

Tibet Oral History Project

Interview #9M – Ngawang Sangpo
April 4, 2010

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TIBET ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

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INTERVIEW SUMMARY SHEET

1. Interview Number: #9M
2. Interviewee: Ngawang Sangpo
3. Age: 65
4. Date of Birth: 1945
5. Sex: Male
6. Birthplace: Phumo Changthang
7. Province: Utsang
8. Year of leaving Tibet: 1960
9. Date of Interview: April 4, 2010
10. Place of Interview: Home for the Aged, Doeguling Settlement, Mundgod, Karwar District, Karnataka, India
11. Length of Interview: 1 hr 54 min
12. Interviewer: Marcella Adamski
13. Interpreter: Tenzin Yangchen
14. Videographer: Pema Tashi
15. Translator: Tenzin Yangchen

Biographical Information:

Ngawang Sangpo hails from a small village consisting of 14-15 families. His was a middle-class nomadic family and he recalls going on a trade expedition to Lhopra, where they bartered their butter, cheese, and wool for grains from the farmers. This trade relation existed for many generations and occurred once each year.

Everything in Ngawang Sangpo's village changed when the Chinese arrived in 1957-58. He says they were excellent in deception, first giving gifts to the Tibetans and then gradually oppressed the people, so much so that people began to commit suicide to escape *thamzing* 'struggle sessions.' Most monks from the local monasteries volunteered to join *Chushi Gangdrug* [Defend Tibet Volunteer Force]. Ngawang Sangpo tells how the monks had no weapons, but resisted with stones and boulders against the Chinese forces' guns and other weapons.

Ngawang Sangpo's parents feared the Chinese would take him away to school in China like other village children and sent him into exile while they waited for the release of his maternal uncle from prison. Ngawang Sangpo first arrived in Bhutan and then went to India, where he decided to become a monk. He later suffered from seizures and describes being treated by a Tibetan doctor with a golden needle.

Topics Discussed:

Childhood memories, herding, trade, taxes, life under Chinese rule, oppression under Chinese, *thamzing*, *Chushi Gangdrug* guerrillas, escape experiences, life as a refugee in India.

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Interview #9M

Interviewee: Ngawang Sangpo

Age: 65, Sex: Male

Interviewer: Marcella Adamski

Interview Date: April 4, 2010

Question: Please tell us your name.

00.00.19

Interviewee #9M: Ngawang Sangpo.

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?

#9M: Yes, you can. You can use it.

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

00:01:35

#9M: Okay.

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

#9M: Okay. I am fine.

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

00:02:04

#9M: Okay.

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

#9M: No, not at all. You can show it anywhere.

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

00:02:33

#9M: [Smiles and nods]

Q: *Gen-la* ‘respectful term for teacher,’ we would like to cover many topics but I would like to invite you to tell me, what are some of the topics you wish us to be sure to cover in this interview?

#9M: I would like to talk about how the Chinese deceived the Tibetans and how the Chinese oppressed [the Tibetan people]. Initially they deceived about which I will relate. Then I will talk about how they oppressed the people and other things that they did.

Q: What about your childhood? Would you be interested in sharing a little bit about growing up in Tibet?

00:03:44

#9M: Okay. I will tell you about when I was 8 years old. At that time, I used to herd the goats, sheep and yaks. I was not working as a servant, but looking after animals that belonged to us.

Q: How many homes were in your village?

#9M: There were 14-15 families in our village.

Q: Can you tell us a little bit about your family; who was in your family, were they well-off or not so well-off, what was the circumstances?

00:05:05

#9M: The family was middle class. There were two sons, a daughter and the parents.

Q: Did you go to any school when you were a little boy?

#9M: I did not go [to school] in Tibet. The Chinese started schools in Tibet, but my parents did not allow me to join. The reason was that they [the Chinese] gathered the children and sent them to China. If I was sent to China, I would be separated from my parents, which was why they stopped me.

Q: Can you tell us a little bit about your experience taking care of the animals?

00:06:23

#9M: [Laughs] I do not have much to say. I seem to have forgotten it. I did go [herding] and I was not alone. I was sent along with companions. I was small and went with the others and I cannot recall very clearly.

Q: ...many other children or older people?

#9M: They were older people, not children. I was sent along with the older people.

Q: How large were the herds of animals?

00:07:13

#9M: There were a lot of sheep, about 1,000. Three people grazed them.

Q: Can you tell us what your job was when you were a little bit older, taking care of the sheep? What did you do?

#9M: I have been to graze sheep, dri 'female yaks' and yaks. We went to trade in winter. We were nomads and went to Lhopra to trade. We gave them butter, cheese, wool and woolen cloth for exchange with *tsampa* 'flour made from roasted barley,' grains and peas. This trade relation had been in existence for generations. When we arrived there, they had everything ready for us. In summer, they came to get butter and cheese from us and we got them ready. This business relation had been in existence for generations and there were no problems whatsoever. They took care of us when we visited them and it was the same when they came to us. I think I was about 13 years old when I went on such a visit.

Q: Was this Pokra? Did you say Pokra?

[Interpreter wrongly says Phari.]

Q: Did you go to Phari or Lhopra?

00:09:21

#9M: [We] went to Lhopra. The place is where you have the Jetsun Milarepa's [the great ascetic of Tibet] Senga Guthok [location where Milarepa endured hardships].

Q: Was that a long distance from your home? Was that an exciting kind of adventure for you?

#9M: We had to drive the yaks along. The journey for each way took about seven days, so we could cover the trip in 14 days.

Q: Were there any adventures along the way or any dangers along the way?

00:10:18

#9M: There was nothing on the way. The region was safe. There were no thieves or robbers. It was very safe. We did not hurry during the journey, but let the animals graze as we went along. We traveled slowly covering just a short distance in a day. The animals carried loads during both the journeys. There was no fear and we traveled slowly.

Q: It sounds like it was very tranquil and pleasant.

#9M: There was nothing [unpleasant]. It was very joyful.

Q: Very happy times. Please could you explain what you were bringing from the village and what you were trying to get in trade to take back to the village?

00:11:38

#9M: We took what they required like butter, cheese, meat—it was dried meat—then there were woolen cloth and fur blankets. These were the things that they had placed an order for, so we readied and delivered the things to them.

Q: And what did you bring back?

#9M: We brought back grains, *tsampa* and peas to last us for the year on our yaks.

Q: Was this a village or a city that you...? Did you trade with local people or shops? How did you trade?

00:13:04

#9M: There was a trade relationship. They would place an order, which we would take to them. In the same way, we placed an order with them for the quantity of *tsampa* we required, which was made readily available [when we arrived]. There was no need to wait for buyers. We gave them their requirements and took what we needed from them. That was it.

Q: It sounds like you got enough grains for one year. Does that mean you only went once a year or did you go many times a year?

#9M: We went only once. We went only once a year at the same time every year. We had trade relations since generations back with the person we traded. When we arrived there, they hosted us like we were their family members. In the same way, we prepared for their visit. We did not have to ask anyone to buy our goods. When we left, they placed their demand, which we would take to them.

Q: What was the same time that you went every year?

00:15:04

#9M: It was in autumn.

Q: On the journey, did you walk or ride the yaks? Can you tell us, did you sleep in tents or under the sky?

#9M: When we stopped for the night, it was at a place where there was good grass and water. We set up a tent and then unloaded the yaks. We let the yaks loose to graze and drink water. They did not have to be herded because they grazed alongside. At the time of departure in the morning, we prepared tea and drank it, loaded the yaks and set off until evening.

Q: About how many people were in the trading group and were there women and children as well as men?

00:16:26

#9M: They [women and children] were not there. For example, when we left, we were from 14 families. In the group were the fathers, sons and uncles. All of them went but children were not taken along. All of them [the men] went to trade while the women and children stayed at home. They did not go to trade.

Q: To go from the village where there are 14 or 15 homes, and when you went to this other town, how much bigger was it?

#9M: That was a good [place]. Every family [on both sides] knew one another. Everybody [in the trade mission] did not converge on one family there. If 14 people went to trade, they would call upon 14 different families, where they would be received with food and drinks. Everything was readied for them. This relation had been going on for generations. There were no problems whatsoever.

Q: Was the town that you went to also same size as yours or was it much bigger?

00:18:21

#9M: It was a little larger. That was larger as they possessed lands. They possessed large tracts of land. Our area was mountainous, while they had large plains.

Q: Besides trading and getting exchanges that were necessary, were there other purposes for such a journey, for instance could a father be looking for a husband for his daughter or to get some teachings from a monastery. Were there other reasons that would occur in this trade journey?

#9M: Yes. There were festivals during which people dressed in their very best, adorned ornaments and went to see the lamas and monasteries. There was also the custom of people coming to seek brides and bridegrooms. There were special functions.

Q: So you attended these festivals in October, in autumn when you went or would you go at another time with the village, take people at another time?

00:20:47

#9M: That was at another time and not during the trade. During the trade visit, it was solely that. The other time coincided with *Losar* 'Tibetan New Year.' Those were separate visits.

Q: And the village would go—people from the village?

#9M: Not particularly. We celebrated *Losar* ourselves. However, it was different if there were marriages. Otherwise, we did not go.

Q: You did not go [to Lhopra]?

00:21:23

#9M: No, we did not because it was a long distance away. We visited nearby places but not Lhopra, except if a bride or bridegroom was given away, in which case the family concerned went there. Other than that, nobody visited it during the *Losar*.

Q: How was your village structured? Was there a leader for your village and who elected the leader?

#9M: The leader was appointed by the Ramba family. We were the tenants of the Ramba estate. He was one of the ministers of the then Tibetan Government. We were his tenants and the leader was appointed by him.

Q: What did it mean to be “a tenant of his estate”?

00:22:59

#9M: We were required to pay a small tax. It was not a large tax. We paid a small tax, as was documented in a contract for that particular family. We paid an annual tax according to the written contract. It was not a huge tax. The Ramba family was one of the best among the estate holders. The tenants did not have many difficulties. The people lived happily.

Q: So each village leader would decide what the taxes should be?

#9M: That [the tax] was decided by the Ramba district [authority]. Since the time of the forefathers, a contract was written and the taxes were paid according to that. There was no increase and no decrease. Tax was paid in accordance to that.

In turn, the Ramba family provided their tenants in this way: a family was given 1,000 sheep for a period of three years, which was then rotated among the [tenant] families. The sheep were given on the basis of *kaymay shimay* ‘no birth, no death.’ If there were births, that was your profit and if the number dropped, you had to make good the loss at the time of returning the sheep. In some cases, due to misfortune the sheep died, which meant you had to give up your yaks or ornaments or anything to cover up the loss.

In that way, the sheep were given in turn to four or five families every three years. If one was fortunate, there was a manifold increase. However, some families faced misfortune and at the end of the three years, when the sheep were handed over to the next family, they had to make up the figure to 1,000.

Q: Your village sounds like it was very peaceful and you did regular trade and you went for festivals, when did your village life begin to change?

00:26:32

#9M: The change came about after the Chinese arrived. The change began after the Communist Chinese arrived.

Q: When did they arrive in your village?

#9M: We were defeated in '59. They were already in my village in '57-'58.

Q: What happened in your village as a result of their arrival? What changed?

00:27:18

#9M: Initially they talked very sweetly. They deceived us a lot. They gave candies to the children and thermos flasks and such to the parents and deceived them. The children were happy and the parents were happy. They deceived a lot. They were excellent at deception.

They [the Chinese] had been advised by their authorities, "Do not stint when distributing *dhayen* 'Chinese silver coins' to the Tibetans. Give away as many *dhayen* as required without stinting. These *dhayen* are sure to come back to us in the future." The Chinese officials were told to distribute *dhayen* liberally as it would go to them in the future. That was a certainty. They oppressed and forcefully took them [the *dhayen*] away [later].

Q: How did you hear this statement?

#9M: I lived [with the Chinese] for about two years there. I saw it with my eyes and experienced what they did.

Q: Well, why don't you tell us what you heard and saw?

00:29:15

#9M: Okay. That was how they deceived initially. Later, gradually they reversed the roles of the servant and the employer. They made the employer into the servant and the servant became the employer. That was how they did it. Now all the employers became servants and the servants became employers. This went on for about a year.

Q: How did the servants feel when they were made the employers? What was their reaction?

#9M: They [the servants] did not have any freedom. If they did not do accordingly, they would be beaten! Then *thamzing* 'struggle sessions' were sure to begin. That's what they did at first. Later they advised the children, "Your parents have suppressed you. Now the People's Liberation Army of Communist China will support you. You must subject your parents to *thamzing*." *Thamzing* proceedings began.

Q: How did they make the children publicly humiliate the parents?

00:31:07

#9M: They made the plans and wrote them down. They lied and said, "If you do not do as told, you will be punished and if you do accordingly, you will be rewarded." So they did it through force as there was no other way. They forced them to do it.

Q: What were the children forced to do? What actions?

#9M: The parents had not suppressed the children but they were told, “Since your birth, your parents have not treated you well. You must say it. If you subject your parents to *thamzing*, you are the winner. We will support you.” Later they implemented socialism. No, not socialism, it was liberation.

The liberation had already started before I left. Liberation was, say for example a family had ten children and another family did not have any children. Their [the latter’s] wealth, assets, goats, sheep and every animal was distributed to each and every person of the other family. That was the liberation. That was equality.

Q: What happened to the people who owned more property? What became of them?

00:33:17

#9M: They became equal with the others. The properties of the rich were distributed to the have-nots. If a family had ten children and they did not own much, the rich family’s assets were equally distributed. Even the newborn babies had the same right [to the assets]. Poor families with many children became rich. Though they were made rich, their [lack of] virtue made them bankrupt.

Q: Did the rich families still remain in their homes? What happened to them?

#9M: They could not stay in their homes. They became the servants. When they did not adhere to them [the Chinese], they were imprisoned and suffered a lot. When they did not obey them saying, “I cannot give away my assets and properties, which have been in my family since generations. I will not give them to anybody.” If one had said that, he was charged with a serious crime, “This is very bad. You are a rebel.” He was forced into prison and brought out for *thamzing* sessions.

Q: Can you tell us what the public humiliations were like?

00:35:36

#9M: When they did not obey them [the Chinese], the poor who did not have anything and the servants of the family were told that they would be rewarded for subjecting them [the wealthy] to *thamzing*. It was done through force.

Q: How did they conduct the *thamzing*?

#9M: [The person] was accused of things that he had never done. He was falsely accused. If he replied that he had not done it, it was insisted that he had done it. Since it was the case of the powerful against the powerless, he was forced to accept it. He admitted to things he had never done, under duress.

If he did not obey, he would be imprisoned and given a death sentence. There was no reason whatsoever. They just wanted to take away their assets and properties and oppressed them.

Q: Did you see with your own eyes the public humiliations involved?

00:37:09

#9M: I did not witness a *thamzing* session as I was a small child. When the family members gathered at night, as a child I used to hear everything. I did not attend an actual session since I was a small child. Some people were imprisoned and when someone learned he was to be subjected to *thamzing* the next day, he stabbed at his own throat and died. Such cases occurred.

Q: Can you remember as a child what kind of feelings you had when you heard about these stories?

#9M: In my heart I wondered when I would get to go to India and that we should not remain there. I thought I would not be able to survive there if I did not escape.

Then there was the family of the leader of our village. The father had passed away and there were the mother and two daughters. They were to be subjected to *thamzing* the next day but they'd escaped during the night. When the time came for the *thamzing*, they were not there. So in their place, three stones were propped up, which were topped with paper hats and these were subjected to *thamzing*.

They had escaped and reached India. The two girls joined the Performing Arts Institute [Dharamsala, India]. The husband was an Amdo, who was also a performer. One of the girls died and the mother has also passed away.

Q: You mentioned that some people who heard they were going to be *thamzinged*, committed suicide. Did you know any of these people by name?

00:40:26

#9M: I know them. I know their names. I can tell you. The family name of the person who slashed his throat was Jungru. His name was Kunchok Tsephel. He used to be called Jungru Kunchok Tsephel.

Q: Before these people you described committed suicide, was suicide used by people who were upset in your village or in other Tibetan villages?

#9M: No, never. It was never there. I have never heard of it. The region was very peaceful. There never was any such thing. It started only after the Communists arrived.

Q: Why do you think these people took their own lives?

00:41:55

#9M: They thought that they would be subjected to severe oppression. They believed that it was better to commit suicide than to undergo the oppression. They believed that way and committed suicide.

They [the Chinese] would not allow them to die immediately like [death] from stabbing or slashing. The hands and feet were pierced with nails and every bone was flogged. A person was rendered neither alive nor dead. The breath was still there and he was beaten cruelly. They might have known this and therefore committed suicide.

Q: And what would be the Buddhist teachings in response to someone who take their life to avoid suffering?

#9M: It is normally said that if one took his own life, he would have to suffer the same fate for 500 lifetimes. However, there is nothing in particular about this in the dharma. That is what people normally say, that one must suffer that.

Q: So what else changed? You were about, when this was going on, this public humiliation and everything; you were about 14-15 years old. Is that so? What else do you remember changed in your village? What happened to the monastery? What happened to the rest of your village?

00:44:53

#9M: No changes took place except that they caused so much suffering. The monastery was destroyed and there were no monks left. The monks escaped. It was a small monastery and the Chinese converted it into a prison. The soldiers lived in the assembly hall and the dormitories housed a prisoner each.

Q: Where had the monks gone and when did they leave?

#9M: The majority of the monks volunteered into the *Chushi Gangdrug* [Defend Tibet Volunteer Force]. Nobody called them but one's country was being conquered and during the troubled time, they gave up their lives for the protection of Tibet and her religion, and volunteered. Except for an old monk or two, there was no one left. Everyone had gone away. Everyone volunteered. People had a lot of enthusiasm.

Q: How far was your village from Lhasa, walking?

00:46:21

#9M: If one left Lhasa in a vehicle at seven o'clock in the morning, he reached my village in the evening around seven or eight o'clock.

Q: The monks that joined the *Chushi Gangdrug*, where did they go? To what part of Tibet did they go to join the forces?

#9M: The *Chushi Gangdrug* initially established in Lhoka Diguthang. Lhoka Diguthang was where the *Chushi Gangdrug* began. The encounters took place at Tsethang, Lhopra Dhuwazong and other places. They [the monks] left together but became scattered in various places.

The majority of the fighters at Lhopra Dhuwazong were monks. The monks did not have weapons. The Chinese arrived and the region has steep mountains and plenty of stones. So

the monks killed many Chinese by hurling stones. I heard these stories from those who returned from the encounters. We met and they spoke about such things. The monks did not possess any weapons. One could use a sword if someone came near, but the Chinese did not come close. So some hurled stones while others rolled down boulders. Those stones killed many Chinese troops.

00:48:36

Lhopra Dhuwazong has steep mountains [shows upright palm] and the monks were at the top of the mountain. When the Chinese arrived at the base, they rolled down boulders and hurled stones at them. They were able to kill many Chinese that way.

Q: Were these the monks from the monastery in your village that joined?

#9M: They were not only from our monastery, but from others too. Everybody gathered there from various regions.

Q: In your village you said you only had 12-14 homes. How many men from the village joined the *Chushi Gangdrug*?

00:49:52

#9M: At least one person from each family joined. If there were three sons in a family, two sons volunteered and left.

Q: And what about from your family?

#9M: All of us in the family were too small, so we could not volunteer.

Q: How did your mother and father react and how did they feel with the Chinese involved in their village? What was their reaction?

00:50:49

#9M: They were filled with panic and fear that something bad would happen. But they were helpless.

Q: Is there anything else that you could tell us about what happened regarding the Chinese coming into your area that we haven't asked you yet? During the pre-interview, you'd mentioned about people being buried.

#9M: That did not happen in my village but at a place very close, a day's journey away. A couple was made to dig a pit in which they were buried alive. The pit was covered.

Q: *Gen-la*, could you please repeat what you said just now because it has not been recorded.

00:52:08

#9M: Okay. The couple was made to dig a pit and when that was done, the couple was buried alive in it. After the pit was covered, their children were made to dance over it and sing. Nobody would be able to watch one's parents being killed, but the children were

forced to do so. They were beaten and told to obey them [the Chinese]. They did things that would never happen in the world.

This occurred in my village. There was an old man called *Po* ‘grandfather’ Dawa. [People] were told that a rebel must be subjected to *thamzing*. What the grandfather did is a beautiful story. The so-called rebel was there for the *thamzing*. The Chinese officer was sitting there. The grandfather got up from the crowd in great aggression and slapped the Chinese officer! The Chinese officer did not say anything that day after the slap.

The next day he was called to the office and asked, “Why did you slap a Chinese officer?” He replied, “I have suffered so much under the rebels that when I reached there, I could not differentiate between the rebel and the officer. Believing that [the officer] was the rebel, I slapped him! I am sorry he turned out to be a Chinese officer.” He [*Po* Dawa] was promoted! He was made a high leader. He slapped an officer and received a promotion! That is how the Chinese are. He was an old man.

Q: So he fooled the Chinese. But he got to slap somebody.

00:55:41

#9M: Yes. Deep down he did not like the Chinese, but he could not tell them that he did not like them. He was a poor man and during the *thamzing*, people among the crowd were asked to come forward to conduct the *thamzing* and he volunteered. He got up and then got to slap someone and received a promotion! He received double benefit.

Q: Do you remember what he was like when he became a leader under the Chinese?

#9M: I knew him. He was a good man. He was a talented person and excelled at settling disputes. When there was a dispute, he used to be hired. People used to hire him and take him to settle disputes. If he took charge of a case, it was impossible that he did not win the case. He was a very clever man. In general he was poor and old, but when it came to settling disputes, he was number one. He could think very well.

Q: He was the leader of the village?

00:57:34

#9M: No, he was not the leader. He was from a poor family with many children. He was a very enthusiastic man.

Q: Who were some of the people who inspired you during these difficult times and why did they inspire you?

#9M: They were my parents and no one else, as I was small then. My parents said that we could not remain there for long and made plans to escape. My parents planned for us to escape together, but my maternal uncle was arrested by the Chinese, who misled them [parents] into believing that he would be released from prison the next day or the day after. They hoped for his release and stayed back.

So finally my parents, older brother and older sister...I was the youngest child. If they did not sent me away first, the Chinese had started a school and were looking for children everyday. For almost 15 days, I did not stay at home during the day. I used to flee into the mountains and come home in the evening.

00:58:56

Then when things became more serious, there was a female relative of ours, whose husband was appointed as *u-yon* by the Chinese. A *u-yon* is a leader and he was sent to Lhasa, Gyantse and Shigatse on an official tour. After he returned from the tour, on account of having said something improper, he was secretly informed that if he remained, it was decided that he would face arrest, so he should try to flee. He escaped all of a sudden and my parents sent me along with him.

So my parents were left behind in Tibet while I arrived here [smiles]. My mother has passed away as my older brother. I do not know if my sister is alive. Earlier we could send letters through people but since the last four to five years, I have no knowledge. I do not know if she is alive or dead. My mother and brother have passed away.

Q: What was the journey like with your brother-in-law? What was that journey like?

01:01:19

#9M: The journey took place during wintertime, a very cold period. We had to cross over snow-covered passes. I was a child and could not walk. I rode a yak over the pass and we arrived in Bhutan. We came through the route to Bhutan. When we arrived at the border, the Bhutanese would not allow us to pass. There were sentries at the border region of Tashi Lhakar.

We were told, “You will not be allowed to enter. You have to go back. You cannot enter.” The women cried and begged. The men said, “If you do not let us enter, we are sure to die if we go back. So we will die here. We will jump from the cliffs or leap into the rivers.” The women pleaded with them. We were stranded for a month. After a month, we were allowed to go to Bhutan.

[Discontinuity in video]

Q: When we left, you had just escaped into Bhutan. Can we pick it up from there? What happens next?

#9M: Then we were sent directly to India.

Q: Did you go to India from Bhutan?

#9M: Yes. The [Bhutanese] officials received order from their government and two soldiers accompanied us from one post to the next until we were handed over to the Indians. After the Indians took over, they were the ones who accompanied us. We walked all the way carrying our things, as there were no airplanes or vehicles.

Q: How many days did it take you?

01:04:26

#9M: I think it took us around 25 days to travel from Bhutan into India. We had to carry our things and the road was very rough. There was hardly a road. If one looked up, you saw the sky and if one looked down, you saw the ground; so thick was the forest. You could not see anything at all. There were wild animals and a cacophony of sounds. It was very dangerous at night. We burned moist bamboo in the night to keep away elephants, tigers and leopards. When the moist bamboo made a popping sound, I believe they [the wild animals] did not come out of fear. So we made a fire the whole night. That was in Bhutan . [Laughs]

Q: Very clever idea. When your family wanted you to leave Tibet because the Chinese were taking the children to schools, I wanted to first ask, did they take any children in your village to China?

#9M: Yes, it happened. They had already taken the first batch and were preparing to take the second and third. They collected children and when the number rose to about 10, they were sent there.

Q: Do you know where they took the children to in China?

01:06:51

#9M: I do not know. They were taken in vehicles and they would certainly not tell us where they were taking them or in which school they would be admitted. Nobody knew anything.

Q: Have you ever heard stories of children who returned after they were educated? Did they come back to Tibet? Do you know any children who were sent to China for an education and then returned to Tibet?

#9M: I have not heard. Once they were taken away, whether they were sent to school in China or were killed and dumped into the rivers, nobody knew anything; neither their parents nor anybody. They [the parents] just lived in anxiety. There was no one they could ask in which school their children were. The parents were helpless and just lived in anxiety.

Q: And were children, a certain number taken from each family or in the village? Do you have any idea of the numbers?

01:08:34

#9M: I am not able to give you a correct figure because I heard of these after I left and I was not there myself. So, I am not able to tell you.

Q: You were walking through Bhutan with your brother-in-law, walking for many days. How did the Bhutanese people react to you when they saw you?

#9M: There were different [reactions]. Some were sympathetic and gave us tea and food. Some, when they saw the Tibetans, considered us dirty and fearing us, did not come close. During the journey, when we made camp, we used to go begging into the villages. Some sympathized and gave us [food] and some did not. When we went begging, the children were made to beg because the adults were shy. The children shouted at the door and some good families gave us alms. There were some who were bad and instead of giving us alms, scolded us. That was it.

01:10:36

In general, the Bhutanese are Buddhists. We belong to the same religion. Their country was very close to ours and they used to come to our region to trade. Some of our people used to scold them and call the Bhutanese *lalo*, which meant someone did not know how to work properly. So, some of them who knew about this told us, “Why do you come to the land of the *lalo*?” [Laughs]

When we were little children, the Bhutanese carried a big basket on their back and I believe they brought goods to sell and on their way back, kidnapped children. When the parents told us such, we used to be very scared. They [the Bhutanese] took the children because they were obliged to pay a heavy tax. They had to transport things from India. So, instead of sending their children, they kidnapped these children, looked after them and then made them transport things from India. Every family had to send a coolie as government tax to transport things, so he was used. Since he was not a family member, they did not feel any kindness towards him and sent him. Children were kidnapped for such reasons.

Q: Now what happens after you go through Bhutan into India? What happens when you arrive in India? Where do you arrive in India?

01:12:54

#9M: Dhangla. Dhangla is very close to Buxa [West Bengal]. Dhangla is on the border of India and Bhutan. From Dhangla, I came to Buxa. Buxa is in Indian territory. That was where Gandhiji was interned by the English. Earlier 1,500 monks were settled in Buxa and that was the place. I came to Buxa.

Q: What was the reception like when you got to Buxa?

#9M: It was very good. It was excellent. They were the Indians and the reception was extended by the Indian government. Those Tibetans who had arrived earlier were instructed and we were provided with food and clothing. We received all these things and it was very good. The Indian Government is very beneficial.

Q: Must have been a relief.

01:14:19

#9M: Yes.

Q: You mentioned that when you reached some of the villages in Bhutan that the children did some of the begging. Was your group larger than you and your brother-in-law?

#9M: Yes. There were about 56 people who were together on the escape journey.

Q: When you left with your brother-in-law, you escaped, your parents wanted you to leave immediately; did you join a large group or just the two of you?

01:15:22

#9M: When we were on the escape journey, we gradually met people from our surrounding villages. There was a steep mountain with narrow valleys, which were very hard to find. So people fled from there. Everyone knew that the other was escaping and so the group grew and reached that number.

Q: Initially there were just two people?

#9M: When we left, we were not just the two of us. There were around 10. Then we met up with people from other regions and journeyed together. We left our village in the night and walked the whole night. Then we hid in the valleys. There was no fear of Chinese as these were barren regions. You hardly met anybody there. We stayed there and started out in the daytime.

We had to cross the mountain between Bhutan and Tibet at a place called Thadi. There was a very huge river at this place and very close to that was a Chinese army camp. We did not know the region, so we hired a shepherd of the village. There were about 36 of us then. He [the guide] was paid a yak and some *tsampa* ‘flour made from roasted barley.’ He guided us through the region he knew. The bridge was very wobbly and shook like this [shakes body from side to side]. Our yaks were not used to that and found it very difficult to walk over it. The yaks had rings on their noses and one was led by it. Then the other yaks followed it.

01:17:37

The roar of the water was very loud. When we went across [the bridge] we could see the Chinese soldiers moving about with their flashlights. However, they could not hear us going across from the thunderous sound of the river. It was dark. After we’d crossed the river, then there was the snow covered mountain. The guide said, “As you go up, there is a Chinese post at the top of the mountain. Since you are large in number, they will be careful and you will not face any danger.” He told us we need not have any doubts. So at a distance after crossing the river, we did not have the guide. We came by ourselves.

Q: How long was the rope bridge? How wide was it?

#9M: It was quite long. Do you see that house there? It was from there to here. The river was very big. The water had a thunderous sound. The bridge was rickety. It was made of bamboo and shaky but it did not break. It was strong. It shook from side to side. The yaks were not accustomed to that. The yaks had holes pierced in their noses and ropes attached there. So someone led one with it and then the other yaks followed.

Q: It sounds very scary.

01:20:38

#9M: It was very scary. However, none of the yaks fell off. Some people had dogs with them. Their mouths were covered, otherwise if they barked, we'd have had it. The dogs' mouths were covered until we had crossed the bridge. Once we were over it, there was no danger.

Q: So was this bridge near the border of Bhutan and still in Tibet?

#9M: No, that was in Tibetan territory. The name of the village was Thadi. If one crossed the mountain pass, then you were in Bhutanese territory while the other side was Tibetan territory. The bridge was on the other [Tibetan] side near the mountain. Once you crossed the bridge, you came to the base of the mountain pass. You climbed the pass and over that side was Bhutan and the other side Tibet.

01:22:09

I and all of us believe that our escape was possible only due to the grace of His Holiness the Dalai Lama because it is almost an impossibility for us to have succeeded in the flight. There was only one route and the [Chinese] army camp was just close by. It was not only us but many people who passed on this route and they too escaped. All of us believe that we succeeded because of His Holiness, considering the impossibility of the situation. It was very dangerous with the army camp close by. We could see the Chinese soldiers with their flashlights. They were close by.

There were people from my village who took the route through Lonala, a mountain pass which was a short-cut route for the Bhutanese who came to trade in the summertime by curving out footholds into the rock surface. During winter it was frozen and people could slip down. Some people took this route and many died there. Many from our village died there. The route...[not discernible] and there were no steps like a ladder. So those who came on this route in winter could not succeed, while in the summer the Bhutanese dug out hollows as footholds. All those who fled in winter on this route, fell down to their death on the slippery ice into the valley. Many died there. That was called Lonala and it was in Bhutanese territory.

Q: When crossing the bridge, how many people were in your party at that time? Did they do it in the day time or night time?

01:24:56

#9M: It was not during the day. We crossed in the dead of night. We timed it so that we reached the bridge around 11 or 12 o'clock in the night.

Q: How many people were there?

#9M: There were about 36 people.

Q: I want to go back to Buxa. You said that you knew that Mahatma Gandhi had been in prison there. Did you know about Mahatma Gandhi when you arrived or before? Or did you just learned about him many years later?

01:25:54

#9M: I did not know of him until I arrived here.

Q: Here [in Mundgod]?

#9M: No. When I arrived in Buxa, I learned that he had been imprisoned there by the British. I saw the prison where Mahatma Gandhi was incarcerated. It was a very small room where he was kept. There was also a huge portrait of Mahatma Gandhi there.

There were monks of the three great monasteries [Sera, Drepung and Gaden] as well as from all the four sects [of Tibetan Buddhism] at Buxa then. His Holiness the Dalai Lama started it with 1,500 monks, in order to preserve the Buddhist dharma. His Holiness requested this of the Indian government and Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru [Indian Prime Minister] accepted. We are very grateful to Pandit Nehru.

Jawaharlal Nehru has been very helpful to us, but he committed a big mistake because he said that Tibet is a part of China. ...[not discernible]...Then the Chinese attacked [India] in 1962. By then he had passed away.

Q: Since you understood something about Mahatma Gandhi, what do you think of Mahatma Gandhi, his work and his teachings?

01:28:26

#9M: Mahatma Gandhi advocated the path of non-violence, which is practiced by His Holiness the Dalai Lama also. Mahatma Gandhi is considered a great man in the whole world. He was killed. Though he was such a great man, they did not know it and he was killed. He was killed in Delhi.

Q: So can you tell us what happens after Buxa? What is the next experience in your life? Where do you go from there?

#9M: I went to Darjeeling from Buxa.

Q: And what happened?

01:29:37

#9M: I was in the school in Darjeeling for 2-3 years. I just about learned the alphabet. [Laughs] Then at the age of 17, I became a monk. I became a monk while at school.

Q: What kind of a school did you go to in Darjeeling?

#9M: That was a Tibetan school, one of the Tibetan schools. Earlier they used to be called Refugee Schools, but later they were taken over by the Education office of the Indian government and they came to be known as Central School for Tibetans.

Q: Why did you feel you were only able to learn so little like just the alphabet?

01:30:43

#9M: I became sick. Initially I suffered from epileptic seizures for about three years. When I got somewhat better, I developed problems with my leg. It must have been my destiny from my past life that I could not study.

For this ailment [seizures] I consulted several good hospitals in Darjeeling but could not be cured. Later a Tibetan doctor arrived in Darjeeling and he injected me with a golden needle on my head. Then I became completely cured and for about a year I was happy. But then the leg problem started and I still have it.

Q: When you had the seizures, can you describe what happened? What kind of seizures they were?

#9M: When you are about to have an attack, you feel it. You knew it but you could not talk. A draft of cold air blew into the nose and you could not breathe out; the air pushed into you. And then you fell down and became unconscious. When you came around, you were in hospital.

Q: Was there ever any kind of foaming at the mouth or the jaw was very tight, anything like that?

01:33:32

#9M: I do not recall if there was foaming, but it might have occurred. I do not remember because I was unconscious at that time. I cannot say much on it.

Q: Did the Tibetan physicians have any idea about what caused these seizures? Or what the names of the seizures were?

#9M: I did not particularly ask him about it. I explained the ailment and he said that I would be cured by the golden needle. So I requested him to treat me with the golden needle. Other than that, I did not particularly ask anything as I was just a child and did not think about it. [Laughs] If it was now, I would have asked. I was a child then and hoped only for the ailment to be cured and just did not think about enquiring about the disease.

Q: You were still quite young and you were away from your mother and your family and Tibet. What kind of feelings were in your heart at this time in your life?

01:35:06

#9M: There were no particular feelings that I had. After having undergone immense sufferings, the heart hardens. When I faced difficulties, I did not feel particularly disturbed.

Q: Did you think that you would ever return to Tibet?

#9M: I think of that eternally. [Laughs]

Q: In what way? Do you wish to go back or you wonder if you will go back?

01:36:02

#9M: There is no way even if I wished to go back. I wish to go back but there is no way. I have problems with my leg and it is very difficult. If I was fit, I would have wished to go to my region but there is no way. Now it is impossible due to my leg.

Q: The Tibetan doctor, was he a lama or a doctor?

#9M: He was not a monk but a lay person. He was a famous doctor in Tibet. He was appointed as the doctor for the 1,500 monks in Buxa.

Q: Was this...that was put in your head, where did they put it in and was it acupuncture or something similar?

01:37:21

#9M: No, that was not it [acupuncture]. That was a real golden needle. The pointed tip of the golden needle was inserted in the head [shows center of top of head] through the scalp and bone. At the top [of the needle] was a wedge on which a *paa* [?] was placed. Here [in India] it is not a *paa* but a piece of Tibetan paper that is used. In Tibet, a *paa* was used but you cannot get *paa* here. The Tibetan paper is placed over the wedge and set fire to. *Ngag* 'tantric verses' are recited and air blown over it continuously. As the *paa* or Tibetan paper started burning, the heat entered within [through the golden needle]. After a certain time, the golden needle sprung out by itself. [The golden needle] had done its work. That was it.

Q: Do you remember how it felt?

#9M: Yes, I do. One had to bear the pain. [Laughs] You cannot scream in pain but bear it. Once the needle became hot, it jumped out [of the head]. The golden needle did not get used up but it was sharpened. The gold remained in it. It could be used again for someone else; only the *paa* was exhausted.

Q: And then you had no more seizures after that. Is that correct?

01:40:20

#9M: I was completely cured. It [the seizure] had been there for almost three years. After the treatment with the golden needle, I became completely well.

Q: And the next illness that befell you. What was that called?

#9M: Tibetans called the illness *dumbu chusi*, as it developed pus; in other words, it is called tuberculosis of the bone.

Q: You said that you decided to join the monastery. What made you make that decision?

01:41:19

#9M: When I became a monk, I was not ill. I became a monk when I was 17 and at that time, I was very healthy.

Q: Why did you decide to become a monk?

#9M: My parents and everyone were left back in Tibet and I had nobody. Normally it was not simple to become a monk. If one wished to join monkhood, it was necessary to have your parents' permission. However, I had no parents or siblings to seek advice. I could make my own decision. So I became a monk.

Q: What was in your heart that made you want to be a monk?

01:42:23

#9M: Life would be much simpler. A lay person has a more difficult life, having to fend for a family. A monk does not have anyone to take care of and it was enough if he could sustain himself. If possible, of course, one should study and practice the dharma to attain Buddha hood. If not, at least as a monk you have fewer difficulties. That's what I thought.

Q: Did you feel it would be easier because you had suffered an illness and it left your leg, somewhat damaged? Is that why it would be easier for you?

#9M: When I became a monk, I did not have problems with my leg. I was healthy. I became a monk at age 17 and I began having problems with my leg when I was 24 years old.

Q: I see. Where did you become a monk? In Darjeeling or did you come here to Doeguling?

01:44:27

#9M: I was in Darjeeling then. It happened when I was in the school. At that time, around 76 students joined monkhood in one day.

Q: Did you stay in Darjeeling for a long time and then come here? When did you come here?

#9M: I stayed for sometime in Darjeeling. Then I developed problems with my leg and the [treatment] took two to three years in Darjeeling. Later I was sent for treatment to Ludhiana [Punjab] and various places.

Q: Here?

01:45:10

#9M: I was not sent here at first. I came here much later when the Education Department sent me, the office of the Education Department in Darjeeling. I had been receiving treatment at various hospitals. Finally, I had outgrown my school years. And thinking for

the betterment of my future, I was sent to the Home for the Aged. I spent two years in Dharamsala getting treated with Tibetan medicine. Then there came a letter from the school. The Education Department had also written to the Home Minister and I went to see him. He said, “Your age is above the school age and there is nothing positive about your future.” If I was healthy, I could have worked and earned my livelihood but I was unable to work and I was too old to study. Finally, I requested that I be sent to the Home for the Aged and the Home Minister sent me here.

Q: At what age did you come to the Home for the Aged?

#9M: I came here in '72.

Q: In 1972?

01:46:46

#9M: Yes. It was in December of '72.

Q: You came here?

#9M: Yes. I might have been around 30 years old or perhaps 28-29.

Q: Were there other monks here and did you receive any teachings that monks usually receive?

01:47:25

#9M: When I reached here, there were many monks. There were two different quarters [for the monks]. We were almost 50 in Quarter Number 4 and another 50 in Quarter Number 6. There were in total about 100 monks in the Home for the Aged. Initially there were 500 residents at the Home for the Aged. There are 12 quarters. Except for the 12th quarter which was empty, the rest of the 11 quarters had two inmates in each room. At that time, there were almost 500 residents in the Home for the Aged. At present, including the staff members, there are only about 140-odd residents. This number could be reached because of some new members; otherwise we are coming to the end.

Q: Do you have any special function that you perform here as part of the Home, as a monk?

#9M: Earlier when the number of monks was many, we used to gather for prayers on auspicious days. The monks of Quarter Number 4 observed many prayers. There were many older monks then, those who had come from Tibet, but now all of them are no more.

Q: What do you think is the role or function of monks in the Tibetan culture?

01:49:58

#9M: [They] teach the people about the Buddha dharma and about the next life and how to meditate and say their prayers.

Q: What do you hope will be preserved about Tibet for generations to come?

#9M: We have to preserve our precious culture for their future and the Buddha dharma which His Holiness has spread in the world. We must advise them to study the dharma and when we get our freedom back, the situation should not be that they, the Tibetans have to learn about the Buddha dharma from foreigners, which is a possibility and is a big shame. It is a sad state of affairs if they have to learn about the precious Tibetan Buddha dharma from foreigners. So I would like to tell them [the youngsters] to learn about the dharma from the lamas.

Q: In conclusion, what do you want the people around the world to know about Tibet? And what do you want them to do about Tibet?

01:52:10

#9M: We Tibetans are six million and the Chinese are 1.3 billion. At present, the six million Tibetans are confronting the 1.3 billion Chinese. We confront them because we have truth on our side. So I request all the people of the world to lend support for this truth. Truth will surely triumph one day. I would like to request the world to give us support. That is what I think.

Q: Thank you.

#9M: [Smiles]

Q: I want to ask just a couple of questions. If this interview were shown in Tibet or China, would this be a problem for you?

01:63:37

#9M: There will be no [problem]. I was very small in Tibet and I grew up in India and became lame. Nobody knows me. I will thank you for promoting this as much as you can.

Q: Can we use your real name for this project or do you want to use an alias?

#9M: You can use my real name.

END OF INTERVIEW