

Dawa Dakpa's Account of His Life in Tibet
As recorded by
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My birthplace is called Phenpo, which is in Utsang Province. There were animals on the mountains and farmlands in the valley. I am the oldest of four children. As a child I had no problems and played about in the dust or in water. My family did both fieldwork and nomadic chores. We grew wheat, peas, barley and mustard in the fields. We also cultivated potatoes and radishes. Around the age of 10 the children went to graze goats, sheep and cows. And then around 15 years of age one engaged in herding yaks far away.

Life as a Young Monk

I became a monk at the age of 11. According to village tradition, it was mandatory for each family to have a monk because this would bring grandeur to the family and enable someone to take control of it. He would be the head of the family and it was necessary to have a monk as someone to look up to. Therefore, one was made a monk at a young age in order to be somebody the family could depend upon. This was prevalent in my village.

Since we were village children, we felt happy to become monks. One must do a lot of work at home like herding cows, goats, sheep, pigs and cattle, and also do fieldwork. It was a lot of hard work. Everybody remarked that by becoming a monk one could study and be happy. So I was happy. A great many monks lived together and there were only general rules and no particular rules for each one. One felt relaxed and very happy. As the monks became older, along with studying the scriptures, they undertook duties like serving tea and other tasks.

I learned to play the longhorn and clarinet and continued to play the longhorn and clarinet for around 12 years. After the completion of 12 years, one generation has passed on and the responsibility is handed over to the younger generation. Around the 10th year we began training the new ones. There were 80 longhorn players and 80 clarinet players. The players must eat a lot of healthy food. In Tibet that meant consuming a lot of meat, butter and soft cheese. One must continue to blow the horns and it used to be said that blowing weakens the body. One must eat well to become strong.

The instruments are used as accompaniment for ritual offerings—so except for religious purposes, they cannot be played indiscriminately. The horns have been in use in the past, many centuries ago by our ancestors. They were very popular. Earlier in Tibet there used to be monthly performances requested by the Tibetan Government. Other than that, the instruments were only played during the initiation ceremonies of lamas and *tulku* [reincarnated lamas] at monasteries, graduation ceremonies of lamas and *tulku*, or when His Holiness the Dalai Lama came to a prayer assembly.

Protests in Lhasa, March 1959

I lived as a monk in Sera Monastery for around 15 years and served in many capacities. I was in this monastery when the change happened in 1959. There was not anything in particular that changed in the monastery prior to the attack on Lhasa. The learning continued and everything remained peaceful as before. The Chinese did not come to the monastery, but had

arrived in Lhasa. The three great monasteries of Sera, Drepung and Gaden are located in the mountains outside of Lhasa. The Chinese did not come there.

After the completion of the Monlam Prayer Festival of 1959 in Lhasa, His Holiness the Dalai Lama gave the examinations for the doctorate degree in Buddhist philosophy in the three great monasteries. The Chinese claimed that to celebrate the occasion they wished to invite His Holiness to a banquet at their headquarters. But they insisted that His Holiness have just a few attendants and weapons would not be permitted.

I was staying in Lhasa then. All the people were going to Norbulingka, where His Holiness the Dalai Lama's palace is located, and so did we. The principal bodyguard of the Dalai Lama knew there was danger if no bodyguards were permitted at the banquet. He said to the crowd, "It is in the hands of the people that have gathered here at Norbulingka whether to allow the Chinese to escort His Holiness or not." The people raised their hands and replied vehemently, "We will not allow His Holiness to be escorted."

Beneath the main gate of Norbulingka, there were many tens of thousands of people moving around with discontent. A meeting with the Tibetan Government officials and aristocrats began at Norbulingka. The people astutely knew which of the aristocrats of the Tibetan Government were interacting with the Chinese. As the meeting ended, the aristocrats who were coming out of the main gate were stoned and assaulted. Bruised and bleeding, they were taken on their motorcycles or vehicles to their residences in Lhasa.

Volunteer Guards at Norbulingka

We were five colleagues who all volunteered at Norbulingka. We were determined not to allow the Chinese to invite His Holiness the Dalai Lama and sat beside the gate. Having come from afar, we did not have any place to stay and slept beside the gate for three nights. I was not wearing monk's robes—I was wearing regular clothes and carried a knife up my sleeve. Between the five men there was only one small gun with 16 bullets. After two days an English-made short barrel rifle was issued by the Tibetan Government to every four men. That was not sufficient and we threatened to raid the Tibetan Government's armory if they did not provide more weapons. After our request, each group was provided with a machine gun, an English-made short barrel rifle for each man with 40 bullets, and a box containing 1,000 shotgun shells.

There were three soldiers of the Drapchi Division [of the Tibetan Army] who taught us to dismantle and assemble the guns. At that time all of us were monks and they trained us to fire the guns. Now there was no time to think about giving back the vows we took as monks. It was a matter of life and death. Should the Dalai Lama be captured by the Chinese, we were ready to forego our vows. I never gave any thought to the vows then because of the dread in my mind. We were ready to risk our lives. I was ready to sacrifice my life for His Holiness the Dalai Lama because I took my monk's vows from him. I took my vows from His Holiness with my hands upon His Holiness' hands. When people said the Chinese were going to take away His Holiness, I was ready to sacrifice my life.

The Chinese attacked at night. All of us inside Norbulingka had been divided among the four gates. I was assigned to the south gate. Some men stood on ledges created on the compound wall within Norbulingka and some men went outside after digging trenches. We had rotations, so when some men went outside, some came inside. We spent one night in the trenches and the next on the ledges. While we kept guard inside the trenches, we also spitefully pulled cables and destroyed the wooden planks of the bridge. However, the following day Chinese tanks appeared

with guns drawn and they repaired the electric cables and placed new wooden planks on the bridge. They came driving in during the day without any fear, while we created destruction in the night.

Shelling of Lhasa

We remained in the trenches and inside Norbulingka for around a week. Then one night instructions were issued that everybody must remain inside. I wondered why this was so but did not take much notice. Then after three days had passed by everything went back to normal—those assigned outside duties moving out and some remaining inside in rotation.

Three days later at around 2 o'clock in the morning machine guns were fired. The sound grew louder and louder. Chinese cannon shells continued to land from the sky. The Security Division in Norbulingka possessed cannons and they put up a challenge to the Chinese. Cannons were fired throughout the night. I went to have a look around the next morning. Artillery shells had cut down all the beautiful trees within Norbulingka. Shells had been fired everywhere inside Norbulingka. The boundary wall where we were positioned was flattened and huge craters had formed in the ground. Then there was the injured and the dead...most of the security forces had been killed. Likewise, the general public had been killed. One did not dare venture out because someone would cry, "Give me water," and there were others dragging legs or dragging a head or dragging a body. It was overwhelming. One dared not go outside because it was so depressing.

Then the Potala Palace was shelled at around 8 o'clock in the morning. There was not any firing from Norbulingka, but the shelling upon it continued unceasingly. There was not any retaliation from the Tibetans. Numerous people were passing by Norbulingka and they told us His Holiness the Dalai Lama had been escorted to India. I assumed that in three days His Holiness would have covered quite a distance and might be near the Indian border. I was overjoyed and thought, "Once His Holiness has been escorted out, I have no regrets even if I die." I was incredibly happy, overwhelmingly so.

Escape to India

That night we fled. I emerged from Norbulingka almost naked with just a gun and 40 rounds, and nothing to eat. Just as we began to walk down the road, the Chinese shot many people dead. We managed to stay alive thanks to the gods. We escaped amidst gunfire into a swamp. Every time a shotgun shell landed in the swamp, it threw up mud into the sky that flattened people.

I returned to Sera Monastery. There was hardly anyone living in the monastery—it was almost empty. In general, all the monks of the monastery had been deployed in various directions: some were guarding the mountaintop, some had gone to Norbulingka and some had gone to the Potala Palace. They had gone to the Potala Palace to fetch guns from the government armory. Everyone had left the monastery except for a few children.

People thought we should move out and fight from the border so I went to Phenpo from the monastery. In Phenpo Chinese planes flew overhead and started shooting wherever we went. I joined the Chushi Gangdrug [Defend Tibet Volunteer Force] and fought along with the Chushi Gangdrug guerrillas. We continued to fight and move from place to place and then finally reached India.

After coming to India I joined the Indian army. While in the army, from the time one goes to sleep until waking up, one must dwell upon thoughts of winning, of losing, and of killing people. That is the job of a soldier and it went against my vows as a monk. There are 223 vows of a fully ordained monk and killing goes against the vows. I was desperate. I was a soldier and as a soldier, I had to think about killing. So I was forced to give up my monk's vows.