

Tibet Oral History Project

Interview #10B – Tenzin Chonphel, Geshe
December 26, 2013

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INTERVIEW SUMMARY SHEET

1. Interview Number: #10B
2. Interviewee: Tenzin Chonphel, Geshe
3. Age: 80
4. Date of Birth: 1933
5. Sex: Male
6. Birthplace: Bomthoe
7. Province: Utsang
8. Year of leaving Tibet: 1959
9. Date of Interview: December 26, 2013
10. Place of Interview: Lugsam Community Hall, Bylakuppe, Mysore District, Karnataka, India
11. Length of Interview: 1 hr 41 min
12. Interviewer: Marcella Adamski
13. Interpreter: Tenzin Yangchen
14. Videographer: Pema Tashi
15. Translator: Tenzin Yangchen

Biographical Information:

Geshe Tenzin Chonphel was born in Bomthoe close to Lhasa and was the oldest among five siblings. His parents earned their livelihood as farmers. He tells that it was his parents' decision to make him a monk at the age of 8 at Sera Monastery. They found a teacher for him with whom he studied the scriptures and then later learned the art of philosophical debating.

Geshe Tenzin Chonphel shares his experience of the first appearance of the Chinese in Lhasa, which lasted peacefully for nine years. The Chinese exhibited gentle behavior in the beginning and claimed they would leave after helping to develop Tibet. However, Geshe Tenzin Chonphel explains that gradually the Chinese became imposing once they had constructed drivable roads from Amdo to Lhasa and brought in huge quantities of arms and soldiers.

When conflict arose in March 1959, Geshe Tenzin Chonphel went to the Potala Palace with many other monks to get guns from the armory and put up resistance. He describes the bombardment of the Potala Palace, Norbulingka, Sera Monastery, and what the general scene was in the aftermath. He and other monks escaped from Sera, planning to join the *Chushi Gangdrug* Defend Tibet Volunteer Force since they already had weapons. When they arrived at the *Chushi Gangdrug* camp, many Tibetans were fleeing and the resistance soon ended.

Topics Discussed:

Utsang, monastic life, first appearance of Chinese, defense of Potala Palace, *Chushi Gangdrug* guerrillas, resistance, escape experiences, life as a refugee in India.

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Interviewee: Tenzin Chonphel, Geshe

Age: 80, Sex: Male

Interviewer: Marcella Adamski

Interview Date: December 26, 2013

Question: Please tell us your full name.

00:00:19

Interviewee #10B: [I] am called Tenzin Chonphel, Geshe ‘monk with Buddhist philosophy degree’ Tenzin Chonphel.

Q: His Holiness the Dalai Lama asked us to record your experiences, so that we can share your memories with many generations of Tibetans, the Chinese and the rest of the world. Your memories will help us to document the true history, culture and beliefs of the Tibetan people. Do you give your permission for the Tibet Oral History Project to use this interview?

#10B: Yes, [I] do.

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

#10B: All right.

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

#10B: I do not have any kind of problem if this is shown anywhere within and outside Tibet. I do not have any suspicion that anybody will cause me harm in the future because of these words. [You] can use what is recorded today anywhere.

Q: Thank you.

#10B: [Silent]

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

#10B: [Nods]

Q: Geshe-*la*, can you please tell us how old you are and where you were born?

00:03:01

#10B: [I]’m 80 years old this year and from the three provinces [my] birthplace is in the province of Utsang called Bomthoe, which is close to Lhasa. That is the place.

Q: What was the nearest temple or monastery?

#10B: The nearest is Gaden Monastery, and Sera and Drepung [Monasteries] are also close by.

Q: What did your family do for a livelihood?

#10B: My family’s livelihood was farming.

Q: How many children were in your family and where were you in that order?

00:04:33

#10B: My parents had five children. I am the oldest among the five.

Q: What year was it when you became a monk?

#10B: I was 8 years old when [I] first joined Sera [Monastery] as a monk.

Q: Do you have any memories of those early years that you can share with us?

#10B: The earliest memory of joining [the monastery] is that the parents [found] a teacher—in order to join [a monastery] one must be left with a teacher—the parents tell the child that [he] must become a monk and was taken to the monastery and left in the care of the teacher. There was not any other thought because [I] was a little child of 8 years old.

Q: Why do Tibetan parents want their child to go to the monastery?

#10B: The Tibetan family’s opinion is that if the parents have two children, have two sons, one son becomes a monk and the other son takes charge of the home to continue with the parents’ legacy. That is the objective. That is the belief in the Tibetan community.

Q: And what do you remember about your boyhood when you were in the monastery? Was it very difficult? Did you have fun? Was it strict? Can you tell us some memories?

00:07:35

#10B: To give a correct picture without any dilution, when one joined the monastery as a young one and the teacher taught the scriptures and one had to study and give tests and receive beatings, it was difficult but when one was left free, it was fun.

Q: Were you a good student or was study very difficult for you?

#10B: After joining the monastery, initially we studied the prayers that are chanted during prayer assemblies. Then one joined the *choera* ‘debate sessions’ to study the fundamental

root texts of debate. Until [I] left to come here [I] was not among the best in the class nor at the bottom but somewhere in the middle.

Q: Was this Sera Monastery?

#10B: Yes, Sera Monastery and [I was] in the Mey Datsang.

Q: When you joined the monastery about how many monks were already living there?

00:09:39

#10B: The standard number of monks at Sera Monastery was 5,500. It used to be said: Sera 5,500, Drepung 7,700 and Gaden 3,300. However, there must have been 6,000 to 7,000 monks at Sera. There were three *datsang* ‘sections in a large monastery’ in Sera.

Q: Which section were you in, *geshe-la*?

#10B: I am from Mey Datsang.

Q: The teacher that greeted you when you went at 8 years old, did he continue to be your teacher throughout your childhood and adolescence?

#10B: I was with this teacher for around 10 years. For around 10 years I studied the scriptures with the teacher and served him like fetching water, cooking and cleaning. After around 10 years the teacher passed away. After his demise I took up my own quarters and stood on my own feet.

Q: What was the name of your teacher and what kind of a teacher was he?

00:12:05

#10B: Generally in the monastery there were two types of monks, one kind studied the scriptures and the other could not study the scriptures but served the monastery. My teacher was among those that studied the scriptures and participated in debates.

Q: [He] taught the scriptures?

#10B: [He] studied the scriptures, [my] teacher. He was among those that studied the scriptures and not among those that went here and there doing tasks.

Q: What was his name?

#10B: The name was Jamphel Tseten.

Q: Did he influence you to want to study the debates yourself?

#10B: [I] began studying the debates after the demise of [my] teacher when I lived by myself. [I] approached a learned teacher and received scripture instructions from him. That is how [I] studied.

Q: So at 18, did you have any wish to study any particular direction in the dharma or was it primarily debates?

00:14:22

#10B: In the monastery at that time, except for studying the debates and prayers that are chanted during assemblies, the regulations of the monastery did not entertain studying of languages, culture and science and Tibetan script. It was just learning the scriptures.

Q: So this is when you're 18 years of age, *geshe-la*. It's 1951. What is the atmosphere like in Lhasa around Sera Monastery? What's happening outside the monastery?

#10B: The environment then was good. The population in the country in general was low. There were fewer numbers of people and the region was clean. Because of the small population the environment was not dirty or an eyesore. It was clean.

Q: What was the political environment like around Sera Monastery in the city of Lhasa?

#10B: Regarding the political situation, the monks did not take any kind of responsibility in the political situation. When the Tibetan Government met for the assembly sessions, irrespective of the importance of the meetings, the abbots of the three *datsang* could take part. [They] had the right to attend. Except for the abbots, the monks in general did not have any political responsibilities.

Q: Was there any awareness that the Chinese were engaged in conflict in Kham, in that area? Did anybody know about that in your monastery?

00:17:57

#10B: Initially in Tibet when the Chinese began to...we lived nine years along with the Chinese before coming here, before coming here. In the beginning when it was said that the Chinese were arriving from Dhomay [Amdo] people were terrified. Not only terrified but His Holiness the Dalai Lama escaped from the Norbulingka to the place called Dromo. Such things happened.

Q: When you said you spent nine years living with the Chinese, what year was that, *geshe-la*, that it began?

#10B: [I] was 26 when I escaped here. [I] was around 17 years old; [I] think the Chinese arrived in Tibet when [I] was around 17 years old. So from the age of 17 to 26 [we] lived together with the Chinese in Lhasa.

Q: Did you see any Chinese? Did they come into the monastery?

#10B: It was more than just seeing [Chinese]. There were 7 Chinese authorities that first arrived in Lhasa. When the 7 men initially appeared, there were not any drivable roads through Kham and Dhomay and they would not want to travel on horses and mules. So [they] came via India. When [they] journeyed from India, His Holiness the Dalai Lama was in Dromo then. Along the way the seven Chinese authorities met His Holiness in Dromo

and since His Holiness' top officials had moved there from Lhasa, they held a discussion and send the [Chinese] leaders to Lhasa. That was the first day the Chinese were coming to Lhasa. The government orders were to receive the first Chinese arrivals in a grand manner. I was among those that were in the reception line.

Q: Can you tell us about that meeting? Was there any discussion from the leaders to the monks in the monastery?

00:22:49

#10B: There was not. After 5-6 months of their [seven Chinese authorities] arrival, around 4-5,000 soldiers appeared in Lhasa through Dhomay and Kham. [They] had come on foot to Lhasa. Except for the government making arrangements for their shelter, unlike the reception for the authorities that came earlier there were no preparations for the soldiers.

When it was said that the Chinese soldiers were arriving in Lhasa that day, we young ones aged 18-19, around 10 of us wondered what the Chinese were like for when the Chinese arrived at the border the Tibetans remarked that the Chinese ate dog's meat and horse's meat and even humans. Wondering what the Communists looked like we went to have a look. We stayed in Lhasa until the soldiers appeared and then entered the military base. The soldiers were young, between the ages of 30 and 25 and numbered around 4-5,000 that arrived in Lhasa that day. A government army barrack was emptied and they were accommodated in it.

Q: What happened when you went to look at them? What did you see?

#10B: They were young and looked around the same age. [I] did not believe what was said in the past about the Communists eating humans. Such thoughts disappeared. When they marched through Kham they had camped at various Tibetan houses along the way, these soldiers that were coming [to Lhasa]. While camping [they] were very polite, paying for fuel and *tsampa* 'flour made from roasted barley' and were humble. What they had stated was, "We are coming to Tibet to bring progress. We are going to develop Tibet. After liberating Tibet we will go back to Tibet [China]." The troops arrived in Lhasa speaking like that along the journey.

Q: What did you think about this possibility? Did you believe it or have any other concerns?

00:27:22

#10B: "[We] have come to develop Tibet. Once Tibet is free from difficulties and after the liberation, we will go back." [The Chinese] said so to the people along the journey while making camps. We just saw the Chinese but did not have any conversation. They would not understand if I spoke in Tibetan and we would not be able to understand when they spoke Chinese. Hence, there was no conversation at all.

Q: Was anybody...were you worried or any of the other monks worried that this was an invading force or did you believe they were going to bring liberation when you heard those stories?

#10B: At that time deep down I never thought that they would cause harm or occupy Tibet in the future, had never such thoughts.

Q: If the Chinese are there from the ages of 17 to 26, does anything change in your life in the monastery during those nine years? Did anything change?

#10B: Since the time the Chinese appeared and though they were there during the nine years everything in the monastery went on as it always did. The monastery closed after the attack in '59. Otherwise, since the time the Chinese arrived [we] lived together and there was no forceful influence nor did [they] bring about any changes in the monastery.

Q: What happened in 1959?

00:30:39

#10B: In '59...for instance, after a few months or perhaps a year after the Chinese authorities' arrival, the Chinese leaders went to Sera, Drepung and Gaden [Monasteries]. They made offerings of tea and money and distributed pictures of Mao Zedong to the monks. They gave many leaflets to the monks and such things.

Likewise, when the Monlam 'Prayer Festival' began in Lhasa—Sera, Drepung and Gaden [Monasteries] hold the Monlam once every year—the Chinese made offerings during the Monlam Assembly and the leaders went around holding incense sticks according to the Tibetan custom. [They] did such things.

Q: Continue.

#10B: Then it was around '59. Near about '59 the Chinese had a strong foothold because during the nine years the Chinese engaged in doing two different things. On one hand they claimed that they were going to help the Tibetans and on the other hand, constructed roads from Dhomay to Lhasa. Once drivable roads were constructed [they] could bring a huge quantity of arms and ammunitions and soldiers. [They] purchased numerous sites around Lhasa and built houses. They took control of all the important areas. The Chinese took control of prime areas in other regions, too. Then [they] began to order the [Tibetan] government, demanding instantly of the government whatever they required. Then the Chinese became imposing.

Q: Did anything happen inside the monastery? Were there any changes that had took place?

00:34:02

#10B: Until the uprising there were no changes in the monastery.

Q: Were any of the monks intrigued by these Chinese soldiers and their stories of Mao? Like did they find it interesting and want to join and find out more about it?

#10B: Nothing of such kind was done. For instance, in the lanes of Lhasa and in the monastery there were a few that interacted with the Chinese and received money from the

Chinese and distributed flyers in the monastery. There were talks about such things happening. Otherwise, the majority did not have any interactions.

Q: What can you tell us about the uprising, *geshe-la*, that you saw with your own eyes?

#10B: During the uprising...the main reason for the uprising was that during the year '59 there was a big event organized in Lhasa in connection with His Holiness the Dalai Lama's *geshe* ceremony. When the big celebration was underway...Earlier to that an invitation was extended to His Holiness to watch a theatrical performance at the large Chinese military headquarters. The government replied that His Holiness would attend after the Monlam Festival. So the Monlam began and His Holiness' [*geshe*] ceremony was completed. As there was the earlier acceptance the Chinese once again said, "Now that the Monlam is over, and also to celebrate the completion of His Holiness ceremony kindly attend the theatrical performance at the Chinese military headquarters." [They] put up a request. The reply to the request was...The Chinese leaders said...

00:37:14

Normally when His Holiness visited or was invited to the Chinese offices, there were around 25 bodyguards from the government that accompanied [him]. That day it was said that there were to be no bodyguards for His Holiness, maybe two or three bodyguards but they were not to be armed. The unrest started when this was stated.

Their [the Chinese] objective in inviting His Holiness the Dalai Lama there was that after inviting His Holiness there [military headquarters] they would put [His Holiness] instantly in a plane and take [him] directly to China. Once [His Holiness] was in China, the unrest in Lhasa...That was their plan. Therefore, when the people realized that the Chinese were going to capture His Holiness, they rushed to the Norbulingka saying, "His Holiness should not go to attend the Chinese theatrical performance. If His Holiness were to attend it, their [the Chinese] objectives do not seem good. Therefore, [we] forbid His Holiness going there." Hence, people of Lhasa, people of the three, provinces rushed and surrounded [His Holiness'] residence and the Norbulingka palace, inside and outside and remained there.

Q: Where were you during all this time, *geshe-la*?

#10B: I was right in Sera Monastery then, right in the monastery. Following the uprising, the division between the Tibetans and the Chinese was evident and all the shops of Lhasa were closed. When the Chinese moved about, the vehicles sported men with guns on two sides. They too moved about in great fear.

Q: What were the monks feeling in the monastery?

00:41:19

#10B: At that time the Tibetan Government provided around 150 English-made guns to the three *datsang* of Sera Monastery. Excluding the old and the fresh young monks, the guns were distributed to the middle ones numbering 70-80 in each *datsang*. This was to launch an attack in case the Chinese caused unrest the next day.

Q: Was that in Sera Monastery those arms were distributed?

#10B: Yes, in Sera Monastery. At that time the majority of monks, the people living in Lhasa and all Tibetans never imagined that in the event of a war [we] could lose. Should there be a clash with the Chinese, [Tibetans] believed the Chinese would lose. Nobody ever imagined [we] would lose and it would come to such a pass.

Q: You were right in that age group. You were 26, neither young nor old. Were you given a rifle?

#10B: When guns were being distributed in the *khangtsen* [smaller community within a monastery, in which monks of one geographical area live] I was the first in line to receive one. I received a gun.

Q: And then?

00:44:05

#10B: After receiving the gun...At that time, for 3-4 days the shops of Lhasa remained closed and an uprising was imminent. His Holiness the Dalai Lama was living in the Norbulingka then. The situation remained so for 5-6 days. After sometime we heard in the monastery that His Holiness had left. [We] heard that His Holiness had left in the night through Lhoka. Around two days after His Holiness had left the firing began at around 11 o'clock in the night.

Q: When you received the gun, you were you said one of the first in line, did they give you much ammunition for each gun?

#10B: Along with the gun was a pack of 100 bullets, 100 bullets. It was a sort of yellow-colored wallet to be worn across the waist that was a pack of 100 [bullets].

Q: Were you as a monk having to give up your vows in order to fight, were you given permission to do that by your teachers?

#10B: One gave up the vows. In general monks have the awareness of not killing humans or taking any form of life, be it even an ant. Though this is there but the Buddha grants acquiescence if it is for the cause of the general public, the monastery, the sustainability of the Buddha dharma or a great reason, for which one can return the vows and go to fight. That is one reason.

For instance, he is going to kill a hundred people, he is going to kill a hundred people. Were I to kill him I would have the penalty for killing one person. [I] have the penalty of killing one person but by killing him, the other hundred lives are saved. I will earn the merit of saving the 100 lives. Likewise, taking into consideration the greater and lesser importance [we] returned the vows and received permission to go to war with arms.

Q: Were you frightened?

00:48:53

#10B: We returned to the quarters after receiving the guns. The guns had been filled with some sort of lard that [I] cleaned and made it ready for use. Two days later the gunfire began in Lhasa around 1 or 2 o'clock in the night. When the gunfire started we went on the rooftop and looked down on Lhasa and the Norbulingka; it was boiling over with gunshots and the sound of *dha, dha, dha*. There were incredible flares beamed at the sky. These were bright lights and very visible. Then some sort of artillery shells was fired. It was the night of the 12th or 13th and then the uprising began.

Q: What did you feel when you saw that in your heart?

#10B: [I] was young then and did not feel any fear. [I] thought that in due course the attack will be over and then everything will return to normal and not even in [my] dreams did [I] think that [we] would have to take flight and that it was a grave situation.

Q: I wonder why the decision was made to give guns to the monks, many of whom had never picked up a gun and why weren't the guns given to the lay people who maybe knew how to use them?

#10B: The reason for giving guns to the monks was because most of the sturdy men were in the great monasteries. There were sturdy men who were distributed with guns. Should the situation arise wherein there was time to use guns...there are many stories in Tibet about the past when Tibetans attacked and conquered. Therefore, likewise, everyone thought the situation would be the same and never that [we] would lose. It was so for the government as well. That is not the only story about gun distribution.

00:52:47

[I] spoke about us receiving a gun each. There were only around 26 guns for each *datsang*. The day after the attack...after the attack on Lhasa and the melee, there was knocking on the gates of all the *khangtsen* just before dawn. Those monks that had received guns given earlier to the *datsang* and distributed, and the rest of the monks were told to report to the *datsang*. So we all went there.

The next morning we went and reached the upper floor of the *datsang*. There was the protective deity of Sera called Karma Shag. Tibetans have the custom of consulting protective deities and this deity divined that the monks go to the Potala Palace to fetch guns. The deity prophesied it. Hence, all the monks were asked to gather and were dispatched in line with a monk possessing a gun posted between every 20 monks. The whole group was sent to fetch guns from the Potala.

So I was plucked from the bunch possessing guns and placed with 20 men. A little further away from the monastery on the way to the Norbulingka [Potala Palace], [I] thought, "I am going to get a gun, so what is the use of taking one with me?" [I] returned and found a monk [I] knew near the *khangtsen* and gave the gun for safe keeping. I left without a gun, empty-handed with the group of monks to the Potala Palace to fetch guns.

00:56:21

At that time, among those that were on the way to fetch guns were the monks of Mey Datsang in the lead and then the monks of Jey Datsang too arrived. So, in total 4-5,000 monks arrived at the Potala Palace to fetch guns. When we reached the Potala and before the government could distribute the guns...a large number of monks had reached there at around 7 or 8 o'clock in the morning and the Chinese became aware of the monks entering the Potala and began pounding the structure with cannons. An incredible amount of shells rained. Because of the thickness of the walls of the Potala [the impact] was only dents created in the walls while the carved parts of the windows that Tibetans construct were destroyed. An incredible amount of shells were fired. The monks of Sera were in there.

Q: And then what happened?

#10B: When we reached the Potala Palace, the government person who was to give us the guns—there was an armory within the Potala from which guns were removed and every monk who had come there was given a gun. The government aristocrat said, “You have been given guns. Hence, you have to leave immediately to a Chinese military base.” [He] issued such orders. At that time there were many older monks of the Jey and Mey Datsang that spoke very strongly, “We cannot go immediately. We will return there [to the monastery] and decide which is an important place to go.” Then [we] returned to the monastery at around 4 or 5 o'clock in the evening.

Q: Why do you think they didn't want to listen to that official and decided to go back to the monastery first?

01:00:18

#10B: Had we listened to the aristocrat and ventured there then, they were prepared, the Chinese. Had we ventured there when the Chinese were prepared but for being slaughtered like goats and sheep...there were Chinese military camps located in all the directions of Lhasa with mounted artilleries. [We] would have managed to go to only one military camp and eventually faced death, which was why [we] refused to go.

Q: So you made a decision that seemed wiser and what happened when you went back to the monastery?

#10B: [We] arrived at the monastery around 5 o'clock. As we were approaching the monastery, the Chinese finally began to shell the mountaintops behind the monastery. While we were on the road [I] felt that the Chinese shells were not capable of falling upon the monastery. That is how [I] thought then.

Q: So you were relieved the monastery wasn't being hit. Did you continue going?

#10B: I was in the monastery and there were two monks of my age from the same *khangtsen* that went to and returned together [with me] from there [Potala Palace]. We were sort of a group of three. The three of us went to my quarters carrying the guns. They had not even gone to their quarters. Just as we reached near my quarters, there was such an incredible shelling on the monastery that one could hardly endure. In the evening

around 5, 6 and 7 o'clock shells fell like rain such that nobody dare remain in Sera Monastery.

01:03:25

Therefore, there was the three of us that had been to get guns; the three of us decided, "Should we remain here planes will fly tomorrow and drop bombs on the monastery and [we] might get killed." Carrying the guns, a small quantity of *tsampa* 'flour made from roasted barley,' some butter, mixed it with the *tsampa*, tied [the bag] to the waist and fled to the mountain behind the monastery that very night, to the top of the mountain. The whole of the next day [we] stayed on the mountain behind the monastery. That night the monks in Sera, the monks in Sera unable to endure the bombardment, the majority exited that very night through other regions, crossed the mountain pass and escaped.

Q: *Geshe-la*, the mountain that you climbed behind the monastery, was that the same direction that the monks fled when they went over another mountain?

#10B: Our monastery is located somewhere here [points to center of upright palm] beneath a mountain. We fled to the mountaintop carrying the guns for if planes flew the next day—actually there were already monks spread on the mountains and we were like additions. By the next morning we had reached the top [points to top of middle finger of upright palm]. Unable to endure the bombardment that night, the monks went through the valley [points to mid-palm and traces line sideways] to another region after crossing a pass.

Q: What did the three of you do next?

01:06:58

#10B: We reached there [mountaintop] the next morning and remained until around 4 o'clock in the evening. There were numerous monks and we watched Lhasa, Norbulingka and the Potala from the mountaintop. One could see everything on the ground like looking into the palm. There was so much shelling upon the Norbulingka that though there was a thick forest, it was covered by dust raised by the cannons.

In the lanes of Lhasa there is the Banashol, which is a large place where traders from Kham stayed. This was shelled and created a lot of chaos in Lhasa. There is the one called Gyuto Monastery. Gyuto Monastery was set on fire, set on fire. Such things were done. At this point [we] lost hope of returning. We were armed with guns but in order to fight the Chinese, if someone were to ask me if I had seen a Chinese [I] had not seen any. That is the gist of the matter.

We remained until late at night and then as most of the monks were fleeing through the valley and over a pass into Phenpo, we too went over the mountaintop to Phenpo. On the way to Phenpo numerous monks arrived at a rocky pass where nomads used to live in the past. At around 3 o'clock the next morning we were on the uninhabited pass. [We] had absolutely nothing and huddled against each other using the guns as pillows. We slept in the desolate pass for a little while. At that time we were five—three of us from my quarters and two other friends—we met on the mountaintop. The five of us slept in a crevice.

The next morning I thought, “[I] have received this gun and must fire it.” I got up the next morning, walked a little distance with the gun and fired the English-made rifle three times just to say that [I] fired the gun. There was no [target] but because [I] was carrying a gun, [I] just fired it three times. There were numerous monks sleeping in nooks on the mountains who asked [alarmed], “What has happened? What has happened? What has happened?” [I] replied, “It is nothing. I just fired. It is nothing.” Except for firing those three shots, the gun was a baggage. And then we arrived in Phenpo.

Q: You didn’t want to miss your chance to use that gun.

01:12:14

#10B: Just fired without reason. [Laughs] That was the only time [I] have ever fired a gun. [I] had never even touched a gun.

Q: What does the group do?

#10B: [Speaks before translation] And then we went down the Phenpo pass and when dawn began the next day in our group of five, one of the monks had his parents, relatives and home in Phenpo. Then we went to his home. When we were in his home—one of our companions, a monk is a member of that family—we told [him], “This is your home and [your] parents are here. So stay back here.” However, he refused to stay home. His mother and older brother said, “Do not go. You can stay here and hide for sometime. [We] do not think anything in particular will happen. Stay back.” Yet he refused.

When [he] refused to stay, we decided to leave and discussed, “There is the *Chushi Gangdrug* [Defend Tibet Volunteer Force] established in Lhoka. Let’s go and join the *Chushi Gangdrug* for we have guns.” The five of us decided to join the *Chushi Gangdrug*. We were a sturdy group. Otherwise, if Tibetans travelled alone or in twos, there were many instances of Tibetans killing each other and snatching guns. Such happened along the routes, as there was no law in the country. Anyway, but for the immeasurable shelling in Lhasa that rendered it impossible for anyone to remain, there were no Chinese to be seen. It was just the artillery shelling that did it.

Q: So please continue. What happened then?

01:15:17

#10B: Should I continue from there?

Q: Yes.

#10B: After leaving from there...The reason, for instance of my reaching India is the power of that gun. Had I not the gun—my home is close to Lhasa and there were the parents, siblings and the house. Nevertheless, because I possessed the English-made gun, should the Chinese capture me---these days one realizes that it was a petty reason but one did not possess much intelligence then—I believed deep down that owning a gun was a big offence. Since [I] possessed the gun, should [I] fall into Chinese hands they would kill or cut me up. So [I] dare not remain there although my parents were there, fearing that the

Chinese would kill [me]. Therefore, [I] joined the *Chushi Gangdrug* and remained with the guerrillas of the *Chushi Gangdrug* for around a week in Lhoka.

Q: If you were so afraid of being caught with a gun, why didn't you just throw it away?

#10B: It had become known clearly in the region that [the monks] had been to the Potala Palace to get guns. Everyone in the monastery knew about [my] going to get the gun, so [I] could not throw away the gun. So [I] took the gun and left for Lhoka. What happened in Lhoka was...Everywhere in Lhasa and other places people were fleeing and the time for resisting the Chinese had run out.

Take this place as an example, if the Tibetans heard that the Chinese had arrived in Mysore all the people and soldiers fled to Hunsur [distance of around 25 miles from Mysore]. When it was said that the Chinese had reached Hunsur, [the Tibetans] fled to Periyapatna [distance of around 15 miles from Hunsur] and when [the Chinese] reached Periyapatna, [the Tibetans] fled to Bylakuppe [distance of 10 miles from Periyapatna]. So in this manner [we] fled and reached the mountain behind Tawang in India and then into Indian territory. [We] kept running away little by little from the Chinese and thus arrived in India. This was so for majority of the Tibetans.

Q: What kind of a journey was it? Was it very arduous? Did it take a long time?

01:19:14

#10B: [Speaks before translation] At the border the Indian Government took away all the guns and swords. The guns we carried were given up to the Indian Government at the border.

If one were to question, "By carrying a gun, did you see any Chinese and fire at them?" One had not fired the gun nor seen any Chinese.

Q: But you made it safely to India.

#10B: [I] did not face any difficulties on the way to India. We were one night on the Mangola pass, which was covered in snow. [We] slept that night nestled against each other like puppies near a big rock. Most of [us] were young then and did not feel the cold. [We] arrived in that manner.

Q: How were you treated at the border by the Indian guards?

#10B: We became relaxed on reaching Indian Territory. When we fled from Lhoka, there is the place His Holiness the Dalai Lama trekked through called Tsona. We were numerous people walking in a file through this route. When we reached near the pass of Tsona, some Tibetan informers from Tsona came [our] way and said, "The Chinese have blocked the Tsona pass. There is no way through Tsona."

That was the route taken by His Holiness the Dalai Lama. "The Chinese have arrived on the Tsona route and there is no way out." We had covered a day's distance and then

retraced our steps. We returned and came upon a rich family. We spent the night there. [I] had the worst thought at that point. That night [I thought], “There is only 5-6 days left before death for the Chinese will capture [me]. [We] have not managed to get through the route and most probably the Chinese will capture [me]. So there is only 5-6 days left before [I] die.” [I] had that kind of a thought then.

01:23:31

#10B: The next day we proceeded and the leader of the *Chushi Gangdrug*, Andrug Gonpo Tashi... We saw Andrug Gonpo Tashi and others on a pass. He gave some suggestions, “Going through this place will lead to the tribal region.” There were thousands of people gathered there who had retraced their steps. “Taking this route will lead to the tribal region and this route to Tawang after crossing the Mangola pass.” He gave guidance. “It is good to take the Tawang route.”

So we crossed the Mangola into Tawang by cutting paths through the ice. The whole region was nothing but a blanket of snow. We continued to create paths through it. Many horses and mules perished along the way. When the horses and mules slipped on the snow they sank and could not be pulled out. Hence, hundreds of horses and mules perished. We crossed the pass in that way and finally reached the border of Tawang. After walking a little distance from the border of Tawang [we] arrived at the Indian post.

Q: How did the Indians receive you? Were there any difficulties?

#10B: There were no difficulties after reaching India. They took away all the weapons and prepared a list. Then we were kept at a huge uninhabited pass for 5-6 days. There were a large number of people and some did not have any food. Some that had not yet given up their guns hunted wild animals and ate them. There was some talk about people boiling leather saddlebags brought from Tibet and eating them.

Q: *Geshe-la*, at this point you're 26. How far along have you gone in your studies? Now you've fled Tibet, where are you in your studies as a monk?

01:28:11

#10B: [I] had done nearly 60 percent of studies while in Tibet. There are five volumes of the Great Treatises of Mahayana Buddhist Philosophy from which [I] had completed around three volumes. [I] had completed Pharchin ‘Prajnaparamita, perfection of wisdom,’ Uma ‘Madhyamaka, the Middle Way philosophy and Namdel ‘Pramana-logic and epistemology, commentary or elucidation.’ When we came here [I] was a little above half way through. Say for instance, if there are 12 grades [I] was somewhere near Grade 9 while in Tibet.

Q: Were these subjects, were they leading towards a *geshe* degree?

#10B: After completing the five volumes of the Great Treatises of Mahayana Buddhist Philosophy, there are certain tests in debates and special requirements connected to the Five Great Treatises that one would have to undergo. One became a *geshe* once these are done.

Q: I know this is skipping a lot of detail but where did you, where were you able to complete your studies in India?

#10B: After I came from there [Tibet] I lived for 11 years in Buxar [West Bengal]. [I] was studying during the 11 years in Buxar. [I] came here [Bylakuppe] from Buxar but Sera Monastery was not the town you see now. We cut the forest to create a large square and pitched tents on it. We lived in the tents for around three and half years.

Q: That was a major change from the mountains of Tibet to this area. How did you cope with that change?

01:31:36

#10B: While we were living in Buxar there were [monks] from the three monasteries of Sera, Drepung and Gaden and the four sects that were considered the seeds for the future of the dharma. That was the reason His Holiness the Dalai Lama gathered the 1,500 monks in Buxar. They were to study the dharma and in the event Tibet became independent in the future and [we] returned to Tibet, [they] were to be the objectives for the dharma in Tibet. We were there for 11 years but did not get to go back to Tibet. Then we came to the settlement here, Sera being allotted a place here. There were 307 monks from both Sera Jey and Mey Datsang when we came here from Buxar. The aim of our stay in Buxar is what I mentioned earlier.

Q: So you have in your life become one of those important seeds of the dharma, your life and your fellow monks. What do you think is the most important aspect of the dharma to pass on to the next generation of Tibetans?

#10B: That is it. Take any country for instance, each country has its unique culture, tradition and every country has established important [institutions] like schools. [The younger generation] finish school, finish college and do whatever higher studies possible and then he/she serves the country. Just like this example, we monks studied the dharma there. For new monks to join during the 11 years of our stay in Buxar there were no Tibetans living nearby. There was nobody to bring Tibetan children. Hence, the advantage for moving here is that though initially there were only 307 monks, numerous children from the settlements became monks. The various lessons that were imparted in Sera, Drepung and Gaden [Monasteries] in Tibet began to be taught like subjects in schools. This has resulted in the preservation and continuity of what used to be taught in Tibet without facing decline. [The younger generation] learn all about the process of dharma from this.

Q: What is it that you like about the dharma? What is the part that moves your heart the most?

01:36:16

#10B: I consider Uma the best.

Q: Uma?

#10B: Yes, Uma.

Q: Can you say something about that?

#10B: If [I] were to comment on the Middle Way, the main description about Uma ...in general the treatise of Uma is vast, which we will not be able to comment on. The conclusion of Uma is that any living being, whoever it may be, everybody would choose happiness between happiness and suffering. Even an ant wants happiness and goodness. No person wants suffering. Therefore, in order to achieve happiness and suffering...the root of suffering stems from the ignorance of your mind. One can find release from ignorance from the Middle Way.

Q: Well, you have done a very fine job of explaining some of the history of Tibet and some of the experiences of the monks and how you came here to Bylakuppe to set up the monastery that you are referring to.

#10B: [Silent]

Q: *Geshe-la*, we're going to conclude our interview now, but I wanted to ask you once again the question in case you have another thought, if this interview was shown in Tibet or China would this be a problem for you?

#10B: How do you mean?

Q: If this interview that we have recorded today is shown in Tibet or China, would you have any problem?

01:39:24

#10B: I will not have any problem whatsoever. [I] have no problem if it is shown to the Chinese or anybody else.

Just now [we] talked about the dharma. [You] asked about the dharma, the Uma and what I explained was that every living being desires happiness and not suffering and the root of suffering is ignorance. It is the desire, hatred and ignorance within you, which are the three causes. The main effort in removing desire, hatred and ignorance is shown in the Middle Way. In general, all the treatises are important but it is the Middle Way that shows the unique way out from the cause of suffering. Therefore, I wanted to say this about the Middle Way. This is in continuation to what [I] mentioned earlier.

Q: Well, that is a very beautiful teaching to take with us and we thank you for reminding us of that teaching and for your words and your wisdom and for sharing such rich detail of your history that we can share with the world.

#10B: [Nods]

Q: Thank you.

#10B: Are there no other questions? Okay.

END OF INTERVIEW