

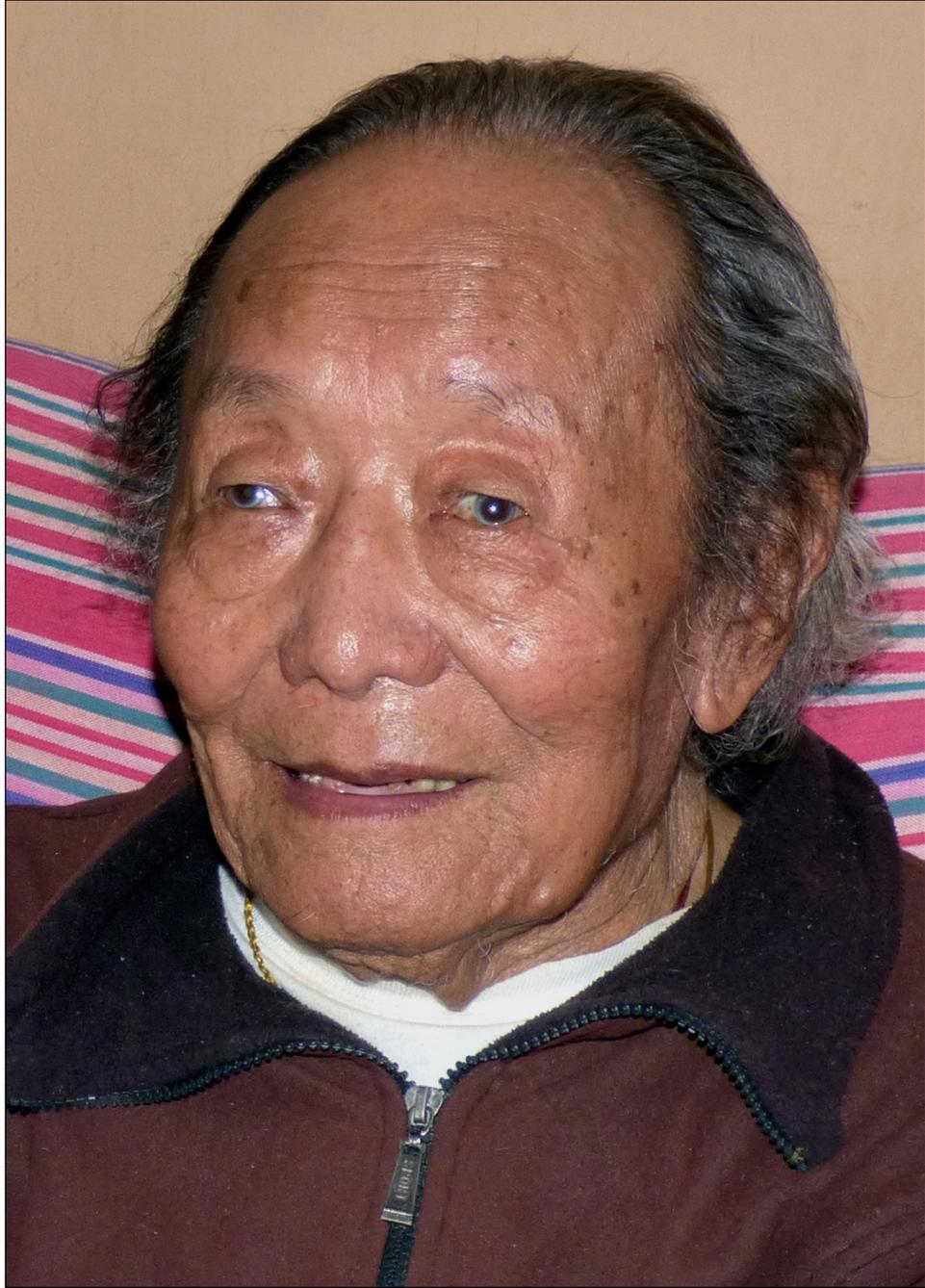
# **Tibet Oral History Project**

Interview #26N – Karma Tsewang Gyurme  
April 9, 2015

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# TIBET ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

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## INTERVIEW SUMMARY SHEET

1. Interview Number: #26N
2. Interviewee: Karma Tsewang Gyurme
3. Age: 88
4. Date of Birth: 1927
5. Sex: Male
6. Birthplace: Layor
7. Province: Utsang
8. Year of leaving Tibet: 1959
9. Date of Interview: April 9, 2015
10. Place of Interview: Private home, Arabank, Boudha, Kathmandu, Nepal
11. Length of Interview: 0 hr 48 min
12. Interviewer: Marcella Adamski
13. Interpreter: Palden Tsering
14. Videographer: Henry Tenenbaum
15. Translator: Tenzin Yangchen

### **Biographical Information:**

Karma Tsewang Gyurme was born in Layor in Ngari region. There were 30-40 members in his family including workers who lived at home. His family members were nomads raising animals and did not do any agricultural work. Since there were no schools, Karma Tsewang Gyurme roamed around as a child and sometimes went herding animals along with the servants.

Karma Tsewang Gyurme explains how the people of his region paid *tamka karmo*, a sum of 20,000 currency units, to the government to use the grasslands for grazing. Then the government offered these payments to monks of the three great monasteries: Sera, Gaden and Drepung. Karma Tsewang Gyurme's paternal uncle was a Governor General and he describes the duties he performed and how his uncle was falsely accused of a crime by another government official which resulted in him being beaten.

Karma Tsewang Gyurme recounts how things changed once the Chinese appeared. He attended meetings as a representative of the Governor General during which the Chinese explained that Buddhist lamas and village leaders were unnecessary. *Thamzing* 'struggle sessions' were conducted and some officials were killed. Karma Tsewang Gyurme's story ends with his escape to Muktinath in Nepal. He presently feels content with his life in Nepal because he is free to practice the dharma.

### **Topics Discussed:**

Utsang, government/administration, first appearance of Chinese.

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## Interview #26N

**Interviewee: Karma Tsewang Gyurme**

**Age: 88, Sex: Male**

**Interviewer: Marcella Adamski**

**Interview Date: April 9, 2015**

Question: Please tell us your name.

00:00:08

**Interviewee #26N: Karma. It is Karma Tsewang Gyurme.**

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?

**#26N: Yes, because...**

[Discontinuity in video]

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.

**#26N: Okay.**

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

**#26N: There will be no problems. I came to Nepal fearing that there would be problems. Now I have spent many years in Nepal, around 50 years in Nepal and am a Nepali. I will not face any problems.**

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

**#26N: Okay.**

Q: *Popo-la* 'respectful term for grandfather,' can you please tell us how old you are?

00:02:44

**#26N: I am 88 years old.**

Q: Where were you born?

**#26N: I was born in Layor in Ngari. The place called Layor belonged to the Tibetan government.**

**Each year as payment for the grasslands...there is [a currency unit] called *tamka karmo* in Tibet.**

Q: *Tamka karmo*.

**#26N: *Tamka karmo*. [We] had to pay a sum of 20,000 such as lease for the grasslands. Layor had a large population; it was a large area. What was done with the money was—when the Monlam ‘Annual Prayer Festival’ took place in the first lunar month—this was to be given as offering to the monks. The government gave each monk a *tamka karmo*.**

**[The sum we paid] was not sufficient as during the pleasant times there were 30,000 to 40,000 monks from the three great monasteries and other areas. The three great monasteries are called the “Trio of Ser-Dre-Ga’ which are Sera, Drepung and Gaden. As those were pleasant times there were about 10,000 monks in each. The money...When all the monks gathered for the Monlam in the first lunar month, the Tibetan Government gave each of the monks a *tamka*. This is a story that happened long ago and not now.**

[Discontinuity in video]

[Relative of interviewee]: My name is Ang Kusang. I am a Sherpa actually and I’m son-in-law of him. So he is saying that Layor is where he is born, the name of the place where he’s born. In Layor the government collects the tax. The tax they have to pay in silver coins, This money, tax, taken to Lhasa to Sera, Drepung, Gaden—three big, central monasteries. They congregate there prayer sessions going on there. So they spent that money on that.

Q: *Popo-la*, what did your parents do for a living? What kind of work did they do?

00:05:58

**#26N: We were nomads. A nomad is one that raises animals like sheep, yaks and horses. The work entailed raising animals only. There was no working in the fields and such.**

Q: How many people were in your family when you were a little boy?

**#26N: In the family...since a long time, our family...from the time of my grandfather we were a rich family. Since it was a rich family there were around 30-40 members in the family including the workers that stayed at home. There were only five or six actual family members because at that time when I was a child there was a paternal uncle who was a smart person. So during his time there were only five members in the family. Including the servants there were 30 or 20 people. There used to be many workers.**

Q: What did you do as a little boy? What kind of activities or games or work did you do when you were a young boy?

00:08:50

**#26N:** There were no schools when I was little. So [I] roamed around and at times went herding along with the servants and at times grazed a few goats and sheep by myself at short distances. Other than that there was no work and there were no schools also.

When I was a child [I] carried a piece of paper and tried to learn some writing. When [I] did that an adult remarked, “Because he hails from a family of leaders, [he] may have to learn. Otherwise, there is a story from the Changthang ‘Northern Plateau’ in which a person went to collect salt. When he went to collect salt [he] rode a yak with a white tail that died. He sent home a letter that said, ‘The white-tailed yak has died. I am sick and there is no salt.’ Instead of writing ‘I am fine,’ he wrote, ‘I am sick and there is no salt.’ Such a letter came. Are you trying to do like that?” The nomads have such a thing to say.

Q: What kind of... When you were a grown up young man, what kind of work did you do?

00:11:52

**#26N:** When I grew to be a little older, our Governor General’s house was being built. [He] came from Tibet [Lhasa] and was the Governor General. There was a paternal uncle of mine who had been the Governor General earlier. What to say? Without any base people...there was a certain government [tax?] that had to be collected from people moving up and down, which [paternal uncle] had not. It was falsely reported to the government that he was a private person who was not obeying the government. Then paternal uncle was taken away and whipped 1,500 times and bloodied.

When [he] reached Lhasa, he asked of the office, “What wrong have I done?” The office replied, “[We] do not know what you have done. It is Chanak ‘Official’ Ogyen Rinzin who reported that you do not obey the Tibetan Government.” “Please call Chanak Ogyen Rinzin and we will discuss,” [paternal uncle] said. “Chanak Ogyen Rinzin is dead,” it was said. “Whether this is true or not, you can go and ask the 25 *chanak*.” So the late paternal uncle had asked, “Where is Chanak Ogyen Rinzin? I wish to speak to him.”

[Interpreter to interviewee]: If you speak too long I’ll forget the earlier part. So please wait.

Q: Was your paternal uncle a Governor General?

00:14:03

**#26N:** Yes.

Q: He was a paternal uncle, right?

**#26N:** Yes, paternal uncle, Governor General. I had two paternal uncles. One was called Rinchen Gyalpo who was the Governor General. The other was called Buncham. He...I had a grandfather from my mother’s side called Rapchung Madok who was an ex-monk of Zonga Monastery. He went to trade and settled in Belung, which is a beautiful place. The paternal uncle went and beat him.

Q: What did the Tibetan Government do to when he didn’t obey it?

00:15:28

**#26N: People made false statements that [he] was not obeying the government. The paternal uncle was taken away and whipped 500 times and imprisoned.**

Q: [The paternal uncle] was whipped 500 times?

**#26N: Yes.**

Q: And after that?

**#26N: 1,500 lashes.**

Q: 1,500 and then?

**#26N: Then [paternal uncle] reached Lhasa and approached the Home Ministry, “I have been lashed 1,500 times and put in prison. [I] have come here now. Please say who reported that about me.” [He] seems to have petitioned the office.**

[Interviewer to interpreter]: Who asked that question? The uncle?

[Interpreter to interviewer]: His uncle.

[Interviewer to interpreter]: His uncle.

[Interpreter to interviewer]: ...who was beaten.

[Interviewer to interpreter]: ...who'd been beaten.

[Interpreter to interviewer]: Exactly.

[Interviewer to interpreter]: And he asked that of the government?

[Interpreter to interviewer]: He asked the government.

Q: What did the government say?

00:17:48

**#26N: [Paternal uncle] seems to have asked of the government, “Who said that about me? What did he say [I] did?” The government’s reply was, “The one who said you do not obey the government is Chanak Ogyen Rinzin.”**

Q: Ogyen Chanak?

**#26N: Chanak Ogyen Rinzin.**

Q: It’s Ogyen Chanak Rinzin, right?

00:18:32

**#26N: Chanak Ogyen Rinzin.**

Q: Chanak Ogyen Rinzin.

**#26N: There were 25 *chanak* of the government.**

Q: Who is that? Is that a Tibetan man?

**#26N: A Tibetan. There were 25 *chanak* working under the Tibetan Government.**

Q: Chanak Ogyen Rinzin had said so...

00:19:27

**#26N: Chanak Ogyen...paternal uncle was very tough. Although lashed 1,500 times yet [he] was not affected. "Who said I had done so? Please show the man." There was a very high official of the government whose name [I] have forgotten that said, "It was Chanak Ogyen Rinzin who said you had done like that. [He] is among the *chanak* and you can ask." Then [paternal uncle] went to the home of the *chanak* and asked, "Where is Chanak Ogyen Rinzin?" "[We] do not know who is Chanak Ogyen Rinzin. This morning a *chanak* died and the corpse is taken away. [He] might be the one. [We] do not know any Ogyen Rinzin, any *chanak*."**

Q: "We don't know the *chanak*, don't know who he is. A person died whose [body's] already been taken away," [he] was told.

00:20:59

**#26N: "We do not know if he was called Ogyen Rinzin. A *chanak* died this morning and the body was taken away," [he] was told. So [paternal uncle] could not locate the person.**

**Poor paternal uncle! Though he was a capable and a good man, the government policy was like that. He was told to return to the village but seemed to have refused. Then there was a government...[not discernible] at Yangtzen where [he] was deployed as the head.**

Q: *Popo-la*, when your uncle was assigned to that village, did you have anything to do with him in terms of your own work or career or job?

00:22:06

**#26N: I did not have any connection because I was a child then while my uncle was an old man. There was no connection.**

Q: Okay. We were trying to understand what kind of work you did in your life...for a livelihood when you grew up to be a man. What kind of work did you do?

**#26N: I worked as the representative of the Governor General when the Governor General was absent. [I] lived in this way. Then the Chinese appeared. The Chinese appeared and...**

Q: What kind of responsibilities did the leader have, you know, when you took over for him what did you have to do as the leader of the village, right?

00:23:35

**#26N: The work...when a leader is absent, quarrels happen among the people, generally in regard to grasslands and water. There are many arguments that [a leader] must heed. When I was at the district called Tutu the Chinese appeared. Then the Chinese...**

Q: You were settling quarrels among the people and arguments regarding grasslands and such.

**#26N: That is right.**

Q: And what else?

**#26N: Then the Chinese appeared when I was at Tutu District. The Chinese boiled insects, insects that were blackish. They ate a lot and asked me to eat too.**

Q: Then when the Chinese asked [you] to eat the insects...?

00:26:07

**#26N: When the Chinese asked [me] to eat insects, we were [representatives of] nine groups that had assembled in the nearby houses. When the Chinese asked [me] to eat insects [I replied], "I will not eat insects. There are things to eat like dry yak meat, dry sheep meat; whether dried, frozen, boiled or whatever. But [I] have never eaten insects and will not do so," [I] replied. When [I] refused to eat the insects, they gave me a glass or two of alcohol. As a glass of alcohol was being poured, [the Chinese] remarked, "If you do not eat insects, perhaps [you] do not like the Chinese."**

Q: The Chinese said, "You do not like us if you do not drink alcohol." Right?

**#26N: [The Chinese] said, "If [you] do not eat the insects, it seems you do not like [us]." [I] replied, "I do not want to drink the alcohol. I have yak meat, sheep meat and anything [I] wish to eat but have never eaten insects and will not do so." Saying so, I left.**

**There were many that had gathered. A little further away was the leader of Chayang village called Chonor who asked, "What happened?" [I] replied, "[The Chinese] asked [me] to eat insects that [I] refused." "Eat insects? Who will eat insects?" he exclaimed. Poor thing, he was very talkative. "Tell the person who asked you to eat insects to come to me and I will talk to him."**

Q: And then what happened?

00:29:25

**#26N: When [I] refused to eat the insects it was said, "You do not like the Chinese." I replied, "I have never eaten insects. You can say that [I] do not like the Chinese." A glass of alcohol was poured but [I] said, "I do not want to drink this."**

Q: Yes, and then you left and met a man outside who said...

**#26N: It was the leader of the village of Chayang called Chonor who asked, "What happened?" [I] described what had been said and [he] exclaimed, "Who will eat insects? Who will eat insects when there is plenty of yak meat and sheep meat? Insects are eaten by those that have nothing to eat." [Laughs]**

Q: What happened after that?

00:30:18

**#26N: After that our meeting broke up.**

Q: Did anything else happen when the Chinese first came to his village? Were there any difficulties [you] personally...I want to know what [you] personally experienced.

**#26N: Then I had to attend meetings as a representative of Bompa at Thoe for four or five years after the Chinese arrived. During one year there was Genpo 'Village Leader' Tsekyi of the northern part of Bompa with me. The two of us went to Ngari Gar to attend a meeting. At the meeting at Ngari Gar was a Chinese leader called Yang Dutang who spoke about how there should not be lamas, religion, leaders and many such things.**

Q: The first time?

**#26N: Yes?**

Q: During the first meeting?

**#26N: Yes.**

Q: It was the first one, right?

**#26N: It was the first one. [The Chinese leader] spoke about such things.**

Q: Ngari what?

00:31:58

**#26N: Ngari Yartsa.**

Q: What's the name of the Chinese?

00:32:12

**#26N: Yang Dutang.**

Q: What happened?

[Interpreter interprets: Then they went to meeting. That time he explained them that religion is no good; we don't need religions. We don't need...]

Q: One shouldn't practice religion, right?

**#26N: There was no need to practice dharma, no need for leaders...**

[Interviewer to interpreter]: Is that what he is saying?

[Interpreter to interviewer]: That Chinese...

[Interviewer to interpreter]: The Chinese are saying to him religion is no good?

**#26N: [The Chinese leader] always said, "There is no need of leaders. There is no need of lamas. There is no need of anything. Each one can live just doing one's work."**

Q: What did *popo-la* think of these words?

**#26N: At that time there were I, the Governor General of Bompa and Genpo Tsekyi of the northern part of Bompa. As for feelings it became useless. However, [I] do not know what both of them felt. The following year Genpo Tsekyi did not attend because the talk was useless. "Who will listen to such talk? I am not coming," he said. I attended three times...no, four times. It was the same Chinese leader called Yang Dutang and the same speech. By continuing to live here, the Chinese will...as the Tibetan person...I forget the name of the person. What was his name...**

Q: You attended the meetings three or four times.

00:34:41

**#26N: I went six or seven times. Years.**

Q: Six or seven years?

**#26N: [I] had to attend continuously for six or seven years because...**

Q: Was it once a year every year?

**#26N: [The Chinese] called [us] for the meetings that had no resolutions. There was a Governor General of Bompa called Nyenmo Dhogompa who used to be a monk official and was a good man. He and I attended every time. The one called *genpo* Tsekyi of the northern part of Bompa attended only once and he remarked, "[The meetings] are so useless, talking about there being no need for leaders, no need for lamas. Then what is needed? I am not coming." [He] did not attend.**

**At that time there was a Tibetan interpreter at Ngari Gar called Lobsang Gyaltsen who was said to be a tenant of the Yabshi Tawang family. The Chinese considered him a high official. A Chinese woman hailing from Xinjiang was brought as bride for him and a wedding held there.**

00:37:03

**And then after sometime I escaped. The one called Lobsang Gyaltzen who was said to be a tenant of Yabshi Tawang enquired, “Where has Gyabna Karma gone, Gyabna Karma?”**

Q: That’s after you had escaped?

**#26N: Yes. “It has been about two years since Gyabna Karma left. He is said to be living somewhere in Muktinath area, but [we] do not know where [he] is,” the nomads replied. “If this person can be found, [he] should be brought back and skinned alive.” [Laughs]**

Q: *Popo-la*, are you in...what area?

[Interpreter to interviewer]: Muktinath.

[Interviewer to interpreter]: Muktinath?

[Interpreter to interviewer]: Muktinath area is in Nepal.

[Interviewer to interpreter]: Wow, way up Muktinath!

[Interpreter to interviewer]: From Tibet...to Nepal.

[Interviewer to interpreter]: I get it. I know.

[Interpreter to interviewer]: Muktinath is like...

[Interviewer to interpreter]: I’ve been there. It’s very high.

[Interpreter to interviewer]: Yeah, 4,600 meters. Yeah, yeah.

[Interviewer to interpreter]: Okay. So that’s where *popo-la* is.

[Interpreter to interviewer]: *Popo-la* is here in Nepal already. He escaped from there.

[Interviewer to interpreter]: In Muktinath.

[Interpreter to interviewer]: Muktinath, yeah.

[Interviewer to interpreter]: And then does he settles there or go somewhere else?

[Interpreter to interviewer]: No, no. He...actually he...

[Interviewer to interpreter]: Ask him.

[Interpreter to interviewer]: Oh, sorry.

Q: After coming from there, did you go directly to Muktinath or what happened?

00:39:32

**#26N: After coming from there I stayed 3-4 months in a place called Tingkar [Mustang] and then at the place called Gelung where I had a friend from very long ago in whose house [I] spent a year.**

Q: How many years in Gelung?

**#26N: One year.**

Q: *Popo-la*, when you escaped Tibet I think I saw you mentioned that it was 1959. If he left in 1959, he was born in 1927; he'd have been 32 when he left Tibet.

**#26N: Thirty-six.**

Q: Was it 36?

**#26N: Thirty-six.**

Q: Was 36?

**#26N: Thirty-six.**

Q: Okay, 36. *Popo-la*, did you leave by yourself? Were you married? Did you have a family? How did you escape?

00:41:09

**#26N: [I] was married and there were five family members.**

Q: Did the whole family go with him?

[Interpreter to interviewer]: The whole family.

Q: Was the reason you left because you felt...you didn't like the Chinese oppression? Is that why...why did you leave? What was your reason for leaving at that time in your life?

**#26N: The reason for fleeing from there was that a large number of Chinese arrived in our hometown. A large number of Chinese arrived and [they] made your relatives and servants beat you. All the officials were gradually killed. The one called Chonor who was the *genpo* of Chayang suffered broken ribs when his nephew kicked [him]. The ribs pierced the lungs and [Chonor] died. Such things were happening.**

[Interviewer to interpreter]: That was why he left because he was a known leader.

[Interpreter to interviewer]: He was a known leader.

[Interviewer to interpreter]: And he could be subjected to *thamzing* 'struggle sessions.'

[Interpreter to interviewer]: *Thamzing*, yeah.

[Interviewer to interpreter]: Yeah, I get it. Okay.

00:43:11

**#26N: That is right.**

Q: That was a good reason to leave.

**#26N: During a *thamzing*, your relatives and friends were made to do the beating while they [Chinese] did not do it. One was beaten and gradually killed.**

Q: They forced their own people to do that. Were you a salt trader for a while? Did you do that as a job?

**#26N: Our family collected salt from the Changthang and bartered it for grains in Mustang for consumption.**

Q: This is obviously...your father, your grandfather, is there anything that you would like to ask him that we can have as a record for your children and your grandchildren? What questions would you ask him?

[Interpreter interprets as: Do you have any advice that will help the young people?]

00:44:48

**#26N: [I] do not have any advice. Actually the youth...in the past in Tibet there were no schools, nothing. So if you knew something, it was good and if not, nothing could be done. Presently, there are schools and every facility available here. Times have changed and everybody is working hard for education and knowledge. That is good. I would like to say this.**

Q: Sounds like the advice of His Holiness the Dalai Lama.

[Interpreter to interviewer]: Exactly, exactly. His Holiness is all the time advising that. Not just reading but we have to understand the point what it says.

[Interviewer to interpreter]: To know.

[Interpreter to interviewer]: To know, yeah.

Q: Maybe one question I would ask is, *popo-la*, when you think of Tibet, what is a favorite memory? What is something that you like to remember about Tibet or you miss about Tibet?

00:46:44

**#26N: [I] do not have any. In Tibet although [I] actually owned land and everything but when you do not have the right to...[I] do not long for anything. [I] prefer it here where**

**one can practice the dharma. What it is about Nepal is that it is very good because one can practice the dharma and you have freedom. It is very good.**

Q: Okay. He's happy. Happy here. I think that we've had a very special opportunity to meet such a senior Tibetan today and thank you for your experiences and your memories of Tibet. And I'm very, very grateful to spend this time with you and I guess I just want to say that I'm honored to record your story. Thank you. If this interview was shown in Tibet or China, would this be a problem for you?

**#26N: There will be no problems. For instance, if there is someone who says I am not right, I will be informed and then I will respond.**

Q: And you'll answer them. That sounds like a strong Tibetan! *Popo-la*, thank you so much.

END OF INTERVIEW