Gyen Gedun Kalsang
Narrator

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Minnesota Historical Society
Interviewers

Interviewed for the
Minnesota Tibetan Oral History Project

September 4, 2005
Gyuto Wheel of Dharma Monastery
Columbia Heights, Minnesota

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Dorjee Norbu **- DN**
Gyen Gedun Kalsang **- GK**
Charles Lenz **- CL**

DN: My name is Dorjee Norbu. And today is September 4, 2005. We are interviewing Gyen[1] Gedun Kalsang la[2] at the Gyuto monastery. And present with me are Gyen Gedun la, I the primary interviewer and Charles Lenz, the secondary interviewer. This interview is being conducted in Tibetan.

Gyen la, Tashi Delek.[3] First, could you tell us your full name?

GK: My name is Gedun Kalsang.

DN: When did you join the monastery?

GK: I am from a place called Makham and there was a small monastery called Norbulinpa with over 20 monks. At 16, I joined this monastery and became a monk. Till that time, I stayed at home with the parents herding animals and doing other household work. I stayed at this monastery till the age of 20 reading scriptures, participating in the rituals and reciting prayers. I then moved to Lhasa. I carried my belongings and it took 2 months and 15 days to reach Lhasa. Arriving at Lhasa, I joined Drepung monastery that had 7,700 monks. There were different houses.

And after staying for about a month in a house, I sought permission to leave the monastery and left for Lhasa city where I had my brother in Lama Gyupa monastery who found a sponsor for me to participate in a particular program called Pesang. Under this

[1] Similar to addressing someone as sir, it can also be used to address someone as honorable teacher.
[2] La, is added to the end of a name as a sign of respect.
[3] Tashi Delek is a traditional Tibetan greeting.

program, I had to memorize 'Gyujong' text and in the eleventh month, I had to join Gaden monastery.

After this monastery, I left for Ramoche Jowo Minthuejee, the most important center of the Gyuto monastery, where I had to learn scriptures for fifteen days. After fifteen days, I had to go to read/recite scriptures and also, I had to give a test. There were eleven monks who gave the test. The test was conducted by the Lama Uze,[4] and of the eleven, I got the fourth rank. I stayed twelve years in the Gyuto Ramoche monastery and the Chinese intrusion and invasion had already started.

In 1959, we lost our country to China and I fled to India. Arriving in India, I first stayed in Assam at a place called Masumari for one month. All the Tibetan refugees first arrived at Masumari and from there they were sent to different places. One batch of monks of Gyuto monastery that had arrived in India earlier was sent to Dalhousie and we joined them later. It was here where I stayed the most, spending over fifteen years learning scriptures, rituals, making mandala, etc. Then I was asked to go to Kalimpong where we had a sponsor and I was sent with another monk. I stayed twenty-three years in Kalimpong.

My next move was to the United States where Dadak[5] had started a Gyuto center[6] and Geshe[7] Dorjee was sent to head this monastery. Lobsang[8] and I were sent as his assistants. Arriving here in the Twin Cities, I first stayed on Portland Avenue. The house we lived in was not very good and so we moved to Columbia Heights. We have been here in Columbia Heights for the last four years.

DN: Did you join the monastery on your own or on the advice of your parents and relatives?

GK: I had a desire to become a monk and when I told my parents about it, they agreed. That is how I became a monk.

DN: Following China's invasion and occupation of Tibet, you came to India. What was the biggest problem you faced in India?

GK: I lived in Dalhousie in the Gyuto monastery with over sixty monks and we lived a life depending on the assistance from the government. While in the monastery, I learned Buddhist texts, drawing lines to make mandala, and butter sculpture for Choe-nga Choepa—butter sculpture offering on the fifteenth day of Tibetan New Year.

DN: What were the main differences between the monasteries in Tibet and in exile?

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[4] A high rank in a monastery.
[5] Thupten Dadak, a Tibetan who arrived in Minnesota several years prior to the Resettlement Project. He has been a key figure in the Tibetan community in Minnesota.
[6] Gyuto Wheel of Dharma Monastery.
[7] A title given in the Gyuto school of Tibetan Buddhism when one has achieved a level of skill similar to that of a Western Ph. D.
[8] Another monk that arrived in the United States with Gyen Gedun.

GK: The monasteries in Tibet are very unique. I lived in Ramoche Gyuto monastery, one of the two monasteries. At three we had our Morning Prayer session and around seven, the session came to a close. We had four prayer sessions in a day. Of the important prayer congregations, the first important one was called Gade Gunchu, which took place in the eleventh month of Tibetan calendar . . . I don't remember the calendar that is in use in the world today. After Gade Gunchu, we had the Chamka Chempo at Ramoche monastery; it used to be a great religious congregation.

In the first month of the Tibetan calendar, we would have the Losar[9] Monlam Chenmo.[10] This huge congregation would take place before the Tsuklak Khang in Lhasa, which had the sacred image of Jowo Sakya Muni. This congregation was attended by monks from the three monastic universities of Sera, Gaden and Drepung and would go for twenty days. During this time, we would be at our monastery performing religious rituals. In the second month of Tibetan calendar, we would have a ritual offering called Tsokchoe Tsewang. This practice started during very early times and became an official practice from the time of Great 5th Dalai Lama. It was a religious procession in which ten to twenty-five monks from the different monasteries would participate by carrying sacred texts and other sacred objects and go around the Tze Poedrang.[11] In the third month, at a place called Chuda, we would go and spend a month and fifteen days performing ritual offerings. In the fifth month, we would attend Gaden Yarchu at the Gaden monastery where we would spend a week making mandala and ritual offerings called Sangwa Chenpo Dajuk. We would then go to Lhasa and participate in what is called Zamling Shesoel in the 5th month.

After that we would assemble at Ramoche monastery for Ramoche Ritual Offering. The next important religious congregation was held on Drukpa Tzeshi,[12] which is an important day. Drukpa Tzeshi ritual offerings congregation was held at Tsuklak Khang before the Sacred Jowo for three days. On twenty-fourth of sixth month, we would assemble at Sera monastery for a week participating in Kangsu Chenmo, the great ritual offering. Drepung is the next monastery we would go and this would be in the seventh month when there would be what is called Drepung Tsokchen Shin-Ngo. Besides the religious congregation, there would be the opera performance before the palace of the Great 5th Dalai Lama. And people would flock to see the show. This would be the beginning of a series of performances. The opera troupe would next go to Lhasa and perform at Norbu Lingka, the palace of His Holiness. They then go to different Shimshaks[13] and Labdrangs[14] and perform opera show. We would go and watch the performances.

On the tenth day of seventh month, we would go to Dakyaba. On the fifteenth day, we would make our seats and assemble for the Ritual Offering congregation. Unless nine

[9] Tibetan New Year.
[10] New Year Great Prayer Session.
[11] Palace of His Holiness.
[12] Fourth day of sixth month.
[13] Residences of important aristocrats.
[14] Residences of Rinpoches etc.

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and above, the monks could not remove their dress belt; they had to stay and sleep on their seats with their hat, eating bowl and tsampa[15] bag with them. Their seats are their beds during this congregation. There would be four prayer/ritual sessions and the young monks would get up early morning to attend to routines like washing hands and face and then get back to prayer session at three in the morning. Those who were nine and above could go to their rooms to sleep.

At Dakyapa, there was a piece of land with black soil that we used to make mud. On twenty-fourth or twenty-fifth, we would start drawing lines. Measurements for Jigje and Sangwa Dupa had to be made very exact. We would have ritual offerings and prayers. At this congregation, monks gave their Geshe Lharampa examinations through monastic debates and dialectics. After this, we would go to Ramoche and congregate for Lhabab Duchen, an important day. At Ramoche, the Geshes once again gave Lharamba examination.

On twenty-fourth of the ninth month, we would go to Tze Poedrang, the palace of His Holiness, and there we would assemble for seven days reciting prayers and performing rituals. We would then go to Ramoche.

These things continued while the Chinese invasion had already started. But the conditions were fast deteriorating. Then the story of His Holiness the Dalai Lama being invited to the Chinese barrack for food came up. The people of Lhasa did not let His Holiness go to the Chinese barrack. Instead, His Holiness escaped into exile. That is the story.

DN: While in India, what were your responsibilities?

GK: We were only sixty or seventy monks. We received help from the government for our living. We had a committee of five monks who took care of the management and accounts of the monastery. The term of this committee was three years. I served on this committee for one term.

DN: How did you come to the United States?

GK: Thupten Dadak, ex-monk of Gyuto monastery, had started a Gyuto center here in the Twin Cities. He requested our monastery to send monks. So a Geshe was sent with Lobsang and me as his assistants. That is how I came to the United States. We stayed on Portland and 28th, South Minneapolis, first. Geshe gave teachings while we recited scriptures and performed rituals. After staying there for two, three years, Geshe was recalled to India, as he was promoted to Lama Uze by His Holiness the Dalai Lama. We then did not have a head teacher to preach. Lobsang and I did all that we could to meet the needs of the community. But we did not preach, as we did not have training for that.

Tara, an American nun, taught for some time. We collected cassettes with the teachings of His Holiness and played for our American students/friends. This went for about a year

[15] Roasted barley flour.

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and then the monastery sent Gongkar Rinpoche as the head teacher. He started preaching at our center.

After about a year, we decided to sell the house, as the neighborhood was not very good. There was a company that was ready to help us if we wanted to renovate the house, but we decided to sell it and that company bought our house. Gongkar Rinpoche lived with his brother while we lived at Dadak's house. We then bought the present house where we have been living in the past four years.

We then have a routine. Every Wednesday, we have meditation and teaching for a group of about twenty American students. And on Sundays we have a gathering of Tibetan community members who come and recite mantras and other prayers as per the instructions of the Department of Religion, Tibetan Administration in India. These prayers are for the long life of His Holiness. We make a record of all this and send it to India.

DN: You came to the United States in 1995. How did you feel when you first arrived in this country?

GK: I found the place pleasant but it is new and you don't know the place. There weren't many people that you know. Language was/is a problem. I found life tough. But there are Tibetans who are more than happy to help us when we contacted them. That made me feel good. While living in Portland house, I fell sick and I was sick from 1995 to 1998. An American friend named Bryant helped me to go to Hennepin County Medical Center and there I was diagnosed with diabetes. They kept me in the hospital for two days and injected into my body a liquid called I.V. and did other procedures but did not give me much medicines to eat. I was then released but had to go to the hospital after two days. They gave me injection and did other procedures.

Dr. Tsewang Ngodup was in the hospital and he gave me all the instructions regarding medicines and injection. Much of the cost was covered by insurance and remaining cost was free. I am now quite well and feel very grateful for the help and service at the hospital. I continue to eat medicine. I then had a swollen in my body and went to Hennepin Hospital. They call it hernia. I had a surgery on August 15th, and it is gone. I had a follow up appointment with the doctor and I was told it was getting cured. I feel little pain in that area. But for that, I am well now.

DN: For the disease like diabetes, do you eat Tibetan medicine?

GK: I don't eat any Tibetan medicine. I eat only the medicine prescribed by the doctor. I feel mixing two is not a good idea.

DN: Was the Gyuto center already established when you first arrived here?

GK: Dadak had received a property for the purpose of starting a Buddhist center and he had spoken to His Holiness about this. After he received approval from His Holiness,

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Dadak contacted the Gyuto monastery. He had registered the center and the property was handed over to us when we arrived here. So we took over the charge and we have been a Buddhist center since then.

DN: You stated that your center was started on Portland and 28th, in South Minneapolis. At that time, how many monks were there?

GK: Geshe la, Lobsang and I were the only monks when we started the center.

DN: You were only three. Did you face any problems?

GK: Portland was not a good place and so we decided to move. After selling the property, Gongkar Rinpoche stayed with his brother named Yeshi Sopa and we stayed at Dadak's house. We did not have a place to preach, so we rented/requested space in the churches. Later we found this place and now we have a space for preaching. The Gyuto monastery[16] sent three more monks and now we are five.

DN: After you moved to the new place, did you have to make changes to your religious activities?

GK: When we informed the Tibetans about the arrival of the Rinpoche and the teachings, there were not many coming. I understand the reason. In America, everybody is busy. On Sunday, we have prayer and preaching sessions and these are attended by a group of Tibetans. The group is not big but they always come and attend the session.

DN: You have a new house. Has it been very useful?

GK: It is an old house and not many people can assemble in this house. The board of directors is looking for a bigger space property.

DN: Could you tell us how a day's schedule is like at your center?

GK: We get up early in the morning and make offerings on the altar on a daily basis. Sometimes Tibetan families invite us to their home to perform rituals and recite prayers. When we do not have to go to any Tibetan families, we assemble three times a day performing rituals and reciting prayers. On important days like the 10th, 15th, 30th every month, we have special prayers and offerings.

DN: Your center gives teachings both to the Tibetans and non-Tibetans? Do you notice any difference between the teachings between the two groups?

GK: No. The teachings are the same whether the audience is Tibetan or non-Tibetan. The only difference is the language. If the audience is Tibetan, there is no language problem as Rinpoche speaks Tibetan. And if the audience is non-Tibetan, then the teachings have to be interpreted. Gyen Lobsang interprets in English.

[16] In India.

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DN: When you first arrived here in Minnesota, how did you find the living conditions of the Tibetans?

GK: When we arrived here, there were not many Tibetans. During celebrations like Losar, Tibetan New Year, and observation of events like Democracy Day,[17] there were not many people. During Losar, we made most of the community New Year offerings. But these days, things have changed due to the grace of His Holiness. More Tibetans own homes and children are more educated and trained in Tibetan performing arts. During community celebrations, there is so much fun and joy these days.

DN: How has the Tibetan community changed? Has it made great progress?

GK: Tibetan community has made great progress. Many Tibetans own their own homes and there is a community center where all can come and assemble. These are the signs of progress. Tibetans no longer have to go in search of space for community events or celebrations. We not only have a community center, but it has the infrastructure needed for spiritual purposes as well as cultural enrichment activities. Tibetan language and performing arts classes are held at the center.

DN: What difference do you find between the Tibetan communities in India and in the United States?

GK: Living conditions of the Tibetans in America are far better than those who live in India. Tibetans in the United States work many hours and make money to help their parents and relatives in India.

DN: How is the relationship between the Gyuto center and the Tibetan community?

GK: Gyuto center has very good relationship with the Tibetan community. Gyuto center caters to the spiritual needs of the Tibetan community. Whenever there is request from the community, our center has responded with a sense of responsibility. Our relationship has indeed been very good.

DN: What are some of the services Gyuto center renders to the community?

GK: Gyuto center is here for the Tibetan community. Whenever a Tibetan family is faced with problems, they seek the guidance of the monks and request for performance of rituals, etc. And Gyuto center also needs the support of the Tibetan community. Therefore, there is a great need for good relationship between the two.

DN: What are some of the challenges Gyuto center is faced with?

GK: We need a bigger space and in order to buy a bigger space house, we need to sell our present house. We are in the process of working on this.

[17] The day commemorates the day in September 1960 that the Dalai Lama announced he would form a democratic government for Tibetans living in exile.

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DN: Have you been to India after your coming to the United States?

GK: I think it was 2002 that I went to India. It is now over three years.

DN: What changes have you noticed?

GK: I went to Dharamsala and saw many buildings constructed. Our monastery, which was based in Bomdila in the state of Arunachal Pradesh, had moved to Dharamsala. The new monastery is constructed at a site close to Norbulinga Center.

DN: I have no more questions. Is there anything that you want to say?

GK: Nothing special to say. We are in the United States with a community of our own. It is important that our community is active and united. In a foreign country, it is not good to drink and fight. It will harm our community and bring disgrace to all. Everybody must keep in mind the words of His Holiness and put them in action. If we all do that, it would be wonderful! Youngsters like you who have completed high school and are in colleges should work hard. Money is important but there are other things that are important, too. His Holiness talks about the importance of specializing in certain areas of study. You should keep His words in mind and do accordingly. We are old; our days are gone. We will pray for your success. You should support His Holiness in finding a solution to the Issue of Tibet. You should pray for that. Who is the man with you?

DN: He is my friend working on the Tibetan Oral History Project of Minnesota History Center. There are over twenty Tibetans chosen and we go to them to interview. These Tibetans are from different backgrounds like teachers, students, etc. The purpose of this project is that anyone who goes to Minnesota History Center can have access to the Oral History of the Tibetans by reading the texts or listening to the cassettes. Such projects are done on other ethnic communities and they are doing one on Tibetans.

GK: That is great!

DN: Thank you very much Gyen la. My friend also thanks you.

CL: Thank you very much.

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