

Tibet Oral History Project

Interview #32U – Sakya Trizin, His Holiness the 41st
March 31, 2017

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INTERVIEW SUMMARY SHEET

1. Interview Number: #30U
2. Interviewee: Sakya Trizin, His Holiness the 41st
3. Age: 72
4. Date of Birth: 1945
5. Sex: Male
6. Birthplace: Tsedong
7. Province: Utsang
8. Year of leaving Tibet: 1959
9. Date of Interview: March 31, 2017
10. Place of Interview: Sakya Dolma Phodrang, Rajpur, Uttarakhand, India
11. Length of Interview: 0 hr 35 min
12. Interviewer: Marcella Adamski
13. Interpreter: Tenzin Yangchen
14. Videographer: Tenzin Choenyi
15. Translator: Tenzin Yangchen

Biographical Information:

His Holiness the 41st Sakya Trizin was born in Tsedong in Utsang Province in 1945. He fondly recalls his aunt who raised him after the passing away of his parents. He talks about his family's special Sakya lineage and the tradition of preparing the children for their future as leaders of that sect of Tibetan Buddhism. His Holiness describes his religious education in the Sakya tradition provided by his root guru and other lamas.

During his first visit to Lhasa in 1950 at age 8, His Holiness was nominated as the Trizin 'Throne Holder' of Sakya by His Holiness the Dalai Lama. His official enthronement celebration did not take place until 1959. Soon after the situation in Lhasa became dangerous under the Chinese occupation and His Holiness escaped to India. He moved around to various places in India such as Darjeeling, Dharamsala, Mussoorie and finally settled in Rajpur, where he established the Sakya Monastery in 1964.

His Holiness the 41st Sakya Trizin explains the recent changes he made by nominating his son to be the next Sakya Trizin. He plans to complete his autobiographical book soon. His Holiness shares his thoughts on the relevance of Buddhism in today's world.

Topics Discussed:

Utsang, childhood memories, Buddhist beliefs, customs/traditions, escape experiences, life as a refugee in India.

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Interview #32U

Interviewee: Sakya Trizin, His Holiness the 41st

Age: 72, Sex: Male

Interviewer: Marcella Adamski

Interview Date: March 31, 2017

Question: 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?

00:00:28

#32U: Yes, of course.

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

#32U: [Smiles]

Q: Your Holiness, maybe we could begin at the beginning. Can you share with us some of your earliest memories of your childhood that you would like to share with people?

#32U: Yes, sure. I was born in 1945 a place called Tsedong, which is about 20 miles from Shigatse towards Lhasa, and there we have a monastery and also our own family land and house. So when my parents were traveling and staying there, I was born there in a very holy room where long time ago one of the earliest great masters was also born in the same room. And then when I was born, of course, they say there was some good signs and of course, that I don't remember. Then also after that they have visited several holy places.

00:01:54

And then they came...after a year or two; they came to Sakya and had a very elaborate celebration of my birthday—my birthday celebrations in Sakya...Not the first birthday, but second or third or something like that. And then...my mother passed away when I was very young. So I don't remember her very much.

But my mother's sister, my auntie, she took care of us. She was like my mother, actually more like my mother. She took care of us, educated us, and taught us everything and specially, she made arrangements [for us] to go to the different places to receive the initiations and teachings and transmissions and so on.

And then, I remember my father quite well. I received several initiations from him and also when he was doing retreat, we used to go, I and my sister. Actually we have four [siblings]...The eldest one is my sister who lives in Canada.

Q: Yes.

00:03:27

#32U: Then [the] second one is another son, but he died when he was very young. I didn't see him; before I was born he already passed away. And then the third one is also another daughter. She, I remember quite well, but she also passed away when she was quite young. And then I'm the youngest one. So the eldest one and the youngest one [are] still living.

Q: Still living. Amazing.

#32U: Yes, and then my father was in retreat and he used to give us...He's very good in making things, like with dough—he can make small statues, small masks and so on just to play with us. He used to give [things] like this, but then my father also passed away when I was only about 6 years old. So basically it is my auntie who took care of everything. And then after that I went to several nearby Sakya...There's another very famous monastery where I went, a place called Ngor Monastery—Ngor Monastery. There I went and received many precious teachings from my holy guru.

Q: Do you remember how you felt about having such an important role in your tradition that you were meant to study and become a teacher? Do you remember as a child? Did that feel strange or...?

00:05:20

#32U: No. No, actually anyone who is born in our lineage would have to become a lama, at least lamas if not leaders. So it is kind of obviously, and then also my auntie and my teachers and also my attendants, they always advise us to be good lama and to be educated, to be good discipline and to have good disciple and good lama. They were all constantly telling us. So therefore, it is quite natural. This Ngor Monastery is very important because that is another...maybe...We don't know exactly how far it is, but it's quite near to Shigatse and there it's very important because there I received the most important teaching. In Sakya tradition it's called *lamdre* 'path and its fruit.' *Lamdre*, you know *lamdre*?

Q: Yes.

#32U: That I received from a great abbot called—he's popularly known as Dhampa Dorjee Chang—Dhampa Dorjee Chang. So he was my most important root guru. And so therefore, I received from him the most important teaching and that's very important for me because I lived there almost two years and received many important teachings. Then later I received from his regent, also many teachings. And then later his regent came to Sakya and gave also many teachings.

00:07:20

I remember very well when I was about 8 years old we traveled [for the] first time to Lhasa. And that was by horse, all the way by horse all the way from Sakya to Lhasa. We went kind of slowly so it took us almost a fortnight. And there, after a few days of our

arrival in Lhasa, His Holiness the Dalai Lama came from Yardong, from [the] border, from Yardong because when the Chinese first started coming he also came to Yardong, to the Indian border. So he came back. I remember that very well because he came back with a very big warm welcome and with so many lines of horses.

Q: Very impressive, beautiful.

#32U: Yes, very impressive.

Q: Very welcoming. How did he treat you?

#32U: Now at that time I was very small. I went to welcome him not as a dignitary, but among with the public—among with the general public. I mean people don't know who am I because I was very small. So I went there, just went there among the people. When there are hundreds and thousands of people waiting to see him, I'm also among them.

Q: Tucked away.

00:09:03

Then something happened. Somehow it was my karma and also the prayers and also the conditions, all three together that His Holiness the Dalai Lama nominated me as the throne holder at that time and it was in 1950. Then we went back to...came back to Sakya.

On the way back we spent some time to celebrate the New Year in my birthplace; I remember that very well. And then came back to Sakya. And we had a simple ceremony because the Sakya Prime Minister, he made the announcement that I will be the next throne holder although I was only 8 or 9 years old. We had a simple ceremony. But the big ceremony which we could not have because it needs lot of preparations and there was so many other things also. So therefore, it was kind of postponed for a number of years.

But in between these, then again I went to Lhasa. The second time I went to Lhasa from Sakya to Shigatse by horse and then from Shigatse we went by car. Second time by car and in two days we reached Lhasa. And there again also I stayed for several months and I attended the Chinese—the big conference there—the Preparatory Committee of the Autonomous Region or something. I was also very small but I represent[ed]. I went there; I remember that very well.

Q: You remember that? Good memory!

00:11:21

#32U: And I also delivered a short speech.

Q: You did?

#32U: Yes.

Q: Were you at ease or were you nervous?

#32U: I was not very nervous though there are many people and there are lot of cameras and many things, but I was not so nervous because when we're [a] very young age...I memorize many things and also I attended many assembly of monks. So therefore, gathering of many people is kind of natural.

Q: That makes sense. You were used to it in some ways.

#32U: Yes and then I came back. Then I came back. In 1956 I came to...When His Holiness the Dalai Lama came to India to celebrate the Buddha Jayanthi 2500, Buddha's celebrations. So he came to India and I also followed him and I came to India in 1956 and visited all the holy places of the Buddha in India and then also I visited several cities like Calcutta and then finally I went back. I went back to Tibet. And then in 1959, the beginning of 1959, I had the official, elaborate enthronement ceremony.

Q: 1959. How old were you at that...?

00:13:20

#32U: According to the Tibetan calendar I was about 14, maybe 13.

Q: You remember it very well?

#32U: Oh yes, I remember that very well.

Q: It must've been wonderful.

#32U: Yes. So many monks and lay people came together and we had celebrations of three days.

Q: Was there anything that happened that was a surprise or were you pretty familiar with everything that was going to happen in that ceremony?

#32U: Pretty much, pretty much of what was happening.

Q: So you very formally were going to be...?

#32U: Yes, that's right, but then unfortunately I could not stay there for long time. Soon after...I think the celebration was done in February and then April...round about April I left because then the trouble started in Lhasa.

Q: Yes.

#32U: So we had to escape—escape, but fortunately because Sakya is actually very close to the Indian border...We don't know exactly because there are no markers [at] that time, but we can estimate it I think...just from Sakya to the border, I don't think there's more than 60 kilometers. But there's no road and by horse, it takes about three days.

Q: Do you remember the journey?

00:14:57

#32U: Yes, of course.

Q: What do you remember about it?

#32U: I remember from where we started and where we stayed. Every night we stayed for two, three days. Then also I remember that everything about on this journey, I remember.

Q: Was it difficult or was it exciting to be...?

#32U: Yeah, it was quite exciting.

Q: It was quite exciting because you weren't in danger. You were just leaving because of potential danger...

#32U: Yes, yes.

Q: ...coming.

#32U: Yeah, yeah.

Q: Did people advise you to leave because of that potential danger from the Chinese?

#32U: Some of my attendants who used to go to India, they advised me that as soon as when we hear there's trouble started in Lhasa, then we should not cling; we should go immediately because otherwise, officially the Sakya Trizin cannot travel without the permission of the Central Government.

Q: Oh!

#32U: But of course, the trouble started. There's the government, the government itself is also going to India. So then we ignored everything and we came to...

Q: Everybody was leaving. Did you take many people with you that were part of your...

00:16:28

#32U: No, not many, only my family. My auntie was with me, the very kind auntie that looked after me for many years. She was with me and my sister is with me.

Q: And your sister came.

#32U: Yes and then just attendants, close attendants.

Q: Did you think you were just leaving for a short time or did you think it would be for good?

#32U: I think it will be...I know it's going to be long.

Q: You knew it was going to be long. Did you have any understanding of what the Chinese were planning at that time? Did your government, your people...?

#32U: There were actually some Chinese people in Sakya also long before, but then the trouble started in Lhasa and everyone is focusing on Lhasa and they all went back to Lhasa. So at that time there were no Chinese, but we still have to be very careful because there are lots of spies.

Q: Yes.

#32U: Tibetan spies, Tibetans who are working for the Chinese. So therefore we cannot leave openly to say that I'm going to India. I just said [I am] going to [a] pilgrimage.

Q: Pilgrimage, a cover to go. Had you made...you obviously had a place to go to? Did you have a monastery you're going to go to in India? Where were you going when you left?

00:17:50

#32U: No, actually we said...There's a hot spring place right at the border. So first we said we're going there and then later we said we're going to Sikkim. We said we're not escaping, but we're going to Sikkim to receive some teachings because a great master is living at that time in Sikkim. Dzongsar Khyentse Rinpoche is living—the previous Khyentse Rinpoche...The previous Dzongsar Khyentse Rinpoche, Khyentse Choekyi Lodoe, was living in Gangtok. So we said we're going there to receive teachings.

Q: And did you go there at all?

#32U: Yes.

Q: And did you receive the teachings?

#32U: I could not. Unfortunately I could not receive the teachings. I received teachings before because he came to Sakya also, but I wanted to receive teachings but he was already quite ill. So therefore, I couldn't receive teachings but I met him.

Q: You did meet him.

#32U: Yeah, I met him.

Q: So were people very receptive and happy to see you and supportive of you?

00:18:53

#32U: Yes, yes. The royal family of Sikkim is somehow related to me. So they were, of course, they made the arrangements.

Q: And then what happens? Do you have to find a new home? What happens to you when you go?

#32U: Yes, in Sikkim first we rented a house. We stayed in a rented house. I remember the owner. In the beginning [it] was kind of little hard because he wanted a high price, but then later he didn't charge anything. He gave us all free [rent].

Q: He had a very good tenant.

#32U: And then after that we came to Darjeeling [India] and I stayed there about four years—four years in Darjeeling. Our first monastery was established in Goom, a place called Goom near Darjeeling—first monastery.

Q: And the people who joined that monastery were they coming from...?

#32U: ...Sakya.

Q: They were coming from Sakya in Tibet?

00:20:09

#32U: Because people keep coming, monks and nuns, and the lay people keep coming. So the lay people were all sent to different settlements. At that time many people went for road workers to make the roads and then the monks have no place to stay. So we kind of hired...there was one temple and we hired that. Later that temple was given to us. So then we established that. It's called Sakya Guru Monastery in Goom. Now it is renovated and looks very nice.

Q: And I imagine people wanted to have teachings from you?

#32U: No, at that time I was quite young. I was myself mostly not giving teachings, but mostly receiving teachings.

Q: Really?

#32U: Yes, yes.

Q: Were you receiving them from teachers in India then?

#32U: Yes, yes.

Q: And Tibetan teachers or Sakya teachers?

#32U: Sakya teachers.

Q: Sakya teachers who were already in India?

#32U: Who came—who came...some of them with me and some of them later.

Q: That was a big change of culture from Tibet to India.

#32U: Yes, it was a big change.

Q: How did you do it? Was it easy?

00:21:28

#32U: And also climate. Climate and everything is changed. Everything is a big change.

Q: The air, the food, the climate because you went from a beautiful cold clear air...?

#32U: But Darjeeling is a nice place. Darjeeling is a nice place.

Q: I know many people have gone there.

#32U: It looks like England. It looks very much because I remember when we first came to Darjeeling, Darjeeling has still very English, English atmosphere. Because there were churches, there were clubs and there were many English people also. At that time—it was not [a] long time ago before that India got independence. So still there were many...many of Darjeeling teagardens are owned by British families. So there were many Westerners also.

Q: You liked the climate?

#32U: Yes.

Q: Yes, they did. So that was a big change. So gradually you kept getting more teachings of your own and maturing...

#32U: Yes.

Q: ...all those years.

#32U: And I lived in Darjeeling about four years.

Q: Four years and then what happens to you?

00:22:46

#32U: Then in 1962 there was a war between China and India in the Bomdila side and there was kind of danger, a sense of danger. So we came here [Rajpur]. We went to Dharamsala, actually. We went to Dharamsala to see His Holiness [the Dalai Lama] and then also we got some advice from the [government] officers there. They said...Because we are also afraid of the heat in India—heat...We could not bear the heat if we have to live in plains. It'll be very hot for us. It's not suitable for us. So we said, "Where is the best place, cool place?" And they [the officials] suggested Mussoorie. Mussoorie is cool and it's nice. So they said, "You should go to Mussoorie." So we went to Mussoorie. It was in January—

December or January—and people...When we reached there the people are saying, “Why [do] you go to Mussoorie in January. Mussoorie is so cold.” [Laughs]

Q: And you’re saying “Good.”

#32U: So we went to Mussoorie and I lived in Mussoorie about six years.

Q: So the climate agreed with you?

#32U: Yes.

Q: It did?

00:24:16

#32U: Yes. And then we established the monastery here, in Rajpur in the late ‘60s. ‘64 actually, we started in ‘64. So I keep coming. Sometimes...wintertime I come here and summertime I stayed in Mussoorie. I keep doing...traveling. Then later it was not so convenient and moreover we are sort of more now used to the heat. So we came down and since 1971, then I lived here in Rajpur—since 1971.

Q: You adjusted to the heat.

#32U: Yes.

Q: So this has become the center?

#32U: Yes.

Q: How did you find funds to build such a beautiful community here and in Puruwala—Puruwala, where we’re going to go next?

#32U: Yes, yes. It was all due to the blessings of His Holiness the Dalai Lama, who was very kind. He gave us the blessings and guidance and support. Then also the Government of India and the government of...the local government, they were all very kind to us. Then also the funds are a concern—the European Refugee Campaign, they help us to pay many...

Q: I see. So support from many streams...

#32U: Yes, yes.

Q: ...helped you to build.

#32U: Yes, yes.

Q: That’s exciting. I mean it was a very good move.

#32U: [Smiles]

Q: Right because Tibet got too dangerous for you, right...?

#32U: That's right.

Q: ...over those years. So is this where you think you're going to continue to stay?

#32U: Yes, yes, sure, sure.

Q: But you travel so much, too.

00:26:13

#32U: But now you know...you know that now we have made some changes.

Q: Yes, I heard a big one recently.

#32U: Yes, that's right. Now I have given...I have retired and my position is given to the young Khon lineage holders. The eldest one is my own son, my eldest son. Very recently, just very recently on March 9th we had the enthronement ceremony.

Q: We were honored to meet you so soon afterwards in retirement.

#32U: [Laughs]

Q: How do you like retirement?

#32U: It is still the same because people keep coming and I'm still quite busy, but hopefully later it'll...

Q: ...slow down.

#32U: I'm just actually making an announcement, from now onwards the official ceremonies and official meetings, conferences and everything will be done in the name of the new Sakya Trizin.

Q: Wonderful and what would you like to do with your retirement if you have less of those regular obligations? How would you like to spend your days?

00:27:22

#32U: First thing is that I'm writing my own biography.

Q: Really?

#32U: Which I have already done...which I have already done, but it still needs lots of corrections and changes and to make final decisions that I wanted to do long time, but

because so many other things happen that I could not finish that. So I wanted to finish that. That is my number one project.

Q: That will help a lot of people understand the decisions you made, how your life unfolded. That's a very big task. Do you have someone to help you?

#32U: Yes, yes.

Q: Do you have a publisher ready, somebody?

#32U: No, no, no. Publisher is not ready because it's in Tibetan; actually it's in Tibetan.

Q: Oh, it's going to be in Tibetan?

#32U: It's in Tibetan, but of course, once I finish in Tibetan and publish, then it's easy to translate.

Q: It's easy to get it once you get it done.

#32U: Yes.

Q: That's going to...that doesn't sound like an easy retirement, right?

#32U: [Laughs] Actually, I have already...general draft is finished.

Q: It's already finished.

00:28:33

#32U: But I still need [to make] lot of changes because I wrote in a hurry. So therefore, there are lots of holes, a lot of things need to be add, some needs to be subtracted and some needs to be added...things like that.

Q: You're going to be a hard editor on yourself.

#32U: [Smiles]

Q: What do you think would be the importance of writing a book for you? What do you want to make sure that that book will do, that autobiography?

#32U: As a lama and as a head, that it is important to write I feel, so that people will know how to be, how the lama's life starts and study and continue right up until now.

Q: I see, how their lives evolve. Because this is an ancient tradition...

#32U: Yes.

Q: In your opinion, do you think the tradition will continue for many centuries to come?

#32U: Hopefully, yes, hopefully.

Q: Hopefully, yes. That'll be really wonderful then to have a book and to have this videotape of you.

#32U: Yes.

Q: Are there things you feel the Sakya tradition has to offer to the world, the bigger world, not just your followers that you think is important today? What teachings from the heart of the Sakya tradition are important for the world?

00:30:01

#32U: I think the Buddhist teaching is very important—relevant in this modern time—because I mean, generally, I believe all the religions, all the world's major religions are important for different reasons...for different people just like we need many different medicines for different diseases, one medicine does not cure every disease. So each disease you need a different medicine. So therefore, the variety of spiritual practice is necessary to a variety of the people. But the Buddhist teaching is very relevant in this modern age because it is not just...Buddha's teaching itself says that you should not just go by faith alone.

There are two types of people: those who are less wise should go by faith, but those who are more wise, they should go with logical reasons. And that is very scientific because science also examines and they investigate and then go. So Buddhism also goes in this line. So therefore it is very...it is very suitable to go along with the science. So therefore, I think the Buddhist teaching is very important in today's world, and also the Sakya teachings.

00:31:37

Although all the Tibetan Buddhist schools are the same, there's no difference, but each has its own kind of special character[istics]. Some schools emphasize more on meditation, some schools emphasize more on the study, some schools emphasize more on...But our school emphasizes equally, on study as well as meditation, together. So that is like...that is like [a] more special characteristic, and with that we can make some contributions to the wider—what should I say—audience or the variety of people.

Q: Yes, yes, I think you're right that there is a scientific curiosity these days about the mind. How does the mind work? And a Buddhist said, "Yes, let's study the mind. Let's look at your mind, how everything changes, everything is unsatisfactory and everything is different than you think it is." So this is wonderful. So you have a wonderful retirement planned to write your book. And will you continue to teach?

#32U: Yes, I'll continue to teach. The administration part and the special duties to attend the conferences and ceremonies, that part I retired, but teaching I will still do. I will still do it.

Q: That's beautiful. And will you still travel around the world, do you think?

#32U: Yes, yes. I will as long as I am fit.

Q: As long as you're fit. Well, I hope that you stay fit for a long, long, long time.

#32U: [Laughs]

Q: Because the world needs good teachers, many good teachers like you. Is there anything else that you would like to add? I'm so grateful for the time you've given us, but I want to be respectful of your retirement.

00:33:36

#32U: [Laughs] I wanted to say to the people that we all are [the] same human beings—all our needs, our difficulties and everything that is needed. Everyone is longing for happiness whether you are Buddhist or non-Buddhist, whether you are believers or non-believers; everyone is longing to accomplish the happiness. Everyone is busy to find the happiness and happiness [you] could not find through wealth, or through power or through force—anything like that. Happiness you have to find through training your own mind.

When your mind is trained with love and compassion and tolerance to everyone, then you will find the happiness—not in other ways. If your mind is controlled with negative emotions, there's no way to find the happiness. So the only way to find the happiness is that your mind...The mind qualities, like loving kindness, compassion and forgiveness and tolerance—these have to be practiced as it is given in the teachings. And then one can make one's life purposeful, and that means [you] yourself will feel happy and also you'll be able to benefit your surroundings.

Q: That's a very good recipe for happiness. Thank you.

#32U: Thank you.

Q: That's beautiful.

END OF INTERVIEW