

Tibet Oral History Project

Interview #29U – Alak Rita Rinpoche
April 7, 2017

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INTERVIEW SUMMARY SHEET

1. Interview Number: #29U
2. Interviewee: Alak Rita Rinpoche
3. Age: 92
4. Date of Birth: 1925
5. Sex: Male
6. Birthplace: Khotse
7. Province: Dhoday (Amdo)
8. Year of leaving Tibet: 1956
9. Date of Interview: April 7, 2017
10. Place of Interview: Tashi Khyil Monastery, Clement Town, Uttarakhand, India
11. Length of Interview: 1 hr 50 min
12. Interviewer: Marcella Adamski
13. Interpreter: Tenzin Yangchen
14. Videographer: Tenzin Choenyi
15. Translator: Tenzin Yangchen

Biographical Information:

Alak Rita Rinpoche was born to a poor nomadic family in Khotse, Amdo Province in 1925. His family was completely dependent on their animals for survival. They owned only 20-40 at a time so Alak Rita Rinpoche's father occasionally had to hunt Tibetan gazelle when they were desperate for food. Unlike many Tibetan nomads, they lived in a *chamgur*, which was a type of round tent that originated in Mongolia. Pastures were allotted to groups of 30-40 families and they relocated according to the seasons.

When he was 8 years old, Alak Rita Rinpoche was recognized as the 4th reincarnation of the previous Alak Rita. He tells the story of how another revered lama, Kunkhyen Jamyang Sherpa, assisted the monks in locating him. They took him to Labrang Tashi Khyil, the biggest monastery in Amdo. Alak Rita Rinpoche describes each year of his education at the monastery and his success at philosophical debate as a result of his animated performances.

At the age of 18 Alak Rita Rinpoche was assigned as an abbot to a local monastery, serving a 4-year term there before being assigned a 3-year term at another location. Then in 1956 he travelled to Lhasa to attend the Kalachakra empowerment and continued on to India for a pilgrimage. Although never formerly trained in traditional Tibetan Buddhist painting called *thangka*, he always had a strong interest and secretly taught himself by copying other paintings. He explains the religious significance of properly creating a *thangka*.

Topics Discussed:

Amdo, childhood memories, nomadic life, monastic life, customs/traditions.

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Interview #29U

Interviewee: Alak Rita Rinpoche

Age: 92, Sex: Male

Interviewer: Marcella Adamski

Interview Date: April 7, 2017

Question: Please tell us your name.

00:00:10

Interviewee #29U: The name after I became a monk is Alak Rita and the name before I became a monk, became a lama, was Tamdin Kyap. [Smiles]

Q: His Holiness the Dalai Lama asked us to record your experiences, so 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?

#29U: Yes.

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

#29U: [Smiles] Yes.

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

#29U: Okay.

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

#29U: Okay.

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

00:02:06

#29U: For the time being it is not possible to say whether there will be any problem or not. If there is nothing that will offend the Chinese and if it is a simple interview, there should not be any problem.

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

#29U: Okay.

Q: *Rinpoche* ‘reincarnated lama,’ can you please tell me how old you are now?

#29U: 92

Q: What village or city were you born in?

#29U: The place where I was born is for the *lhadhe* ‘servants of a monastic estate’ of Labrang Tashi Khyil—the *lhadhe* of Labrang Tashi Khyil Monastery. There were around 400 families that were complete nomads—were complete nomads—and the name of the place is Khotse.

Q: And that was in the province of Dhomay [Amdo]?

#29U: In the province of Dhomay.

Q: What did your family do for a living when you were growing up?

#29U: We were nomads, poor nomads, and a very poor one among the nomads. My parents were not very capable. We were complete nomads. Being complete nomads, the survival—what to say—was so hard as to bring tears and at times wild animals used to be hunted and brought in.

Q: How?

#29U: Killed wild animals.

Q: Did hunters come?

#29U: Wild animals were hunted and brought in to feed us meat.

Q: Who did the killing?

00:04:42

#29U: My father when times were desperate. In general we were nomads. However, as nomads there were not many animals. Perhaps there were 30-40 animals because without this many a nomad cannot survive.

Q: What kind of animals was he able to hunt?

#29U: The wild animals at that time were what we call *gowa* ‘Tibetan gazelle’—*gowa*. It was mostly *gowa*—the animal called *gowa*. Indians call it *hiran*; it seems to be *hiran*. [I] think so, but it is very small. It looked like [*hiran*].

00:05:53

The main livelihood was milking the 30-40 animals and collecting the butter and cheese that were sold in order to buy barley—buy barley to make *tsampa* ‘flour made from roasted barley.’ Our staple food was *tsampa*, butter and cheese. Being complete nomads,

meat was consumed in order to survive. So one could not do without meat—could not do without meat. Therefore, at times when there was not any meat, a sheep from among the flock was slaughtered and consumed. Then another day wild animals were hunted. There were not any others except the one called *gowa*, or *hiran* as the Indians call it. These were slaughtered for meat. In this way, one survived mainly on *tsampa*, butter and cheese. Though a nomad, we were poor nomads. Our shelter was called *ba* ‘tent made from yak hair.’ Do you know a *ba*?

Q: Tent?

#29U: It was not exactly a tent. Yes, it was a tent. Inner and Outer Mongolians pitch round shaped tents. It was like that. Among our nomads both the tents were used. Among our nomads, there were tents and *ba*, but most owned *ba*. *Ba* is black and square. [Laughs]

Q: What’s the round one?

00:07:52

#2U: The round one is the tent.

Q: That’s the tent.

#29U: It is called *chamgur*.

Q: So both were there?

#29U: No, not both. It was just the *chamgur*. Poles were erected and covered with *champa*. There was one like that. You must know a *champa*, a tent.

Q: Who used these, the Mongolian tents?

#2U: [These tents] are found in Mongolia, mainly in Inner and Outer Mongolia. Long ago it used to be the shelter of the Inner and Outer Mongolians. Gradually a few continued to come to our region. Many people from Mongolia came and could not go back; many got left behind. As is the tradition, they used the *champa* tents.

Q: What were your activities as a young boy? What kind of things did you do in the family?

00:09:46

#29U: As a little one, there was not any other duty but to go and graze the animals. I have a sibling. The sibling and I used to go to graze animals though there were not many animals but 10, 15, 20 or 30. At times there were 30-40 and at times it went down to 20-30 that [we] went to graze—went to graze the animals.

Q: Did you ever stay, in grazing animals, out in a *ba*? Did you have another home besides your *ba*?

#29U: There was not. It was either a *ba* or a tent. We owned only a tent and not a *ba*. Other nomads lived in *ba*. In general, nomads had only one shelter. Between these, the tent was more convenient because whether there was a gale or it rained, however strong it did not seep in. It was not damaged by a gale. It was warm in the winter and cool in the summer. It was convenient. It was considered the best shelter for a nomad, though in general it seems poor. However, it was considered the best.

Q: Did you ever go to higher altitudes when it was...in the summertime or did you stay in the same area all the time and graze your animals?

00:12:15

#29U: The nomads have been allotted sites for there were many families of nomads. So groups of 30-40 families had been allotted a certain area. So there were different sites for the winter, summer and autumn.

Q: Okay. So did the whole group of people travel winter and summer?

#29U: [The 30-40 families] moved and lived together in a circle in their respective area. For instance, on this side [points to right] there were 30-40 families and on this side [points to left] there would be 30-40 families. In this way [the nomads] lived in circles.

Q: In tents?

#29U: In a circle.

Q: In a circle?

#29U: Yes.

Q: Was there any monastery that you would go visit in the winter or is it a different one in the summer? Where did you do your prayers?

00:13:53

#29U: For prayers?

Q: Yes.

#29U: One need not visit a monastery. The monastery was located in a particular place. However, if one wished to offer prayers, one took along a riding animal, a horse or any other animal and invited the monks home to read prayers.

Q: The monks came out to where the nomads were?

#29U: Yes.

Q: What kinds of occasions would bring monks to visit the nomads?

#29U: [Occasions] did not matter. Whenever one wanted to offer prayers, whether in summer, winter, autumn or spring and wherever one was based, if one wanted to make prayers, one took along riding animals—one rode horses or yaks and it did not matter...One took along riding animals and invited home whatever the number of monks was required.

Q: Did you ever want to belong to a monastery yourself?

00:15:43

#29U: When younger I used to go to the monastery when there were prayer assemblies. During such times all the people went to make offerings. So [I] used to go at times then.

Q: And then how did it come about...I understand that you were recognized as the 4th reincarnation of someone very important. Can you tell me about how that came about?

#29U: It was like this. Until the age of 8 I was living in the nomadic birthplace—was living there. If you wanted to make offerings, there was your monastery. It was not a very large one, but there was a small monastery in the region. For instance, in Khotse there was a small monastery for the people called Khotse Monastery. This was where people mostly went to make offerings. Do you understand?

00:17:26

And then when I was 8 years old...the nomads had to keep migrating—nomads had to migrate and during the migration, we packed the tents and all belongings and the next morning loaded these on animals and moved to the other place—had to move. When was that? ‘25, ‘26, ‘27, ‘28, ‘29, ‘30, ‘31, ‘32, ‘33...it was around 1933. In the year ‘33, our [group of] nomads got ready to move the next day. We packed the tents and everything in preparation for the next day. [We] were there without a tent or roof that night. Understood?

Suddenly from somewhere some people appeared and pitched a tent close to us. Then a few monks also came there—a few monks came and what they were doing was searching for [the reincarnation of] a lama, searching for one. We were at home— at home though there was no roof, but were sitting there surrounded by packages. It was said that [they] were searching for a lama. They were talking outside and I could hear my name Tamdin Kyap, Tamdin Kyap. I wondered what it was, but being a child did not understand it. Before long they said, “Tamdin Kyap is the reincarnation of a lama and [we] have come to offer *khata* ‘ceremonial scarves.’”

[To interpreter] Is it too long? Is it fine?

Q: Came to offer *khata*?

#29U: [To interpreter] Am I speaking for too long?

Q: It’s okay. The monks came to offer *khata*?

#29U: [I] heard that [the monks] had come to offer *khata*.

Q: Who was this lama? Someone you knew about or your family knew about?

00:21:29

#29U: The family may have knowledge, but I was a child and did not know much—did not know much, but it was like this...Labrang Tashi Khyil, which I speak about, Labrang Tashi Khyil is not a small monastery, but the biggest monastery in the province of Amdo. It was the biggest monastery and the best in religious studies. Amdo Jamyang Sherpa...[to interpreter] you may or may not know about him. There is none in Sera, Drepung and Gaden [Monasteries] and elsewhere that has not heard of Amdo Jamyang Sherpa. It is the monastery of Amdo Jamyang Sherpa, his monastery. Though Amdo Jamyang Sherpa himself was not present, Amdo Jamyang Sherpa's 6th reincarnation—the 6th reincarnation—the 6th reincarnation called Tenphel Gyaltsen...He is the reincarnation of Amdo Jamyang Sherpa...Oh no, the 5th reincarnation—the 5th reincarnation. He was the one that recognized me as the reincarnation of a lama of Labrang Tashi Khyil. There was no connection with the Khotse Monastery. That part was over.

Q: Did that have any effect on...you are about to leave with your family and go to a new nomadic site and these people came and they wanted to offer you a scarf. Did anything happen or change in your life as a result of this recognition?

00:23:55

#29U: [I] wondered why they were talking about me. Before long a few monks came bearing *khata* and as per tradition a small yellow brocade *chupa* 'traditional coat' and a yellow pointed cap. Bearing these [the monks] came to our house all of a sudden. "[The child] is the reincarnation of Alak Rita and we have come to take [him]." A monk came and offered me a *khata*. Then a big basin was brought forth and also some fresh water and placing me in the basin, [I] was bathed and attired in the new clothes and the new cap. Then I was placed on a felt mat near the fireplace. I sat there and they prostrated three times. That was the age-old tradition of giving respect. After prostrating three times, I was offered a *khata* and told, "You have been recognized as the reincarnation of Alak Rita by Tenphel Gyaltsen, the 5th reincarnation of Amdo Jamyang Sherpa." [I] was offered a *khata*.

Q: Was there any...how did the 5th reincarnation recognize you? Was he with that group or was he in his own monastery?

00:26:41

#29U: Oh no, he would not come like that. There were our custodians in Tashi Khyil. There were the custodians of my previous reincarnation in the monastery. The previous reincarnation's custodians, they came.

Q: Are the custodians family members?

#29U: Well, the custodians of the previous reincarnation can be termed as family members. In the case of families there are progenies that take charge of the family. Families have progenies. Here it is not progenies, but his *chanzo* 'business manager.' When

the lama is there, he will take care and then the *chanzo* will take charge, and when he is no more, the next *chanzo* will take charge. A *ladang* ‘grand lama’s residence’ has custodians. They were the ones that came.

Q: What kind of signs did the 5th reincarnation use to recognize you?

00:27:55

#29U: The sign seen was like this: The story will be very long. For instance, I am the 4th reincarnation—the 4th reincarnation of Alak Rita. The 1st reincarnation was called Alak Rigpay Relti and was highly learned. That was the 1st reincarnation that was the disciple of the 2nd reincarnation of the Jamyang Sherpa—the 2nd reincarnation of Jamyang Sherpa and was highly learned. It looks like my story will be too long. Perhaps I will recount in brief for it will be too long.

Anyway, I am the 4th reincarnation—the 4th reincarnation. My predecessor passed away—passed away and there was a lama who was my custodian. This lama approached Kunkhyen Jamyang Sherpa and wished to ask if the next reincarnation had been born or not. The lama went there. This lama was a highly realized and a strange one. He took along an attendant. He took along an attendant and on the way told the monk [attendant], “When you are in the presence of the Kunkhyen”—at that time the Kunkhyen Jamyang Sherpa was very young, about 15 years old—“the Kunkhyen is young and you should not say too many things.” The lama said that. Understand?

00:29:48

The lama said, “Do not say too much. Keep to the point.” There was his [Jamyang Sherpa’s] tutor. In case of a high lama one must first approach the tutor— approach the tutor and apprise him and then the tutor would tell the Kunkhyen. The Kunkhyen was young in age. So the senior lama [the custodian] approached the Kunkhyen...no, approached the tutor. The Kunkhyen was sitting in a room. The attendant had earlier served as the attendant of the Kunkhyen. So [they] knew each other. “Please come here,” the Kunkhyen called and said, “What is it?” “Alak [the custodian] has just now gone to see [your] tutor.” “Okay, that is okay.” There was the akar wood. Do you know the akar wood?

Q: It’s a kind of tree?

#29U: Yes, a tree called akar. Akar has a sweet fragrance.

Q: It has a sweet fragrance?

#29U: It has a sweet fragrance, the akar. A dry branch of akar...Listen well. There was a dry branch of akar that had fallen on the ground—fallen on the ground. [The Kunkhyen Jamyang Sherpa said,] “Please bring that branch and I shall plant it.” That is the sign. Listen well. “[I] will plant the branch,” said the Kunkhyen. The monk [attendant] replied, “The branch is dry. Will it grow? The branch is dry. Will it grow? Will a dry one grow unless it does with your blessing?” he replied. “Do not say that. Bring it and we shall plant it and it should grow.” The dry branch of akar was picked up and planted in the flowerbed

where there were many flowers and said, “It is planted and will grow,” said [the Kunkhyen]. “It is planted and will grow.” [To interpreter] Keep that in mind.

00:32:04

The lama had apprised the tutor and came out and met the attendant. “Did the Kunkhyen say anything?” “Yes.” “What did he say?” “There was a dry branch of an akar and [he] said ‘Bring that and we shall plant it.’” “What did you say?” “I replied, ‘Will a dry branch grow?’” [Laughs] “Will a dry branch grow by planting unless it does with your blessing?” [The lama] became angry. “I told you earlier to take care of your mouth and speak after thinking.” He became angry and scolded [the attendant]. “Then what happened?” “He planted the dry branch.” That was the sign by the Kunkhyen.

Q: Did it grow?

#29U: No, no. It was about me. [The lama and attendant] had gone to seek information about me. [To interpreter] You did not follow. The lama was seeking information about me, the reincarnation of my predecessor.

Q: Yes, yes, yes.

#29U: [The lama] was seeking information and that was the auspicious sign. You asked about the sign earlier. That was the auspicious sign.

Q: Where did they plant the tree?

00:35:50

#29U: It was planted at the residence of Jamyang Sherpa where there was a flower garden nearby. It was planted there. The reason for planting it was to look for an auspicious sign. [To interpreter] You should know. The reincarnation of Alak Rita was being searched for. To put it in our terms, “Kunkhyen Jamyang Sherpa foresaw it.” Understand? He was looking for a sign, which was that [the next reincarnation] was of noble birth.

However, for the time being due to some misfortune, [it] had fallen on the ground and dried. So the dry branch must be planted and made to grow. “[The next reincarnation] is of noble birth like the akar and not just any other kind of wood. Earlier it was asked as to what the signs were and this is the sign. “Kunkhyen Jamyang Sherpa knew right from the beginning” to put it in our terms. Otherwise, nobody had told him anything earlier...Nobody had told him yet he knew the reason for [the lama and his attendant] coming there and gave this indication to the monk. Understand?

Q: How did the two searchers know to come and find you as a special person? How did they get directions?

00:38:17

#29U: I am narrating [the incident] about [the lama and attendant] seeking indications from Kunkhyen Jamyang Sherpa. Then Kunkhyen Jamyang Sherpa asked to bring a list of the names of certain children in a certain area. [He] said that. Understand? “Bring a list of

the names. Bring a list of the names,” he said. Then a list of the names of children from certain areas were drawn, a list of the names were drawn and taken to him. Then either through divination or premonition—we would not know—names were withdrawn step by step and finally only one remained; only one remained. Then it was decided that the one that remained was the reincarnation. Understand?

Q: Were there many...were they looking for boys of a particular age because you were 8 you said. So were they looking for all 8-year-old boys for some reason that age was important?

00:40:10

#29U: The same age group. For instance, the requirement was 8-year olds. I was 8 years old then and [the requirement] was 8-year olds. As I mentioned [Jamyang Sherpa] was approached to seek information about Alak Rita and not about me. When the next reincarnation of Alak Rita was being sought, the indication was the dry akar that he had knowledge about.

Later when the names of all the children were collected and after elimination of the others, I was selected. It was decided that I was the one. It was decided that I was the one. It seems he knew from the beginning and this could be gauged from his saying that when planted a dry akar would grow. “There is some kind of obstacle, but once recognized as a lama, he will turn out well gradually.” Therefore, he determined it was I.

Well, if one does not know the whole story, it is complicated. This is a long story though I am trying to narrate a gist of it and this may turn out to be too short. You must know the whole story and it is something like this. [To interpreter] Understand? It is good if you understand.

Q: What was your personal reaction to that information to being told you were the special reincarnation? Do you remember how you felt at 8 years old?

00:42:21

#29U: [I] was a child, and as a child felt that someone had come for me. We were a poor family. Being a poor family, everything was poor in terms of food and clothing. And then suddenly the custodians came and [I] was being recognized as a lama. There was not anything else but the feeling of happiness.

Q: Did your life change in any way?

#29U: Yes.

Q: How did it change?

#29U: Well, [we] had to move to another place the next day. I left with those that had come. My custodians had come and they took care. We [the nomadic group and the monks group] traveled side-by-side and camped together for a few days and relaxed along the way. I did not understand much but my custodian had come, the custodian had come. The

custodian said, “He is a true reincarnate, a true reincarnate because he has foreknowledge, foreknowledge, has foreknowledge.” This was signified by...

00:44:00

My custodian lamas used to travel frequently to Mongolia—to Mongolia, travel frequently to Mongolia. The attendant who had come did so too. He had a whip in his hand—a whip, a whip to use on horses. Actually, the whip was one that was used on camels. It was a stick, one that is called a whip. It seems I said this though I do not remember and one should not lie. I do not remember, but he [attendant] said, “He is a real reincarnate because he has foreknowledge for he asked to be given the stick and said, “This is a stick that is used on camels when you go to Mongolia, right?”” He was told this. Therefore, it was said that [I] was a real reincarnation. There was this conversation, but I cannot remember this—cannot remember talking about Mongolia and such. However, such a conversation took place.

Q: I missed...what about the trip on a camel to Mongolia?

[Interpreter to interviewer]: A whip, whip.

[Interviewer to interpreter]: Oh, you said...

[Interpreter to interviewer]: He had a whip and Rinpoche said, “You use this whip on the camel when you go to Mongolia.”

[Interviewer to interpreter]: That was the attendant he said that to?

[Interpreter to interviewer]: He said to one of the attendants.

00:45:57

#29U: You know a camel—a camel?

Q: Did the family...did you understand the idea of reincarnation and what that meant or was it just that you were being told you were very special?

#29U: I just said that I cannot remember [talking to the attendant] but it was said that I said it. They said so.

They said so but I could not understand.

Q: And so where did they take you and what happened next?

#29U: Then [we] traveled together, together with the nomads for a few days. We had to stay a few days and did so at a certain place. I will narrate a long story and [to interpreter] it is better that you take notes to remember. [We] camped at a place—camped at a place and pitched tents and such. Then people gathered and offered *khata* to the one recognized as a lama. Understand?

Listen, first listen, and then it is easy for you [interpreter] to take notes. Then we went and camped at a place. The people collected, people came there. Then we pitched tents like we do here in times of celebration. Likewise, tents were pitched and a throne erected on which I was placed. It was announced, “[This child] is a native of our region and is the reincarnation of Alak Rita.” Then all the people gathered and made offerings of *khata*.

Q: And then what happened to you?

00:48:17

#29U: And then we had to proceed to Labrang Tashi Khyil. We journeyed to Labrang Tashi Khyil. Understand? We journeyed to Labrang Tashi Khyil. There was a certain place before reaching Labrang Tashi Khyil where [we] had to spend a night. After spending a night, my custodian lama and many others that knew [the previous Alak Rita] and many sponsors came to this place and spent a night. Then everybody made offerings of *khata*. The next day we went to Labrang Tashi Khyil to my residence.

[We] proceeded after spending a night at that place.

Q: Did your parents come with you or did they accept the fact that you were being taken away?

#29U: Father and Mother were required to come along that day. I had to be dropped off at Labrang Tashi Khyil. A few people of my region and Mother dropped me off at Labrang Tashi Khyil and after offering *khata* went back to their respective places.

Q: Do you remember how that felt when they left you and went away?

00:50:38

#29U: There was not anything like that. [I] felt glad and happy. There was no sadness of any kind.

Q: And then what did you do? How did you spend your days after you were brought to that monastery?

#29U: On reaching Labrang Tashi Khyil there was the lama who was my custodian. There was the custodian lama. This lama took care [of me] and began to teach the scriptures. After choosing an auspicious day, [he] began to teach the scriptures. The lama taught [me] the scriptures—the scriptures.

Q: How long did you stay as a student in the monastery?

#29U: Well...this is a very long story but everything is not required. This lama took care of me. For around a year we lived in the same house and the lama taught the script and everything. Later, the lama was very busy and it was not easy. So a teacher, a great learned one, was found from outside. So instead of living in the *ladang*, a small house was purchased where I moved and studied.

Q: Did you like studying? This was such a big change from being a herding boy?

00:53:15

#29U: [I] did not have any such feelings—did not have feelings like missing the animals. There was nothing like that. I focused on studying and what the teacher taught. I am one that loved my teacher very much, one that loved the teacher very much.

Q: Why did you love your teacher so much? What was your teacher like and how did your teacher treat you?

#29U: The physical appearance? [Laughs] To describe the physical appearance, [my teacher] was very tall like you, the English, incredibly tall and plump. [He] did not have hair, just a thin line of hair here [touches back of head]. He was very dignified and grand looking.

If not seven feet, [my teacher] was definitely six feet [tall].

Q: Yes?

#29U: The height. If not seven feet, [my teacher] was more than six feet. [He] was that tall, and very grand looking.

Q: When I said “what was he like” I meant was he very strict? Was he kind? Was he patient? Did he punish you if you didn’t do your homework? Did he reward you? What was he like as a teacher?

00:55:30

#29U: [My teacher] was not strict. Perhaps a little if one spoke lies at times. [He] was not strict but very relaxed. Using tactics...if I was tired after reciting for long, [my teacher] stopped and told stories to make one relax. Once one felt at ease, [he] resumed teaching the prayers. [He] did such.

Q: And then because you were this important reincarnation, did you have to, you know, be the head of all ceremonies and frequently were you brought forth to bless the people? What duties did you have?

#29U: The duties came much later. In the meantime when I turned 10 years old, at the age of 10 one must join the assembly at Labrang Tashi Khyil. Understand? Join the assembly—join the assembly at the monastery. It was not simple to just take on responsibilities. One must join the assembly at Labrang Tashi Khyil.

Q: What’s “join the assembly,” a test?

#29U: Join the assembly; little monks must join the assembly. Do you understand or not? All new monks in Sera, Drepung and Gaden [Monasteries] must join the assembly. Likewise, [I] had to join the assembly at Labrang Tashi Khyil.

00:57:31

It is the substitute for a school—substitute for a school. These days there are schools, but instead of a school, one must join a monastery.

That was a long time back. The previous incarnation of the Panchen Lama, Choekyi Nyima...Choekyi Nyima arrived in Labrang Tashi Khyil. [The Panchen Lama] had traveled to Mongolia, and from Mongolia to China, and from China to Labrang Tashi Khyil. It was the year I joined that [he] arrived in Labrang Tashi Khyil and stayed a month and gave the Kalachakra initiation. That is a very precious one.

Q: So the previous reincarnation was still alive...?

[Interpreter to interviewer]: The Panchen Rinpoche Choekyi Nyima.

#29U: Panchen Choekyi Nyima.

[Interviewer to interpreter]: Not the reincarnation...?

#29U: The previous reincarnation of the one that passed away in China.

[Interviewer to interpreter]: The previous...

[Interpreter to interviewer]: The Panchen Lama.

[Interviewer to interpreter]: The Panchen Lama was alive and gave the...

[Interpreter to interviewer]: ...Kalachakra initiation at Labrang Tashi Khyil.

#29U: [The Panchen Lama] stayed for a month. At that time, for instance, there were 13 grades at Labrang Tashi Khyil—13 grades as in a school. It was the year I was a freshman and in the 1st grade.

Q: What kind of a student were you?

#29U: Me?

Q: Yes.

00:59:38

#29U: [I] was not the best of students because [I] did not make any effort. [I] did not lack in intelligence; the intelligence was good but [I] did not make any effort.

[I] liked drawing from a young age.

[Interviewer to interpreter]: Drawing?

[Interpreter to interviewer]: Drawing.

Q: Was that how you first got interested in *thangka* ‘ritualistic Tibetan Buddhist paintings’ painting?

#29U: No, there were no teachers that taught about *thangka* painting. If there was a good drawing there [points to the right, I] copied it. If there was a good drawing there [points to left, I] copied it. In the case of drawing, [I] liked only good drawings and not bad ones right from the early days. Besides, [I] do not like drawings of humans or houses or such, but the drawing of deities that [I] liked as a child. Therefore, I looked at drawings done long ago by accomplished artists and loved to copy those. The fairly good drawing I am able to do these days is due to that for there were no teachers to learn from.

Q: Did they let you do drawings in the monastery as part of your study?

01:01:42

#29U: [I] did it secretly on any kind of paper. The teacher should not see these. The drawings were done in secret on anything.

Q: Oh, my goodness, a secret artist!

#29U: For the memorization, there was a particular portion to memorize just like a school where there is a syllabus for each year. Whichever the grade, there was a particular number of pages that were this [keeps hands apart two feet] long [to memorize] in a year. There were two portions in a year whether it was 20 pages or 40 pages. There was the syllabus that had to be learned and a test given.

Q: Was it memorization?

#29U: Yes, give a test after memorization.

Q: Did you learn how to write as well as...did you learn how to read and did you learn how to write in Tibetan or Sanskrit?

01:03:07

#29U: Except for Tibetan there was not any need to learn other languages then.

Q: I understand many years may have passed since you did it officially, but when did you start to paint *thangka* paintings?

#29U: [I] began to paint a few *thangka* at around the age of 20, but did not do many paintings because it was not taught. It was not taught, but it was done because I liked drawing. It was not taught. Therefore, whenever I felt like it I did a few *thangka* and this started around the age of 20.

Q: When you were 20 years old?

#29U: Yes.

Q: Did you acquire any formal education?

#29U: There was not any education, but [I] kept practicing as a child. There was not any formal education.

Q: Rinpoche, you have a beautiful *thangka* behind us...behind you...and I wonder if you can tell us about some of the...First of all what does this *thangka* represent and did you design it yourself or is it a copy of a very famous *thangka*?

01:05:27

#29U: Some [of the figures] are copies and some are not and done from [my] mind.

Q: From your mind?

#29U: [Nods]

Q: Okay. Could we...what if...maybe we could just turn your chair around and maybe you could point to some of the figures in the drawing? Would that be okay?

#29U: Yes, that is okay. In general, this is a story about me and perhaps [I] should continue it because it is moving in another direction, right?

Q: Okay.

#29U: Let us continue where [we] left, the part about my education. Right?

Q: Okay.

01:06:35

#29U: To continue...for instance, there are Grades 1, 2 and such in school. I was in the 1st Grade the year the Panchen Lama visited—in the 1st Grade and even if one did not study, the teacher always guided and taught the scriptures. The memorization part was imperative and there was no escape whether one liked memorization or not. Besides that there was the debating part, which you could not do just like that, but joined the other students in the class, debated and learned the meaning of the texts. So in brief, there are *khadhok karmar* ‘lesser collected topics of logic,’ *dhueda* ‘collected topics, elementary class in logic,’ *dhuechen* ‘greater collected topics of reasoning’ and then *tharig* ‘logic.’ Fourth Grade...let’s skip to the 4th Grade. [Laughs] I think it is getting too long.

Q: Fourth grade.

#29U: Gradually [I] reached 4th Grade without failing—it should be mentioned—[I] did not lag behind. It was like that.

01:08:45

Then in the 5th Grade my classmate—perhaps you have heard and perhaps not—Gongthang Jamphelyang. [To interpreter] Perhaps you have not heard, but perhaps he [points off camera] has heard. There is almost no one belonging to the Gelug tradition that has not heard about him, who was from Labrang Tashi Khyil and highly accomplished. We were in the same class. Gongthang Jamphelyang.

Jamphelyang was a very high lama and very learned, the previous reincarnation. The present one and I were in the same class.

Q: He was a highly accomplished what?

[Interpreter to interviewer]: Lama.

[Interviewer to interpreter]: Lama?

[Interpreter to interviewer]: Lama.

#29U: A *rinpoche*, *rinpoche*.

We were in the same class. In the 5th Grade...you would have heard about our rising and debating in an assembly. Two people rise and debate. That takes place. Two people rose and debated in the middle of an assembly [of monks]. My opponent Jamphelyang and I debated. Understand?

01:10:45

The assembly was in session and we had to rise and debate. [We] debated. Generally, to look at I seemed gentle then, but possessed an aggressive nature though I did not know it. As the debate went on [I] became more and more aggressive and did it powerfully.

Jamphelyang was not like that. He was very relaxed and never became aggressive. [He] was relaxed, and highly learned. We debated like that. Understand? However, when people watched, people saw that...he was a high lama and was making an offering of tea to the entire monk congregation that day. Understand? So there were many thousands of nomads that had come there from his side of the region. Understand? The large assembly hall was full of spectators. I jumped up and down as if doing wonderfully—jumped up and down [laughs]. It happened like that. Later it was said that—my name is Alak Rita—“Alak Rita is a highly learned one. Jamphelyang is also highly learned.” People said that and [we] became famous. Understand? [Laughs]

01:13:05

He was the learned one and I got the name.

Q: You put on a good show, a good performance.

#29U: Yes. [Laughs] That is why I narrated this.

Q: Oh, that's great! Rinpoche, could you give us, for people who have not seen a debate, some of the questions that you would throw at each other that you would challenge each other? Can you give an example of some? Is that permissible?

#29U: Whatever questions you throw, it is to test whether he knows the answer or not—test him. If he does not there is a *tsar* '[gesture indicating] to be finished' one can do, do *tsar* like this, like this [claps with the back of hands]. Doing the *tsar* means you could not answer and it was to break him and say "You have been broken."

01:14:37

For instance, there are various kinds of questions-answers. If it were two lay people, one would question me about business and another would want to ask questions about office work. [To interpreter] It is not necessary to write this down. I relate an example.

So during the debate, one will throw questions only about business, "What will happen if one does this kind of business? What will happen if one does this kind of business?" The other will ask questions about office work. It was like that. There are two different [people] debating. If he cannot answer my question, I will crush him. If I cannot answer his question, he will crush me. That is how it is. Debating means that. So that day I was the winner, and you can stop at that and ask me about something else.

Q: That was a very special day.

01:16:14

#29U: It was in the assembly.

Q: Wonderful story.

[Whispering]

Q: Anything else that you'd like to talk about for that period in your life?

#29U: Then gradually the 5th Grade was completed. The 5th Grade was completed and [I] was in the 6th Grade. One must study the full year, and attend *choera* 'debate sessions' from time to time and study. Besides, there was an assembly when all the monks congregated. If it was the class above mine, the class above gathered. The class gathered and I must rise alone and debate [against the entire class]. The two classes met as opponents. When the two classes met as opponents, all the students of the upper class assembled and gave the answers. The one that stood up has to be one person from the lower class. Understand?

01:18:12

That year when the debate took place, the class above had gathered on one side and we on the other side. One person each had to stand in turns from our class. I stood up and then someone else, and then perhaps five or six people in turns. That year too I stood up. Whatever be said, deep down I was not of poor intelligence. However, there was lack of effort and that was the drawback. When the debate took place that year there were over a

hundred monks in their class, in their class. I had to rise alone, which [I] did and debated. That year I was fortunate during the debate and they just could not answer my questions. Since they did not know [the answers] I jumped up and down and overcame them. Then I acquired a great name of a learned one. I am speaking the truth and not lies. This was in the 6th Grade.

Q: Yes, I believe you. You really enjoyed learning and competing with people for..., yes.

01:20:17

#29U: [I] did not like studying regularly but...[not discernible]. [Laughs]

Q: I think you liked the competition. Rinpoche, what would you like to discuss regarding your life next? Any topic you wish to cover?

#29U: Then it was like this. I will recount in sequence. Then that year [I] became famous as a learned one. However, what I feel is, in my opinion I feel that there have been obstacles in my practice as a dharma practitioner because without much education I became famous. [I] had a great name but did not wish to study. I have a feeling of suspicion that was an obstacle in my becoming a learned one. Understand?

Again the next year in the 7th Grade...it was the 7th Grade. [I] had to rise in the 7th Grade too like before. Understand? [I] had to stand in the 7th Grade too and stood up alone to debate. However, during the debate session...your teacher would be watching the proceeding and if something did not go well, the teacher stopped it. Understand? The teacher put a stop to it.

That year the debate went on as before with [me] jumping about. They [opponents] partially understood my questions. There was an error and they understood partially. Actually [they] did not but I was jumping around a lot and the teacher felt uneasy thinking, "Oh, they have understood. This is not right." The teacher quickly stopped it and I did not get to debate much. That year [I] neither won nor lost and there was no time to get a name. [Laughs]

Q: Why was the proceeding stopped?

01:24:03

#29U: As I mentioned earlier they understood. They had understood, those who were sitting—sitting on the floor, that class. If the [opposing] class understood, I would not be able to throw too many questions. Understand? Thinking [I] would not be able to throw questions; he [the teacher] stopped it.

[Discontinuity in video]

...in our hometown lamas cannot be doing nothing, but must go to different places as abbots because the monastery was very vast. [To interpreter] Do not write this. This is to give a general picture so you can remember. [A lama] must go. Therefore...take me for instance. [I] was 18 years old when [I] finished 12th Grade. [To interpreter] You can write

this. [I] was 18 years old when [I] completed 12th Grade, 18 years of age. There were many monasteries under Labrang Tashi Khyil.

[To interpreter] Write this down. There were many monasteries. It used to be said that there were 108 monasteries under [Labrang Tashi Khyil]. Abbots had to be appointed in all these and the lamas were required to go as abbots, the *tulku* ‘reincarnated lama.’ Understand? The *tulku* had to go. If the *tulku* were the ones to go, then there had to be many *tulku*. A small number of *tulku* cannot cover all. So after we completed 12th Grade, one joined a higher institute, which we call college here. [A lama] did not get the opportunity to attend one for [they] were appointed as abbots. Understand?

When I completed 12th Grade [I] was 18 years old. Ten days after my 18th year, the 5th reincarnation of Khenchen Jamyang Sherpa that had recognized me as a lama called [me]. There was a monastery called Tsayi Gonpa, which is a subsidiary of Tashi Khyil; it was not a large monastery but a small one and I was told to go as an abbot there. I was sent as an abbot there. Understand?

01:27:36

[I] was appointed as an abbot and remained there as an abbot for four years. Initially it was for three years, but then everybody praised [me]. Both the monastery and village praised me though I did not know about it. Everybody liked [me] and the term was extended by a year. So [I] was there for four years. During that period there developed very cordial relationship between the monastery and the people. They liked me very much. In that monastery [an abbot] must call *mangja* ‘prayer assembly of entire monk congregation during which tea was served’ seven times a year. So for instance in four years it is seven times four which equals 28. There were 28 *mangja* that took place in four years. There was very cordial relationship between us and the people and the four years came to an end. That is about it, right?

01:29:14

So in this way...18, 19, 20, 21 [I] was 21 years old, 21 years old.

Q: 22 years old.

#29U: Yes, 22 years old, completed 22 years of age. After that there was a bigger monastery called Mergay Gonpa—Mergay Gonpa. There was a large monastery known as Mergay Monastery. Again [I] was sent to this large monastery. It was only 10 days after my previous assignment. Ten days after the term ended [I] had to go to this monastery as an abbot.

[I] went there and like it happened earlier had to stay for four years. After three years it was said, “It is imperative for you to stay back.” The monastery and the village came and said that it was imperative for [me] to stay back and [I] had to remain for four years.

However, the people of that time were not like people these days for they were very spiritual, incredibly so. Even a little child prayed to Kunchok Sum ‘the Three Jewels: the Buddha, the Dharma and the Sangha’ and chanted *Om mani padme hung* ‘Hail the jewel in

the lotus.' Their hometown's lamas and likewise monastery, likewise Labrang Tashi Khyil, which is the main monastery where Kunchen Jamyang Sherpa and others lived and besides these even as far as Lhasa, and His Holiness the Dalai Lama was believed to be the Buddha by everybody. Both the young and the old had the same belief. Likewise, these days it is almost the same here. However, in those days it was more than this as everybody had great faith and belief.

01:31:45

And then [I] completed four years at Mergay Gonpa and returned. There was Shetsang Gonpa—Shetsang Gonpa, which is also a monastery where there were 400-500 monks. The earlier monastery also had 400-500 monks and the new one also had 400-500 monks. To this monastery again...By then Khenchen Jamyang Sherpa who recognized me earlier was no longer living. [I] was three years in Shetsang Gonpa.

After three years it was said that [I] should stay another term. There was a great deal of insistence. At that time, for instance, at home was my custodian lama who said, "You have to go on a pilgrimage. You are the only one amongst us who has not been to Lhasa. This time you must go on a pilgrimage. Request to leave." So [I] requested to leave and remained there for only three years though there was a lot of insistence. I stayed only for three years and then sought leave and returned home to Labrang Tashi Khyil, returned to my home and made preparations to go to Lhasa.

01:33:31

My lama was alive at that time. My teacher was no more. He had passed away long ago. The new teacher was there as also my lama. The lama told me, "You should go." I will recount this though [I] do not know if it is right or not. Anyway, there is a *vajra* 'thunderbolt and diamond' design on the throne of the lamas. When His Holiness the Dalai Lama visits, there is a *vajra* design laid out on the throne. Have you seen a *vajra* made of brocade?

Q: Yes.

#29U: That is done. For my lama as an auspicious symbol—I had skillful hands—I stitched such a *vajra* out of brocade and took this [to my lama]. "I am going away. May you live long and give teachings," I requested my lama. To this the lama replied, "There is no longer time. Time has run out. The Chinese are already here these days. So there is no time for such. There is no time in this life, but this is an auspicious symbol that you will have the chance in the next life for you are a courageous person." [My lama] said that.

01:35:23

Then I left for Lhasa.

Q: Rinpoche, do you want to finish the story there?

#29U: It depends on the interviewer. I have no say. If [the interviewer] wishes, I will recount in brief. To recount [the entire story] is very long. If you want it in brief, I will do that or stop at Lhasa. It is up to you. I am okay.

Q: Let's see, what year did you go to Lhasa, 1956? What was Lhasa like in 1956?

#29U: At that time in Lhasa there was a large number of Chinese, but they were not in power. [The Chinese] were gentle and did not say anything; there was nothing. It was the year His Holiness the All Knowing [Dalai Lama] bestowed the Kalachakra empowerment—bestowed the Kalachakra empowerment in Lhasa.

The *Chushi Gangdrug* [Defend Tibet Volunteer Force] offered a golden throne [to His Holiness the Dalai Lama] and Amdo Jinpa Gyamtso and others sponsored the Kalachakra. It was the year the Kalachakra empowerment was bestowed to many tens of thousands of people. At that time it was peaceful in general. The Chinese were not creating any unrests and it was a time when it seemed like [they] were not there.

01:37:56

After the Kalachakra empowerment concluded, I left for India.

Q: Right from the Kalachakra to India?

#29U: I did not come directly to India, but went on a pilgrimage. It is our tradition to see the caves and monasteries where holy lamas used to live in the olden days. It was the tradition to go on pilgrimage to visit these. Here too people go on pilgrimage. Likewise, [I] went on pilgrimage.

Q: That was the purpose of going to India, was to go on pilgrimage?

[Interpreter to interviewer]: The pilgrimage was in Tibet.

Q: I mean to go to India was to visit the caves?

#29U: In the beginning the plan was to go to India on pilgrimage and then return. [I] came with the intention to go back.

Q: , and then go back.

#29U: [I] came to India in the 12th lunar month of the same year—in the 12th lunar month after the Kalachakra empowerment to India.

Q: And then did something happen that you didn't go back?

01:40:00

#29U: Yes, yes. [I] came to India and visited most of the pilgrim sites of India, visited most of the holy pilgrim spots except for a few, and then went to Kalimpong. Then [I] wanted to go back but there was no way for the passage between India and China was blocked, and [I] could not return.

Q: So then did you decide to live in India?

#29U: [I] had to stay back for there was nowhere to go.

There were no valuables, nothing. I had a colleague who was an old monk. There were just the two of us with no valuables, no money and [we] were complete paupers.

Q: So you had gone from being a very famous debater and head of monasteries and now you were quite poor.

01:41:40

#29U: Yes, [I] had absolutely nothing, but did not feel sad—felt nothing at that time. [I] do not know why and became sort of numb and it felt the same whether there were problems or not. I did not think, “I am suffering. I have lost everything.” There was nothing like that and life went on until now. [Laughs]

And then around a month after the pilgrimage, my thoughts were good and [I] wished to do some practice. So I went to a cave. If this [hold up index finger of right hand] is Darjeeling there is a large mountain on this [holds up index finger of left hand] side. [I went] for around four months and meditated, stayed sort of doing that. Then I fell ill and had to come down and stayed for a year at a place called Kharshang near Darjeeling until the illness got cured.

Q: First, I guess I want to say we are happy that you survived your meditation in the cave and I wish we could hear the rest of your story, but because our time is limited perhaps we could really learn something if you could tell us about the *thangka* behind you that you’ve painted and just tell us what the meaning of the *thangka* is and what you plan to do with it when you finish it?

01:44:24

#29U: I am a dharma practitioner. Being a dharma practitioner, according to the tradition there are the *ku* ‘body,’ *sung* ‘speech’ and *thuk* ‘mind,’ the *ku sung thuk*. *Ku* means the image of the Buddha [points to *thangka*]. It means the image. We make supplications to the trio of *ku*, *sung* and *thuk*—make supplications. There is the image of the Buddha, an image of the Buddha or your lama. The reason an image of the lama is drawn is because the lama is very benevolent. When you knew nothing earlier, the lama gave teachings and one became aware through education because of the teacher.

Likewise is the Buddha’s *sung*. The Buddha’s *sung*...For instance the *kagyur* ‘translated words of the Buddha [108 volumes]’ and *tengyur* ‘translated treatises [collection of 225 volumes]’ contains the *sung* of the Buddha. By referring to them we are able to teach others—able to teach. Therefore, the *sung* is precious.

As for *thuk*, there is no need to explain. It is the awareness of omniscience, knowing all the dharma without exception. It is incredibly precious. Therefore, we make these drawing because of their benevolence. The *sung* is symbolized by the images of scripts, prayer wheels of *mani* ‘mantra of Avalokiteshvara’ that are rotated; the *sung* is benevolent. The *thuk* is symbolized by the images of stupa or *vajra* and bell; the Buddha’s *thuk* is placed in

the center. We consider the trio of *ku*, *sung* and *thuk* as incredibly precious and benevolent to us. [The *thangka*] is a form of tribute and to remember the benevolence.

01:46:28

Therefore, that is the reason for doing the *thangka*. Understand? That is the reason for doing the *thangka*. Though it is fine to do any kind of image, yet the body of the Buddha has to be according to specifications and without any flaws. If it is without any flaws...if we draw without proper knowledge with the face disproportionate and the hands disproportionate, you will not accumulate merits, but accumulate demerits. So making haphazard drawing is very sinful.

So an artist—an artist draws an image of the Buddha based on the specifications mentioned in the scriptures. If one draws according to specifications, one earns much merit. You gain benefit in furthering your knowledge and while writing something, if the spelling and form of the script is good, you earn merit. When you speak, the speech is clear and truthful and liked by everybody; all these will come about.

The mind should be honest and *jangchup kyi sem* ‘Boddhichitta, mind directed towards pure and total presence’ helpful for everyone. This kind of mind will help everybody whoever it may be and [people] will listen to you. For instance, His Holiness the Dalai Lama because of his *jangchup kyi sem*, everyone he meets whether old or young listens to whatever [His Holiness] says. The reason everybody bows is because of...[not discernible]. So we consider the trio of *ku*, *sung* and *thuk* precious.

Q: Thank you.

#29U: [Joins palms and smiles]

Q: Thank you, Rinpoche. So we appreciate hearing about your life story and hearing the meaning of the many aspects of this work of art and it was a pleasure to meet you and we appreciate your sharing your story with us.

01:49:25

#29U: Yes, and as for me, while telling my story, [I] do not like to speak well about myself and ill about others because you are working hard for the cause of Tibet with the hope of helping Tibet. You are working with a kind heart and though I do not have the power to make it happen yet, with a kind heart I pray hard that whatever you do will be a success. Thank you.

Q: Thank you, Rinpoche; we would love to have your prayers. Yes.

#29U: [I] do not know if this will be helpful or not, but it is a brief account.

END OF INTERVIEW