

Dr. Tsewang Ngodup
Narrator

Dorjee Norbu and Charles Lenz
Minnesota Historical Society
Interviewers

Interviewed for the
Minnesota Tibetan Oral History Project

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Dorjee Norbu Residence
St. Paul, Minnesota

Dorjee Norbu - DN
Dr. Tsewang Ngodup - TN
Charles Lenz - CL

DN: Hi. My name is Dorjee Norbu. Today is the 24th of July, 2005 and we are interviewing Dr. Tsewang Ngodup at my house. And the people present today are Dr. Tsewang Ngodup, myself, the primary interviewer and Charles Lenz, the secondary interviewer.

Your name?

TN: Tsewang Ngodup.

DN: Can you spell it for us, please?

TN: T-s-e-w-a-n-g N-g-o-d-u-p.

DN: Thank you. First, as we start out, can you just briefly describe your life in India before you moved to the United States?

TN: My parents moved from Tibet. I grew up in Dehra Dun, which is now Uttaranchal State. Initially, I started off my school in Tibetan Children's Village but that was only, I believe, just for a few months or less than a year, and I was very small. I don't recall very much. Then moved to Dehra Dun. Studied in a missionary school until I was about in third or fourth grade and then moved to Dehra Dun School. Finished my high school there. Then went to Chandigarh to do pre-medicals and then to Amritsar to do my medical school. After that I went to work in a Tibetan Camp in Kollegal, which is in Mysore, Karnataka State. Worked for three years then went on to do post-graduation in pediatrics in Chandigarh.

And subsequently worked briefly in Nepal in a missionary hospital and visited some Tibetan camps and Tibetan schools. However, I was called to come to Tibetan Children's Village, Dharamsala, because they were in need of a physician and particularly there a pediatrician. So I moved back to Dharamsala. Was there for about five years and subsequently came to the United States to pursue studies. And since then, except for about a year, when I went back to India to work again in Tibetan Children's Village, I've been here.

DN: And can you describe . . . how did you get interested in the field of medicine?

TN: I was interested because, as you know, we are the first generation to be educated. So my parents couldn't provide any guidance and when—I used to go to school regularly. Do my school studies regularly, so I was sort of a good student. However, there wasn't any role models and at that time all that we wanted to do was do something. Finish school, do some training and get a job so that you can earn some money for yourself and for your family. However, it's a coincidence. My older brother who was a graduate from the same high school was visiting the school and speaking with one of his teachers, school teachers, who was then teaching me. And I just overheard the teacher telling my brother, "Oh, you should let Tsewang become a doctor because he can." So then I said, "Well, if the teacher says I can, then probably I can." You know. So that's how I—then I thought, "Okay, I should think about it." Otherwise we didn't any role models. We didn't have any counselors or—so that's how I started thinking about it.

DN: And was the medical field, was that a popular field within the Tibetan community during that time?

TN: No. No. There were hardly any, at least from the school there I went. There wasn't any that I know of. But later I found out that in some other schools there had been students who had already been to medical schools. Yes.

DN: So after that when did you first become interested in moving to the United States?

TN: Well, when I was finishing my medical school, I did know an American. The American did sort of talk about it. Then several of my Indian classmates did move to the United States straight after finishing medical school. That was in like 1985. So I knew about it but I wasn't too interested then. Then one thousand Tibetans moved to United States in 1991 but the process started around 1989.¹ But I did not put my name there because I thought, "Well, I would be more useful in India." So I didn't do that.

But then I was working in Tibetan Children's Village for about five years and, you know, there was some health problems because it was a large number of students in a small area. I thought we had done pretty good in controlling it although there was some ongoing, you know, sort of issues like small epidemics of infectious diseases but—and

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. Names of applicants were selected in lottery.

then I wanted to do something more, pursue something more. You know, learn something more, but there wasn't much scope there. I tried doing a few things while I was still there but it didn't work out very well. So then I thought. "Well, this is the only option to apply for a scholarship and come study." Then initially I was thinking that I would go back to India after I attained some more sort of skills. That was why I thought of coming here but my preference was to come on a temporary basis. That was my plan then.

DN: Can you describe in more detail like the whole process? The student—was it difficult for you in obtaining that or any—was it competitive, the scholarship?

TN: Well, this was, especially for Tibetans. I believe that time we had about ten, ten scholarships. And there was certain criteria including academic achievements and service in the Tibetan community. So I fulfill all the criteria and there was some competition but I don't think I would say it was very competitive *then*. Things may have changed now.

DN: And obviously you would have discussed with your relatives and friends. What were their reactions?

TN: Well, my wife thought I should not. She thought, you know, things are okay in India and we should just stay. My other relatives were supportive but I had to explain to her that I needed to get some more training in order for me to grow more further in my own field and also to be more useful to others. And also to give more opportunities for my own children, that I needed to. I also tried to explain to her that I needed—if I could—once I was here that things would open up and we maybe find more options and avenues.

DN: And when did you actually move to Minnesota? Do you know why you picked Minnesota?

TN: I have a sister in Madison, Wisconsin. So I had heard you feel very lonely when you first move to United States, so I wanted to be close to my relative. Unfortunately there wasn't a good program around Madison. The next closest was Minnesota where there was a Tibetan community close and relatively close to my sister. In addition, the program was good. So those were the three reasons that I moved to the Twin Cities.

DN: And when did that happen?

TN: September 1997.

DN: So were you the first in your family to—you just said that your sister was here before you.

TN: Yes.

DN: Okay. And then when you think about it right now, do you think you made the right choice by moving here?

TN: Absolutely.

DN: Has there ever been a time when you thought like this move was a mistake or did that ever come across your mind?

TN: Well, I mean when I come here I had come with too many aims or objectives so the first one year . . . actually two years, but particularly the first year was very difficult for me. Around the end of the first year and also in the second year, yes, there were times when I thought it was a mistake. Those were the only times.

DN: You mentioned the family. Could you briefly introduce them for us?

TN: My wife's name is Tsanchoe, T-s-a-n-c-h-o-e. I have a daughter Tsetan Dolkar, T-s-e-t-a-n D-o-l-k-a-r, who is now twenty years old and studying University of Toronto. Will be going to the third year of undergraduate this fall. Next is Tenzin Tseky, T-e-n-z-i-n T-s-e-k-y. She is fifteen going to tenth grade this fall and the last one is Nawang Singhe, N-a-w-a-n-g S-i-n-g-h-e. He is six and will be going to the third grade.

DN: And you mentioned that you moved here in September of 1997. So how long were you separated from your family?

TN: My wife joined me after about a year for about six months and I was able to bring my family after about two or two and a half years.

DN: And did they—like what were some of the difficulties that they encountered? Did they have a hard time transitioning or—?

TN: Not very much. Because for my wife, the main thing is that the family should be together. So when she came she was with children and with me so that was okay. Yes. In the beginning when she came alone after about a year that was very difficult for her because my youngest son was then only about a year old and in India. So that was very difficult for her and therefore she went back in about six months. But the next time when we were able to bring all the children together then she was fine. For my children, absolutely no problems because I was there and more importantly my wife, their mother, was with them. So for them it was—nothing was difficult because by then I had established myself and I had an apartment for myself, unlike when I was here for two years. I was moving from one place to another. [Chuckles]

DN: And you mentioned that like initially you were planning to go back so when did you actually decide that you wanted to stay in Minnesota? Do you know why you made that decision?

TN: It was about two years into my residency training and my oldest daughter was in eleventh grade going into twelfth. So to move back for her it would have been very difficult because she would be in high school and the systems are absolutely different. So she started telling me that it would be very difficult for her to go back. Similarly, my younger daughter didn't want to go back. Then my wife. For her, I mean, as long as the family is together she is fine and then also once she is in a particular place she just likes to be staying. Likes to stay there rather than move around. So then they started telling me that, you know, somehow we should stay.

And then I also thought, you know, that maybe I could contribute to the community even by staying here. By then I was the president of the Tibetan American Foundation of Minnesota. Then there were other reasons including the desire which I had for a long, long time to have a passport so that I can move around and even visit Tibet. Maybe some day be able to start some projects there. So those were some of the reasons besides some of the small ones.

DN: So we were talking about your role in the community. What was your first reaction when you got here of the Tibetan community? It was pretty—it was started in around . . . well, like five or six years before you reached here. So what did you notice?

TN: Well, I thought Tibetans were doing pretty well. Most of them seemed to be doing well economically and they were having cars to drive. So I thought they were doing pretty well. They seemed to be working long hours. I was busy with my own studies. So . . . at the same time I did have a sort of a feeling that unless people took some precautions that they may have problems. That some people can have when they acquire wealth in a short span of time. But that was just a feeling. Yes.

DN: So now that you have been in this community for quite a few years, do you notice any changes, either positive or negative aspects?

TN: Oh, the last three or four years I think it's moving in the right direction on the whole. Very good changes. Very positive. Community is coming along very well. People are interacting among each other very well. Have a feeling of community and I think the family, children, youth, all are moving the right direction.

DN: And do you believe that is maybe partly due to our new Community Center? Do you think that helps bring the community together?

TN: No, no doubt. Absolutely no doubt. That's—I mention in my first message in *Yakety Yak*² last year that His Holiness³ is like the beacon globally while this Center is a rallying point at the local level. So, yes.

DN: You said that you were pretty active in the Tibetan community. Can you just like list some of the things that you were part of or those that you took on?

² The community publication of the Tibetan American Foundation of Minnesota.

³ His Holiness the Dalai Lama.

TN: I initially, when I was a resident physician, I tried organizing some panel discussions about families, the relationship between children and parents to raise some awareness as there were all these issues about parenting and gender—sorry, generational gap. So those sort of things. Later I was elected to the Board of Directors of the Tibetan American Foundation of Minnesota, which was then Tibetan Association of Minnesota. Then I was asked to take on the role of the president. So that was quite heavy responsibility and was very hectic.

DN: When was that? What year?

TN: That was 2001 to 2002.

DN: What were some difficulties that you encountered as a leader in the community?

TN: Well, number one, I mean we all have our own full time job. And then I was a resident physician, which was very difficult in terms of time constraints and it was a training period. So that was one for me. Then, I mean everybody were volunteering, so time was one major factor. Then this is a community organization so when you are dealing with people directly there is always certain issues, some difficulties and it's sort of a democratic setup so you always have to discuss things and reach a consensus. There are differences of opinion and then there's resources. You never have enough money. You don't have the right skills. So . . . you're always trying to get things done with a lot of constraints.

DN: So recently during your presidency, two young members of our community passed away, unfortunately. And so how did you have to deal with that and how did you deal with the misfortunes? And can you just talk about that a little bit?

TN: I learned that . . . when I was working in my clinic and I didn't have a whole picture, so even before I had a picture there were a lot of calls from various press people so it was very difficult for me not knowing what had actually happened. Later things became slightly more clearer. It's always a tragedy whenever we lose lives, particularly in their prime time and since we are a small community so it's always a big loss. However, sometimes tragedies help for anybody to learn from those events and I think the community has come together very well. And I truly believe that we have learned some good lessons and that in many ways this tragedy may have contributed in bringing the community together and helping us to move in the right direction. Even though, even before that we were doing pretty well. But this even may have helped. I still regret, feel bad for the families that lost their children and even for those young children . . . I think it was just being at the wrong place at the wrong time. They were good children.

DN: And you mentioned that there were press, media people were trying to contact you so because you had to deal with like the American media system and because you as the president—you also had to be kind of the middle man between the funeral, like conducting that . . . So what are some of just your general views on the way that went? Did anything shock you or surprise you?

TN: I mean the event itself was very shocking. The interest of the media was sort of overwhelming. So it was in many ways difficult because being the president of the community I had a role and a responsibility, too, as the community—the picture that I had to project to the outside world. At the same time, I wanted the community to learn from the event. So . . . and I wanted to be honest on both sides. To be truthful on both sides. So with that in my mind I did what I thought was the best.

DN: And what are your views on how the funeral was conducted? Do you think it kind of satisfied . . . the way funerals are conducted, traditionally conducted, and like in India through the Tibetan way or—?

TN: I mean it's—of course it's now a different place, so you don't have the traditional funeral that one would have either in Tibet or in India. Having said that, I think people adapt, particularly Tibetans adapt very well. From having moved from Tibet to India and then to United States. And in many ways I think our religion, Buddhism, it helps us to adapt. So I found that the elders who were helping with the funeral rites had adapted very well and I believe we were able to conduct the rites in a way that satisfied the family. And fortunately we do have our Buddhist monks at Gyuto Monastery.⁴ That helps a lot and then we have many elders who are very familiar with the rites and rituals and I think that helped and it's my impression that the family and others were satisfied with the rites and the whole process.

DN: And you mentioned how being a Buddhist helped adapting. Does that also have any effect in your practice as a physician?

TN: I believe it helps because we always try to say that we should do things to help others. And even if we can't help, don't harm. So it definitely—it helps. Then the thought of compassion and loving kindness. It absolutely helps. And we are human beings. Sometimes we make mistakes, particularly when the schedule is very hectic and we are physically and mentally exhausted, but it always helps to come back.

DN: And so like as you were able to practice after finishing schooling here, you were a certified physician. Where did you first start working in Minnesota?

TN: I trained in Hennepin County Medical Center, and then I just worked there even though I have worked in some of the smaller clinics temporarily. But mainly in Hennepin County Medical Center and its satellite clinics.

DN: And just out of curiosity, do you have any like Tibetan patients in the clinic?

TN: I do. I have a few.

DN: And do you feel like you treat them differently or—?

TN: Not really. I mean the guidelines are the same. I don't think so. I don't know.

⁴ Gyuto Wheel of Dharma Monastery.

DN: What are some differences that you notice between your work place in India and here?

TN: I mean technologically it's very advanced there. And where I worked it was mainly in Tibetan settlements and schools, so you always had very small clinics and very basic labs. Even for X-rays we have to send to some other place. Then in India mainly you have infectious diseases. Mainly. While here you mainly were dealing with other types of conditions. So those are some of the differences.

[Tape interruption]

DN: So we were talking about the field of medicine. What is your opinion of Tibetan medicine?

TN: Tibetan medicine has been there for centuries, it definitely has some benefits to the humanity. The concept is very good but I haven't really studied a lot. I have taken a few classes, read a few books in English, but haven't really practiced myself so I won't be able to comment a whole lot. But to the best of my understanding, Tibetan Buddhism has a big role in Tibetan medicine. I definitely feel that the spiritual aspect could be extremely useful to some of the people that have emotional and mental problems, but I can't tell how it would be applied or how it could be presented in a way that it could be universally accepted. Even though I would say that it's already being used, for example, meditation, mindfulness. But I think there may be more ways in which it could be used. For example, counseling. I can't tell you definitely because I myself don't know a whole lot. But from the little glimpses that I've got I feel there may be some role.

DN: And do you ever recommend Tibetan medicine or Tibetan medicine to your patients here?

TN: We do. Our department has a clinic called Wellness Clinic and that is Complementary Alternative clinic, CAM, C-A-M. There we have a physician who provides acupuncture and other modes of treatment. But I don't specifically tell any patient to go and get Tibetan medicine. We, through the Tibetan American Foundation of Minnesota, we have invited Tibetan physicians for consultation and that's one way of trying to make Tibetan medicine accessible to the Tibetan as well as non-Tibetan clients.

DN: And so after work there, what do you do during your free time?

TN: Usually I spend time with my family and try to read some books. I spend more time reading about Tibetan Buddhism, actually. Mainly those and then, yes, for the last one year I haven't had much free time because once again I was the Tibetan American Foundation of Minnesota president. So actually most of my time was consumed by that role.

CL: Were you involved in the search for the new Community Center?

TN: Actually, when I was the president we did search but by the time my role was up we had not decided at that time, and then my visa ran out so I had to go back to India for a year. So it was during that period that the Center was acquired. Yes. When I was the president we did start the search but we did not find a location that was acceptable to us in terms of cost and other requirements.

CL: Can you talk a little bit about when that search started? What the feelings or the emotions of the board was? Why the Community Center was needed and the things that you hoped to accomplish by acquiring it?

TN: The main idea was so that we had a center, you know. The purpose was mainly a community center. At the same time through that we did call it a Cultural Center, because we thought through that, our culture would be maintained, promoted. Because the number of Tibetans were relatively less compared to India or Nepal, the community members had always thought that such a center would provide a very useful rallying point where we could come together, interact, use our language, learn cultural and traditions such as dancing, singing and of course Tibetan Buddhism. So those were the main ideas that the community members were always thinking about a center and looking for one.

DN: So you talked about some of the activities and stuff that you were thinking about when you were planning on acquiring the Community Center. Do you feel that that's becoming successful? What are some activities that have taken place at the Community Center?

TN: I think we are doing very well. We have a Saturday Tibetan language and culture school that's going on very strong. Similarly we have the music and dance classes. Both young and old are taking increasing interest in learning these skills. Particularly the last one year we have noticed a surge in interest. There are so many young children who now take a keen interest in songs, dance and learning Tibetan musical instruments. It's extremely encouraging. And if this trend continues for the next few years, I think we would have achieved a lot. In addition, we have had several religious and spiritual gatherings. We had invited several well-known Tibetans from outside the state to speak to the Tibetan community about culture and other social issues.

DN: And you mentioned that you were active in the community from early on. I was just wondering were you part of the members or part of the group that helped plan His Holiness' visit to Minnesota? Were you any way involved in that?

TN: I was. I was involved in the committee, but honestly at that time my contribution was limited.

DN: Can you describe your experience when His Holiness was here?

TN: That was a great feeling. I believe it was first visit for His Holiness to Minnesota, and by then we had a sizeable Tibetan community and all the programs were a huge

success. I think His Holiness' visit benefit the Minnesotans both non-Tibetans and Tibetans and it was through that visit that we were able to get the seed money to buy the Community Culture Center. Even though the Tibetan families had also contributed the seed money. So it was the combination of His Holiness' visit as well as the contributions from the Tibetan families that we managed to have the Center.

DN: So what are some of your future plans in the community? Do you plan to stay involved?

TN: I mean being a Tibetan, you are always involved. Being a board member you get certain formal role, certain authority if you will or certain avenue to use your ideas. But even without being a board member I believe it's in every member of any particular community have to try to contribute in whatever way they can for their own respective communities.

CL: You talked a little bit about the Tibetan community helped out in providing money for the Community Center and I've always been amazed at—for such a young community in Minnesota or in the United States, that they were willing to give so much for this. Can you talk a little bit about why you think it was important for the families to make such a large financial contribution?

TN: Well, in many ways the reason is because we do not have a country of our own. We had to move out of our own country, Tibet. We were forced to. So . . . and our struggle for the last . . . now forty-five years or so has been to maintain our culture and that has been our way of fighting back with the Communist China. So I believe the same sort of desire may have been there when Tibetans contributed in order to acquire a Culture Center. So that we could maintain our culture and remain together in the true sense as well as symbolically. So that's how I feel. That's my take on it.

CL: You also talked about some of the activities that go on at the Cultural Center and how there seems to be this great interest right now. How do you think those activities are contributing to the community or giving back? How are they helping to shape and define the community here?

TN: I mean there's always a danger that you will lose your language once you come to such a big country like United States. And remaining together, interacting together on a daily basis, helps to maintain the language, our way of living, the way—how we take life. So those are the main reasons in the ways that—how the Culture Center is helping. At the same time, I believe it gives us a purpose for living. Not just earning our livelihood or thinking about a career only. We have a bigger purpose. Being a Tibetan. So I think it helps us in many ways, particularly when you have a bigger purpose of . . . for the things that you are doing. If the Tibetans can realize that, I think it will serve them well.

CL: Where do you see the community as it continues to move forward and the Tibetan community every year it grows larger and larger? Do you have any goals or aspirations or things you'd like to see the community accomplish in the next several years?

TN: Well, as it gets bigger it will be harder and harder to keep the community together. Having said that, the goal should be integration with the community at large which means, you know, the mainstream of the United States or Minnesota. At the same time maintaining our own core values. It's a tough challenge, but I think it's doable if people can give it thought, and realize it, and make a conscious attempt. So it's, you know, something like not being melted in the melting pot but having some . . . being integrated. I don't know if it makes sense, but it will get harder as the community gets larger. So the leaders have a big role.

It will always be a challenge how to fulfill this role, because the way we have been doing for the last thirteen years, working on a voluntary basis and being in contact with the community members directly, it's very time consuming, very stressful. So it will be a challenge. But much will depend on the leaders. How they lead. Because if the leaders lead sincerely, I think the community members will respond, because actions speak louder than words. So much will depend on the leaders but to be able to maintain a chain of such leaders year after year can be difficult. Honestly. It can be difficult.

CL: You talked about the Community Center being a rallying point for the community. And earlier you also talked about your hopes of one day being able to have—to work in some sort of projects in Tibet. What do you think the community's responsibility here in Minnesota, as they become more and more integrated with the population, what do you think their obligations are to Tibetans in India and Tibetans in Tibet?

TN: Until there is a solution reached between the Chinese government and the Tibetan Government in Exile led by His Holiness the 14th Dalai Lama, we have an obligation to help reach that goal. At the same time we have to help the Tibetans in India, Nepal, Tibet, giving them better opportunities in terms of health, living conditions, education in whatever way either individually, directly or through certain organizations such as non-governmental organizations. Many Tibetans are already doing it, have been doing it since they arrived to United States. Once a solution is reached between the Chinese government and the Tibetan Government in Exile, then it's mainly helping financially to uplift the living conditions, the Tibetans in Tibet. Then our role I think will change. The burden will be much less. I believe. For the time being every Tibetan has to carry the burden of making . . . of working towards the objective of having the Tibet issue reach an agreement that is beneficial to both the Tibetans and the Chinese.

CL: Was there anything specific—like in the beginning when you came to the U.S. and you decided to stay. You mentioned that you wanted to get a passport so that you could travel freely. Was there any specific projects that you had hoped to be able to start in Tibet or to work on?

TN: Being a physician, all this, the first thing that I can do is health projects. But I would be interested in certain educational projects because it's the education that changes the living conditions, the way people think, health, everything. So I don't have any definite plans but something of those nature.

DN: Just briefly you spoke about how there's that challenge or there's a balancing between maintaining kind of your traditional or your identity and then also working with integrating with the mainstream. Do you—can you give like specific examples when you came across that challenge? Maybe like during your educational period here or in your workplace or in your community?

TN: No. I can't tell you very specifically. I mean for . . . for me, I mean I've lived most of my part in the Tibetan community in India so it's too late for me to change. Honestly, I can't think of any specific . . . but I believe it would be more for the younger generation who all that they will experience is the life here. I think for them it will be a natural challenge. But for our age I think it should not be a challenge. Having said that, sometimes people change very fast in a different environment. Although at times that could be useful but at times it could be detrimental ultimately.

DN: Do you have anything else? I think that's it.

CL: I wanted to thank you for partaking in this with us.

TN: Thank you. Okay.

CL: Thank you again.

DN: Thank you.

Minnesota Tibetan Oral History Project
Minnesota Historical Society