

Tibet Oral History Project

Interview #69M – Tashi Gyaltzen
April 10, 2010

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TIBET ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

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INTERVIEW SUMMARY SHEET

1. Interview Number: #69M
2. Interviewee: Tashi Gyaltsen
3. Age: 78
4. Date of Birth: 1932
5. Sex: Male
6. Birthplace: Tsakhalowa
7. Province: Dhotoe (Kham)
8. Year of leaving Tibet: 1959
9. Date of Interview: April 10, 2010
10. Place of Interview: Loselling Old Age Home, Drepung Loselling Monastery, Doeguling Settlement, Mundgod, Karwar District, Karnataka, India
11. Length of Interview: 0 hr 55 min
12. Interviewer: Marcella Adamski
13. Interpreter: Tenzin Yangchen
14. Videographer: Pema Tashi
15. Translator: Tenzin Yangchen

Biographical Information:

Tashi Gyaltsen was born in Tsakhalowa village in the Ba region. He was 3 years old when three out of his five family members died due to a mysterious disease. His grandmother was the other survivor and she took care of him until she too succumbed to the disease. A monk relative found him two days later with the body of his grandmother. He was placed in the charge of a neighbor who was also a lone survivor of the illness until the age of 7.

At the age of 7 Tashi Gyaltsen was admitted to the local Kandha Monastery and was taught to read and write by his uncle, a monk. He describes his life in the local monastery until he left for Drepung Monastery in Lhasa at age 15. He gives a vivid account of crossing the Mekong River by being tied onto bamboo contraption called a *ding*. Tashi Gyaltsen appreciated the educational opportunities now available to him at Drepung Monastery and learned how to debate.

Tashi Gyaltsen served as an assistant to one of the monk business managers. He explains the system of collecting the harvest from villagers who farm the monasteries lands. When the Chinese occupied Lhasa they tried to restrict the number of monks and prompted Tashi Gyaltsen to join the *Chushi Gangdrug* [Defend Tibet Volunteer Force] in 1958.

Topics Discussed:

Childhood memories, monastic life, taxes, life under Chinese rule, Chushi Gangdrug guerrillas.

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Interview #69M

Interviewee: Tashi Gyaltzen

Age: 78, Sex: Male

Interviewer: Marcella Adamski

Interview Date: April 10, 2010

Question: Please tell us your name.

00:00:16

Interviewee #69M: Tashi Gyaltzen.

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?

#69M: Yes, you can use it.

Q: Oh, good. Thank you. During this interview... Thank you for offering to share your story with us.

#69M: Okay.

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

#69M: Okay.

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

00:01:44:

#69M: Okay.

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

#69M: There will be no problem.

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

00:02:08

#69M: Okay.

Q: *Gen-la* 'respectful term for teacher,' please tell me where were you born in Tibet?

#69M: The name [of the village] was Tsakhalowa. It came under the region of Ba.

Q: How many families lived in your village?

00:02:42

#69M: Perhaps there were 160-170 families.

Q: What did your family do for a living?

#69M: They worked as agriculturists.

Q: Can you tell us how many people lived in your family's home?

00:03:17

#69M: When I was small, there were me and four others.

Q: Okay and...

#69M: There were four members, but three expired when I was young. When I was small-about 3 years old, three members passed away and my grandmother and I were left. She cared for me when the others died. [We] moved to a small house a little further away. It was a bad illness.

And then grandmother became sick and passed away. No one was there to care for grandmother and me. [I] heard that I spent two days with the body of my grandmother. Later a monk from the monastery came and he found that grandmother was dead. [He] took me away from the body. I was the only one who survived from my family.

Q: *Gen-la*, do you know what the epidemic was and can you describe the symptoms of the people?

00:05:12

#69M: [I] do not know what it was. Many families died that way. Whole families perished. There was headache for around two days and then they died.

Q: How old were you when that happened?

#69M: [I] was 3.

[Poor sound quality from 00:05:53 to 00:22:52]

Q: Could you please tell us, do you remember if any of the people had pock marks on their face or any other condition that you can remember even later hearing about?

00:06:24

#69M: [I] do not know.

Q: Did you have any knowledge of how many people died during this epidemic, later on if he found out?

#69M: Four members died from my family. In another family, they lost five members. [I] only heard about these.

Q: This would have been in 1935. He was born in 1932. 1935.

00:07:20

#69M: I was born in '32. Yes, it must be '35.

Q: When you were left and the monk came, were you by yourself or was your grandmother still alive?

#69M: She had passed away. It was two days since she'd died. [I] was sleeping with my grandmother's body.

Q: Do you have any memory of that experience?

00:08:09

#69M: [I] cannot remember much. Very slightly.

Q: What happened next in your story when the monk came? What did he do?

#69M: In the other family where five members died, there was one survivor. I was given in charge to that person. The disease was contagious and it might spread to other families. Since the two families had already contracted [the illness], I was given in charge to that family member by the monk. The monk brought food for me from the monastery. I was not allowed to meet [anyone] except from afar.

Q: For how long did you live alone like that?

00:09:43

#69M: I was left there until the age of 7. I was admitted to the monastery at the age of 7. One could not be admitted to the monastery until the age of 7, since they could not attend prayer assemblies.

Q: Before you joined, who were you living with up until age 7?

#69M: I lived with that person who took charge [of me] until age 7.

Q: He was a grown man?

00:10:36

#69M: He was an adult. Five people had died from his family and he was the lone survivor. He was the one [who took care].

Q: *Gen-la*, when you became a monk was that your decision or someone else's?

#69M: It was [my] teacher who took me there. He was the maternal uncle who lived in the monastery.

Q: *Gen-la*, what monastery was that?

00:11:29

#69M: It was called Kandha Monastery.

Q: How large was the monastery in terms of numbers of monks?

#69M: There were a little over 200 monks.

Q: *Gen-la*, how far away or how close was the biggest city to your village?

00:12:06

#69M: The nearest was Tsakhalowa. The monastery I joined was in Changlung, which was a big village. I told you earlier that there were over a hundred families. Tsakhalowa was situated a little further away and there were about 300 families in it.

Q: Which was the biggest town next to Tsakhalowa?

#69M: It was my village called Changlung.

Q: And how many hours or days walk was it?

00:12:45

#69M: It was very close, a distance of half an hour. There was only a short distance.

Q: Was Changlung a large town?

#69M: Yes.

Q: Can you tell us about what happened, if you can remember when you first went to the monastery with your uncle?

00:13:19

#69M: I cannot remember much, except that I lived in the monastery and memorized the scriptures.

Q: Did someone take you as their student? Was your uncle your teacher? Was there another teacher?

#69M: My maternal uncle was the teacher. He was the teacher.

Q: Were you able to read and write Tibetan at that time?

00:14:15

#69M: I used to be taught at that time. I learned to read in the local monastery from the age of 7 to 15.

Q: When you think back for those years from 7 to 15, can you tell us something about life in the monastery? What was your daily schedule like?

#69M: One had to memorize the scriptures and there were many prayer assemblies for the monks to attend. It was memorizing the scriptures and attending prayer assemblies.

Q: How did you feel about being a monk? Was it something that you liked doing or did you want to go and play outside or be in farming? What was your preference?

00:15:46

#69M: [I] liked being a monk.

Q: What did you love about it?

#69M: It is studying the scriptures.

Q: Did you find it hard to memorize or were you good at it?

00:16:29

#69M: It was easy as a child, but when you grew older it was difficult.

Q: Did your uncle stay your teacher or did you progress to other teachers when you were 10 or 11, 12?

#69M: [Teacher] was not changed. It was not necessary to change.

Q: Had your uncle been in the monastery for a long time that he could become your teacher?

00:17:29

#69M: He'd been [a monk] a long time. When I was in the village, he was about 60 years old.

Q: This was your uncle, so was this like your mother or your father's brother?

#69M: I think it was like that [mother's brother], but I do not know very well.

Q: In the monastery you must have had schedules. Can you tell us like when you had breakfast and lunch and dinner? What kind of food were you eating in those days?

00:18:35

#69M: Mainly it was eating *pa* ‘dough made from roasted barley flour and tea’ and drinking tea. In Tibet it was mainly *pa*. Then there was *thukpa* ‘noodle soup’ mixed with different ingredients, wheat flour and rice.

Q: During the day, how many hours a day would you study with your uncle the scriptures?

#69M: If there were no prayer assemblies to attend, [we] spent some time [studying], but if there were prayer assemblies to attend, [we] did not find much time. At around 3 or 4 o’clock, [I] would get a break for an hour or so.

Q: And then what happened next?

00:20:02

#69M: Then at the age of 15, I came to Lhasa and joined Drepung Monastery.

Q: When your uncle was teaching you, can you explain to us what was the process, because you were a young boy and you didn’t know how to read and write? So how, did you have to learn how to read and write first and then study the scriptures or did you just start memorizing words?

#69M: First one had to learn the alphabet.

Q: Did you have books to read or paper or what did you write on?

00:21:25

#69M: The writing was done on wooden boards. You know wooden boards, black wooden boards. That was what [we] wrote on. There were small square wooden boards in those days.

Q: Were there many students in your class when you studied with your uncle or was it just you and your uncle?

#69M: I was the only one in my quarters, though there were many monks in the monastery.

Q: Were there other young men and other boys your age in the monastery?

00:22:24

#69M: Yes, there were.

Q: What kind of a student were you, *gen-la*?

#69M: One had to memorize the many prayers. There were many prayers that were chanted during the prayer assemblies and others.

Q: Were you able to memorize those?

00:22:48

#69M: Yes, [I] did.

Q: Did you have a good memory for learning the text?

#69M: [It] was good at that time.

Q: When you think back to the text that you were learning, this was the first time you were studying them, can you remember anything that impressed you when you were a young boy like say 12, 13, 14? Was there anything about the text that made you feel it was important to learn?

00:23:55

#69M: [I] was a small child at that time and did not think much of anything. It was just memorization. Later when I came to Tibet [Lhasa], there were scripture teachers. While in my village [monastery] it was just memorization.

Q: Can you tell us how the decision was made for you to come to Drepung [Monastery]?

#69M: My teacher sent [me] to Drepung. Once one had [taken the vows to] become a monk in the village, he could not remain in the monastery without going to Drepung. He could go to Drepung, return and stay [at the local monastery] or he could stay on in Drepung. The local monastery would not allow one to stay on unless one had been to one of the three great monasteries [Sera, Drepung or Gaden Monasteries in Lhasa].

Q: *Gen-la*, please tell us why was it a must that you go to Drepung Monastery?

00:25:41

#69M: Actually, it was for studies and also a monk must take the ordination vows at the great monasteries.

Q: Was there anything unique about Drepung that was different than the other monasteries? How did they differ?

[Interpreter to interviewer]: You mean from the village monastery?

[Interviewer to interpreter]: No, from Gaden or...

#69M: There was not much difference. The teaching was the same, but there were differences in the number of monks. When one arrived from the village, one was assigned to a particular [monastery]. Some were assigned to Sera and some to Gaden. One joined [the assigned monastery].

Q: Were there more monks in Drepung?

00:26:50

#69M: There were more in Drepung.

Q: What was different for you when you went from a small monastery with 200 to a very big monastery?

#69M: Well, the difference was that [I] liked it more. One had better opportunities to study if one was able to.

Q: Did you take advantage of those opportunities and in what way?

00:28:18

#69M: [I] studied the debates. One had to study the Great Treatises [of Mahayana Buddhist Philosophy]. The distance from the village was very great. The journey took over two months. The teacher arranged for the money and everything [for my journey].

Q: [Your] maternal uncle?

#69M: Yes. [He] arranged for me to travel with traders from the village who were on their way to Lhasa. The travelers provided me with food until Lhasa. It took about two months and four days. There were no vehicles then and we had to walk.

Q: How was that journey for you? Was that the first time you were away from your own village? Can you tell us what it was like?

00:29:50

#69M: During the journey? When someone was told that he was going to Lhasa, everyone was happy.

Q: Tell us more about the journey. What did you do and what did you see?

#69M: During the journey where there were no bridges, there was one called the *ding* across the rivers. The *ding* was made of bamboo. One used it whether one was a human, an animal or things. Everyone crossed using the *ding*. The *ding* was made of bamboo. The river that flowed in my village was called the Dhachu 'Mekong.' Now-a-days Dhachu is...

Q: What was it like? Can you describe it?

00:31:22

#69M: The *ding* was made of bamboo. Bamboo was split and twisted to make a *ding*. The bamboo's thickness was so much [gestures off camera]. It was twisted like ropes. The bamboo was of very good quality. There were [two *ding*] that moved to either sides of the rivers. They were separate. Men, animals and belongings were carried across them.

Q: What were they in? Were they in a basket or what?

#69M: There was a rope on which one sat and held on like this [holds on imaginary ropes and looks up]. There was a rope.

Q: Were you tied up?

00:32:31

#69M: The little children were tied, but it was not necessary to tie the adults. One must hold like this [holds imaginary ropes]. Over the top of the bamboo was a wooden saddle-like thing, which slid away.

Q: Was there wood placed over the bamboo rope?

#69M: There was a [piece of wood] called the *wa* placed on it.

Q: Did one sit on that?

00:32:56

#69M: No, one did not [sit on it]. A rope was tied to it.

Q: Where was the *wa*?

#69M: The *wa* was placed on top of the *ding*.

Q: This was the *ding* and it was placed on it?

00:33:04

#69M: It was placed on top of the *ding*.

Q: They didn't sit in a basket or anything?

#69M: There was nothing to sit in. There were ropes for people and ropes to tie animals.

Q: Was it very high up and very wide or what?

00:33:58

#69M: It was high.

Q: Was it wide?

#69M: It was wide. The river was big. It was called the Mekong.

Q: Can you tell us how you felt when you were doing that?

00:34:22

#69M: I ventured with joy then and did not have fear as I was a child. When an adult crossed [in the *ding*] a child would be tied to his chest.

Q: And was he big enough to go by himself?

#69M: [I] was tied to an adult.

Q: You said that you studied debates at Drepung Monastery. Can you describe to us the debate process? What is a debate like and how do you do a debate?

00:35:38

#69M: It is [studied] to change your heart for the better; it is just like the debates that are conducted here these days, where they clap their hands.

Q: I can see it, but what is the aim or the process of the debate? What is the purpose of the debate?

#69M: The main aim for everyone is to gain permanence.

Q: To gain permanence?

00:36:28

#69M: It is to attain Buddhahood.

Q: But what does the person say who's standing to the person who is sitting down?

#69M: He would have read and memorized the scriptures and consulted his teacher and the debate is based upon the meaning.

Q: *Gen-la*, could you please give us some sample questions that the person... So there's one person standing and there's one person sitting on the ground. What does the person standing, what would be an example?

[Brief interruption]

00:38:07

#69M: One can ask whichever question that begins in the scriptures. One can start with the question that he wishes. Both of them [the person standing and the person sitting] have studied the same scriptures. However, when the debate is going on, each one thinks differently in his own way.

[Interpreter to interviewer]: It's difficult to explain about the debates.

[Interviewer to interpreter]: It's too hard?

[Interpreter to interviewer]: Yeah, because he's saying, you know like...

[Interviewer to interpreter]: He's saying?

[Interpreter to interviewer]: It's difficult to explain about the debates because *gen-la* is saying it's about the topics that you find in the scriptures. So.

[Interviewer to interpreter]: I see.

[Interpreter to interviewer]: It's different when you, you know, like explain here.

[Interviewer to interpreter]: Right, but so a topic, a statement is made about the scripture or a question and the other person must give you an answer?

[Interpreter to interviewer]: ...his interpretation.

[Interviewer to interpreter]: His interpretation?

[Interpreter to interviewer]: ...of the scriptures that he's learned.

[Interviewer to interpreter]: Okay.

Q: Did you become a very good debater, *gen-la*?

00:39:20

#69M: I am not very learned. After joining [Drepung] Monastery, I got to study for only two or three years. I served my teacher and was engaged in different tasks. [I] did not get to study the debates much.

Q: Can you tell us about other works that you did for the monastery?

#69M: Yes, my teacher was one of the *chanzo* 'business managers' of the *datsang* 'division in a monastery.' I accompanied him everywhere, which was for the benefit of the monks.

Q: You helped your teacher with those duties. Can you give us an example of the kinds of duties that the business manager has to do?

00:40:44

#69M: They [*chanzo*] must fend for the monks though in general there was a capital sum. They must provide food and tea for the monk population. The business managers must perform the main duty of the monastery of providing for the monks.

Q: How does he accomplish providing, the food and the clothing and everything? So where does he get the money to do that?

#69M: There was a capital amount. There was a capital fund. It was earned through the interest. There were estates [belonging to the monastery] in the villages from which they had to collect.

Q: Did you accompany the *chanzo* when he was making collection of grains?

00:42:27

#69M: I accompanied them like a servant.

Q: So with your own eyes, could you tell us when you tried to collect, when you did collect grains from the villagers, what was their attitude towards having to give these grains to the monastery?

#69M: [They] did not show any attitude. [They] worked with a good heart saying that it was for the monks. All the lands [they tilled] belonged to the monastery. They were like tenants.

Q: If they were tenants, what percentage of grain did they have to give to the monastery and what percentage could they keep for their families?

00:43:50

#69M: If it was the estate [of the monastery], they had to give the whole [yield]. They would have been provided with another [piece] of land. The tenants had [separate] lands. They must give [the yield] from the monastery lands to the monastery. [They] must give the grains.

Q: Was there ever any problem collecting these supplies of grains?

#69M: There were no such problems because they gave whatever was the produce and there was no set figure.

Q: Yes?

00:44:52

#69M: [They gave] whatever was the yield of grain and there was no set figure.

Q: Did the farmers have enough land given to them to supply their families' needs?

#69M: Yes, they did.

Q: In later historical accounts, the Chinese said that the monasteries imposed burdens on the people and used the people as serfs and took advantage of the people. What was your experience of this relationship between the monastery and the peasants?

00:46:31

#69M: There was good relationship. It [collecting grains] was not suppression. They [the farmers] had their own entitlement and the monks theirs. They [the farmers] did the work but it was not their grain that was collected. The land belonged to the monks and the people had their [share]. [I] believe that was not suppression.

Q: You are in the monastery from... You go to Drepung when you are around 15 years of age and you stay until 1959. Is there anything that you want to tell us about that period of history in the monastery?

#69M: There was no major happening that occurred between those years.

Q: You know when you were a little boy, there was an epidemic that killed your family. Was there ever an epidemic that hit Drepung Monastery?

00:48:24

#69M: It did not happen. It did not happen. Nothing like what had occurred in the village happened at Lhasa.

Q: When did your life change at Drepung Monastery?

#69M: Life remained so. How did life change?

Q: While you were living in Drepung it became impossible for you to remain. How did that change take place?

00:49:05

#69M: That was because the Chinese suppressed [us].

Q: What happened to you when they invaded?

#69M: They did not let us live in the monastery. I felt something like that. Even earlier to that they were causing suffering to everyone. Later they attacked in '59.

Q: Can you give us an example of how you saw the Chinese suppressing the people?

00:50:18

#69M: The suppression was that they demanded rights and lands and posed a lot of problems. [They also said] that there should not be many monks. [They] said various things.

Q: What did they do to the monks, *gen-la*?

#69M: [They] complained that there were too many monks.

Q: And what did they do to the monasteries, to your monastery?

00:51:08

#69M: [The Chinese] attacked Drepung Monastery, but I was not there at that time. [I] was not there at the time of attack. I had gone earlier to join the *Chushi Gangdrug* [Defend Tibet Volunteer Force] when it was established in Lhoka. [I]'d left in '58.

Q: When you joined *Chushi Gangdrug*, the resistance forces, did you take off your monk's robes or did you continue as a monk?

#69M: When one joined the *Chushi Gangdrug* Force, one was required to remove the monk's robes.

Q: That was in 1958. Did other monks from your monastery disrobe and join the force and how many?

00:52:22

#69M: Yes, there were many.

Q: About how many?

#69M: Many monks joined it. Many monks went to join it.

Q: How long were you in *Chushi Gangdrug* and when did you flee Tibet?

00:52:45

#69M: Only one year [in the *Chushi Gangdrug*], from '58 to '59.

Q: Did you have any encounters with the Chinese?

#69M: [I] did not get to where the encounters took place. [I] was given the responsibility of working for the main army camp. [I] was given the task of cooking for the leaders of the force. I did not own a gun.

Q: But you had a spoon and a very important job.

00:53:40

#69M: [Laughs] Yes.

Q: You know, I think we're going to have to wrap up and maybe follow up another time but for today, let's see I want to ask, what was it like for you today to sit here and tell us your experiences.

#69M: It's been a good experience. [Laughs]

Q: Good experience? How was it a good experience, in what way?

00:54:16

#69M: Because everyone will know about it; all that took place long ago.

Q: I see. I see. Okay. Because you covered a number of subjects, I want to just check one more time. If this interview was shown in Tibet or China, would this be a problem for you?

#69M: There will be no problem.

Q: And can we use your real name for this project?

00:54:57

#69M: Yes, yes.

Q: Before we finish, I want to thank you very much for sharing your story with us.

#69M: [Smiles and nods]

Q: I'd like to present this to you.

[Interviewer presents an envelope to the interviewee]

END OF INTERVIEW