

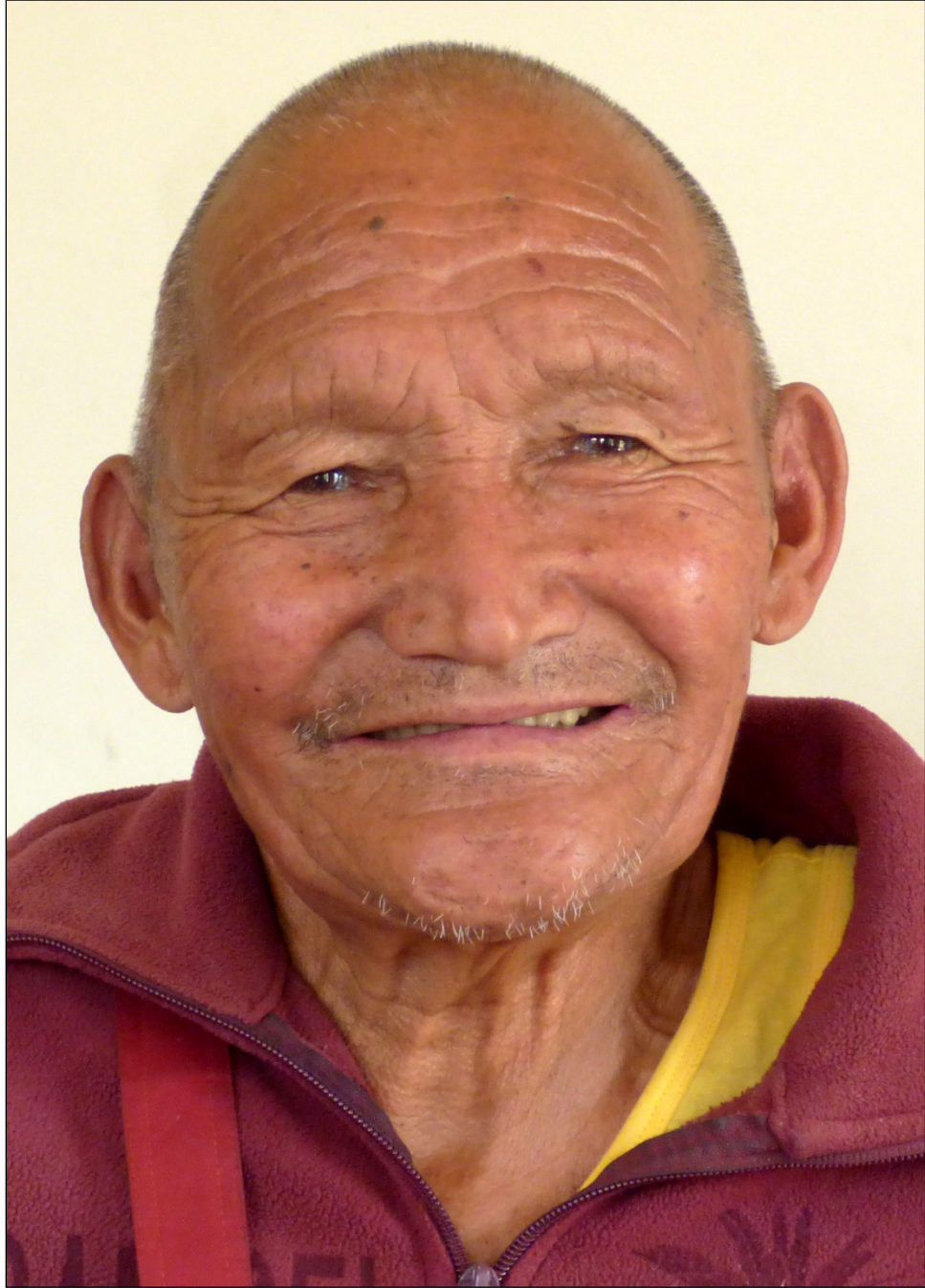
Tibet Oral History Project

Interview #27N – Kunchok Namgyal
April 8, 2015

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INTERVIEW SUMMARY SHEET

1. Interview Number: #27N
2. Interviewee: Kunchok Namgyal
3. Age: 82
4. Date of Birth: 1933
5. Sex: Male
6. Birthplace: Dhueda, Jamdha
7. Province: Dhotoe (Kham)
8. Year of leaving Tibet: 1959
9. Date of Interview: April 8, 2015
10. Place of Interview: Hotel Norbu Sangpo, Boudha, Kathmandu, Nepal
11. Length of Interview: 0 hr 55 min
12. Interviewer: Marcella Adamski
13. Interpreter: Tenzin Yangchen
14. Videographer: Dhiraj Kafle
15. Translator: Tenzin Yangchen

Biographical Information:

Kunchok Namgyal was born in Dhueda, Kham Province. His was a nomadic family that raised animals, herded and milked them. His father was also the designated leader of a group of 70-80 nomads.

Kunchok Namgyal witnessed oppression and suffering inflicted after the Chinese invasion. He recalls how senior lamas and leaders were abducted, persecuted and were never to be seen again. He cites the example of his own father and maternal uncle who were either killed or died from starvation. The Chinese coerced poor Tibetans to be “activists” and created class divisions. He gives a detailed account of how a *thaptsoe* ‘physical struggle [*thamzing* ‘Chinese struggle session’]’ was conducted in front of the compulsory public meetings during which leaders were falsely accused of victimizing the poor.

Kunchok Namgyal was witness to the executions of two leaders that led the resistance against the Chinese. He describes the destruction of all the local monasteries at the command of the Chinese and many of the monks were killed. Fearing his own arrest or execution, Kunchok Namgyal decided to flee. He traveled to Mt. Kailash, where he and his daughter circumambulated the holy mountain before continuing on to exile in Kathmandu, Nepal.

Topics Discussed:

Kham, oppression under Chinese, *thamzing*, escape experiences, life as a refugee in Nepal.

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Interview #27N

Interviewee: Kunchok Namgyal

Age: 82, Sex: Male

Interviewer: Marcella Adamski

Interview Date: April 8, 2015

Question: Please tell me your name.

00:00:13

Interviewee #27N: Kunam [short form of Kunchok Namgyal].

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?

#27N: [Nods]

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.

#27N: [Nods]

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

#27N: I do not think [I] will be able to go to China. The Chinese do give problems.

Q: If we were to show this interview that we are doing anywhere, would it be a problem for you?

#27N: [Silent]

Q: We're doing an interview today; you will be telling us a story. Can we show this story anywhere? There wouldn't be any problem if this were to be shown?

#27N: No, no.

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

#27N: [Nods]

Q: *Gen-la* ‘respectful term for teacher,’ can you please tell us where you were born?

00:02:55

#27N: What?

Q: What is the name of your birthplace, name of hometown?

#27N: Dhueda.

Q: What province is that in?

#27N: It came under the King of Derge in the olden days.

Q: In which province of Kham, Amdo and Utsang does it come?

#27N: Kham. It is the district of Derge in Kham.

Q: What was the nearest monastery to your home?

#27N: The nearest was Dhiphu Gonpa.

Q: What year or how old are you now, *gen-la*?

#27N: [I am] 82 years old.

Q: When you were a young child, what did your family do for a living?

#27N: [We] raised animals, herded and milked them. That was the work. Other than that there were no farmlands or anything.

Q: How would you describe your childhood? What was it like growing up in Kham?

00:05:07

#27N: As mentioned earlier, the livelihood in Kham was raising animals. The Chinese were capturing [people] then, the Chinese.

Q: There were no Chinese when you were a little child.

#27N: [The Chinese] appeared in the year '59. Now I am 82 years old. So how many years has it been?

Q: When you were a little child and living in the hometown...when [you] were growing up then...what was it like then when [you] were little?

#27N: When [I] was a little there were nomadic activities and nothing besides.

Q: Did you remember seeing the Chinese with your own eyes?

#27N: What?

Q: Did you remember seeing the Chinese?

#27N: Of course, [I] did. We were a little bit scared when the Chinese came, scared.

Q: What happened when they came?

#27N: What?

Q: What happened when the Chinese came into the region?

#27N: The Chinese oppressed the senior-most leaders and the senior-most lamas. Then the country became theirs.

Q: How did the oppression begin? What did you see the Chinese do to your village?

#27N: [Silent]

Q: [The Chinese] oppressed the senior-most lamas and the senior-most leaders. How did the oppression begin?

00:07:33

#27N: Saying that they needed to be trained [the Chinese] took away the best people and the best lamas. For instance, [they] took away 20-30 of the best people in a region and imprisoned [them].

Q: Did you know any of these people?

#27N: There were many that [I] knew. None of them are alive now. All of them are dead, died in prison and from starvation. Most of [the prisoners] died from starvation, due to lack of food.

Q: When the Chinese came you were still a young boy...do you remember how old you were when the Chinese came to your village, around what age?

#27N: Me?

Q: Yes.

#27N: I was 15-16 years old then, but [I] cannot remember well.

Q: Did anything happen to your family, *gen-la*?

00:09:40

#27N: Family?

Q: There was your family then...

#27N: What?

Q: Did anything happen to your family?

#27N: My family?

Q: Yes.

#27N: In my family was a maternal uncle. [The Chinese] said that he must attend a meeting and took [him] away. He was not to be seen or heard again. What happened or whether he was alive or killed; he was not to be seen again. He might have been killed. [He] was taken away together with the influential people. There is no knowing what happened [to him].

Q: And then the others? The other family members?

#27N: The other family members were suffering. [They] could not move about freely and had to remain [in the village]. [For instance, they could not] go a distance beyond the Boudha stupa [in Kathmandu]. They were not allowed to go anywhere.

Q: Did you witness anyone being hurt by the Chinese with your own eyes?

00:11:22

#27N: Yes, yes. Many were captured. My father was captured, father. The maternal uncle [I] mentioned earlier was captured. Both of them were never to be seen.

Q: And then?

#27N: [We] do not know whether [they] were killed or died from starvation.

Q: Were there any meetings held in your village by the Chinese for the people to come?

#27N: What?

Q: Were any meetings held, meetings?

#27N: [Silent]

Q: Did the Chinese call the people to meetings; call the people to attend meetings?

#27N: Yes, [the Chinese] did. There were meetings where many people gathered. When many people collected, the poor and serfs were segregated as those having been oppressed and was promoted as leaders. All the leaders were arrested, segregated and their wealth and finances given to the poor and the serfs. The others were labeled as *ngadhak* 'leaders' and were sent away separately. Some of them died of starvation. One was not even allowed

to dig for *doma* ‘wild sweet potato’ for instance. Such was the situation [brought on] by the Chinese. It was not good. So [we] had to escape to Nepal. The Chinese are devils, real devils. They do not have compassion or kind-heartedness.

Q: Who went with you when you escaped?

00:14:17

#27N: [I] do not have anybody. Those that were there have all died.

Q: Who went with you at the time of escape?

#27N: There were 10-11 people during the escape, 10 or 11. One died along the way. Around 10 people managed to escape into Nepal. [We] did not arrive here in Nepal but at Mt. Kailash where there were no Chinese, it being on the Indian border. [We] arrived there.

Q: Was your journey...were you coming from Derge, from your village Jamdha in Derge and you were traveling to Mt. Kailash? How long did that take?

#27N: It took a little over a month. It took a month to Mt. Kailash from the hometown. Altogether it took around two months.

After crossing the river one was in Nepalese Territory.

Q: When you got to Mt. Kailash, did you do any circumambulation?

00:16:20

#27N: Yes, yes circumambulated Mt. Kailash.

Q: One time or many times? How did you do that?

#27N: Circumambulating 13 times is the standard number, but [I] could circumambulate only around 12 times and then it started snowing. One can complete one circumambulation...

Q: In a day?

#27N: Yes, if one started early in the morning one finished by dusk. One must do such a circumambulation 13 times. [I] could not accomplish 13, only 11.

Q: Is it 11 or 12?

#27N: Twelve and it began snowing. When [I] wanted to start the next morning, it started snowing. Then [I] could not go through.

Q: *Aku-la* ‘respectful term for paternal uncle,’ what kind of prayers was in your heart as you were leaving your home and escaping the Chinese? What were you praying about or praying for?

#27N: “May [I] reach a place where there are no Chinese.” [I] said this prayer and left. Then [I] reached Nepal where there are no Chinese.

Q: Were there other Tibetans, you know, at Mt. Kailash? Were there many or very few? What was that like there?

00:18:41

#27N: Tibetans? There were a few nomads but none from my hometown.

Q: Were there nomads?

#27N: There were many nomads from Nagchuka and such that were living beside the snow. Except for them there were none of our people. There should have been people fleeing from Tibet but there were none.

Q: And so at Mt. Kailash who was with you? Your father was gone. You had no idea if he was dead or alive and your mother was with you. Who else was on that journey, part of the journey?

#27N: Mother was not there. There was a girl, a girl: my daughter who was little.

Q: Who else?

#27N: There was not anyone else that [I] knew.

Q: How old was your daughter?

#27N: Daughter was 13 years old then.

Q: [She] wasn't a sister but your daughter?

#27N: [My] real daughter whose mother had died.

Q: How was the circumambulations, the *koras*, for your daughter? Was she able to do that?

00:21:01

#27N: [She] could.

Q: Did [she] circumambulate 12 times?

#27N: It was not 12 but 11. Then it snowed and [I] could not continue. [My] daughter accomplished the standard number of 13 circumambulations. She did one circumambulation a day along with people like Benpo and others that were circumambulating.

Q: She accomplished it and how many did you do, 12 or 11?

#27N: Eleven.

Q: [You] couldn't do 13, right?

#27N: Yes. I missed two circumambulations. [My] daughter completed 13 circumambulations.

Q: You were leaving Tibet in 1959. So that would have...you would have been about 26 years old at that time?

#27N: Yes.

Q: If you were 26 years old, [your] daughter cannot be 13, right?

#27N: How old was I then?

Q: Twenty-six.

#27N: [I] must be more than 26, perhaps in the 40s.

Q: When leaving Tibet?

#27N: Yes.

Q: Did you leave in the year '59 or later?

#27N: [I] left in the year '59, came in the year '59 and circumambulated Mt. Kailash, and stayed there.

Q: If that was in the year '59, now you are 82 years old. So you cannot have been 40.

#27N: [I] was round about there.

Q: Okay, so you were born in '33.

00:23:28

#27N: [I] am 82 now.

Q: Right. If you were born in 1959...I mean you left in '59 and you were born in 1933 that would make you about 26. Okay. Well, what's even more important is when you were fleeing from Derge, your town in Derge Jamdha, was there any persecution of the monks or lamas in your town that you witnessed?

#27N: In Jamdha?

Q: Yes.

#27N: [The Chinese] claimed they were being reeducated but actually they were prisoners. Such was done.

Q: What else happened? Did you witness any *thaptsoe* 'physical struggles'?

#27N: I was categorized...for instance, [I] was in the *ngadhak* category.

Q: You were among the *ngadhak*?

#27N: Yes, among the *ngadhak*.

Q: And then?

#27N: One was not allowed to go anywhere.

Q: Was your family among the *ngadhak*?

#27N: Yes, the family was *ngadhak*.

Q: And then?

#27N: [Silent]

Q: And what happened...were there any monks or religious leaders that you witnessed being mistreated by the Chinese?

00:26:02

#27N: Yes, [I] witnessed many.

Q: Can [you] describe one?

#27N: Somu Tulku.

Q: Somu Tulku?

#27N: Yes, [he] was a minister in the court of Derge, and Nyingmo Agye. They were killed, shot.

Q: Was there any reason given why they were killed by the Chinese?

#27N: The reason for the killing was that [they] were leaders. [They] had taken the responsibility of organizing resistance against the Chinese; that was the reason. Somu Tulku was head of the [resistance] army, the one that was killed. [The Chinese] said that was the punishment.

Q: Were they religious leaders? Was Somu Tulku a lama, a monk?

#27N: Yes, a monk, a *tulku* ‘incarnation’ who became the head of the army and fought. [He] used to be a leader.

Q: When you saw these two leaders killed, shot to death, what was your reaction to witnessing this persecution?

00:28:23

#27N: Though I was not a very big leader, [I] feared [I] might also be killed. However, I was not killed and then escaped.

Q: Was the execution held publicly? Were many people, you know, demanded to be present for this, required to be present?

#27N: Yes, all the people were told to gather. Then those that were to be punished, those belonging to the class of leaders like us, we were kept next to the ones that were to be killed to put fear in us [puts hands behind back].

Q: What about the hands at the back?

#27N: The hands were at the back.

Q: Tied?

#27N: Yes, yes, [the hands] were tied and the legs in shackles.

Q: And then?

#27N: The ones to be killed were led a little distance away. Actually we did not know who was going to be killed. When the actual time came, the clothes of the ones to be killed were removed. [They] were rendered naked and led away in shackles. Then you realized that he was the one when rendered naked. The ones not to be killed were not rendered naked though were in shackles...[not discernible]. They were not killed. Then when you realized they were on the verge of being killed, you ran away.

Q: What was the reaction of the people to see this event, this treatment of the leaders?

00:31:35

#27N: “The leader must be killed. He inflicted hardship upon us. He is a bad man and must be killed.” People were made to say such things.

Q: By whom?

#27N: By the Chinese.

Q: Did the people have to say that?

#27N: The people had to say that. The people had been told to say bad things about someone, which they did. So [the accused] was killed. That is how it was.

00:32:22

Among those were the ones called “activists.” The activists claimed that such a person must be killed, the reasons for him being killed and what hardships the person had imposed. For instance, [the Chinese] made [the activists] point to the person. In some cases the bad activists poked the eyes [of the victims].

What was an “activist”? [They] were the ones that were poor, were beggars and those that lacked food, which was provided by the Chinese. These were called activists. [The activists] accused [a victim] of imposing hardship when [he] had not and of oppression that [he] had not. [They] spoke lies. These were all lies. Then [the accused] was beaten, slapped and poked in the eyes before being killed.

Q: Lashed?

#27N: The *thaptsoe* ‘physical struggle [*thamzing* ‘Chinese struggle session’]’ continued for 2-3 hours and then [the victim] was led away and killed. We, the people were also taken along and left at a distance from here to that compound wall. The ones to be killed were placed there and we were to watch. Then [they] were killed. It was terrible.

Q: Were the people who were forced to hurt the other Tibetans, what would happen if they didn’t do that?

#27N: What?

Q: The activists, the poor people, what would the Chinese do to them should they not do bad things?

00:35:28

#27N: Not do bad things?

Q: The activists were hurting the *ngadhak*. Should the activists refrain from doing so...?

#27N: Then he would be included among the *ngadhak*.

Then there was the liberation that was conducted. If one was an activist then...an activist was a person that had no riches or food supplies. A person that was to be subjected to *thaptsoe*, half of his wealth and finances was awarded to the one that carried out the *thaptsoe*.

Q: Half?

#27N: Yes, reward.

When the liberation took place, the wealth of the person who was to undergo *thaptsoe* was given to the one that carried out the *thaptsoe*. The Chinese did not give anything. The wealth belonging to the people was distributed.

Q: *Gen-la*, how big was the monastery in your town, you know, in Jamdha in Derge?

00:37:43

#27N: The monastery in Jamdha called Jophu Gonpa was not very big. A little further away was a monastery called Ziga that was large. The Chinese killed its monks in the year '59.

Q: Zinga?

#27N: Yes.

Q: Zinga Monastery?

#27N: Ziga.

Q: Ziga?

#27N: Yes.

Q: How were they killed?

#27N: [The monks] fought the Chinese. When the Chinese came to destroy the monastery, the monks resisted and fought and thus were killed. Many monks were killed.

Q: Belonging to Ziga Monastery?

#27N: Yes.

All the monasteries' lamas, *tulku* and *chanzo* 'treasurer,' they took away, imprisoned and killed most of them. It was not only Ziga Monastery but Jophu, Dhiphu, Gophu, Zigang, Horpa. It happened to every monastery.

Q: And the monastery in your own town, how many monks were there and what happened to that monastery?

00:39:50

#27N: There were 30-40 monks or perhaps 40 [in Jophu Monastery]. It was not a large monastery; it was a small one.

Q: What happened to this monastery?

#27N: The monastery was destroyed. The Chinese captured the monks or killed [them]. Actually Jophu Monastery, Gophu, Dhiphu, nearly all the monasteries were destroyed. The

Chinese did not leave one monastery standing. [They] destroyed every monastery in sight. Later some were built anew and presently there are some to be seen. Otherwise, [the Chinese] took away all the images and scriptures. All the bad people were forced to demolish [the monasteries]. The monastery called Dhiphu Gonpa did not even have a rain protection.

Q: Yes?

#27N: It was a fairly big monastery and should it rain, there was not even a roof to shield one for the whole building was demolished.

Q: Which monastery was this?

#27N: Dhiphu Monastery.

Q: Dhiphu Monastery?

#27N: Yes. This happened to most of the monasteries, the majority.

Q: What was the people's reaction to see their monastery destroyed?

00:41:39

#27N: The bad people collaborated with the Chinese and received wealth and provisions while the influential people resisted the Chinese. That is how it was.

Q: Was there a particular, something...a reason why you decided to leave? Did something happen one day or was that just a plan? Were you in danger specifically or just a general plan to leave?

#27N: When the monasteries were destroyed and when people were being killed or arrested, there was no way one could remain but to escape. So all of us escaped and reached here. I fled and arrived in Nepal. Otherwise, [I] would not be here.

Q: Had one not fled?

#27N: Had one not fled one might have either been imprisoned, killed or died of starvation.

Q: Was there a reason why your father was arrested in particular or was he a leader of the village?

00:43:43

#27N: Yes but [father] was not a big leader as such. He was the group leader of about 70-80 people. Ministers that ruled over 300-400 families, Rari Tenam, Chamdo Katop, they were leaders of very large divisions. My father was the leader of a small group of about 60-70 people. [He] was the leader of such a group.

Q: Did you ever hear any information about your father in the years to come?

#27N: [The Chinese] sought information like how many years one had been a leader, how many Chinese one had killed and such things. [They] interrogated in depth, again and again.

Q: How? How many Chinese one had killed?

#27N: Yes. [The Chinese] might have asked, “How many Chinese did you kill? How many encounters did you have with the Chinese? How many times did you go?” If one replied, “[I] did not kill any Chinese. [I] did not fight” then [the Chinese] said, ‘If [you] did not flight, why did you flee up the mountains?’ It was like this. It was bad; it was hell, hell.

Q: The Chinese took away your father. Did you hear any information about what happened to your father later?

00:45:55

#27N: No. You have already recorded the story about father. They captured [him] but there was no knowing where [father] was. We must take food to him. [I] said, “I will go and take food for father.” But nobody knew where [he] was. That was it.

[We] could not deliver any food—did not know where [father] was.

Q: So to go to the story that you told about escaping and going around Mt. Kailash, when you were done where did you go with your daughter after Mt. Kailash?

#27N: There were nomads in the region and [I] stayed doing some nomadic work. Then [we] came to Nepal.

Q: How many years before you came here to Nepal?

#27N: [I] worked as a shepherd, a herder for the nomads and was there for quite a number of years with [my] daughter. I do not know exactly. I cannot remember.

Q: Okay, and then when did you decide to become a monk?

00:48:27

#27N: What?

Q: When did you decide to become a monk?

#27N: I am not a monk, have never been a monk. [I] am a lay person. After [my] wife passed away, [I] began practicing the dharma, circumambulated Mt. Kailash as mentioned earlier and lived that way. [I] had fled from there and when the wife died and did not start a [new] family.

Q: So you only had one wife who was the mother of your daughter?

#27N: Yes, that is right.

Q: Did you take monk vows after the passing away of your daughter's mother?

#27N: Yes. [I] did not seek a wife and did not start a family. [I] lived by seeking alms and circumambulating.

Q: What do you pray for now, *gen-la*? What do you pray for when you circumambulate?

#27N: [I] pray. "May it benefit all sentient beings, including the wife that passed away." She was called Tadon.

Q: Yes?

#27N: Tadon.

Q: That's the name?

#27N: Yes.

Q: Tadon?

#27N: Tadon. "May this prayer be dedicated to all sentient beings including the late Tadon." Praying like that, [I] circumambulated Mt. Kailash and also chanted the *mani* 'mantra of Avalokiteshvara.'

Q: What about the Chinese? Do you have any prayers for them or about them?

00:50:56

#27N: What?

Q: For the Chinese, the Chinese?

#27N: Yes. When [I] say all sentient beings, the Chinese are included. [Laughs] That is it.

[I] do not say any special dedication prayers for the Chinese, but when [I] say all the sentient beings of the six realms, they are also in the realms. Other than that, [I] do not say particular prayers mentioning the Chinese.

Q: What are your hopes for Tibet and prayers for Tibet?

#27N: Tibet is included among the sentient beings. [I] do not say a separate prayer.

Q: Not Tibetans but Tibet, the country of Tibet?

#27N: Whether it is the people of Tibet...when one says all, it is included in there. [I] do not say any individual prayers for Tibetans or anyone but for the sentient beings of the six realms.

Q: *Gen-la*, is there anything else that you would like to end...to add to this interview before we end?

00:52:55

#27N: What?

Q: Is there anything [you] want to tell us?

#27N: There is nothing else. [I pray] for all sentient beings. Even if [I] cannot be of help to anybody [I] cause no harm. That is how [I] feel. There is nothing more.

Q: Where do you live now, *gen-la*? Where is your house or your home?

#27N: Presently [I] am living in a rented place.

Q: How do you get by if you're not part of a monastery?

#27N: There is [my] daughter. She takes care.

Q: Well, we thank you for your story...

#27N: [Yawns]

Q: I think we've worn you out a little bit, but we are grateful to hear your story and sorry that you suffered so much, but we ask for your prayers as part of all sentient beings.

#27N: That is correct, right. It is this. [Raises thumb]

Q: Thank you so much.

00:55:06

#27N: [Joins palms] Okay. *Tsering* '[may you have a] long life,' *lamay kyab* '[may the] lama give you refuge.'

END OF INTERVIEW