

# **Tibet Oral History Project**

Interview #15M – Tsondue Gyaltsen  
April 7, 2010

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# TIBET ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

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## INTERVIEW SUMMARY SHEET

1. Interview Number: #15M
2. Interviewee: Tsondue Gyaltzen
3. Age: 74
4. Date of Birth: 1936
5. Sex: Male
6. Birthplace: Digung
7. Province: Utsang
8. Year of leaving Tibet: 1959
9. Date of Interview: April 7, 2010
10. Place of Interview: Home for the Aged, Doeguling Settlement, Mundgod, Karwar District, Karnataka, India
11. Length of Interview: 1 hr 51 min
12. Interviewer: Marcella Adamski
13. Interpreter: Namgyal Tsering
14. Videographer: Pema Tashi
15. Translator: Tenzin Yangchen

### **Biographical Information:**

Tsondue Gyaltzen's birthplace Digung Thashoe was a distance of three to four hours by vehicle from Lhasa. The most unique part of his village was that it was surrounded by a fence with gates in the east and west. His family was engaged in farming and paid taxes to the Digung Monastery and the Tibetan government based on the family's wealth. He elaborates on the two types of taxes and how they were paid.

Tsondue Gyaltzen describes the monks called *tsam-pa* 'meditators' and their role in the life of the local villagers. Tsondue Gyaltzen became a monk at the age of 13 and joined Gaden Monastery near Lhasa. He provides a vivid description of an epidemic which claimed the lives of many young people, including a large number of monks. He was able to escape death during the epidemic as a result of an unusual remedy provided by his teacher.

Tsondue Gyaltzen explains in length about the death ritual of *chadhor* in which dead bodies were dissected and fed to the vultures. This was the preferred method of burial except in the case of death by disease when bodies were buried instead of sky burial during the epidemic.

Tsondue Gyaltzen witnessed the bombing of Lhasa by the Chinese in 1959. He wanted to join the *Chushi Gangdrug* [Defend Tibet Volunteer Force] but was too late and escaped into India.

### **Topics Discussed:**

Taxes, monastic life, religious festivals, customs/traditions.

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**Interview #15M**

**Interviewee: Tsondue Gyaltzen**

**Age: 74, Sex: Male**

**Interviewer: Marcella Adamski**

**Interview Date: April 7, 2010**

Question: *Pa-la* 'respectful term for father,' please tell us your name.

00.00.17

**Interviewee #15M: Tsondue Gyaltzen.**

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?

**#15M: Yes.**

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

00:01:18

**#15M: [Nods]**

Q: During this interview if you wish to take a break or stop at anytime, please let me know.

**#15M: Okay.**

Q: If you do not wish to answer a question or talk about something, let me know.

00:01:45

**#15M: Okay.**

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

**#15M: I have relatives in Tibet but I do not have any relations with them.**

Q: Would there be any problems?

00:02:15

**#15M: There will be no problems. I do have relatives but we do not have any relations. Since coming here in '59, I have never gone back [to Tibet]. If one went back after coming here, there might be contact. However, I do not have such contacts.**

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

00:02:52

**#15M: Okay.**

Q: *Pa-la*, tell me a little bit about where you were born?

**#15M: I was born in Tibet near Meto Gongkar.**

Q: Where is Meto Gongkar?

00:03:18

**#15M: Meto Gongkar is in the central part [of Tibet]. It's at a distance of three to four hours from Lhasa.**

Q: Walking or on horse-back?

**#15M: In a vehicle.**

Q: Were there vehicles then?

00:03:32

**#15M: There were vehicles then. There were no vehicles before the arrival of the Chinese, but after the Chinese came, there were.**

Q: What did you say?

**#15M: There were no [vehicles] before the Chinese arrived in Tibet. After the Chinese arrived in Tibet, there were vehicles.**

Q: How many people were in your village? How many families?

00:04:08

**#15M: Our district was Meto Gongkar. My home was in Digung Thashoe.**

Q: How many families were there?

**#15M: There were about 70-80 families.**

Q: So this was a big community.

00:04:36

**#15M: It was big. There was a boundary wall surrounding the homes and gates in the east and west. There was no other entrance except through the two gates.**

**Right in the center was a big palace, which was the original monastery of Digung [Kagyü sect of Tibetan Buddhism]. I heard that when the Chinese arrived, they destroyed the whole thing.**

Q: Was it unusual for a village to have a fence around it?

**#15M: There was a fence around it with gates in the east and west. Nobody could enter except through the gates. In the early times, the gates would be shut but later they were not closed. In the center was an open space which was laid with stones.**

Q: Was the fence around the whole village or just in...

00:06:04

**#15M: [Interrupts] The animals were tethered on the stones during winter.**

[Question is repeated.]

**#15M: The whole village was surrounded.**

Q: The fence was around the whole village. What was the fence made of?

00:06:36

**#15M: It was made of stones.**

Q: Like a stone wall?

**#15M: Yes, it was built of stones.**

Q: Was it plastered with clay?

00:06:49

**#15M: Yes, it was plastered with clay.**

Q: How high was it?

**#15M: It was about four-stories high.**

Q: Four stories? Could you estimate a measurement?

00:07:03

**#15M: You can estimate that [points to wall of the room] as one storey and so on.**

[Interpreter describes as three men's height.]

Q: Three men's height? Okay, so say six foot times three is 18 feet. What was the purpose of this wall?

**#15M: The purpose of building this wall was because that was the place where the original Digung Monastery of the Kagyu sect was established. It was said to have been established by Choepa Rinpoche.**

Q: In your home, how many people lived in your home?

00:08:19

**#15M: There were my mother, my mother's younger sister, her four children—two sons and two daughters—and my mother's two sons and two daughters. My father...**

Q: Your mother's sister lived in your house?

**#15M: Yes, she did. There was one father and two mothers who were sisters.**

Q: Were you the son of the first mother or the second mother?

00:09:37

**#15M: I was the child of the first mother.**

Q: Were the mothers equally liked in the home by the father?

**#15M: They were not treated differently.**

Q: What kind of work did his father do?

00:10:13

**#15M: My father took the responsibility of the fields and any work outside the home.**

Q: What else did he do besides field work?

**#15M: [He did the] field works as well as paid taxes to the Digung Labrang [residence of a grand lama] and the government. There were two types of taxes called external tax and internal tax. The external tax was paid to the government and the internal tax was paid to the Digung Labrang. There were two Digung *kyabgon* 'high lama' in the Digung Labrang called senior *kyabgon* and junior *kyabgon*.**

Q: Why did you have to pay tax to the monastery?

00:10:58

**#15M: Because the monastery was our leader.**

Q: Were the taxes affordable? Could the family afford the taxes to the monastery and the government?

**#15M: The tax to the Digung Labrang was separate. The Digung Labrang owned a farm which had to be cultivated and after the harvest, the proceeds must be offered to the Digung Labrang.**

Q: What was grown in the fields?

00:12:07

**#15M: Barley was grown.**

Q: What was the tax that you paid to the Tibetan government?

**#15M: There was transportation service and charcoal that needed to be given to the Tibetan government. The weather was extremely cold in winter and there was plenty of wood in our region. So we had to prepare charcoal and deliver it at long distances.**

Q: How did you prepare coal?

00:12:47

**#15M: We prepared coal by burning wood.**

Q: Then you delivered this to the Tibetan government as tax?

**#15M: Yes.**

Q: Where did you work to earn food for you to keep?

00:14:04

**#15M: A school was started for the very small children of the village to teach them Tibetan. Another [school] was started for the older children. They were taught the..., so that they could turn out to be...**

Q: *Pa-la*, you said that you did some farming of some land and gave the proceeds to the monastery and then you burned wood to make charcoal and gave that to the government, but when did you have time to work, so that your family could keep the food and the labor?

**#15M: The government had given land for the families to earn their livelihood. We earned from that.**

Q: The government had provided land.

00:15:31

**#15M: Yes, the government had provided us land.**

Q: You could [utilize] that land.

**#15M: Yes, we could. The area of land depended upon the amount of taxes one paid.**

Q: So that in addition to the land that you cultivated for the monastery, the government gave you some land and you cultivated that?

[Interpreter to interviewer]: Paid tax accordingly and had a little bit of lands to cultivate.



Q: *Pa-la*, your father worked on the lands. What did your mother do?

00:16:29

**#15M: My mother prepared food for those that worked outside [in the fields] and the children. She managed the home.**

Q: Was the monastery the center of village life and how was that? How was monastery the center?

**#15M: We visited the monastery on auspicious days and made offerings to the monastery.**

Q: And what about the monastery to the village?

00:17:27

**#15M: There was no other...**

Q: [Interrupts] Didn't the monastery do anything beneficial for the village?

**#15M: If there was no rain during summer, the monastery performed the "rain ceremony."**

Q: Did the monks ever work in the fields?

00:18:23

**#15M: [Shakes head] The monks did not do field work.**

Q: Did they just spend their time in prayers?

**#15M: Yes, they spent their time in prayers.**

Q: Were the people accepting of the taxes or was there any other feelings besides acceptance?

00:18:55

**#15M: There were various degrees of taxes. Taxes were very high for the wealthy families. Some *trelkhang* 'high tax payers' were obliged to two regiments. They had to send men to the Drapchi Regiment and Kusung Regiment [different divisions in the Tibetan army].**

Q: Why did they have to go to the army?

**#15M: They had to send men to the army and bear the cost of their food and clothing.**

Q: What about the lower taxes?

00:19:41

**#15M: The lower tax payers were not obliged to send men to the army. At the same time, they had less area of land [for cultivation].**

Q: The higher tax payers owned more land...

**#15M: The higher tax payers were obliged to send their men or substitutes to the army.**

Q: Did the people feel this was fair?

00:20:31

**#15M: There was no feeling of dejection or anything like that because the more taxes you paid, the richer you were.**

Q: I asked the question because later the Chinese often said the people were oppressed by the government and by the monasteries and forced to pay taxes. So I am enquiring *pa-la*, whether this was so. Did the people feel oppressed as the Chinese said they did?

**#15M: They were lying.**

Q: This monastery in the middle of your village, the Digung Monastery, had it been there for many years, many centuries? Was it an old monastery?

00:22:26

**#15M: I have no knowledge about that.**

Q: But it was there when your father was born?

**#15M: Yes, it was.**

Q: How many years earlier to that, can you make a guess, was it there?

00:22:52

**#15M: If I make a guess, I suppose it was about 10-15 generations [old].**

Q: How many monks lived in the monastery?

**#15M: In the Digung Monastery in my village, there were only about 30 monks.**

Q: That's not too big.

00:23:32

**#15M: It was considered the main monastery of Digung. It was considered the original establishment. There were two Digung *kyabgon* and if [one of the] lamas passed away, the funeral rituals were performed here and if the lama reincarnated, his enthronement ceremony happened in this very region.**

Q: The lama who was the head of the monastery, when he was alive, was this very special person, a reincarnation person?

[Interpreter to interviewer]: He was a reincarnation person.

Q: He was a reincarnated lama. He was the reincarnation of which person?

**#15M: I do not know how many reincarnations had been born. The Digung Monastery in my village had 30 monks. There were two other Digung [Monasteries] called Digung Yaraga and Digung Thay. The Digung Thay consisted of two *tsam-pa* 'meditators' divisions. [The *tsam-pa* are those that have] matted hair on their heads. They have matted hair on their heads and they are called *tsam-pa*.**

Q: Were they monks?

00:25:25

**#15M: Yes, they were monks with [touches hands upon head].**

Q: Why did they have that?

**#15M: They were *tsam-pa* and went into retreat. There were two such divisions and a monk division. These divisions consisted of a population of 300 monks. The Digung *kyabgon* lived at Digung Yaraga. There were over 500 monks at this monastery.**

Q: How many *tsam-pa* were there [at Digung Thay Monastery]?

00:26:20

**#15M: There were about 100 monks and 200 *tsam-pa*. There were two divisions of *tsam-pa* called *tsam-pa* east and *tsam-pa* west.**

Q: Were some monks, they stayed in meditation for long?

**#15M: There were some who sat in retreat for a year and some for three years.**

Q: Where would they be in this meditation?

00:27:13

**#15M: Each one had a separate room and a courtyard. The monastery provided them with tea and water. In order to get water [inside the cells], there was a stone with a groove outside. A water container was placed inside [the cell]. When [someone] came to provide water, he knocked on the window and said, "*Solchu* 'honorific term for water'" and the lid of the water container was opened. Water was poured onto the groove in the stone. Water was brought and poured onto the stone groove.**

Q: Was the same thing done in the case of tea?

**#15M: Water was poured on the stone groove and [it filled] the water container inside.**

Q: So these meditating monks, they were in rooms?

[Interpreter to interviewer]: There were separate rooms for them, very silent and no one is allowed to enter.

Q: Was this Digung sect specially known for meditation?

00:28:43

**#15M: These *tsam-pa* were very renowned. There was one lama called Gelong Angor Rinpoche. He was supposed to have a [letter] "A" on his foot. The "A" was formed naturally on his foot. He was poor. There were many people who approached him for divinations. He'd say, "Just wait. I will offer you food." and he would travel in the air to Lhasa and bring back steaming hot *momo* 'dumplings.' This was a story that used to be told.**

Q: Was he alive at the time that *pa-la* was? He was living at the same time?

**#15M: [Speaks without listening to question] He was showing miracles.**

[Question is repeated.]

00:30:32

**#15M: I have seen him. The reason I could see him was because I have an uncle who was a *tsam-pa* and he became blind. I used to accompany him on circumambulation and assist him. When he sat in retreat, I used to cook for him and serve him food, as he meditated.**

Q: Was he your relative?

**#15M: Yes, he was a relative.**

Q: How was he your relative?

00:31:04

**#15M: He was a relative from my father's side. I lived for about two years at the monastery.**

Q: How old were you when you did that, *pa-la*?

**#15M: I was 9 years old at that time.**

Q: You entered the monastery? When did you become a monk? What year?

00:32:01

**#15M: I lived there for nine [?] years. During the nine years, there were two teachers that taught me. One was a lame monk who did not beat me much. The other teacher beat me a lot. I would have to fill out my cheek [with air] and he hit it with a bamboo stick.**

Q: *Pa-la*, when did you go to the monastery from your home first?

**#15M: When my uncle, the *tsam-pa*, passed away, [I] returned home. [My parents] said, "We need someone in the house who understands the taxes. You should not [continue to be] a monk. We will keep you at home." I told them that I did not wish to stay home and at the age of 13, I became a monk.**

Q: So you became a monk at age 13.

00:33:28

**#15M: Yes, at Gaden [Monastery].**

Q: You were a monk from 9 to 13?

**#15M: I left [home] to become a monk at age 13.**

Q: So from 9-13 you stayed at home?

00:34:05

**#15M: Yes. [At age 13] I went to the monastery.**

[Interviewer to interpreter]: But before 9, he helped his uncle. Was that in the monastery?

[Interpreter to interviewer]: At the meditation monastery.

[Interviewer to interpreter]: When did he go, like 6 years old or something? When did he go to his uncle?

Q: How old were you when you went to help your blind uncle?

**#15M: I was 9 years old then.**

Q: Were you there for two years?

00:34:47

**#15M: I was there until I was 10.**

Q: Then you returned home.

**#15M: From there, I returned home and stayed for two years, until I was 12.**

Q: When you left for the monastery, why did you want to go to the monastery instead of staying at home and write family business?

00:35:22

**#15M: I wished to become a monk and practice the dharma. So I became a monk. The teacher taught me the scriptures very well. I was very sharp at that time. I could memorize two long pages and two short pages of the scriptures [at a time]. Then I would be taught *khalap*.**

Q: What's *khalap*?

**#15M: *Khalap* is oral teaching, which one must keep in mind. I could recite the whole thing by memory to my teacher. My teacher did not beat me. However, I was very naughty. In the evening the teacher would take a test and then give me *tsampa* 'flour made from roasted barley' mixed with cheese and butter. After the test, he would give me that and tell me to go to sleep. In the cold of winter, I would be clad only in the *thonga* 'monks' sleeveless shirt' and not the *zen* 'shawl-like upper garment' and made to recite the scriptures.**

Q: So for how long you were given very little clothing and it was cold and it was better to study that way? Is that what you are saying?

00:38:28

**#15M: It was said that if one was clad in warm clothing, he would feel the warmth and not study. He would fall asleep. If one was cold, he would not sleep.**

Q: Would it be in the monastery that he was then kept kind of cool, not too warm?

**#15M: It was in the monastery.**

Q: Which monastery was it?

00:39:02

**#15M: At Gaden.**

[Interviewer to interpreter]: So he joined that monastery and not the one in his village?

[Interpreter to interviewer]: Not in his village.

Q: Ah, he went to Gaden. Did he have a room of his own? Was he in with other students?

00:39:23

**#15M: [I] was not kept inside the room. [I] sat in the courtyard.**

Q: So you sat on the verandah and studied. And how many days did you do that?

**#15M: I did that for five to six years. Then in one year, there was an epidemic in Lhasa including in Sera, Drepung and Gaden [monasteries] and many young monks died. Many died in Lhasa and it was said that dogs were dragging [the bodies] in the streets.**

Q: So there was an epidemic or a plague. How old was *pa-la* at that time?

00:41:07

**#15M: [Speaks before question is interpreted] When this epidemic occurred, all the younger people died. All the hair on the head fell off. I developed boils in my eyes and could not open them. *Chang* 'home-brewed beer' was brought from my teacher's home,**

which was located below the mountain pass. He mixed musk in the *chang* and gave it to me. The dormitories of the monks were like this [makes a circular motion and points to the middle] and right there was the courtyard. Every young monk of my age in those dormitories died. I was the only one who became well. I was cured because of the musk.

Q: Does he see people dying or he hears of it?

**#15M: I saw it myself.**

Q: Did the monks in the monastery get this illness?

00:42:58

**#15M: Yes, many died in Sera and the same occurred in Drepung as well as in Gaden. It was all the younger ones that died. Since it was a bad disease, *chadhor* could not be performed.**

Q: What is *chadhor*?

**#15M: *Chadhor* ‘sky burial ritual’ could not be offered to the birds. Since it was a bad disease, [the bodies] needed to be buried.**

Q: Did they have a name for this disease?

00:43:53

**#15M: The epidemic was in three types. One was the hair fall; the other was fever and then the boils. The boils occurred in the eyes. There was this injection that used to be given here [points to left arm].**

Q: Was there injections in Tibet?

**#15M: A tiny cut was made in the flesh here [points to left arm] and [to the interpreter] do you know the *khambu gamzik*?**

Q: What's that?

00:44:28

**#15M: The inner core of the apricot was broken and medicine was filled in the hollow part. This was tied on it [points where the cut was made on the arm] and bandaged with a cloth. A week later it was untied and pus would have formed there.**

Q: Were the boils under the arms here?

**#15M: There were boils. They were called *lhandum*.**

Q: Were did the boils occur, on the arms or the face?

00:45:54

**#15M: It occurred on the face as well as on the arms.**

Q: The name, it sounds like, the name is the bubonic plague. Small-pox? Maybe small-pox.

**#15M: Those who were not afflicted [by the illness] abstained from having contact with the afflicted. They were isolated. When the boils healed, they formed depressions in the flesh.**

Q: I think that's probably small-pox, with the hole. It's terrible. If you went to the monastery and you were 13, so this had to be in, somewhere 1949-1950-1951.

00:47:15

**#15M: I think I was around 15 years old at that time. Since it was a bad disease [the bodies] had to be buried and it used to be said that there was no space left to bury [the dead].**

Q: In your monastery in Gaden, how many people died roughly? What percentage?

**#15M: Perhaps a thousand.**

Q: And Gaden had how many thousands then?

00:48:11

**#15M: The average figure of Gaden was 3,300 monks. However, there were more than 3,300.**

Q: If there were 3,300 there, 1,000 of them died; so one in three people.

**#15M: Yes, that is right.**

Q: Do they know what caused this illness? Do they...

00:48:40

**#15M: [Interrupts] It did not affect the older ones.**

[Question is repeated.]

**#15M: Much later, after the epidemic had ended, it was said that the epidemic was brought by a nun. The nun was the cause of the epidemic. It was then said that she had gone away beyond the mountain pass.**

Q: How did she get it?

00:49:08

**#15M: The disease was brought...**

Q: ...by the nun?



**#15M: Yes.**

Q: Why did they think a nun brought it?

00:49:31

**#15M: It was said that the nun had brought the illness and it spread.**

Q: Where did the nun get the disease from?

**#15M: I do not know how she got the disease. [Smiles]**

Q: Had she been traveling outside of Tibet?

00:50:07

**#15M: The nun was said to be staying in the monastery. Then many young people became sick and died. After the illness ended, it was said that the nun had left the monastery. That's what was said.**

Q: Why was the nun staying in a monastery?

**#15M: I do not know about that.**

Q: Was there any inoculation? Did any outside people come to give them shots or needles for protection?

00:51:14

**#15M: Such things were very rare. If there were doctors present in the monastery, they would be consulted. Good doctors were found in Lhasa. So for analysis of urine [of a sick person], it was filled in the horn of yak, covered and taken to Lhasa on horseback to the doctors there. Then they diagnosed the illness and provided medicines.**

Q: Did they find any medicine that was effective or did the epidemic just go away slowly?

**#15M: Very good medicines were available. There were doctors in Lhasa at Tengayling and Chakpori.**

Q: Really, the medicine helped cure people?

[Interpreter to interviewer]: Yes, it helped cure people because the two main doctors, according to their prescription, medicines were required.

Q: Good. So every monastery, Drepung had it, Sera had it and Gaden, everybody? Three monasteries had this epidemic?

[Interpreter to interviewer]: Yeah, all the monasteries had it. Even they had it in Lhasa.

Q: Even the city of Lhasa?

00:53:17

**#15M: Yes. Monks of the three monasteries of Sera, Drepung and Gaden assembled in Lhasa for the Monlam Chenmo 'Great Prayer Festival.' After the assembly got over, there were *dhodi* constructed about this height [gestures off camera] and another one higher than this and then a third one. There were three such *dhodi*. Medicine dispensers sat on the *dhodi*. The medicines were in [pouches made of] woolen cloth and a piece of paper attached to it. The names of the medicines were attached to the medicine pouch. After checking the pulse, the doctor [gave the prescription] and the dispenser took the medicine out of the pouches.**

Q: And did it bring the epidemic to a close?

[Interpreter to interviewer]: ...close and they were checked and then medicine was distributed. Stalls were made for the medicines.

[Interviewer to interpreter]: A medicine stall was held in Lhasa to give out medicine.

[Interpreter to interviewer]: ...during the Monlam period.]

Q: When is the Monlam period?

**#15M: The Monlam's duration is 21 days.**

Q: In what month?

00:54:59

**#15M: It started on the 4<sup>th</sup> day of the 1<sup>st</sup> Tibetan lunar month. On the 15<sup>th</sup> day *chonga choepa* '15<sup>th</sup> day offering' was celebrated, *thogya* 'pyramid-shaped offerings' took place on the 16<sup>th</sup> and *jampa dhende* 'bringing out of the statue of Jetsun Jampa Gonpo' was celebrated on the 17<sup>th</sup> day.**

Q: Was the medicine given out freely or did people have to buy it?

**#15M: The medicine was free. One did not have to pay for it.**

Q: Can you remember what the medicine looked like?

00:55:51

**#15M: They were in the form of pills as well as powder. They were Tibetan medicines. It was similar to the medicine that is dispensed at the Mentsekhang [Tibetan Medical Center] here.**

Q: You said that when the epidemic broke out, the people were dying so fast that their bodies were in the streets in Lhasa?

**#15M: It used to be said that the dogs were dragging [the bodies]. It came to be said that there was no space left at the Sera Shar cemetery. [The bodies] needed to be buried at the cemetery as only [dead bodies of] people [who died] without bad diseases could be offered to the birds. There was the *thomdhen* who conducted the *chadhor* [shows cutting motion with hands]. *Chadhor* was conducted and [the bodies] offered to the birds. [Those bodies] which did not have bad diseases were given to the birds.**

Q: Did people think this was any kind of an omen or punishment or anything? What was the attitude about why this was afflicting the population?

00:58:10

**#15M: When the epidemic was present, [healthy people] did not have contact with those that had contracted the disease. They remained within their rooms and did not venture where the disease was since the epidemic was infectious.**

Q: When they had to take them out of town, did they bury people or cremate the bodies? You said there was no room in town, in the village—no room left. So you took the bodies outside. Did they burn them, cremate them or did they bury the bodies?

00:59:22

**#15M: They might have buried them close to each other.**

Q: *Pa-la*, how long did this last? Like a month or one week or how long were people sick before it went away?

**#15M: It might have been one month or two months. The epidemic came and [the number of sick] increased.**

Q: How many months did it take altogether?

01:00:14

**#15M: About two months.**

Q: And the nun they said brought the disease, do you know what happened to her, *pa-la*?

**#15M: It was said that the nun left and the disease was at an end.**

Q: Just that when she left, there was no disease left.

01:00:54

**#15M: Yes.**

Q: Does he believe it was the nun's fault for the disease?

**#15M: That's what people used to say.**

Q: Did you believe that to be true?

01:01:11

**#15M: Yes, I thought that was true. I was sick myself. Look, there are windows in a row here [points around the interview room]. Let's take them as the monks' quarters. In each of these quarters lived a teacher and two or three students. So imagine how many would have died in a community hall like this. I was the only one who became well. If we take this hall as an example, I was the only one who survived. The rest died. How many would have died in the other houses! If we take these windows as the quarters, how many monk students were in each room! I was the only monk student in my quarters. My teacher's home was below the monastery. They brought *chang* from there and mixed it with *latsi* 'musk.' After drinking that, I became well. I was the only one who survived, while all those who were afflicted died.**

Q: From which animal do you get *latsi*?

**#15M: *Latsi* is derived from a wild animal called musk deer.**

Q: Was the *latsi* its waste matter or blood or what was it?

01:03:20

**#15M: It was obtained from the genital of the male animal.**

Q: And did his teacher survive?

**#15M: He did not fall sick. He was older.**

Q: *Pa-la*, do you know after this epidemic, how many people died from the epidemic in Lhasa?

01:04:41

**#15M: I think it was countless because there were more monks in Sera and Drepung than Gaden. [Imagine] how many would have died!**

Q: This epidemic happened when you were 15 years old and you had gone back to the monastery when you were 13. I just want to review. You studied meditation and scriptures for two years and then the epidemic came.

**#15: Then I became well and everything was good.**

[Interviewer to interpreter]: So what does he do next? He is the only student in his group, is that right, that survived?

[Interpreter to interviewer]: Yes.

Q: And then *pa-la*, what do you do next?

01:06:29

**#15M: Generally if people died from diseases other than the epidemic, there were *thomdhen* who conducted the *chadhor* by cutting the flesh and feeding it to the birds. The birds arrived who also had their rules. One of the vultures flew, while all the rest of the birds sat bowing [bows head]. The leader of the vultures took a bite of the flesh and flew away. Then the rest of the [vultures] went to eat.**

Q: Was that later on because you said none of the people who died in the epidemic were given to the vultures, so we are talking about a later time now.

[Interpreter to interviewer]: A later time.

[Interviewer to interpreter]: How does he know about the sky burial so much?

**#15M: I have seen it with my eyes. There was a [sky burial] place at Digung Thay, which was considered very holy. It used to be said that not a day passed when a corpse was not brought there. There is a very holy cemetery in India called Siwatse Dhutoe. It was said that there is no difference between the Siwatse Dhutoe and the Digung Thay cemetery.**

Q: Does it mean that all the flesh gets eaten here? It was eaten by the birds?

01:09:23

**#15M: After the birds had eaten [the flesh], only the bones were left behind. The bones were ground and mixed with *tsampa*; even the brain within the head was ground and mixed with *tsampa* and they were once again fed to the birds. Everything got eaten. There was nothing left behind.**

Q: This area was near you when you were a child or after you left the monastery?

**#15M: That area was called Digung Thay. That was the monastery where I told you I lived for two years.**

Q: During the two years near Gaden Monastery?

[Interpreter to interviewer]: Not Gaden.

[Interviewer to interpreter]: He was in Drepung?

[Interpreter to interviewer]: He was in Gaden and not in Drepung.

[Interviewer to interpreter]: What monastery did he go to?

[Interpreter to interviewer]: He went to the Gaden Monastery but earlier, before when he was at the age of 9, or something like that, with uncle he stayed.

[Interviewer to interpreter]: With his uncle, he stayed and then he saw the mountain.

[Interpreter to interviewer]: Because nearby, the holy place was located.

[Interviewer to interpreter]: Got it. I understand. So he saw it with his own eyes.

01:11:39

**#15M: I am not relating anything more [than it actually happened]. I am not telling any lies. I am relating exactly what happened.**

Q: This is important information. Did people wish to have a sky burial? Is that their first choice or were there other kinds of burials that they wanted?

**#15M: If it [the death] was not from a bad disease, not an infectious disease like the one I told you about now, all those that did not have infectious diseases were fed to the birds.**

Q: You wanted us to know about the sky burial and my question was, did people prefer the sky burial or were there other forms of burial that they wanted?

01:12:51

**#15M: When someone died, rituals were performed in the home. Then it [the body] was taken to the cemetery. Inviting monks to read prayers depended on the economic situation of the family, whether to invite monks from the main monastery or the *datsang* [section in a monastery]. Offerings were made [to the monks].**

Q: Why was the sky burial the first choice? Why was it not buried or cremated?

**#15M: That was the tradition since long ago.**

Q: And what was the next option?

01:13:54

**#15M: It was always given to the birds.**

Q: But if you didn't live near a mountain to do that, what other kind of burial could you have?

**#15M: [Speaks before question is interpreted] These days if someone dies, he is cremated at the cemetery. [I am] old and if [I] could go back to Tibet and die there in my country, I could have the *chadhor*. [I] would prefer that. *Chadhor* is preferred to burning.**

[Question is repeated.]

01:14:43

**#15M: It would be taken there, wherever the [sky burial] cemetery was. The person who conducted the *chadhor* would be there.**

Q: So everybody who died in his village, do they have a sky burial?

**#15M: Yes. However, it was not everybody who performed the *chadhor* [makes cutting motion with hand]. There was one particular person who conducted it. Nobody else touched [the body].**

Q: *Pa-la*, did you ever witness with your own eyes a sky burial?

01:16:03

**#15M: I have seen it with my eyes. I told you that I stayed for two years at the meditation monastery at Digung Thay, where there were two *tsam-pa* Monasteries and a [regular] monastery. There used to be a *chadhor* held everyday at the cemetery.**

Q: Have you been to witness it?

**#15M: Yes, I have been to witness it. The vultures sat there and a person with a stick stood guard over them. The vultures sat thus [bends head and shoulders]. Then the leader of the vultures flew down. When the leader landed on the ground, all the vultures sat with bowed heads, just like humans do when they show respect to someone.**

Q: Did he see the body being dissected? Has he witnessed that?

01:17:32

**#15M: [Speaks before question is interpreted] After they landed, their wings moved like this [moves hands up and down]. He [the leader of the vultures] took a bite from the dissected flesh and flew away.**

[Question is repeated.]

**#15M: Yes, I have witnessed that.**

Q: Do they start with any particular part of the body?

01:18:03

**#15M: Yes, the person [who dissected the body] was called *thomdhen*.**

[Question is repeated.]

**#15M: He put on a different type of attire, meditated and then dissected with a knife.**

Q: Which part did he do first?

01:18:25

**#15M: It was started from the upper part of the body.**

Q: And then did he cut straight down?

**#15M: No, the body was laid face down.**

Q: Did he cut straight down or sever the hands?

01:18:35

**#15M: The hands were not severed. [Makes cutting motion with hand.]**

Q: Right down the middle?

**#15M: Right down the middle starting from the upper part.**

Q: And what happens to the head?

01:18:59

**#15M: The head was ground. The brain was removed and mixed with *tsampa*. The bones were ground finely and mixed with *tsampa* and given to the vultures. There was nothing that was left behind. Everything was cleaned. That was what I witnessed.**

Q: What about the organs in the body, the heart, kidneys, lungs?

**#15M: It was cut here [indicates front portion of body] and [the organs] removed. They were fed to the birds along with the flesh.**

Q: How long does it take for the vultures to finish taking away a whole body?

01:20:35

**#15M: It took about an hour. After all the bones were eaten, they flew away and slept on the rocky mountains, with their wings stretched out in the sun.**

Q: Does every village have a place where they take their bodies to be dissected for the vultures?

**#15M: Yes, they did.**

Q: And does every village have a man who does that work?

01:21:33

**#15M: There was never any burial [underground]. As long as it [the death] was not from a bad disease, there never was any burial. It was considered bad to bury. It was considered good [for the body] to be given to the birds.**

[Question is repeated.]

**#15M: Yes, most villages had [a place for sky burial]. In some cases, if they did not have one, [the bodies] were brought on horses and yaks from distance of two or three days.**

Q: Do they do the feeding of the bodies in the spring, summer, winter, fall, all year long?

01:22:40

**#15M: It was done throughout the seasons. It was done throughout.**



Q: What happens to the person's possessions, their earrings and things like that? What happens to them?

**#15M: Those were offered to the monasteries. They were offered to the monasteries and lamas.**

Q: Does the monastery keep those items?

01:23:34

**#15M: Then they sold them.**

Q: And are the monks, do they have sky burials the same as lay people?

**#15M: Whether one was a monk or a lay person, it was the same.**

Q: Was it the same for women?

01:24:11

**#15M: It was the same for women.**

Q: So before we heard about the sky burial, I was asking you when the epidemic was over, *pa-la*, in the monastery, what did you do next?

**#15M: I continued to be a monk.**

Q: What happened then?

01:24:48

**#15M: I continued to be a monk and then I lived separately from my teacher. There are the monasteries called Gyuto, relocated in Dharamsala [Himachal Pradesh, India] and the Gyumey, relocated in Hunsur [Karnataka, India]. After completing his Geshe Degree 'Master in metaphysics,' my teacher left for Gyuto Monastery. And then my teacher was deputed as an abbot to a branch monastery of the Gyuto Monastery. I accompanied him as his steward. I was the steward to the abbot.**

Q: And where is this monastery located?

**#15M: The Gyuto Monastery was located in Lhasa. It was at Ramoche in Lhasa. Both the Gyuto and Gyumey Monasteries are located at Ramoche. From there he had to go to a branch monastery of the Gyuto Monastery as an abbot. He took me along as his steward.**

Q: Does the teacher travel very much in a year?

01:27:38

**#15M: Until he reached the monastery where he was deputed, he was provided a certificate by the government authorizing him to tax people for a horse for his travel and**

**animals for the transportation of his belongings. When he produced the certificate from the government, he was escorted from one place to the next. He would receive a donkey, a horse, a yak or an ox to load his things. They [the tax payers] also brought him a horse to ride on. This was done from one point to the next.**

Q: And this special letter; is it from the Tibetan government or is it from...yeah, from the Tibetan government?

**#15M: It was a letter from the Tibetan government.**

Q: The epidemic is over and it's 1952. What happens between '52 and the next five years? What happens in his life?

01:29:59

**#15M: I lived separately [from my teacher]. In autumn and during the time of cultivation, I went to work in the fields. During the sowing and harvesting seasons, I went home to help my parents in field work.**

Q: How old were you then?

**#15M: I was 23 years old when I escaped in 1959. Until then, I stayed at home and helped my parents. I did not stay relaxing at home on account of my being a monk. I helped my parents in the fields. I did not plow the lands, but pulled out the weeds from the fields of wheat, peas and barley. I helped them in whatever way they required. I did not sit relaxing at home just because I was a monk.**

[Interviewer to interpreter]: Was he still traveling with his teacher at that time?

[Interpreter to interviewer]: No, no. He left the teacher and went back to the house.

Q: How many years was he with the teacher?

**#15M: I was eight years with the teacher.**

Q: Eight years? From which year? You traveled with your teacher who became an abbot after you became well from the epidemic...

**#15M: Then I lived separately. I did not live with my teacher. When the teacher was leaving [for Gyuto Monastery] he could get other stewards but he preferred to take me, who was his student, with him. So I left with him.**

Q: After he took you with him, how many years did you stay with him?

01:32:39

**#15M: [I] stayed about two years. And then I went back to the monastery.**

Q: Which monastery? Gaden?

**#15M: Yes, I went back to Gaden. His Holiness the Dalai Lama was holding the ceremony of offering of the *Geshe tsenthak* at the three monasteries of Sera, Drepung and Gaden.**

Q: What is *Geshe tsenthak*?

01:33:18

**#15M: His Holiness the Dalai Lama had to make an offering for the Geshe 'Buddhist philosophy' Degree.**

Q: His Holiness had to make the offering.

**#15M: Yes, the offering had to be made. It was *thukpa patsema* 'specially-prepared rice' mixed with apricots, dates, grapes and liquid butter. That was *thukpa patsema*. [The monks] had huge bowls like this [joins palms together to form shape of bowl]. A ladleful [of *thukpa patsema*] was put into it and pressed down [shows action of ladle pressing down on the food in the bowl]. Then another ladleful was poured onto that and again pressed down. And once more another ladleful was put on it. The bowl looked heaping.**

Q: What's in the *thukpa*?

01:34:54

**#15M: There were dates, white grapes and apricots in it.**

Q: What else?

**#15M: Liquid butter. The butter from *dri* 'female yak' was used.**

Q: Were there rice or wheat in it?

01:35:24

**#15M: It was [made of] rice. I was one of those who carried the *thukpa* in containers and served tea.**

Q: So that was the special ceremony.

[Interpreter to interviewer]: He got the opportunity to come back to Gaden.

Q: And then do you stay at the monastery there or what happens?

**#15M: My teacher told me that I must accompany him to the monastery, but my mother and grandmother arrived and said, "Times are very bad. Please do not go back [to the monastery with your teacher]. Stay [at home] or we might never get to see each other again." About 500 monks of Gaden had left to join the *Chushi Gangdrug* [Defend Tibet Volunteer Force]. There was a separate division called Gaden Division [in the Force].**

**I was not allowed to accompany my teacher. Had they sent me with my teacher, I would not be here.**

Q: What was the danger of going to the monastery?

01:37:33

**#15M: Times were bad because there was a war looming over.**

Q: Did he join those monks [who went to fight]?

**#15M: I did not join the force. I became sick during the Monlam Festival and my mother and older sister came to see me. They asked me to come home. I lived at home and then [received a message which] said that monks should not stay in the villages but return to their monasteries. On my way back to the monastery, as I left the district [headquarters] of Meto Gongkar the next morning, Lhasa was being shelled by the Chinese. Lhasa was covered in smog and echoed with the sound “dHING, dHING.”**

Q: You heard artillery. And then what happens next in your story? We're going to have to wrap up.

01:39:36

**#15M: When the Chinese first appeared in Tibet, it was during the Monlam Festival in Lhasa that they first came to Lhasa.**

Q: What year was it?

**#15M: I do not know which year but it was during the Monlam Festival.**

Q: When did you first see [the Chinese]?

01:40:02

**#15M: It was several years after I had become a monk. Then there was the battle at Sera [Monastery]. There was a monastery in Lhasa called Tsomoling and close to it a big road called Chanzesha which led to the Potala Palace. On one side of the road was the rented house where we stayed during the Great Monlam Festival in Lhasa. In the courtyard of this rented house was a small house in which lived a very high Chinese official and a woman. We were young monks then and used to play around and he complained to the older monks after which we got a beating on the head.**

**Once it was night and the other monks had gone to attend the assembly, while I was alone [in the house]. The house where the Chinese official lived was in the courtyard and I could see a lamp burning. I peeped in and saw the Chinese official break four eggs and stir it. The woman was cutting some onions. I wanted to spite them. If I moved in front, they would have seen me. I took a handful of dust and waited. [They] fried the onion in the pan and then added the eggs. Just then I threw the dust in the pan and fled.**

Q: It sounds like it was your protest. We are going to have to wrap up now but it sounds like when you heard the shelling in the background, was that Lhasa being bombed? Was that 1959?

01:43:39

**#15M: That was in the year 1959.**

Q: Do you know the month?

**#15M: It was in March.**

Q: Had His Holiness left at that time or not?

01:43:49

**#15M: When the shelling was going on, His Holiness was there [in Lhasa].**

Q: After Lhasa was attacked and occupied, how soon after that did you leave Tibet?

**#15M: It was on the 15<sup>th</sup> or 16<sup>th</sup> of March 1959 that I left the monastery. Then I went to escort a lama who belonged to my village.**

Q: Where? To Gaden?

01:44:55

**#15M: No, he belonged to my village and needed to be escorted to India. When I reached home, I told my parents that I wanted to join the *Chushi Gangdrug* and fight. My father agreed, but my mother cried and pleaded with me not to go. She said we would never meet again.**

Q: Your mother would not give permission.

**#15M: [She] asked me not to go but I insisted that I wished to go. At that time there was no thought about going to India. I believed I would fight in the war and be back after that. I never thought that I would go to India.**

Q: Did you join the *Chushi Gangdrug*?

01:46:57

**#15M: I did not join the *Chushi Gangdrug*. When we reached there, the *Chushi Gangdrug* had left for India. That was in the 4<sup>th</sup> Tibetan lunar month. There was a double 6<sup>th</sup> lunar month that year and we left during the last days of the second 6<sup>th</sup> lunar month.**

**They [the Chinese] had seized all the boats. We found one boat in which we managed to cross. We could not go to the villages to buy *tsampa* as the Chinese had arrived there. Had we gone there, we'd be captured by the Chinese.**

Q: Maybe we'll talk to you about that again, but right now we're going to wrap up for today.

**#15M: [Interrupts] I had a gun. It was a short-barrel English-made rifle. I had only five bullets. [Smiles]**

Q: Did you fire your gun?

01:48:39

**#15M: I did a trial. I fired at a target but could not hit it. I had never used a gun before.**

Q: So you obeyed your grandmother and your teacher and you didn't join the *Chushi Gangdrug* but you tried to fire your gun somewhere and it didn't work.

**#15M: I tried the gun. [Smiles]**

Q: We're going to conclude our interview now and I want to thank you very much for your story. We have many more things to talk to you about and maybe we can do that another time but for today, I want to thank you for this very helpful interview.

01:50:01

**#15M: Okay.**

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

**#15M: There will be no problem for me because I am living here. There will be no problem.**

Q: Can we use your real name for this project?

01:50:32

**#15M: Yes, you can. I have relatives in Tibet but there has been no contact between us. I had a relative who passed away on the 15<sup>th</sup> of November 2002. [The relative] died from hypertension and diabetes. [The relative] visited Tibet twice but I have not been there since [I left].**

END OF INTERVIEW