

**Thupten Dadak
Narrator**

**Tsewang Sangmo Lama and Charles Lenz
Minnesota Historical Society
Interviewers**

**Interviewed for the
Minnesota Tibetan Oral History Project**

**July 26, 2005
Kmitch Girls/Heart of Tibet (Thupten Dadak's Store)
Stillwater, Minnesota**

**Tsewang Sangmo Lama - TL
Thupten Dadak - TD
Charles Lenz - CL**

TL: Today's date is July 26, 2005. We are in Stillwater, Minnesota. I'm interviewing Thupten Dadak. I'm Tsewang Lama and I'm the primary interviewer and the second interviewer is Charles Lenz.

Can you say your name, please?

TD: Thupten Dadak.

TL: Can you spell it?

TD: T-h-u-p-t-e-n D-a-d-a-k.

TL: Does your name have any Tibetan meaning to it?

TD: Every Tibetan names have meaning. Thupten Dadak means unchangeable moon or unchangeable famous moon, something like that.

TL: When and where were you born?

TD: I was born in Central Tibet, Dingri, near Mount Everest.

TL: How old are you now?

TD: I'm fifty-two.

TL: Where did you live before moving to Minnesota?

TD: I lived in India, in Dharamsala, as well as in Assam.

TL: What did you do there in India?

TD: First, I joined the Tibetan school. Then I joined the Tibetan monastery in Assam.

TL: Can you provide a history of the monastic institution that you were in?

TD: The monastery is called the Gyuto Monastery, which is a very well-known monastery. Especially, they are specialized for rituals and chanting. Especially, they do provide service for His Holiness¹, as well as Tibetan government. It is located in Central Tibet in Lhasa. Then, since occupation by Chinese, only seventy-five monks who were able to come out from Tibet, 1959, then they rebuilt the monastery in India. Before the Chinese occupation, the monastery has almost 900 monks. Only seventy-five monks are survived and able to escape and rebuild a monastery in India. So I got opportunity to go to that monastery and study.

TL: What is a typical day like in a monk's life?

TD: It's a very busy life, because, at the young age, you have to memorize all the Buddhist text, many, many pages. After they are qualified to giving a test, exam, then they able to enter the monastery. Then you have to perform a lot of rituals, and you have further studies.

TL: What was your favorite part of being a monk?

TD: Favorite part of a monk is simplicity.

TL: What do you miss about being a monk?

TD: Simple life.

TL: What else did you do besides—?

TD: While I was in the monastery, I did service for assistant of all the monastery in charge. At the time, I would come out of school and we are few of them can read or write English as well also speaking Hindi. So we are very much helping with all the monks, how to rebuild the monastery in India.

CL: How old were you when you entered the monastery?

TD: Probably, I'm fifteen years old.

TL: When did you move to Minnesota?

¹ His Holiness the Dalai Lama.

TD: I moved here in 1986. I'm the second Tibetan in Minnesota at the time.

CL: Did you move right to Minnesota when you came to the US or were you somewhere before Minnesota?

TD: Minnesota is the first place.

TL: Why did you choose to move to Minnesota? Like, there are a lot of States in the United States.

TD: Minnesota, because my ex-wife was from Minnesota. I met her in 1985 in India.

TL: Did you have any discussions with your family members or relatives? And then, how were their reactions when you said you are moving to Minnesota or the United States?

TD: Well, my story is a little different because even I was in school, whenever I see the Westerners, I'm always curious what is it like, the West or Europe. It's always the same thing all our life. What's behind that tree? You know. You are always curious. So I have too much curious, and I'm very involved with the Westerner who comes to India and talking about their lives and, then telling my parents, "Oh, I want to go west. It seems very interesting." At the time it happens, they are not so much surprised.

TL: Do you remember your family or friends discussing about US? What did you discuss? Now that you're actually in the United States, what is different now?

TD: Well, all the, especially, Tibetans who live in India or even inside Tibet, always wonder, wow, a lot of expectation of the West or Europe. That's the same thing I had. Now, I'm in America and lived almost twenty years and running own business. Now I see as the value of how simple living without a few clothes and living very simple life, and I have more appreciation about simple life.

Also, I have appreciation of lives in Tibet before Chinese took over. That Tibetan lives are very much simple and more, much so there doesn't need be—require so much depending on others. They have their own land and animals. As I remember, we Tibetans, we don't have—inside Tibet, we don't have a guest house before Chinese come. We are that much open. Any guest come, they are your relatives or . . . you hosted your house and feed the animals. Same thing when we traveled to other part of Tibet, they do the same thing. Here now in Minnesota when I get out my door, I have to depend on, first, car, and then gas, then insurance, all of this. So a lot of headache. But at the same time, I mean, the good part of America is that freedom (which is inner freedom I'd call it), which has freedom [to] express our religion, freedom of speech. I think that's a great value. Even though it's busy and I miss part of Tibet or part of living in India still, I keep the value and I try to be happy.

TL: Do you think moving to Minnesota was the right choice for you?

TD: Yes. I have a hard time adjust when I first come because I'm this very much first Tibetan, and I have only a few friends. Then there is only one Tibetan Buddhist center. It's called Sakya² Center³. That's the only organization I know in the Twin Cities, and there are very few members. Also, they are very much going to dissolving, because they are not so much members. There's not so many people who are interested about Buddhism. So the founder of that organization asked me to keep the center and change whatever I wants to be, because it's a non-profit. I thought about it. But the center was also, actually, founded by High Lama from Sakya Center. So I told the members, "This is blessed by the High Lamas, and we should keep it whatever it is, and we should do more active things in the center." So from that center I kind of learned many Americans who are interested about Buddhism and become more friends.

Then, after that, I founded organization called US Tibet Committee. Which is strictly a political organization and based in New York, and we had branch in Minnesota. First thing we did was tenth of March 1987⁴. Three members only, and we demonstration to the skyway in St. Paul, saying how much Tibetans are tortured and killed and why Americans doesn't helping Tibetans. That kind of things.

CL: When did you leave the monastery? When did you become a layperson and were no longer a monk?

TD: I left in 1974.

CL: So it was long before you came to Minnesota?

TD: Long before I came. Oh, you mean when I entered the monastery?

CL: No, when you—

TD: Left from the monastery? In 1980.

CL: So you entered the monastery in 1974?

TD: Yes.

CL: Okay. So, when did you become a layperson then and no longer a monk?

TD: 1980.

CL: When you left the monastery?

² A school of Tibetan Buddhism.

³ Minnesota Sakya Center for Buddhist Studies and Meditation.

⁴ In March 1959, Tibetans rose up against the Chinese occupation. On the tenth of March, 1959, His Holiness the Dalai Lama, escaped from Tibet into India. Because of this, the tenth of March is celebrated as Tibetan Uprising Day.

TD: Yes. See, I was choose by my parents when I was young as a monk. But I did not have opportunity to go to the monastery when I was six, because it was under the Chinese occupation. We have to escape. So when got in India, instead of join monastery, I joined in the school. But in the school I remain like a monk. So then I have opportunity to join in 1974 to real monastery. Then I study until 1980. Then [in] 1986 I came to Minnesota.

CL: Okay.

TL: What do you like about Minnesota?

TD: Well, Minnesota—first of all, I found Minnesota people are, especially, very conservative. I've been travel other states, but Minnesota is one of the very conservative people. But then, as soon as I learned more and more people—and they're more genuine. And more people who have true understanding about the human requirements of help each other. So that's [what] I like about Minnesota.

TL: If you were to describe Minnesota to other Tibetans who are in India or Nepal or another state, how would you describe Minnesota to them?

TD: Well, I have experience because in 1991 when the Resettlement Project⁵ start, I was coordinating the Resettlement Project in Minnesota, and I founded Tibetan American Foundation⁶ in 1991 and I am co-founder of it. At the time, I'm the only Tibetans, but we have 400 American members. All the board members are all American except myself. Those 400 members provide everything for the Tibetans who settle in Minnesota. So, now, we have about 1,500. And I always tell to the Tibetans, even His Holiness, these are due to the kindness of the people of Minnesota. So I have great appreciation of that. And I also say the same thing to the Tibetans, anyone who asks what Minnesota people look or how they are.

CL: Did you start the Tibetan American Foundation in conjunction with the Resettlement Project or was that before?

TD: These are joined together. Yes, same time.

TL: These 400 members, how did you approach them, like as a sponsor or did you have a hard time—?

TD: First of all that 1991, I have opportunity to travel with the Gyuto monks because I studied their monastery. The Gyuto monks are quite famous in West, their way of their chanting. We had recorded their chant at the George Lucas Studios in 1998. Also, we travel with a lot of Western musicians, like Grateful Dead and Beastie Boys and all of that. Then [in] 1991, the tour started again, and then they come to Minnesota and we have a lot of program here during their visit. We did a sand mandala at the Institute of

⁵ US Tibetan Resettlement Project, a program that became effective under the 1990 Immigration Act passed by Congress.

⁶ Tibetan American Foundation of Minnesota, TAFM.

Art⁷ and we did a sand mandala at the Landmark Center and we did a lot of programs in the colleges, the University. At that time, I promote the Resettlement Project, as well as Tibetan American Foundation.

The Tibetan American Foundation, the first mission is to resettle the Tibetans—160, we started 160. And once they're resettled, then to keep our culture and promote the Tibetan culture. And then the third one is to introduce what the Chinese had done to the Tibetan. So how to help the human rights issues and things like that. That's how it become with the members involved, because we have done so many event and programs during the monks' visit. Then they signed it up, and then we have board of directors. And then we have different committees, because there are 1,000 who are come as Resettlement Project that don't have like Hmong or Vietnamese or Cambodians or Somalians. They have fundings from the state and also the Federal Government. But the Tibetans, they did not have a funding from any of this, because American government recognizes Tibet as still a part of China. So they are the ones say, they are refugees. But it's just honor to His Holiness 1,000 Tibetan to come to America. If anyone locally, who find a jobs and sponsor letters, send us, if you want to invite one of your relatives, you have to responsible for everything. So, similarly that we created this organization and to us individual people to get the jobs and place to stay and the doctor can do volunteer work and lawyers can be as a volunteer to file their family unifications. So, we have almost eight or nine different steering committees, and education, one of the education. We have a lot of doctors and a lot of lawyers, also some educators, as a teacher, because some Tibetans don't have speaking English. So they have to start it over. We have all of that, so it became very successful program. Minnesota is one of the largest, largest area—Resettlement Project.

CL: In the Resettlement Project, the people that got chosen, did they get to pick where they were going to go or was that chosen for them?

TD: No. It's very much, as you know, Kungboe in New York which under His Holiness' representative and they're sending us all the list. So, some cases that if I know, I picked it up. But mostly I don't know, so we just keep their names. We, especially in Minnesota, have ten or twelve who doesn't speak English at all who lived in the border of Nepal and Tibet. Those who never spoken English or even some never saw Americans or met any Europeans. But it comes on the lottery, so those who, other state, nobody picked their names, so we did. We have ten people who don't speak any English and two deaf guys, of course, who doesn't speak either. We picked it up here and that we would help them. Now, they live same as other people who have a knowledge.

CL: Were there so many Tibetans that came to Minnesota simply because there were many, many sponsors willing to help them?

TD: Yes. That's the whole—the sponsors and the jobs. That's part of the organization, you know. Our organization is very devoted to help with, first, to settle those Tibetans.

⁷ Minneapolis Institute of Arts.

We have probably twelve board members; almost they do their full time job as a volunteer base.

CL: Do you think that—because you mentioned the Cambodians and the Somalis and the very large Hmong population in Minnesota—do you think because Minnesota had so much experience working with other immigrant groups already that that helped a lot when the Tibetans came?

TD: Ah, I believe so. That's the one thing I was talking about. The Minnesotan people, because they seems very conservative. But it comes the reality to see needs, then they are there. I believe that's the one case.

TL: When these Tibetan immigrants came into Minnesota, how long did they live with their sponsors?

TD: They lived six months. Six months and then they have to move their apartment. We set up this kind of the rules. All the Tibetan has stayed the six month and everybody has to move after six month because they have to share their apartments. Then the jobs are very much what skills they have, you know. First time they come, and a lot of them doesn't have a skill. So, we have very basic jobs, cleaning jobs, but that's the way of immigrants.

CL: When you were setting all this up and working with the selection committee, did you work with any other community in the US?

TD: Yes, we have a kind of network. We always share same information. Then we have also meetings, quite a few meetings, before any Tibetans come. All the different state coordinators have meetings and talk about how we solve the problems or how can we do in effective way.

CL: Do you still have contact with any of those groups or people at all?

TD: Um, not any more. Not any more. Because, for example, myself, I stay as executive director. In 1991, we started, and until 1996. Then I stay as a board member for many years, because our board members are Tibetans. Once Tibetan came, Tibetans we have election, who ever that be, organization board member not somebody picks up. Is a community election. So, the people elected me several years. But I was as executive director for 1996. Then, I kind of resigned because I want to give opportunity to other fellow Tibetans who have done some Tibetan exile government service and they have some experience. That is very much, also, other coordinators have done. Once a Tibetan arrives, it's kind of give to the community and let the community handle the organization level. So, there's not so many original who started any Resettlement Project or organizations America who really with Resettlement Project. They are, right now, mostly done by the Tibetan community.

TL: You said that you are the second Tibetan to move to Minnesota. Can you describe how your initial years went by in Minnesota being the second Tibetan here?

TD: Say again.

TL: You said you are the second Tibetan to move to Minnesota.

TD: Yes.

TL: Can you describe how your initial years went by?

TD: How's the life, my life?

CL: What was it like in Minnesota only having one other Tibetan here?

TD: That's the one thing my desire—when Resettlement Project became opportunity, I grabbed it. I want to have Tibetans here, because I grow up with a community, and I grow up, especially, in the monastery. So, the monastery is like—when I was in the monastery they have about 300 monks, and we lived together doing every things together. And suddenly, then you are by yourself, except you depend [on] your wife. But otherwise, it's all by self. So it's very—sometimes very hard because you miss your community, you miss your families. But then, I try to entertain myself.

I go to—I lived a very dangerous neighborhood. Because at the time, I don't have a business, so I lived on Rice Street, on Front Avenue and Rice Street. So many beggars, you know. So many homeless people there. I challenge all of those. I went Christian coffee shops and talk about Tibet. If I tried to speak about Buddhism, then, they turn the face other side. But, if I talk about where I'm from and things like that, friendly . . . So I spend a lot of Christian reading places and the community places and I talked about Tibet and who I am and what the Chinese did to the Tibetan people and how they live in India as a refugee. Then people more, more, more become friends. I think I have probably thousands of friends now. Non-Tibetans because of, as I mention, this very funny way. Even I look different and, at the time, probably, my English is not that good. But still, they understand what the human's problem are in the past and how to solve the problems. If you behave right, then they have listeners, then they have also people willing to help you. I have some appreciation and happiness of making good friends, not just friend of mine; also, they are friends of Tibetans. Then, at the time, a kind of little sad because I can't talk any Tibetan language, and I can't express what's a supposedly easy way to other people. So it has mixed feelings about it.

TL: Tibetan New Year and, then, the sixth July⁸, very important for all Tibetans. I want you to tell me how you spent or celebrated the Tibetan New Year and then sixth July when you first came to Minnesota.

⁸ The Dalai Lama's birthday.

TD: Well, I was by myself. I mean, that's a very traditional—we celebrate coming year to wish to be your life to be successful and also to pray for world peace. We don't have traditional way of doing; I'm by myself. But I do some offerings and do some try to meditate and do some little readings. That part of what I done with other Tibetans celebrating on New Year. I didn't miss that much, because in the monastery, New Year is not the big deal. But I always miss Dalai Lama's birthday, because that's the same in Tibet. Either monastery or laborers, everybody joins in celebrations. The monks do the chanting in the morning. Then, they go to their community events and watch Tibetan dance and things like that. Most importantly to understand who is His Holiness, what His Holiness has done, his life. To benefit in the ritual as well as the whole world definite for the Tibetans and try to remember his kindness. That part very hard for seven, six years without a community. But I did my best when Dalai Lama's birthday comes. Mostly by myself doing prayers for a long life for him and wish whatever he has liked to achieve to the peace of the world and whatever he has a desire for the future to become a success. That's kind of—I did the prayers and things like that.

[Tape interruption]

TL: You said that you have American wife? Are there any complications because she's American and you are Tibetan?

TD: Wife and husband, always sometimes—even doesn't matter which country you have, because you have twenty-four hours. [Chuckles] That's kind of human nature. Certainly, then of course they have language barriers and cultural barriers, and certain times, a little confusions. It's a more challenge than I think married Tibetan to Tibetan. But, my ex-wife, after divorce—we didn't divorce because we doesn't love each other or we don't understand each other cultural. We divorced because she wants to become a Buddhist nun, so I have to respect, because she wants to do better than me. So I can't control that. So I let her to do what she wants to do. Therefore, then, we have separated and finally we divorce, and I didn't talk or see her for almost ten years. I know when we separated, at the time, she was a nun and I hope she still is a nun.

TL: What do you think is the most clashing ideas or values that Tibetans and Americans have?

TD: [Pauses] Here in America, you mean?

TL: Yes. Like, because you have the experience of having interracial wife. So what do you think is the most clashing ideas or values between Tibetans and Americans? There are a lot of them, but then what is the most pressing one?

TD: [Pauses] Mmmm.

TL: What is the most different?

TD: Different things between the Tibetans and—well, first of all, I never married—

TL: What is the significant or dominant one?

TD: First of all, I never married Tibetans. I don't know. [Laughter] I have no experience. My second wife is still American, so I can't say, "Oh, my first Tibetan or second Tibetan wife is better than American or American is better than Tibetans, you know." But for example, I was, yesterday, at the Minnesota Club. There is a Buddha Prince, which is Dalai Lama's story on play, and I was one of the speakers. As I told it to the audience, sometime I feel I'm very lucky I have American wife. Because she can do more than Tibetan wife can do in this country in order to help others, Tibetan other followers. So again, it depends on many—even we Tibetans have married with a Tibetan and they have a divorce, and some Americans have wife Americans, probably there are more divorce than who stay as married, especially in this country.

CL: Do you think there are any values that just Tibetans have and Americans or Westerners have that maybe do agree or that don't agree a lot?

TD: Say again.

CL: Do you think there are values that Tibetans have and that Americans have that agree really well together, or that just agree with each other? And do you think there are values that clash or that don't, Tibetan values and American values that don't match up?

TD: There are certain things, certain cultural things, very many things. For example, small things like Americans, for example teaching, teaching, Americans in Dharamsala, when there are thousands of people. When the Westerner comes, then, they bring their shoes in their hand top on of the people's head.⁹ We, as Tibetans or Asian, this seems very odd. Because, one thing, Indian as Tibet or other Asian, the street is not clean as America. That may be part of that. But, still, the shoes is, you step anything, either good or bad—you know, you can accidentally step somewhere. It seems very odd to carry people's head, shoes around. Then, older Tibetan will laugh. Then, similar, some Tibetans picking their nose or something like that or picking their nose when they cleaning. Then Americans see this weird and nasty. That's kind of very manner—if I do touch my nose in Tibet, India, it's very common. But if you do here, people gross out, you know. Similar then, Tibetans, when they have teaching, Americans bring their shoes, their head; this is kind of gross and bad. That's kind of small, you know. But in the mainly as I'm married with American, and as I told you how many I have American friends, because we have shared values. Not only one person's value and you become friends. Because we have two different values and then, we shares. There we have a Western value that's there for the American like super country because there is a value for that.

Then, for the Tibetans especially, we have religious beliefs. Our beliefs and the cultures have no separation. It's all together. Whatever we do, that's our belief, that's our culture. Always sense of, then, everyday what you do, some kind of value in the spiritual sense, and it helps with Americans that don't have. For example, Americans that goes to

⁹ In Tibetan culture, it is very disrespectful to carry ones shoes above the heads of others.

the church on Sundays. For Tibetans, mostly for older generation, the first thing in the morning, we go on the altar. We have a meditation place, and we do offerings and are still doing it here in America. When you get up, at least you tried to remember, I'm not going to hurt somebody or make somebody upset, that's the purpose of the offerings and doing things. When it comes in the day, as something happens, at least Tibetan has more patience and more compassionate, even though somebody takes advantage of you, and more tolerance. Then, Westerner sees this kind of value. At the same time, the Tibetan sees way of Western living have better ideas, and, also, technologies, although it has to learn. Even using your small things in your house, you have to learn from where you live, you know. So sharing values is equally same. Hopefully, the long run, the spiritual value is more benefit. This does make sense?

CL: Yes, absolutely.

TL: Can you tell me what was your first job in Minnesota?

TD: No, I didn't had a first job. [Chuckles] I started, I tried to look at job for everywhere. Nobody hire me. Except one hire me was Chinese restaurant, right in Stillwater. It's called Silvers Restaurant¹⁰, which is Chinese Restaurant. I fill up the form, and he wants me a dishwasher and wants to pay \$3.25 an hour. So then I decide I never done dishwashing, and I have no experience, and I stay almost a year without job.

Then I start own business called Toy Town, right in Stillwater. Probably, that is 1987. Then my Toy Town became kind of well known in Stillwater, because I call them non-violent toy store. One thing I never carried was toy guns, GI Joes, which is Army figures and things like that. So one of the local newspapers wrote article about me, and I mention about what I carry then. My toy store has become a more educational toy store. So people look at as I'm a little different. At the same time, provide some kind of message to the younger generation. How even a young child can know what things can play without a gun. Through that, our business did very well. Because of what my missions are, not just doing business, but at the same time to educate even four-, five-year old children. The parents liked it, and, then, I expanded and expanded. Now I have probably 11,000 square feet. I run the toy store almost twenty years now. But store is started in 1985 by my ex-wife. Since I came, we expanded and now 11,000 square feet.

TL: I have read in the newspaper that you also started Heart of Tibet?

TD: Yes, I had, actually, several stores. I had one called the Heart of Tibet in Uptown. That was started in 1990. I have until 1992. Then I expanded this store, and we moved everything here in Stillwater. Also, I used to have a clothing store in St. Paul. I try to stay as much busy while there's no Tibetans, because I don't want to be lonely not thinking, you know. [Chuckles] So all the time my brain is all occupied thinking how to set up organizations, thinking what I can do to help with the Tibetans, and how I can run a business, and how I can help through my business to other Tibetans. So I try to occupy my brains and make sure that I not feel lonely myself.

¹⁰ Silver Lake Restaurant.

CL: Your Tibetan items in the store, do you sell mostly to other Tibetans or do you sell to Westerners?

TD: No, this for mostly Westerners. I didn't really, didn't had bought this as to a sale item. I am hoping I can do a lot of exhibitions and things like that to introduce the Tibetan culture and furnitures and, also, musics, and things like that. But sometimes it doesn't work. What you wishes doesn't come. So, it end up in the store. But, I must say, some of them, we have opportunity take at the Smithsonian a few years ago. We also had exhibition during Dalai Lama's visit, 2000, at the Institute of Art. Then we have exhibition at the Landmark Center. I wish that can be preserved, and then to introduce the younger generation of Tibetans who going to be born here and grow. And also, that Americans who are interested other cultures and other values, they can be a share. Probably, sometime, it will happen.

TL: So you have a lot of business, small business, in Minnesota. Did you have any particular difficulties opening a small business in Minnesota being an immigrant? And then, did you have any government bureaucracy difficulties?

TD: Not government problem. But, of course, anything you open business, you have some difficulties, especially when new immigrants. When I have first came, I opened the toy store, and then I have some Christmas figurines, and I don't know anything about Christmas until I came to Minnesota. And a small child, an American, four-, five-year child, pointing me Santa Claus. I don't know what the Santa Claus is. [Chuckles] Even though I have it in the store, I don't know the Santa Claus. I learned a lot of things from the American kids. I still feel they are my good teachers, because I learn language through toy names, through Christmas ornaments, through selling to the kids. So I'm very lucky. When kids walk into my store, I appreciate that they buy or not. Still I feel these people are kids who put me standing in America my own. So I have great appreciation of them.

CL: How do you find the Westerners accept your Tibetan items? Do you think most of them have any kind of idea of what an item might stand for or what its significance is before they buy it?

TD: We've sold a few things. A few items that I sold to friends who been involve the Tibetan culture and the community, and they knows about the value and know what the meaning of the arts and things like that. Then, certain customers that are artists or designers, they have not fully understanding, but they're understanding the artwork and have done by hand. So they have appreciation of that, and they buy. So it's two kinds of customers.

CL: When a Westerner might come in and see a particular piece of jewelry or something, do you take that opportunity to maybe teach them a little bit about it? Like, what a prayer box might mean or what this certain kind of stone might mean?

TD: Absolutely. That's just one thing I stay as a business long enough. I take time if a customer comes some items, and they're bringing it. I not try to grab money and just let them go. I spend quite a bit of time to make sure they understand whatever they picks up. If there is a meaning or symbolic—especially Tibetan artifacts or jewelry, make sure they understand. So once they have it, they know what that means to them. So I always try to explain them since either it is a Buddhist or since it is a culture. If somebody is not familiar Buddhism, but is familiar Tibetan culture, I can explain it as the culture. If someone is familiar about the Buddhism, then it has a further explanation. So that's I do.

TL: You said that you didn't face any bureaucracy, bureaucratic kinds of difficulties while opening the store, but do you remember any other policies that should be changed so that there are more aspiring immigrant business in Minnesota?

TD: When I first opened the toy store, I never carry made of Chinese toys. That does not mean that I understand all the Chinese. Because I'm Tibetan, the false side is anger. Then, slowly, I learned about it's not my anger. For example, I have a toy manufacturer in America. I carry certain toy five, six years, and soon as the Chinese become more powerful with economic and trade with America, those companies totally lost. They cannot compete then. That small company in Iowa I buy the toy, there are thirty employees. One time, they wrote us a letter—not just me, wherever they just put their toys—because they cannot compete with the Chinese, therefore, they can't stay in that business. Since then, I learned something, because it's not just my anger, it is the story the American people's job, also competing with other countries market.

We all know some of the Chinese government-related companies, they are made by the prisoners, Chinese prisoners as well as Tibetan prisoners or other part of the world prisoners. So that doesn't require a labor payment or labor salary. Therefore, it costs America ten dollars. They can sell you for fifty cents. So, how American can compete that? So I totally against that. But then, more and more later, everyone, even American companies, move to China now and open it. So, they have no choice. So I change probably seven years ago what I had supposed to be, and I cannot compete either or I have to give up my business. So, I choose to whatever I can get, but still, I choose to stay as non-violent toy. I don't carry any guns or GI Joes, which makes a lot of money, because that the kids are raising today. Still, I decide not going to. I buy probably very small portion of my business from the Chinese manufacturer, but mostly all the toys and collectibles are from Europe or are made in America.

CL: Where do you get your Tibetan products from?

TD: Those Tibetan products—for example, carpets. Some carpets are made of Tibetan refugees in Nepal, some from India, and the furnitures directly come from Tibet.

CL: How about the jewelry pieces that you have in your store?

TD: Jewelry pieces, they made in India, also in Nepal. Some of the jewelry, we own our design and give it to made in Nepal or India by Tibetan refugees or some Indians.

TL: You have done a lot of great work for the Tibetan community in Minnesota. I was wondering if you are still actively involved in the Tibetan community these days, and, if so, in what ways are you active?

TD: I'm not officially active as, you know, I did. But as a Tibetan, we always active, because that's just one of our mission, not just be Americans. We have more than that. We have to—we have to make sure that our younger generation doesn't lose their language and culture and beliefs. We have great responsibility. Even His Holiness said, when I first audience with him, His Holiness said that, "Every Tibetan who goes to West, you are representative of six million Tibetans." That's his message when anyone goes to West or Europe. So, we have to really remember. It's easy to forget because when you are not doing as a board member or things like that, then they think somebody will do it. Whatever I can, whatever I'm possible, then I try to be as active as possible.

TL: I read that you have started a Tibetan education network in Tibet?

TD: Yes.

TL: Can you tell us about this?

TD: This is, I went 1995 to Tibet first time since 1959. So I spent a long time the place I was born, near Dingri, near Mount Everest region. I spent almost two weeks, and then one week I spent in Lhasa and Shigatse as a pilgrimage. But most of the time I spent in the villages. When I first time visited Tibet, I have two kind of mixed feelings. I have very happy, you know, that remembers when I was six years old coming out Tibet and see the mountains and the valleys and all the landscapes. Then, when I really meet the people and see the condition, very sad, because no young generation able to read or write, and sees lot of monasteries. My own house is totally destroyed except the kitchen, the family kitchen was able to maintain. There are three families shares the kitchen room, are living there. The rest, all of my family house, is destroyed. And seeing those kind of things and then older people who have very sadness. To His Holiness is a long way and Tibet is still under China. So, it's very sad to hear their stories. So I kind of have a mission to going there. Either I should go there to help to open clinics, more clinics, because there's no medical attention at all, or I should open a school because there's no school. So I have these kind of two kind of missions.

Then I went back, come back to Nepal and come to India. And while I was in New Delhi, His Holiness, Dalai Lama, has a conference, Hindu and Buddhist conference. I have opportunity to go to that conference. Then, end of the event (conference), everybody lined to see His Holiness. I was in the line, and His Holiness come in front of me and asked me when I came to America and what did you do and why you going? So I told him that I just back from Tibet, and he is further questioning about Tibet. I get so nervous. I have no preparation for that, because I picked up from the street. So I don't know what to say to him, and then His Holiness probably understood, or whatever happened. He said, "You have to come to see me in the hotel after the conference." So I have opportunity to see him in the hotel. I reported whatever I seeing in Tibet and what I

like to help. So His Holiness' guidance is to open a school. That's very important. His Holiness said even, "Whatever you can do, then, if you can't . . ." Then he can probably be able to help financially. At the time, I said, "I'm going to do my best in my own way. If I can't at some point, then I'll report to you."

So then I started the school, 1996, and I give startup money for classrooms. For actually ten classrooms and give to the community. And then they built thirty-two classrooms. They start eighty children. Then I provide whatever necessary their needs, food or clothings. It's been now almost ten years. The past ten years, I think every year, there's six or seven who graduated as high school. I think since ten years, four or five even went to university in Beijing. They went through further study in Lhasa and Shigatse, which is part of ISCD in Tibet. They study there, and now they even go to China and study further. So we have 197 childrens in Tibet.

TL: So you sponsored them?

[Tape interruption]

TL: Did you sponsor all those Tibetan kids by yourself or did you have an organization?

TD: I started 1996, by my own, through the proceeds of my business. Then, end of 1996, I formed organization called Tibetan Education Action. It's a non-profit organization. We have individuals and foundations [that] helped us and also some individual sponsors. Now we are hoping also to build a clinic, hopefully, next year.

CL: Since you were here so much, you know, earlier than most Tibetans in Minnesota, you've had the opportunity to see the community from day one now through many years, fifteen years almost, of a Tibetan community here. How do you think the community is today based on how you envisioned it back in 1990 and 1991 when you started working with the Resettlement Project?

TD: [Sighs] Well, as individual how they manifested is incredible. People who doesn't speak English at all, today they're driving a CR-V Honda or they're buying a house, probably \$250,000 a house, even more. It is such a happy to see that, especially when I was helping in the first place. Then, since most Tibetans doing well as for preserving culture and our beliefs, that means our religion.

But then there is some kind of sadness because American is—what do you call it? Everything is in one pot. So, too many cultures, too many different influence. Sometime, I'm more worry than people who live under the Chinese, because here we have too much freedom and if you take freedom is not in the right path, it's easy to lose. What that means—that the younger generations lost how I respect my father and how to respect other elderly. That sense is not only Tibetan. Almost all the immigrants, they lose a part of the culture and a part of this value. Especially as we are Tibetan, we are very small population. There's only six millions. One Tibetan child cannot speak Tibetan or cannot read, that's a big tragedy. That's a big loss for us. So it might be also

very dangerous with our community. Even though our community is very active doing things, but still, the community leader cannot force everyone, every family kids, to participate, to learn Tibetan language or read your reading. Even though we have a Saturday school, certain kids that come, certain kids that doesn't come.

Inside Tibet, the China has controlled and destroyed the culture and everything. But the parents explain what the culture is and then they have a fear and then the kids understand the Chinese are enemy and what I should do better. They have no freedom as we are here. They're under the own enemy. Through their fear, they always do the best because they don't want to give up that. Here, too much freedom and too much dollar and then it's easy to lose who you are. That's a very much fear for, I think, not just me, all the Tibetans, especially like my generations. We are very fear about to lose the younger generations. That influence, rock 'n' roll, drinking, and many. So all this. You think, "Oh, now I'm doing job, I got money, and I buy the fancy car, and I go in the nightclubs. I go this and that." Then, parents try to control and say, "You know, we never done this before. We should do the prayers. We do the service here and there." They don't agree. I not say all of them that that can happen. That's a very fear. It's easy to also forget your culture. Too much freedom.

CL: What do you think can be done to stop that or to help it slow down, maybe?

TD: As I always mentioning whenever we have our community programs—I was founder of the organization—I never expect, I never thought of fancy cultural centers and huge buildings. I always project if I have money, I could put in program, very active program, instead of money spending on the building. We can have anywhere building. You can build in America anytime. But losing one Tibetan child's identity is a great loss than having the big cultural center and the nothing program happening. Still, I'm telling community, "If we have any money, put it in a program. Make sure we have a lot of activities." There is religious activities, cultural activities, children's activities, and storytellings. I mean, we can do many, many things. That way able to make their kids become busy within the community rather than going out and having fun.

TL: What do you think the Tibetan Americans or Tibetans in Minnesota should learn from Americans in Minnesota? Are there any special things about Americans in Minnesota that we should learn from them?

TD: What we should learn from the American or from the Tibetan?

TL: Are there any special attractions or special values that Americans in Minnesota have that Tibetans should learn from?

TD: Well, first of all, as I said, we have to look at this country through the founders, how they set up democratic systems and the values of freedom. That's exactly for younger generation. They don't understanding freedom, what the freedom means. Freedom is what you learn and you can express, you can do things many ways. Freedom is not that you go in the clubs and then influence the gangs because you are in America as

a freedom, you know. Freedom is not build huge buildings and have big cars. Freedom is inner peace inner mind that freedom have given. You have to learn, and then you can express. If I have truly understand Tibetan history and if I have a true understanding of Buddhism, I could express anywhere in the United States. Nobody can say, “This is wrong,” because this is the freedom country. Instead of that, the people use the freedom in a sense of a different and a wrong way. One way is most cases, you become a victim, and, secondly, as a Tibetan, we lose one person who lost their identity.

CL: Do you think there are any things that Minnesotans or Americans can learn from the Tibetans here then?

TD: Yes, I think so. I mention earlier, Tibetan culture is really very spiritual life. Even, for example, in my own case. They have thousands of toy stores. No one calls it “non-violent toy stores.” Certain people learned and appreciated what I do. Not only appreciate, they are try to teach their children. “See, this guy have a toy store. He don't sell [violent] toys, because that is bad.” If you have a toy guy when you are a six or seven year old, when you are thirteen, he want to buy a gun and go to hunting that could end of your life. We saw that on the news almost all the time. Or you might be accidentally shoot your father or your child. In the bigger way, then, when he go high school, he might be carrying to high school guns, because he has this attention in a child life. How many tragedy happen with a gun through the high school and kills your other students? We have to—it's not more Thupten Dadak. This is learned from His Holiness and from the Buddhist teaching, non-violence, how we act, behave, in the child life. That's kind of my contribution. The same thing: there are other Tibetans who have more knowledge than me, and they have probably more sense of values they can teach to the Americans.

TL: Are there any things in Minnesota that you don't like and that you think you will never be able to adapt to?

TD: Not really. Like or not like is very much who you going with, who you initiating with. If you go in something in the wrong places and meeting the wrong people . . . Wherever you live, you have finding negative things. Always, you try to be in the positive way. For me, I always try to wherever interest with my culture or someone have a value that I should learn. I don't feel like I have this bad experience. I wish that go away. I don't have that feeling at all.

TL: You have done so many things to improve Tibetan lives in Minnesota. Then is there any other stuff that you have done that you're always proud and that you find very rewarding?

TD: Not that I feel I have done so much. I think we have do more. Sometime I feel guilt about spend too much your own business. I rather do something bigger, so sense of community or sense for the Tibetan. Then certain times, the Tibetans within our community influence it, because everybody busy their own stuff. Then, suddenly, I want do something. Why me? This is very negative way of my personal, you know. Before

I'm Tibetan, I want to do that. If I don't do that, who going to do it? No, if I try to do, "Oh, there's 1,500 Tibetans. Why they don't do that? Why I'm the one?" That comes then, I feel instead of encouraging ones to do it, I feel negative my own personal way of thinking and I wish I can do more now, you know. I don't feel like I done so much and I should expect a reward. I didn't do it because—one thing I did is when I first went back from Minnesota and had the audience with His Holiness, as I mentioned, if you go and live in the West, you are representative of six million. That does not mean you sit in office and do things. That means that you have to create it in a positive as a Tibetan to the way whatever society you live and, then, from there, you can fight what your rights are. Certain things, most of the times, that I didn't still not, fearful that. So I feel that we have a lot more things to do.

TL: Since a lot of Tibetans, now they have become American citizens, are there things that you want the State of Minnesota to be actively involved to improve Tibetan community here in Minnesota?

TD: Well, this one thing . . . In fact, I was talking one of the older leader yesterday. Now we have a culture center. We have office and we have executive director and passed. Those executive directors not just tied up doing small things. I was encouraging them what Minnesota has the fundings to the communities. So far, we're doing our own through our own communities. Now there is our culture and our beliefs. First of all, it's a benefit for anyone, any human, who thinks believing in the peace and non-violence. So we culture which we are is not a destruction culture. This is culture of giving a value of peace and non-violence. Therefore, I always think must be some organization have fundings or foundation who gives the fundings and get this opportunity and bring it to the community and provide this to the Americans. Like, share the value for the younger generation of the American people what our culture, what the values, what the spiritual means to you, what the religious mean to you. If we try to do that, then I think it really fulfills what His Holiness wishes. And it fulfills why we are in America helping to others, and it helps through the non-violence tackle our freedom. This is something that I feel that executive director, once a new one comes, he should looking into those opportunities with American corporations and foundations and other organizations where they get the grant and more program rather than, you know, doing small things. Did it make sense?

CL: Yes. You mentioned that when you first arrived in Minnesota there was just the one Sakya Center.

TD: Yes.

CL: Now, we have a monastery in Minnesota.

TD: Yes.

CL: Did you have any involvement with bringing that monastery? Because it is a Gyuto Monastery, too, which was from the same monastery that you were in. Did you have any involvement in establishing that or bringing monks here from India?

TD: Again, 1993, I went back to India and I had an audience with His Holiness. Because now Tibetans first group has arrived already, so I see the monastery is the key for the Tibetan community, because it involved the cultural and spiritual. So, I, again, consult with His Holiness that I like to have some spiritual center in Minnesota. Without a doubt, His Holiness, “You are from Gyuto. Ask Gyuto. Take some monks from there, and I will send you the teacher.” First of all, he said, “How you going to build? You have a money? How you organize? How you going to feed the monks?” Again, I said the same thing, “I’m going to do my best.” So then he said, “Okay. Then ask Gyuto, ‘Send some monks to do service for the Tibetans and also for the Americans who are interest, like to learn Buddhism.’” So then I went back to the monastery and requested. And then monastery send a special monk to Dharamsala that want to be a teacher with the monks to us . . . His Holiness. So, His Holiness give the permission, the teacher and all three monks. We had three monks in 1995—one monk 1994 and then two other monks came 1995. Then I able to raise some money. Most time, they stay in my house. Then, few years later, we found someone, given directly through my name, for duplex apartment. So I change into the monastery. Then we sold that and then bought existing monastery now. We bought that building. Now, we have probably six monks. They provide all the religious service for the Tibetan community and also we have a class for the Westerners. Again, we have no cultural sense. Anything we do without a monks is very funny. Like Christian monastery, Catholic monastery without Christmas, you can’t be a celebrate. [Chuckles] Same thing, anything Tibetan event, anything, we have acquired the monks and perform the rituals. So it’s very important. I’m very glad. They do very well.

CL: You just mentioned the rituals and monks being present at celebrations and whatnot. What main purpose, do you think—or what is the most important thing that the monks are doing? Or having a monastery and the monks in the monastery are doing for the Tibetan community here? Also, how do you think they serve the Western population or the Americans in Minnesota?

TD: Well, right now, I think they’re doing more to the Tibetans, because the center of location very small. We didn’t really promote it that much to the American, because they are busy with their community. For me, same thing going back, that Tibetan younger generation is very important. Because a lot of new babies born here, and if you don’t have monks, they’re never going to see any monks. When they go back to India or Tibet, they’ll saw the monks. Then they’ll look as though something very strange people, you know. This I like to introduce: the monks and lamas to the younger generations through their young age, and, hopefully, they can follow the teachings and the rituals and things that we do. Then, secondly, it’s very important now because we have lot of older parents are coming from India, and they lived with social, religious, all in the monastery. They go to the monastery. They go to chanting together with the monks or they go to—what do we call—kora¹¹.

CL: Yes.

¹¹ In Tibetan Buddhism, kora, or walking kora, is the process of circumambulating a sacred site in order to gain religious merit.

TD: Do all this very important. If they don't have few monks in here, they will be very lonely. So this, if their children or daughter or son have time, they can bring them anytime in the monastery and be with the monks or do prayers with the monks. So this is the second thing. Then, third is also community event and things like that. So far, I think the monks do very good. Also, Tibetans really see very precious having monks there in the monastery, especially my generation people. For example, myself, most things by myself 1986 to 1991. There's no monks, so that's the one part very lonely and missing part of your life.

[Tape interruption]

CL: You just mentioned kora or circumambulating Holy Sites. This is something that's come up in the meetings that we've had with our group. How important it is for an older generation? And it's something that I noticed in my time in India and Nepal and in Tibet, that not only for older generations, but—

TD: Also younger generation.

CL: For monks and many people, that's a daily ritual. Something that many, many people do in the morning or the evening. They go to the monastery, to the Holy Site, and they do kora. Minnesota has almost a lack of a place to do that. What do you think can be done or is being done to compensate for that? Is it simply just traveling and spending time in the monastery or do you think maybe a site needs to be established where the community can go and reestablish that ritual?

TD: Well, in fact, the early telephone call is friend of mine who is board member of the monastery.¹² We are processing and looking at land. If we find the land right and something that we able to offer, then it can be done. This is our—I see us inner—what do you call it? It sees us identified as a Buddhist, the out structures. To having the identity of Tibetan Buddhist and the community. And, also, the kora is form of yoga that is the physical offerings. And then reciting, purifying anything negative from your speech and visualizing the Buddha and doing the kora, the stupa¹³ itself as manifestation of Buddha. This is form of your physical purification, physical body purification, speech purification, mind purification, also visualization of Buddhist physical wisdom and physical speech, which is teaching and mind, which is Buddhist true wisdom in order to receive. It's kind of very healthy yoga. And then, sense of them become also social interconnection, interconnection. So it's very important and one things identity of Tibetan and the one thing is form of yoga, which is very, very helpful. Once you did the three times¹⁴, probably at that moment, nobody doing that with anger or hatred or jealousy, whatever negatives are. They're doing purely more in the sense of compassion and kind. Then, if somebody does it, sees it, then someone wants to do it. Someone else wants to do it. So, even like Nepal or India, non-Buddhists will do that. There is Christians, the Muslims, the Hindus and become a tradition. Since everyone, they're not

¹² He is referring to a phone call he received before recording began.

¹³ A specific kind of sacred monument.

¹⁴ Kora is often performed by circumambulating a structure or site three times.

thinking this is only Buddhist. Whoever they're doing, it's their own beliefs, but same attention. Hopefully, it happen here in the Twin Cities and any religious people can participate. That does not mean you have to be a Buddhist.

TL: Do you have plans to retire in the U.S. as an old man or somewhere in Asian country or back in Tibet?

TD: I'm hoping to retire in a cave. [Chuckles] That's my dream if we're free in Tibet. Otherwise in Sopema.

TL: Where is Sopema?

TD: Sopema is near Dharamsala. You probably know the place for the like, Guru Rinpoche.¹⁵

TL: India?

TD: Yes. Lotus place. That's my wish.

TL: You're a Gyuto, that's a Gelugpa?¹⁶

TD: Gelug, yes.

TL: [Unclear] is a Nyingma.¹⁷

TD: Nyingma really, it's just kind of lineage issue. This question is very interesting, because my parents are in Tibet before Chinese took over, purely Nyingma. Their teacher is Nyingma, lineage is Nyingma. But we have all different teachers come through, because we are on kind of a freeway, Dingri. So anybody who goes either in Lhasa or going to Mount Kailash has to stop in Dingri. So we have all kind of lineage teachers go through. But still, parent thinks they're Nyingmapa¹⁸, because mostly teachings are from Nyingma.

When I raised in India and I went to school and then I joined the Gyuto. Mostly Gyuto teachers who studies are Gelug lineage. Then my sister, who is with me here, she lived with Mussoorie.¹⁹ You know the Mussoorie? Yes. His Holiness Sakya Trizin²⁰ lives there. Then, my sister send a nunnery at Trilokpur, which is near Dharamsala, a nunnery. Actually, it's purely Kagyu. So then my mom become later; she's a nun, the healthy reasons. She took the vows from Ling Rinpoche, which is Dalai Lama's tutor and purely Gelug. Then after, I have a uncle who took the vows also. He took vows from His

¹⁵ Padmasambhava, one of the founders of Buddhism in Tibet.

¹⁶ A Gelugpa is a follower of the Gelug school of Tibetan Buddhism.

¹⁷ A school of Tibetan Buddhism.

¹⁸ A follower of the Nyingma school of Tibetan Buddhism.

¹⁹ A town in India near Dehra Dun in Uttaranchal State.

²⁰ The head of the Sakya school.

Holiness. So, now, where is Nyingma? [Laughter] [Unclear] all the teachers and become Nyingma.

So, for example, myself, when I'm first Tibetan here, I organize here teaching Sakya Trizin and he stay in my house ten days, and he's great master teacher. Then I have a Kagyu Lama came, stay my house. Then, of course, before anybody here, there's a Sakya Center, and I always participate there with the centers. Then our family generation's teacher is Tusha Rinpoche great Nyingmapa Lama who is highly respected from the Dingri region, especially, and lives near Mount Everest, Nepal side. He is one of the Root Guru my sister and my brothers and I took, also, teachings from him. So it really doesn't matter. But still, as you study long enough, like Gyuto is become like your university, your school father. Wherever your school is, you have some kind of attachment. That's about it, sense of the teachings. I have received many teachings from many different lineages.

TL: When the Sakya Center was the first and only foremost in Minnesota, so all the Tibetans irrespective of being Nyingma, Sakya, Gelugpa, they all went to Sakya Center, right?

TD: At the time, there's no Tibetans. I'm the only one. So, I go there and probably ten or nine Americans students come their meditation. Then, see, the Gyuto is the one well known, not just in the lineage aspect of it, because they are practice their rules and regulations. For example, a monk's life, once you give all the qualified test and enter the monastery, they have to get up three o'clock, even in India today. Three to probably, like, eight-thirty Sangwa Dupa chant, no breaks. Eight-thirty, they have a breakfast tea and tsampa. Then, eight-thirty to go eleven-thirty. Then, eleven-thirty to around three-thirty to some time, depends on what kind of rituals, is most to take some time twelve p.m. Then, if you are young, you have to memorize again and you have to give an oral exam in the morning to your teacher, whatever you memorize. So probably the young one who just joined the monastery does sleep four hours or five hours. That's their routine. Then, every chant they do, they don't look in the book. Everything is memorized. Even, for example, if you want to build a stupa, you don't look in the book. You have to memorize all the measurements. If you want to do a sand mandala, what the color coordination is and what these diagrams are, each diagram, everything is memorized.

TL: We have a Sakya Center, right? Can you tell me what are the other centers that are recently opened?

TD: There are small centers. Like there is Shambhala Center²¹, which is Chögyam Trungpa²², one of the branch center. Then, I only know Sakya Center and—

CL: There's a Karma Kagyu²³ Center, too.

²¹ Shambhala Meditation Center of Minneapolis.

²² Founder of Shambhala.

²³ Minneapolis Karma Thegsum Choling.

TD: Karma Kagyu Center there, yes.

CL: Very small.

TD: Small. There are small centers. As the Gyuto is for, even I say, even in Lhasa, all the different lineage come to the Gyuto and Ghuma—that's two university—because they are displaying and they are very well known in the whole community, so there's a very respected all the lineages. Now even we have Sakya Center, Kagyu or Nyingma Center, but still, ones that they have are Gyuto monks. All the Tibetans go there, because there's a familiarity and known very well. Then, also, is not run by one lama. It's branch of the monastery, so it makes a difference.

CL: Anything else? All right, I think we're done then.

TD: Okay.

CL: I wanted to thank you for participating.

TL: Thank you.

TD: Thank you.

CL: It's much appreciated.

Minnesota Tibetan Oral History Project
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