

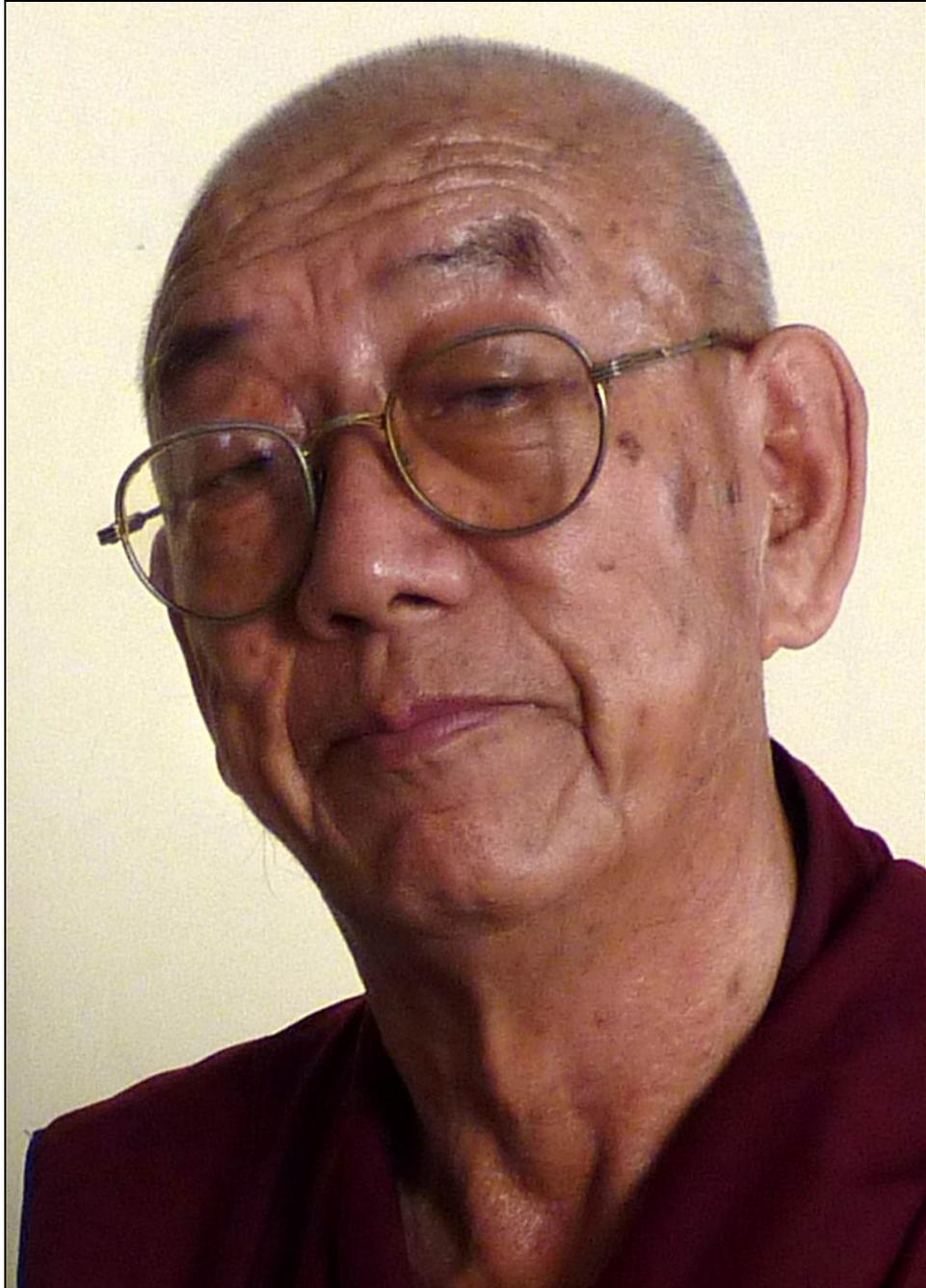
# **Tibet Oral History Project**

Interview #27M – Kunchok Paksam  
April 10, 2010

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# TIBET ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

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## INTERVIEW SUMMARY SHEET

1. Interview Number: #27M
2. Interviewee: Kunchok Paksam
3. Age: 81
4. Date of Birth: 1929
5. Sex: Male
6. Birthplace: Chashi, Markham
7. Province: Dhotoe (Kham)
8. Year of leaving Tibet: 1959
9. Date of Interview: April 10, 2010
10. Place of Interview: Residence of Interviewee, Drepung Loselling Monastery, Doeguling Settlement, Mundgod, Karwar District, Karnataka, India
11. Length of Interview: 2 hr 03 min
12. Interviewer: Marcella Adamski
13. Interpreter: Tenzin Yangchen
14. Videographer: Pema Tashi
15. Translator: Tenzin Yangchen

### **Biographical Information:**

Kunchok Paksam's father had passed away before his birth and his mother died when he was 14 years old. Despite his mother's plans to have him marry, he was determined to become a monk so he sold his family's possessions after his mother's death and traveled to Lhasa. He relates the long journey of over two months to Lhasa, the tremendous hardships he and his companions faced due to the severe cold weather and scarcity of food. He vividly recounts his feeling of happiness on seeing Lhasa and his subsequent enrolment in Drepung Monastery.

Kunchok Paksam recounts his life in the monastery, his religious education and his close relationship with his teacher, Tara Rinpoche. He also talks about the mismanagement of the food supply for the monastery by two monk officials and the reforms started by His Holiness the Dalai Lama. When the Dalai Lama was 16 years old he implemented changes in taxes and loans.

Kunchok Paksam talks about the shelling of Norbulingka in March 1959 in Lhasa. He escaped from Tibet through Bhutan and into Buxa, West Bengal, India. He tells about the training he underwent to become a teacher and different Tibetan schools in India where he worked. Later he served three years as the abbot of Drepung Loselling Monastery in Mundgod.

### **Topics Discussed:**

Childhood memories, monastic life, first appearance of Chinese, Norbulingka, escape experiences, life as a refugee in India.

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## Interview #27M

**Interviewee: Kunchok Paksam**

**Age: 81, Sex: Male**

**Interviewer: Marcella Adamski**

**Interview Date: April 10, 2010**

Question: Please tell us your name.

00:00:20

**Interviewee #22M: My name is Kunchok Paksam.**

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?

**#27M: Yes, you can use it.**

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

00:01:26

**#27M: Okay.**

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

**#27M: Okay.**

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

00:01:49

**#2M: [Laughs] Okay.**

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

**#2M: There will be no problem at all, as far as I am concerned.**

Q: Khensur Rinpoche-*la* [respectful term for ex-abbot and reincarnate lama], can we begin by your telling us where you were born and how many people were in your family?

00:02:28

**#27M: Tibet is made up of three provinces. Among the three provinces, I was born in the Dhotoe [Kham] province.**

Q: The name of the village?

**#27M: The name of the village is Chashi. I am a Khampa [a person of Kham origin]. [Laughs and raises fist to indicate that Khampas are known for their courage.]**

Q: What year were you born?

00:03:19

**#27M: 1929.**

Q: So that makes you 81.

**#27M: Yes, I am 81 years old.**

Q: Tell us a little bit about what it was like to grow up in a Khampa family in your village?

00:04:00

**#27M: I have never set eyes on my father. He'd passed away before I could see him. My mother passed away when I was 14 years old. Though I did have relatives, I was practically an orphan.**

Q: From the time you were born to 14, who did you live with and what did you do during the day?

**#27M: I lived with my mother until I was 14. She took care of our livelihood and sent me to learn the scriptures.**

Q: Was there any work required of you as a young boy, besides studying the scriptures?

00:05:35

**#27M: Yes, there were. I had to take the cows and other animals to graze in the morning and bring them back in the evening.**

Q: Were there other children in the family or you were the only child?

**#27M: I had an older brother who did not live in the village. He had already left for Lhasa then. My father had passed away and so it was just me and my mother. She passed away when I was 14 and then I was alone at home.**

Q: After your mother died, was a decision made? What happened to you next?

00:06:44

**#27M: Before my mother died, we owned land and animals like cows, goats and sheep. I was the one responsible for looking after them. My mother had already arranged a marriage for me.**

Q: So what happened next?

**#27M: I was 14 and when my mother passed away, I felt very troubled. I always wanted to become a monk. Due to these two reasons, I sold the cows and my other belongings and decided to go to Lhasa to study.**

Q: You were your own man at a young age.

00:08:14

**#27M: Yes, that is right. I wanted to become a monk, right from the beginning but my mother sort of misled me. She used to tell me, "Do not become a monk so soon. You can become one after you turn 18." So my mother misled me. She had already arranged [my marriage] with a girl. After my mother died, they [the girl's family] told me that I should get married. However, facing my mother's death, together with my desire to become a monk, I decided to go to Lhasa instead.**

Q: After your mother died, did you go by yourself to Lhasa or how did you get there?

**#27M: I sold off the cows and the household items. I owned a house and agricultural land, which I left with my relatives. I packed the things that I needed for myself and I set out with travelers as well as a relative of mine who were on their way to Lhasa.**

Q: Can you tell us what do you think inspired you to want to be a monk for such a long time?

00:10:25

**#27M: A *lama* 'learned dharma teacher' arrived in my village. During the teaching that he imparted, he paid obeisance to the tattered clothed monks of the three great monasteries [Sera, Gaden and Drepung Monasteries in Lhasa]. I was about 7 or 8 years old then. I wondered how a learned person could pay obeisance to poorly-clothed monks and I was deeply touched. That's what inspired me.**

Q: Are you remembering something else?

**#27M: No, I am not. You can continue to question me in sequence as you are doing now. That is fine.**

**The distance [from the village to Lhasa] is a journey of two months. I was 14 years old and during the walk, I had pain in my calf, which did not heal during the whole two-month journey. It was very far and we reached Lhasa walking all the way.**

Q: Khensur Rinpoche, do you know what caused the pain?

00:12:40

**#27M: If you walk the whole of today, you get a pain in your legs. The pain does not subside because you walk tomorrow too and the day after. I continued the two-month journey in this condition.**

Q: You were very determined to be a monk.

**#27M: That is also right, but since I did not have both my parents, I knew I had no one to turn to and that is why [the determination].**

Q: The village of Chashi, what size was the village? How many families approximately?

00:13:46

**#27M: It was not large at all. There were only 7, 8 or 9 families, though these days it has increased.**

Q: Near your own village, was there another monastery you could join instead of going all the way to Lhasa?

**#27M: There was a monastery, but the facilities for learning were not as good as it was in Lhasa. In the village monastery one could learn just the basic prayers and rituals. However, everyone's [monks'] aim was to go to Lhasa to learn the debates [of Buddhist philosophy].**

Q: You said it took two months. Was there any part of the journey that was scary or frightening because you were leaving a very small village to go a long, long way?

00:15:15

**#27M: I was not particularly frightened because there were many other travelers. I faced a lot of difficulty due to the extreme cold weather.**

Q: Was the weather winter time or were there a great deal of mountain passes to cross?

**#27M: Actually it was during summer but even in summer, when you are on the high mountains, it snowed. It was strange in Tibet. One had to cross many mountain passes and there were no proper roads.**

Q: If you were going with a group of travelers and your leg was hurting, could you not ride on an animal so you could get a break?

00:16:27

**#27M: Though there were animals, I did not own one personally. The other travelers had animals, but they were laden with goods for which they were being paid [to transport]. They [animals] were carrying bricks of tea, which were to be sold. I did not have the right to ride any animal.**

Q: Because that was such a transition journey, is there any other memory you can think of before we move on?

**#27M: When we were crossing a mountain pass, it started to snow. Normally when we reached the time to set up camp, everyone went in search of wood to make a fire. However, that day it was so cold that no one could go out to look for wood. We covered ourselves and sat huddled together. That was the most difficult time I faced [during the journey].**

Q: This was a whole new experience for a 14 year old boy. When you arrive in Lhasa, do you remember the day or the date?

00:18:33

**#27M: I cannot recall the exact day or date. However, it was summertime. When we arrived in Lhasa, the fields were ready for harvest. I cannot remember the date.**

Q: What was the experience like to see Lhasa for the first time?

**#27M: Just as it had been my objective for long, I was overjoyed when I arrived in Lhasa. As soon as we reached Lhasa, we went to see the Jowo Rinpoche 'statue of Buddha Sakyamuni.'**

Q: Can you describe what Lhasa looked like? This would be 1944. Can you describe the city and the kinds of people you saw and interesting sights?

00:20:04

**#27M: I came from a village which was not big. When I came to Lhasa, I could not find my way about if my colleagues were not with me. Actually Lhasa is not that big a city, but since I came from such a tiny hamlet, I could not find my way. I had to depend on my colleagues to lead me.**

Q: When you first arrived, where did you go? What place was that?

**#27M: When we arrived in Lhasa, the traders had rented houses where we stayed for a day or two. Then I went to Drepung Monastery, which is about 5-6 kilometers from Lhasa and where I was to study.**

Q: Was there a reason you went to Drepung? Why that monastery and not the others?

00:21:46

**#27M: That was a custom in our village. There is a river that runs through our village with a bridge across it. Those [monks] that lived on one side of the bridge went to Gaden Monastery and the [monks from] families on the other side of the bridge went to Drepung Monastery. That was the tradition we followed.**

Q: What was the name of the river?

**#27M: We used to call the river as Lungchu [*lung* 'village,' *chu* 'water'] as it ran through the village. It was known everywhere as Lungchu.**

Q: When you first saw Drepung, what was your first impression of it?

00:22:59

**#27M: I had faced a lot of difficulties to come to Drepung and when I reached it, I was overjoyed.**

Q: Did it seem overwhelming or enormous in size, in the number of monks, more than you had imagined?

**#27M: Yes, it did. I had not imagined that it would be enormous. When I reached it, there were so many monks and the monastery was so big. I was astounded.**

Q: At that time how many monks were there in Drepung?

00:24:11

**#27M: In general, nobody actually counted the number of monks, but the traditional strength of Drepung Monastery was 7,700 monks.**

Q: I would like, Khensur Rinpoche, to just tell us your story of what happened, so I don't have to keep asking questions. You know your story and maybe if you will be kind enough to tell us what becomes of you in the next few years?

**#27M: When one joined the monastery, a teacher was required. You saw the little monk who came here? The little monk is Tara Rinpoche.**

Q: Tara Rinpoche?

00:25:19

**#27M: Yes, the one who came here, the one who speaks English. He is the reincarnation of the previous Tara Rinpoche. The [previous] Tara Rinpoche was a relative of mine and he was living at the [Drepung] monastery then. He took me as his student. As his student, I studied the *dhuera*, *pharchin*, *oma*, *dhuewa*, *zoe*, which are also known as the *shung kapoe nga* 'Five Great Treatises of Mahayana Buddhist Philosophy.' I studied all these while I lived in Tibet. While I was studying the *zoe*, the Chinese arrived. We lived side by side with the Chinese for about nine years.**

**Then in the infamous year of 1959, the Chinese started to attack. I was living in Drepung Monastery when it began. I saw with my eyes how the Chinese fired their guns and artilleries. I witnessed their actions but there was no way we could overcome them. Knowing that, I could not eat for two to three days. That was because of fear. I was not brave and felt fear.**

**They began the war and fired shells at the Norbulingka [summer palace of His Holiness the Dalai Lama]. The trees at the Norbulingka that were hit, were thrown up, and when they slammed down, many people were killed underneath. Many people got killed under the trees, not to mention, of course those that were killed by gunfire. Large numbers of people were killed.**

**We could see these because we were very close. So, we could not stay back due to the terror. It was on the 12<sup>th</sup> day of the Tibetan lunar calendar, but I do not know the date according to the Western calendar that each of us carried what we could and fled. We had to leave our homes and everything behind.**

Q: That's a very important story, Khensur Rinpoche but before we go on, did you ever have a meeting with Chinese leaders or anybody and His Holiness before 1959?

00:30:01

**#27M: I was not an official and have never been to one [meeting]. Before I made my escape as I was sleeping one night, I dreamed a dream in which Tara Rinpoche and I were handcuffed with ropes and suspended. It was a dream. Rinpoche was suspended and so was I. I started praying and the ropes fell loose and then I woke up. The panic from the dream made me not want to stay at the monastery.**

Q: You said for a while the Chinese and the Tibetans lived side by side. What were you doing in the monastery? You came as a little monk and then could you tell us how did your studies progress? How did you progress in the monastery?

**#27M: I studied the *shung kapoe nga* and had completed my studies by then. However, I had not finished my *geshe* 'Buddhist degree in philosophy.' I completed my *geshe* degree and served as abbot of Loselling [one of the sections of Drepung Monastery] after I came here [Mundgod].**

Q: I want to apologize. My notes were mistaken. I thought you were at the meeting of His Holiness and the Chinese leaders.

00:33:17

**#27M: No, I was not at Domo. His Holiness the Dalai Lama went to Domo because at that time there was the danger from the Chinese. Domo is very close to India and in such an event, it is very easy to go to India from Domo. That was the reason His Holiness stayed at Domo.**

Q: Can you give us any understanding about what happened at that meeting with His Holiness?

**#27M: His Holiness the Dalai Lama and all the important officials of the Tibetan Government had collected there [Domo]. They met to discuss the best step to take as the Chinese leader was already there [in Lhasa]: was it better to return to Lhasa or go to India? The meeting was attended by many people and some said it was better to go to India, while some were of the opinion that returning to Lhasa and finding a solution with the Chinese was better. There were two different opinions. Finally, taking the majority's opinion, it was decided that His Holiness return to Tibet, which he did.**

Q: How far along did your studies progress at Drepung Monastery because you were there until about age 30? Is that correct, Khensur Rinpoche?

00:35:39

**#27M: I came there when I was 14 and lived there until I was 29, so that makes it around 14 years, right? I lived that many years in Drepung Monastery.**

Q: Did you study debate as well as the scriptures?

**#27M: *Shung kapoe nga* is the same as debate. That is the basis of the debate. The debate we study and learn to perform is the *shung kapoe nga*.**

Q: Before you came to the monastery, did you know to read and write from training at home?

00:36:53

**#27M: I did not know how to write Tibetan at all. Leave aside writing, I did not even know to read the *u-may* script [a script different from that used in the holy texts]. People in Tibet did not study, except the government officials. There were hardly any schools in Tibet.**

Q: So you made big progress from 14 to 30. You had to learn to read and write and master the scriptures and master debate.

**#27M: Yes.**

Q: Can you tell us what kind of a student you were and what kinds of studies you know you enjoyed doing and which ones were difficult?

00:38:12

**#27M: I was not an excellent student. Actually there were others who were good and I could not study as well as them. However, while I lived at the monastery, I studied hard though we did not have *tsampa* 'flour made from roasted barley' to eat. I strived hard at studying the scriptures. Once I did not have *tsampa* to eat for three days.**

Q: So there was not always enough food at the monastery?

**#27M: No, there was not. These days, due to the grace of His Holiness the Dalai Lama, we just have to take an empty bowl and the monastery provides everything for us. In Tibet there were no such facilities.**

Q: Tell me about that. What would create difficulties in receiving food? What circumstances would make it difficult for the monastery to get food, Khensur Rinpoche?

00:39:42

**#27M: These days there are many donors who make offerings to the monastery. His Holiness directs people to make donations to those who are engaged in [dharma] studies. Therefore, food is plentiful in the three great monasteries. It was not so in Tibet. As I told you, there were 7,700 monks in Drepung Monastery and in no way could the monastery provide for everyone.**

**In those days there were the *chanzo* 'business managers' and officials of the monasteries who amassed wealth and grew rich. They did not distribute grains to the monks. They [the monastery officials] were very powerful. During that time, His Holiness the Dalai Lama gave two Kalachakra initiations.**

**The Government had allotted lands for the welfare of the monks of Drepung Monastery. However, all the grains [from these lands] were collected by two rich officials and hardly**

any were distributed to the monks. His Holiness the Dalai Lama spoke twice [during the Kalachakra initiations] on this issue saying, "Take the case of Drepung Monastery. All the collections are taken by the two officials and the monks do not get much." Though His Holiness spoke several times, changes could not be affected.

Q: Were these managers monks?

00:42:42

**#27M: Yes, they were monks but not highly educated. They were rich as they had amassed everything. The fact is that the government had given lands for the welfare of the monks. But they [the monk officials] collected the harvest from the land and made themselves rich and did not distribute to the monks.**

Q: Would you say that there were periods almost of malnutrition or starvation among the monks in the monastery?

**#27M: It almost looked like that. The monks were thin with poor clothes. We did not have such robes. [Shows own robe] The robes were all in tatters. They were such that if the wind blew, the air could come in.**

Q: I don't understand, Khensur Rinpoche, why couldn't the Tibetan Government take these men and do something with them and relieve them of their responsibilities and give it to good monks who would distribute the food?

00:44:42

**#27M: [Waves hand to show impossibility before interpretation is complete] That was impossible to achieve. During the nine years that His Holiness the Dalai Lama lived there [in Lhasa], he attempted and managed to bring about quite a lot of changes among the public. It [change] was impossible earlier to that.**

Q: Was there ever any rebellion among the monks, anger and wanting to take action?

**#27M: They [the common monks] did not possess the power to do so. They [the rich monk officials] could do what they liked. It was almost like the Chinese rule, though that is not true. Nobody dared to say anything.**

Q: Were these monks from Drepung or other monasteries?

00:46:03

**#27M: What I am referring to now were the monks from Drepung Monastery.**

Q: Were there particular years that this occurred like somewhere between 1940-1950? What years?

**#27M: One had to fend for oneself during the scarcity of food, as there was no help forthcoming from the government [monastery office]. This was in continuance since early times.**

Q: What did these powerful monks, what did they do with the food? They couldn't eat it all themselves? So what did they do with it?

00:47:13

**#27M: For them the heart is always greedy and it is never satisfied. For one who is greedy, how much ever you possess, there is no satisfaction. It was like that. He was a single monk with no progeny and if he died, that was it. However, he was greedy and there was no satisfaction. He was very rich.**

Q: So they collected the money?

[Interpreter to interviewer]: The grains.

Q: They couldn't eat them all, so what did they do with all that grain?

**#27M: The government had provided land on account of the monks. They collected the income from the land, which they should have distributed to us. They only gave us a little and kept the rest for themselves.**

[Question is repeated.]

00:48:14

**#27M: That was how it was and there was nothing to do about it. I told you earlier that during two Kalachakra initiations, His Holiness the Dalai Lama had spoken about their keeping back [what belonged to the monks] but still they did not change. His Holiness took charge of the country at the age of 16. Since then His Holiness brought about a lot of changes in the way the Government officials were oppressing the people.**

Q: Can you tell us what kind of changes His Holiness brought about?

**#27M: The villagers had to pay a lot of taxes which His Holiness reduced. When grain was given on loan, the rate of interest was very high and His Holiness decreed that none could charge high interests. For example, grains were measured in *khel* and when grain was given on loan, interest was forcefully extracted at the rate of one *khel* for every 4 or 3 *khel* of grain. His Holiness brought about the rule that an interest of one *khel* of grain be charged for every 5 or 6 *khel* of grain loaned. Also when taxes in the form of work horses [transportation] were needed, His Holiness decreed that they should not be forced but paid for the work. He brought about vast changes.**

**His Holiness took charge of the spiritual and temporal duties at the age of 16. Had not the Chinese invaded us and had His Holiness been able to live there [in Tibet], it was certain that the whole of Tibet would have seen a lot of change and progress.**

Q: What was the reaction of the people to the changes that His Holiness was making?

00:51:48

**#27M: The people were incredibly happy. Even to this day, the people in Tibet, thinking of His Holiness give up their lives for the cause. His Holiness has done so much.**

Q: What do you think allowed or enabled His Holiness to see the changes needed to be made? He was a young man. Where did this wisdom come from?

**#27M: This is what happened. During the time the Chinese arrived, two rulers [of Tibet] did not get along and there was instability in the country.**

Q: Who were the two kings?

00:52:53

**#27M: They were the rulers [regents] Reting and Talungta. The actual ruler was Talungta. He and Reting were not amicable and each side developed factions, leading to a lot of unrest. When such a situation arose, the people and the deities put their trust in His Holiness the Dalai Lama. His Holiness was 16 years old then. The deities and the people requested him, "Things are not happening well in this country. Please accept the spiritual and temporal duties." To this His Holiness replied, "In the past, all the Dalai Lamas have taken over their responsibilities only at the age of 18. I am just 16 and have no experience. I cannot accept it now." But humans and deities alike pleaded and he had to accept the responsibility.**

Q: With his take over he was given power? Did both of these two rulers allow him to have this power and to establish changes?

**#27M: They could not do anything because His Holiness the Dalai Lama became the King of Tibet. Gradually their issue died down. Whatever work was to be done was done by His Holiness.**

Q: Khensur Rinpoche, we would love to continue this interview. We have to change tapes in a few minutes. Would you be willing to stay a little longer with us? Is this acceptable to you?

00:56:16

**#27M: I am fine. It depends on the two of you.**

Q: This is very useful information that we need to hear from someone who has seen with his own eyes.

**#27M: Yes, that is right.**

Q: I have a question before we finish as we have a few minutes left in this tape. When His Holiness said transportation should be paid rather than demanded, what was the transportation about?

00:57:19

**#27M: The nobles and the government officials have written permits to ask for horses [from the villagers]. So when they needed to travel or transport things, they did not pay for it but demanded for horses or yaks. [His Holiness] decreed that they [the owners of horses and yaks] be paid for such work.**

**His Holiness banned the forceful extraction of high interest, like charging an interest of one *khel* of grain for every 3 or 4 *khel* of grain loaned. It was deemed reasonable to charge an interest of one *khel* of grain for every 5 or 6 *khel* of grain. His Holiness brought about a reduction [in the rate of interest].**

Q: Did the monastery get even when His Holiness cut down interest and said only one measure as interest for every five part? Did that mean less food for the monasteries?

**#27M: For example, demanding an interest of one *khel* of grain for 3 *khel* of grain loaned was oppression. That was very high interest. Now the rate of interest was fixed at one *khel* for every 5 or 6 *khel* of grain. It was forbidden to charge high interests. Also there were families who owed loans since very long ago. These accumulated old loans were written off. There were many such families who could not repay their loans and which were waived.**

Q: And that was right after His Holiness' 16<sup>th</sup> birthday when he came into power?

01:00:25

**#27M: Yes, he was 16 years old.**

[Tape change]

Q: Khensur Rinpoche, could we please have some understanding about the conditions of health in the monastery, of food, of warm clothing? What were the conditions in your time? You went in 1944, say until 1954, the first ten years you were there. What were the conditions like?

**#27M: At that time [the monks] did not have good clothes. Maybe there were a few rich ones or about 10 percent who had good clothes. The clothes were very poor [for the common monks]. Never mind food like *momo* 'dumplings' and *thukpa* 'noodle soup;' we hardly had enough *tsampa* to make *pa* 'dough made from *tsampa* and tea' to eat!**

**Tara Rinpoche and I used to go to live in caves in the mountains to study for periods of a month and half. We'd use up all the tea leaves we'd brought with us. If there were no tea leaves to add to the boiling water, you did not like it. So in the mountains, we found a plant with white flowers and red berries. If we removed the bark of the root of this plant and added it in water, it became a reddish color and you liked drinking it. We drank that concoction for 10 to 15 days. However, that brought on diarrhea and both of us became sick. It was due to that [concoction]. We became sick. We did not have tea leaves.**

Q: It seems that many of the young monks like yourself came from farms where there was good cheese, milk and grains. So this must have been a big change in diet to not have enough food to eat and these were growing boys. So what was your observation?

01:04:51

**#27M: Whether it was the blessings of the monk assembly or the protective deities, it never occurred to us, "I have nothing to eat. I must leave." We wished to carry on at the monastery. In reality it was not possible to stay on at the monastery; one would wish to go where there was food. I think it was the blessings of the monk congregation and the protective deities that we never thought of going away.**

Q: Did the limitation of food in any way—did it effect study, for good or for bad? Or did it help with study or help with meditation?

**#27M: In reality if the food is poor, one will not have the wish to study. As I told you earlier, it was the blessings of the monk congregation; when everyone gathered together for the prayer assembly, you felt happy. We Tibetans believe in the blessings of the protective deities. Even during the hardest of times, I never felt that I should go back to my village or anywhere.**

Q: Did it ever occur to the monastery, Khensur Rinpoche, that maybe they should not accept more monks for a while until they could care for them better, provide for them better?

01:07:11

**#27M: The monastery did not accept the monks. These days we admit monks into the monastery, but it was not like that in those days. Each one joined the monastery voluntarily. From around 7,000 monks, those that were engaged in studying the scriptures stayed at the monastery. However, most of the monks did not study. They went to the villages to work during the harvest season. They got paid and came back carrying grains or *tsampa* [indicates carrying load on back]. They that were not engaged in studying the scriptures were the ones who went to earn a livelihood.**

Q: So they were self sufficient. They were not dependent on the monastery.

[Interpreter to interviewer]: They were hiring themselves out.

Q: You mentioned going on a retreat. Was that with your teacher, just you and your teacher? Did you go to a cave or stay in some monastery?

**#27M: They [the caves] were in the mountains where there was nothing to eat. We went to the caves to memorize the scriptures for periods of a month or 15 days. It was much easier to memorize the scriptures [in such surroundings].**

Q: So the major activity, Khensur Rinpoche, when you went to the cave was to practice meditating the scriptures or was it just to be still with the mind?

00:10:00

**#27M: I went with two purposes: to memorize the scriptures as well as to understand the meaning of what I was memorizing.**

Q: Did you meditate?

**#27M: I meditated too.**

Q: We talked about an epidemic with some other people and they said that a large epidemic affected a monastery and it was the three monasteries in Lhasa, the three major monasteries. Did you ever see an epidemic or did you ever hear of an epidemic?

01:11:13

**#27M: I have not heard about it. Nothing like it happened during my time.**

Q: Maybe it happened earlier?

**#27M: I do not know if it happened earlier. I told you a while ago about an outbreak of boils [points to face] that I heard about. I have not heard the other one.**

Q: Perhaps that was the one?

01:11:30

**#27M: Yes, if that was the one, I told you last time that I heard there was an outbreak of boils [small pox?] on the face, which happened in a monastery. I do not know in which of the monasteries of Sera, Drepung or anywhere that it occurred.**

Q: In the monastery were 7,000 men, so what would you guess, what percentage just study and what percentage engaged in farm work in the fields and what percentage had other important jobs like managing the monastery or cooking or something?

**#27M: From the total strength of 7,000 monks, only about 2,000 engaged in studies. Almost 5,000 went out on trade or to work elsewhere. They returned at times and at times were out. Though I am not exactly sure, I think there were only about 2,000 monks that engaged in learning the scriptures. For example, I belong to the Loselling School and there were around 200 students in my class. Only 60 of us lived in the monastery to do our studies.**

Q: And were you one of those?

01:01:40

**#27M: Yes, I was among them.**

Q: I thought so. Did you enjoy studying?

**#27M: [Speaks before question is interpreted] When I was doing my studies, we studied because we liked to, since there were no examinations to test if you could go on to the next grade. We learned the scriptures out of our own will and graduated to the next grade. There were no examinations at the monasteries.**

Q: Did the teacher approve of your going to the next class?

01:14:57

**#27M: Yes, you progressed step by step but there were no examinations. Now here, due to the grace of His Holiness the Dalai Lama, we conduct examinations.**

Q: Would the teacher decide based on what you could memorize and what you could present back?

**#27M: If one was able to memorize well, and after 15 or 20 years, the abbot would make the decision. If one was very good in his studies, he was awarded a *lharampa* degree. A medium student earned a *tsorampa* degree. Lower to that was the *lingsi* degree and then the *dhorang* degree. There were four different types of *geshe* degrees that were awarded. The Loselling School had four kinds [of degrees]. During a debate session, the abbot made observations as to how the student performed and awarded either a *lharampa*, *tsorampa*, etc.**

Q: How high were you able to go into the degrees at your monastery?

01:17:00

**#27M: I received the *lharampa* degree. Here, we had an oral test in which I secured the second position. Actually when I sit for a test or participate in a debate session, I am not very voluble because I used to serve as a teacher. I was a teacher for many years and when you are teaching, you do not get the time to study.**

Q: Are you referring here?

**#27M: Yes, I completed my *geshe* degree here [Mundgod, India].**

Q: Was there any teacher who was very special to you in your memory and who inspired you? Can you tell us about him?

01:18:04

**#27M: That teacher was Tara Rinpoche. I am related to him, though not as brothers.**

Q: Can you tell us something about why he inspired you or motivated you?

**#27M: I did not have my parents and thus came with a main aim to [Tara] Rinpoche. To me he was almost like my parents, in terms of the trust and hope I had in him. I have made mistakes for which I have been flayed. [Laughs] However, Rinpoche was very smart and after the beatings, he would give me treats and speak gently to me and win me over.**

Q: He sounds like a parent.

01:19:28

**#27M: [Speaks before statement is interpreted] Had Rinpoche not been my teacher, I was a very stubborn in nature. I used to believe that I should not depend on anyone. Since I was an orphan, I was a strange person. I was stubborn. However, after I came into the presence**

**of Rinpoche, he beat me, cared for me and molded me. I lived with Rinpoche for 47 years. And then Rinpoche passed away.**

Q: I now understand that even though the monastery had 7,000 people, many times 5,000 of them were outside in other places. Is that correct?

**#27M: Yes, they went out. However, if there was an occasion of good food or high offerings [that were being distributed to the monks], they returned. Otherwise they were not there. [Laughs]**

Q: It sounds like Mundgod! We want to get to the end of your story, so I want to understand, when is the first time you personally heard about the Chinese being in Tibet?

01:21:31

**#27M: It was in Lhasa that I saw them with my eyes. [Points to eyes] Yes, it was in Lhasa. I was living in Drepung Monastery when the Chinese arrived. Preparations were being made, which I went to see. Then their vehicles arrived.**

Q: What were they doing? Just driving by or going somewhere? What were they doing?

**#27M: When the Chinese first appeared the Tibetans did not possess such knowledge, but the Chinese come from a large country and they were trained to say, "We have come to help you. What kind of help do you require? If you need work to be done, we will do it. Whatever financial assistance you require, we have come to fulfill it." They came bearing these messages.**

**They gave gifts to the influential people. There were traders in Lhasa who sat with their wares and they [the Chinese] paid them handsomely in white silver coins called *dhayen*. A song went like this in Lhasa, "Mao Zedong is a benefactor, *dhayen* are falling like rain." They [the traders] sang this song. They only saw the money and did not realize that they [the Chinese] were deceiving us.**

Q: Did the Chinese ever come into your monastery and did you see them with your own eyes?

01:24:02

**#27M: They came. A leader wearing a cap like this [places hand on head] along with three or four assistants came and went around Drepung Monastery and then left. They gave *dhayen* to the monks with a letter which read, "We the Liberation Army are offering these *dhayen* that we have collected to you." They were deceiving us and we did not know it.**

Q: What did you see next in the monastery that the Chinese did? Was there any difficulty or problem? Was everything okay?

**#27M: They did not particularly give any problem. They stayed at the army camp in the vacant ground. We did not have any contact with them.**

Q: The time that you became most aware of the problems, was that the bombing you described of Norbulingka, Khensur Rinpoche?

01:25:57

**#27M: It was artillery shells that were fired [at the Norbulingka]. They fired shells continuously. That was where His Holiness the Dalai Lama lived. I am not certain but perhaps they thought His Holiness was living inside then.**

Q: I think so. Did you know His Holiness had escaped?

**#27M: Yes, His Holiness was gone. We did not know of it earlier but learned of it just prior to the shelling. I thought, "It matters not if they shell the Norbulingka, for His Holiness has already left." There was an old lama who thought His Holiness was still inside when the shelling began. He started crying. I told him, "Gen 'teacher,' do not worry. His Holiness the Dalai Lama has already left." He asked [shows startled expression], "Is it true?" And he stopped crying.**

Q: And what did you do next? What happened to you personally after the shelling occurred?

01:27:32

**#27M: I told you that I witnessed the shelling and not being able to eat due to fear and about the dream I dreamed. I had absolutely no wish to stay back. One night, carrying as much provision as we could, we climbed over the mountain pass near Drepung Monastery and came away. We did not have a flashlight and there was no moonlight. But we just continued walking and stumbling.**

Q: What kind of things did you take from the monastery on your journey?

**#27M: We [the monks] did not possess many things. I had a distant relative who'd taught me, "Do not go where there is war. A war will break out in Lhasa. You must not go where there is fighting. If a war starts, you must flee through remote regions and carry some food with you." He was someone who was used to fighting. So I mixed butter and sugar in a bag of *tsampa* and carried it on my back. I ate the *tsampa* on the journey.**

Q: What do you remember about that escape? Who was with you?

01:29:48

**#27M: There were Tara Rinpoche and my relative, Gyaltsen. We used to share a room and ate together. The three of us came together.**

Q: Were the other monks leaving in small groups or large groups or did some of them still stay?

**#27M: They were fleeing too. Everyone was going. There was fear of remaining at the monastery. Everyone was fleeing.**

Q: What were the monks afraid would happen if they stayed in the monastery?

01:30:50

**#27M: [We feared] that the Chinese would come and that they would put us in prison. Looking at the way they fired, we could gauge their every action.**

Q: Had you heard about monks being imprisoned?

**#27M: At that time, it was just the beginning and imprisonment had not yet started. We had seen them [the Chinese] kill countless people by shooting at them. By looking at the way they killed, there was nothing more to do.**

Q: Can you give us a description of how you got from your monastery to India, Khensur Rinpoche?

01:31:59

**#27M: Yes, I will tell you that. As we journeyed on, there was the *Chushi Gangdrug* [Defend Tibet Volunteer Force], consisting of Khampas, as well as the people of other provinces, who were responsible for escorting His Holiness the Dalai Lama. The *Chushi Gangdrug* members came [to Lhasa] and escorted His Holiness across the river. We knew about His Holiness' escape. The *Chushi Gangdrug* had set up a base camp and we thought we would go where they were stationed. There was no way we could stay back [at the monastery]. We wanted to go there. If the situation became desperate, we thought of going over into Bhutan. We thought of it even at that time.**

Q: And what happened then?

**#27M: Then we continued to journey and it took us eight to 10 days to reach Bhutan from Tibet. When we reached the Bhutanese territory, there was a high mountain covered in snow. We were not permitted to go across it.**

Q: By the Bhutanese?

01:33:45

**#27M: By the Bhutanese. His Holiness the Karmapa Rinpoche had been allowed to cross over as he was held in high esteem by the Bhutanese. We were stopped there. We were still close to the Chinese and they might arrive there. However, we were inside Bhutanese territory. For His Holiness the Karmapa to go across, goats and sheep had been sent over on the mountain and then yaks, followed by horses and mules and the retinue [of the Karmapa]. Later we followed in the same path.**

Q: Were the goats and sheep sent across to pave a path?

**#27M: The path was first paved by the goats and sheep because one did not know the way. After they walked [in the snow], it settled down a little. Then it was the turn of the yaks, followed by horses and mules and then the people. We also walked across this path. That was our journey into Bhutanese territory.**

Q: Good.

01:35:45

**#27M:** After we had crossed the pass, again the Bhutanese would not allow us to continue. There were not many Bhutanese soldiers, only about 200. However, there were Indian soldiers and we were not allowed to move ahead. After crossing the mountain, we were stranded at the border for 10 days.

In the meantime, had His Holiness the Dalai Lama not reached India—the Indian government had taken away the passes they had already issued to Tibetans in Kalimpong [West Bengal], Gangtok [Sikkim] and Darjeeling [West Bengal]. Had His Holiness not reached [India], all the Tibetans in Kalimpong and other places would have been handed back to the Chinese. We would also have to go back because we would not have been allowed to enter India.

His Holiness had crossed over through Tsona and met Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru [former Indian Prime Minister] and permission was granted [for Tibetans] to enter [India]. So we were let through. Forget the big things, if not for His Holiness the Dalai Lama, not one Tibetan could have come here. After His Holiness reached [India], we who followed later were let in and those whose passes had been taken back were re-issued them. Otherwise, there was no permission for even one person to come [to India]. That is all due to grateful thanks to His Holiness the Dalai Lama.

Q: Khensur Rinpoche, where do you go in India? It is a big country.

01:38:08

**#27M:** After we left Bhutanese territory, we reached a place called Kukiraza [?] in Assam. The Indian Government provided us with provisions like rice, wheat flour, etc. And we felt very happy. We were issued our passes here. When we came through Bhutanese territory, they extended us a little help, but at that time they were a small [nation] and could not offer us much. Once we arrived in Indian territory, we received plenty of rice, flour and oil. And we felt so satisfied! [Laughs]

Q: As we wrap up, I'd like to understand how did you resume your life as a monk in a monastery?

**#27M:** There were no monasteries [then in India]. His Holiness made arrangements at a place called Buxa in India, close to Bhutan, which was a jail for influential Indian prisoners during the British rule for us to stay. It was large and all of us were housed there. The Indians provided us iwth this place. His Holiness specifically wished the 1,500 monks to study the dharma. We were kept together at Buxa.

As soon as His Holiness the Dalai Lama reached India, his objectives were for the monks to study [the dharma], speaking to Jawaharlal Nehru to set up separate schools for Tibetan children so that they need not be sent to different schools, and to set up settlement camps for the people, besides sending the slightly older youth to the Indian Army. At that time these were His Holiness' wishes.

Q: Did you continue your studies at Buxa for long or did you go next to another place?

01:42:03

**#27M: The monks lived in Buxa for a long period. However, we found Buxa to be very hot. Tara Rinpoche, whose student I was, belonged to the Lama Gyupa Monastery, which was relocated at Dalhousie, a cooler place in India. So when the monks of Lama Gyupa left for Dalhousie, I went along with them. I stayed only about a month or two at Buxa. Have you been to Dalhousie?**

Q: No, but I heard it's cool.

**#27M: It's on a high mountain and it snows much there.**

Q: Sounds cool.

01:43:12

**#27M: Yes, it is cool.**

Q: And then how many years were you in Dalhousie and did you come to Mundgod eventually?

**#27M: We were provided with food rations in Dalhousie. At that time, His Holiness the Dalai Lama advised that all monks who were engaged in debate studies and who were under the age of 40 should learn to write the [Tibetan] script, as we did not know how to write. His Holiness sent a letter [to this effect]. And only then did we start to write. I was 33 years old then and started to learn the alphabet. [Laughs]**

Q: The Tibetan alphabet? You mean when you were in the monastery you hadn't learned to read and write?

01:44:15

**#27M: [Raises both hands to indicate none] Never mind writing the [standard] script, we could not even read the *u-may* script. We could only read the *u-gyen* script [used in writing the holy texts]. If someone started to write, he would be teased, "Are you planning to become an official in the Government?" Nobody wrote.**

**So at the age of 33, I started to learn to write the alphabets in Dalhousie. I learned to write for a year or so. His Holiness planned to select probable teachers among those who were engaged in studying the debates [and learning to write]. We were 64 monks and among them, 24 were selected to train as teachers. I was one among the 24 and I knew only to write the alphabet! Some monks might have recommended me saying that I was good in scripture studies and a good person.**

**Then the selection narrowed to 13 who were sent to Dharamsala. The final number was seven and still I was one among them and I did not know to write. So I went to the Education Department in Dharamsala and requested of them, "I do not know to write. Please excuse me [from training as a teacher]." However, people of noble descent can talk very well and assured me, "You are engaged in studies. It does not matter [if you cannot**

write]. It is very simple." So he deceived me like this and I was in the teacher's training group. I had such a tough time writing my examinations. The tough time lasted for seven to eight months and then eased a bit.

Q: What was the age of your students?

**#27M:** We were yet to train as teachers then. We had to train for two years. After the training, there were many students in the school. Let me say a little on that. His Holiness the Dalai Lama planned to start schools and once spoke in Dalhousie where 3,000 people had gathered, "Who among you will give me children?" There was a man with long hair who hailed from Amdo region. He offered his four year old child to His Holiness.

From then on children were taken in. There were people who wondered what could be done by taking in so many children. But His Holiness had plans and that was how the schools were started. That was the first child. Gradually more and more children were offered and more schools were opened. When the students were ready, you needed teachers. We trained for two years.

Q: What did you teach, Rinpoche?

01:49:20

**#27M:** [Speaks without hearing question] Our teacher was a Canadian girl called Miss Judy. She was a young girl and was teaching us. She had already completed her teacher's training. She was teaching us. We studied teachers' training for almost two years. Then we were to begin our job as teachers.

In the meanwhile His Holiness the Dalai Lama visited our place. We did not have mattresses like this [gestures to mattress on floor]. We were sitting on rugs, as at that time the [Tibetan] Government was already overburdened. His Holiness came and gave us a speech for over two hours, "You must work as teachers and help others. Our situation is like this and you must endeavor to do your best." I could hardly follow because I was in tears and I covered my head with my robes and sat like this [bows full upper body]. It inspired me to work to the best of my ability when I worked as a teacher later. I taught for 22 years to the best of my ability.

Q: For 22 years, did you remain at the schools or did you come back to a monastery?

**#27M:** I taught in a school at Mount Abu in Rajasthan. That was my first stint as a teacher. Though I could not write well, whatever I taught, there was no opposition from the students. Gradually I became better though I could not write well at first. I was three years at Mount Abu. It is in the Indian state of Rajasthan.

Q: And then?

01:52:22

**#27M:** There is a school at Dalhousie with a student-strength of about 1,000. I taught in Dalhousie for about seven years. The Gyuto Monastery was relocated at Mon [Arunachal

Pradesh] and Tara Rinpoche was the abbot there. I requested for a transfer to the school there. I taught at this school for about 12 years. By then I wished to resign from my teaching job. I think it was during a Kalachakra in Bodh Gaya [Bihar] that His Holiness gave a speech saying, "The hermits who live in the caves are exceptional. However, teachers are very valuable." So I could not tender my resignation.

Q: What did you want to do instead of teaching? Was there some other wish?

**#27M:** Then later I was deputed to Darjeeling. I still had some years left to serve in my job as a teacher, but I wished to retire prematurely. We owned a small house at the Gyuto Monastery in Mon. I wanted to retire and spend my days in quiet prayer, as it was very peaceful there.

Q: During all this time, were you still a monk?

01:55:23

**#27M:** Yes, I wore robes like this.

Q: Were you attached to monasteries in these different places or were you on your own?

**#27M:** I lived at the schools where I served. There were about 1,000 students in Darjeeling, 700-800 in Dalhousie and over 400 in Tenzingang [Bomdila, Arunachal Pradesh].

Q: In what year did you finally come to Mundgod and this monastery?

01:56:08

**#27M:** I wanted to resign from teaching and live quietly at our house in Tenzingang. However, I received a letter from His Holiness telling me to take the responsibility of abbot of Loselling Monastery. So it was imperative that I come here. It was difficult for me to directly request His Holiness to excuse me from taking the responsibility, when His Holiness was doing so much.

Secondly, when Tara Rinpoche, after completing six years of abbotship, approached His Holiness with a request to relieve him of the post, His Holiness told him, "You are asking me to relieve you. Whom should I ask? Gyalwa Gedun Drup [the first Dalai Lama], whose hair was white and used a walking stick, built the monasteries for the upkeep of the dharma. You must think about it." Tara Rinpoche had to serve three more years as abbot.

Since I knew about all these, I could not ask to be excused from taking up the post of abbotship. After I had completed two years of serving as abbot, I received the opportunity of an audience [with His Holiness]. I requested, "I have served two years and would like to request you to excuse me after serving three years. I could not request earlier because of what was told to Tara Rinpoche, which I knew." His Holiness said, "That is alright. I will excuse you."

Q: So now you are free to practice and not have responsibility?

**#27M: I have no responsibilities. I have no duties and no problems.**

Q: Maybe we can conclude if you can tell me what do you miss about Tibet or being in Tibet? You have any wishes or memories about Tibet?

01:59:09

**#27M: About Tibet? If it was possible, we should go back. His Holiness the Dalai Lama has justly shown the Middle Path, which gives right to the Chinese as well as to us. I think it is very good if we can achieve this. However, the Chinese do not accept it [the Middle Path].**

Q: What do you think about the Chinese these days?

**#27M: If one is honest, we must say that they are our enemies. However, at times I think it is also due to our past follies that the Tibetans had to particularly suffer. I do not think that the Chinese are out rightly wrong.**

Q: What do you hope, Khensur Rinpoche, will be preserved about Tibet for future generations?

02:00:52

**#27M: It is very important for the younger generation to preserve. His Holiness has particularly persevered very much to set up, not just request of the Indian government, but to have separate schools exclusively for Tibetans, so that Tibetan studies, Tibetan nature and everything Tibetan can be acquired [by the students]. There are exclusive Tibetan schools, which I think are very important.**

Q: What do you want the people around the world to know about Tibet and to do about Tibet?

**#27M: Whatever requests His Holiness the Dalai Lama puts forth, we wish them to lend support. His Holiness does not think solely for the well being and happiness of Tibet; if the issue of Tibet is resolved well, just as His Holiness says, it will be greatly beneficial throughout the world.**

Q: As we finish our interview, I would like to ask, Khensur Rinpoche, what was it like to sit here and tell your history and the history of Tibet and to do this kind of interview? What was it like? How do you feel about doing this?

02:03:05

**#27M: I feel it has been good for us to talk about the true happenings. We have been talking about real events.**

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

**#27M: There will be nothing. It is like a story of my life, so there will be no problems.**

Q: Can we use your real name?

02:03:55

**#27M: Yes, you can. You can do what you like.**

END OF INTERVIEW