

Tashi Lhewa
Narrator

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Minnesota Historical Society
Interviewers

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Dorjee Norbu Residence
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Dorjee Norbu - **DN**
Tashi Lhewa - **TL**
Charles Lenz - **CL**

DN: Hi, my name is Dorjee Norbu. Today we are interviewing Tashi Lhewa at my residence. I am the primary interviewer and with me present today are Tashi Lhewa himself, Charles Lenz, the secondary interviewer. The date is August 28, 2005.

And before we start can you say your name and spell it for us, please?

TL: Yes. That's T-a-s-h-i L-h-e-w-a.

DN: And can you introduce yourself? Where were you born?

TL: I am a Tibetan immigrant here in the U.S. I reside in Minnesota. I was originally born in Mussoorie, Uttaranchal, India and I resided there since my childhood until about age seventeen when I moved to the U.S.

DN: And where did you go to school in India?

TL: I attended my early couple years in Tibetan home school in Mussoorie, Happy Valley, Mussoorie. It's a Tibetan settlement there. After that I transferred to Woodstock International School, which is—it's an American missionary school, it's the international school there, which has a lot of the students residing.

DN: And can you just briefly describe your experience at Woodstock? How was it different from the Tibetan school that you went to earlier?

TL: It, again, like I said before, had a lot of diversity. It had its own different culture. It was different in that I didn't get to go through some of the experiences which some other

Tibetan students might have. But I did get a chance to interact with a lot of people from different backgrounds, which I thought was a real plus and I learned a lot over there.

CL: This is—the Woodstock School is in Mussoorie, right?

TL: Woodstock is in Mussoorie. The school was originally established back when the British ruled India. It was established for the children of British missionaries and British officials that were residing there and subsequent to the British leaving the school stayed open.

DN: And you just briefly talked about your schooling. Like what did you do on your breaks? Or how long were your breaks and what would you do?

TL: We had a couple of months off, about two months over the winter and one month over the summer. Other than a few spring breaks, which was like a week off. But it was a dorm school so one thing that was unique was I was in boarding school since first grade. Which a lot of people don't go through that experience, which is interesting in its own way. But during our breaks I used to go home and my home initially was in Mussoorie but subsequently later it shifted to about an hour south of Mussoorie to Rajpur, which is further down. And I used to spend my summers over there taking extra classes, tuition, learning Tibetan, taking courses in Tibetan language. Which was one of the detriments as going to an American school was that it gave me kind of—took away from my opportunity to learn Tibetan.

DN: And when did you first find out that you were moving to the United States?

TL: That was during my tenth grade and I was told by my mom that we were moving to the U.S. And at the time I had no idea of where American was or—I mean I got my little bits, snippets of information from the movies, but the furthest out of my hometown that I had been was—I hadn't even been south of Delhi or to even south India pretty much. The only other country I traveled to was Nepal. So somebody telling me I'm going to move exactly halfway around the world was quite a bit of shock. But I had a couple of friends who were from the U.S., a couple of classmates who said that wasn't such a bad idea.

DN: So were you like excited and did you share this with your friends at school?

TL: I did. I did. At the time I didn't understand exactly what moving to America would entail. I was seventeen years old and just kind of took into stride. But I talked to a couple of—my dorm parent back then was from Philadelphia and so he was pretty shocked when I told him that I was moving to Montana. Because he thought that was out there in the rural area. But I had no clue. Montana could have been New York to me.

DN: So who came to the United States first from your family?

TL: My dad arrived here first and he got here through the thousand program, the resettlement program.¹ And he got in through a lottery which was for employees of the Tibetan Government-in-Exile who had served for ten years. So he originally arrived here in Montana. He was there for five years after which he managed to file petitions, immigration petitions for us, and at that point we came and we joined him. My mom and my sister and me.

DN: So what was your initial reaction like when you first reached Montana? What was going through your head? Anything that kind of shocked you or surprised?

TL: It's very different from India. The first thing that caught my attention was just how few people there were out there. In India when you step outside your house you consistently see people walking back and forth and you don't interact as much with people. When I came to Montana as soon as I looked outside my house, I was in the suburbs somewhere, and I saw all the streets were empty and the only thing going off were the sprinklers. That was quite a big shock. But there was some other things. I mean just the way everybody reacts and behaves. A lot of cultural aspects which are very different from how it was back in India.

CL: Where in Montana did you move to?

TL: I was in Missoula, Montana, which is a small town of approximately forty thousand people. It's one of the largest, most highly populated areas in Montana.

CL: College town.

TL: It is a college town. We have the University of Montana over there. It's—even though it tends to be in a rural state it tends to have a certain amount of open minded people there because it is a college town. So it has a unique culture to the town itself, which was pretty nice for me.

CL: So what year—you said your dad came in the first thousand, the resettlement project.

TL: Yes.

CL: What year did he come?

TL: He arrived here I believe it was in 1993. And five years subsequent to that he filed petitions for my mom, my sister and me and we came to join him over there.

CL: So you came in like 1998 then?

TL: I arrived here in 1997-1998. Around that time.

¹ U.S. Tibetan Resettlement Project, a program that became effective under the 1990 Immigration Act passed by Congress. 1,000 Tibetans were granted Visas to come to the United States.

DN: So you were seventeen. So did you start high school at Montana?

TL: I did do that. I did my eleventh—my junior and senior year there. It was an interesting experience. It was very different from Woodstock and very different from schools in India in general. There's a different culture here. Though there were some strong similarities to the teaching methods that I had experienced back in Woodstock, so it wasn't that much of a shock but there were substantial differences as well. Overall it was a great experience that I had.

CL: How was it not being in a boarding school situation for the first time?

TL: That was slightly—that was pretty interesting. The thing with boarding school was, I had been in a boarding school since first grade. So one thing that happens as a result of this is you make some very strong friendships with the people you live, because you're going to eat with them, you're going to sleep with them, you're going to study with them. So over here it seemed I was a bit more distant to my classmates over here. Not only because—there were other cultural aspects as well and me being somebody joining late in the game in high school. But I made some very good friends there and some excellent teachers. Overall it was a great experience.

DN: And did you feel that because you were at kind of a diverse and like an American school at Woodstock, did you feel that kind of helped you ease, more easily adapt, to schooling in America?

TL: In some ways it did. Maybe it was due to my age back then because I was much younger that I wasn't more . . . I wasn't more aware of discrimination and other factors like that. But when I came over here to the U.S. I did notice it in high school. Comparing the diversity of Woodstock to the high school I went to, we had about two thousand students there and out of those there were maybe six Asian students and around four or five black students. So it wasn't all that diverse and when I talked to people they hadn't had much experience. A lot of students had never left the state, had never gone outside the state, so it was interesting trying to explain to them where Tibet was and where India was actually.

CL: Because you mentioned when you were at the Woodstock School and you were told that you were going to America that you hadn't traveled very far in India at all, were you able to relate to other kids at all that maybe hadn't left the state at all? You had just taken this incredible journey, this huge journey halfway around the world and seen something new for the first time.

TL: Yes, I could relate to them trying—their certain inabilities and difficulties that they would face and try to understand some concepts. Because I had gone through it then exactly myself. It was a big culture shock for me. I guess they would have felt it to a lesser extent since they were still in their same environment but for me it was a very big step.

DN: And so when did you first learn that your family—or why did your family decide to move to Minnesota?

TL: It wasn't exactly a personal choice. My dad had moved here. He'd been resettled here. The Tibetan resettlement program places Tibetans strategically in different areas across the U.S. and my dad's sponsor resided in Montana and so we came there. Montana is a beautiful place, especially western Montana where we resided. There's a lot of outdoors activities that one could do. It is rural. If you're out looking for some urban fun you're not likely to find it but overall it is a beautiful place. Fantastic weather as well.

DN: And when did your family decide to move to Minnesota?

TL: My family decided to move to Minnesota after I believe it was my mom who—well, we only had approximately—in the entire state of Montana there must have been around eight, nine families maximum. Though the vast majority of them, like around six of them, lived in Missoula. It was still a very small group and my mom was feeling kind of homesick at that time and so she decided that—and seeing that we had heard that Minnesota has one of the largest populations in the U.S. of Tibetans, it was something that she wanted to do. So she initially moved there while my dad was trying to sell the house and wrap up things in Montana. My sister followed after that. And subsequently, a year later, me and my dad, we finally moved all to Minnesota.

DN: You said that the community was much smaller in Montana, the Tibetan community, so did you like do gatherings together or how was that?

TL: We did do the gatherings. That's one thing that we were pretty proud of. We still have a small number of Tibetans in Montana. Some of them have tended—a large portion actually, have tended to move out to other states where there are more Tibetans. Like in—some have moved to Minnesota. Others have moved to the West Coast. But definitely we were able to get together on all the important events and have our gatherings. Even though we were all leading very hectic and separate lives back there.

DN: Did you personally want to move again? I mean you had just moved from India to Montana. What was your reaction on moving again to Minnesota?

TL: It was difficult in some ways, as I had just started to make new friends there in high school. On the other hand I knew that there was a lot more to the U.S. than Missoula, Montana. And so I knew that there were better opportunities for me outside of the state. Montana is one of those states where a lot of the youth after graduating from high school, they move out. Just due to the sheer lack of jobs and opportunities in the state. So on the one hand I was sad to leave the state that I had grown to enjoy over the two years but on the other hand I knew that there were more opportunities elsewhere in the U.S.

CL: So you had just graduated high school then when you moved, right?

TL: Yes. I had just graduated from high school and I had started applying for college in Minnesota at that time.

DN: And when you first reached Minnesota what was your initial reaction to the Tibetan community here?

TL: Well, I knew a couple of families here. There are a lot of Tibetans here who were formerly from Mussoorie so that there were a lot of familiar faces as well and I had relatives here. My uncle and aunt who resided here as well who also came here on the resettlement program. So the adjustment wasn't as difficult but I think I got another sense of—a completely new sense of America when I came to Minnesota, which was very different from Montana. Whereas Montana I got much more rural sense, over here I could see the whole urban culture, which is very different and interesting at the same time.

DN: Do you feel that your—like the connections are weaker between the Tibetans here because the community is so large compared to that really small community in Missoula?

TL: I guess on one extent Tibetans when they are in smaller numbers there you can't do as much as you would like and you don't have the same resources as with a larger community. But at the same time we held together much more strongly in that whenever we had a gathering everybody showed up. While as over here though, we have more resources, we have a Cultural Center, a newly built Cultural Center over here and we have gatherings and whatnot, there is a tendency for—as the numbers increase there's a tendency . . . we grow slightly more distance as we aren't close to all the various members of our community here.

DN: And has the community changed at all since you moved here?

TL: It has grown a lot. Generally after the resettlement, from what I know, Tibetans were placed all across the U.S. into smaller towns and there's been a general shift like over a decade. They will tend to clump together where there are more Tibetans. So basically we have Minnesota which has, I believe, the second largest population of Tibetans in the U.S. And we have New York and California and Portland where Tibetans tend to cling together from small areas where they were initially resettled from. So I've seen a lot of new faces over here over the last six years that I've resided in Minnesota.

DN: And you said that you were applying for schools in Minnesota before you moved from Montana. So where did you continue your schooling here?

TL: I applied and I got into St. Cloud State University, which is around an hour north of the Twin Cities. It's a small college town and I was residing in the dorms there. I decided to pursue a degree in political science. I was always interested in politics and international affairs and I met some very inspiring professors over there who really got me interested in it. And after two years at St. Cloud State I transferred to the University of Minnesota Twin Cities over here and I continued on with my B.A. in political science.

And I guess subsequent to that I eventually decided I was interested in law school, so now currently I do go to the University of Minnesota Law School. I'm in my—I will be starting my final year in about a week or so.

DN: And if you go back to your experience in St. Cloud University, were there other Tibetan students at St. Cloud at that time or during your schooling there?

TL: When I initially joined there were none. After my first semester, first year, we got a couple of Tibetan students, which was interesting. It was nice to have some Tibetans around. Again, St. Cloud State isn't nearly as diverse because just the area itself. It tends to have a lot of students from northern Minnesota. But one thing nice about St. Cloud was it had a specific program for international students where they pay in-state fees. So we had a substantial amount of international students from India, Pakistan, Bangladesh. And due to my being raised in India I made a lot of friends from India and Pakistan because I could speak the language as well.

DN: And were you involved in any groups or did you start any groups at St. Cloud?

TL: I was involved. I was actively involved actually in St. Cloud. I was involved in the speech and debate club. I was involved in the student senate and student government over there. I was a justice of the peace on the judicial council for one year. I was the chief justice of the judicial council the other year. So I was also a member of Amnesty International. I was involved in Habitat for Humanity and the Pre-law Students Association. So I was actively involved during my time at St. Cloud.

DN: And so law is something that has always interested you it seems because you were in so many of these related groups?

TL: It has. It has. It actually had to do more with my professors who got me interested in it. I had a couple of professors who were former attorneys or law professors and so they sparked my interest. And I was interested in the way just how society functions and the rules that govern how society functions. So that was something that got me interested and pretty much there's not much you can do with a political science degree [chuckles] so I thought law school wouldn't be bad.

DN: And what would you do like let's say on the weekends for fun at St. Cloud University?

TL: There is a lot to do. It has a slight reputation as a party school but overall . . . I mean you had fifteen minutes out and got a lot of nice places where you can go camping or trekking or hiking. I used to come to the Cities a lot. My family was here and it's only an hour's ride away so many weekends I used to just drive down here to home.

DN: And you said that after you graduated from—I mean you continued your schooling at the University of Minnesota. Like when did you plan to go to law school and do you know why you chose this field?

TL: Again, to a certain extent it was—I was interested in law and for just the general reason that a lot of people get wrapped up into it. I used to watch a lot of TV shows that were related to law and courtroom scenes which always struck me as very interesting and just how the lawyers debated and argued. I was also, like I mentioned earlier, I was in the speech and debate club where I used to do parliamentary debates which kind of tends to lend towards this kind of adversarial debate model that you have in the courtroom. So also I hang around with a lot of friends who were going into law and so that got my interest going.

DN: Did you feel any pressure from your parents to go into a professional field or was it just kind of your free choice?

TL: There was pressure to go into professional field. Actually, my dad was strongly pressing that I go into computer science or some computer-related field. My mom wanted me to go into the medical field. I kind of disappointed them both. But, yes, generally Tibetans—parents generally have the tendency to want their children to go into some medical line or medical field. So a lot of my cousins are going into medical school right now. But I guess they weren't as disappointed with me going into law but they were worried.

DN: Do you think the high expectations from Tibetan parents, do you think is that because of our past or why do you think . . . what drives our parents?

TL: It is. Generally Tibetan—the Tibetan family is a unit. There's a lot of—and not only restricted to Tibetan families but also just any Eastern family, there is a lot of emphasis where children are expected to excel to a certain degree where the parents or financial concerns are not the responsibility of the children. The parents will take care of that but the children's main goal is to study and do well. And that's where the focus should be. Especially with Tibetans, especially . . . there's always the expectation. Especially among the refugee community, that each generation do better than the last generation and we improve somewhat.

When my grandparents came here originally, to India from Tibet when they fled Tibet, they had nothing. My mom—my dad and mom both were around ten years old. And at that time they literally had to beg. That was like the first experience my mom had begging. And so she had to beg on the streets in Darjeeling, which is a small town in northern India. And so they worked really hard to improve their living standard and to give me an opportunity. A lot of the Tibetan children—I was actually blessed to have the opportunity to go to Woodstock. A lot of Tibetan children don't have such opportunities and my mom—they had extravagant tuitions there as well. It was a premier school. So my mom had to work very hard . . . both my parents had to work very hard to put me through. And so there's always the sense of obligation that you have to live up to their standards or the expectations that they have.

DN: So how did your parents react then when you told them that you were going to law school or when you made it into University of Minnesota Law School?

TL: They were happy. They were happy when I made it into the law school. But prior to that when I told them I wished to pursue law school they were hesitant at first because it was a broad leap for them. Because they wanted me to take something that was slightly more . . . more risk averse and more conservative, some more traditional line than something—because law was something which is a big leap and even they knew that it's something that—it's a career that isn't nearly as stable as going to say med school or a traditional job that other Tibetans go into.

DN: And like how popular is the field of law in the Tibetan community? Are you the only student at the University of Minnesota Law School?

TL: Currently I am the only student. I know that there are other Tibetans who are pursuing law school. We have one student in Madison, Wisconsin who's going to law school and there are a couple of Tibetan attorneys that I personally know in the East Coast, in New York and Boston. We do have another Tibetan attorney who resides in Boston who came here to Minnesota to speak some time back, about a couple of months back. So it is interesting field. I know that there are Tibetan students that are interested in pursuing it.

One thing that kind of detracts them from it is just—it requires a mastery of the English language which only comes to a lot of people from being born here from early age. And because just the language, the legal language, is very difficult sometimes to understand. So I didn't face that difficulty but I know that there are Tibetan students here interested and I've spoken to a couple of them and I've always encouraged them to pursue it. I mean law is one field which can come in very helpful to the Tibetan community as a whole as far as understanding international law, the notions of self-determination. It's one avenue that hasn't been explored fully which can lend to helping the Tibetans back in the home country a lot.

DN: And you talked about barriers such as language. Did you—were there any other barriers that you encountered?

TL: For me I had difficulty in my later years here in the U.S. learning how to network. Networking is a skill where—just like the differences in culture made it hard to communicate with some people as well. With the way people understand things and the way people—mannerisms that people have here which was something that I had a hard time trying to pick up and learn.

DN: And what do you plan to do with your law degree? What area of law do you wish to pursue?

TL: I had initially wanted to enter into some area of international law but later on due to again to a very kind of inspiring professor, I wanted to—now I currently wish to pursue a focus in employment discrimination and employment law. It's a field that's very interesting to me. Also on the side I'd like to pursue a little immigration law and give me

an opportunity to help the Tibetan community here and back in India. And so that's something which currently interests me.

DN: And where do you see yourself in ten years?

TL: In ten years I hope to be a practicing attorney and somebody who will be of benefit to the Tibetan community. I'm not sure whether I will still be in Minnesota. I may be in the East Coast. That's something I was considering. But whichever Tibetan community I reside in I hope that I will be able to assist the Tibetan community in any little way I can. I know that there's some excellent attorneys here in the Twin Cities who are very involved with the Tibetan community and they provide a lot of help for them. They put their skills—did a lot of pro bono work with the Tibetan community, and I hope to contribute in the same way. In the same way.

DN: And speaking of the communities, have you been back to India since you have moved to Minnesota or to the United States?

TL: I have not been back to India. It's been eight and a half years now and I've always been putting it back for some reason. But one of the reasons is a lot of my relatives have moved to the U.S. and a lot of my friends are no longer there. But still I would strongly like to go back to visit. I don't know if it's going to be possible any time soon since—and during law school it's hectic where all our breaks are taken up searching for summer clerkships or associateships. So that you don't actually get opportunity. But that was one of big regrets during college is that I never did a study abroad or went back for the summer to India. But definitely that's something that I plan to do in if not a year, two years time.

DN: And you hardly get any free time because you are so busy with law school. But when you do get free time, do you do anything in the community or do you go to any community events?

TL: I do. I do. I haven't been able to volunteer as much time as I would like with the Tibetan community here in the Twin Cities. But our—I've tried to go to all the gatherings, especially when they have speakers come here to our TAFM, Tibetan American Foundation of Minnesota, here at the Cultural Center. They have speakers come every on and off and I try to make them all. I'm really interested in hearing what they have to say. And our last president, Tsewang Ngodup, he brought some very inspirational speakers from a wide diverse range of backgrounds. We had Gelek Rinpoche come about two months ago. And prior to that we had Lobsang la, who is a Tibetan attorney, speak on self-determination and international human rights law, which is also very interesting. So I try to make them all. I am involved with a couple of law school organizations. I'm involved with the American Constitutional Society. I'm involved with the Asian American Law Students Association and I am actively involved with the Students for Free Tibet at the University of Minnesota. The Students for Free Tibet was—after I moved from St. Cloud to Minnesota they were going through some

difficulties and so I was able to attend a few meetings and tried to attend a few actions that were taken by them. But that's something that I wish to pursue as well further on.

[Tape interruption]

DN: And you were just talking about your law school. So can you—like how was the student body? Can you briefly explain? Is it a diverse student body?

TL: It is a diverse student body. The University of Minnesota Law School, to its credit, has an excellent Affirmative Action Program. It tries to recruit strongly in minority areas and this is not—unlike other law schools it's not mandated by law. It's a personal goal which the U of M Law School sets for itself and it's something that they've been—sometimes it's like critical mass that they try to set and sometimes they are able to reach that percentage. Sometimes they aren't. But one thing that's nice is the state has not—I mean the legislature has not had to actually step in and to mandate it. The professors are great over there. I was accepted at a couple of other law schools and I'm very happy to say that I decided to stick with the University of Minnesota. The law school experience is something that—I found it very interesting and very helpful and I wouldn't take it back. There's no regrets about that. If you have interest in law it's something that I would recommend for any Tibetan student to pursue. The legal system in the U.S. is very unique, very different from other countries.

CL: What was it about the field of law that really interested you? You talked about being influenced by TV shows and whatnot and that you had been in debate programs in India and in high school here, but was there anything like really specific that just, I don't know, that got you going and grabbed your interest?

TL: As I stated earlier, in the broad general sense what I found really interesting was just the way that the entire society functions by the rule of law. These are guidelines and rules. Otherwise you have anarchy and chaos. These are guidelines which society sets and that's what I felt was kind of in—that was kind of on the broad level. That's what interested me. But on the more narrow level I'll have to say the U.S. legal system is very interesting and very unique, in that it has an adversarial role. That's why you have—I mean the negative spin off of that is that it's the most litigious society, [chuckles] country that there is out there. But at the other end it's something where people can come up with their grievances, be given a fair chance in most cases to state their grievances and come to an equitable result. So I always found that interesting.

CL: You mentioned that you had a few professors that inspired you to pursue your interest in employment law. Was there—what is it about that field specifically within law that really interests you?

TL: Well, employment law, what interested me, in some ways it's very similar to tax law or immigration law in the sense that it's a set of rules that are kind of very unique and set aside. It requires some kind of specific specialization like the tax code or the immigration code. It's kind of removed from other areas of law, which are based on

more broad notions or very—more vague terms. So it has much less judicial—I mean it is much more statutory based. Meaning it's much more legislative based, based on rules, statutes laid out by the congress or the legislatures. As opposed to other areas of law, which is much more judicial based on notions of reasonable person standard or what's equitable.

So . . . on top of that employment law (Title 7) is very interesting. I'm not sure if I should go in depth into that concept. But it's a whole world by itself to say the truth. And employment discrimination is also another field where—a couple of years before I started law school I had a chance for an internship at the Legal Aid Society of Minneapolis, which is a nonprofit civil law firm. And at that time I got to understand individual clients' experiences that they went through facing employment discrimination, whether it be based on religion or race or gender. So from then on I guess I always had a slight interest and kind of personal knowledge of what individual people go through.

CL: So do you think being Tibetan you could—did you have any similar situation that you were able to relate to or did being Tibetan affect you at all in that decision?

TL: It has. It has. I have—I can relate much strongly to people when they say that they've been discriminated against or based on their employment. And again, now discrimination nowadays is much more subtle than it used to be back in the 1960's, where you had blatant forms of discrimination. Now it's just with a wink and a nod that a lot of discrimination goes on. I mean I have—I could say that I could relate to these individuals who have gone through similar cases. And again, discrimination nowadays is something that's very hard to prove, as people are very aware of what the rules and guidelines are and are able to work around them.

CL: And you mentioned that you had several law schools that you got accepted to. What were some of the other schools you applied to and why?

TL: Well, generally it was a strategy. The general strategy that they lay out is they should apply to some schools that you're sure you're going to get into, some schools which are at the medium level, and some harder schools where—some more of the Ivy League schools. So I was accepted at Wisconsin, University of Wisconsin, and William Mitchell here in Minnesota, at Washington and Lee in Virginia, and I eventually decided to—and one or two others. But I decided to stay in Minnesota because—primarily because University of Minnesota is an excellent school. It's ranked up in the top twenty as far as law schools are concerned. On top of that there were financial reasons why it made more sense to stay in Minnesota. They have exorbitant out-of-state fees. I have a couple of classmates from California right now who are paying nearly twice as much as I am. So that was another reason. But also, one of the other reasons was they have a great human rights library here. The University of Minnesota Human Rights Library which is located at the law school. And we have David Weissbrodt, who is one of the most premier academicians, professors, on human rights who consistently works with the United Nations. I've taken several of his classes.

DN: And as a law student, what are some of your opinions on the Tibetan Government in Exile² and how it's set up? And like the recent changes that we have made with the new Prime Minister?³

TL: I think that the Tibetan Government in Exile is doing an excellent job as far as how notions of having women's organizations, civic organizations, having a Tibetan Youth Congress. We have different cultural organizations and so—and there's a certain amount of transparency which you won't find in a lot of other governments. I believe His Holiness⁴ is taking the correct steps in encouraging people to not blindly follow him but actually be themselves involved in the political process, as far as it being a government of the people. And as far as the—I guess stepping back and looking the fact that it is a government in exile from—in looking at international law, from what I know, international law again . . . (and this is kind of a cynical view) is that international law is not real law. Stating that if one country—say if the U.S. were to take a step and some other countries don't like it and take it up with the court, there's not much recourse unless you have the power to go against the U.S., or if you have the military force. So in that sense, international law, it's sometimes difficult because you can just keep on yelling the same point again and again and again. But unless you have the force to back it up, it depends on whether all parties consent to whichever step is taken. So as far as the Government in Exile and recognition by the international community, which I know there isn't much at all if any, it is frustrating. But at the same time, I think that the Government in Exile is taking whatever steps it can take. It's doing what it can do.

DN: And would you be ever interested in holding a position or working for the Tibetan Government in Exile?

TL: Eventually yes. It's something—I've been interested because I know that they have a judiciary branch of the Government in Exile and it's something that I would like to go to India eventually, later on down the road, and work at least some time with them to see how exactly it functions. The judicial system with the Government in Exile is very different as it doesn't deal with any criminal matters. It has some civil authority which is fairly limited and that too is if all the parties consent to this, to the judicial branch having jurisdiction over the matter. So it's definitely something that I would be interested in. I was hoping also this summer, which I didn't get a chance to—I was hoping to go back to India to see—to Dharamsala to see how it functions. But I didn't get a chance this summer.

CL: You were in boarding schools from a very young age. The first school you went to actually was a Tibetan school, right? But then later on you were in Woodstock in an international school and then in Missoula, Montana with a very small Tibetan population. So how much, like cultural Tibetan learning, like the language and things like that did you have as a child?

² Central Tibetan Administration (CTA).

³ Samdhong Rinpoche is the Kalon Tripa, Chairman of the Kashag. The position is similar to that of Prime Minister.

⁴ His Holiness the Dalai Lama.

TL: It was slightly less than other Tibetans, I'd say. Definitely. But I was at home. We always spoke in Tibetan. I had taken classes of Tibetan tuition during our summer breaks and whatnot. But yes, there were some things that I missed out on which—and on the other hand I did gain a lot of experience in other areas. Overall I would say no regrets.

CL: So how do you feel about the Cultural Center here now? We don't have a—there isn't a Tibetan school here but they're taking a real initiative in having Tibetan classes, and whether it's in art or language or just the culture in general.

TL: I think it's excellent and I think they are doing an excellent job. I've seen their website. I've seen the various breakdown of the organizations and they seem to be doing a very good job. The Tibetan American Foundation of Minnesota here. Like I said before, I've been really impressed with the speakers that the former president has brought over here and I hope they continue to do that. It's very important, especially for the younger generation, to retain a sense of their culture, the language, and the notion of being Tibetans. This is something which is one of the . . . I wouldn't say dangers, but it's one of the challenges that face the younger generation coming to the U.S. While we were residing in India the threat of losing our culture wasn't as severe as over here in the U.S. as in India the Tibetans generally tend to stick to themselves. So we have generation after generation. But they held onto their culture. But in the U.S. there's a slightly . . . there's more of a tendency. And I don't know where exactly it comes from, but there is a more of a danger to losing our culture and our sense of being Tibetan.

CL: So do you think those classes have—do you feel they're more important in maintaining that culture or improving the culture?

TL: Both, I would say. On the one hand I believe these classes give the opportunity to look at what is negative in our culture and try to do a compare and contrast to see what things like what things are wrong, the negative aspects of our culture. At the same time, we should be able to retain these aspects. And one thing about these classes, where I think they do an excellent job, especially for the younger generation. The nine, ten year olds that go to these schools, I think . . . it is a very good job for them of trying to hold on to Tibetan. One thing I think they could definitely improve on is trying to expand and try to bring other children. Because I know that there are a lot of other Tibetan children over here in Minnesota who don't go to these classes and I think it's critical that they do go.

CL: Early on in the interview you talked about the small population in Missoula and the population is larger here and it's growing and it's growing rapidly. And people are spreading out and getting, you know, in the farther suburbs and whatnot. And that you kind of alluded to that as being a problem that not everyone can come together at all the events. Do you think that that is hurting the community or will hurt the community?

TL: Not necessarily. I think it's just a natural progress of things that when you're going to have larger number you're going to have some people who are not just going to be as tight-knit as if you are a smaller community. You feel the sense of necessity to go to these meetings. Where if you are a larger community over here, you don't feel the same

urge. But overall I'd say it's just a natural expansion. I know that the original Tibetan community here was restricted to south Minneapolis and several areas in the Northeast largely, and that's changed rapidly. They have been moving out to Richfield, to the outer lying suburbs where we can get much better houses. They tend to be further out from the cities. So that's the current trend of things, I think. But I think it's a good thing that a lot of people, a lot of Tibetans, are deciding to move to these little population centers. It aids us a lot in—when we have civic organizations like TAFM to hold onto our notion of being Tibetan.

DN: And the fact that they are moving, that they are spreading out into all these different suburbs, do you think Tibetans are trying to create kind of a smaller community within the larger community?

TL: I think that's something that's bound to happen and it's going to happen whenever you have large numbers of people. They are bound to make little subgroups. And it's not necessarily a bad thing. It's just a natural thing that's going to happen regardless. At the same time we should be aware that, well, with Tibetan society there is a certain—and I don't want to say that it's Tibetan . . . but it does lead to some kind of dissention and we have our own little internal politics. Which I don't think should deter us. And I think that having more people should be looked at as a benefit as opposed to something negative.

CL: How do you feel about—I mean Tibetans have been in Minnesota now for over a decade and there is a large population. Do you see a need now for Tibetans to stand up and start taking on political roles in the community or a kind of branching out and serving the greater good of Minnesota and not just the Tibetan community? Do think that that's something that needs to happen or do you feel it is already?

TL: Definitely. I believe to a certain extent we are doing that. But there's always place for improvement. Actually, there's a lot of place for improvement. We Tibetans with TAFM, the problem is—the problem that I see is like we have organizations such as TAFM where we have community leaders who are extensively involved. They were involved with the Wellstone⁵ campaign trying to get the Tibetan issues out there. And also on other things that concerned the Tibetan community here. But the thing is, the idea, the problem we face is not trying to just get the community leaders involved because they already are involved. It's trying to get the other people who are more distant and who aren't as involved to be involved. To be actively involved. I would think that any decision that's made in Minnesota will have a strong impact with Tibetan community.

Last year when we had the elections I believe there was a lot of—any policy can affect the Tibetans just as any other Minnesotan here. When there was a proposal by Pawlenty⁶ to require mandatory visa expiration dates on drivers license (this was right prior to him being elected) that was of grave concern to the Tibetan community here. I mean Tibetans

⁵ Former Minnesota Senator, Paul Wellstone.

⁶ Minnesota Governor, Tim Pawlenty.

who don't—over here who reside in Minnesota who don't have proper documentation could face a lot of challenges and such. And at that time I thought it was very important for the Tibetan community be involved.

CL: How do you feel about that being—or a future attorney? That if someone is here illegally and if they are going to be discriminated on based on their drivers license but they have over-extended a visa and they are here illegally. What's your opinion on that?

TL: I can understand both sides of the argument as I've heard them both extensively. On the one hand, specifically in regards to the driver's license, I think it leads to a lot of abuse where police would be going beyond their normal duties and becoming immigration officers, which is not the aim. It also leads a lot of immigrants to not be willing to be open with the police and share concerns and problems that they have because of a threat. They feel personally scared and threatened that they would get deported. I know that this affects Tibetans as well because we have quite a large number of people who don't have proper documentation here. On the broader level of immigration, if you are going to have a twenty-mile an hour speed limit, people are going to be breaking the law and so I think that you have to be rational and reasonable. I mean you can't just label anybody who doesn't have his proper documentation as a criminal. You can't be an ideologue. So as long—and I hope that in the next year or two that I know congress is looking into it, that they come up with a reasonable and rational immigration policy that gives immigrants an opportunity to—those without proper papers and documentation an opportunity to eventually work to gain documentation or legal status in the U.S.

CL: You mentioned before that when you were at St. Cloud that you met a lot of other international students because of the in-state tuition thing for international students. I think—personally, I think a lot of people would agree with you, that the Tibetan community has been a very successful immigrant community here in the city. You're Tibetan yourself and in the community and have had relationships with other immigrants and other communities, other smaller localized communities here in the cities. What do you think it is about Tibetans or the Tibetan community that has allowed them to be so successful?

TL: I believe it's largely in due part to their own experiences that they've gone through. Coming from . . . all the way from Tibet, making the trek across the mountains, starting afresh in India, was a very traumatic experience for some Tibetans. I mean I think that especially the Tibetans of the younger generation can't fathom or begin to fathom what their parents had to go through. My parents had a very hard time both from my dad's side and mom's side and so that was a very hard step and the parents have—just as natural examples within a family. The parents are natural examples that the children look up to. That there is a tendency to be hard working and trying to excel, trying to do better than where their parents left them off. I guess there is a very strong—one thing I noticed that is parents strive strongly to make sure their children have all the opportunities that they didn't. And so I believe that in the U.S. especially they have opportunities which their parents couldn't dream of, whether it be academic or professional.

DN: You were talking about studying in your law school, talking about studying immigration. Do you feel like you have an advantage being a Tibetan immigrant or do you feel you bring something kind of extra to the class when you're studying specifically law?

TL: Yes, I believe I do. In my courses I've taken in immigration law I know it said a lot of the students—I mean it's always—I can always bring my own personal experience which a lot of students—I mean it's one thing to study at the broad policy level. To step back and say, "Okay, we have this many illegal immigrants in the country," and whatnot. It's another thing to individualize it. And I can relate much more strongly. I have—there are Tibetans other than my own personal experience—speaking with other Tibetans, in New York especially, there's a large undocumented population of Tibetans which—I mean they have to go through a lot of tough times without having the proper papers. They're very vulnerable to abuse by employers and just blatant abuse.

CL: You talked about the fact that you're involved with SFT at the University of Minnesota. How do you see SFT, Students for Free Tibet, how do you see that organization in its outreach with Westerners?

TL: I think SFT does an excellent job. I was originally involved in SFT back at the University of Montana when I was in high school, over there initially. And that's where I first had my contacts with SFT. And there were some excellent and very nice people that I ran into over there. Some of the nicest people I know and some who are still friends to this day with me over there. And the Americans over there do a very good job of—who are involved in that situation. They do an excellent job of trying to relate, trying to explain to other Americans exactly what's going on. It's something which a Tibetan finds it very difficult, especially if you're straight from India or somewhere, only lived a couple years in the U.S., to relate his experiences or her experiences. And so SFT, the members, are much better able to communicate with other Americans, trying to explain, raise the concerns about what's happening to Tibetans. I would go as far as to say I think SFT is one of the most effective organizations that I know of so far that are helping Tibetans back in Tibet with the current circumstances.

CL: There are lots of SFT chapters all over the U.S. And probably the majority of them are in areas where there aren't Tibetans. So there is no Tibetan involvement in that organization. How do you feel being involved in this organization that's largely—that's for a Tibetan cause, but largely run by Westerners across the country?

TL: I think it's excellent. When I was in Montana, our SFT, there was my sister, there was me. But other than that everybody else was an American. It's very inspiring because I know there's a couple of Tibetans . . . we tend to despair and lose hope and it's been now what? Forty-five, fifty years almost since we initially fled, since the occupation, and there is a tendency to despair among the younger generation. And when these Americans set an example that there are other non-Tibetans who are still concerned, it is inspiring for Tibetans, those who tend to lose hope. At the same time, here at the U of M, I think our Students for Free Tibet is made up exclusively of Tibetans. And I can

see the negative and benefits of that. Where on the one hand we face difficulties of not being able to function with the same understanding. We have difficulty trying to communicate with other Americans.

CL: Do you think largely as a whole though, the organization has done a good job of speaking the Tibetan cause?

TL: I think they've done an excellent job. We have avoided pitfalls of being involved in the internal bickerings of the Tibetan community that do occur and they've they stuck—I think they've been very effective. I would say they've been the most effective organization so far along with the Tibetan Youth Congress in raising the concerns about Tibet.

CL: How do you think an organization like SFT compares to the TYC, the Tibetan Youth Congress?

TL: Well, the TYC is exclusively Tibetan. And the TYC maybe speaks to a Tibetan—I mean it does speak at a broader level to other—outside Tibetans, but it tries to raise concerns within the Tibetan community about Tibetan issues and stuff which is not SFT's goal. SFT tries to deal externally, outside the Tibetan community, trying to raise concerns and they have different audiences, different focuses. But again, even their methodology is different. We have elections for the TYC. I mean there's elections for the SFT as well which occur but SFT, I think, is much more successful at the grassroots level starting up in all these college campuses across the U.S. Recently we had one start in St. Cloud and the one here at the U of M is relatively new as well.

CL: So what would you say to other Tibetans that are starting SFT branches at their colleges, their universities or even Westerners or Americans starting a branch?

TL: I would say be patient. It is time consuming. You have to have a genuine interest in working on these matters and you have to have a general interest in the issues and the focus of SFT. That's the main things. You have to have a general, genuine interest in the matter. The rest . . . a lot of it's hard work. My sister was working on the central committee in D.C. so she is extensively involved in SFT. Me to a far lesser extent, but still, yes, a genuine interest. And that's key, I'd say.

DN: And do you feel—I mean, like there's a lot of kind of debate going over this but do you feel that it's important to have a Tibetan person at the front that leads the cause? Like in an organization such as SFT instead of like a Westerner? Do you think it is important?

TL: Not necessarily. I don't think so. The thing that Westerners bring in is—one thing I've noticed is that they are avidly interested and they are willing to put the time and effort that's required into it. And that's not necessarily true of all Tibetans. I mean we have a lot of Tibetans who are members, but that's not necessarily true. We don't exactly need to have a Tibetan leading it. Though it is important to have Tibetan members

because—who can relate and try to clear up any differences or misunderstanding that do occur. But I don't see any necessity for them to be in the lead position. Because from my experiences, I've noticed like back in Montana we had an excellent SFT that was actively involved, compared to some SFT's I've seen which have more Tibetans, which haven't gotten nearly as much work done as the ones that consisted of Americans. So I don't see much of a difference or require...

[Tape interruption]

DN: My name is Dorjee Norbu and today is August 28, 2005. We're interviewing Tashi Lhewa and this is tape 2 of the interview.

And we were just talking about your involvement in SFT. When did you first feel that you had a responsibility towards the Tibetan cause?

TL: Well, basically any Tibetan is raised with a strong civic notion of being a Tibetan and having to contribute to the effort or the cause. And so it's pretty much all Tibetans have it ingrained in them since childhood that they are part of this community and they have to work together. And I would say that's true largely of entire refugee community.

DN: And were you politically active in India or is that something that happened when you moved here?

TL: I was not—I was seventeen when I moved to the U.S. so I was not that involved during my first two years of high school there. I would have to say when I came here to the U.S., in high school I got involved in Amnesty International and that's where it took off. Though I was always very conscious of my identity as a Tibetan and having to serve the people. It wasn't until I got involved in Amnesty International in high school and subsequently later in Amnesty International at St. Cloud and a couple of other organizations that I started to partake more.

DN: Then like what are some ways that—like has there ever been like any kind of similarity between what Amnesty International does and what SFT does?

TL: Yes. Amnesty International is extensively involved with human rights matters on a more global scale in lots of other areas and SFT is much more narrow in it's scope in that it's related specifically to Tibet. But yes, a couple of our Amnesty campaigns that I worked on back some long years ago did deal with Tibetans. I'd initially heard of Amnesty when I was back in Woodstock, in India, but I wasn't a member until I got to high school over here in the States.

CL: You mentioned that the civic duty is kind of ingrained in Tibetans from a young age. But not all Tibetans are active in the community or fighting for the cause or educating other people. Why do you think that is and why do you think that not everyone is as committed as other people?

TL: It's a lot of factors. Generally . . . though when I say that everybody is ingrained with a sense of civic duty, I mean it's a belief that's ingrained in them. So if you ask any Tibetan they'll give you that straight answer that, "Yes, I'm a Tibetan. This is my culture. I think this is important." But the next tacking, going to number two and taking specific actions, as far as that's concerned, a lot of it has to do with just the living conditions that people are in.

People don't have the opportunities and job opportunities back in India. There's a lot of despair. It's been—I mean it's been forty-five to fifty years now since a lot of them came. And so with the passage of time I can understand why some people tend to lose hope of eventually some positive result coming out. But it has to do largely with that despair . . . as far as the community here in Minnesota, again, culture shock. Just the generation gap. Especially the youngsters in Minnesota don't face the same—I mean in some sense they face more severe challenges as far as the generation gap goes than back in India. In India it was a pretty smooth flow between each generation going down but over here it's—you have circumstances where both the parents have to work and the child is left alone at home with a lot of free time on their hands and so that—and it's a lot of the TV culture that just seeps through and overtakes them. So that does lead to a lot of problems.

CL: Do you have any suggestions on how the community might be able to overcome that?

TL: A couple years back we did have [an] adult-youth seminar on how to overcome these problems. I was the moderator on that forum. And [sighs] it's a tough decision. I mean . . . it's something where on the one hand, the parents due to income—I mean they're working hard for the children so they both work. But I think the only solution is that they have to spend more time with their children at home. I mean it's a tough give and take where at the one hand you have financial concerns but at the other hand I think it's more important that you spend—that you have to spend time with your children. I've seen it go both ways where—and as a general rule I think the more time with the children leads to a better understanding with the children.

DN: I have a question about how active a group can be. And I don't mean to stereotype, but Tibetans generally, like even in school, like being shy and being kind of timid. It's not something that's looked down as like a negative aspect, like being kind of humble and being shy in school. But the difference here is that here, you're kind of being shy is not something that's positive. Like you're taught even in school at a young age to be kind of outgoing and kind of like free-spirited. And do you think that affects how active like a group can be? Like politically active?

TL: Definitely. I think that's a good point. We have to be more assertive. I face the same problem where I notice that people generally in Tibetan culture, they are, it is held to be polite and good manners to be less assertive and because it comes out as threatening to some people. Where over here definitely there is a need to be more assertive. And generally I think we can balance this. Where if we know where we're coming from and what we're trying to achieve and we are aware of it. I think there can be a well balance

where we don't have to give up exactly our mannerisms or our way of behavior with the Tibetan community, as to what's expected of us when we are expected to be politically active. One thing with the American political scene is if you want to get the attention or get anything done you have to be assertive because there's a lot of clutter. There's a lot of other messages that are being thrown out and to get your message through you have to—being assertive is a requirement.

CL: Do you think that—whether it's a personality trait or a social trait or a cultural trait—do you think that that hurts the Tibetan community at all? I know like—I'll give you an example. Like do you think that that tends to make Tibetans clump together more and not interact with other people in the same situation?

TL: There is a tendency, yes. I would agree with that. When we are—we behave differently towards other people than we behave among ourselves. I think a lot of it has to do with—that can be resolved through education and just . . . after ten years, I mean I would think that we would be able to interact better with people of the different communities. But there is a lot of other communities here in Minnesota that have gone through the very same experiences that we have. If you look at the large Somali population here, they know exactly what it goes through being a refugee. Or the Hmong population here. They know exactly. We share some of the same concerns. I worked a year back at the Legal Rights Center, which is a criminal defense law firm, a nonprofit law firm, and I worked extensively with the Somali and Hmong community. Going out to immigration hearings or legal advice sessions, where I got to hear some of their concerns. And they were exactly the same ones that the Tibetans have about trying to find a job, the generation gaps, the behavior of the children, the inability to spend time with their children. So I think definitely reaching out is a very good thing and it's something that we should expand on.

CL: So you think that there should be more interaction? Because I've actually—that same topic I've brought up in personal conversations with other Tibetans before, is that look at all these other groups and Minnesota is such a fantastic place because everybody is right here. And I oftentimes I kind of get this glassy-eyed look and like, "No. We're Tibetans. Not the same." But I see those similarities, too. So do you think there needs to be more interaction? Like up front and noticeable in the community?

TL: Definitely. There should be more interaction. I mean just because of the similarity of experiences we have with other groups here. I think it is an excellent opportunity. At the same time, I think what other Tibetans are kind of concerned about is a sense of losing our unity or our sense of cultural independence, you might call it. And I think that, yes, it's important to hold onto that but that doesn't . . . I don't think [that] restricts us from reaching out to other communities here. Yes, again, Minnesota is an excellent place where we have people who share some very similar concerns and experiences that we have. And I think that given the chance to work together, I think it's an excellent opportunity.

CL: Minnesota is such a—and you talked about a little bit about the hardships that Tibetans have gone through coming from Tibet and into India, and now many of them coming to the U.S. We could talk about many different transitions but just the transition from India to the U.S. They're very different places. Culturally, socially, economically, in just about—many, many different ways. So do you think that that created a hardship for Tibetans at all? I mean obviously economically in the beginning, but many Tibetans have, like we talked about the success of the community, many Tibetans have been able to overcome that. But do you think that those radical differences in the cultures and communities helped or hurt Tibetans in any way?

TL: As far as economics are concerned, I think it's been an excellent opportunity. Unlike—I mean Tibetans, they came to India and India there is a large underclass where people don't have many opportunities at all. And Tibetans thrived under that condition. So they can thrive in—the refugee population can thrive in India. I think that coming to the U.S., where there is a *lot* of opportunity, if you are willing to work hard . . . I believe it. I mean it's not perfect but there are a lot of opportunities for people out there and we have thrived. I would say we have thrived. We still face challenges but we have thrived. At the other end there is a large culture clash. In India the culture was not as alien for Tibetans with a strong emphasis on family, on the way to rear children and all that. But over here there is a larger cultural clash. So, I mean, that brings along negative and positive aspects as well to it.

CL: Tibetans in India, they've adapted. You mention that the cultures are not as dissimilar as say Indians and Americans or Tibetans and Americans. But the Tibetans adapted a lot of Indian things. You can see it in clothes, food, especially food. That's very noticeable. All kinds of different things. So do you worry about Tibetans becoming Americanized here? And if so, is that a bad thing?

TL: Under the current circumstances I think it's not so much—I mean people should—I mean I've dealt with this issue not only with Tibetans but also just the general notion of assimilation, and I think it's important. On the one hand, it's not a pure black and white issue. On the one hand, it's important to hold onto your language, your culture. I mean Tibetan culture. That's very important for us. At the same time that shouldn't blind us and lead to isolation, because I think education is key. As long as you are confident as to where you are as a Tibetan, that identity . . . I mean I think it's very important to reach out to educate yourself about other communities and what else—be actively involved in the community, which I think is very important. So it has its up and downs, its plus and minuses. In India I, to be honest, don't think in India people didn't face the same cultural shock or the cultural bombardment. I mean people in India, the children over there still retain the Tibetan language. We had little settlements and all that. And over here it's much harder to do that. So there's a natural instinct, like you say, with your experiences earlier, there's a natural instinct to cling together. Especially when we have—Tibet is occupied. Had the circumstances been different people might—Tibetans generally might be a bit more open, but the fact that we've always been told that we have to hold onto this identity and it's always under threat. It's been fifty years but you have to instill this in the children. So that's something that's always there. But I can see—I mean there is a

necessity to reach out and at the same time there is a necessity to hold onto our basic language and culture.

DN: And besides education, how important do you think it is for parents to spend time with their children in order to kind of pass down like our traditions and culture?

TL: I think it's crucial for parents to spend time with children. Because in the six years I've lived in Minnesota, and even my two years in Montana, I've noticed, I've seen that generally the parents that spend time with their children, the children turn out to be better. We have a lot of delinquency problems with the youth over here. They are involved in the—get into altercations and there's a police involvement. So there are a lot of problems that stem from the fact that parents don't spend nearly as much time with the children. Back in India the children stayed with their parents 24–7. And over here it's an impossibility if both parents have to work. And also, I mean people—there is a lot more incentives and temptations here that the children didn't face back in India. So I think it's crucial. And I think it was the key ingredient for—even if Tibetans want to hang onto any sense of language or culture or pass down something on to the children, I think it's key that they spend time with their children. Even if it comes at the cost of maybe the inability to work or make some more money.

CL: Any other questions? All right. We wanted to thank you for participating in our program here. Thank you.

TL: Thanks, Charles and Dorjee.

DN: Thank you.