

Keotsang Tulku Jamphel Yeshe's Account of His Life in Tibet
As recorded by
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I was born in Won Village in the Nethong District of Utsang, Tibet. Several thousand people lived in Won. My parents were *samadok*, farmers and herders—they grew crops and raised animals. When I was born in 1944, I was recognized as a reincarnated lama; there had been four Keotsang reincarnations before me. When I was 2, I was given the title of *lama* [spiritual leader in Tibetan Buddhism] and taken to Lhasa, to a small monastery called Keotsang Ritoe, which I inherited from the previous Keotsang Rinpoche. My father and mother used to visit me once a year until the Chinese invaded Tibet in 1959.

Monastic Education

When I was little, my teacher was a lama's steward. He taught me the Tibetan alphabet. Then, when I was around 9 years old, I had a special tutor called a *geshe*, a monk with a Buddhist philosophy degree. There were around 30 monks at the monastery. When I was about 13 or 14 years old, I met His Holiness the Dalai Lama and he told me, "Study the scriptures well. That is the main responsibility of a lama, so study the scriptures well. A lama without learning the scriptures is nothing." From the age of nine through 12, I memorized the scriptures very well; I could memorize almost a page in a day and I could recite it in around three hours. We were children and, though we memorized a lot of texts, there was time for play and a little bit of freedom—we used to play outdoor games like wrestling or football and in those days, towards nightfall, there would be a lot of noise from children playing.

From the age of 11 or 12, we attended the *choera* [debate sessions] and this is when my debate studies began. It was very strict and we had less free time, but I don't think that was bad. The teacher taught us that there are two reasons for a *tulku*, a reincarnated lama, to come into the world. One is to develop dharma through *shepa* [commentary], to learn the scriptures thoroughly. The second is to develop dharma through *dupa* [spiritual practice], to meditate and practice taking many sentient beings to the land of the Buddha. That is the objective of a lama. If a lama does not do well, he is a disgrace. When the teacher scolded me, I sometimes wished I was not a lama or that I could be excused from being a lama and go home.

Arrival of the Chinese

I was about 5 when the Chinese first came in 1951. I heard that the Tibetan Government Army had waged and lost a war against the Chinese in Chamdo and that the Chinese were coming towards us. Everyone was terrified. When I was about 7, a huge number of Chinese soldiers appeared in Lhasa and people were very frightened. At that time, we saw the Chinese, but there was no contact with them. However, Keotsang Ritoe sits on top of a hill and when we walked away from the monastery, we could see that the Chinese were carrying out construction, breaking rocks below us. We did not speak with them because we did not know their language.

When the Chinese came, His Holiness the Dalai Lama had to flee to Dromo, which is in Tibet, close to the borders of Sikkim and Bhutan. I was a little worried about what would happen. Would the Chinese inflict a lot of suffering? Later, His Holiness returned to Lhasa, the

capital of Tibet. The Chinese said, “We will not do anything. We have come to bring progress to Tibet and will not cause any suffering to you. We have not come to live here. After developing Tibet, we will be going back.” However, many Tibetans did not believe this and thought, “These must be lies. Eventually, the Chinese are bound to do something bad.” Everybody was anxious about it.

Then the Chinese gradually announced that Tibet would be “liberated” peacefully. In 1955, the Dalai Lama was advised to go to China; he really had no choice, but to go. His Holiness was escorted to China, where he joined the Panchen Lama, who was already there—the Dalai Lama and Panchen Lama are the two highest lamas in Tibet. Many Tibetans were very anxious, thinking, “His Holiness has been invited to China and the Chinese will keep him and he will not be able to return.” There was a great procession of people seeing him off when he left Lhasa—local Tibetans, Tibetan soldiers, and Chinese troops—and many of the people were crying, including me.

Gradually, the situation between the Chinese and Tibetans became more serious. Finally, we got a message that said, “If all the monks do not move out of the Sera Monastery tomorrow, it will be destroyed.” So I left Sera Monastery in the night in a group of about 10 people. Then six or seven Chinese passenger planes arrived that dropped bombs on us and fired at us and many people were killed. I was terrified, particularly when the planes flew so low that I could see the Chinese letters under the wings and the Chinese *wushing*, the star. Some people who knew what to do said that we should lie on the ground and not stand. Other people said that we should cover our heads with leaves so as not to be spotted by the planes, but it was winter and there were no leaves, so we just lay on the ground. We hid in the mountains for two weeks.

Chinese soldiers gradually arrived to launch the “liberation” and they handed out flyers that had four points: 1) Surrender voluntarily; 2) Surrender and give up your weapons—if you give up your weapons, you will not be killed and will not be subjected to *thamzing* [struggle sessions]; 3) You will not be imprisoned, and 4) Whatever you possess will remain yours and nothing will happen. It seems that many people believed this and returned. We did not believe what the flyer said and, like many other people, we felt running away was better. So we tried to flee. But, Chinese troops surrounded us and we returned to the estate in Phenpo.

Life Under Chinese Occupation

A month later, we were told that we had to return to the monastery in Lhasa, to Sera. We had to attend re-education meetings every day. These were propaganda lessons about how bad the old Tibetan society was and how we had been “liberated.” Every night there were also movies. Although it was annoying to have to learn the propaganda lessons, there was no reciting the scriptures, no scolding from my teacher, who had been arrested, and there were movies, which made me feel free. I was happy for a few months, but in 1960, things became more difficult and monks had to fend for themselves. We were given lands and had to start farming. Though still a child, I carried manure on my back to the fields and irrigated the land.

People would say, “The policy of the Chinese is similar to a wet leather cap.” If you’re wearing a wet leather cap, it covers the head when wet and, as it dries, it gradually becomes tighter and tighter. Similarly, China’s grip became tighter and tighter. And then the physical assaults began. A monk or lama would be brought out before the rest of the monks and accused of oppressing people in the old society and then he was subjected to *thamzing*.

By the time I came back from Phenpo to Sera, *thamzing* had already started and two men had even been killed. Cleverly, the Chinese did not do this. Instead, they influenced the monks to beat and kill fellow monks; they could do this because people feared for their lives. *Thamzing* assemblies took place frequently. The Chinese said, “You must uncover the roots of the offensive old Tibetan system. You are not to be blamed. The main perpetrator is the old society.” We endured this re-education for months on end.

Denouncing His Holiness the Dalai Lama had also begun. Initially, the Chinese did not say that His Holiness should be denounced; instead, they said, “The Dalai Lama is very good. He is a very good lama and has agreed that China will liberate Tibet peacefully. The culprits are the senior rebels of Tibet.” Ultimately, the Chinese hoped that the Dalai Lama and Panchen Lama would be seen as the origins of what they saw as Tibet’s offensive old society. But, some of us said, “The root of what the Chinese consider an offence is that we have revolted against the Chinese invasion and have joined the uprising. We did this voluntarily and neither the Tibetan Government nor His Holiness the Dalai Lama ordered us to fight the Chinese. We did so of our own free will.”

Arrest, Public Humiliation and Beatings

In 1960, the Review Committee was formed. This was to reexamine those who had revolted against the Chinese in 1959—there were still some who had not been punished and the Review Committee was designed to clean this up. At this time, well known people or people with titles were occasionally arrested and sometimes imprisoned. But, now we were threatened because the Chinese said, “There are still wolves in sheepskin among the public and monks. Unless you accept your crimes and confess, one day we will pluck you out like hair from butter. We did it in the past. There is no escape.” This was said repeatedly and everybody became very alarmed. The situation had escalated to such a degree that people like us felt that it was just a matter of time before we went to prison.

And then, finally, a big assembly was held—I can remember the day clearly; it was around the 26th of September, 1960. About 10 people, including me, were captured, subjected to physical struggle for a whole day, and then sent to prison. According to the Chinese, there were many crimes that led to my imprisonment, including hiding guns, but there were three main accusations: 1) I was a lama and the Chinese considered lamas to be members of the leadership class. They claimed that a lama didn’t work, but lived by oppressing the people; 2) I was against the peaceful liberation of Tibet and I had taken part in the uprising of 1959 by distributing protective amulets to people who revolted against the Chinese; 3) I tried to flee to India—after the Review Committee had been set up, I realized that I would soon face imprisonment so two monks and I planned to flee to India. However the two monks revealed this during interrogation by the Chinese.

About 10 of us were subjected to *thamzing* that day in front of about 2-3,000 people, both monks and laypeople. The beatings lasted for almost nine hours, with an hour’s break for lunch. We had to stand all day stooped over, with our hands held apart. Behind us were soldiers holding guns and police. It is extremely difficult to remain stooped for long and if you fell, you were kicked. We were beaten and our arms were twisted. One by one, we were taken forward and accused: “You did such and such in the past.” All the crimes were listed while the accused person stooped nearby.

I was in shock that day and I thought that I would be killed. But, one thought I also had was, “I am not alone. There are many others. So this is nothing.” When we broke for lunch, the accused could sit together, though there was a guard present, and everybody remarked, “This is our destiny. This is the fate we have accumulated from the past. So, it does not matter.” When the others said this, I felt it was true and I wasn’t particularly grief-stricken or angry with those who beat me. These thoughts and remarks helped to calm my mind.

Life as a Prisoner

I was imprisoned in Thasukhang, the high security section of Drapchi Prison, for a little over a month. When I was sent to the prison, I carried a blanket on my back and was led away by rope, like an animal. A little after a month, those of us from Sera were ordered to come out and we were taken to Sera. We didn’t know if we were going to be released or killed. At Sera, we had to remain stooped while our verdicts were announced in front of all the people. I was sentenced to 20 years in prison and, for seven years after being released, no political rights, like voting.

I didn’t think I could survive 20 years in prison as the food was very poor and I thought I would die in prison. After being sentenced, we were required to do hard labor. There were 10 people in my cell. There were almost 5-6,000 prisoners at Drapchi at that time. While I was in prison, I did not see any of my family members. I learned that my mother and father had died and that a paternal uncle was alive and other family members were fine. But, there was no contact. I was released from prison three years early—after 17 years—and transferred to the work section.

For three years, 1960, 1961, and 1962, there was a severe food crisis in China and Tibet. It was not just the prisoners, but the entire country of Tibet faced great difficulties. We had a small bowl of very thin gruel in the morning, at noon, and at night; it was little better than water with a tiny bit of vegetable. There was nothing else, not even *pa* [dough made from roasted barley flour and tea], bread or rice. Besides the poor food, the work was very strenuous and at least 70% of the prisoners died of starvation. Most people did not think they would ever get out of prison and they used to say, “May I be able to eat a stomach full of *pa* before I die.” We were starving and we prayed, “I will have no regrets if I can get a stomach full of food.”

On top of the food shortage, we had to reach work targets. For example, a stonecutter had to cut a certain number of stones and a bricklayer had to make a certain number of bricks. Each type of work was measured and we had to reach the target. And after returning in the evening, we were obliged to study. A prisoner who did not work hard or obey the Chinese authority would face *thamzing*. Some committed suicide under such immense suffering; some cut their necks with cans and some strangled themselves to death quietly in bed in the night.

The Cultural Revolution

The second problem for Tibetans was the Cultural Revolution that began in 1966. The food in the prison wasn’t as bad as it had been in Drapchi, when we had only gruel, but everything was rationed. There was *tsampa* [flour made from roasted barley], but not enough to ward off hunger. But worse than that, we were told, “The Dalai Lama must be denounced. Religion must be denounced. Religion is poison. The Dalai Lama is bad. The Dalai Lama and the Panchen

Lama must be denounced.” Many prisoners said, “His Holiness the Dalai Lama and the Panchen Rinpoche are our *lamas* and have nothing to do with politics. We cannot denounce them.”

Everybody protested and some people were sentenced to death. I protested and I had three demands, which I wrote down in a letter to the authorities: 1) to be given enough to eat, 2) not being required to denounce His Holiness the Dalai Lama, and 3) to be able to practice *dharma* [Buddha’s teachings]. I said, “Even if I am killed over this, I have no regrets because I can never denounce His Holiness the Dalai Lama. If you do not provide me with enough to eat, I can no longer work. And, if not permitted to believe in the *dharma* now, I shall practice in the future. Please grant me these three demands. If granted permission, I will behave well and if not, I will not behave well.”

I stopped working and for eight or nine days, I was subjected to *nyetson tsengul*, which is forced labor, which I barely survived; this was one of the worst sufferings I underwent during the Cultural Revolution. I was driven like an animal the whole day and was often kicked because I could not walk due to exhaustion and the heavy weight carried on my back. Just prior to my release, Mao Zedong died and China’s policy changed, which saved my life.