

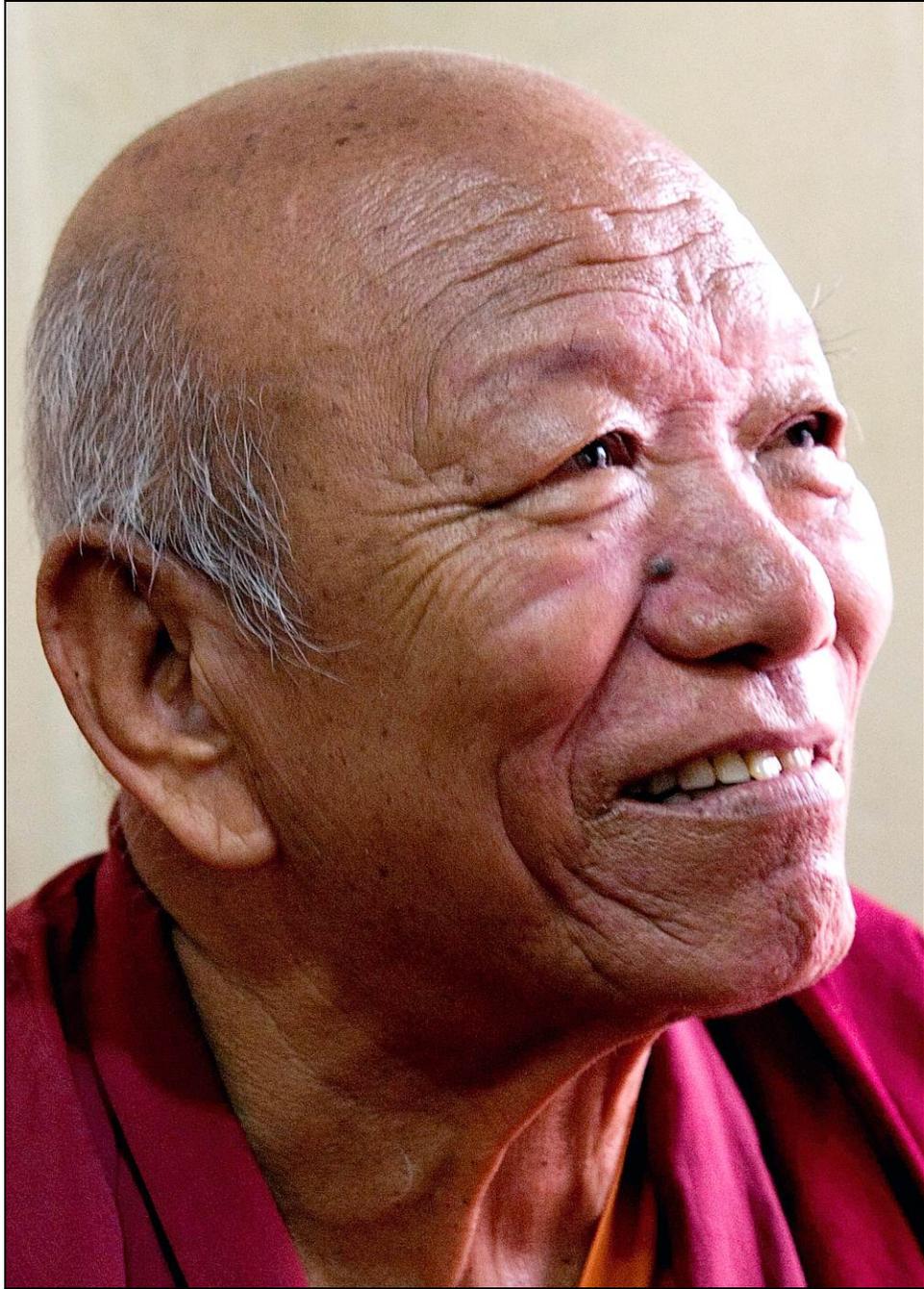
Tibet Oral History Project

Interview #91 – Ngawang Choseng
July 7, 2007

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INTERVIEW SUMMARY SHEET

1. Interview Number: #91
2. Interviewee: Ngawang Choseng
3. Age: 73
4. Date of Birth: 1934
5. Sex: Male
6. Birthplace: Gerdha, Lhatse
7. Province: Utsang
8. Year of leaving Tibet: 1962
9. Date of Interview: July 7, 2007
10. Place of Interview: Sera Je Monastery, Lugsung Samdupling Settlement, Bylakuppe, Mysore District, Karnataka, India
11. Length of Interview: 2 hr 27 min
12. Interviewer: Martin Newman
13. Interpreter: Lhakpa Tsering
14. Videographer: Jeff Loda
15. Translator: Tenzin Yangchen

Biographical Information:

Ngawang Choseng was born in the village of Gerdha in Utsang province. His family was a tenant of the Lhatse Chodhe Monastery and, as a form of tax, they sent Ngawang Choseng to the monastery to become a monk when he was 7 years old. His father was *Chipon*, the keeper of the horses of the monastery.

At the monastery Ngawang Choseng learned the Tibetan language and basic Buddhist scriptures. When he reached 13 years of age, he started studying Buddhist philosophical debates, which became the main focus of his education. At the age of 28, he went to Lhasa and enrolled in Sera Monastery. After the Chinese invasion, he witnessed the arrest and public beatings of many monks. Ngawang Choseng returned to his village after Lhasa was attacked in 1959.

Ngawang Choseng made his escape to India in 1962 with three other monks. Initially, Ngawang Choseng worked on road construction and later settled in Bylakuppe where he joined 300 other monks who labored to build Sera Monastery in Bylakuppe.

Topics Discussed:

Childhood memories, monastic life, first appearance of Chinese, life under Chinese rule, *thamzing*, escape experiences, life as a refugee in India, early life in Bylakuppe.

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Interview #91

Interviewee: Ngawang Choseng

Age: 73, Sex: Male

Interviewer: Marcella Adamski

Interview Date: July 7, 2007

Question: So we will begin.

Interviewee #91: [Nods]

Q: Please tell us your name.

#91: Ngawang Choseng.

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

#91: I give my permission.

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

#91: Yes, and I thank you for taking interest in our cause.

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

#91: Yes.

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

#91: Okay.

Q: During the interview, if you wish to take a break or stop, please tell me.

#91: Okay.

Q: If you do not wish to answer a question or discuss something, also tell me.

#91: Okay.

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

#91: There is nothing. You can show it anywhere you like.

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

#91: [Nods]

Q: So I would like to ask first about your life in Tibet before the Chinese came and how you began your monastic life.

#91: Okay.

Q: Can you tell me where you were born?

#91: Lhatse.

Q: And that's in Utsang province?

#91: Lhatse is the name of the district.

Q: What is your village's name?

#91: Gerdha.

Q: How big a village was Gerdha?

#91: There may have been about 40 to 50 families.

Q: And what did your parents do for a living?

#91: In the beginning, we did not have any special livelihood and later started cultivation. We belonged to the estate of a monastery, so we requested [land from] the monastery and started farming.

Q: You were the tenants of a monastery?

#91: Yes, the Latse Choedhe.

Q: What kind of crops did they raise?

#91: They grew grains, peas and wheat; also *pekam* from which oil is extracted.

Q: Oil?

#91: It's called *pekam* from which oil is made. They have yellow flowers.

Q: Sunflowers?

#91: No, it's not sunflower. It has seeds, which are very small.

Q: Did they also have animals?

#91: Yes, they did.

Q: What animals did they have?

#91: They had oxen to plough the land. They also had a *dzo*, or two, and donkeys.

Q: A *dzo* is like a yak?

#91: There are two types of *dzo*; one which is bred from a yak and a cow and the other from an ox and a *dri* 'female yak.'

Q: So at what age did you go to the monastery?

#91: I must have been around 2 or 3 years old when it was a sort of tax levied on us to make me a monk. The reason they forced the tax was that the monk population at the monastery was low, so they requested the higher authorities about it and a tax was levied.

Q: What is the meaning of a tax to become a monk? I don't understand.

#91: They [the monastery authorities] say, you have to become a monk. To my parents they said that their son must become a monk at the monastery; that the monk population was dwindling. When there were no new entrants to the monastery, such taxes were imposed.

Q: The tax is that they offer their son to the monastery?

#91: However, I was about 7 years old when I actually joined the monastery and had to follow the rules. Until then I was with my mother.

Q: When did you become a monk?

#91: I must have been 2 or 3 years old because there was a ceremony at the monastery and during that ceremony, I was said to have been in my mother's lap. My name was enlisted [in the monastery] when I was 2 or 3.

Q: They said you would become a monk when you were 2 or 3 and you didn't join until you were seven?

[Interpreter to interviewer]: Yes.

Q: Who were the higher authorities? The higher authorities of the tax collectors? Who were the higher authorities?

#91: The monastery officials said that the number of monks was dwindling.

Q: To whom did they say that?

#91: They appeal to the *Labrang* 'Grand Lama's office,' the government and many other high leaders. In my case, it was someone called Tsashok and I was a direct tax from the monastery.

Q: And they said you should come because they sensed some special destiny for you or just because they needed more monks in the monastery?

#91: Because if there were no monks in the monastery, it would go to ruins. That was why they needed more monks; else the monastery would be ruined.

Q: You remember anything of your childhood before you were 7? Do you have any special memory before you went to the monastery?

#91: I don't remember anything. Even after becoming a monk at seven, I have only a faint memory of those days. I don't remember much.

Q: You remember the first day you went to the monastery when you were 7?

#91: I can't recall anything. What I remember is that we had to get up very early in the morning, it was maybe around 5 o'clock and that was very difficult for me. When I went to sleep at night, I remember I used to miss my parents. Other than that I do not remember much.

Q: So when you first entered the monastery you missed your parents?

#91: Yes, I used to miss my parents.

Q: There were many boys around your age there? There were other boys your own age?

#91: I was among the youngest. My father was the monastery's *chipon*, the keeper of horses, so that was the special reason they wanted me to become a monk.

Q: Your father looked after the horses, so you continued to see him while you were at the monastery?

#91: My father was at the monastery only at times. He had to take the horses to different places wherever there was grass.

Q: What was the name of the monastery you went to?

#91: Lhatse Choedhe Gaden Wongming.

Q: That was a Nyingma Monastery or what was the sect?

#91: Gelugpa sect.

Q: What was a typical day in the monastery life for you as a child? What kind of things did you do?

#91: I used to miss my parents and at times I found it difficult to follow the rules of the monastery. I remember those. As I became older, I had to learn the scriptures, which were difficult. I don't remember much else.

Q: When you were very young, you felt it was very hard for you?

#91: Yes, I used to find it very hard to get up early in the morning in the freezing weather and then having to attend the prayer session. I still remember that.

Q: Did you have to sit out in the snow and study sometimes, when it was snowing?

#91: When it snowed we sat inside to study. We didn't have to sit where it was snowing.

Q: Because I have seen monks in Tibet outside in the snow studying. That is why I asked this question.

#91: Yes. But it didn't snow that much in our region. It snowed a little in winter.

Q: It was just very cold.

#91: It was extremely cold.

Q: At what age did you have to start studying the scriptures?

#91: I was taught the alphabets from the age of 7.

Q: When did you study the scriptures?

#91: Before we start studying the debates, we have to memorize a lot of texts, which are chanted during the prayer sessions.

Q: What was the age?

#91: At about the age of 8 or 9 years old—after learning the alphabet.

Q: Did you have any idea what the scriptures meant at that age?

#91: I did not understand the meaning of the words. We had to recite out of memory and I memorized many prayers.

Q: Did any of your teachers ever hit you when you made a mistake?

#91: Yes, I have been beaten a little. I ran away from the monastery six times.

Q: That's because they hit you with their hand or stick. How did they hit? What did they hit you with?

#91: If the teacher became very angry, he would hit with a rope.

Q: With a rope? Did that make you very angry then, when they do that?

#91: I was too scared to get angry!

Q: You were memorizing scriptures—at what point did you actually start to find meaning in what you were studying?

#91: When I started understanding the meanings of the scriptures was when I was about 13 or 14 years old. That's when I started studying the Buddhist philosophical debates.

Q: And you remember that moment, when something you had first insight into the dharma or into what was being taught to you?

#91: We start learning the philosophical debates at age 13. The teachers teach us the meaning of the scriptures and we learn a little. It was not possible to know much.

Q: What was the first meaning that you felt you really understood? What was the first thing you thought you really understood?

#91: I did not fully understand the meaning of the dharma until I came to Sera Monastery.

Q: At what age?

#91: At the age of 18, I came to Lhasa from Lhatse.

Q: To Sera?

#91: Yes, Sera.

Q: So you moved from this monastery and then you went to Sera Monastery. When was that?

#91: When I came to Lhasa, I was 18 years old.

Q: So up until 18, it was basically memorization and studying without really understanding?

#91: No, we had to learn the philosophical debates, the *tse-nyi*.

Q: *Tse-nyi* is question-answer?

#91: We do it here. One will ask a question and it is replied to and then another question is asked.

Q: That you learned in...

#91: Lhatse Choedhe.

Q: Did you become very good at that?

#91: I think I did quite well. I was promoted from the lower-grade to the upper-grade because I was good. We were about ten students in one class.

Q: So you must have gotten better at that?

#91: Yes, you can say that. However, our monastery was a small one and here [Sera Monastery in Lhasa], I think I was quite good.

Q: You think you were a better questioner or answerer?

#91: No, I don't think there is much difference between them. Whatever the teacher has taught you, you go and say it there and when you receive a reply, you have to think and recall what your teacher has taught you and say it. That's how you do it.

Q: Do you remember any particular questions that you enjoyed in particular?

#91: You have to go according to whatever is given there in the scriptures.

[Question is repeated]

#91: Yes, I used to be happy. I was very interested.

Q: Any particular question?

#91: You have to keep the scriptures as your base, and according to that, you question and receive an answer. You have to be really fluent in that—the meanings of whatever are there in the texts. You ask a question and receive an answer and at times you say that that is right, or at times that that is not right and the debate goes on. The texts have many sections, like Dhuera, Lodha, Dupton Sasum and so on. You have to know whatever is there in the scriptures.

Q: And before you went to Sera Monastery, did you do any particular meditations of any kind? Did they teach you or require you to do meditations?

#91: No, I did not know meditation. It was not in our rules to teach meditation; instead we had to learn the basics of philosophical debate. They tested us on that and also the scriptures that we memorized. Other than that, we did not know about meditation and such things like *Lamrin*. Except if a high Lama came and spoke on *Lamrin*, the study portion of our monastery did not cover meditations.

Q: Did you learn meditation? Did you learn to do sand *mandalas* at all or any of that kind of...

#91: No, I did not learn any of that kind.

Q: You only learned the debates?

#91: Yes, I concentrated on debates. I did not even learn to write well though I can read the Tibetan *Ugyen* script. I do not know to read or to write the other form of Tibetan script, *Umay*. We were not taught to.

Q: Did the Chinese come before or after you went to Sera Monastery?

#91: The Chinese had not come then. It was two or three years after I left for Sera Monastery that the Chinese arrived.

Q: So why did you go to...How did it come about that you went to Sera Monastery from the place you were?

#91: My going to Sera Monastery was mainly for education. My teacher had studied at Sera Monastery and returned to our monastery. He advised that I should go to Sera Monastery for my studies and that our monastery was too small for a good education. Sera Monastery being a big monastery was better for my education, so I was sent there.

Q: Were you happy to go to Sera with your teacher?

#91: My teacher did not go with me. He remained at our monastery.

Q: Were you happy?

#91: I went walking. It took me over 15 days from Lhatse to Lhasa. Early in the morning at around 3 a.m., I would start walking.

Q: You walked to Sera? Were you happy to go to Sera?

#91: I was very happy. My going to Sera Monastery was not a form of tax. It was only when I was made a monk that that was a tax. I went to Sera Monastery out of my own wish.

Q: What had you heard about Sera Monastery?

#91: My teacher told me that at Sera Monastery there were many good teachers to teach the scriptures. He said that at Sera Monastery there were more opportunities to learn and hearing about them, I wanted to go to Sera Monastery. When I went to Sera Monastery, it was not just walking, but I had to carry food, water and clothing on my back.

Q: How long did it take you on foot?

#91: It took me about 16 or 17 days.

Q: Who went with you?

#91: There was another student, my roommate and three other monks who had earlier studied at Sera Monastery and were returning after teaching at our monastery.

Q: And when you got to Sera Monastery, how was it different from your previous monastery?

#91: Concerning education, the opportunities were great at Sera Monastery, but where food was concerned, it was better at my previous monastery. At Sera Monastery, food was scarce.

Q: There wasn't enough food?

#91: At times there would not be enough *tsampa* 'flour made from roasted barley.' It was not like what it is here [in Bylakuppe] today. We ate *pa* 'kneaded dough from *tsampa*' and at times, I missed meals. Food was difficult to obtain at Sera Monastery.

Q: At the time you went there, how many monks were in Sera?

#91: At Sera Monastery? I do not have any figure to quote. They normally used to say that there were about 5,000 to 6,000 monks. In Sera Monastery, there are three *datsang* 'sections' named Jeka, Meypa and Ngagpa. I was in the Jeka Datsang. They say that there were around 5,000 monks.

Q: In Sera Je?

#91: Yes, in Sera Je. There was no custom of taking a count. However, after the battle in Lhasa, the Chinese took a census and said that there were over 5,000.

Q: In Sera Je alone?

#91: Yes, they said that there were over 5,000 monks in Sera Je alone. In the early days, we had no custom of head counting, but the Chinese wanted to find out the strength of the

monks after the war to learn whether the figure had increased or decreased and they counted 5,000.

Q: Is Sera in Lhasa or outside of Lhasa?

#91: It is outside Lhasa. It is located behind the Tse Potala Palace. It is towards the north of Lhasa.

Q: Did you go into Lhasa very much?

#91: When I reached Sera Monastery, the next day I went to Lhasa. I have something funny to relate.

On my first trip to Lhasa, someone helped me, but that day I did not meet the person I had to meet—I had to meet this person because some of my food was transported on his horses and mules. The next day my companion and I thought we could go by ourselves. We walked the whole day. We started from Sera Monastery at daybreak and by the time we returned from Lhasa it was night! We had gotten lost on the way. We were fools because we could have asked people the way to Sera Monastery, but we were ashamed to do so! I was a fool at that time!

Q: I guess everyone must learn to ask the way.

#91: That is right, but I didn't ask. The reason why I didn't ask was that they would realize that I was a new person around the area and I'd heard that there were cheaters and robbers. So I was scared and didn't ask the way.

Q: That's a difficult situation.

#91: Yes. In comparison to my village, Lhasa was a big town but comparing it with the cities in India, it's nothing. However, both my companion and I were lost. At one point, both of us became angry at each other. One would say that that was the way and the other would say that it wasn't. We walked up and down. [Laughs]

Q: After you learned the way, did you frequently go into Lhasa after that?

#91: Yes, I did go later, but only with someone who knew the way!

Q: Did you go to the Bakor in Lhasa?

#91: We circumambulated the Bakor most of the time. We would walk for a little distance and then get scared that we'd lose our way and return to the Bakor.

Q: After you returned to Sera Je, how were your studies different than what...how did you find the difference?

#91: Basically, it was the same because the basis was the scriptures. However, there were different grades and I had studied the lower grades at the earlier monastery. The higher grades were taught there and the teachers were also different. In the Sera monastery we had renowned teachers while we didn't have such in the village monastery.

Q: You were being taught the higher grades?

#91: For example, in the schools here you have grades one, two, three and so on. In the same way we had the *Shung Kapon Nga*, which was taught grade wise.

Q: So you had many examinations to pass?

#91: I suppose I know a little, but not much.

Q: Many exams or not many exams?

#91: Not many.

Q: At that point, were you introduced to any meditations or anything like that in Sera?

#91: Even at Sera Monastery, there were no special sections in meditations, which we had to learn within the study portion. It was there in the texts and we just followed it, but we did not sit meditating with our eyes shut. However, the scriptures contained lessons on how meditations should be done and how to control your mind.

Q: Is there a particular time when meditation is introduced into the teaching or is it different everywhere?

#91: While learning the basics of the scriptures, you automatically learn how to meditate, but there are no such special lessons like demonstration during a prayer assembly that that is how you meditate. While you are learning the scriptures, it contains in it how you control your mind. That is how you meditate. That's what you understood by way of learning the scriptures.

Q: I guess just for my own understanding because I don't know very much about this, I wonder, I have heard stories like in Dzogchen monastery, people would go often to caves and maybe spent four years in a cave or they would take a young boy and put him in a room and he would stay in the room for six months. Were you familiar with any of those practices and why would they be in some places and not in others?

#91: I have heard about those who meditate. There are many such people.

Q: You haven't seen them?

#91: I have seen them too. There are many around Dharamsala. In our village in Lhatse, there were nuns who spent their entire life in a room; they plaster the door with mud and leave just a small opening to take food in. I have seen them. I have been to them too.

Q: How long did she stay in the room?

#91: She stayed there her entire life, until she was brought out by the Chinese. She might have been in there for 20 or 30 years.

Q: They broke the door down and they stopped her from meditating and they put her in a jail?

#91: I don't think she was put in jail. I heard that she was taken out and not allowed to continue [her meditation]. After the defeat of Lhasa, I stayed only about three years and then escaped.

Q: When did you become aware that things started to change in Sera? What was the first kind of thing that you noticed that was changing in your life?

#91: Generally in terms of economy, there was no change whatsoever. But in my mind there was a change, since I learned the scriptures; my mind embraced the dharma and my mind learned to keep away from wrong things. Other than that I did not find any other way.

Q: That's what you learned in Sera—that materialistic life is not so important, that developing your heart was the most important thing.

#91: That is right.

Q: Last year, I was in Amdo and I was speaking to the Lama there in a monastery in Amdo Province and he was telling me that the monastery actually was acting as the court of law in that particular area. If there were problems between people and cases that had to be settled, they didn't come to the Chinese, they came to the lama, the monastery to settle these disputes. Is that how things worked then?

#91: If it was a dispute among the monks, then there was the *Lachi* the main body and there were the *Shesay*, *Shango* and *Sinkhang*, which settled them. Then there were various *khangtsen* 'houses' and *datsang* 'sections'.

Q: The laypeople?

#91: Not the general public. If the people belonged to the estate of the monastery, then perhaps they approached their particular head, but not the general public.

Q: When did you become aware of the Chinese?

#91: Perhaps it was two years after I joined Sera Monastery that people said that the Chinese were coming to Lhasa. One day I too went to see them come marching in. Other than that, I don't remember much.

Q: Two years after you joined Sera?

#91: I think it was around two years. I am not very clear.

Q: What did you see?

#91: I saw them come in a procession.

Q: You saw soldiers or civilians?

#91: Soldiers.

Q: Did they bother you at all? Did they come to Sera, to your monastery? Did they leave you alone there?

#91: No, they didn't come to Sera Monastery; perhaps they came just to see the monastery, but they didn't bother us. At that time the Chinese were trying to be really diplomatic. I have something to say. The Chinese were very much trying to be extremely diplomatic with the Tibetans at that time. They were trying to be gentle in words and in attitude.

Q: They were clever.

#91: No, not that. Peaceful. Caring. They were trying to be very gentle. What happened [one day] was that there was a narrow path leading from Sera Monastery to Lhasa with water on both sides. We were five or six of us walking on this narrow path and a Chinese was coming from the opposite direction. He was sounding loudly on a sort of bell to signal us and one of my companions became very angry. He pushed the Chinese into the water, but he [the Chinese] never quarreled with us nor did he get angry.

Q: Did you think the Chinese were good?

#91: No, they were not good, I knew that. They were being tactful in order to try to make the Tibetans like them.

Q: He wanted to get through and you were there and your friend just pushed the guy into the river? What was he ringing?

#91: Something like a cycle bell.

Q: The Chinese was shocked?

#91: The path was so narrow; there was hardly any space.

Q: What did he say after he was pushed?

#91: The Chinese didn't say anything. The monk said—though the Chinese wouldn't understand—"If we sidestep for you, who will sidestep for us?"

Q: Was this a soldier or just a...

#91: He was an ordinary official, dressed in blue.

Q: So at least in the beginning, the Chinese did not cause big problems. When did things start to get worse?

#91: A few years later after His Holiness the Dalai Lama went to India and returned to Tibet, around that time, and a little earlier than that. Mainly in Kham area, the Chinese began the so-called liberation and caused much suffering to the people there, which were heard in Lhasa. In Lhasa also the Chinese' actions became worse in regard to the leaders.

Q: The Chinese began to cause suffering after His Holiness left for India?

#91: No, no. His Holiness went to India on pilgrimage, a little earlier than that.

Q: Which year was it?

#91: Wasn't it 1957 when His Holiness went to India on pilgrimage? It was around that year.

Q: By doing what?

#91: In Kham they caused a lot of hardship and killed many people.

Q: Did they do anything in the monastery?

#91: They didn't do anything in the monastery.

Q: But you heard what was happening in Kham?

#91: Yes, we heard what was being done in Kham. The Chinese said they were bringing about reformation; that the old ways were not good and that they were going to bring about good ways. They started the reformation in Kham and it was very bad. A multitude of people from Kham, in the east were fleeing.

Q: Were the Chinese still friendly or were they changing?

#91: No special friendship. The monks had no relationship with the Chinese. We were in our place and they stayed where they were. No one spoke about politics. At times the Chinese tactfully made special offerings in the monastery and gave money to the monks.

[Inquiries about the comfort of those in interview room]

Q: So maybe it was the translation when you said first that they were not good and you said the Chinese were providing all this stuff. So I don't understand.

#91: Except for the battle, the Chinese didn't do anything nor torment [the monks at] Sera Monastery. They didn't come to Sera Monastery, except to make offerings.

Q: They mistreated the people in Kham?

#91: We heard that they mistreated the people in Kham. Many people fled from there and the monastery was filled with monks [fleeing from the East].

Q: When did you start to see trouble yourself in Lhasa or in Sera in front of you?

#91: We heard that people were being arrested in the East and to be frank, I did not have any interest in what the Chinese were doing there.

Q: Right. You didn't have any interest in those matters, but those matters were coming to you; you weren't coming to them.

#91: Yes, the Chinese were interested in us. They were cleverly giving money to the abbots. A song was sung in Lhasa with words like “*dhayen* ‘silver coins’ are being rolled inside the monks’ robes.” I don't know all the words of the song, but the gist was that money was being rolled in the monk's robes [paid as bribe].

Q: What the Chinese did first was to try diplomatically to make the Tibetans like them. When they were not successful in this, they changed their color? How did they change?

#91: The change was that they were harassing the government to accept the so-called “Democratization of Liberation” process. The Chinese started building houses and hotels and the citizens were raising a hue and cry. This is what I heard, as personally the Chinese have not said a word to me.

Q: But not in 1959?

#91: That was prior to 1959. In 1959, the actual war started.

Q: They were building hotels?

#91: Yes, they built hotels and houses in various places. The Chinese were everywhere. Not only that, when such a huge number of Chinese moved into Tibet, Tibet being a small country, there was a scarcity of food grains. The prices of grains escalated.

Q: Prices were going up.

#91: Every monastery has its own oracle, like the Nechung. When we consulted our oracle, he placed a 100 *ngu-sang* 'Tibetan currency' on a *bo* full of grains. The *bo* is a measuring can similar to a one kilogram weight here. It was a prediction that the price of grain would escalate.

Q: I don't understand. You consulted an oracle?

#91: The oracle predicted that in the future there would be scarcity of food grains and the price of food grains would be exorbitant; he placed the 100 Ngu-sang note on the *bo* to indicate that. *Bo* was a measuring device used when grains were sold.

Q: The oracle placed the note on that?

#91: Yes, it was to indicate that such a quantity of grain would cost a 100 *ngu-sang*. Those were the reasons no one liked the Chinese.

Q: That's why you didn't like them?

#91: Also they burned bones, garbage and such things. It was said that they ate dog's meat. It might be true that they ate dog's meat because there were many plump dogs in their army camps.

Q: They burned bones?

#91: It was said that they burned bones, but in truth perhaps those were garbage. At that time it was considered bad to burn bones.

Q: Whose bones?

#91: Every type of bones. The bones of the meat they ate.

Q: They ate the flesh of whom?

#91: That I don't know.

Q: You just heard they were eating flesh and burning the bones?

#91: Yes, bones and garbage.

Q: It was considered bad to burn garbage?

#91: In general, nobody would say anything if garbage was burned, but among the Tibetans, it was not the custom to burn garbage. However, when bones and such stuff were burned, we considered it very bad. It [the smoke] was said to harm the deities and so on.

Q: Okay, continue.

#91: Then it became worse and worse and the actual war started. The Chinese brought down the Tibetan government. They came to power and started imprisoning people. The earlier intellectuals, officials of the government, monasteries and estates, highly learned religious masters; doubting those people, they captured all of them.

Q: Did they come and arrest the lamas at your monastery?

#91: Many. Not just arrests, they [the monks] were subjected to *thamzing* ‘struggle sessions’ and beaten. The student monks were made to beat their teachers; parents their children and the children their parents. Such dreadful things happened.

Q: Did you witness that?

#91: Oh, yes, I saw that. I saw many times. Not only that, the Chinese would claim, "They [the Tibetans] did the beatings." The Chinese did not do any of the beatings. Our people were made to do it. The Chinese told the Tibetans who did not engage in beatings, "You are bad. You have not been indoctrinated enough. You are this and that," repeatedly, until in sheer frustration students beat their teachers and parents.

Q: Did anyone beat you or did you have to beat anyone or were you forced to do anything?

#91: I have neither beaten anyone nor been beaten. However, in our monastery, there were many elder lamas holding office that were beaten and imprisoned. Later, two monks of our monastery committed suicide by stabbing themselves.

Q: You heard about that or you saw that?

#91: I saw it. That afternoon they were subjected to *thamzing* and shoved to the ground. One fell, seriously injuring his hip. That night unable to bear the hardship, he found a small old knife in a room where normally prayers are offered to the protective deity and stabbed himself three times in the abdomen. The other cut his throat and I heard that people hung themselves in other places. [Shows action of hanging]

Q: When you saw them, were they dead?

#91: When I saw him, he was not dead. They took him to the hospital.

Q: You witnessed their suicide?

#91: No, I didn't see them do it. They did it at night. They were in prison.

Q: Did they succeed? Did they die?

#91: One died and the other didn't. He came back. Some people died in the nearby monasteries. Let me continue. The other thing that happened was this. The monk had stabbed himself in the night when he was imprisoned alone in a room. The next day, about 500 of us monks were divided into groups and the monk was brought out for *thamzing*. He was asked to confess what he had done and what he had said.

Q: The one who had stabbed himself?

#91: Yes, he'd stabbed himself the night before, but did not die. He had worn a pair of pants made of *paktsa* 'animal skin' in anticipation of the cold if he was taken to prison. We could see the blood and pus dribble down on the floor in front of us.

Q: Through the *paktsa*?

#91: Yes, blood and pus dribbled through the *paktsa*.

Q: He was in that situation that night? He was subjected to *thamzing* in front of the all the monks?

#91: Yes. He had stabbed himself in the night, and the next day he was brought out for the *thamzing*. He had been subjected to struggle session the day before too.

Q: Why did they put him in the center of the room? For what purpose? For another *thamzing*?

#91: *Thamzing* is the way of the Chinese. In order to arrest them [people] and take them away to prison, they needed a motive, so the Chinese instigated Tibetans to make accusations and taking that as a motive, they were taken away to prison. Otherwise, you just can't catch someone and...

Q: The person who was stabbed; did they *thamzing* him because he tried to kill himself?

#91: He stabbed in order to kill himself.

Q: So he was again subjected to the struggle sessions?

#91: Yes, because he was not dead, he was subjected to the struggle sessions again.

Q: You were there and you saw that?

#91: Yes, I saw it. The monk's name was Changchung Dorjeela.

Q: When you saw these things happening, these terrible things; what was going through your mind? What did you think?

#91: I started to hate the Chinese from the depth of my heart and then I thought about escaping.

Q: You decided to flee then or later?

#91: I decided to flee then. There is more. The Chinese needed evidence of an offense committed by the monk in order to arrest him; they had to put it down in writing and send it to say that was the reason he was arrested. Since there was no offense, the Chinese told the monks that they have to make such and such accusations [against the monk they wanted to arrest]. So there was one monk who was subjected to *thamzing* for about two hours and, finally, to all the accusations he admitted, "Yes, I did it!" He said "yes" to every accusation hurled at him. At the end of the meeting, the Chinese leader said that the meeting had been a great success. However, the accused said, "What I have said today are all lies. I said all that out of dread!" Everybody was so surprised!

Q: He was a monk?

#91: Yes.

Q: And then they beat him?

#91: They beat you until you accepted the accusations, so he said "yes" to all for fear of more beatings.

Q: This was in 1959? Is that right?

#91: It was after the war in Lhasa was lost; that was in the spring. It was around autumn of 1959. I fled from Lhasa and went to my old monastery at Lhatse.

Q: In 1959 you fled from Lhasa?

#91: When the war took place at Sera Monastery, I fled to my old monastery.

Q: While you were in Sera, what did you know what was going on in Lhasa and the developments with the Dalai Lama? Had you escaped already or were you still going to escape?

#91: When the war began in Lhasa, it was early morning at around 4 o'clock. If I looked out from my window, I could see the Norbulingka and the Potala Palace. A lot of artillery shells were being fired and I was very scared. I went to the top of the house and found many monks there. The monks were saying, "What would have become of His Holiness the Dalai Lama? Look there, the Norbulingka is being bombed." Someone told me, "His Holiness is not there. He has already left. Don't worry."

Q: It was 4 a.m. in the morning?

#91: Yes, it was around 4 o'clock in the morning.

Q: What did you feel when you heard that?

#91: Then I felt happy. I was wondering what would happen because a lot of shells were being fired. You could hear the sound of guns and artillery at Sera Monastery. I was sleeping at that time and was woken up by the sound of guns and shells.

Q: So then surely thereafter you fled back to your village?

#91: No, not until Lhasa was lost and it became hopeless. The Chinese fired a lot of artillery shells at Sera Monastery. Scared of being at Sera, I went to stay at a mountain cavern nearby. I was afraid to remain there too and fled to my village.

Q: To your own village?

#91: Yes, to Lhatse.

Q: What did you find when you got home to Lhatse?

#91: There were many monks at Sera and Drepung Monasteries who were originally from my village monastery. I was the first monk to return.

Q: From the village?

#91: No, from Sera Monastery to Lhatse Choedhe. I was the first to reach Lhatse from Sera Monastery among its many monks. I was the first to arrive there. Except for a few who had heard the news over the radio, most of the monks [in the village monastery] had not heard about the war, even 10 to 15 days later. A few monks had heard about it by listening to the radio. They had spent the nights reciting *Dolma* prayers for His Holiness the Dalai Lama. Majority of the people were ignorant about the war in Lhasa.

Q: What was the reaction when you personally told people what you had seen?

#91: People cried. When I returned, I was not in my monk's robes; instead I was wearing a layman's dress. People were very surprised and everyone came to see me.

Q: They believed you?

#91: Yes, they believed me. The senior monks had heard it over the radio, but they dare not reveal it to the people.

Q: Why?

#91: They were afraid as to what would happen later.

Q: Then what happened?

#91: As I was the first to return, our monastery's officials gathered for a meeting. The discussions were: what to do with me, as I had come from the war area; what would they tell the Chinese if they were questioned regarding me. Some felt that if the Chinese ask anything, they could just say the person is here and talk to him directly while some had the opposite opinion and they couldn't come to an agreement. The next day, they called me to the office. There was something called the *Zendi* or a prophecy for which you consulted the deity; that procedure was done for my case.

Q: They were deciding to hand you over to the Chinese because they were afraid the Chinese would come and then harm everyone?

[Interpreter to interviewer]: Yes.

Q: Did you use the bowl for fortune telling?

#91: It was like this: you wrote the options on notes, which were rolled in *pa 'tsampa* dough.' Those [the dough balls] were rotated [in a bowl] and whichever ball fell out was the chosen one.

Q: That's how they decide what to do? They threw it on the ground and read how it scatters?

#91: The *pa* would keep moving in front of the deity and then you chose which fell out. The one meant for me said, "Don't do anything to him." They [the other monks] were trying to be tactful with me. When they planned to carry that out [consulting the *Zendi*] the next day, I heard it in the evening. Some monks warned me that there were some bad people who were going to do that to me and that I was to be careful the next day, but they did it very cleverly. They called me the next day and enquired as to what happened in Lhasa, as though that was the reason they had called me.

Q: There were bad people in the monastery?

#91: There were different types of people. They were not actually bad, but were afraid of the consequences, as I had come from the war area.

Q: Then they said don't harm you, don't turn you over to the Chinese, just leave you alone?

#91: That's right and nothing happened. It was good for me. Later many monks arrived from Lhasa.

Q: You must have been very relieved?

#91: I became very happy, but I didn't want to stay there. I wished to come here [to India].

Q: So how were you able to flee? This was still 1959 and you said earlier that you did not; I think you did not flee until 1962? What happened in those three years?

#91: I fled in 1959.

Q: When was it when you fled to India?

#91: That was in 1962.

[Question is repeated]

#91: In those three years, I could not find a good travel companion. I did not know the way to India. There were some of us who discussed among ourselves and we spoke to someone who knew the way and then we decided to escape. That was the delay.

Q: So you had to wait for two to three years to be able to flee?

#91: I remained there with the thought that I would make my escape when I found a good travel companion.

Q: Yes, but I want to know, did you have to wait two years before you were able to do that?

#91: Yes, I had to wait.

Q: What did you do in that time? Where were you?

#91: The Chinese made us cultivate the fields. I don't know why, but that year the crops grew abundantly. At the time of harvest, they [the Chinese] didn't let us stay at the monastery. They drove us out to the village. They selected a monk or two whom they were suspicious of and made them stay back at the monastery. They said, "You can stay here and have the freedom to practice religion." The majority of us were ousted. They did that twice. The first time they did that, we did not budge.

Q: Were you driven out of the monastery?

#91: Yes, they wouldn't let us stay in the monastery.

Q: After you had harvested?

#91: No. First they said that the so-called revolution was on and conducted a lot of *thamzing*. When that was over, they expelled the monks.

Q: They allowed two or three monks to remain in the monastery?

#91: We stayed for one year.

Q: Where were you for one year?

#91: In the monastery.

Q: You mean you were growing crops?

#91: During that time they didn't make us cultivate. We were at the monastery for one year while the *thamzing* were going on.

Q: Who were there?

#91: All of us monks of Lhatse Choedhe were there.

Q: So for one year the Chinese carried out *thamzing*?

#91: Yes, for one year they carried it out and let the monks stay at the monastery. Then they expelled a part of the monks. About 93 or 95 of us resolutely remained there, though the Chinese told us to leave.

Q: Did the Chinese come and carry out *thamzing*?

#91: Yes, they conducted *thamzing*.

Q: Did you cultivate land the following year? Where was this?

[Interpreter to interviewer]: At Lhatse.

Q: You are still in Lhatse.

#91: Yes.

Q: And then they came to your Lhatse Monastery and then you went through another series of *thamzing* there and then after that was over, you had to cultivate the fields?

#91: Yes, *thamzing* for over a year. Then the majority of the monks were expelled and there were just a small number of us left.

Q: The monks were expelled?

#91: The majority were expelled. They were not allowed to remain in the monastery. The Chinese verbally said that there was freedom of religion and we could stay in the monastery. In actual fact, they said religious education was not good and expelled the monks.

Q: They took some monks away and put them in prison?

[Interpreter to interviewer]: They allowed only a few monks to stay in the monastery.

Q: And you were one of the monks left in Lhatse Monastery?

#91: The first time I was not expelled, as I was determined to stay on. The second time it was not possible to stay for they [the Chinese] were very strict, so I had to leave.

Q: To work in the fields?

#91: Yes.

Q: And the *thamzings* you saw in Lhatse, were they similar to the ones at Sera?

#91: They were similar. At Sera Monastery, I did not see the *thamzing* because I fled immediately after the war, but the methods adopted for *thamzing* were similar.

Q: So then you were sent to the fields and then you heard some people; were there people passing through or how did you finalize your plans to escape to India?

#91: We discussed among ourselves—one of my companions is the previous abbot of Sera Je Monastery here [in Bylakuppe], another one is now in France and the third is a Lama now living in Germany. We were four of us.

Q: Initially where did they come from, these other people?

#91: We came from the same village.

Q: Were they all monks?

#91: Yes. The Lama was from another monastery, who had escaped to our monastery. There was great suspicion on him as he was a Lama.

Q: So you were four monks from the same monastery?

#91: Yes, we were all monks.

Q: You were all monks there together working in the fields of Lhatse?

#91: Yes. However, those monk officials who'd been imprisoned and we, the common monks, were not put together. We were not allowed to mix.

Q: But you and your friends who were monks also decided to flee to India together?

#91: That is right.

Q: So tell us about how you made your escape?

#91: Initially, I was waiting for a companion to make my escape. Incidentally, I visited the room of one of the [future] escapees and learned about their plan. I requested them to take me with them and not to leave me. Earlier many others had left me behind because I was poor. I pleaded with them to let me join them.

Q: Because you were poor they didn't want to take you with them?

#91: It was because they wanted the group to remain small. They feared capture if word leaked out.

Q: So ultimately they let you come with them?

#91: I learned that they were planning to escape because I noticed that some of the things that they planned on taking to India were missing in the room. I knew that, so I told them, "You are planning to leave and you have to take me with you." Then they said, "We are leaving tomorrow, so how will you come?" I replied, "Tomorrow? I would come even if you said you were leaving just now." So that night I went to my home and early the next morning, we fled.

Q: I don't understand the first response when they said, "How can we take you, you are poor?" What does that mean?

#91: They didn't say that they wouldn't take me. They wouldn't reveal to me that they planned to escape. When I was expelled from the monastery, I was living in my mother's village.

Q: They didn't tell you that you were poor and couldn't accompany them?

#91: They were suspicious of me. They feared that if more people spoke about it [the plan to escape], they'd be captured. Earlier we had discussed escaping.

Q: Did they say that you were poor and shouldn't come with them?

#91: No, they didn't say that.

Q: What did they say earlier?

#91: Because I was poor, they suspected me.

Q: Suspected that you were with the Chinese?

#91: No, not that I was with the Chinese. They thought I would talk about the escape and if more people learned about it, the Chinese might come to know of it.

Q: That it would put them at risk?

#91: Yes. I did not tell my mother that I was going to escape.

Q: You didn't tell anybody; not even your mother. You just packed and then you were ready to go.

#91: I did not have many things. The others had things to take. That was how I came to know they were planning to escape when their things were missing in the room. I did not speak a word of it to my mother.

Q: Then you made your escape?

#91: Yes, we escaped.

Q: How did you escape?

#91: From my village I went to the place where my companions were. They gave me some of their belongings to carry. So I left alone with the things on my back.

Q: They let you go first and the three of them came later?

#91: No. One of them had left the day earlier. It was through their missing belongings that I came to know of their plan to escape.

Q: So you escaped with their effects?

#91: There was a village ahead called Thathok. There I reached the home of the person who had left the day earlier.

Q: Where is Thathok?

#91: Thathok is...I cannot measure the distance in kilometers, but on foot it took us two hours from Lhatse Zong.

Q: Then where did you go?

#91: That night the two of us stayed there. The other two were yet to arrive. In the nights the Chinese used to play films for the people. Everyone came out to watch the film and our two companions did too. Otherwise, no one dared to come out of the monastery for fear of the Chinese. On the pretext of going to watch the film, our two companions made their escape. They reached [Thathok] at around midnight and all four of us were together.

Q: Where did you go from Thathok?

#91: We were in extreme fear at Thathok. The house in which we stayed belonged to a very well-to-do family in the early days. It was full of Chinese soldiers.

Q: At Thathok?

#91: There were many soldiers in the house where we were staying. Friends and relatives of one of my companions came to plead with him not to go to India. We were full of fear that night.

Q: The relatives told him not to go?

#91: Yes, they told my companion not to go. There was no one to tell me not to go. I did not have any relatives there.

Q: Because?

#91: They were relatives and they didn't know what India was like and the problems he might face, which was why they persuaded him not to go.

Q: They thought he would face a bigger problem in India than he already had?

#91: That might be it. He didn't know the country, the language and the food. While in Tibet they could somehow manage to get something to eat and India was so far away. In other words, they didn't want to be separated; they wanted to remain together.

Q: Who didn't want to be separated?

#91: The relatives.

Q: Then where did you go from Thathok?

#91: We left in the night at around 1 o'clock. There were many Chinese soldiers, but they didn't take much notice of us; they were engrossed in their own duties. It was the Chinese officials who were alert, but not the Chinese soldiers. The Lama who was with us had bought a horse to carry his belongings. The horse had a sore on its back and early in the morning when we loaded the things on it, it started jumping and neighing, throwing down the load. The two senior companions left.

Q: From the four of you, two had already left?

#91: The seniors moved ahead because of the fear of being captured by the Chinese. We were left to bring the horse.

Q: So two persons left earlier and two later? It was 1 o'clock in the night?

#91: We left at the same time. It was the horse's sore and throwing of the load...

Q: It had a sore on its back, so it was in pain?

[Interpreter to interviewer]: Yes.

Q: The two left earlier?

#91: The two seniors went ahead leaving us to our fate.

Q: Then you two left?

#91: Then we left with the horse. They had gone ahead because of fear for the Lama's safety.

Q: The one with you was a Lama?

#91: Yes, he is the one who now lives in Germany.

Q: He was with you?

#91: He was. No, he was not the one who remained with me [and the horse]. He was one of the two who went ahead because there was fear [for his safety].

Q: So you mean from the first two, one of them was a Lama or both were Lamas?

#91: They were both monks, but one was a Lama or a reincarnate.

Q: And there was a fear that the Chinese would really want to capture this Lama, so that's why you sent him out front, to go first?

#91: Yes, because of fear.

Q: So they went on ahead and then what happened?

#91: Then we met up at around noon. They were waiting for us at a deserted place.

Q: You caught up with them?

[Interpreter to interviewer]: Yes.

Q: Then where did you go then?

#91: We walked on for many days. Then one day fearing that the villagers might capture us, we became separated. There was a place called Dhopta, which we reached at dusk. We could find no grass for the horse to eat, so we went to buy grass from the village and found

that the entire village of people had fled and the village was deserted. That village was located on a hill and there was another village down at the base of the hill.

#91: At Dhopta? The hill was empty?

#91: That village was empty. However, there were inhabitants in the other village situated further down. They had seen us arrive and taking us to be robbers who'd come to rob them, they came rushing towards us. That was when we became separated.

Q: Wow! So you were not dressed as monks? You were dressed in regular clothes?

#91: Yes, we were wearing regular clothes, not monk's robes. I hadn't worn monk's robes since living at the village.

Q: So they thought you were thieves?

#91: The villagers on the lower area thought we had come to rob the things from the deserted village. We were in need of grass for the horse as we had walked for many days.

Q: So you scattered and what did you do?

#91: We the two junior monks met up once again. However, we got separated from the seniors and did not meet them until at a place called Dongkhuk on the Indian border.

Q: You met up at Dongkhuk, the younger ones?

#91: The two of us were together and the villagers surrounded us, some even had guns and they questioned us.

Q: Did they capture you?

#91: No, they didn't capture us. They didn't come close to us, but encircled us. There were 15 to 20 people. They questioned us and we told them the truth that we were escaping.

Q: Did they let you go?

#91: We [also] told them a lie.

Q: To whom?

#91: To those many people. Our horse was lying down there. So we told them, "Our horse is exhausted and it can go no further. Tonight we will come to your village. We have lost our two companions because of the fear that you might capture us. Perhaps they will slowly come back here. Please return to your village and then perhaps they will return."

Q: Did you ask them to capture all four of you together?

#91: We were not asking them to capture us. We said we would come to their village.

Q: You told them that you were escaping.

#91: There were some villagers among them who sympathized with us and said we were travelers and should be allowed to go on. Some advised us against leaving, but no one said they were going to capture us.

Q: When you told them that they believed you?

#91: They believed we were trying to escape, but they saw that our horse couldn't go further. The horse was lying there.

Q: Then what happened?

#91: Now it was just the two of us. We each had a load to carry; we agreed that in case we faced difficulties on the way, we would drop some of the things and carry some. However, our two companions had left behind their effects and even their caps! So we had more to carry now, but we left behind most of it, right there.

Q: The older ones left their things behind and now you had to carry their stuff too?

#91: Yes, and lead the horse. It didn't have grass to eat, but it was not completely exhausted though the villagers believed otherwise, as it was lying there.

Q: Did they think the horse was dead?

#91: No, they didn't think it was dead. It was tired and couldn't walk.

Q: Then where did you reach?

#91: Then we reached Dhopta and met up there after two days.

Q: You've already been to Dhopta, you're going back to Dhopta?

[Interpreter to interviewer]: Not going back, they were scattered.

Q: I thought you already made it to Dhopta?

[Interpreter to interviewer]: No, no. Dhopti and Dhoptuk.

Q: Okay. I was confused. So you met up again at Dhopta?

#91: We met at Dongkhuk, on the Indian side.

Q: You are on Indian soil?

#91: Yes. That place [the village on the hill] where we ran away from was not on Indian soil.

Q: Dongkhuk is on Indian soil?

#91: Yes. It is on the border.

Q: Oh, that's on the border? Okay. Then what happened?

#91: We met up [with the senior monks] and then we continued. We sold the horse, as there was no proper road. The Indians were just constructing roads then. We carried the belongings ourselves. The two seniors did not have anything to eat and they had pledged the few things that were on their body to a family saying, "When our companions arrive we will pay you and in case they do not, please keep these things" and received some things to eat.

Q: Then what happened?

#91: Then we reached Gangtok. There was a police officer who spoke very good Tibetan, perhaps he was a native of Gangtok and he asked us where we wanted to go. While in Tibet we had heard the name Darjeeling often and Kalimpong too so we said we wanted to go to Darjeeling.

Q: Then what happened?

#91: The person was a high official. He told us that if we went to Darjeeling, we would not receive the aid that was made available [for the Tibetan refugees]. If we went to Kalimpong, we would receive aid and he asked, "Wouldn't that be better for you?"

Q: So you went to Kalimpong?

#91: Then we reached Kalimpong.

Q: So now they knew you were monks?

#91: Who?

Q: The people there.

#91: In Kalimpong, except for one person from my village, I knew nobody.

Q: How long did you stay in Kalimpong?

#91: About 10 to 15 days.

Q: And then I think you said you went to Dharamsala from Kalimpong?

#91: From Kalimpong, I went to Buxa. At Buxa, I didn't receive the aid. I was not accepted in.

Q: You were not included?

#91: No, because inclusion was strictly regulated by the Indian government, though our [Tibetan] side was flexible.

Q: Then where did you go?

#91: Then I went back to Kalimpong. From Kalimpong, we went to Dharamsala; all of us together. There were two more people that joined us.

Q: Then?

#91: From Dharamsala we went to Kulu Manali for road construction work.

Q: So you had to work on the road crew too? Even monks had to work on the road crew?

#91: There were many monks on the road crew. We were eight monks in a separate group.

Q: Was there anyone who was willing to help you find a monastery where you could then continue to be a monk? Why had you to go on to the road crew?

#91: There was no one [who could help] because such a great number of monks kept arriving. None [of the monks] could work in an office nor did they possess special skills, so most went as road crew. It was mostly monks who worked at the road construction site at Chamba.

Q: I see. Okay, and you worked how long on the road crew?

#91: I think I worked there for around three years.

Q: Three years and did you find...I mean you came from a life in which you lived most your life in a monastery. How difficult was it for you to stand the labor of road crew?

#91: I didn't find it hard. Recalling the hardships I suffered in Tibet, I felt happy with the freedom. There was a lot of fear and uncertainty in Tibet.

Q: It didn't matter to you. You were just happy to be free?

#91: That is right.

Q: So three years on the road crew and then what?

#91: Then I went to Buxa. We were accepted there.

Q: How long did you stay in Buxa?

#91: Perhaps I was there for three or four years; I am not sure.

Q: Three or four years? What did you do there?

#91: At Buxa I studied the scriptures like I do here [Sera Monastery in Bylakuppe]. His Holiness the Dalai Lama had requested that the Indian government set up a monastery for the large number of monks who escaped from Tibet to continue with their religious education.

Q: A monastery was set up?

#91: Yes, that is right.

Q: Then you became a monk again?

#91: I was a monk all along. The only difference was the dress.

Q: Then you became a monk again?

[Interpreter to interviewer]: Yes.

[Discontinuity in interview]

#91: I have not been able to say everything. I still have so many things left to say.

Q: So you said actually your monk clothes were underneath and when you took off the other clothes you were what you really are?

#91: That is right. I have taken the vows and except for the layman's clothes...

Q: You were a monk.

#91: Yes, I was a monk, except for the dress.

Q: Your true nature is to be a monk. You were three years in Buxa in a monastery there and then you came to Bylakuppe after that?

#91: Then I came to the settlement.

Q: Was this monastery built then? When was Sera Monastery built?

#91: I don't exactly remember the year.

Q: When you arrived here, was the monastery already built?

#91: No, when we came here there was no monastery. We lived in tents. The area used to be a jungle, but most of it was cleared.

Q: So there were still trees that had not been cut down and there were still elephants here?

#91: There were many elephants, which came at night to eat the crops. We watched out for elephants during the night.

Q: The crops and not the elephants! And the elephants scared you?

#91: Yes, very much. They are very fearful. We went out in the night and the corn crops were tall and at times unknowingly we would come close to the elephants! I was very scared.

Q: You couldn't see them because the corn was so high? You couldn't see if you were close to an elephant or not?

#91: If the elephants were really close, you could see them, but if they were at a little distance away, you couldn't see them. We were shorter than the tall corn stalks and couldn't see the elephants.

Q: Then you can't see it.

#91: We went very quietly, so that we could listen to the sounds of the elephants eating the corns. If we made any noise then we would not be able to hear it.

Q: You were living in tents. Was the monastery first established in tents before you could build the buildings?

#91: First, we began work on building the houses. You see those houses? [points with finger] They were built through aid that we received. We labored hard building those houses for over two years, a little less than three years.

Q: All those houses?

#91: Not every house here. That [points with finger] is one of the houses built during that time. This [points to house in which interview is taking place] was built much later when I had many students and we could not fit in the old house.

Q: So houses were built by the government?

#91: Yes, you could say they were built through aid.

Q: They gave funds for you to build houses?

#91: Initially there were almost 300 monks who came here from Buxa. We built 13 or 14 such houses; I can't remember the exact figure. No, no it was not 13, but 30-something houses that we built. It was 39. That's it.

Q: Provided by the administration?

#91: Yes, every eight monks were allotted a house.

Q: Here in Bylakuppe?

[Interpreter to interviewer]: Here in Bylakuppe.

Q: Right up here?

#91: Yes, here.

Q: So you were living here from the beginning? Eight monks to a house?

#91: One part of the house had four monks and the other side four, so eight to a house. [Continues gesturing] This is one whole house and there is the partition in the middle. On one side were four people and the other side had four.

Q: And so here you are.

#91: Yes, I am still here.

Q: After all that here you are. Then you resumed your life as a monk here. Is that true?

#91: Yes.

Q: What I want to ask you from the very beginning of this interview was you seem like a very happy person and I am wondering where do you think this happy spirit of yours comes from?

#91: My thoughts never dwell on the past troubles and I am always satisfied with whatever I have. That is why I am happy.

Q: But you said like when you were in Sera in Tibet; that there was a time when you hated the Chinese and do you still hate them now?

#91: There is no reason to hate all the Chinese, but to be frank, I am still angry at some of their leaders. [Laughs]

Q: You just hate the bad ones?

#91: Yes, I am angry with some, like their leaders.

Q: How do you reconcile that you hate some of them with the dharma that says compassion for all sentient beings?

#91: I will never harm them like taking a knife and stabbing them, but the fact that I am angry at them for causing us suffering remains. I will never harm them. I will not even be able to get to where they are.

Q: You are not going to kill them. That is a good answer.

#91: [Laughs]

Q: Suppose you could go back and face some of those people who were cruel to you. Would you want to kill them?

#91: No, I would never kill. [Laughs] I am not a person who is capable of killing nor would I kill. [If I killed], then I would no longer be a monk. It is not good to kill. What is the use of killing one person, which is not going to help us? Even if 10 [Chinese] were killed, we would still be left in India.

Q: In all your years now of studying the dharma, what do you think its greatest teaching has been for you personally?

#91: You mean what I have learned as a monk? I have learned what I have studied from the scriptures and nothing much besides that. I have learned the Tibetan script fairly well. In Tibet I didn't know it because we were not taught that; however, during my time on a road crew, I studied it. Here I taught Tibetan script and the scriptures to a large number of students. I have taught a large number of children.

Q: That's one of the things you do here? What is your title here? What are you considered?

#91: You could call me an ordinary monk. Considering my age and other developments, I am among the senior monks.

[Somebody speaks to interviewee from off camera]

#91: Yes, I was a *gekoe* 'disciplinarian' earlier. I have held many other responsibilities [in the monastery]. One job I undertook was to farm the monastery fields.

Q: You had been a *gekoe* once?

#91: I have been a *gekoe*. I looked after the dairy farm too, hoping that the monks would get to drink good milk. I worked as a teacher at the school for seven years. I have done quite a lot of work.

Q: Discipline for whom?

[Interpreter to interviewer]: To the monks.

Q: What does the *gekoe* do?

[Interpreter to interviewer]: A *gekoe* has to look after the monks [discipline]; those who break the rules, they have to look after them.

Q: I want to ask this question: if I were living here, if I were a monk here, let's say I was a bad monk—maybe I ran off to play snooker or something, smoke cigarettes and get tattoos and things like that—what would you do?

#91: I will tell you that those are not permitted. When I was a *gekoe* I made rules forbidding monks from riding motorbikes and driving cars. There was even a fight because of this. I also restructured the examination system, which is still being followed to this day. I found that the earlier way of taking examinations was not favorable, so I changed that for the better.

Q: Do you have any regrets that you never had a family or lived the life of a regular person?

#91: No, never, not at all. That is because right from the beginning that leaning was never there in me. There is never regret that one does not have a wife. There is no regret that there are no children. Even if there are no children, living in the monastery is adequate.

Q: Is there anything about monastery life that you really don't like?

#91: Yes, there are things I don't like. There are certain monks—I don't mean all the monks, but a few monks in the monastery whose actions bring a bad name to the entire community of monks, lamas and *geshe* 'monks with philosophy degrees.' I love reading newspapers and when I read articles against the monks, I feel very sad. I never like those types of behavior in the monastery.

Q: When such things are written about in the newspapers?

#91: I am not angry that the articles are written in the newspapers, after all they are writing the truth.

Q: You mean when one or two monks break the rules?

#91: Yes, that is right. I do not like that.

Q: You feel bad because it makes the monastery look bad?

[Interpreter to interviewer]: It will bring the reputation of the monastery down.

Q: So that's why you like to be disciplined, so the monks will be good.

#91: I have made a set of rules in writing for our *datsang*. I worked very hard for over a year drafting that and also prepared a record of all the assets of the *datsang*. When the rules were completed, many [monks] did not like them and for two nights, stones were pelted at my house, which is why those shutters had to be made. They did that twice in the night within a gap of about seven days. There were about six of them. All the window panes were broken.

Q: What happened to those monks?

#91: Nobody knows who they were.

[Someone speaking off camera]: Some who like freedom did not like the rules.

Q: But what happened to them after they...Did you know the monks that threw the rocks? What happened to them?

#91: I don't know who they were though I have my suspicions about one person. On both occasions, it happened around 3 o'clock in the night. I guess there were around six of them considering the amount of stones that were hurled.

Q: So you never knew who they were?

#91: I suspect one person. The Indian Intelligence Officers came and questioned me, and also the monastery officials and I told them that I have my doubts about one person. This person was interrogated by the Indian Intelligence Officers and within one month, he left the monastery. That was it.

[Someone speaking off camera]: Whatever Ngawang Choseng has done for this monastery has been very useful and for the betterment of the monastery. Whether he worked with the cows, in the field, as a disciplinarian or a teacher; whatever he did, he did it wholeheartedly.

Q: Yes, I can see that. So one more question, which is, what advice would you like to give to the younger generation of Tibetans?

#91: My advice is that a person must be kindhearted and possess integrity. Of course, one should have education, without education there is nothing. But if a person has education and no integrity, with his education he can create suffering and problems for the people. So along with education, one should have integrity. And together with that there should be unity.

Q: Do you think there is any chance of regaining freedom for Tibet?

#91: It is very difficult to talk about freedom. The Chinese are creating so many hassles just to negotiate, so it is hardly possible that they will give us independence, that's what I think. However, it is certain that Tibet was an independent nation. The future is unpredictable and nothing is sure.

Q: Do you miss anything, especially about Tibet?

#91: I miss Tibet very much. I love listening to the songs of Tibet and at times, I shed tears hearing the words of the songs. Some Tibetan singers in Tibet put words like, "Tibetans are united" and when I hear such songs, I cry.

Q: I think that's enough for today. I really want to thank you very much for sharing with us your story. I think it is very meaningful for Tibetans to be able to hear it.

#91: This is for our cause. I would like to thank you for doing this work, which is our cause and not yours. I don't need "thank you"s, it is for our cause.

Q: No, thank you!

#91: [Laughs]

Q: What is the name of the Lama who went to Germany?

#91: He is called Zongtse Tulku. I don't remember his actual name, but we call him Zongtse Tulku.

Q: Is he alive?

#91: Yes, he is. He left the monkhood. I don't know what he does, but he lives in Germany. We don't have contact.

Q: What about the one in France?

#91: The one in France is called Tenzin Dorjee.

Q: Is he a monk?

#91: Yes, he is a monk. He is pock-marked. He was ill and his face has scars. There are still two more who escaped with us.

Q: You still talk to them?

#91: No, I don't have contact with them. I am the only one here.

Q: Do they ever come here and visit?

#91: No.

Q: So you know, because of the way you just spoke about how you missed the music, and I know how music is very important to me—so I have the CD of Tibetan music that I would very much like you to have.

#91: Thank you. I am very happy.

Q: I hope you enjoy it.

#91: I love music. I listen to it and hearing the words, I shed tears. The Tibetans in Tibet strongly stress that we should all remain united.

Q: Unity of what?

#91: Unity of the Tibetan people.

Q: So this is the time for...

#91: The words [of the songs] are like a message.

Q: It is a message sent from Tibet in the form of song.

#91: They can't send a direct message, so we have to dig for a meaning. We the [Tibetan] people in India should try to understand that.

Q: And then, because this is the day of giving, so in gratitude for your sharing your story with us, this is from the entire Tibetan Oral History Project, in appreciation for your telling your story. We'd like you to have this White Tara [picture].

#91: Thank you.

[Interpreter explains the release form.]

#91: I have no objection, so I am going to sign it.

END OF INTERVIEW