begin a venture. It is used at such times.**

Q: *Geshe-la*, this is very interesting and very helpful but I must request that we go on with your personal story about what happened when you left the monastery and I also wanted to ask if this would be a good time to take a little break for five minutes to refresh, get some water, something, some tea? Would this be a good time to take a break? Then I want to come back to hear your story about what happens when you leave your first monastery and go to Sera Jey.

**#2C: Okay.**

Q: *Geshe-la*, we have a long life to cover.

I have one last question. Did anybody do your astrology chart and is there anything you would be willing to share with us about what they said about your life and your activities?

01:25:01

**#2C: Not specifically because astrological results stem from many sources. For instance, if 10 people gather to debate on one subject, each person will put forth an opinion. Each person will put forth an opinion that will be collected and a decision reached. Astrology is similar to that for results are based on planets, stars, birth signs, some of which are similar and some not, right? All these must be collected and a conclusion reached. This conclusion would depend upon the experience and expertise of the astrologer. So there has been no particular chart made for me. What should happen will happen and what should not will not. Some of those predictions turn out right and some do not.**

**Mainly a calendar is formulated. Creating a calendar is problematic and a lot of work. It is not easy at all. It is 2-4 months of work for one person. It is not easy.**

[Discontinuity in video]

Q: *Geshe-la*, I would like to please ask how long were you at your monastery and when did you go to Sera? How did that happen, the change happen?

01:28:39

**#2C: [I] got the opportunity to go to Sera in the year 1954. [I] think it was the year '54.**

Q: What made that possible for you to go?



**#2C: I had become older by then. When I made the decision and pushed it, [I] was allowed to go.**

Q: Was that the first time when you went to Sera Jey... Was that the first time you had been there? What was that experience like, to see this enormous monastery?

01:29:56

**#2C: Generally it was not the first time [I] visited Sera Monastery. Perhaps it was the third. Earlier [I] had been on a pilgrimage and visited Sera. [I] returned after seeing Sera. Later [I] visited Sera once again but could not remain and went back. [I] got to live permanently in Sera during the third time.**

**The monastery was grand with many *datsang* ‘sections in a great monastery’ and *khangtsen* ‘a smaller community within a monastery in which monks of one geographical area live,’ many monks and [I] found it amazingly good.**

Q: About how many monks were there, *geshe-la*?

**#2C: Generally it used to be orally mentioned as 5,500 in Sera. It was deemed that there were 5,500 monks altogether.**

**However, it seemed more than that. It was said in the year 1958 that there were 5,000 in Sera alone. Perhaps there were over 8,000 in total. No, more than 7,000 in Sera.**

Q: Were you going to be studying under a teacher or did you have a special teacher at Sera Jey?

01:32:41

**#2C: Generally in the great monasteries [Sera, Drepung and Gaden] there are no teachers appointed by the monastery. Each one must search for a teacher. My teacher was the lama, a relative of mine that I mentioned earlier. The lama who was a relative had already completed the *geshe* ‘Buddhist philosophy’ degree. Hence, when I arrived there he became my teacher and I learned from him. The teacher’s name was Tashi Bum.**

Q: Tashi...?

**#2C: Bum.**

Q: Is he the one who has a *geshe* degree?

[Someone off camera explains relationship between interviewee and teacher to interpreter but speech not discernible.]

**#2C: The lama and I shared the same teacher.**

Q: The lama...?

[Clarification from someone off camera]

Q: Who received a *geshe* degree?

**#2C: The lama who was related to me.**

Q: Oh, and the teacher also completed [*geshe* degree]?

**#2C: Yes, and that lama's name was Kalsang Shar.**

Q: I see, Kalsang Shar. And Tashi Bum...?

01:34:34

**#2C: ...was that lama's teacher as also mine.**

Q: Tashi Bum was the teacher and the lama's name?

**#2C: It is Kalsang Shar.**

Q: *Geshe-la*, can you tell us any personal memories you have? You were 19 years old when you went to Sera Jey. Can you tell us any personal stories or memories of your life there, so we can have a picture of what life was like for you, personal stories?

01:35:49

**#2C: There was not anything special that happened. Upon reaching Sera, one received an audience of the abbot and joined the institution. Then one studied and gave further tests to be eligible to take part in the debate sessions. After passing the tests, one attended the debate sessions. It was the same everywhere. It was like that. So in this way after studying for three years, the good students gave the *tsoklang* test. What *tsoklang* means is, during the monastery's *tsok* 'prayer assembly,' you *lang* 'stood up' and debated against a challenger. That is called *tsoklang*. There are two categories called *rigchen tsoklang* and *rigchung tsoklang*. [I] was given [the opportunity to take part in] the *rigchung tsoklang* and took part in it.**

**Annually 16 people in Sera Jey took part for the *tsoklang*.**

Q: *Geshe-la*, did you enjoy debating like that? You had a very good memory you told us. So was debating very exciting and fun and challenging for you?

01:39:21

**#2C: It was very difficult because Sera Jey's assembly was large. Though not all the monks were present at the assembly, there could be nearly 3,000-4,000 monks at the gathering. Every one of them sat quietly watching and waiting for the answers. Moreover, your teacher was sitting there. Therefore, one was nervous.**

Q: For people who have never seen a debate, could you please give us a few examples of what one person would say and what the other person would answer and the other person would say, a little bit of how a debate is expressed?

01:40:52

**#2C: First there would be the one who would be giving the answers. A person who was the questioner initially questioned the one giving the answers. If the answer to the question was affirmative, [the answer giver] had to prove why it was not a “no.” [He] had to prove by citing reasons why it was not so. Should it be negative, [the answer giver] must prove why it was not affirmative. One had to pose a challenge to whatever the opponent said such that you tried to render the opponent speechless.**

[Person off-camera clarifies with interpreter]

01:42:56

**For instance, if the opponent says that *da* ‘sound’ is permanent, you have to prove that it is not permanent, prove that it is impermanent. If the opponent mentioned it as impermanent, you must prove that it is permanent with reasoning.**

**If both [agreed] on an issue...if one claimed *da* was permanent and the other agreed and said, “Yes, it is permanent,” then there is no debating; the case is closed. Both would have to sit still.**

**If one mentioned it as impermanent and the other agreed that it was impermanent, there is no debating.**

Q: You want to keep the debate going?

01:44:39

**#2C: It is a challenge in the sharpness of reasoning; a competition to find the sharper reasoning.**

Q: At 21 you became good at debating. What were your other major subjects and which ones were your favorite ones? Which ones did you enjoy studying at Sera Jey?

**#2C: You did not have a choice to select a subject that you liked or did not nor did [I] have any such thoughts. What was required to learn, you did so accordingly. The monastery had fixed a syllabus of what must be studied in each grade.**

Q: What were some of the courses that you took, some of the subjects?

01:46:28

**#2C: When you first joined there was the one called *dhuera*. *Dhuera* is a compilation of the important treatises from *tsema namdrel* ‘pramana-logic and epistemology, commentary or elucidation’ and some of the other important philosophy.**

Q: Is *dhuera* metaphysics?

**#2C: *Dhue* and *tamo*. *Dhue* means to make a compilation and *ta* is the name of the section. Mainly it is to sharpen the reasoning. In addition to that is *lorig*, which is about the functioning of the mind.**

[Interpreter interprets as: Then there is the mind training aspect.]

01:47:35

**#2C: It is not mind training but about understanding the mind.**

**Then there is *tharig*, which is logic. Logic is mainly about sharpening the reasoning. For instance, grammar is about how you use a word. There is no other definitive description for it. Hence, logic is similar to that.**

**Primarily one must study the five great canons. First is the *prajnaparamita*- perfection of wisdom, which is about *pharchin*.**

Q: *Geshe-la*, did you enjoy studying all these subjects and was it what you expected it to be?

01:49:07

**#2C: Generally [I] liked it very much. [I] had a desire to study. However, initially [I] had a little problem with the functioning of mind.**

Q: *Geshe-la*, you were 21 at that time and that's in 1954. When do you become aware that things are changing in Tibet and near Lhasa, especially around the Chinese invading? What kind of news reaches you?

**#2C: The Chinese army must have entered Tibet in the year 1951. [I] think it was then. However, I had not joined Sera [Monastery] then. By the time I joined Sera a lot of time had elapsed since the Chinese army's arrival.**

**At that time army bases had been established in every direction of Lhasa, bunkers created within which water and electrical supplies were connected. Stone slabs covered the bunkers in the event gunshot and cannons were fired from outside. There was great preparedness for war.**

**Nobody knew what was present in the bunkers. There was no knowing how many soldiers were present and the types of weapons they possessed.**

01:52:09

**Normally there were not many soldiers seen outside. Many of them emerged on days like Sundays.**

Q: *Geshe-la*, what caused you to have to leave Tibet around that time? What happened?

**#2C: It was the Tibetan New Year just ahead of the riot [in 1959]. [I] could see bags filled with sand heaped near the windows on the upper floors of all the Chinese houses in readiness for a war. It was certain then that a war was looming. So [I] felt that the need**

might arise to go elsewhere during the Monlam ‘Great Prayer Festival’ of Lhasa. [I] had many thoughts. However, [I] could not proceed and remained. Then the first problem started on the 10<sup>th</sup> of March.

Q: And what were you doing *geshe-la* at that time, please?

01:55:22

**#2C: [Speaks before questions in interpreted] The Monlam...[I] think this is a part that must be told. The Monlam gathering took place for 21 days. It was planned that His Holiness the Dalai Lama would arrive at the assembly on the 15<sup>th</sup> day [of the 1<sup>st</sup> lunar month] of the Tibetan calendar to bestow teachings. There were many Chinese present in the house located directly atop where the teaching was scheduled. There were talks that cannons and guns were mounted there. Hence, there was great danger.**

Normally after the Monlam was over, His Holiness the Dalai Lama would return to Norbulingka [Palace] in a grand manner with horses lined up. But that did not happen and [His Holiness] left simply and in secret to Norbulingka after the Monlam.

01:57:38

Then the Monlam was over and the Uprising began, which is the March 10<sup>th</sup> Anniversary that we observe these days.

The reason for this was that just prior to it Chinese army officials approached [His Holiness] and said, “A group of performers are coming from Beijing. [We] are inviting His Holiness to watch the performance at the garrison. So please come. [We] are organizing a show.” It seems [the Chinese] informed [His Holiness] about the performance.

That was before the 10<sup>th</sup> of March. Perhaps it was the 9<sup>th</sup>. It was the 9<sup>th</sup> or 8<sup>th</sup> that they said, “The date is fixed for the 10<sup>th</sup>. The Dalai Lama cannot bring his security guards. Only the four Ministers and a few attendants may be taken along. However, they will not be permitted to carry arms,” thus [the Chinese authorities] seemed to have said.

02:00:12

Close to the garrison was a stone bridge and it was said that no general public was allowed over to the other side. So it was considered very dangerous. Stories from Kham and Amdo about lamas and prominent leaders being taken away and imprisoned were being heard. Therefore, this was considered very serious.

So in the evening of the 9<sup>th</sup> an announcement was made in Lhasa, “His Holiness is being invited to the Chinese garrison tomorrow. [We] must go to protest.” The message was passed. A message was passed asking [people] to come to Norbulingka. The message said that [people] must go to request [His Holiness] not to visit the Chinese garrison.

02:02:11

When the morning of the 10<sup>th</sup> dawned, Norbulingka was filled with the people of Lhasa.

Q: *Geshe-la*, what were you thinking at that time or planning to do yourself?

**#2C: There was nothing to plan except for the thought and the hope of going to a safe place yourself. There was nothing else a monk could do besides that.**

Q: What happened to you next?

[Interpreter to interviewer]: You want to say, “How did you escape?”

[Interviewer to interpreter]: Yes.

Q: How did you escape?

02:03:05

**#2C: Well, His Holiness the Dalai Lama was not allowed to visit the Chinese garrison on the 10<sup>th</sup>. Norbulingka was almost enveloped with the people of Lhasa and army to safeguard His Holiness the Dalai Lama.**

**A few days passed this way, perhaps till the 17<sup>th</sup> or 18<sup>th</sup>. [I] cannot recall correctly.**

**[I] was not able to move to another place and then in the middle of one night, cannons were fired.**

**The house where I resided was located at a high altitude. [I] looked out of the window and saw that the shelling came from the front of Drepung [Monastery] and towards Norbulingka.**

Q: What did you feel when you saw that?

02:05:21

**#2C: [I] was numb and felt, “Alas, what must His Holiness the Dalai Lama be doing?” That was the only thought.**

**Likewise in the north of Lhasa, close to Sera [Monastery] lay a large hospital. Artillery firing appeared from here too. There were very few shots fired from small guns and one could hardly hear them. It was mainly cannons that were fired.**

**A Chinese military camp was located behind the Potala Palace and in front of the Drepung [Monastery] from where [I] could witness firing.**

02:06:51

**There was nothing to do. Many monks woke up and watched but were helpless. It was not yet dawn and [I] went back to bed again. There was nothing to do.**

**Daylight appeared and the same situation continued. The attack was still going on.**

A senior monk came back to the *khangtsen* after visiting the *datsang* and said, “Fortunately His Holiness the Dalai Lama has left Norbulingka the evening of the day before yesterday. [He] is no longer living in the Norbulingka.” [We] heard this news.

Then everyone felt, “Let anything happen” and became relaxed.

02:08:19

Our *khangtsen* held a meeting in the morning to discuss the next course of action.

There was a printing press at Shol near the Potala Palace where a meeting was to be held with representatives from everywhere attending it. A senior monk left to attend it. He said, “The monastery’s money is kept in my quarters. Here is the key. I may or may not be able to return. The possibility of my not returning is more certain.” The monk left to attend the meeting near the Potala Palace.

Then perhaps it was around 9 o’clock. Unable to wait and watch, 700-800 monks left the monastery to the Drapchi camp, which is a Tibetan army base.

02:10:35

They had gone there to get arms.

At that point of time, the Chinese attacked Sera [Monastery]. The shelling came from across the river, from the other side of the river of Lhasa. All the firing emerged from the bunkers and there was no way to retaliate.

When the monks arrived at the military camp, [they] were told that [the Tibetan army] did not have weapons and that [the monks] were to go to the Potala Palace to fetch arms and ammunitions. So all the monks proceeded to the Potala Palace.

Q: Where were you at this time?

02:12:12

#2C: We were the ones mainly engaged in attending prayer assemblies, debates and studying the scriptures. So, the *khangtsen* [authorities] directed us to read prayers and perform rituals.

Many monks were sent to the top of the mountain behind [Sera Monastery] to guard it.

Q: Where were [they] sent?

#2C: There is a big mountain behind Sera where [they] were sent.

The monks that went to the Potala Palace...At that time a huge number of artillery shells were fired at the Potala Palace from across the river. There was dust and smoke due to the shelling. Sera is located behind the Potala Palace. However, [I] could see the dust and smoke raised by the firing rise up in the sky.

Q: Were any monks killed when the bombs hit Sera?

02:13:56

**#2C: Towards evening the monks returned and many had received guns. [They] arrived bearing guns. There were others who could not and returned empty handed. Perhaps a monk or two might have been injured while the majority was fine.**

**One or two might have been injured but [I] did not hear of anyone mentioned as having been killed.**

**At that moment Sera was once again attacked from across the river. There are rocks and huge boulders behind Sera and when the shells hit them, they broke and fell down like garbage.**

02:15:34

**It was said that [Chinese] vehicles were coming and so they [the monks] dug a pit at the boundary wall of the monastery gate. Cannon shells fell on this spot killing one or two that were engaged in digging.**

Q: Where was this?

**#2C: There is the boundary wall of Sera and a gate.**

Q: Where was the pit dug?

**#2C: A pit was dug in front of the gate fearing vehicles may enter from there. And then it became dark.**

02:16:51

**That morning the monks and the soldiers of the Drapchi had planned to collectively attack the Chinese [army] camp located close to Sera, but nobody gathered that evening.**

**Later in the evening those in the Norbulingka, the people, the soldiers and everyone could not withstand the bombardment and [I] saw them fleeing towards the northern side where there is a huge swamp.**

**Firing continued and due to the dust raised by the shelling, [I] could not see the people. Once again when the dust and smoke settled, [I] could see dark silhouettes of the people walking.**

02:18:35

**Later that evening the people arrived at Sera. Some were injured and some in other conditions. There was this confusion and then night fell.**

**I dared not sleep in my room because the location was such that a shell could easily fall right in. So I borrowed a room on the ground floor and five or six of us monks stayed there.**



**And then a monk who hailed from my region was shouting, “All the monks are leaving. The abbot has already left. It is time to leave.” Thus [he] shouted.**

02:20:09

**“All the monks are leaving. It is time for you to go. The Chinese soldiers are coming to Sera.” And all of a sudden [I] took some food and left the monastery instantly.**

**[I] crossed the mountain pass and escaped. [I] did not go back.**

Q: What were you feeling when you had to leave the monastery?

**#2C: The first [reaction] was, “It is good. [I] have managed to escape.” [I] could leave and felt good about it.**

**Once [I] reached the top of the pass where there was no longer danger, [I] felt grief stricken. [I] looked down and could see the monastery.**

02:21:27

**In this way [I] crossed the pass and continued walking.**

Q: *Geshe-la*, I’m going to move very fast ahead to the present today because these questions are very important to many people. And I’m going to ask you questions about the Buddha dharma. What do you think are the most important teachings of the Buddha dharma that people should study and hold in their heart?

**#2C: [To interpreter] How? Can you repeat [the question]?**

Q: Please talk about the Buddha dharma that people should hold in their heart and that is beneficial, teachings about the Buddha dharma that would be beneficial to everybody?

02:22:44

**#2C: Okay. In general whether the Buddha dharma will be beneficial or not depends upon the person. So, if the person does not have belief, it will be difficult even though he is taught in great length. For instance, even when the Buddha personally came to this world and lived, the Buddha dharma could not transform everyone.**

**The Buddha could not transform his relative into a good practitioner. Devadatta was the Buddha’s cousin.**

**However, it is not that one cannot strive to have faith and practice the teachings of the Buddha. It cannot be said of everyone but can be of help to many.**

02:25:25

**Mainly it is about explaining the benefits of practicing the Buddha dharma and the disadvantages of not following it.**

The most important point is to accept and believe in a past life and a future rebirth. If one does not, [he/she] must try to accept it. The result of believing in the past life and future rebirth...If one has faith and belief in the Buddha dharma, there are many stories in the Buddha's teachings like *dhurwa* and *kyerap* 'Jataka Tales.' Reading these might perhaps encourage one to believe.

02:27:41

However, a non-believer of the Buddha dharma might think it as unimportant and refuse to accept it. It is elucidated in the *tsema namdel* about the past life and future rebirth and making use of such might be beneficial. The simplest is the presence of people who can recall past lives. These confirm that there is an existence of a past life because they recall since there is something to recall.

For instance, when a lama passed away in Tibet, however precious the lama might be there was no practice of searching for his reincarnation in Tibet earlier. That practice came about from [the time of] His Holiness the Karmapa. How it came about was that the first Karmapa was a practitioner. After his passing away a child claimed, "I am the Karmapa." It was said so clearly that he had to be recognized as the Karmapa. Therefore, in that way the practice of recognizing a reincarnation after a lama passed away came about.

Q: *Geshe-la*, I'm going to make this my last question because I'm concerned about your schedule and time. What advice would you have for the children, the next generation of Tibetan children as they grow up all around the world outside of Tibet? What advice would you have for them?

02:31:07

**#2C: Wherever the Tibetan children are living, in whichever society they live, the most important is your language, script and tradition. It is very important to acquire these.**

Hence, the main onus rests with the parents. In addition, good teachers must lend support. If such is practiced, there is hope that the next generation will turn into proper Tibetans.

Otherwise, the language is forgotten. [The children] do not speak the Tibetan language, do not know the script and remove the [Tibetan] clothes, so it is just in name that one claims to be a Tibetan but does not possess any [Tibetan] characteristics.

Similarly, there are many that came to India a long time ago and settled in Darjeeling [West Bengal] and nearby areas. It is said that [they] came from Tibet long ago but presently are like Nepalese and Indians. They will become like that.

02:33:50

Then there are other races of people like the Tsong, Tamang, Rayi and Bawang who are all Tibetans but do not possess Tibetan characteristics. History says that they originated from Tibet.

Q: *Geshe-la*, was there anything else that you would like to say before we conclude the interview? Anything you wish to tell us about your experience today or anything?

**#2C: I do not think there is anything in particular that I have to say but [you] have spoken about disseminating the Buddha dharma, its preservation and benefitting others. That would rely mainly upon the preacher and the practitioner.**

02:35:35

**As His Holiness the Dalai Lama always says it is not enough to chant the mantra and claim to be a Buddhist. One must understand the Buddha dharma and study it, [His Holiness] says.**

**Buddha dharma is one with logic, one with reasoning. It can compete with modern science and therefore, many great scientists have shown keen interest. One must study it, [His Holiness] says. [I] think these are very important.**

**That is it.**

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

**#2C: [I] do not think there will be any...because [I have] spoken about the uprising in the year '59, which is a true story. It has already been published everywhere. They [the Chinese] have made documentaries on it. [Smiles]**

Q: Can we use your real name for this project or do you want to use an alias?

**#2C: It is fine.**

Q: Thank you for sharing your story with us, *geshe-la*.

02:38:28

**#2C: Do you think it is risky...if I were to go to China?**

Q: I don't know. I cannot answer that because I don't have big vision but I will pray nothing happens. Are you going back to Tibet soon?

**#2C: If there is an opportunity, [I] will go.**

Q: Many, many people have given us this story.

**#2C: Right and they are all similar. The incident about the year '59 is clearly detailed in the book "My Land and My People" [authored by His Holiness the Dalai Lama].**

**It has more than what [I] have said now. This is just what I observed. Living in Sera, I did not get to witness the events in Norbulingka and Lhasa.**

END OF INTERVIEW