

Naljorma Jangchup Palmo's Account of Her Life in Tibet
As recorded by
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I am 70 years old this year and was born in Tibet. I was born in the place called Jang Namru. It is located to the north of Lhasa near a lake called Namtso. A pilgrimage to the lake is done once in a 12-year cycle. So it was the Year of the Sheep that I was born, during the time that people took a pilgrimage to Namtso. My father's ancestors were from Kham and arrived in Jang Namru where they became leaders. Father was an honest and very good leader. Mother passed away when I was small and my mother's sister took her place.

Those of us in Jang Namru were nomads. Due to the extreme cold, cultivation was not possible. There were innumerable sheep and then cattle, horses and goats. Horses were used for travelling. The nomads' livelihood depended upon the animals. It was extremely cold in winter but there were rarely any houses. Except for one or two wealthy families, it was impossible because of the lack of wood for construction. My father and mother hailed from influential families and were given rights to two huge places. We stayed in one and moved to the other when grass was depleted and animals became weak during autumn.

Practicing Buddhism at a Young Age

My parents loved their five children a lot. Since there were no schools, the parents taught us children equally. Generally everyone was equal, but I was different because I would cry when people fell sick or faced problems. I was sympathetic and would cry instantly while the others did not cry. As a child whenever I went to anybody's home, I had a desire to make water offerings, burn incense and light butter lamps. I loved to do such things as far back as I can remember. Not just in our house, but I used to go to the relatives' homes and asked to be allowed to do such things.

We have a Sakya monastery called Nalanda, located in Phenpo near Lhasa. It took six whole days of riding by horse to reach this monastery from our village. My family visited every year during wintertime because it was warm in Phenpo Nalanda. We spent three months there, receiving teachings from the lamas and attending parties. During summer, the monks from Nalanda came to Jang Namru. My family played host and this was a very enjoyable time. We would have a horse race between our horses and the horses that belonged to the monastery.

When I was 13 years old my parents received the Sakya Lamday 'Path and its Fruit' teachings for which we were the sponsors. The Lamday teachings lasted for three months. The sessions were from 8 in the morning until noon, with a 1-hour break for lunch, and then continued until 5 in the evening. I sat between my parents and I listened but I could not understand the teachings. However, I found it melodious and I sat in the same place for three months and received the teachings.

Actually, from morning until night the sounds of the dharma were unending in our family—whether it was chanting the mantras or inviting lamas to our home. So when the Lamday teachings were going on, I felt I was seeing the Buddha. I felt happy believing that the lama was the Buddha. When the session resumed after lunch, other children were annoyed because they wished to go out to play. As for me, instead of playing I felt happy that I would be seeing the Buddha. I would be the first to sit, even before my parents.

At the age of 13 I undertook an intensive practice of silent meditation. We owned a house, which had a prayer room where monks sent by the Nalanda monastery were staying. A retreat was organized. During the retreat one eats only on alternate days and meat is never consumed. One is not allowed to talk, never at all. One must observe complete silence.

Travels to Lhasa and First Encounters with the Chinese

When I was 14 years old my family went to Lhasa. During the journey, we saw a great number of Chinese marching. The Chinese carried packs and were on foot driving along laden mules. Our journey lasted a month. The Chinese we passed along the way were weak and their hands frozen and covered with cracks. They could not endure the cold and were nearly dead and shivering as they walked. We fed them hot noodle soup when we set up our tent during the journey. We could not understand their language.

When we returned to our home in Jang Namru I was 15. My paternal uncle and others were near Lhasa at Nalanda and sent a messenger with a letter for us, which said: "Now the situation is not good. It is very strange with the Chinese. Come here as soon as possible. There is nothing for us to do but flee." It was 1959. It was said that one must go where His Holiness the Dalai Lama had gone. When we were leaving Lhasa we encountered thousands of monks from the three great monasteries of Sera, Drepung and Gaden—all were fleeing.

My father said that the Chinese were Communists and particularly adverse to religion, while the Tibetans were followers of the Buddha dharma. So it was totally the opposite. There was no way one could remain in Tibet due to the totally contrary ways. But it was not right to save only our family. A leader must take care of the whole tribe. So it took a long while before everyone could leave. It was the 30th day of the 4th Tibetan lunar month that we left Jang Namru. The Chinese had arrived and all of us fled. Some fled leaving their tents standing and their dogs chained up. The Chinese that were there earlier manned shops, paid silver coins and were gentle people. There were no problems. Now the soldiers arrived and it was said that Lhasa was lost.

Failed Attempts to Flee to India

My father took charge and the whole tribe fled. We had been traveling for around a month when we reached a place where on one side was a huge river and on the other side a big mountain and a narrow path in between. While moving on this path someone shouted, "Chinese soldiers have come." Everyone got their guns ready and fought. We had to push through the soldiers on horseback. When we rushed through on horseback, they fired. We fled right through gunfire. Oh my God, innumerable gunshots were fired! Dogs were killed, men were killed, horses were killed, and everything in sight got killed.

Then perhaps it was around 5 or 6 o'clock when dusk was falling that my father passed away. The Chinese had killed him. I was shot on my right foot, then shot in my right ankle—once, twice, three times. Then I was shot in the calf of my right leg, the calf of my left leg, the left arm and I was entirely spotted! Six times on the leg and one on each hand, so that is eight shots. In my family there were the five children and our parents. We were together, and then some were killed and the others destroyed and there was none left. There was no family left.

After that I could not walk and the Chinese held me prisoner. The Chinese were very good and treated my wounds and gave me food. However, I did not feel any happiness in my

heart. It was a year before the legs healed. Then I fled when the legs healed a bit. I was 16 years old and the legs healed enough for me to use a cane. During the first escape two of my siblings had survived the Chinese assault. The three of us and a few other people—together we were 12—fled once again. Again the Chinese attacked us along the way, firing during the nighttime. We fled after the attack and were captured, so I remained a year at home and then fled again.

Intensive Buddhist Practice at Mount Kailash

I was determined to escape to India as a refugee. I thought I must succeed and perform prayers for my parents. One must offer prayers when parents pass away and there was no opportunity to perform prayers in Tibet. I wanted to perform prayers, study and practice the Buddhist dharma. I never felt hardship or anything because of the determination to succeed in the escape. I was 17 years old. I met a cousin of my relative on the escape journey. We travelled directly to Mount Kailash and it took a year to reach there. My cousin stayed on and we made full-length prostrations around Mount Kailash, which took 17 days. When we reached the Dolma pass, the cold was so intense that we were shivering—many froze and we felt so too.

I felt agonized by the thought that the Chinese had caused us suffering and killed without any reason yet I continued to practice. I lived in a cave, eating roasted barley flour and drinking water and sleeping there too while at Mount Kailash. Then I met a Rinpoche [respected lama]. I told him, “Rinpoche, I pledge to spend my whole life in this way practicing the dharma, which will benefit the many that died and have been killed. But I perceive the Chinese as enemies.”

Rinpoche replied, “If you feel like this, it is worthless continuing your practice. You must understand that there is only love and compassion and no difference between enemy and friend in the dharma. If you practice this, the enemy will not be the enemy but like your relatives, siblings and parents. If you can love the Chinese without any degree of difference, if you can do that, then you will learn to feel no difference.”

Learning to Forgive and Find Happiness

I had to put in tremendous effort to learn. I exercised again and again, really hard. I did pilgrimages and prostrations around the mountain—I meditated and made every effort that I could. I concentrated single-mindedly on this teaching from the Rinpoche, but I could not do it for almost two years. It improved a bit, then a little more, but the thought of the Chinese as enemies kept returning. After that I did the full body-length prostrations three times around Mount Kailash. I lived at Mount Kailash for many years, practicing the dharma and there was no place to sleep except in the caves.

According to my experience every one of us, any sentient being, does not desire any kind of suffering. Therefore, what I understand to be of great benefit is the importance of peace. Through practicing peace one realizes that the problems I suffer are also felt by the other person. That is the way to exercise peace according to my practice. Whatever difficulties I face like illness and pain, I realize that the happiness I feel is likewise felt by the other; the suffering I undergo is likewise suffered by the other. Whatever I feel, the other has the same feeling. If one understands that perfectly, the feeling of wanting to harm another person, of being spiteful and other things will disappear automatically.

If one practices that, first you will enjoy physical and mental happiness. Then the family members, the children and spouse will be happy as well. And then the neighbors will be happy.

And then be loyal and thoughtful to the country. If one is loyal to one's country and if there is happiness in your country, you will automatically be happy. One must be on friendly terms with neighboring countries. This is my opinion. Countries that share a border must be cordial. If the two countries treat each other with compassion and love, they will enjoy great happiness. When the two countries are happy, the population finds happiness. There would be great peace.