

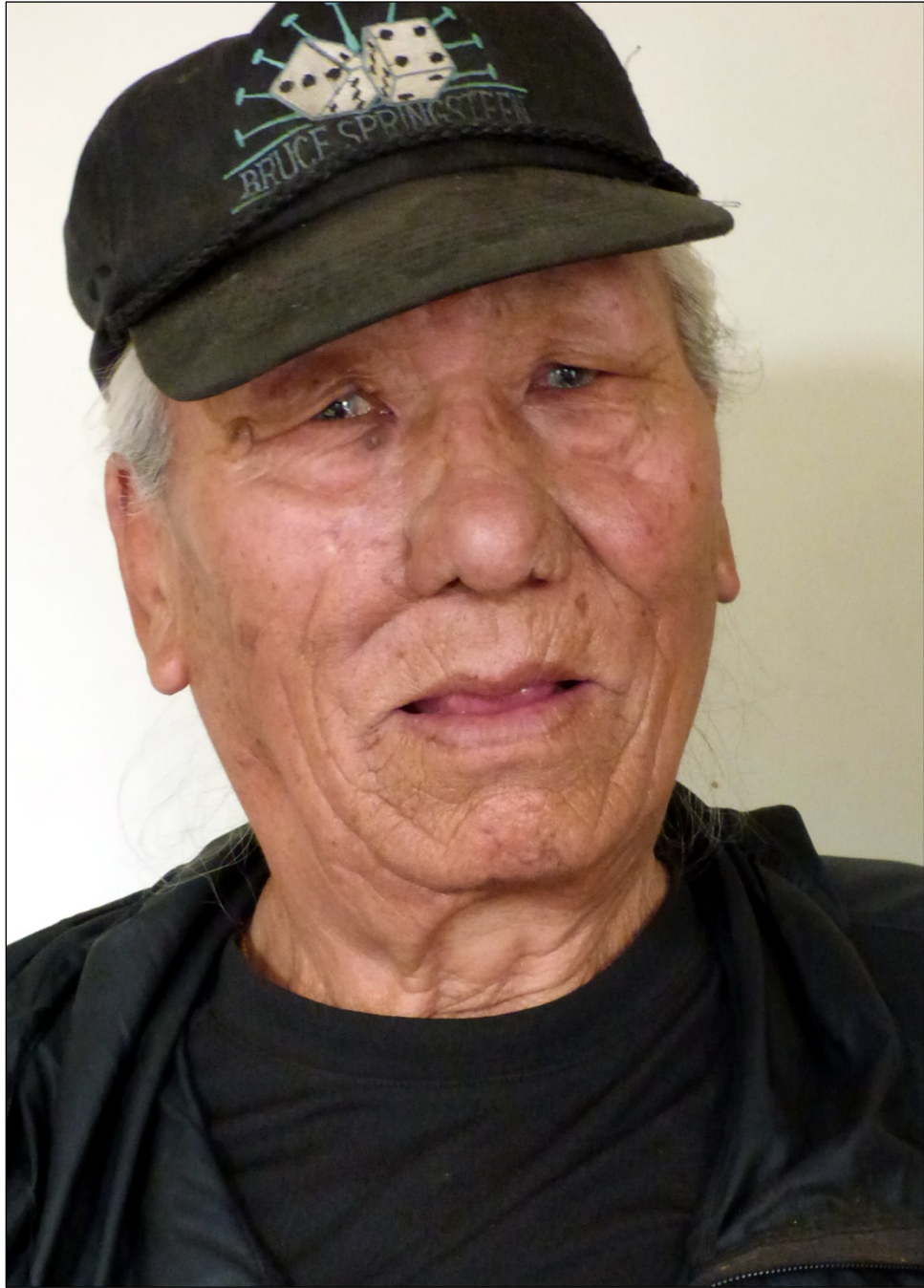
Tibet Oral History Project

Interview #1N – Ngawang Khedup
April 7, 2015

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INTERVIEW SUMMARY SHEET

1. Interview Number: #1N
2. Interviewee: Ngawang Khedup
3. Age: 78
4. Date of Birth: 1937
5. Sex: Male
6. Birthplace: Lhasa
7. Province: Utsang
8. Year of leaving Tibet: 1959
9. Date of Interview: April 7, 2015
10. Place of Interview: Hotel Norbu Sangpo, Boudha, Kathmandu, Nepal
11. Length of Interview: 0 hr 49 min
12. Interviewer: Marcella Adamski
13. Interpreter: Palden Tsering
14. Videographer: Dhiraj Kafle
15. Translator: Tenzin Yangchen

Biographical Information:

Ngawang Khedup was born in Lhasa in 1937 long after his parents migrated there from Kham following trouble with Nationalist Chinese. His father worked as manager of a *shika* 'estate' near Lhasa. The estate was a source of income for the monastery that owned it. At the age of 6, Ngawang Khedup joined the Drepung Monastery as a monk where his brothers already resided. He talks about life in the monastery, his teachers and the different types of prayer assemblies and sessions in the great monastery.

Ngawang Khedup heard stories about Chinese atrocities and the suffering of people in eastern Tibet in the early 1950s. He left the monastery in 1959 along with many other monks to join the *Chushi Gangdrug* Defend Tibet Volunteer Force to fight the Chinese army. Ngawang Khedup had hopes of driving away the Chinese from Tibet. He describes the battles he participated in and the weapons they had available. He believes the lack of manpower and training forced the guerrillas to flee from Tibet.

Ngawang Khedup escaped to India and initially stayed in Missamari, working as a coolie and attending school during his spare time. Eventually he joined the Tibetan Unit of the Indian Army in 1962 hoping to return to fight the Chinese in Tibet after training, but the opportunity never arose. He retired from the army in 1987.

Topics Discussed:

Utsang, monastic life, Chushi Gangdrug guerrillas, escape experiences, life as a refugee in India.

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Interview #1N

Interviewee: Ngawang Khedup

Age: 78, Sex: Male

Interviewer: Marcella Adamski

Interview Date: April 7, 2015

Question: Please tell us your name.

00:00:13

Interviewee #1N: Ngawang Khedup.

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?

#1N: Yes.

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

#1N: Okay.

Q: No problem?

[Interpreter to interviewer]: No problem.

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

#1N: [Nods]

Q: *Pa-la* 'respectful term for father,' please tell me where were you born.

#1N: My birthplace is Lhasa.

Q: In Lhasa? What year were you born or how old are you now?

00:02:27

#1N: [I] do not know the month and such but the year is 1937, it seems.

[Interpreter interprets as: I don't know the exact day and date but the year was 1936.]

Q: 1936. So you are 79 today.

#1N: Yes.

Q: When you were born who was in your family?

#1N: My family did not have a home as such in Lhasa. Long ago before Tibet was lost my father and others were beaten by the Chinese and had fled from Kham.

Q: Really? How old were you? Were you born when your parents moved to Lhasa? Were you already born?

#1N: There is no understanding about those days.

Q: [You] weren't born then?

#1N: [I] was born in Lhasa.

Q: They moved before...really? Do you know what year they moved?

00:03:52

#1N: I do not know about that. Actually in the Tibetan custom, one does not normally question one's father and mother about what they did. Moreover, my parents passed away when [I] was young, around the age of 13. In the meanwhile I was left at the monastery and did not have much interaction with the parents to ask about their story and the years.

Q: But if they left Kham because of the Chinese, I wonder what kind of problems they were having before 1936? Before you were born your family was having problems with the Chinese in Kham. Is that what you said?

#1N: It was the Kuomintang Chinese of the early days and the Siling Chinese that were having conflicts between themselves, the Kuomintang and the Siling. Then after that the Communists rose. When they were having conflicts within their country, they created many problems for the neighbors just like problems being faced now. It seems [my parents' region] was located close to the Chinese border.

Q: Yes, that makes sense. Yes, okay. So before you became a monk, what kind of livelihood did your family have in Lhasa? What did they do for a living?

#1N: Our livelihood was...My maternal uncles were leading the lives of nomads on the mountains close to Lhasa. My father was managing a *shika* 'estate' nearby Lhasa.

Q: *Shika*?

#1N: *Shika*.

Q: What's a *shika*?

00:06:45

#1N: *Shika* is the village, which is the source of income for the monasteries. That is called a *shika*. [He] was the estate manager over there. For instance, whoever this hotel's owner maybe, a manager is appointed here. Likewise, [he] worked as the estate manager for a while.

Q: Father?

#1N: Yes, to earn a livelihood.

Q: Okay.

#1N: My paternal uncles did not live exactly in Lhasa but were nomads on the mountains near Lhasa.

Q: What about your mother? Did she have any special work outside the home?

#1N: She, around the estate...a woman in the family is like the cook or the family's storekeeper, feeding the children and the servants.

Q: Were there any brothers or sisters in your family?

00:08:46

#1N: Yes. [I] have six or seven.

Q: Do you have any memories of when you were a little boy before you went to the monastery?

#1N: [I] was 6 years old at the time of joining the monastery, so not many memories prior to that.

Q: Well, once you got to the monastery, what can you tell us about it when you were 6 years old? What was it like for you?

#1N: At that time two of my siblings were already monks. Therefore, as a child [I] went to the monastery very happily.

Q: Which monastery did you enter?

#1N: Drepung Monastery.

Q: Did your brothers take care of you or somebody else help you?

00:10:27

#1N: We had teacher, a *topdhay* teacher and a *paycha* 'scriptures' teacher. Along with them they [brothers] cared a little bit [for me], but [I] could not be with them because [I] had to start the alphabet and everything.

Q: A *paycha* teacher and what's the other?

#1N: *Topdhay* teacher, one that gave you food.

Q: How did you like being a monk? What was...how was that for you?

#1N: [I] was happy as a monk.

Q: Happy time? Really? Was it difficult to study?

#1N: It was difficult.

Q: What kind of a student were you, *pa-la*?

#1N: [I] was like this [moves middle finger of right hand] as a student. I did not reach here [indicates thumb] but was like this [moves middle finger].

Q: In the middle.

[Interpreter to interviewer]: Yes, in the middle.

Q: Can you tell us about life in the monastery? What was...you know, about the food or prayer assembly, talk to us and tell us about your life in the monastery?

00:12:31

#1N: In the morning we had to attend the *mangja* 'prayer assembly of entire monk congregation with tea served.'

Q: *Mangja*.

#1N: Early in the morning. After that one must attend the *choera* 'debate sessions,' and after that attend the *daja* 'prayer assembly of one section of a monastery with tea served.'

Q: *Daja*.

#1N: Yes. After attending *choera*, one must attend the *shotsok* 'morning assembly' called *daja*. After the *daja* assembly got over, one must attend the *gungtsi* 'congregation of monks for mid-day meal' *choera*, which is another *choera*.

Q: What does *daja* mean?

#1N: *Daja* is when at around 10 o'clock the *datsang* 'section in a large monastery' assembly begins. After that is the *choera* assembly.

Q: *Gungtsi choera*.

#1N: *Gungtsi choera*. From then until around evening time there is no prayer assembly. It is interval and time for studying the scriptures. Then in the evening there is the *gongtso* ‘evening assembly’ *choera*. In the initial stage, the *gongtso choera* got over fast but towards the middle, one chanted Dolma ‘Praises to the 21 Taras’ and other prayers in the *choera* until 11-12 o’clock. That was one day’s schedule. In case of special days, if the *khangtsen* [smaller community within a monastery, in which monks of one geographical area live] and *mitsen* ‘group of monks from a particular region’ had their respective prayer assemblies, that was another matter. Otherwise, that was the general [schedule].

Q: The morning *mangja* is having tea?

#1N: The morning *mangja* is *mangja*. After that is the *choera* and then the *daja* assembly, and then is the...

Q: *Gungtsi choera*.

#1N: Attend the *gungtsi choera*. Between these you have to learn your scriptures. Around 4:30 one must attend the evening assembly. That was it.

Q: Did you have any teachers that you found very helpful or kind to you that you can tell us about?

00:15:35

#1N: Yes, [I] have. It is primarily due to the teachers that [I] am able to read the scriptures and have belief in the deities and lama. Initially, the parents did admit [me] to the monastery but after admission the parents have no role. [I] believe It is the kindness of the teachers.

Q: May I ask your teacher’s name and tell us about him? What was he like?

#1N: [He] was called Geshe Yeshe Lobsang. [He] is no longer alive and had passed away before we lost Tibet. He was a good *geshe* ‘monk with Buddhist philosophy degree’ and moreover, had reached quite a high status among the lamas. [He] had studied a great deal.

Q: Was he older, much older than you?

#1N: Of course, even at that time [he] must have been in his 50s or 60s.

Q: Was there any teachings that were very helpful to you with your life that you learned from him? Like what did you learn from your master teacher?

00:17:55

#1N: A special...I did not get to stay long to study with the teacher. The teacher passed away soon and also times were bad. [I] remember this but before [I] could develop a strong belief in the dharma, the uprising took place. Today I feel that I have benefitted by being literate and have faith, which is due to his kindness. Otherwise, it is difficult for someone

hailing from a Tibetan village to know so much. However, it was a great loss that I did not have the chance to continue studying under [him].

Q: What kind of problems developed, *pa-la*?

#1N: The main reason for the uprising was that in eastern Tibet...Before the suffering in Tibet [Lhasa] there was a lot of suffering in our region of eastern Tibet in '51, '52, '53 and after that was the suffering in Lhasa. We heard through friends and parents about the suffering inflicted by the Chinese. Tibetans in the central part did not know much but that the Chinese had arrived and just wondered about it. Most of the Tibetans said [they] were happy that the Chinese had come hoping for a change. What was in my heart was that since the time of my parents' parents there was suffering and [I] felt that the Chinese should be challenged.

Q: So what did you choose to do, *pa-la*?

00:21:01

#1N: There was nothing for me to do but join the *Chushi Gangdrug* [Defend Tibet Volunteer Force] and follow the leaders. Personally I did not have any resources to do anything. [I] hoped to fight and kill the Chinese or that everyone will be able to drive the Chinese away.

Q: Maybe, did I understand...so did you join the *Chushi Gangdrug* and at what age?

#1N: At 23.

Q: At 23? Did you go directly from the monastery to *Chushi Gangdrug* or was there some time in between?

#1N: No, [I] went directly from the monastery to the *Chushi Gangdrug*.

Q: *Pa-la*, did you ask to have your vows taken away or did you just leave?

00:22:32

#1N: It was not like that. Anyone that wished to join from the monastery could do so and there was not any need to seek permission from the monastery. The *Chushi Gangdrug* was established and whether it was monks or traders, anyone could join it as desired and nobody stopped you.

Q: Out of your own free will?

#1N: Out of your own free will.

Q: If you left when you were 23 that would have been 1959, the same year that the Dalai Lama had to escape from Tibet. Is that correct?

#1N: 1959 had already begun.

Q: Was it during that period?

#1N: Yes.

Q: *Pa-la*, before we hear your story about what happened, can you tell us were there any changes going on in the monastery? Were there any problems at Drepung Monastery? Any problems with food or anything?

#1N: What problems?

Q: At Drepung Monastery?

#1N: At Drepung Monastery, one should say that it was some sort of a bad omen that there were minor problems between those that were studying the scriptures and those that were not in the monastery.

[Interpreter concludes: ...minor problems like whether people were reading texts or not, kind of problem. Some are not following, like...]

Q: Not following taxes or texts?

Interpreter to interviewer: Text.

Q: Text. Oh, you mean the monks were not following texts?

00:24:38

#1N: Yes, everyone read the scriptures and prayers, but there were differences between those that studied the debates and those that did not.

Q: I see. Were there any Chinese influence or involvement in the monastery before you left? Was there Chinese presence in the monastery at Drepung?

#1N: No, there was not.

Q: Were there, *pa-la*, other monks that left with you who also wanted to join the *Chushi Gangdrug*?

#1N: There were.

Q: Did they go with you?

#1N: Along with us were 17-18 monks.

Q: Really? They left along with you. They left, 17-18. Can you tell us what were...you said you really wanted the Chinese out of Tibet, but what were your fears about the Chinese coming into Tibet? What were your worries or your concerns?

00:26:20

#1N: When the Chinese appeared, at that time I was not of an age to be able to determine what the problem would be. Our parents, friends and older people, those people from Kham...but in the central region, those in Lhasa were hoping that the Chinese would be okay. In those days we did not have newspapers and there was no practice of media coverage. We listened to those people that had been there and returned, who described what was happening and what was not. From what [I] heard from them and what the parents had drilled into my ears long back, I guessed that the Chinese were no good.

Q: So...

#1N: Those days in Lhasa one could never hear news immediately like these days. One relied on what people said and on oral messages brought by people, as there were no newspapers, no cinemas, no telephones, no newsreaders.

Q: How did you hope to get the Chinese out of Tibet?

#1N: I thought once the *Chushi Gangdrug* was established, with the *Chushi Gangdrug* established...In those days bandits were very famous. Therefore, I believed the Chinese were not that strong and did not have much weapons and [I] was confident that they could be easily ousted, that they could be driven out. I did not know about the huge backup [troops] they had but only saw those that were in and around Lhasa. So [I] believed them weak and could be driven out.

Q: And so when you left Drepung, what happened to you next? What did you do?

00:29:33

#1N: Now one was a wanderer. Right? There was nothing else to think of, no parents, except the thought of driving out the Chinese. There was no thought about a new country or anything. It was a speedy thought of just driving out the Chinese.

Q: And so if you encountered a Chinese in Lhasa what would you do to drive them out?

#1N: If one encountered a Chinese then, should one directly encounter a Chinese, one could not grab and kill him. However, if an enemy approached...There were many Chinese in Lhasa that were traders, vegetable sellers and such. It would be sad to kill them. Besides, we as Buddhists cannot kill them. We did not have the thought of killing. However, if a battle ensued and one encountered a Chinese with a gun, then one was determined to kill.

Q: Were you able to kill any?

#1N: [I] do not know if any Chinese were killed but [I] fired many times during an encounter.

Q: Would they be Chinese you would see on the streets or out in the countryside?

[Interpreter interprets as: Battled with soldiers?]

00:31:32

#1N: Yes.

Q: Chinese army. They would be like army transports or army camps? What would they be?

#1N: No, they were soldiers that came to drive us away.

00:32:02

#1N: I wish to answer nature's call.

[Discontinuity in interview]

Q: *Pa-la*, who was your commander in *Chushi Gangdrug*?

#1N: Alo Dawa. [He] was called Lithang Alo Dawa.

Q: Lithang?

#1N: Yes.

Q: From Lithang?

#1N: Kham Lithang.

Q: Kham Lithang. In Kham, got it. I know that. Was he in Lhasa? Is that where you joined him or did you go to Kham?

#1N: No. He and I were like from the same region. [He] had come to Lhasa where he had a house but was based in Kham.

Q: Who stays in Lhasa?

[Interpreter to interviewer]: Alo Dawa.

Q: Alo Dawa stays in Lhasa. So can you tell us about some of the experiences you had confronting the Chinese with Alo Dawa? What happened?

00:33:22

#1N: Memories of confrontation... the Chinese came pursuing after the fall of Lhasa, and confronting the Chinese along the way, we reached Mangola pass.

Q: Really? Completely occupied. So did you have any battles before you got to the Indian border?

#1N: We had many battles. One can say battles. We faced 5-6 encounters with them.

Q: Were they in Lhasa or around Lhasa?

#1N: No. From Lhasa there is Chushul. The place where the river from Tsang and the river from Lhasa meet is called Kyinak. Our military camp was located in Gongkar and [I] was deployed from Gongkar to stop the Chinese at Kyinak. For 3-4 days and nights [we] stopped them with firing from both sides.

Q: How many people killed?

#1N: Around three people died from our side.

Q: What were you fighting with, *pa-la*? Were you using guns or...?

00:35:31

#1N: It was a 303 short barrel English-made [rifle].

Q: Three...

#1N: 303.

Q: 303. Okay. What's the name of the gun?

#1N: It is 303. In Tibetan we call it *Enji khadhum*.

Q: Indian?

[Interpreter to interviewer]: English.

Q: English rifles. I see. And so what were you feeling during those experiences? You were coming from a life as a monk and now you were fighting. What did that feel like to you?

#1N: Absolutely nothing except fighting.

Q: Were you glad to be able to use your energy to try to fight the Chinese? Did that satisfy you? Was that satisfying?

#1N: [I] was satisfied feeling that [I] would get a chance to challenge them.

Q: Now at some point did it seem that the Chinese were going to overwhelm the fighters, the Kham...the *Chushi Gangdrug*? Did it seem that way?

[Interpreter to interviewer]: Overwhelm?

Q: At some point the *Chushi Gangdrug* were being pushed by the Chinese. Were the Chinese forces very extensive?

00:37:31

#1N: One reason for the loss suffered by the *Chushi Gangdrug*—what to say—was maybe because of lack of training. The Chinese were highly trained. The *Chushi Gangdrug* were guerrillas and knew just about firing a gun. Except for courage, [they] did not have training like they [Chinese army] had had for years on end. That was clear, which is why the loss.

Q: Your spirit was strong. Your training was minimal.

#1N: That was it. After coming to India, I was in the Indian Army for 20-odd years. When undergoing training at that time [I] thought had we had such training back then, [we] would not have let the Chinese win. The difference between trained and untrained is like the earth and sky. Later [I] had regrets while we were undergoing training thinking, “Had I had such training then, [I] would not let the Chinese off easily.”

Q: What would you like to, you know, recount about your story? So it looks like fall of Lhasa and then how did you...? You had to get out of Tibet, right? You joined the Indian Army but you remember...Can you tell us a little bit about your final flight out of Tibet? What was that like?

00:40:10

#1N: [I] did not have any bad experience. For one, when we reached the border His Holiness the Dalai Lama was already in India. When the Chenrezig ‘Bodhisattva Avalokitesvara [Dalai Lama]’ is here, we would never believe that we would face any problem. I felt it would be good and never that we would face anything bad.

Q: Did you just travel to India with some fellow *Chushi Gangdrug*?

#1N: All the soldiers. Not just soldiers, not just monks, all escapees were fleeing at the same time.

Q: What did it feel like when you reached India?

#1N: One hardly had any thoughts. Some people said—they were not who gave speeches or advice—some people remarked then, “We will not have to stay long in India but must get good training and then return to fight the Chinese.” [I] had that sort of hope and never thought that I was poor or would face problems.

Q: So after you got to India, what happened to you? What did you do?

00:42:17

#1N: Initially for around six months we were taught Tibetan and numbers in English at Missamari. Then [I] moved to Balingpong and attended *layshor lapta* ‘spare-time school.’ It was an actual school in Missamari while at Balingpong it was a *layshor lapta*.

Q: What’s a *layshor lapta*?

#1N: One worked and attended school for short durations. Normally regular classes were not held. One worked as a coolie in the morning and evening and lessons were taught during the day.

Q: And then do you join the Indian Army?

#1N: From '59 to '61 [I] moved about like that working as a coolie. At the end of '62 [I] joined the Indian Army. It was not the Indian Army but the 22nd [Establishment] is a Tibetan army.

Q: What were they doing?

00:44:20

#1N: [Speaks before question is translated] It is not the Indian Army. It was actually Tibetan, a guerrilla unit. Initially, we were told that [we] would be given good training for six months to a year and then deployed in Tibet, which is why people specifically left their coolie jobs, employments and little stores to join it.

Q: And what happened?

#1N: Later it got delayed and further delayed and now it is similar to the Indian Army. Actually it is a separate Tibetan army but it enjoys rights like the Indian army.

Q: And then what happened to you?

#1N: And then [my] life was coming to an end. [I] was 27-28 years in the army. After 28 years in the army [I] was an old man when [I] came out and even if a person has the mind, the body cannot function.

Q: When did you retire from the army?

00:46:16

#1N: It was towards the end of '87 but I am not sure of the exact date.

Q: Yeah, I understand. So yeah, you were born in 1936. Okay, so you were aged about 51, right?

#1N: Yes, around that.

Q: How has your life been since then, since you retired?

#1N: Life has been a happy one.

Q: Maybe as we conclude this interview, *pa-la*, you can tell us, what are your hopes for Tibet today?

#1N: In my personal opinion, the need is independence for Tibet, complete [independence]. Listening to His Holiness the Dalai Lama's speeches, [he] says that the Tibet Autonomous Region [Middle way Approach] is something very beneficial for both China and Tibet. He is a lama who knows about both this and the next life. Therefore, as his advice [I] think there will be a happy time for Tibet even if [we] do not gain independence.

Q: That's a wish that we share with you.

#1N: [Joins palms] Yes, thank you.

Q: Thank you. Thank you. I think this is a good place for us to complete the interview unless *pa-la* has anything he wants to add?

00:49:07

#1N: I do not have anything to say. [I] do not know much about politics, as earlier [I] was a monk and then a soldier. [I] am one determined to follow whatever advice His Holiness the Dalai Lama gives in this and the next life. Other than that I do not have anything to say.

Q: We share your hope. We share your hope. Thank you.

#1N: [Joins palms]

END OF INTERVIEW