

Tibet Oral History Project

Interview #3B – Karma Lamthon
December 27, 2013

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INTERVIEW SUMMARY SHEET

1. Interview Number: #3B
2. Interviewee: Karma Lamthon
3. Age: 88
4. Date of Birth: 1925
5. Sex: Male
6. Birthplace: Gemokhuk
7. Province: Dhotoe (Kham)
8. Year of leaving Tibet: 1959
9. Date of Interview: December 27, 2013
10. Place of Interview: Private home, Old Camp Number 4, Bylakuppe, Mysore District, Karnataka, India
11. Length of Interview: 2 hr 01 min
12. Interviewer: Marcella Adamski
13. Interpreter: Tenzin Yangchen
14. Videographer: Pema Tashi
15. Translator: Tenzin Yangchen

Biographical Information:

Karma Lamthon was born in Gemokhuk in Kham Province. His brother was a reincarnated lama and his father was a *ngagpa* 'shaman,' who helped to cure the nomads' sick livestock. Karma Lamthon recalls being taught to read the scriptures by his parents at home. He joined the local monastery as a monk at the age of 8 and shares his experience in the monastery until the age of 20.

Karma Lamthon recounts how he spent three years in meditation at the retreat center of Dolma Lhakhang from age 12 to 15 where he was instructed once each week by his teachers in different meditation practices.

Karma Lamthon talks about his long journey to Lhasa where he witnessed the festival of Tse Guthor, a religious dance performance by monks given at the Potala Palace. He proceeded on a pilgrimage and gives vivid images of various sacred and holy places in Lhasa and surrounding areas. Karma Lamthon renounced his vow of celibacy and left the monkhood. Since he chose to continue his religious practice and retain all of his other vows, he decided to become a *ngagpa*. He gives us a detailed understanding of the tradition and practices followed by *ngagpa*, the rites and rituals they performed, and the ensuing benefit in both this and the next life.

Topics Discussed:

Kham, childhood memories, Buddhist beliefs, shamans/mediums, monastic life, customs/traditions, religious festivals, pilgrimage.

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Interview #3B

Interviewee: Karma Lamthon

Age: 88, Sex: Male

Interviewer: Marcella Adamski

Interview Date: December 27, 2013

Question: Please tell us your name.

00:00:14

Interviewee #3B: The name is Karma Lamthon.

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?

#3B: [Nods] Yes.

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

#3B: Okay, okay.

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

#3B: There will be no problem.

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

#3B: [Nods]

Q: *Ngagpa-la* 'respectful term for shaman,' let us begin by asking how old you are today and where were you born?

00:02:30

#3B: I am 88 years old and was born in Gemokhuk in Tsawa Pasho.

Q: What province is that?

#3B: Pasho is part of Kundeling.

Q: Kham, Amdo...?

#3B: It is in Dhotoe [Kham].

Q: What is the name of the nearest monastery?

#3B: It is called Dolma Lhakang.

Q: When you were born, how many people were in your family?

00:03:33

#3B: When I was born there was my sibling who is a *tulku* 'reincarnated lama.' Including him and a sister, we were three besides the two parents, so five in all.

Q: Are they all alive yet, the brother and sister?

#3B: The sibling who is a *tulku* is no more. He was called Genor Tulku but is no more. The older sister is also dead, passed away.

Q: *Ngagpa-la*, what did your family do for a livelihood?

#3B: I was small in age then and can only recall from the age of 8. I spent my time learning to read. [I] learned to read. At a young age [I] became a monk of the monastery but only in name. [I] was not left at the monastery, instead lived at home and learned the scriptures. Then at age 8 [I] was sent there [to the monastery].

Q: Was that the local monastery or another one?

00:05:27

#3B: It was the Dolma Lhakang.

Q: What kind of a little boy were you? Were you playful? Did you like to study? Were you adventuresome? Tell us about your childhood.

#3B: There was not much for us to study. It was just reading the Tibetan scriptures. I focused only on working for the monastery and my own practice and there was not anything else that was special nor did [I] have any inclination.

Q: Did you have many teachers or one teacher that worked with you?

#3B: In general in our monastery...While at home, my father and mother taught me. Both parents were literate. Father was a *ngagpa* 'shaman.' My father was a *ngagpa*. They taught [me] and there was not any special teacher. Once you became older in the monastery, there were teachers.

Q: Can you tell us about your father? You said he was a shaman. From where did he get his training and what kind of shaman work did he do?

00:07:38

#3B: The shaman activities were in accordance with the tradition of Tibet. There was making incense offering and likewise performing *yangdup* ‘ceremony to call in the blessing for propitiation of prosperity.’ There are also many kinds of sutra readings for little children, and likewise treating sick animals in the families through *chod* ‘spiritual practice of “cutting through the ego”’ and using hot plates. Particularly being nomads there were many illnesses the animals suffered. If one suffered a boil, it might die. So [father] performed rituals to cure such illnesses. Generally, there are many different practices to recount.

Q: What school was that from or what sect was that training under?

#3B: Generally the practices that we shamans presently conduct are from both the Nyingma and Kagyu sects.

Q: The one that your father conducted?

#3B: The one that father conducted was Kagyu, the Karma Kagyu.

Q: Were shamans also used by monks in the monastery to make decisions and have readings?

00:09:45

#3B: [You] mean performing rituals in the monastery in Tibet?

Q: Yes.

#3B: Yes, [I] learned the rites and rituals in the monastery in Tibet from the age of 8 until 12.

Q: In Dolma Lhakhang?

#3B: In Dolma Lhakhang.

Q: Did you want to be a shaman like your father was?

#3B: I did not have any wish to be a shaman then. [I] remained in retreat for a few years and lived at the monastery until [I] left for Lhasa. The plan was to remain a celibate monk but it was not in my destiny and I could not be a celibate monk. Initially, there was no wish to become a shaman. Generally, if one became a shaman, even if one did not take a wife, one can practice as a shaman since the tantric practice is not based on celibacy. However, it depends on you, as there are no such [rules].

Q: What are the typical kinds of questions that people would ask the *ngagpa* to help with? What were the things that are impossible for the *ngagpa* to help with? What could he do and what was impossible to do?

00:12:03

#3B: The *ngagpa* cannot perform any of the rituals connected with *dhulwa* ‘Vinaya, Buddhist ethics and ethical codes.’

Q: *Dhulwa*?

#3B: *Dhulwa* is found in the *Kagyur* ‘Translated word of Buddha (108 volumes),’ and a practitioner has to uphold 250 vows of which we do not have the vow of celibacy. Other than that, as I mentioned earlier there are not any restrictions on what a *ngagpa* can do. However, we cannot do anything that is connected to celibacy. We cannot do anything that is connected to *dhulwa*. The Buddha has taught the sutra and tantra. We only conduct rituals connected to tantra and not sutra.

Q: What were some typical kinds of questions that people would come to you to have help with, to the *ngagpa*?

#3B: The reasons are for the benefit of both this and the next life. If one conforms well and to perfection, [a *ngagpa*] can be of benefit to both this and the next life. It is perceived as though a *ngagpa* cannot help with the next life. That is not so. If the person performs the *ngagpa*’s duty wholly, except for not observing the vow of celibacy—if that is the only vow from the 250 vows that is not observed—a *ngagpa* can perform rites and rituals for the benefit of the sentient beings in this life and the next as well.

Q: Which vow do they not observe? Celibacy? I see. For people who don’t know what would you give as the description what is a *ngagpa*? We haven’t yet established that.

00:15:36

#3B: *Ngagpa* means...in general terms *ngagpa* in the religious sense means originating from *lamay gyue* ‘lama’s lineage.’ In layman’s terms *ngagpa* is understood as someone who chants mantras and then blows on something but that is not so. Since a *ngagpa*, having the lama’s lineage has *ngag* ingrained in [him], [he] practices it. I have spoken earlier about whether one can practice it or not. Some perceive *ngagpa* as someone who can do everything but that is not so. Since [he] has the lama’s lineage, [he] is called a *ngagpa*.

Q: What’s *lamay gyue*?

#3B: There are many originations and the lama’s lineage is one kind. It is mentioned in the *Kagyur* that one originating from the lama’s lineage is called a *ngagpa*. Secondly, in the Nyingma tradition—it is not proper to compete with the Guru Padmasambhava—through his [Guru Padmasambhava] lineage there are many *ngagpa* in the Nyingma tradition. There are *ngagpa* who wear white robe-skirts, drape a robe on top, keep long hair and such kinds. However, the extent of power depends on each one as I said earlier and the beneficial result of prayer varies. Generally, *ngagpa* originated from the lineage of Guru Padmasambhava. So all these factors contribute to a person becoming a *ngagpa*.

Q: Is one born a *ngagpa* by reincarnation or does one train to become one?

00:18:56

#3B: There is no reincarnation for *ngagpa* as such. However, in some the *ngagpa* lineage continues in the family. Other than that, there are no reincarnations for *ngagpa* as a whole. However, some like Sakya Gongma Rinpoche, and likewise, there was a lama in my village called Namkha Tinlay; there are some like them in whose families *ngagpa* runs from generation to generation.

It is not necessary that every *ngagpa* should have a reincarnation. For instance in our case, the forefathers were all *ngagpa*. It was like that. It does not seem correct if I say so but someone like the Sakya Gongma Rinpoche, the *ngagpa* lineage continues but in general, it is not that a *ngagpa* should beget a *ngagpa*.

Q: So to go back to your story, you said that you joined the monastery from age 8-12. Did you like that time in the monastery? What was your time spent doing?

#3B: [I] went to the monastery at the age of 8 and performed ritual activities in the monastery until around the age of 10. I had already learned to read the scriptures at home. There were monastic activities like performing rites and rituals, *cham* ‘religious dance performance by monks,’ creating *mandala* ‘circles’ [cosmic diagrams] and various such rituals connected to the monastery. [I] did so until the age of 12.

Q: *Ngagpa-la*, what happened at 12?

00:21:47

#3B: From the age of 12 until 15, [I] remained in meditation.

Q: Can you tell us how that life is lived in retreat? What is one’s daily life like? How do you eat? Where did you go to be on retreat? Did you...somebody give you permission?

#3B: In our monastery of the Kagyu sect, there were four kinds of retreat centers. Each center consisted of eight meditators and two helpers. It was the two helpers’ duty to make fire, boil water and bring such [to the meditators]. We [meditators] did not have any responsibilities but to remain in session. There was a session from 4 o’clock in the morning through 5, 6, 7 and until 8...yes?

Q: From 4 o’clock till 8?

#3B: It is 3 hours, from 4 o’clock through 5, 6 until 7 o’clock. That was one meditation session. Initially before joining the retreat, one must complete the *ngondro* ‘preliminary practices’ of a 100,000 prostrations, 100,000 refuge prayers, 100,000 mandala offerings, 100,000 [recitations of the] hundred-syllable mantra and 100,000 guru yoga similar to the *bum-nga* ‘five times 100,000’ that is practiced here. It is the same practice with the Kagyu sect and this must be completed prior [to the retreat].

00:23:56

It is not simply chanting but one must focus on the four mind-changing: reflections on the precious human body, impermanence and death, cause and effect or karma and the

shortcomings of samsaric existence that the lama has taught for five months. It is similar to practicing the *bum-nga* that is observed here [in the Namdoling Monastery in Bylakuppe]. However, the difference is that we conducted in the quarters. You cannot move out nor allowed to meet anyone. For three years you lived in your small living quarter and at night there was no space to stretch out to sleep. You sat up and slept like this [moves head towards left supported by left hand] in the night. You observed the sessions and there was no bed like we have here.

Q: You were only at that time 12 years old. Were the other retreatants that young or was that an unusually young age?

#3B: It depended on your wish. I was young and I mentioned earlier a sibling called Genor Tulku. My parents had taught [me] the scriptures and he put me for the meditation program. My colleagues were all older than me in the age range of 30-40 and none that were 50-60. Some were aged 35, around 26 or between 20 and 50.

Q: Did you want to do such a long retreat at such a young age?

00:27:40

#3B: Partly yes and partly [I] was influenced by [my] sibling. However, [I] never felt [I] did not want to do it. If one did not wish to, one could refuse. It was not like that. There was a desire but [I] was young and most importantly since [my] sibling was a reincarnate lama, he advised and [I] heeded. Ultimately it has been good.

Q: When you were on the 3-year retreat, did anyone come and give you teachings or was it regular meditation and recitation or did you get instructions and guidance from a teacher?

#3B: Among those of us in retreat, there was a teacher. Once a week the teacher tested us for *nyam thokpa* ‘experience and realization’ and gave empowerments and oral transmissions, while the higher instructions were taken from another lama. There was a principal person in the group to whom you gave a weekly report on your experience. He gave a description whether the two kinds of meditation called *kyerim* and *zogrim* ‘development and completion stages’ have been conducted well or not. There are many things to report on and you reported to him and he will guide on the correct way of meditation. This took place once a week within the center but one could not go out nor did anyone come there.

Q: Boys between the ages of 12 and 15 have a lot of energy and like to experience their body physically. So what was it like to be cooped up in such a small space for those very active three years?

#3B: Right from the beginning...The meditation practice is...The desire was there in the heart and in addition to that was the advice from the sibling. So there was the desire in one’s heart. The lama gives instructions on how to conduct each day that is contained in a volume. It is divided into the 30 days of a month and then the 30 days into three or four weeks and what to recite and meditate during each week. One referred to the text and

should there be parts one did not follow; one could approach [the senior lama] once a week. That is how the practice took place.

Q: Can you describe what, when you were doing three hours of meditation, what did you do with the mind? What kinds of concentration exercises or was it recitation? What happened?

00:32:46

#3B: There are two kinds of [meditation] called *kyerim* and *zogrim*. *Zogrim* is doing meditation without recitation. [Ours] is not that but it is the *kyerim*. In the *kyerim* practice, one recited prayers. For instance, if it is [recitation to the] Guru Padmasambhava, one must visualize Guru Padmasambhava as being there and conduct all the rituals as though doing it in front of him along with the recitation. The meditation one performs along with recitation is called *kyerim*.

What we followed was the *kyerim*. Along with reciting the prayer, one must visualize the particular deity and meditate on it in three ways called *dhag*, *dhun* and *phum*. *Dhag* is what “you” have to do and *dhun* means “front” where you visualize the deity to be and *phum* is making offerings and creating a “sacred vase” and such. Since it is the *dhag*, *dhun* and *phum*, you must meditate as you chant the prayers.

Q: If you are willing, would you please share with us any insights or awareness that you were able to achieve by this deep practice?

#3B: Generally, the most important one for you must be the appearance of certain indications [of a successful meditation practice]. It could be the appearance of nectar on the ritual dough offerings, or you analyze the dreams that you dream at night, but this should not be revealed because such subjects should not be spoken of to non-practitioners. So I will speak a little bit about my experience. Most importantly the appearance of signs will depend upon the clarity of your meditation, and little [signs] do appear indicating that this is a sign. However, there have not been any special major ones for me.

Q: Was there ever a time when you wanted to leave during those three years?

00:36:56

#3B: There was no such feeling. There was not any. [I] was accustomed to from the beginning. Once you are accustomed, there is not any desire not to remain. You have faith, devotion and belief in the dharma. So first you memorize what the lama teaches and once that is ingrained in your mind, you utilize it and so there’s no feeling of not wanting to do it. You have only that to think of and focus on and nothing else. There never was any wish not to remain.

Q: One last question about, why do you think your brother wanted you to go at such a young age instead of waiting until you are, you know, in your twenties like the rest of the monks went?

#3B: [My brother] talked about me to His Holiness the Karmapa—that Karmapa was the earlier reincarnation of the present one, Khatsap Dorjee. When informed [about the interviewee, the Karmapa] said, “This child must study well and not be kept at home. [He]

should be brought to the monastery and taught the scriptures. He is unlike other children.” Due to this [I] was guided to study at a young age. That was the reason.

Q: So they recognized innate skills in you that they wanted to help you develop?

#3B: Right.

Q: What happens when you...the three years are up? How is the ending? What takes place?

00:40:00

#3B: [I] remained there from 12-15 years of age. During the ages of 16, 17 and 18, [I] returned to the monastery and continued monastic duties like before. [I] attended prayer assemblies and went here and there to perform prayers until the age of 20. And then [I] left for Lhasa.

Q: I forgot to ask something about the cave and where you were staying. What was the surroundings like and what was it like in winter, summer, spring? What were the seasons like and how remote was this cave?

[Interpreter interprets as: Was the retreat conducted in a cave?]

#3B: No. It was a retreat center like you have the Retreat Center in Namdoling Monastery here. It was similar to that. There were four different retreat homes for the meditators and [I] was in one that housed eight people. It was not a cave.

Q: So they were buildings?

#3B: They were buildings. Each person had a room, perhaps about 8 feet by 8 feet; it cannot be 10 feet. There was not much space. It was a square room with a small shrine where you made offerings sitting nearby. Here [indicates right side] was a fire stove and a kettle. There was enough space here [indicates right side] to do prostrations. It was not a large room but a small one.

Q: If you didn't leave that room for a long time, a very long time, did your body have any difficulty if you weren't exercising? When you came out, was it difficult to walk or run? Was there any changes in your body?

00:43:09

#3B: There was nothing at all. Later when we meditated on the *Naro choe dug* ‘the six yogas of Naropa,’ there was in depth practice on the meditation of *tsa-lung* ‘channels and energy’ that must be studied for six months...one cannot discuss this except with those imparting instructions or your dharma colleagues. Otherwise, I have information about it but one cannot speak on this. It is on account of this that there was no problem and I feel that [my] good health at present is because of that. [I] had no problem walking.

Q: Can you please tell us why...you said that you were in the monastery, for how long after your retreat before you went to Lhasa? How long?

#3B: Unlike the practice here, there were not prayer assemblies everyday in the monastery. There were no prayer assemblies except for around three months in summer, seven days in the 12th month and around a month in autumn. During other times [I] went around for prayers to people [homes] or on pilgrimage or where my brother *tulku* was living. That was how [I] lived. [I] visited people's homes when invited to read prayers along with other monks.

Q: Were there some monks that stayed all the time in the monastery and then...? What was the difference because there must've been monks living there all the time? I don't understand.

00:46:22

#3B: There were no monks that specifically lived permanently because in the four Retreat Centers there were eight monks each that were in retreat. These four [groups] had eight helpers that changed every month. Then in the monastery were two *gonkhang* 'protector's temples' with 6-7 monks each. Then there was a caretaker. Some undertook retreat in the campus of the monastery.

As for me, after the completion of the retreat period, [I] did not stay in retreat in the living quarters. [I] visited people's home for prayers or undertook various duties in the monastery like conducting rites and rituals, taking the responsibility of ritual master, chant leader and such. That is what [I] engaged in during that period.

Q: Dolma Lhakhang is the monastery we're talking about?

#3B: Yes, Dolma Lhakhang. The reason [for the name]...because behind the monastery is a pilgrim site having 21 Dolma 'Goddess Tara' that had formed naturally. Since the monastery is located in front of it, it is called Dolma Lhakhang. In the Tibetan language *gonpa* 'monastery' is also called *lhakhang* 'temple.'

Q: Is there a hill?

#3B: Behind [the monastery] is a pastureland on which is a white rock. It is open ground.

Q: I did want to ask, after you left your 3-year retreat, when you came out into the world again even to the monastery, did you see the world with new eyes, with a different kind of perspective as a result of all that internal spiritual work?

00:49:59

#3B: Generally, though I have not seen what the world is like, while making *mandala* offerings we chant *Shar Lughagpo* 'Sublime in body in the east,' *Lho Zambuling* 'Jambu continent in the south' and that Tibet is the land where the dharma flourishes. So that is what we meditate on and I believe this world is unlike any other place and that it is much better. That is what comes to my mind always.

Q: Now tell us about your journey to Lhasa. Why did you decide to go?

#3B: In the monasteries travelling to the central monastery in Lhasa is considered [exceptional]. The Karma Kagyu sect has [a central monastery] of the Karmapa in Thoelung Tsurpu, Sherabling in Derge Pawang and one called Karmagon close to us. From the three seats of the Karmapa, the foremost seat is the Karmagon; the next seat is Sherabling in Pawang and since the other is in Tsurpu and the Karmapa was there, [I] went to see the Karmapa and on a pilgrimage to see the Jowo ‘statue of Buddha Sakyamuni’ in Lhasa. [I] came on a pilgrimage in addition to visiting the central monastery.

Q: Can you tell us about that journey? Who was with you and how long did it take? And what year was that?

00:52:32

#3B: When we left the village, I had a companion who was a monk of our monastery and [we] drove yaks. The two of us had eight yaks. [We] came through the north with the yaks laden [with provision] that we consumed along the way. [We] traveled through the north. On reaching Lhasa, we sold the yaks to people returning to the village and decided to go to the central monastery and on pilgrimage to Lhasa. In general the Yiru Bakor pilgrim site is considered very holy. First [we went] to Zangri Khangmar the pilgrim site. Is it okay to talk about it?

The first pilgrim site is Zangri Khangmar, the seat of Machi Lhachi Dolma and then [we] went onwards to Dhensathi where scriptures are heaped like a mountain that is supposed to have taken place during the time of Ling Gesar [King Gesar, an emanation of Guru Padmasambhava in the 12th century]. Zangri Khangmar is the seat of Machi Lhachi Dolma. Then [we] went to Yarlung and saw the Tensum Neysum, like Yarlung Sheda and likewise Tsethang Gonpori, then likewise Richung Dugphu. Yarlung Sheda is the pilgrim site of Guru Padmasambhava. Then onwards to Yala Shangpu where there is a very holy hot spring. [We] saw these and moved northwards to Tsang and then to Sakya. There are the Sakya Gonpa and Ngoro Gonpa of Tsang. Then finally [we] arrived in Thoelung Tsurpu.

Q: We’re talking...if you’re about 15 years old; you went to Lhasa right after the retreat, correct?

[Interpreter to interviewer]: Twenty years old.

Q: Oh, 20 excuse me. So you were five years in the monastery after the retreat. So 20 and that would have been in 1945. In 1945 you were traveling through Tibet. Did you see any presence of the Chinese in Tibet at that time or was it only Tibetans that you saw?

00:55:56

#3B: No, there were no Chinese then. None had appeared then. [I] have heard about there being Communist Chinese somewhere but [they] had not appeared in Tibet then.

Q: What were the conditions of the people as you went from village to town to shrine, holy sites? What was the situation of the people? Were they happy? Were they well off? Were they poor? Were they struggling? Can you talk about that? What did you see?

#3B: There were many types [of people]. As [we] traveled through the north, most were animal herders. Places like Sok Tsendhengen had farmlands. Some places seemed pleasant but there were none that seemed poor then. The families owned many animals like *dri* ‘female yak’ and yaks. Some owned farmlands and some places were pleasant. There were none that seemed really bad with beggars and such, and likewise thieves and robbers. We were many then, nearly around 100 people that had converged along the journey. Otherwise, when we left from there, the two of us were alone but along the way many converged and there were around hundred people and many thousand animals. Then [we] traveled jointly to Lhasa. There were no problems.

Q: So it started out as two pilgrims and you became a pilgrimage of about a hundred people.

00:58:47

#3B: Yes, yes, [people] collected one by one. *Khampa* ‘people of Kham Province’ must always go on pilgrimage. So many travel on pilgrimage and one by one [people] converged and each supported the other. There was a grand lama’s group from my village, a lama called Sonyi Tulku. This group was huge in strength and so when [people] met this group, [they] joined it and gradually others hitched one by one and the number grew.

Q: You started out from Lhakhang, the monastery?

[Interpreter to interviewer]: Dolma Lhakhang.

Q: Dolma Lhakhang. How many days and I know you had stopped along the way but how long did it take to get from there to Lhasa walking?

#3B: Starting out from the monastery of Dolma Lhakhang, it took one month to reach Lhasa.

Q: So from two people you wound up with a hundred people within that month?

#3B: Right, it happened like that. As [we] journeyed along more and more people joined. They were not together initially but joined up at camps along the way. Most [people] joined at the place called Riwoche in Kham. [We] stayed a few days there and met many going to Lhasa. Some plan to wait two or three days and then journey together. So in this way it wound up to a hundred people and a thousand animals including horses, mules, yaks, *dzo* ‘animal bred from a yak and a cow’ from Derge, Dayab and likewise from Chamdo and from my region.

Q: Why were they bringing a thousand animals for a hundred people?

01:01:56

#3B: Most of those from Derge drove *dzo* for sale in Tibet [Utsang Province] where they fetched a high price. A large number of *dzo* were being driven from Derge to Tsang. Some [drove animals] so as to save oneself from carrying stuff. As for the lama's group, it consisted of at least 15-20 people including the lama. So all these people require food and clothing. And besides, tents for setting up camps must also be laden on yaks, as people cannot [carry them]. That is the reason for driving animals. It looks like the large number of *dzo* was for sale in the Tsang region. There were a large number of monks from Derge Gonchen that drove *dzo* that were to be sold.

Q: What was the atmosphere of the group? Was it very solemn or very joyful? And what was the weather like? Was it spring or winter? Can you give us a picture of it so we can see it?

#3B: It was summertime when we journeyed and the weather was very good. If it rained a little—it did not rain as much as it does now—in case it rained a little bit at night, [we] were in tents that were set up. While walking during the day there was not any heavy rain. It was summer and not winter, so there is not heavy rain in the northern region. There was not any heavy rain. [We] did not face any problem along the way; it was good.

Q: Were the people very happy to be on this pilgrimage?

01:04:47

#3B: Since one was fulfilling the desire of pilgrimage and not trade, all were traveling in joy. There were some that had to beg for food and some that were burdened with stuff; there were many kinds. There were some that drove animals. Everyone on the pilgrimage chanted *mani* 'mantra of Avalokiteshvara' with joy and focused on the dharma and not trade. Being on pilgrimage everyone journeyed with much joy.

Q: Do you remember when you first saw Lhasa with your own eyes? What was your impression?

#3B: On arriving at the Tsangpo river of Lhasa, there was a rock pile about the size of a building that we in Tibet consider as *mandala* offering. It was a cairn of white and round rocks with a flag mounted on top. When [I] reached it, the feeling was of great joy, "Today is so joyful and unlike any other [day]. This is where His Holiness the Dalai Lama, the exceptional lama of Tibet, lives and a very holy pilgrim site of the abode of the Jowo." [I] shed tears of joy. That is how joyful [I] felt.

Q: Tell us what happens next as you come into Lhasa.

01:07:29

#3B: I had my paternal aunt in Lhasa. My paternal aunt lived in Lhasa. Before going to my paternal aunt, my companion and I sold the yaks to some [people] that were returning to the village from the monastery in Digung. We took a canoe from Digung to Lhasa. Then after reaching there, [we] went to the paternal aunt. Since her family was very wealthy, we did not...both of us took a room on rent from a family for around a month.

Beginning from the Potala Palace in the morning [we] circumambulated and as the sun began to rise, reached the Jowo where there is a flat rock called Dho Amulay. Any prayers offered at the rock...There is a gem on the Jowo Sakyamuni and when the sun shone on the golden *gyaphib* 'cupola furnace' in the morning, it touched the forehead of the Jowo. Any prayers offered at Dho Amulay, the flat rock would be answered. [We] spent a month or two circumambulating in the morning and visiting temples during the day.

Q: One month?

#3B: Yes, one month.

Q: [You] didn't visit your paternal aunt?

#3B: [I] did go to the paternal aunt and stayed there but they were business people and we were not comfortable with so many people around. So we stayed separately and visited [paternal aunt] sometimes during the day. We stayed the nights in the rented place. At that time the rentals were not much.

Q: Was Lhasa very crowded? Were there lots of pilgrims, people? What was the action like in the streets? What did you see all around Lhasa?

01:10:36

#3B: In the center of the Bakor 'Square' in Lhasa is the Jowo [Jokhang or Central Cathedral] that is three stories high. [Images of] Songtsen Gampo and likewise all the Kings of Tibet and many protectors' temples are located on the middle floor. Right on top is a temple of the Karmapa of Thoelung Tsurpu. Next to that is a temple dedicated to Palden Lhamo [protective deity]. Below is a temple to Dagmo, the mother of Palden Lhamo. [We] saw these, and then located in the main temple is Jowo Sakyamuni and below that a huge [image of] Gyalwa Jampa 'Buddha Maitreya, the victorious Loving One.'

All around [the Jokhang] are prayer wheels and shops located close by. In the Bakor are [traders] some of who have shops and some not. There are many shops belonging to Lhasans, Nepalese and likewise Chinese dentists. They were not the present day Chinese but perhaps from Sining. There are many Chinese living there said to have come...[not discernible]. There were these Chinese and different kinds of shops, Nepalese stores, dentists and such. Those that did not own shops displayed their wares on wooden boards similar to what they do here. In the east, south, west, north all around the Jokhang in the Bakor are...In the east is a tall flag post called Gaden Dhanyon and another one in the south that is called Shar Chari and another called Nup Chari. There were flags located in the four directions. All the houses belonged to the people.

Q: What were the flags?

01:13:40

#3B: The flag was called Gaden Dhanyon but I cannot explain exactly. The flag post was very tall, nearly four stories high. The poles were attached to one another with leather, as one pole cannot reach [that height]. That is the Gaden Dhanyon. There was one called Shar

Chari that is a smaller one and on another side...[I] have forgotten the name. There were four smaller flags in the four directions.

Q: Gaden...?

#B: ...called Gaden Dhanyon.

Q: Gaden Dhanyon.

#3B: ...called Dhanyon. Then one called Shar Chari.

Q: I understand that you circumambulated around the Bakor but did you also go into the Potala Palace?

#3B: Yes?

Q: Potala Palace?

#3B: [I] went to the Potala Palace. His Holiness the Dalai Lama moved to the Norbulingka Palace on the 15th day of the 3rd lunar month or so. [He] spent the summer in Norbulingka and winter in the Potala. The Potala is very complex and one could get lost. There are innumerable stairs and temples. On the top is His Holiness' residence and below that, on the 29th of the 12th lunar month there was a *cham* performance at the Potala called Tse Guthor and also *thorgya* 'offerings of pyramid-shaped dough' that one could witness. His Holiness sat on the top of the Dheyangshar along with the *gyaltsab* that is someone like the Prime Minister here and the two tutors, Ling Rinpoche [and Trijang Rinpoche] were looking down on the proceedings.

01:16:06

The *cham*, an annual event called Tse Guthor, was performed below. The *cham* took place in the Dheyangshar. All Lhasans witnessed it. The building was huge and [people] witnessed it from the upper, middle and all floors. Some sat below and on every floor and in layman's language one would say "enjoying the display" and in religious term one would say "witness the *cham*." Such an event took place on the 29th day of the 12th lunar month.

Q: Did you see that performance?

#3B: [I] witnessed it.

Q: Can you describe what it was like? What did they do?

#3B: The three main *cham* are the Dhamchen Choegyal 'King of Dharma,' Namsay and Gonpo and the other characters perform around them. The principal Dorjee Lupon 'Vajra Master' of Namgyal Monastery...A fire is lit in Dheyangshar with a certain white colored thorn that's found in Lhasa. There's a huge metal cauldron in which oil is heated since morning. A little later the Dorjee Lhupon appears performing the *cham* and bearing a skull containing alcohol that has been consecrated for a week or so.

The Dorjee Lupon continues to perform as [he] gets close to the hot oil—it is necessary to get close. The oil is not the one we have here but mustard oil that is used in Tibet—it is a very strong one—holds the spirit like this [raises both hands together] and continues to perform and pours the spirit into [the cauldron] like this. You could hardly see the lama because the fire flared up in a *whoosh*, right to the top where His Holiness sat looking down. It was frightening. The lama emerged a while later without any injuries whatsoever. The oil was spilt on the ground. Then he slowly went back.

01:19:46

Then around the twenty something, a pole was erected on which a man climbed up using a rope. [He] had something tied here [indicates waist area], perhaps [a piece of] wood with a metal piece that he fixed [to the pole] and then rotated at the top of the pole like in a magic show. One could watch such displays at Shol. [The event] was called Shol Thachom.

Besides that there used to be something called the Thajang. Someone slid down a rope to Shol below from a rope tied to the Potala Palace. This was discontinued later because of some injuries that had occurred. The Thajang was later discontinued but used to be there earlier. I have heard of it but not seen it. The pole performer was very agile and seemed like a magician. The pole must be 2-3 stories high and there were many that rotated upon it.

Q: And all of these dances and performances and access to the Potala Palace, they were all free to the people? Is that so or were they all free?

#3B: There were not [any fees]. Money was not used at all. It is a different matter if one visited markets but not when one went there [to the Potala Palace]. It was not possible to see the temple that day because of the *cham* by the monks. His Holiness the Dalai Lama would be there on the second or third floor in front of [his] residence where incense offering was lit and one could just get a glimpse of His Holiness. It was not possible to get a clear view. Money was not used at all.

Q: It sounds like you really enjoyed Lhasa.

01:24:36

#3B: [Laughs] Yes. [We] enjoyed Lhasa, as there were not any worries in the mind and we were monks then. There were not any worries and [I] was happy mentally and physically.

Q: In Lhasa, were there very many poor people in Lhasa because it's obviously a wealthy city with traders and royalty from the Tibetan people? Were there poor people and how were they taken care of if there were?

#3B: There were. There were the poor. There were definitely the poor that increased particularly during the 4th lunar month. Going on a *lingkor* 'circuit' of Lhasa in the morning stretched from the Potala Palace to the Chakpori and the Zungyur Lukhang at the back and then reaching Wodhen Shingkha. That was the pilgrim [circuit] in the morning. The whole stretch was filled with beggars. Since it was the 4th lunar month, there

would be some *ngagpa* that were like beggars, living in tents and performing *chod* rituals. They would be given offerings or donations. There were some with [begging] bowls like they do in Bodh Gaya [India]. There were many beggars in the 4th lunar month and even otherwise, too.

Q: So there was no provision in Lhasa to take care of the poor people like a house for them to live in or medical care or food service. People could only get help by begging and then also why were they poor?

01:27:38

#3B: There was hardly any [help] then. There was not much. Each one must [fend] for himself and in the case of illness, there was no hospital with Western medications. There were none of the Western medicines then that we have now. One must visit the Medical Center at Chakpori. If you could go there, there was no fee for the treatment. You did not have to pay any money for medicines but you had to go there for the Tibetan medicines and having to go to Chakpori is far. Otherwise, like you [to interviewer] are helping, there were no help or sponsors, and nor did the government [have any provision].

Q: Why were these people so poor? Where were they coming from?

#3B: Unlike we do here, there was nowhere where one could seek employment and earn. Those people possessing land have their own servants or receive help from each other. Since there was not much opportunity for employment, [the poor] begged and survived, begged and survived. That was how it was. The government did not [provide] any lands to them at that time.

Perhaps it was due to one's poor virtue for there are different kinds of people. That could have come about due to their low virtue. However, those that begged for a livelihood earned enough to appease their hunger. What they received today was consumed that day and what was received the next day...Some gave *tsampa* 'flour made from roasted barley' and some a little money. The money, made of copper was called *zhokang*, *karma* and such. They survived by collecting these by running around many places.

[Interviewer to interpreter]: From donations?

[Interpreter to interviewer]: As alms.

Q: Is there anything else, did you experience any kinds of divinations at the Potala? Were there any demonstrations or ceremonies in which you saw divinations?

01:31:12

#3B: There are none that do divinations at the Potala. Next to the government's military base called Drapchi is a [temple of a] *lhamo* 'goddess.' One could seek a divination before this *lhamo* called Trochen. Likewise, one could approach and specifically seek divinations from very high lamas. Otherwise, there was not anyone particular that performed divinations. However, there were some sitting within the Bakor, though whether [they are] real or just making some money, it is not necessary to talk about it. It was like that. If one

approached a high lama, [he] will give a divination. There was the one called Trochen inside the Gesar Temple where one could seek a divination.

[I] forgot to mention something. There is one at the Chakpori. I have heard that there is a person that does divination at the Medical Center that's located atop the Chakpori; I have not witnessed it. There was one there.

Q: So at this point you're 20 years old and you're in Lhasa and you are now 88. So we have 68 more years to cover. [Laughs] So maybe we need to move on and ask you what do you think is the next important part of your life story to tell us about?

01:33:36

#3B: The sad part that occurred in my life was the arrival of the Chinese in Lhasa. There was not anything extremely bad I saw or heard. After the Chinese arrived, later I returned to Lhasa but this question has not been asked. If asked [I] can talk about it later. [I] remained in Lhasa until the age of 21 and then I went to Tsari through Kongpo. [I] went to live in Tsari.

Q: At 21?

#3B: [I] must be 21. I cannot remember. Yes, it must be 21.

Q: Twenty-one?

#3B: Yes?

Q: Did [you] say 21 or 28?

#3B: Twenty-one.

Q: Twenty-one.

#3B: [I] might have been around 21.

Q: Was there a reason why you went there and what happened?

#3B: There was not any reason to go to Tsari but on pilgrimage. Tsari is considered as the Palace of Dhechok 'Chakrasamvara' [important tantric deity] and initiated as a pilgrim site by the Lama Kyiwu Yeshe Dorjee long ago. Being a holy pilgrim site, while circumambulating there, even in summer, one never hears the thunder roll in Tsari.

The topmost part [of the Tsari mountain] is snow covered. Once in 12 years, in the Year of the Monkey, there is what is called Tsari Rungkhok and during all other times, one can circumambulate the top portion as many times as possible during the summer months from the 3rd lunar month to the 8th lunar month. [I] went for the purpose of circumambulating this [holy mountain]. [I] reached Sanga Choeling along the way where I found a patron. [I]

practiced dharma and also was sent to trade by the patron. In that way [I] spent many years in Sanga Choeling.

Q: What kind of work were you doing, *ngagpa-la*?

01:36:47

#3B: Initially [I] read prayers for the patron in Sanga Choeling.

Q: And then?

#3B: Later...Since I was young and able, [the patron] sent me to Lhasa to buy a set of Kagyur.

Q: And then?

#3B: [I] was told to go to Lhasa and buy the Kagyur but it was not readily available in Lhasa. [The texts] had to be printed that would take 4-5 months. [I] thought spending that many months in Lhasa was useless and when my paternal aunt said that [I] should go to Kalimpong [India] to assist someone, [I] went. [I] agreed to go to Kalimpong for three months. When [I] returned from Kalimpong that was the year His Holiness the Dalai Lama visited China. Then [I] received the Kagyur and returned to Sanga Choeling.

Q: Were you still a monk at this time or had you decided to no longer be a monk?

01:39:24

#3B: [I] had left monkhood. I could not remain a monk during the sojourn to Kongpo. [Laughs]

Q: Because you are a shaman of the Kagyu faith, can you tell us a little bit more about your training as a *ngagpa* that would help us understand? In your adulthood, how were you trained?

#3B: Since I was young long ago...Generally, though I lost the vow of celibacy [I] never left the earlier practice of meditation and monastic rituals wherever [I] went. [I] recited the daily chants and whatever [I] used to do earlier whenever [I] found a little time. I never left my earlier practice after turning into a layman.

[I] became a part of the *ngagpa* group that thought, “It is good to join it. Though [I] have foregone one vow, I must never stop the practice.” So whether it was the 10th day or 25th day rituals, whether it was chanting prayers from memory or not, [I] continued the practice. While living in Sanga Choeling with my patron who was deeply spiritual, he had [me] read prayers. At times he may depute [me] on some work but otherwise, [I] was engaged in reading the scriptures. I never overlooked the dharma in any way.

Q: Was there a time in your life when you eventually decided to marry?

#3B: Yes?

Q: Did [you] decide to marry?

#3B: That is destiny. That happens according to destiny and [I] never thought I should get married. Whether one calls it destiny or an obstruction, [I] should say that it happened.

Q: You did get married?

01:42:42

#3B: Yes, [I] did. [I] have a wife now.

Q: Did you have any other additional training in how to be a *ngagpa*?

#3B: There is not any particular training to become a *ngagpa*. Having grown up with my father and worked with him and having received empowerment, spiritual oral transmission and instructions, I practiced that. [I] lost my vow of celibacy in Kongpo but continued the rituals during the pilgrim journey. [I] continued to be a dharma practitioner.

Q: These days, *ngagpa-la*, do you continue to do divinations and readings for people?

#3B: [I] do divinations. In general there are many that do divinations here. However, there are some that come to [me] for requests to do divinations and [I] comply.

Q: What are some of the typical kinds of requests that the people have?

01:44:52

#3B: It is mostly in regard to the sick and to learn about better prospects in business at different places. And should there be any other matter [that needs forecast], [they] come to seek a divination.

Q: What about if we ask *ngagpa-la* if he would like to do a divination for the Tibet Oral History Project?

#3B: Yes, of course. [I] do not know if the prediction will be correct. I will offer supplication prayers as [I] do not have the spiritual oral transmission of higher perception as does anybody else. [I] shall serve you but cannot say for certain if the predictions will be correct or not.

That would mainly depend upon your faith and commitment—if faith and commitment are strong, not only in regard to divinations but it should be so in religion or in all walks of life. Commitment is very important and there should be faith and commitment since this is not a game. Therefore, [I] will do the best on my part.

[Interviewer to interpreter]: So how would we go about that right now? Do we ask a question to the *ngagpa*?

[Interpreter to interviewer]: Yes, please.

[Interviewer to interpreter]: And does he have to use his materials or anything?

Q: If we have a question now for you to seek a prediction, would you have to refer to the scriptures and other materials?

#3B: Yes, [I] must refer.

Q: Do [you] have to look through them?

#3B: Yes.

[Interpreter to interviewer]: Yes, he has to go through the scriptures.

Q: So how do we begin now, *ngagpa-la*?

01:47:25

#3B: There is nothing else to begin with but I will recite the chants and throw the dice. [You] have to ask the question. It is about the work [you] are doing, right?

Q: Yes.

#3B: Is it to ask how the work will go on or what is the main question on?

Q: My question is should the project continue to gather oral histories right here in India where many Tibetans live or should we try to reach Tibetans living in other countries like Nepal and America as well or should we just stay focused on Tibetans living in India?

#3B: Okay, okay.

01:48:54

[Interviewee removes a loose-leaf scripture wrapped in yellow cloth out of a bag, opens it to a particular page, and with right hand picks up two dice from a small round container and begins to recite mantra counting on rosary with left hand.

Keeps rosary on table, holds dice container in left hand and starts to shake dice in right hand, then blows air on right hand and moves hand up and down while continuing to chant. Repeats action several times.

Touches right hand holding dice to forehead and continues to chant with eyes shut. Repeats action and slowly drops dice in open container in left hand. Checks the number of dots on dice.

Picks up dice, blows on right hand, shakes hand, drops dice into container and checks the number of dots on dice. Repeats action four times. Then interviewee closes dice container.]

01:54:56

#3B: The divination is very good. There is no difference between the two [options]. The divination is good. However, I will explain. [Holds scripture, turns loose pages.]

[The results] are similar [for both options]. The divination is very good. [Referring to scripture] Wherever you go, it is like the sound of *dhung* ‘conch shell.’

Q: What’s a *dhung*?

#3B: *Dhung* is the white conch shells we blow during prayer assemblies. [The project] will resound like it. [It] will be very famous. The sound of the conch shell is loud, similar to which [the project] will be famous. It will be successful like the turquoise [colored] leaves.

Q: What did you say about the turquoise?

#3B: [The project] will succeed similar to leaves of trees that are turquoise [colored]. It also mentions [referring to scripture] that like the sound of the cuckoo, [the project] will be famous everywhere. The cuckoo’s call is very melodious, so that is good. The stability is also likewise good. From the point of religion too, propagating the dharma will bring good results.

01:57:15

[Explains while referring to scripture] If it is a family with a husband and wife, the virtuous deeds they had earned will spring forth like leaves growing on a tree or flowers blooming that are very good [indications]. It also mentions that supplicating the deities and naga will bring forth good results. It is not necessary to seek a forecast on the suitability of house, right?

A little regret might crop up for a short while, something like “Oh, [I] should not have done this.” Otherwise, the prediction is very good. It is very good. It is mentioned that the result will be very good. [The project] will be world-famous. Though there is no difference [between the two options], however [doing interviews in] India is slightly better.

Q: Thank you.

#3B: [Wraps scripture and packs in bag.] Is it done?

Q: Yes.

#3B: Okay. Thank you.

Q: Is there anything you wanted to tell us?

#3B: I have nothing to say.

Q: You have given us a great insight.

#3B: Okay.

Q: Thank you. I think that just because... We are very honored to record your story and appreciate your participation in this project.

#3B: Okay. Thank you.

END OF INTERVIEW