

# **Tibet Oral History Project**

Interview #65 – Dhondup (alias)  
July 2, 2007

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# TIBET ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

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## INTERVIEW SUMMARY SHEET

1. Interview Number: #65
2. Interviewee: Dhondup (alias)
3. Age: 68
4. Date of Birth: 1939
5. Sex: Male
6. Birthplace: Zina
7. Province: Dhotoe (Kham)
8. Year of leaving Tibet: 1959
9. Date of Interview: July 2, 2007
10. Place of Interview: Interviewee's residence, Old Camp No. 6, Lugsung Samdupling Settlement, Bylakuppe, Mysore District, Karnataka, India
11. Length of Interview: 1 hr 3 min
12. Interviewer: Marcella Adamski
13. Interpreter: Tenzin Yangchen
14. Videographer: Jeff Lodas
15. Translator: Tenzin Yangchen

### **Biographical Information:**

Dhondup's family, in addition to farming, also engaged in trading and traveled between China, Dhartsedho, Chekudho and Lhasa and later to Kalimpong in India. They traded goods such as tea, wool, pelts and musk. Dhondup recreates a beautiful picture of his region which was full of forests, fruit trees, flowers and a host of wild animals.

When the Communist Chinese arrived in his region they deceived the Tibetans by requesting their weapons and horses on the pretext of fighting the Americans, whom the Chinese considered their enemies. Later they divided the villagers into groups based on wealth and power and would not allow the poor people and wealthy people to interact with each other.

Fearing that his father was to be arrested, Dhondup accompanied his father on a very long journey to Lhasa. His father then joins the *Chushi Gangdrug* Resistance Force while Dhondup travels with their mules. Both later escaped to India.

### **Topics Discussed:**

Childhood memories, trade, farm life, wildlife, first appearance of Chinese, resistance fighters, Chushi Gangdrug guerrillas, escape experiences.

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**Interview #65**

**Interviewee: Dhondup [alias]**

**Age: 68, Sex: Male**

**Interviewer: Marcella Adamski**

**Interview Date: July 2, 2007**

Question: I thought I would begin by asking a little bit about your family. Where is your family from and where were you born?

**Interviewee #65: I was born in Zina.**

Q: What was the largest city near Zina?

**#65: The largest town was called Rizi-nyi.**

Q: How many families were there in your town of Zina?

**#65: There were about four or five families.**

Q: What kind of work were your parents doing?

**#65: My parents were farmers. They also did some trading.**

Q: What kind of businesses?

**#65: They went to China and Dhartsedho. At Dhartsedho they purchased Chinese goods and sometimes took them to Chekudho. From Chekudho, they went to Lhasa to purchase Indian goods to be sold at Chekudho. Some of the unsold goods were then taken to Dhartsedho.**

Q: How long was the journey from Zina to Lhasa?

**#65: It takes about three months and 15-20 days.**

Q: Walking or on horseback?

**#65: On horseback. There were two routes, Ronglam and Chonglam. Going by the Chonglam route took about five to six months. Most people traveled by the Ronglam. That was the route which did not go through the desert. It was the way through Kongpo Gyamdha.**

Q: Your parents would go to Lhasa to buy goods from India and bring them back and sell them in your area?

**#65: It was my father who went [on the business trips]. My mother was always at home.**

Q: What kind of things or objects were popular in Kham?

**#65: The goods that were brought from China were tea [bricks]; it was mostly tea.**

Q: What were the goods from India?

**#65: From Chekudho the objects were mostly leather, wool, pelt, *yatsa gunbu* 'summer grass, winter worm'—a sort of caterpillar fungus, scientifically called *Cordyceps sinensis*—*bemuk* [root plant having medicinal power; grows wild on the lower slopes of hills and resembles garlic], *boo* [*yatsa gunbu*], *zayang* [similar to *bemuk* but grows at the very top of the stony hills; root is dug out around two feet deep and used as medicine] and *latsi* 'musk,' which were taken to China.**

Q: And you sell them in the town?

**#65: These were sold in Dhartsedho.**

Q: Did you ever go with him on any journeys?

**#65: When I was young I went with him for a year or two.**

Q: Do you remember seeing Lhasa when you were young?

**#65: I saw Lhasa only later.**

Q: When you went with your father, did you see Lhasa?

**#65: We didn't go to Lhasa then.**

Q: Your mother stayed home and she took care of the farm? Were there other children?

**#65: We were four children and I was the youngest.**

Q: Did you get special treatment because you were the baby?

**#65: Yes, I did.**

Q: What did they do that was special?

**#65: [Laughs] They would give me better food and stitch more clothes for me.**

Q: Were the other children boys or girls?

**#65: All the three were boys.**

Q: When you were growing up, did they all stay at the farm or did they get married or become monks? What happened?

**#65: They were all at home. They were all small. When I left home, the youngest brother could just about walk.**

Q: But you were the youngest among the four children?

**#65: No. I was the oldest.**

Q: You still got the better food and best clothes?

**#65: I meant that when you asked about the youngest child.**

Q: What are some memories of your childhood?

**#65: In my region there were no schools when we were young. It was not like my parents did not send me to school. The whole area didn't have a school. Some children, who came from well-to-do families, did work like grazing animals. When [a child] reached the age of 8, 9 or 10, if the parents were traders they were taken along. So that was how we lived. In general, the region was very beautiful and plentiful. There were forests and clean grassy mountains with beautiful flowers. There was plenty of water.**

Q: What kind of food was your family growing?

**#65: We grew wheat, barley and peas. We also grew buckwheat. For fruits, there were apples, walnuts and peanuts.**

Q: If there were jungles nearby, were there any wild animals?

**#65: There were animals like tigers, leopards, bears, wild dogs and antelopes. There were goats and deer. All [wild] animals were found there. Except for elephants, all others were there.**

Q: Did you ever see tigers?

**#65: Sometimes they came lower down in the valleys. We could see them. Sometime they came to eat the goats and sheep that were tethered in the yards. The forest was nearby. If one walked 8, 9 or ten kilometers, you reached the forest.**

Q: How did you scare them off if they came?

**#65: Sometimes they went away by themselves and sometimes we fired a gun from the upper floor of our house.**

Q: Were you scared of them when you were a little boy?

**#65: Yes, I was afraid.**

Q: Was there any monastery where your family lived?

**#65: Yes, there was the Tao Nyantso Monastery.**

Q: Were there many monks there?

**#65: There were about 3,000 monks. It was a large monastery.**

Q: What sect was that?

**#65: It was the Gelugpa sect.**

Q: How far away, by walking, was the monastery from your farm?

**#65: It was about 10 kilometers away.**

Q: Did they give classes for the children at all?

**#65: They were taught to read the scriptures, but writing was not taught.**

Q: Was that for the monks or the children in the village?

**#65: The village children were not taught. The monks were taught to memorize the scriptures. Reading and writing were not taught like they are done in India.**

Q: But if you were not a monk, you did not get any lessons?

**#65: No, I did not.**

Q: Where did these monks come from? Three thousand is a large number.

**#65: The monks came from the villages. People loved to become monks. If there were three or four sons in the family, except for one who stayed at home, the rest became monks. That was the custom in the region since the early times.**

Q: What about your family?

**#65: I was young then. My father took me with him during his travels. Later [my parents] were preparing to make the younger ones monks at that time.**

Q: If you send all your sons to the monastery, who would take care of the farms?

**#65: They would keep one in the house. Some [boys] when they grew older, did not remain as monks. Generally, that was the custom.**

Q: Did you want to be a monk or not?

**#65: No, I did not.**

Q: Eventually did your younger brothers go and stay in the monastery?

**#65: I think two of them went [to join the monastery]. The Chinese began the reformation in 1954 or 1955. Since then no one was allowed to live in the monastery.**

Q: What kind of a little boy were you from 1 to 10? What kind of a child?

**#65: I was an angry child and ready to fight.**

Q: Who did you fight with and about what problem?

**#65: I fought many times with the village children.**

Q: How did you fight, with your fist?

**#65: I threw stones and fought with my fist.**

Q: What do you think you were so angry about?

**#65: We had arguments while playing games. There were no other reasons.**

Q: When does life change? You are helping with the farm and your father goes away sometimes, did your life stay the same or did something happen?

**#65: There was a great change.**

Q: When did the change happen?

**#65: You mean when I was traveling?**

Q: You were leading a normal life and when did it change?

**#65: The change took place when the Chinese arrived. The Chinese began the reformation, captured all the influential people and inflicted much misery.**

Q: When was that?



**#65: That must have been in the year 1955...1954 to 1955.**

Q: Which Chinese were these?

**#65: That was the present Chinese [Communist]. They arrived in our region around 1935-1936. First, they reformed China and at that time, many people from our village used to go there for trade.**

Q: What did they do during the revolution?

**#65: During the reformation they evened the properties of the people. When they arrived they said very sweetly, "We have come to help Tibet. We will build roads where there are no roads. We will give wealth to those who do not have it. We have come to help."**

Q: That was in 1935?

**#65: It was around 1935-36. It has been a long time since then. I am not exactly sure.**

Q: You would have been only four years old.

**#65: I don't even know if I was born then. I am relating the story of my parents.**

Q: Before the Chinese Communists came, were there other Chinese that had power over your community?

**#65: Yes, they had arrived. They were living there permanently.**

Q: Was there a name for these Chinese?

**#65: Those were the Chinese before the Communists came into being.**

Q: What did you call them?

**#65: That was the same China. The Chinese government split into two; one led by Mao Zedong and the other by Chiang Kai Shek.**

Q: They were the Chiang Kai Shek Chinese that came to your village? How did they treat the people in the village?

**#65: Yes, that is right, those that escaped to Taiwan. They very gently and gradually invaded [our country]. From Dhartsedho they had already invaded an area at a distance of one month's journey.**

Q: What happened when they got to your village?

**#65: They ordered for our service. For example, we had to give them labor service from Tao to Dango. The power they used in ruling over us was in the form of forced labor. There was nothing else.**

Q: Did anyone in your family have to go?

**#65: Yes, we had to.**

Q: Who went?

**#65: We sent servants and probably my father went at times.**

Q: What kind of labor did they make them do?

**#65: They had to transport things. For example, they had to transport the things on the animals a similar distance as from Kushalnagar to Periyapatna, [the two largest towns near Bylakuppe]. There were no wages paid for that.**

Q: Where did you take the loads to?

**#65: From Tao to Dango and also from Tao to Mi-nya.**

Q: How many days would that be?

**#65: Tao to Mi-nya was two days' journey.**

Q: Was there any other difficulty that your family suffered under Chiang Kai Shek's Chinese soldiers?

**#65: There were no other problems.**

Q: Did you have to pay taxes to Lhasa at that time?

**#65: No, we did not.**

Q: Were the people who were ruling you at that time the Chinese?

**#65: There were the Chinese as well as our village leaders.**

Q: Was your family involved as community leaders?

**#65: Yes, my father was a leader of the people for a very long time.**

Q: What kind of a leader was your father?

**#65: People used to say that he did very well. All the people liked him.**

Q: What makes a good leader in Tibet?

**#65: One who is just, gentle and good is considered a good leader.**

Q: You said that the Communist Chinese came in 1954 to your village, so you would have been about 15. What happened when the Communist Chinese came?

**#65: In 1954 or 1955, the Chinese had already arrived and they were carrying out the reformation process. We are talking about that. They arrived around 1935-1936. They came from China and said that they had come to help us.**

Q: What happened to your family property at that time?

**#65: First they said that there would be reformation only in China and not in Tibet. So for five to six years until 1954-55, the situation remained the same. Then they started the reformation process [in Tibet]. In 1955, they began the reformation. First they told the people that the expansionism-oriented United States of America was troubling the Chinese and that they [the Chinese] needed to talk to them through lawful means. They collected all the influential people of the village and took them to China saying that they must come to settle the dispute.**

Q: Why?

**#65: The Chinese were deceiving us. Otherwise, why would they need the Tibetans and how could the Tibetans settle the dispute when they did not know the language?**

Q: What do you think they were trying to do?

**#65: We had plenty of arms, so the main reason for taking them [the influential people] away was to collect all the weapons.**

Q: By making the leaders go to China, how did they collect the arms?

**#65: The Chinese asked us to loan them the weapons saying that in case of a war against the Americans, they needed the arms. So they collected all the weapons.**

Q: They wanted the Tibetan leaders to bring their guns?

**#65: The leaders were kept there [in China] and the Chinese collected the arms in the village. We had plenty of arms in our village.**

Q: They were trying to disarm the Tibetans?

**#65: Yes, that was it. Otherwise there would be a revolt. The Chinese thought that if the weapons and horses were left with us, we might revolt and they would not be able to subdue us.**

Q: Did any of the Tibetan leaders go to China?

**#65: Yes, they were taken to China.**

Q: This was from your village or all around the area?

**#65: This was from all the areas up to Chekudho. [All the leaders] were taken together in one day.**

Q: Do you have any idea how many were taken?

**#65: There might have been several thousand.**

Q: Several thousand leaders from one region were taken in one day? By horseback, train, how?

**#65: They were taken away in vehicles.**

Q: Did they come back?

**#65: Yes, they did. Once the weapons were taken away, they returned.**

Q: They were almost kept hostage?

**#65: Yes, they were captured and once the weapons were collected, they were free to come home.**

Q: So the leaders come back and roughly we are talking about what year?

**[Interpreter to interviewer]: 1954-1955.**

Q: The guns were collected. Did anything change in your village after that?

**#65: The Chinese then said that they were helping us and that they would bring about equality in the village. They divided the families into three [four] groups; *Fulong*, *Shufulong*, *Dhetoo* and *Sadak Delrim* 'landlords.' The highest among the groups was *Sadak Delrim*, next to that was *Dhetoo*, next was *Fulong* and then *Shufulong*. Take for example this camp, all the families are divided into four categories. Keeping *Fulong* as the average, they said that *Shufulong* people would get a share of the properties taken from the other categories for equal distribution of wealth. *Sadhak Delrim* were those rich families who owned large areas of land.**

Q: Were those names descriptive of any economic category?

**#65: Those are Chinese terms. Names that were given by the Chinese. *Dhetoo* were the rich families who held power.**

Q: What were the other two categories?

**#65: *Shufulong* were the very poor. Considering those who were a little better than the *Shufulong* as average [*Fulong*], the wealth and lands of *Dhetoo* [and *Sadhak Delrim*] were seized and evened.**

Q: When you heard these ideas, you were kind of young but what did you think of these ideas or what did your family think of these ideas?

**#65: I felt that they were forcefully taking away the things and other than that I had no thoughts.**

Q: Were you worried?

**#65: I think I was too young to worry. My parents were very worried.**

Q: What began to happen with your property?

**#65: They seized everything and distributed the lands to the poor.**

Q: Did you lose much property?

**#65: They took away quite a few things.**

Q: And so how did your life change as a result of that?

**#65: Then the people who belonged to *Dhetoo* [and *Sadhak Delrim*] were not allowed to mix with the people of *Fulong* and *Shufulong*. One couldn't talk to the other nor visit each others' homes.**

Q: You mean they were segregated according to each category?

**#65: The people that belonged to *Fulong* and *Shufulong* could mix with each other. However, those who were in the *Dhetoo* and *Sadhak Delrim* categories were not permitted to mix with anyone.**

Q: What happened to you as a young boy? What happened?

**#65: I fled in 1955.**

Q: Why?

**#65: It was said that my father would be captured by the Chinese. When we heard this, we fled from the nomadic region and gradually reached Lhasa.**

Q: What was the nomadic place?

**#65: That was called Serta.**

Q: How long did it take you to get there?

**#65: That was a day's journey.**

Q: What did you take with you?

**#65: We only had four or five horses and nothing else.**

Q: Who were the family members with you when you escaped?

**#65: It was only my father and I who escaped. All the rest were left behind.**

Q: Why were you chosen?

**#65: I was the oldest among the sons and my father took me along to help him.**

Q: When you got to the nomad area, what happened then?

**#65: When we reached the nomad area, we sold the horses and then slowly made our escape. As I told you earlier, the Chinese initially said that there would be reformation only in China and not in Tibet. Later they said the reformation would take place for the farmers and not the nomads [in Tibet]. So at that time when we were among the nomads, they were not yet touched by the reformation.**

Q: Did you stay with the nomadic people or keep moving on to freedom?

**#65: We might have spent a month or two with them.**

Q: And then?

**#65: When all the arms in the village were confiscated, the people of the village made small axes with handles of this size [gestures] and revolted against the Chinese until 1968 to 1969.**

Q: Where were you at this time?

**#65: My father and I had escaped to the nomadic region. Those who stayed back did that [rebelled against the Chinese].**

Q: So it was a battle in the village?

**#65: Yes. Our village was surrounded by jungle and the people hid there. They ambushed the Chinese vehicles that passed through. They did such things to the Chinese.**

Q: Did they succeed in stopping the convoys or killing many Chinese?

**#65: Then in 1956, the people were made into divisions of, say a group of a hundred families and everyone had to eat together and work together.**

Q: But you were gone by then?

**#65: We were not there.**

Q: After you left the nomads, where did you go?

**#65: Then we came to Chekudho.**

Q: Then?

**#65: After that we reached the north. It was a barren area with just a few scattered families with animals.**

Q: And then?

**#65: It took us over nine or around 10 months to reach Lhasa from this point. The weather was very cold and the region was desolate.**

Q: Did you pass any villages along the way?

**#65: There were hardly any villages along the way, except for a family or two. For almost two months, we lived by killing wild animals.**

Q: You must have been cold and hungry many times?

**#65: We didn't die since we had nothing to eat, except meat, for about two or three months.**

Q: When you nearly died, were you cold or just sick or starving?

**#65: The reason we came through the north was because of the many resistance fighters. Groups of 50 or 100 or 200 men were engaged in resisting the Chinese in many pockets [of Tibet]. They [the Chinese] watched those fights on the grounds from their airplanes and the Chinese soldiers [on the ground] drove the people away, so that they [the Tibetan resistance fighters] were not able to get together. Consequently, there were many [escapees] in the north. We were not alone; many of those from Kham were driven to the north.**

Q: So did you travel in small groups?

**#65: Yes, we were over a hundred people.**

Q: From Kham area?

**#65: Yes, that is right.**

Q: When the Chinese flew overhead, did they shoot or did you have to hide? What happened?

**#65: Most of the time, they did not shoot, but sometimes they did.**

Q: Why were you going to Lhasa?

**#65: His Holiness the Dalai Lama was in Lhasa and we thought it safer there. Also that in a few years' time we would be able to return home. That was why we went there.**

Q: If it took you 10 months, when did you finally reach Lhasa? Do you know the year?

**#65: It was between 1956 and 1957.**

Q: What happened when you got there?

**#65: From Lhasa we came to India.**

Q: His Holiness was still in Lhasa when you went to India?

**#65: That is right.**

Q: Why did you decide to keep going to India?

**#65: We came to India for trade. We had to do something, whether it was trade or any other work. We owned six guns of various types. There were three long ones and three short ones, six in all. We had four horses with us, so we sold all those and made enough capital to purchase goods at Kalimpong [in India] to be taken for sale in Lhasa.**

Q: You sold the guns in Lhasa?

**#65: Yes, that is right.**

Q: Did you come back to Lhasa?

**#65: Yes, we did.**

Q: So it wasn't an escape exactly. It was a business trip. Did you stay in Lhasa until 1959? Is that correct?



**#65: We might have been in Lhasa for five to six months.**

Q: Were you there when the Chinese attacked the Potala Palace?

**#65: No, I was not there. We had left in the fifth or sixth month of 1958 to Lhoka to join the *Chushi Gangdrug* Resistance Force.**

Q: Where were they that you met them?

**#65: We heard about the *Chushi Gangdrug*, which was being spoken about among the people. My father joined the *Chushi Gangdrug*.**

Q: Was that in Tibet, in Lhasa?

**#65: It was in Lhasa.**

Q: What did you do? You were quite young.

**#65: I lived in Lhasa and then came to Phari. We became separated.**

Q: Why did you go there?

**#65: I came to Phari along with the mules that we had.**

Q: Were you upset or scared when you got separated from your father?

**#65: I was very scared that I would not meet my father. I was extremely scared.**

Q: It must have been frightening. You were alone, no other family. Did you get lost in the crowd or what happened?

**#65: There were many people from my region who were together with me. There were many mules, around 1,000.**

Q: Your father joined the *Chushi Gangdrug* and in 1958 you went to Phari. Did you hear about the turmoil in Lhasa? Where were you at that time?

**#65: Yes, I heard about it. That was not in 1958 but in 1959. We were traveling from Phari to Kalimpong. Then from Kalimpong we went to Lhoka.**

Q: Lhoka?

**#65: Yes, where the *Chushi Gangdrug* was.**

Q: Then?

**#65: Then that was it.**

Q: Where was the war fought? Where did your father fight?

**#65: They might have fought a few times.**

Q: Where was the *Chushi Gangdrug* then, in Lhasa or Lhoka?

**#65: At that time it was at Lhoka.**

Q: Earlier it was in Lhasa and then later in Lhoka?

**#65: Yes, that is right.**

Q: Did your father get away?

**#65: Yes, he got away. My father came to India and later died here [in Bylakuppe].**

Q: Is there anything else about your life story until India that you think we should know about?

**#65: I think that is it.**

Q: It looks like you have a big family now?

**#65: There are four children and the two parents. We are six.**

Q: What advice or message would you like to give the next generations of children, your children, your grandchildren? What advice or message would you like to give for the future?

**#65: I would like to tell them to study hard and that they must serve the Tibetan government in the future.**

Q: In what capacity?

**#65: It is very important to be hardworking, honest and truthful.**

Q: If it was possible, would you return to Tibet?

**#65: Yes, I would return to Tibet.**

Q: Do you have any plans to go back?

**#65: I hope to be able to go back, but I do not have any particular plans as yet. I am old now. I am 68 years old. I am afraid of the extreme cold weather.**

Q: I was wondering what happened to the rest of your family.

[Tape change]

**#65: My mother passed away quite early; she died in 1968-69. One of my brothers, the third one came and he died here. I think he came here in 1983.**

Q: To Bylakuppe?

**#65: Yes.**

Q: And your sister?

**#65: My sister didn't come. The son of my brother, the one who lives at home [in Tibet] came here. He is in Mundgod.**

Q: The Communist Chinese first came to your village in 1934 to 1935. Were they helped by the Tibetans?

**#65: Some [of the Tibetans] extended help [to the Chinese]. The person who first brought the Chinese into our region from China was Dege Chagoe Tobden. Another person was Sayam Khenpo, an abbot of Sera Jey Monastery and Tao Chonzey. They were the ones who brought the Chinese. They came along with the Chinese as they [the three Tibetans] were facing some problems in the region. So they went to China and came back with the Chinese.**

Q: Who were these three people? Were they leaders and of which regions?

**#65: The abbot was the abbot of Sera Jey Monastery. He had some trouble with the administration and returned to his village. Tao Chonzey faced some problems in Tao and he went to China.**

Q: The Chinese came twice to your village, the first time in 1934-35 and then again in 1954-55.

**#65: They didn't arrive in 1954-55. They were already there. They started forcefully taking away our possessions in 1954, 1955 or 1956. The very first time that the Chinese arrived [in my village] was perhaps between 1910 and 1915. They came once then.**

Q: Which Chinese were they?

**#65: They were the red Chinese. It is 68 years since they came. I heard that at that time I was in my mother's womb. They [the Chinese] were very poor then. They went back and then came again.**

Q: The Chinese arrived several times in your village. What did the people think about that?

**#65: The people did not like them. When the Chinese arrived in 1910 to 1915, the people of the entire region revolted and they were forced to go back.**

Q: What do you think about the Chinese now?

**#65: I feel that it was the Chinese who caused misery to my parents and the region. Other than that I do not think anything. They caused terrible sufferings. It was not ordinary.**

END OF INTERVIEW