

Tibet Oral History Project

Interview #5N – Thupten Sonam
April 6, 2015

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INTERVIEW SUMMARY SHEET

1. Interview Number: #5N
2. Interviewee: Thupten Sonam
3. Age: 78
4. Date of Birth: 1937
5. Sex: Male
6. Birthplace: Khora Dokpa, Dayab
7. Province: Dhotoe (Kham)
8. Year of leaving Tibet: 1959
9. Date of Interview: April 6, 2015
10. Place of Interview: Hotel Norbu Sangpo, Boudha, Kathmandu, Nepal
11. Length of Interview: 1 hr 38 min
12. Interviewer: Marcella Adamski
13. Interpreter: Tenzin Yangchen
14. Videographer: Henry Tenenbaum
15. Translator: Tenzin Yangchen

Biographical Information:

Thupten Sonam was born in a middle class family in Kham Province. They were nomads that raised yaks and sheep in the mountains during summer and descended in the winter. There were more than a 100 families in his region that bartered their milk products, meat and pelts for grains with the farmers in the 8th or 9th Tibetan lunar month.

Thupten Sonam was sent to Yatol Lekpa Monastery as a monk at the age of 6, where he learned to read and write and memorized prayers. At age 17 he and three other monks spent nearly two-months travelling to the city of Lhasa to study for three years at the great Drepung Monastery. He talks about life in the monastery, reading prayers in people's homes and serving the patrons of the Drepung Loselling Monastery in various capacities, including as a bodyguard.

Thupten Sonam noticed the Chinese presence in Lhasa and watched their propaganda films played on street corners. He attended a Kalachakra Empowerment bestowed by His Holiness the Dalai Lama primarily just to be in his presence. During the second Kalachakra he attended, the *Chushi Gangdrug* Defend Tibet Volunteer Force offered His Holiness the Golden Throne, which was built so that the members of the *Chushi Gangdrug* could have an excuse to meet and discuss resistance against the Chinese. Thupten Sonam joined the force hoping to drive the Chinese out of Tibet and if not to find a route to escort the Dalai Lama abroad.

Topics Discussed:

Kham, childhood memories, nomadic life, monastic life, Chushi Gangdrug guerrillas, escape experiences.

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Interview #5N

Interviewee: Thupten Sonam

Age: 78, Sex: Male

Interviewer: Marcella Adamski

Interview Date: April 6, 2015

Question: Please tell us your name.

00:00:10

Interviewee #5N: Thupten Sonam.

Q: 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?

#5N: Of course, with pleasure.

Q: Thank you for offering to share your story with us. During this interview if you wish to take a break or stop at any time, please let me know. If you do not wish to answer a question or talk about something, let me know.

#5N: Okay. [I] do not think there will be [questions I] do not wish to answer.

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

#5N: There will be no problems at all. I came here to India hoping there would be no problems and it has been 55 years in India. Whether it is shown in China or Tibet, I have no hesitation or fear.

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

#5N: What?

Q: Thank you for coming to share your story.

#5N: Thank you. [I] would like to thank you for giving me the chance to speak a few words.

Q: *Pa-la* 'respectful term for father,' please tell us where were you born?

00:02:45

#5N: I am from Dayab, Kham.

Q: And how old are you?

#5N: 78

Q: How many people were in your family?

#5N: There were four siblings, my parents and a *nama* ‘bride/daughter-in-law.’

Q: Four siblings?

#5N: Yes, two older brothers and one younger to me. The four of us, father, mother and a *nama* of the oldest brother.

Q: What did your father do for a livelihood?

#5N: We were nomads and earned a living [by raising] *dri* ‘female yaks,’ yaks and sheep.

If I were to speak about how we earned a living...there were the nomads and the farmers and they earned a living between them. In the 8th or 9th [Tibetan] lunar month the nomads took meat, butter, wool and pelt on yaks down to the farmers, the landowners. The landowners kept ready woolen cloth, *tsampa* ‘flour made from roasted barley’ and grains for us and also butter, tea, snuff, dyes, hair tassels and various things bought from merchants [besides] dry fruits, brown sugar cubes and rice. When these were carried away, for a year from the 8th or 9th month... after the nomads and farmers exchanged provisions, the stock would last for nearly a year. Nomads do not have grains.

Q: Overall in terms of the food, was there food for the population or were there any problems with food or was there enough food?

00:05:25

#5N: There was no problem with food at all. [I] cannot speak for other regions, but there was never any problem with food in the place where I was born.

Q: Were there any history of bad crops or starvation or famine in your area?

#5N: There may be the danger of bad harvest at times, but one could request lamas to prevent hailstorm and such by performing rituals. During the time I was there, there were no problems with crops.

Our staple food was *tsampa*; *tsampa*, butter, meat, milk and cheese. There were no vegetables to be seen like in foreign countries.

Q: You mentioned that you had four siblings. *Pa-la*, where were you in that order of children?

#5N: I had two older ones and a younger one. I am the third.

Q: I wanted to enquire about your father. He was primarily a nomad. What about your mother? What was her occupation, her duties?

00:07:34

#5N: Mother's name was Pema.

Q: What were mother's duties?

#5N: [Mother's] duties were tethering the animals, milking, churning butter and making cheese. [Laughs] Such were the household duties.

Q: What kind of a person was your mother?

#5N: All of us children loved mother more than father. Mother was very kind-hearted and extremely loving and good. Father was little short-tempered and scolded.

I did not stay long with father and mother, as [I] lived in the monastery since [I was] young and went [home] only during festivals like Losar 'Tibetan New Year.'

Q: Before we talk about the monastery I wanted to inquire, you were part of a nomadic community. So what level was your family? Were they moderate income or well off or poor? Can you give us some idea?

00:09:10

#5N: [The family] was among the moderate, owning around 200 yaks and *dri* and around 500-600 sheep.

Q: So that would be a middle-class family that owned about that much?

#5N: [We] were considered a middle-class family. A poor family owned just 40-50 yaks and *dri* and no sheep but they could survive.

Q: In terms of the size of the nomad community, about how many families were in your region, in your area that you traveled with?

#5N: Nomads nearby my home? There were families with 7, 8, 9 10 [children]. There were some with 5-6 sons. It was our tradition to bring just one *nama* [into the family]. It was just one *nama* even if there were 5-6 sons.

Q: And how many families were in your region that were nomad families? Is it five families or 200 families?

00:11:12

#5N: In our region? There were over a hundred families where my father and mother lived. It was called Khora, a large nomadic site and the [nomads] moved higher up during

summertime and descended in winter where there was no snowfall. There were around 200 families, 100-200.

Q: Was the nomad life at that time very peaceful or were there skirmishes or were there any problems from the outside, from other countries like China or were things very settled?

#5N: There were no such happenings. Except for the appearance of the Communist Chinese, I have not heard of any such things prior to that. During our time the Communist Chinese arrived and caused suffering. [They] came in '49.

Q: You mentioned that you went to the monastery. What age was that that you went?

#5N: What?

Q: How old were you when you went to the monastery to become a monk?

#5N: I must have been 6 years old.

Q: *Pa-la*, if you can remember how did you spend your days when you were a...before you went to the monastery when you were a little boy? Do you have any memories of those days and what did you do?

00:13:26

#5N: Just playing, nothing else. [Laughs]

Q: What kind of a little boy were you?

#5N: Me?

Q: Yes.

#5N: [I] must have been a badly behaved one. [Laughs] Just joking. Because of being well behaved [I] was made a monk.

Q: Tell me, can you describe your memories of being told that you're going to go to the monastery? How did you feel about that?

#5N: It was the tradition in our region that if a family had 3-4 children, one is made a monk or a nun. That was the practice in the region and one loved to go to the monastery to become a monk or a nun. Although one does not know what is going to happen in the future, one loved to go to the monastery to become a monk.

Q: Why would a mother sent her son to the monastery? What would be her motivation, the reason in her heart to do this?

00:15:22

#5N: The reason is very good. It is because being Buddhists—it is very good to have one spiritual person in the family. It was never the practice to send one to become a monk because of economic problems or disobedience.

Q: It was not a punishment. It was a joy to give the son...

#5N: Yes.

Q: When you said we would send a son because we didn't know the future. I'm not sure I understand what that means?

#5N: A child would not know how the future would unfold. [He] does not know what will happen when [he] grows older.

Q: So the mother will send him to the monastery because she thinks this is a good future?

#5N: Of course, [she] has a great hope that [he] will become a monk, a practitioner and not one who indulges in negative actions, which is why [he] is sent.

Q: Can you describe...you said you played a lot as a child. What changed when you went to the monastery? How did your life change?

00:17:33

#5N: There was no time to play but only studies in the monastery. Initially, it was difficult to learn to read and write. After mastering the script, it was difficult to learn the prayers and after learning the prayers, it was difficult to memorize the prayers that one must do by closing the eyes and then giving a test. Except for problems with teacher, there was no time to play. Unlike schools abroad where there is time to play and holidays, [we] had none.

Q: How did you feel about being in the monastery?

#5N: What?

Q: How did you feel about being in the monastery?

#5N: [I] was very happy. [I] was the disciple of a very holy lama. My teacher was a lama. He had returned after completing the *geshe* 'Buddhist philosophy degree' at Drepung Loselling Monastery. [I] was the disciple of Lama Dakpa.

Q: Can you tell us some more about Lama Dakpa?

#5N: What?

Q: Can you tell us some more about Lama Dakpa?

00:19:03

#5N: Lama Dakpa said that when he was small [he] used to herd goats and kill birds called *sakpa* with rocks.

Q: *Sakpa*?

#5N: *Sakpa* is a tiny bird. [He] said that [he] was a child that threw rocks and killed such. Later [he] became a monk under Lama Yang Rinpoche. Lama Yang Rinpoche sent him to the great monastery where [he] did his *geshe* and returned. Lama Yang Rinpoche advised him to remain in the monastery and [Lama Dakpa] became the lama of our monastery. It seems as a child he was not well behaved.

Q: Tell us the name of your monastery?

#5N: Yatol Lekpa.

Q: Yatol Lekpa?

#5N: Yes.

Q: What area was it in and what was the nearest city or town?

#5N: What?

Q: What was the nearest biggest city to Yatol Lekpa?

#5N: There were no big cities. It was a day's journey to the town of Chandul.

Q: Where?

#5N: Chandul. Chandul is where there are the Dayab Magon and Bhugon [Monasteries]. It is a day's journey to the Bhugon town and three days to the Magon town.

Q: Is it Dayab?

#5N: Yes, Dayab Magon and Bhugon.

Q: And how many...when you joined the monastery at 6, how many monks were there at that time?

00:21:32

#5N: There were 50-60 monks.

Q: I know as a young child you went to study but were you able to go home and visit your family? How far away was the monastery from your family?

#5N: It was either half a day or a full day's journey home. During wintertime it was half a day's journey, but during summer when [the family] moved high up the mountain it was a day's journey.

Q: Did you go home and visit your family? If so, how often would you see them when you were 6 years old and older?

#5N: [I] visited twice a year. [The parents] came to fetch [me] without fail for the Losar and once in summertime.

Q: Tell us then, you're in the monastery from 6, but I also...6-17. So what happens at age 17?

#5N: At age 17, four monks like me left for Lhasa. [We] walked for around a month and 20-odd days carrying packs.

Q: What was the reason for going to Lhasa?

00:23:47

#5N: To join the great monastery and [we] planned to stay for three years and then return. There was never any thought of going to India or that there would be a rebellion against the Chinese. This is the reason [I] mentioned that one does not know what the future will unfold.

Q: When you were in the monastery near your home from age...until age 17, how did you progress in your studies? What kind of a student were you?

#5N: [I] had studied what a monk of the monastery was required to study like the memorization of prayers.

Q: Were there any teachings of the Buddha dharma that you found very important to your heart, to your mind in your studies? Anything?

#5N: At that time giving memorization tests, it was so difficult that one did not get to dwell much over the dharma and the future.

The difficulty was being able to take tests on the portions taught by the teacher and there was not much to do with the teaching of the Buddha dharma.

Q: Give us an idea of what was your...I know it changed over the years, but what was your general school schedule like or your daily life like in the monastery? When did you get up and study and go to bed? Can you tell us about that?

00:26:17

#5N: When [I] lived in the monastery as a young child in [my] hometown?

Q: Yes.

#5N: One got up at dawn since there were no watches then. [Laughs] One got up at dawn and went to sleep at dusk. During the day one approached the teacher and studied. There was a break for lunch. Otherwise, one continued reading the scriptures.

Q: We were talking about the fact that at age 17 you walked for one month and 26 days...Can you...with four other monks...can you describe what was that journey like? Were on your foot? Did you have horses? Were there any dangers? What are your memories of that incredible journey?

#5N: There were no horses, no animals, nothing. One carried a pack on the back called *khuga* in which was *tsampa*, butter and meat. [We] left with quite a load from the hometown initially. Then it grew less and less as one journeyed. First [we] ran out of salt and then *tsampa*. [We] would approach families along the way and beg for *tsampa*. [We] sought shelter and received *thukpa* ‘noodle soup’ for the night and a bag of *tsampa* the next morning that [we] carried along.

Q: Was there any part of the journey that was dangerous and why?

00:28:38

#5N: There was no danger for us. Having nothing on us, there was no danger. People would fear us instead of us fearing them.

Q: Why would they fear you? What did you look like?

#5N: [We] were young men of 17-18 carrying spears, with nothing but a pack on the back. Other people like the villagers were scared on meeting us on the road.

Q: Why were you carrying a spear?

#5N: What?

Q: Why were you carrying a spear?

#5N: Carrying a spear was our practice to challenge an enemy along the way or in particular, to challenge dogs or wild animals. It was the practice for a traveler to carry a *khuga* and a spear. [To interpreter] Do you know a *khuga*? It is a bag made from bamboo. Two sticks of bamboo are curved and tied with ropes and then it is stuffed with things and carried on the back.

Q: Can you...you crossed, obviously so much territory, but can you give us a description from your memory about some of the passes or some of the rivers you had to cross? Take us on a little adventure with you. Tell us what it was like?

00:30:52

#5N: When we initially left from there, there were six passes and six slopes called Yiru Laduk Thurduk that one had to cross, which was the most difficult. Then there were Shargangla and Nupgangla and many such passes one had to overcome.

Q: What made those passes difficult?

#5N: [Speaks before translation] Nearby Lhasa one reached Kongpo Bhala. Then one was close to Lhasa.

Q: Was it difficult to breath going over those passes?

#5N: There was not [difficulty in breathing] then. There was no difficulty in breathing then. One did not understand breathing problem, knee pain and waist pain then.

At that time we drank milk, ate butter and meat and never knew what these [problems] were. When old people...when [my] father's father and mother complained of pain in the knee and waist, we used to laugh. "Why are [they] saying this? Why is there pain?"

Q: Were there any scary accidents or things that happened when you were doing this incredible journey for the first time?

00:32:48

#5N: No, nothing happened at all.

Q: Were you wearing monk's clothing or did you wear the nomad dress?

#5N: What?

Q: Were you wearing monk's clothing or did you wear the nomad dress?

#5N: A *chupa* 'traditional coat,' a white *chupa*. A white *chupa* made of woolen cloth. [We] were carrying *zen* 'monks' upper garments' and *shamthap* 'monks' skirt-like robes' on the back. You know the *zen* and *shamthap* of the monks? [We] were carrying those folded on the back ready to be donned at the great monastery.

Q: Did you have a chance to say farewell to your family before you left and did you expect to ever see them again?

#5N: [I] expected to see [the family]. [I] thought [I] would return as a monk after three years at the monastery. That was the thought and never that [I] would remain in Lhasa or come to India.

Q: So you cannot tell the future.

#5N: Yes, that is the reason one cannot tell the future. Now [I] can tell [my] future. There is no way but death!

Q: When you got to Lhasa and you're coming from the beautiful land of the nomads in Kham, what was it like to see Lhasa for the first time with your own eyes?

00:34:57

#5N: Seeing Lhasa for the first time was astounding, as it was a very large city. [We] had never seen such in the hometown and went around the Bakor ‘Square’ of Lhasa carrying the packs asking for the way to Drepung Monastery.

Q: At the Bakor?

#5N: Yes, going around the Bakor. We asked, “Where is Drepung?”

Q: How did people...I wanted to ask both in the travel, how did they treat you as monks and how were you treated in Lhasa, with what kind of regard or attitude?

#5N: People considered *dagyun* ‘continuing monk’ as very good. Those that were coming to join the great monasteries were regarded very highly. During the journey when we sought shelter [people] gave *thukpa* at night and a bag of *tsampa* in the morning .The people liked [us] because we were going to join the monastery to practice dharma.

Q: There was great respect for the monks and for the teachings that you were going to engage in. What were you hoping to do when you got to Drepung Monastery? *Pa-la*, what was the expectation?

00:37:04

#5N: One hoped to join the monastery and if one can, learn the scriptures and debates. And if that was possible, to stay for three years and return to the hometown.

Q: So tell us what did happen actually?

#5N: At Drepung Monastery, we belong to the Loselling Datsang [section in a large monastery] and the *khangtsen* [smaller community within a monastery, in which monks of one geographical area live] was Nyara Khangtsen. [We] were four monks and each of us was taken by a teacher.

Q: Can you give us *pa-la*, some idea of what was your life like? This is a new monastery, very special place of learning. So how did your life change or how was it different from your former monastery?

#5N: [I] had heard about the great monastery earlier. The lama used to talk about the great monastery, about the rules, about the way of life and everything and that was very beneficial. [I] felt very happy and liked it very much to be among a great number of monks.

Q: How many monks were...we first need to establish what year you actually arrived at Drepung. What year would that have been?

00:39:23

#5N: Perhaps it was ’55.

Q: Well, if you were born in 1937 and you went to Drepung at 17, so that would’ve been 1954.

#5N: It must have been. [I] cannot say whether it was '54 or '55. One did not know much about years and dates then.

Q: That's okay. Just curious, Drepung is like a very famous university and a place of study. So how is it that do you go freely? Are you accepted without charge or do you bring gifts from your family or your monastery to support your food and your teachings and your shelter? How was that paid for?

#5N: There were not any obligations as such. If you had the means you may make a tea offering for the *khangtsen* but one need not pay anything to the *datsang* or the general assembly. One with means will sponsor a tea for the *khangtsen*. Otherwise, there was not any practice of paying something when a new monk joins.

Q: That sounds like a very affordable tuition for such a great monastery.

#5N: Yes, if one had the means. However, we came bare and did not have anything. The teachers made the offering and later it was reimbursed from the hometown.

Q: Can you give us...what was the mood in the monastery that time? Did people feel safe and comfortable? Were there any changes going on? It's 1954. You've just arrived. What was the attitude and feeling of the people...of the monks?

00:42:31

#5N: The Chinese were in Tibet at that time and changes were taking place. Though [we] were not certain that because of the Chinese we would have to flee to a foreign country yet the Chinese were in Tibet, and anybody would think that a new leader had arrived.

Q: A new leader. Who was the new leader?

#5N: What?

Q: Who was the new leader?

#5N: Mao Zedong.

Q: Was there any plan in the monastery for dealing with the fact that the Chinese seem to be coming into Tibet? Were there any plans or activities that were happening?

#5N: There were no [plans] against the Chinese. [They] fought [the Chinese] and could not win. The Tibetan Government Army fought but failed to stop [the Chinese]. [They] resisted at Derge, at Derge Gyamda. When the Tibetan Government Army retreated, the Chinese advanced. Nobody put up any challenge.

Q: What did you do in the monastery during those days? How long did you stay in the monastery?

#5N: After arriving at the central monastery?

Q: At Drepung Monastery.

00:44:28

#5N: After arriving at Drepung Monastery [I] was sent to read prayers [at the homes] of patrons, as having newly arrived from the hometown [I] could chant many prayers. Many a times [I] went with senior monks to read prayers for the patrons. Later [I did other jobs like] helping construct houses of patrons and going to Menkhang District in Tsang Nyenmo as servant to an aristocrat. [I] did many such tasks.

Q: To construct a *menkhang* ‘hospital’?

#5N: [I] went to Menkhang District in Tsang Nyenmo.

Q: Menkhang?

#5N: Menkhang District.

Q: Because you were trained and you went to say prayers in homes, were you still a...you were still serving as a monk, correct? Why did you go to do construction work?

#5N: [The house owner] was a patron of the monastery. There were patrons of our *khangtsen* that were big merchants. When such [patrons] were building a new house, [we] removed the monk’s robes and went to work.

Q: How long did you work there? For a month or years or...?

#5N: What?

Q: How long did [you] work at the construction site?

00:46:32

#5N: What?

Q: You went to construct a house...

#5N: Yes.

Q: Were [you] building a house for a month, a year or how long?

#5N: A few months. It was not years. [I] worked for a month or two.

Q: Since you were outside the monastery to help build this house, what did you notice about Lhasa, the city? Did you see more Chinese in the city? What was the feeling in the city at that time?

#5N: The Chinese were there at that time. During the day [I] worked and at night went to watch movies that the Chinese were screening beside the road. [Laughs] Then [I] went circumambulating the Bakor and such. Since [I] did not have to follow the rules of the monastery and could roam around, [I] was happy.

Q: Tell us about the movies that you saw?

#5N: The Chinese showed [movies] only about their victory and others' loss. [The films] were only about their winning wars.

Q: What was your thought about why they were showing you these movies? What did you think was the purpose?

00:48:33

#5N: [I] found it strange. Leave aside wondering why it was being shown, there was a piece of white cloth on which people were riding horses and shooting. [I] went and touched the cloth and found it was a cloth on which were people and horses and speech. We could not understand that!

Q: You'd never seen that before?

#5N: [I] had not. In our hometown there was a music system with the label of a dog's head. One put in a disc and then turned a handle and listened. Such a recorder was available. It must be turned manually and had the picture of a dog's head. One can listen to songs and speeches. Except for that one [I] had not seen anything else. When [I] first arrived in Chamdo and saw bicycles and vehicles, [I] was astounded.

Q: No bicycles in Kham!

#5N: No, there was not even a matchbox in the region! There were no soaps, no kerosene. Everything was pure. Because the water and air was pure I am still healthy.

Q: So back in Lhasa, who organized these films and where were they shown?

00:50:44

#5N: Screened beside intersection of roads like Tiphungay and Tomshikhang. [You] would understand if you had visited Lhasa. There were intersections like Tomshikhang and such where they were shown. One need not make any payment. One just watched standing, as there were no seats.

Q: Who screened them?

#5N: The Chinese did.

Q: What were your personal reactions to seeing these movies? What did you think?

#5N: At that time [I] was not in a position to think that the movies were depicting their victory and others' loss. There was a lot of action, shooting and riding horses and such. Not having seen anything like that [I] liked it very much.

Q: It was so unusual.

[Interpreter to interviewer]: It was very surprising and strange.

Q: So *pa-la*, to go back to your story, you were helping to build a house, you got to see movies, you were outside more. What happens to you next in your life? What's the next big change?

00:52:26

#5N: Following that [I] received the Kalachakra Empowerment and then joined the army in 1958, the *Chushi Gangdrug* [Defend Tibet Volunteer Force].

Q: When did you receive the Kalachakra, in '58 as well, same year?

#5N: [I] think it was '58. [I] do not know the exact time. It was the second Kalachakra. His Holiness the Dalai Lama gave the first one before leaving for China. This was bestowed after returning from China. [His Holiness] left for China in '54 and returned in '55.

Q: For people who do not understand what Kalachakra means, can you give us a description of what it means and why it was important for you to go?

#5N: One never understood what Kalachakra meant then, just that it was an empowerment being bestowed by His Holiness the Dalai Lama. We, the people, could not see His Holiness the Dalai Lama in Tibet. It was only said that His Holiness lived in the Norbulingka in summer and the Potala in winter, but one couldn't see [His Holiness] like [we] do now. Hence, to see [His Holiness] during the Kalachakra was very precious.

Q: You said at that time you didn't understand what the Kalachakra meant. Did you gain any understanding since then you could share with us?

00:54:58

#5N: [I] have received the Kalachakra Empowerment several times.

Q: Do you know about the importance of the Kalachakra Empowerment now?

#5N: The main point of the Kalachakra Empowerment is that it is not just meant for one or two persons but for the well being of the people and the country. That is the main point of the Kalachakra Empowerment. If we are able to receive it, unlike other empowerments, it is beneficial for this and the next life. Mainly it is for the [well-being of the] world and the country. Kalachakra Empowerment is very precious.

Q: So before you...you mentioned that you joined the *Chushi Gangdrug* but before you did that, I also...I thought I heard you mention something about being a security guard. Did you have a job like that somewhere?

[Discontinuity in interview]

Q: At Menkhang Dzong ‘District Headquarters’ what services or job did you perform there? You mentioned going there.

#5N: [I] was bodyguard to a Kungo ‘Your Presence [title of address for government officials]’

Q: Who was the Kungo?

#5N: [He] was the district administrator. The district administrator was our *khangtsen*’s patron. As [I] mentioned earlier some bandits had come to raid a village and the villagers had captured and handed them over to the district [administrator]. They were then imprisoned at the district and lashed just before [the administrator] left for the Monlam Festival in Lhasa and released.

Later when Kungo was in Lhasa, a threatening letter was sent that said, “Come back after the Monlam and we will wait for you with *chang* ‘home-brewed beer.’” Therefore, [he] wanted men from Kham to act as bodyguards and four of us young monks were deployed as the Kungo’s bodyguards. We removed the monks’ robes, wore *chupa*, rode horses, carried guns and were deployed to watch over Kungo.

Q: Did you have to take a...did you have to take a change from vows to go and do that, to act as security guards?

#5N: What?

Q: As a monk one had taken the vows. Did you have to give up your monk vows?

00:58:34

#5N: One did not get to give up the vows. [I] got into the *Chushi Gangdrug* and then came to India. [I] lost monkhood without giving up [the vows].

Q: Did [you] give up vows at the time of becoming a bodyguard?

#5N: No, [I] did not. One just left like that.

Q: Did you have any encounters with those bandits who threatened to harm the administrator?

#5N: [We] did not have to fight but just watched over [the administrator]. When it became known that the district administrator had Khampa [people from Kham] guards, the entire village was scared and nobody came [to harm him]. [He] could not even get servants for the fear of beatings from the Khampa.

Q: Tell us why people are fearful of Khampa men?

#5N: The Khampa have a bad name. Otherwise, the Khampa are kind-hearted and sincere, which [people] do not know. Everybody fears the Khampa because the Khampa speak roughly and very decisively. Besides [they] are tall of stature and speak boastfully. However, they do not understand that deep down [the Khampa] are compassionate and kind-hearted.

Q: You mentioned when you were a little boy, the children felt closer to your mother because your father was someone angry and maybe stern. Did you take on some of his characteristics when you became a man? Were you more like your father?

01:01:02

#5N: I am like mother, not having any arguments and kind-hearted. It has been 11 years since [I] joined the Home for the Aged and until now [I] have never had a disagreement with anyone. Otherwise, there are many that indulge in quarrels, drink *chang* and have clashes. [I] have never quarreled with anyone.

Q: You mentioned being at two Kalachakras. The second one, where was that held? Was that significant for you to go to a second one?

#5N: It was at the Norbulingka. The purpose being that everybody attended and [I] had never received a Kalachakra Empowerment. [I] went to [receive] the Kalachakra where the *Chushi Gangdrug* offered a Golden Throne, which is presently in the Norbulingka.

Q: For people who would not have heard of the Golden Throne, can you describe how it was initiated and built and any stories you know about the Golden Throne?

#5N: About what?

Q: About the Golden Throne that the *Chushi Gangdrug* offered to His Holiness the Dalai Lama.

#5N: Yes, the Golden Throne.

Q: About the Golden Throne.

01:03:15

#5N: The main purpose of the Kalachakra Empowerment and offering the Golden Throne to His Holiness the Dalai Lama was that the *Chushi Gangdrug* needed to hold meetings to challenge the Chinese. Without such an excuse to hold meetings, the Chinese were proclaiming that Khampas return to Kham and the people of Amdo to Amdo and that people from outside were not to remain in Lhasa.

Hence, by declaring that they were going to construct a Golden Throne, meetings were held wherein on one hand was the construction of the Golden Throne and on the other discussions went on as to where to establish an army base; what was to be done in the future if the Chinese cannot be ousted from Tibet or if the 17-Point Agreement was not implemented; and if the need arose that His Holiness the Dalai Lama had to be escorted to

a foreign country. It seems the routes to be considered and establishing an army base at Lhoka were being discussed then.

Q: So the Golden Throne, the activity to make a beautiful Golden Throne in honor of His Holiness was as a cover so they could meet and discuss and make plans for resistance. Is that correct?

#5N: Yes, that was the main purpose.

Q: Was the Golden Throne made of gold and where was the gold coming from?

01:05:43

#5N: The gold was purchased from traders. All the merchants of *Chushi Gangdrug* collected money and purchased gold from a trader from Amdo. Have a look at the book by Ratuk Ngawang. It mentions how many *tola* '11.66381 grams' of gold it contains, who was the maker, how many kilograms of gold it contains, the number of gems embedded in it. I have the book by Ratuk Ngawang, which has everything.

Q: Thank you. That's a very good resource for people who wish to know more.

#5N: Yes.

Q: But we want to go back to your story because you're the only person who can tell your story.

#5N: [Laughs]

Q: Okay. So tell us what happens to you? You go; you have the Kalachakra ceremony; you see the Golden Throne and then you said you joined the *Chushi Gangdrug*. How did this happen? How did a monk become a member of the *Chushi Gangdrug*?

#5N: It was time for us to return to the village since the three years were up. Never mind going back, the Chinese were creating a lot of unrest in Tibet and before I could, a large number of men had left for Lhoka. There was nowhere else to go but join the *Chushi Gangdrug*, as I did not wish to remain in the monastery and the time had come for us to go back to the hometown, but returning would have been a problem. Since many men had left for the *Chushi Gangdrug* in Lhoka, [I] too followed along with some colleagues.

Q: We determined that it was 1955 that you had come...1955 and in three years, so now we're at 1958 and you decide to join the *Chushi Gangdrug*. Do you give your vows back? Is that the first step you have to take?

01:08:55

#5N: [I] did not get to [give back the vows]. [Laughs] [I] just left...freely.

Q: Sounds like a Khampa man...freely.

#5N: [Laughs]

Q: *Pa-la*, what was your reason, your personal reason for wanting to join the *Chushi Gangdrug*?

#5N: [My] personal thought was similar to what others of the *Chushi Gangdrug* thought. If possible, drive the Chinese out of Tibet and if not to find a route to escort His Holiness the Dalai Lama abroad. That was our plan at the beginning. [I] joined the force because of that.

Q: So going back to your very personal story, tell us how did you go about joining and what happened to you?

#5N: When [I] joined the *Chushi Gangdrug*, [I] did not even have a gun or a horse. [Laughs] The four of us monks came armed with sticks. At the border the *Chushi Gangdrug* men held and led us. “Which is your hometown?” There were different groups like Dayab, Gonjo, Chamdo, Lithang, Chating...When [we] replied, “Dayab,” they guided [us] to the Dayab Division. Once at the Dayab Division, they provided guns and horses.

Q: When you say there were four of us, where did you go to find the *Chushi Gangdrug* troops and who was leading at that time?

01:11:23

#5N: At Lhoka. From Lhasa one went to Chushul and then crossed the river at Chushul and went to Lhoka. There is this airport at Gongthang presently, the Lhasa Gongthang Airport. At that time there was no airport and one walked through there to Lhoka.

Q: When you arrived there—just in your memory—about how many people were gathered there? I understand that they were gathered according to the regions that they were from, but do you have any idea how many people you saw with your own eyes?

#5N: In our division?

Q: Yes.

#5N: There were around 200. Atuk Lama was our Commander, the Dayab Commander and Ngawang Yonten, the group leader.

Q: Tell us about your group. Were these people some of whom you recognized from your community of nomads?

#5N: There were monks from the monastery [I] recognized, those who had joined earlier.

Q: Can you describe then what did you do as a new member of the *Chushi Gangdrug* forces? What happened to you?

01:13:40

#5N: [Laughs] Wherever the leaders directed you to keep watch at night or wherever you are directed to go during the day, you followed orders.

Q: Where did you go and what did you do?

#5N: My main duty was at Lhoka. Then two months prior to the passage of His Holiness the Dalai Lama, I went to Tsethang to block the Chinese army base at Nyetsang that [I] told you about earlier and remained so for around two months. Then after His Holiness left for India, we left too.

Q: When you were in...you were sent two months after he left?

[Interpreter to interviewer]: Prior.

Q: ...prior to His Holiness leaving. What did you do? What was your duty around that Chinese military camp?

#5N: The Commanders were Ratuk Ngawang and the Chinese Lobsang Tashi, the leaders at the time of blocking the Chinese army base.

Q: What was done to block the Chinese army base?

#5N: The Chinese Lobsang Tashi and Ratuk Ngawang were our leaders.

Q: What did [you] do?

01:15:24

#5N: We had to keep watch at night. During the daytime [we] stayed indoors and at night came out on the road and moved about to prevent the Chinese from venturing out.

Q: You were being observers, sentries, watching that they didn't come out and attack Tibetans.

#5N: [We] were among those that prevented the Chinese from emerging. There were other soldiers keeping watch at a distance to see that backup Chinese soldiers and weapons did not arrive. We were deployed to prevent [Chinese troops] from coming out of the military base.

Q: Did you with your own eyes, did you see any action or activity by the Chinese against the Tibetans?

#5N: That happened a lot. At times [the Chinese] fired guns and at times artilleries. Sometimes they put up loudspeakers and announced, "You have nowhere to run if you wanted to. You will not win in a fight. You have no weapons, no ammunitions. We have guns, weapons, airplanes." They chided us like that.

Q: The Chinese were threatening and trying to frighten the population. What was your feeling personally when you heard these messages? What did you feel?

01:17:54

#5N: In our minds we were not scared of the Chinese fear tactics for [we] went there to die. [Laughs] Should our leaders order, we were ready to combat face to face and there was no thought of running or hiding then.

Q: To give up one's life, there is usually a very profound reason. What would be your reason to lay down your life? Why would you be doing that?

#5N: My reason was for the purpose of Tibet's independence and nothing else.

Q: So what happens next in your story? You are a sentry; you heard loudspeakers and voices trying to intimidate the public including the soldiers. What happens to you next?

#5N: After His Holiness the Dalai Lama had left for India following the fall of Lhasa, a large number of our people crossed over the Mangola pass and Shawula pass and arrived in India.

Q: What happened to you, *pa-la*?

#5N: What?

Q: What happened to you, *pa-la*?

01:19:59

#5N: Nothing happened to me. [I] came along with the soldiers riding a horse and carrying the gun. [Laughs]

Q: Were you by yourself or were you with a larger group?

#5N: Came along with many people, around 500-600. At the time of reaching India, many thousands of people arrived together. Monks from the monasteries, villagers, merchants, everyone came. Around 80,000 people arrived at the same time.

Q: Do you have any recollection of what your thoughts were when you were leaving Tibet? Did you think you would go back? Did you think you were leaving it forever? What kind of feelings did you have and about your family who's still in Kham?

#5N: I thought that once His Holiness the Dalai Lama is in India and if we can reach India, other countries of the world will extend help. If we can get trained to jump from airplanes, receive good weapons to fight and a good training, [we] can return immediately to Tibet and challenge the Chinese. There was never any thought of living in India or going to foreign countries. There were not any other thought but to get trained and return to Tibet to fight.

Q: What has it been like to remain in India away from your beloved Tibet? How has that been for you?

01:22:29

#5N: Until now for 55 years [I] have remained in a foreign country. We have not achieved the main goal of our purpose in coming here.

Once a man of Pakistani origin who was studying in America came to Nepal. [He] was in a restaurant and talked about [his] wish to meet Tibetans from Tibet that had left in '59 and were around 80 years of age. The restaurant owner brought [him] to the Home for the Aged. He asked me why I came to India and how I had come to India. I gave my answers.

Finally he asked me, "Did you achieve your goal of coming to a foreign country?" I replied, "The goal has not been achieved but a good foundation has been laid. We had a very good dharma and tradition in Tibet but we suffered loss due to lack of modern education. Having come to a foreign country and due to the benevolence of His Holiness the Dalai Lama all the youngsters have received 100 percent education and can move on par with people of the world. Hence, a good foundation has been laid. His Holiness has become a world leader. A very good foundation has been laid. I pray that when I die, may I be reborn as someone who will drive the Chinese out of Tibet."

He said, "This thought of yours will never happen." I said, "This is not something that will never happen. Let me give you an example. India's Subhash Chandra Bose is the reincarnation of Kudun Ram." [I] asked, "Do you know Kudun Ram?" [He] replied in the negative. [I] asked, "Do you know Subhash Chandra Bose?" [He] replied that [he] did. "Subhash Chandra Bose is the reincarnation of Kudun Ram."

Q: Whose reincarnation?

01:24:06

#5N: Kudun Ram.

Q: Kudun Ram?

#5N: Yes, Kudun Ram. He was slain by the English, hung to death. Kudun Ram was asked, "You have three minutes. What do you have to say?" [He replied], "I have nothing to say. By my dying India will not run out of people. When I die and am reborn, [I] will be reborn as someone that will drive you out of India." Subhash Chandra Bose was his reincarnation. Subhash Chandra Bose has a rope mark on his neck.

Q: I understand you...your wish would be to be born again and to work and fight to drive the Chinese out so that Tibet would be free.

#5N: Yes, [I] still have that thought.

Q: How would you do that?

#5N: That will happen. Presently there are those in Tibet who are immolating themselves and those brave people that oppose the Chinese despite being beaten and put to death,

those fearless ones are the reincarnation of those martyrs that died between 1949 and the mid '80s. They [Chinese] kept it a secret under the red flag.

Q: From '46 to...?

#5N: What?

Q: From '46 to...?

01:28:35

#5N: Around 1.2 million Tibetans have died under the Chinese between '49 and the mid-80s. [They] died in different ways, some died in face-to-face [combat], some died from torture, some jumped into rivers, some died from starvation, some died from beatings in prisons. Around 1.2 million have died in 30 years. The reincarnations of those martyrs are the present brave ones who immolate themselves and who challenge the Chinese despite beatings and killings by the Chinese. These are their reincarnations.

This is something that can happen.

Q: That they were reincarnations of other fighters, prior fighters? So there will always be more people coming through rebirth. Why do you think it is so important for Tibet to be free?

#5N: At this time we are not fighting for independence. We are seeking the Middle Way as initiated by His Holiness the Dalai Lama. We are following this approach presently. The approach then and now is different. However, my real feeling remains the same.

Q: You are loyal to your goal.

#5N: [Speaks before translation] [I] am old, nearly 80 yet [my] blood has not turned cold; [my] blood is still hot.

Q: What would you tell this younger generation of Tibet? What would you...to those that are living in exile, what would be your advice to them?

01:31:22

#5N: [My] main advice to them...there are many that are still fighting for independence, fighting for independence and complete independence. [I] think it is better to give that up and adopt the mutually beneficial Middle Way Approach that His Holiness the Dalai Lama propagated in 1974-75 and go according to the exile government's policy. Just claiming that "This is my stand." or "This is my way." and following another path will not serve any purpose. If it is the livelihood of a person, one can do any trade but when it concerns a nation's freedom, [I] think there should be only one approach and not two.

Q: So it sounds like you would encourage the younger generation to adopt the Middle Way, but you personally in your heart remain a man who would want to fulfill your personal wish to fight the Chinese and have Tibet free.

#5N: My view is different. I am close to the cemetery and will carry my view with me. They are the people who will seek Tibet's freedom in the future and must think in a different manner. Mine is a different path.

Q: Given the fact that China is such a big global power, do you think that Tibet will become free?

#5N: Though not independence I think, but [I] have one hundred percent hope that we will gain freedom under the mutually beneficial approach of His Holiness the Dalai Lama. His Holiness has said that [he] will live for 113 years. So if not in our lifetime I am certain that Tibet will gain freedom in your [interpreter] lifetime in which [I] believe a hundred percent.

Q: That sounds like a very good place for us to end our interview and so I want to...I want to go back and ask just one more time if this interview was shown in Tibet or China, would this be a problem for you?

01:35:01

#5N: There will be no problems. [I] have no problems to whomever this is shown.

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

#5N: There is nothing to thank for. I feel very happy that I could do this interview.

[Interviewer to videographer]: Keep it running.

Q: *Pa-la*, I would like to ask even though the formal interview is over, I would like to ask you, what was it like for you to sit here and tell your story to us? Can you tell us what that experience was like?

01:35:51

#5N: [I] was able to tell what has been in my thought and mind, which [I] have been waiting for a chance to talk about.

Q: Why did you feel you want to tell it?

#5N: I am near [my] end and if I tell my story and if it's written on paper, others will see it.

Q: Why would it be important for somebody else to see your story?

#5N: It is important because they will understand how they [elders] struggled in the past, what their views were, how deeply they respected His Holiness the Dalai Lama and realize that this person is someone who was ready to sacrifice his life for the country.

Q: *Pa-la*, do you think it is useful for us to gather stories from many older Tibetans and why?

#5N: It is important. As I told you earlier from the new generation born in India, Nepal and foreign countries, many do not know the Tibetan language. They will understand how the older generation persevered to escort His Holiness the Dalai Lama and become successful in a foreign country.

Q: You are helping the younger generation in many, many ways.

01:38:06

#5N: Yes.

Q: And we are honored to have your story and we will share it around the world.

#5N: [Joins palms] Thank you. Thank you.

Q: Thank you. Thank you.

END OF INTERVIEW