

# **Tibet Oral History Project**

Interview #15 – Tsering Palden  
June 28, 2007

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## INTERVIEW SUMMARY SHEET

1. Interview Number: #15
2. Interviewee: Tsering Palden
3. Age: 72
4. Date of Birth: 1935
5. Sex: Male
6. Birthplace: Doomba
7. Province: Utsang
8. Year of leaving Tibet: 1959
9. Date of Interview: June 28, 2007
10. Place of Interview: House No. 37, Old Camp No. 4, Bylakuppe, Mysore District, Karnataka, India
11. Length of Interview: 1 hr 56 min
12. Interviewer: Rebecca Novick
13. Interpreter: Tsering Dorjee
14. Videographer: Ronny Novick
15. Translator: Tenzin Yangchen

### **Biographical Information:**

Tsering Palden's large family lived as nomads in a remote area, who exchanged animal products for rice, wheat and other goods in Bhutan and among Tibetans. He explains why his village, Doomba, is highly respected by the Tibetans and he describes the legend behind the hills and mountain near his village. In exchange for guarding the border with Bhutan, the people of his village were given the right to sell incense "at any distance the white bird could fly for 18 days."

Tsering Palden gives many details about marriage customs. He says, "Here [in India] you have something called falling in love, in Tibet it was in the parents' hands." When Tsering Palden was 19, his family brought a girl from another place and told him she was his bride. He explains how parents matched the zodiac signs for each couple and consulted lamas for divination and astrological calculations before a marriage is decided.

The Chinese did not arrive in Tsering Palden's region until around 1958. Daily life was disrupted as the Chinese began giving silver coins to the poor and appointing them to leadership positions while subjecting the original village leaders to *thamzing* 'struggles sessions.' He provides an account of his return to Tibet in 1994 to visit his relatives and describes the changes that have taken place in Tibet.

### **Topics Discussed:**

Nomadic life, trade, customs/traditions, escape experiences.

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**Interview #15**

**Interviewee: Tsering Palden**

**Age: 73, Sex: Male**

**Interviewer: Rebecca Novick**

**Interview Date: June 28, 2007**

[Questions are asked by either interviewer or interpreter. In Interview #15, the interviewer directs questions to the interpreter, who then asks the questions of the interviewee.]

Question: If you could apologize to Tsering for keeping him waiting and please thank him for coming and agreeing to share his story with the Tibet Oral History Project.

**Interviewee #15: Okay.**

Q: Do we have his permission to use his story and his experiences for the Tibet Oral History Project?

**#15: You are doing this for the cause of Tibet and if sharing my story will help in any way, I am very happy. I am glad that I have the opportunity to relate my story and hope that it will be beneficial.**

Q: And tell him that we are interested in sharing his story with the younger Tibetans, who have never seen Tibet. So this is why we ask him all the questions about what Tibet was like before the Chinese came. But also people from all over the world will be able to understand what Tibet was like before the Chinese came.

**#15: [Nods]**

Q: In this regard would it be a problem for him if this were shown in Tibet or China?

**#15: No, there will be no problem.**

Q: And tell him if he needs a break at any time, just interrupt us and let us know.

**#15: Okay.**

Q: If there is any question he would rather not answer, that's perfectly fine.

**#15: Okay. However, I don't have anything special to say except about the life and the livelihood. I could stay for only 23 years in Tibet. So I will relate the experiences of this period.**

[Interpreter to interviewee] They will ask you questions and you can give your answers accordingly.

Q: He left when he was 23?

**[Interpreter to interviewer] Yeah.**

Q: Let him know that as much as he wants to elaborate on something, we really encourage him to just continue. If he has something to add to something that we don't necessarily ask him, please we want as much of his story as possible and as much of his experience as possible.

**#15: I see.**

Q: So first of all, I'd like to ask him about his village Doomba and we'd like to hear what the environment was like around there? What did it look like and what kind of landscape it was and what did it look like?

**#15: It used to be said that the reason the area was named Doomba was that long, long ago, there was a lama. In his mind he wished to build a monastery. Nearby his retreat cave, he used to keep a Doomba, an animal. He considered the Doomba his deity. When the Lama wanted to construct the monastery, he took refuge in the Doomba and decided that wherever the Doomba slept, he would build the monastery there. He searched for where the animal made its lair.**

**One time it spent three nights at a place and he considered building the temple at that spot. In those days the lamas were omnipotent—to us these days it doesn't seem possible—and he had the power to magically raise the walls of the houses alone and at once. When he began the foundation of the monastery, the Doomba did not stay there. It went and slept atop a hill with rocks for many months, so he believed that that was the spot and constructed the monastery there and the place came to be known as Doomba. The animal was called Doomba. It was a precious animal and couldn't be seen easily. That was the story. [To the interpreter] You may find it difficult to explain.**

Q: What kind of animal was it?

**#15: It was said to look like a fox with red stripes on the sides and a sort of beard. It was very rarely seen. It was said to be precious. That was the animal called Doomba. Since the Doomba slept at that spot, the lama constructed the temple and the place came to be known as Doomba.**

Q: Has he ever seen one?

**#15: It used to stay on higher grounds and on the rocks.**

Q: Has he ever seen one?

**#15: I have never seen one. That was a legend that there was an animal called Doomba. It was not an ordinary animal but very precious, which was why it could not be seen easily. The name of the lama was Thuji Sangay Rinchen. At that time, the lama considered it as his protector.**

**Our village was an extremely remote place. It was in the Tsang region of Tibet and located at the upper part of Tsang, with Bhutan on this side [gestures]. Here in the center was the snowcapped mountain and Bhutan was on the other side of the mountain pass. We were on the uppermost part of Tsang. It used to be said that the Doomba existed in this region. That was how the name was given in ancient times.**

Q: Was it very beautiful, his village?

**#15: The village was beautiful. On one side were snowcapped mountains. In front of these snowcapped mountains and all around were hills. They were considered as holy pilgrim hills. On the faces of the rocks, on the hills were shapes like *Norbu Mey-bar* ‘flaming gem.’ Some shapes were like elephants. There was one hill called *Apo Gur* where even today you can see shapes like the *Gyal Sey Ney Dhun* ‘the seven precious royal emblems.’**

**Those were holy *en-bay* pilgrim sites; *en-bay* pilgrimage meaning that the monastery was not visible. There were such legends attached to it. In ancient times during the reigns of the religious kings, there used to be terrible warring times and during such a time, two mountains joined each other, which was why the monastery could not be seen. There were many such stories. It was a sacred pilgrim site.**

Q: It's a very sacred place? Was it sacred to any particular tradition? It is sacred to all Tibetans?

**#15: The hills were sacred because on them were the religious symbols like the *Gyal Sey Ney Dhun*, *Tashi Tak Gye* ‘eight lucky signs’ and *Dhungkar Yencho* ‘left sided conch shell.’**

Q: Were the hills shaped like them?

**#15: They were naturally formed on the rocks of the hills. On one hill was the symbol of the *Dhung* ‘conch,’ on one the *Ser-nya* ‘golden fish’ and on the next the *Dhug* ‘umbrella’ and on the other the *Pema* ‘lotus.’**

Q: The hills were rocky hills?

**#15: All were rocky hills. On one side were snowy mountains and the others were rocky. There were no woods. The mountains were bald because there were no trees. The mountains of Tibet did not have much grass on the higher, rocky mountains. The mountains were huge and tall. In the valley of the hills was the monastery and there were those religious symbols present on the hills. That was why they were considered sacred. You find these religious symbols here on the door curtains. The hills had all these Buddhist symbols.**

Q: Is it a place where people would go up and do retreats or pray or practice?

**#15: People came for pilgrimages. In early Tibet we did not have drivable roads, so it was very difficult for those who came. They had to come walking. If you compared it to this day, those hills were very beautiful and would become a tourist attraction. There were snowy mountains this side, a monastery here, hills on these two sides and a lake [gestures]. That was what my village looked like.**

**The region was extremely cold. It was at high altitude and close to the snowy mountains. In winter it snowed and in summer there was rain. There was never a sunny day because it was surrounded so closely by the snowy mountains. If you crossed over the mountain pass, you reached Bhutan. All these will come about as we continue with the story. There was a mountain pass to Bhutan and areas around it, which the government of Tibet had given as *La-su* to those who had made the pass. Generally in Tibet, those who cultivated large areas of land in Gyangtse had lands to farm as well as paid a high tax to the Tibetan Government.**

Q: Are there any stories about how these formations occurred? Is there any legend of how they occurred?

[Interpreter to interviewer] You mean the auspicious symbols and rock formations?

**#15: That was considered a sacred pilgrimage site because there were religious symbols. The hills contained all the auspicious symbols, which was why it was considered sacred. Generally in Tibet, in the Tsang region it was said that Tsari was the first pilgrimage site and the second pilgrimage site was ours, the *en-bay nay*. It was considered very strict, that which cannot be seen all the time. The symbols on the hills were not just any symbols; they were the *Gyal Sey Ney Dhun* 'seven precious royal emblems,' which can be seen to this day. It was a natural formation on the rocks. The exact symbol of a conch is there on the rocks. The religious symbols of *Gyal See Ney Dhun* are the most important symbols for the Buddhists. That was why it was sacred. Besides this I don't have any other stories.**

Q: As he was so close to the Bhutanese border, was there a lot of trade between Tibet and Bhutan? A lot of Bhutanese came over to his village? Was there a lot of exchange?

**#15: Yes, there was trade.**

Q: What about his family life? First of all, could he just say who lived in the same house as him? And we'd like to talk a little bit about his family life.

**#15: At the time when my parents were living, there were many children in my family and we were about 10 or 11 members. Both my parents died early and five siblings reached India. Some died after reaching India. In all there were at the most 10 or 11 [family members] and during the lower count about seven or eight. At the time when I left, there were six or seven members. That was it.**

Q: From the 11, two were your parents and the nine were children?

**#15: One or two siblings were left behind in Tibet. There was an older sister who was given away in marriage in another region and couldn't escape to India. She couldn't come with us.**

Q: From your parents, how many siblings did you have?

**#15: At that time there were about six. Two died in India.**

Q: Two parents, six children—that is eight. Three were given away in marriage? You said you were eleven.

**#15: I was married at the age of nineteen by my parents. That was early. When we escaped we had a child with us.**

Q: What was the livelihood of his family? How did they make a living?

**#15: In my village there were 80 to 90 families. We were mostly nomads. There was no farming. We were nomads and in summer we sheared the sheep and goats. From the lower quality wool, we wove clothes to be sold in Bhutan, which were a great hit there. They didn't have such things in Bhutan. We gave them clothing like pants made of wool and in return bought rice and wheat flour. Then animal products like milk and cheese, we sold them to the farmers in Tibet and brought back grains. That was how we earned our livelihood. We did not cultivate fields.**

Q: I'd like to ask him if he can tell us some of his earliest memories from childhood; if he can just describe—doesn't matter what they are—some of his earliest first memories that he has, impressions.

**#15: That was what our livelihood was. We raised a lot of animals. We depended on the products and wool of the animals by trading them with the Bhutanese or Tibetan farmers. Besides trading in these things, we did not do any farming. In my home, before I fled we owned 700 to 800 sheep and goats. We also owned 60 to 70 *dri* 'female yak' and yaks.**

**Everyday the people went to graze the animals. Not in winter but in summer we had to shear the animals. The women spun wool and made clothes to be sold in Bhutan. All the good quality butter and cheese went toward central Tibet. Because we had so many animals to graze, we went to one place in summer, to another place in winter and again to another in autumn. If you remained in one place, there wouldn't be enough grass. We had to keep changing sites all round the region.**

Q: So would he live in tents when they moved from place to place?

**#15: Yes, we lived in tents. We had to take our tents and household articles like utensils to cook food and beddings. We remained in one place for three or four months depending on the availability of grass in that place. Thus we moved from place to place, which was in and around the monastery I told you about. On one side was Bhutan where we couldn't go, but we moved about on the Tibetan sides like Nyero, Gungnungchang and others which were close by. You might not have heard, but we had to go to these places. It is difficult to explain. That was one thing and the second thing about our livelihood was—I will tell you something funny.**

**On the other side of the hill where the monastery was located, there was a huge lake. Nearby was a beautiful place called Thang Kapo, beautifully formed with forests and incense plants. In this region also grew very precious medicinal plants called *Yar Tsa Gun Boo* [literal translation: "grass in summer and insect in winter"] which were used in the Tibetan medicines. The government doctors would camp there in summer in their tents searching for medicinal plants. There were medicinal plants and incense plants.**

**She [the interviewer] would not know to ask me questions on this, so I will relate the story. It used to be said that in the early days, the mountain pass to Bhutan was like a border and—like other countries of the world have armies on the borders—the people living there were like the guards. The people were provided a huge area, much more than the size of the Tibetan settlement in Bylakuppe, maybe more than three or four times the size. The people did not have to pay tax to the government as they were like the guards of the area. There were no authorities over them and they governed themselves.**

Q: The place called Thang Kapo?

**#15: At Thang Kapo incense was sold which was very fast moving. The right to sell the incense was the remuneration for guarding the mountain pass. There was a deed from His Holiness the Fifth Dalai Lama, granting permission for the people of the area to sell incense to any distance equal to which the white bird flew for 18 days. That was the story of my region.**

Q: That was in your village?

**#15: Yes, in my village.**

Q: Your village had about 80 to 90 families and they had the right to sell the incense?

**#15: Yes, we could sell the incense ourselves. There was plenty to be harvested. Some incense was pounded into powder and sold, some was made into what was called *Dap sang*. When there were prayers in the monastery the incense was left open inside the monastery. When it was sold, it was considered very precious and was said to have healing powers for cold.**

**At that time that was the faith and we do not have any other explanations. It was said that we could sell the incense at any distance the white bird could fly for eighteen days. That**

**was the pact from the time of His Holiness the Fifth Dalai Lama. There were documents with the seal of His Holiness the Fifth Dalai Lama, and that was our main livelihood. If one could go to gather the incense plants, one could sell it anywhere.**

Q: Was that a big part of the livelihood of the region; incense gathering and the herbs on the mountains?

**#15: Yes, that was a part. One could take the incense and trade anywhere. As I told you earlier, the place was a sacred pilgrimage site and so the incense procured there was considered very sacred.**

Q: What were the things he most enjoyed doing when he was a kid?

**#15: When one is very young, one doesn't understand much. As I grew older, I was happy because the place was a happy place. In other areas like Samadawa and Gyangtse where people farmed large areas of land, the government officials would order them to do this and that as directions from the government. There were none like that for us. We did our own things and had no leaders. In fact if a boy from our region married a girl from another region, we would claim her people as part of ours! Tibet is small in area but has many different types of situations. It was like that in our regions.**

Q: Speaking of which, how did he meet his wife?

**#15: It was like this. In Tibet—here you have something called falling in love—it was in the hands of the parents. Parents of both sides would talk among themselves and arranged the marriage. Looking from the parents' point of view, they would do something that was good and never anything that would not be good. They would consider the person's ancestry and some would want a big name and things like that. They would arrange a marriage even from distant places in this way. That was how it happened. When I was 19, they brought a girl from another place and told me that she was my bride. That was how it was. [Laughs]**

Q: Was that the first time he met her, during the ceremony? And he was 19 years old?

**#15: I had never seen her before.**

Q: Can he talk about that? Can he talk about the ceremony and if he can just go back to that day and just take us through the things that happened? What did he think when he saw her?

**#15: [Laughs] One would not think anything! That was what the custom was. As the days passed by, you got to know each other. That was how it was. In Tibet there were many traditions to be observed.**

**It was not simple to bring a bride. You had to give a lot. The bride had to be given clothes and things. It was a remote area and—these days you can buy anything anywhere—it was not like that in Tibet. If the bride was from a well-off family, there would be talk like “she**

has a set of 15 dresses or a set of 20 dresses,” which would include everything right from the socks.

The parents would seek a person from a sound economical family or a gentle ancestry. This is not done by the foreigners. Our parents would probe deeply before deciding on the bride. There would be many girls and their birth signs would be asked. They know their son's birth sign and would enquire the girl's birth sign. They would be compared to see if they matched. Some would not match; for example a dog and a dragon. They never match. When the dragon thunders, the dogs would bark in fear and so that was a mismatch. The birth signs of Rat and Horse do not match because the horse would trample on the rat's hole and the rat would die. Likewise, the dates and days would be probed and matched. Nobody would just look at a girl and ask for her hand.

The lamas had to be consulted for divinations and astrological calculations; whether this girl or that girl was a match. They would select about three girls and find out which one matched in accordance with the divinations and astrological calculations. In some cases it would not match and in some cases there might be slight hindrances for which prayers had to be performed. In this way a lot of checking was done. No one just simply asked for a girl's hand. The probes could even take years.

Divinations and astrological calculations were done; like the astrological calculations we do when a person dies, similar calculations would be done in this case, too. If the astrological calculations matched then the bride would be brought home. And if the calculations did not match, they would say “sorry” and explain that the astrological calculations mismatched. If they had spoken to the other family, they would say sorry and that all the divinations and astrological calculations did not match and request them not to be angry. If the calculations matched the girl's side also would have done the same and then there was something called the *Longchang*. The family had to go across with *chang* ‘home-brewed beer’ to the girl's family asking for her hand twice or thrice. It was not easy for the boy and girl to see each other. There were many formalities to be carried out first. Things were not done simply.

Q: There were no special feelings when he met his wife?

#15: There was no special feeling. [Laughs] One can't say. You just feel that she is my wife and you do not think like "Oh, I do not like her. She is not up to my expectations." Now-a-days one falls in love and considers her beauty, capabilities and all such things. Such things were not there then. They [the parents] had gone to such lengths and it was considered okay. There was never an unsatisfied thought. So it was done this way mostly.

This was done by the better and well-off families. There were many poor families in Tibet, who did not have anything. They just did what they were able to. They would talk among themselves or maybe at the place of work or maybe meet someone in the streets. In Tibet those who did it had to follow a lot of formalities like divinations and astrological calculations and it was not simple.

Q: Did he talk about the wedding at all? Can he tell us anything more about the wedding day?

**#15: [Laughs] On the day of the wedding, as per the Tibetan traditions, it was very strange. There were many things to be done. On the day of the wedding, the bride would arrive in the morning but not just anytime. The best day and time had to be seen and she had to arrive by then.**

She would sit on the bed, but here also there were different directions like *Bomthong* and *Choekha*, which had to be taken into consideration. Facing the *Bomthong* was considered bad, meaning emptiness. She would sit facing the *Choetsang* and then the actual ceremony of offering *khata* ‘white ceremonial scarves’ took place. The ceremony had to be completed within the specified time. The other smaller rituals followed later.

However, the main ceremony had to be done within the stipulated time because that time was said to be auspicious or lucky for the future of the couple. If the ceremony delayed beyond the specified time, then it was inauspicious and the couple might not have a lasting marriage or such things would occur in the future. These sorts of things used to be said. Isn't it similar to what they [interviewer] have asked in regard to the boy and girl?

Q: He can talk about how ceremonies take place and about the wedding day.

**#15: That was how it was. You [interpreter] can tell them that. Of course, they [bride and bridegroom] would sleep together. [Laughs] When the bride arrived, she would sit by the side of the groom and his parents. She would have to sit facing the *choetsang* whichever side it was.**

Q: According to the astrological calculations?

**#15: Yes, according to the astrological calculations. The *choetsang* directions would change. Say it is the fifth month now, in the fifth and sixth months, the *choetsang* might be towards the west, and then the *choetsang* might be towards the north. The *choetsang* was considered very important. She had to sit facing the *choetsang* and then the ceremony of offering the scarves by the relatives took place and this ritual had to be completed within the specified time. After that was over, everybody enjoyed themselves by singing, dancing, talking or playing games, just like we do here. If there were any more rituals, these could be continued in the next day or two. That was how it was.**

Q: What was he laughing at?

**#15: [To interpreter] Did we come to the funny part? You can tell them.**

[Interpreter to interviewer] Of course, everybody sleeps with the wife.

[Everyone laughs]

Q: Did the astrologer tell them when?

[More laughter]

**#15: What?**

Q: Did the astrological calculation say when he could sleep with his wife?

**#15: No, that did not come in the astrological calculation. The calculations revealed when she should enter the house. No, it did not say when you could sleep with your wife.**

Q: It's so interesting. This is the first time I heard anyone talk about a Tibetan wedding, so it's really interesting. Was she very nervous too? Does he think she was very nervous?

**#15: [Laughs]**

Q: No, I mean about getting married. Tell him we just mean about getting married.

**#15: The girl is the same as every human. So what she does is similar.**

Q: [Question is repeated]

**#15: There is something else. All brides come with their heads covered. She does not show her face. According to the old tradition, she would have to remain with her head covered for three days. The customs are really very complex. In our region, we would perform an incense burning ceremony—the girl would have been released by her protective deities—requesting that the girl be accepted into the protection of the local deity. After the ceremony was performed, the girl would remove the veil from her face.**

Q: That was after three days?

**#15: Yes, after three days.**

Q: You know, I just want to clear something up. I heard that the bride comes to the groom's house on a white horse. Is this true or not in his region?

**#15: Different places have different customs. I think there was such a custom. Perhaps it was not the bride who rode a white horse; it was the *donchen* or the person who came to take the bride that rode on a white horse. They were many customs to be carried out.**

Q: The one who came to fetch the bride?

**#15: Yes, the one who came to fetch the bride would—I told you earlier about the *choetsang* direction—take aim with a bow and arrow towards the *choetsang* and recite some verses. I heard that the person who came to fetch the bride rode on a white horse. In earlier times in Tibet were the noblemen and private families who had very elaborate arrangements and the person would shoot the arrow in the right direction reciting the verses.**

Q: The one who rode on the horse?

**#15: Then the *donchen* would ride forward on his horse with the bride and her entourage following him. It was suppose to be the remedy to remove all obstacles and misfortunes. That was how it was.**

[Tape change]

**In my region receiving a bride or bridegroom was considered very serious. Just drinking *chang* and playing games during the wedding, which is considered very impressive these days was not what we considered then. The rituals and ceremonies that were extremely grand and pronouncing the verses were considered more important. Drinking *chang* and playing games was not considered important.**

**Now-a-days people here do not understand the real objects behind the ceremonies except eating and drinking. In earlier times in Tibet, the results of the astrological calculations, the rituals and reciting the verses, which in actuality were “verses of praise” and were deemed extremely important. Now-a-days in the Tibetan community nobody takes notice of such things, but people just offer the ceremonial scarves and rush to play games, eat and drink. In Tibet rituals were very important and not playing games and drinking *chang*. These were done towards the end of the ceremonies.**

**The main ceremony, the brides' coming, the directions, the results of the astrological calculation, and if before the bride arrived, the astrological calculation had showed any hindrances and *pooja* ‘rituals of worship’ to ward off these hindrances; such *pooja* had to be carried out. After all the *pooja* were completed then the bride would arrive.**

Q: So could you please ask him to describe, we kind of want to move on from this idyllic scene but like how life changed in his region when the Chinese arrived? In what ways did life start to change?

**#15: When the Chinese first arrived in 1948 to 1949 from the east, since then Tibet has not seen any happiness. We heard that they were seizing lands and occupying all the places as they came along. It was only during 1958 to 1959 that they were in our region. The Chinese had already arrived in Dhoday in the eastern part of Tibet. Then there was nothing but sadness and tension in every part. There was no relaxation of mind. Like in the days of old, there is a saying, which goes, “Make preparations for the winter in summer and make preparations for the summer in winter”—there were things to do which could not be done.**

**The whole village became strange. When the Chinese first arrived in our village, their troops helped carry water for us. Unlike in India, in Tibet we did not have taps for water. We had to fetch water from the lake. However the lake was not far, maybe the distance from here to Camp Number 3 [half a kilometer]. We carried water in big *chosum* on the back. They claimed to be helping us, doing so many things for us.**

Then they started giving *dhayen* ‘silver coins’ to the poor people of our village, thus among the Tibetans, the people were segregated. By then quite a number of people had become [like the] Chinese, thanks to the money. Then these people would be in the forefront and not the Chinese. Such things happened. Take our village for example, we were in a remote area and so it was not to that extent. However, in the villages close to us, the *genpo* ‘leader’—today we can see that the scheme of things in old Tibet was bad, suppressive and unfair—were beaten and subjected to *thamzing* ‘struggle sessions.’ As our village was very remote, such things did not happen.

There were some Tibetans who pretended they were going to fight the Chinese, claiming to be *Chushi Gangdrug* guerrillas and would be whiling away their time. There were many cases. This was all negative talk. Once the Chinese arrived, then there was no happiness, whichever part of the country it may be because the Tibetan community was divided into two. The Chinese gave *dhayen* and titles like *tuyin* and *u-yon* to these people. Many meetings were called and advice given in regard to the Chinese principles. From then we were not happy. It was in 1957, ‘58 and in ‘59 we escaped. Before that we were extremely happy.

Q: How did his family life change as a result?

#15: In my family were my wife and the children of my siblings. In general at that time, we saw and felt that our region looked different, that it looked like it lacked luster. We felt tense, to a great degree. We heard that in March 1959, His Holiness the Dalai Lama had left Lhasa. We had no intention of escaping to India. Only after we heard about His Holiness' escape did it cross our mind. There was nowhere to go and stay. We used to say among ourselves, “We are working hard. Let's prepare good food for it is short term happiness. Let's be happy for the time being, as the future is not going to be good.” Everyone talked this was to their dear and near ones. We couldn't talk this was to any or every other person.

My father had shouldered some responsibilities in our village. He was dead but his children were alive; this was being said behind our back. Talk like, “They have wealth; the wealth should be divided among the people” was being said by the poor people. There was nothing good to be heard. Then later we heard that His Holiness the Dalai Lama had escaped and many top families of Phari had also escaped. After hearing these we never wanted to stay there.

Then in around July, we were four or five higher families of the village—we were close to the mountain pass, naturally as we were protectors of the pass. The fact that we were guardians of the pass, the Tibetan government...I don't know whether this part of my description will be beneficial to her [interviewer] or not.

During the reign of the great Fifth Dalai Lama, the people of my village were considered the *la-sung* ‘guardian of the pass,’ though Bhutan was such a small country and they would not have caused any harm. When there were battles in Tibet, armor called *u-mo* used to be worn. Have you heard of that? These were *chupa* ‘Tibetan coats’ made of iron and helmets

made of iron. There were these and arrows stacked in houses. Being the guardians of the mountain pass, perhaps these arms were given by the Tibetan government. In the olden days there were no guns, only bows and arrows. A house like this was fully stacked with arrows.

Q: These were in a house?

**#15: Yes, in a house. There was a *chang-gu*, an iron plate with holes and made into a *chupa* and a helmet. The person then stood up and shot their arrows. The iron plates prevented the arrows from piercing. We had houseful of such armor. That is the story about the olden days. It started during the reign of His Holiness the Fifth Dalai Lama. I only have stories pertaining to the time after the reign of His Holiness the Fifth Dalai Lama and not before that. There are documents which have the seal of His Holiness the Fifth Dalai Lama and documents bearing big red stamp marks. Then about 40 members of my village—we couldn't drive the goats and sheep, but we could bring around 200 *dri* and yak—arrived in Bhutan.**

Q: Where did he see them?

**#15: My late father was the leader and in charge of the storehouse of our village. Once when I was a little child I accompanied him when he opened the lock and I saw them.**

Q: So did they bring it with them or did they have to leave it?

**#15: We had to leave them. Where would we take them? I was a little child and saw a pile of armor. When I tried to lift one, I couldn't. One iron was fixed to the next, that's how the armor was.**

Q: So they to just leave it?

**[Interpreter to interviewer] Yes.**

Q: So they came out with 200 yaks and a large group of people into Bhutan? What happened when they got to Bhutan? How did the Bhutanese receive them?

**#15: When we reached Bhutan, at that time we came with the intention of going to India. Our first aim was that since we were very close to Bhutan, many of our people knew the Bhutanese. We thought our stay would be temporary and that the problem with China would end—we were really stupid—in a month or two. We greatly hoped that it would end. We planned to stay for a few months in Bhutan, which was why we brought along the animals.**

**When we arrived in Bhutan, they said we couldn't stay there and that we had to move on to India, like many other travelers ahead of us. They said that we had to go to Assam in India. But we had a lot of animals with us and so they said we could stay there for one month. The animals were sent up in the hills to graze with some men and we were there for one month.**

Before the month was over, a Bhutanese army captain said that we had to bring down the animals the very next day to the place where we were staying. He said we had to sell off the animals in two days and that on the third day we had to leave for India. There was just three or four day's time. The next day we brought down all the *dri* and yaks and we were to sell them. The Bhutanese tethered all our animals and then they would ask who each particular yak belonged to. The yak was the bigger animal, the *dri*, which is the female yak, is medium sized and their calf is called *yarko*. They paid us five *rupees* for the calf, 10 *rupees* for the *dri* and 15 *rupees* for the big yak. The Bhutanese had tethered them and we could not quote our price. We had to accept whatever they paid us because we couldn't go back to Tibet and we had to move on to India. We had to accept whatever they gave us and couldn't quote our price. We were in such a situation. The Bhutanese gave 5 *rupees* for the small ones, 10 *rupees* for the *dri*s and 15 *rupees* for the yaks and nothing more. I had about 70 *dri* and yaks and received only that price. It might have been 300 or 400 Indian *rupees*.

Q: Was it very disappointing for them to have to be moved on to India at that point?

**#15: No, I was not disappointed because there was no returning to Tibet, we had left it. We did not understand anything at that time and hoped and believed that India and other countries would support us and thought that the problem would be resolved. Though we were not allowed to stay in Bhutan, we were told that His Holiness the Dalai Lama was in India and we were happy that we would be able to see him.**

Q: I understand that Tsering-*la* went back to Tibet in 1994. I am really interested in his experience returning and if he could be as descriptive as possible about what it was like to go back, what he saw, his journey to Lhasa and what he saw, how it made him feel and the changes that he saw.

**#15: When I went back from here, in general I saw that the roads and fields have been greatly developed. However, the monasteries of the old have been completely destroyed, some without a trace. They told me that the Chinese were good. Our region was very remote and the people seemed obedient to the Chinese. Meeting my relatives was just personal and we did not discuss politics. There were a few older people who talked to me, but I hesitated taking the first step. I was not sure of their thoughts because many of them praised the Chinese. It was like that.**

That year they set up a local committee in our region. I asked one woman, "Is the Chinese policy good these days?" to which she replied, "Uncle, it can be considered well. What could be worse than the rotten old Tibetan system? The policies of these days are fairly good." During the meetings they were asked questions like 'What was old Tibet like? What is Tibet like in the present time? What would Tibet be like in the future?' They used to be asked questions on these three points. The woman said she replied that "The old Tibetan system was completely rotten and what could be worse than that. The present system is fairly good if it doesn't deteriorate. We cannot say about the future because after sometime the *dhumba*—those of us living in foreign countries are called *dhumba*—might come back and demand us to divide all our assets and properties. Who knows?"

I told her, "This will never happen. If we who live in foreign countries come back, the agricultural lands and grazing areas would have to be divided for all, but the assets and properties that you have collected would never be divided by us, like was done by the Chinese during the "liberation" days. I, though just a common man, can speak assertively on this." "Well, I don't know if that would be the case," she said.

I warily spoke to them and only if they did first because they praised the Chinese a lot. I couldn't gauge their feelings. In the case of Lhasa, people would ask us secretly. We would just be walking along with a rosary in our hand—none of them carried rosaries as they did not recite the *mani* prayers—and we had the rosaries whether we said our prayers or not. There was this old lady in a shop who asked, "Where are you from? It looks like you are from India." I told her I was from India. She remarked that I had a rosary in my hand. I used to smoke at that time and I asked her to sell me a cigarette. She gave me a cigarette and said with tears in her eyes, "I do not want the payment. You people are so fortunate. You have been able to go and live under His Holiness the Dalai Lama." We talked for sometime and she continued, "You are lucky to have gone to live under His Holiness the Dalai Lama. My sibling is still in the Drapchi prison. He has not been released."

Q: How had Lhasa changed a lot? What was his impression of Lhasa?

#15: I had not seen Lhasa before we lost Tibet. However, my companions said that there was a great change. They said at some places where there used to be houses, none were there. In some places the Chinese had constructed many buildings. At that time there was no open ground in front of the Palace that is there now as we see in the pictures. At that time it was not built. There was a paved street with rows of houses on either side. Now they have demolished all these and constructed a huge open ground, which we can see in the photographs. My relatives who went to Tibet have photographed it.

In general they have made many developments in the country, but internally we cannot say what it is like. However, for me personally I went to meet my relatives and see my land. But looking around and at the way they did their things and in whatever way, I could never feel at ease there in Tibet. I don't know why. I felt I wanted to come back [to India]. If they were to hear this, they would say that we were too eager to leave our own country. I never felt happy.

At first there was the anticipation of meeting my relatives, but after 10-15 days after seeing them—they were very busy with their work like farming and grazing the goats and sheep and a lot of other work—I could never feel relaxed. I felt eager to come back. I felt, now that I have seen my relatives I should return. I sort of felt very certain about returning. Earlier I used to feel if only I could go to Tibet. Now that I have been there once, I feel satisfied.

Except for the relatives, they have turned the country upside down. Where there were houses in the early times, they were not there anymore and where there were none, they have constructed many buildings. The real important, beneficial things are the roads and

**fields, which they have developed very well. That's how I saw it. I had the feeling of not wanting to stay there.**

Q: How were the people in his village doing?

[Interpreter translates some of the above points that he had missed earlier.]

Q: Could you ask him if people that he met asked him about His Holiness?

**#15: People asking about His Holiness the Dalai Lama is very rare. However, there was one person who asked me.**

Q: Was it in Lhasa?

**#15: It was in Shigatse. I stayed at a guest house in Shigatse. There was an old man in a *chupa* with a hairstyle and *zompa* 'boots' like in olden Tibet. He and I were in different guest houses. The old man was on his way to Lhasa to look for medicinal plants. I asked him if I could join him as I was alone in my room. He agreed and so I came to his room. The room rent was just three *rupees* but I did not wish to stay alone. I thought the old man and I could talk. The old man said, "I have a friend in Gyantse who sullied the name of His Holiness the Dalai Lama. I used to tell him that he should not abuse the name of His Holiness. I used to tell him that if one doesn't believe in the Compassionate One at least one should not abuse his name." He then said that when His Holiness the Dalai Lama was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize, it became widely known in Tibet. The friend then told the old man, "Friend, I would like to seek pardon from the Dalai Lama. How can I go about it?" To this the old man had replied, "There is no way you can seek pardon. Even if one does not believe in the Compassionate One, one should not speak against him. You cannot seek forgiveness because you are way down there, when you die." I met a man who spoke like that.**

[Laughter]

Q: So I'd just like to hear about his return to his village and what that was like when he went back and what impression it made on him? Just like seeing his relatives again must have been quite emotional. Did he go into detail about that? I only heard a short part about it.

**[Interpreter to interviewer] When he was first going into Tibet to meet his relatives, he was very excited. And then after reaching Tibet and after spending a few days, he never felt at home there.**

Q: Okay. I just wanted to ask him—I'm going to be thinking about this the whole day if I don't ask—I didn't feel like I had quite enough about his return to his village. Had things really changed a lot in his village or was it pretty much the same?

**#15: In my village?**

Q: Yes.

**#15: In terms of development, there was not much change. My village was completely destroyed, only animals stayed there, I heard. I didn't go there. I went to my relative who lived in another village. Though the nomads claimed that they were happy and that they had plenty of grains to eat and that there was plenty of *tsampa* to eat, I didn't feel that they were that happy or that it was that good.**

Q: Your village was not there? There was not a trace?

**#15: There was not a trace left of my village. It was completely destroyed; there was nothing left. It was situated at the base of the pass, near the snowcapped mountain. It was now where the animals went by and there was no village or anything. I wanted to go at first, but hearing what they said, I didn't go. It was about a day's journey. I didn't go there. I went where my relatives lived. That was how it was.**

Q: Did he go back to Doomba just to see it?

**[Interpreter to interviewer] No, he thought of going, but it was one day's journey from there.**

Q: Could you ask him—we ask everybody the same question at the end of the interview—what advice does he have for the future generation, the young generation of Tibetans coming up now that he could deliver?

**#15: The main advice that our generation has for the children at anytime is that they should study well. Without education, look at Tibet—the Chinese used to say that Tibet was a backward country and that is true that we were backward. In that way we lost our country. However, the foreigners considering the grace of His Holiness the Dalai Lama, have assisted the Tibetans in many ways like providing sponsorship and facilities for education. In India there are the many Tibetan Children's Villages as well as schools set up by the Indian government and there are opportunities even in foreign countries. The main requirement for the children is not just any education but quality education. I tell this to the children, but I do not know how they will do.**

**Other than that, hoarding wealth—in Tibet in the olden days we had wealth collected over many generations. Take for example my family, it was a very old family in Tibet. In those days in Tibet a sign of lack of education was that people used to think only about food. People used to hoard food and had thoughts for nothing else. They followed the dharma, but understanding the actual meaning was difficult, as is with all of us. These days His Holiness the Dalai Lama says that our practicing dharma is like what the Chinese call *choeba*. We do not understand the real meaning of religion. When we say our prayers, we do not know the meaning. What the children and younger generations need these days is education, so that in the future if China gradually frees Tibet and we have to make our own decisions. If people have education we can manage it; without education it would be difficult. That is just what I think.**

**Our generation is now over. The younger generation, whether they are my children or friends' children—from my side this is what I tell them. However, there are many different types of people who might or might not listen. There are some who tell us that we are “green brained” [unripe or not mature] while others might think that we were right. So what we older generation say is that people need education. If there is no education, the knowledge is not up to the mark and you face many problems in your life and if it concerns the country, one is without abilities or capabilities. If we look back that is what happened in Tibet. That is how it is.**

Q: Thank you so much. Ask him if there is anything we missed? Did we cover everything? Does he have anything else?

**#15: I think that is all I have to say. I do not have much to say in general because the place I was born in was very remote and I was young—I could stay there for only 23 years. I had to leave when I was 24 in the year 1959. My experiences are limited and I do not have much to say. So I am sorry. From your side, it is highly laudable what you are doing for the benefit of Tibet's future, leaving your work aside and I appreciate it and would like to thank you very much.**

Q: He gave us very much information. It was so interesting. We really enjoyed it and I haven't laughed so much. Tell him we enjoyed it very much.

[Photographs are taken, release form is signed and gifts are presented.]

END OF INTERVIEW