

**Kalsang Phuntsok**  
**Narrator**

**Tenzin Khando and Charles Lenz**  
**Minnesota Historical Society**  
**Interviewers**

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**Tenzin Khando** - TK  
**Kalsang Phuntsok** - KP  
**Charles Lenz** - CL

**TK:** This is Tenzin Khando interviewing Kalsang Phuntsok at the Tibetan Cultural Center on the 2 September, 2005. The people present are myself, Charles Lenz and Kalsang Phuntsok.

Could you please state your name?

**KP:** My name is Kalsang Phuntsok.

**TK:** Could you spell it please?

**KP:** K-a-l-s-a-n-g. Last name P-h-u-n-t-s-o-k.

**TK:** And your age?

**KP:** I am . . . let's see . . . thirty-six, I think. [Chuckles]

**TK:** Starting out with childhood. Where were you born?

**KP:** I was born in actually in India, Northern part of India. It's called Pithoragarh, which is in actually . . . really actually up north in India, basically.

**TK:** And did you live there with your entire family?

**KP:** No. Actually, I think I was probably about three, four years old at the time. And it was also a transition period for my parents having escaped Tibet and they didn't know actually where to go at the time. So when they escaped Tibet, actually they kind of got—

settled actually along in these kind of areas where actually there are not many Tibetans, basically, but mostly, you know, some like neighbor friends and stuff. So I think I was there probably about four or five years old or something.

**TK:** Was that where you attended school and—?

**KP:** No. I think then actually my parents actually made a conscious effort to actually move to Dharamsala where actually His Holiness<sup>1</sup> and the—most of the Tibetans who were actually here were moving to basically at the time. So this was actually in like 1970s. I can't remember what year it was but at that time, actually, yes, once we got in Dharamsala that's where I did my schooling and, you know, started as a day school. We did my high school basically in TCV, which is called Tibetan Children's Village. Upper TCV.

**TK:** Did you have any idea at that time what you were going to pursue in the future?

**KP:** [Chuckles] That's really difficult to say. I wasn't really sure actually, you know. I mean what I was thinking looking forward. But you know, I think at the time actually the only thing you could dream about was going to college, basically. That's all.

**TK:** So you were dreaming about going to college?

**KP:** That's all I could dream. Yes. At that time. You know. We were pretty much concentrating on the studies and a lot of my friends were talking about where to go. Basically colleges in India like Delhi, Chandigarh. Basically where our elders have gone to, basically.

**TK:** So where did you end up going to college?

**KP:** I ended up going to college in the U.S., basically. You know. In Berea College. In Kentucky.

**TK:** How did that come about?

**KP:** How did that come about?

**TK:** Yes.

**KP:** Well, I got actually, basically a scholarship to go there. So we had actually what's called series of tests we had to get in order to qualify and you had like math tests, basically. Kind of like SAT. And English essays and interviews and all kinds, basically. So luckily when it was all said and done, I was basically one of the candidates actually to go there.

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<sup>1</sup> His Holiness the Dalai Lama.

**TK:** So you did go to secondary school in the United States attending college at Berea College in Kentucky?

**KP:** Yes.

**TK:** What was that like moving to Kentucky all the way from Dharamsala?

**KP:** It was tough, actually. I mean especially . . . I think actually we were probably the—me and actually my friend, you know, my colleague, basically, we were probably the first . . . among the first Tibetan students to go to actually U.S. college directly from high school at the time and at the time actually we just got out of high school. You know there were only a few months gap, actually, where we had to do a lot of preparations and stuff. So once actually we were in college it was totally different in terms of accent and food and we were nothing used to and you don't have actually, you know, your friends or any kind of neighbors that you know. So it was actually quite a different, you know, I mean . . . experience.

**CL:** Do you remember what year that was?

**KP:** 1990.

**TK:** Were you the only Tibetan at Berea College?

**KP:** No. There were actually about like seven Tibetan students that were ultimately . . . that ultimately passed the test to go to the college here so then actually—among the seven they sent two earlier. So you know, my friend and actually I was the first ones actually to go there. So ultimately there were actually you know, like seven Tibetan students and then later on there were like a few more. But yes, I was among the first technically here. Tibetans.

**CL:** Was there something specific about that school that you wanted to go to or was it just a school that was chosen or—?

**KP:** No. It was actually the only option we had, basically.

**TK:** Why was it the only option?

**KP:** Well, that was the only scholarship available at the time. So we sort of applied for that one then. That's how it came about.

**TK:** What was it like having a number of Tibetans there with you at the college? Was that helpful in any way? Advantageous?

**KP:** Yes. I think actually, I mean it's actually a small college. Probably about like thirteen hundred students. So I mean, once you are in the country or place, actually, where you don't have any of your friends or things, you know, it's really helpful to have

actually Tibetans with you. Primarily because you can—I mean being a Tibetan you know you have actually this background where parents have actually gone through a lot in terms of escaping Tibet from Chinese rule and stuff.

So when you had actually a group of Tibetans we could actually make Tibetan food and then share with other students. We could organize a Tibetan dance and any kind of Tibetan activity, basically, and then share that with the others. So we could organize like movie shows. We did actually a lot of like documentaries and showed it to the students down there and, you know, they get class credit and stuff. So that was really helpful in terms of having quite sizeable Tibetan students down there.

**TK:** So since you did have all these shows and performances staged at your college what was the response of the student body?

**KP:** Well, you know, I mean as you would find in any place where people are generally ignorant about one, it's actually primarily you that has to like deliver the stuff. So you have to actually come up with the enthusiasm and the stuff basically to show to people here. We have this thing to show to you so do you want to come? So it's actually a lot of urging to people who didn't really have any clue about Tibet in general, and so we had actually a lot of explaining and things to do to the students down there. Especially the staff members were really helpful in terms of trying to get students to come over.

So most of the time we had these kind of movie showings. We had actually probably about like thirty students that will come to watch Tibetan stuff, including the Chinese students. So it's quite eye opening for them. So I think really it's you, actually. All the effort depends on you whether you can attract people or not. So by directly you go out and try to get people know about it. The kind of events that you are going to do. So when you do that then it's really helpful. I mean some cases where we end up actually having like few people, but you know, for us even if there is one more person that learns about Tibet, it's really helpful. So basically knowing that you are a Tibetan and that not that many Tibetans down there and you have sort of a responsibility to say to like others here, "Okay, you want to know something about Tibet and Tibetans? Then this is what it is about." So being there, actually I think it really opened a lot of peoples' eyes towards the Tibetan situation. Even the—including Chinese students. We had a good . . . I mean response from the Chinese students even though I mean we don't get along with everyone but still there are people who are willing to be open. They are always more actually enthusiastic about learning things.

**TK:** And you were in Kentucky for—?

**KP:** Four years.

**TK:** Four years.

**KP:** Yes.

**TK:** Completing your undergraduate.

**KP:** Yes.

**TK:** What happened after that? Did you decide to—?

**KP:** Well, after I graduated then I moved, actually, [to] Minnesota primarily because there's quite a sizeable number of Tibetans out here. And we had like friends out here. So we moved up here and thought I could get a better job out here. So I think actually my first job here was with the Target headquarters where I worked at the information system.

**CL:** What was your degree in in Kentucky?

**KP:** I actually had economics and with a minor in math. And the reason I went into information system was primarily because for more than actually two years in college I worked as the computer system installation person down there. So I had actually that work experience, basically, and then once I got here and while actually working then I took like computer programming courses out here. So now since then actually I've been working as a computer engineer, basically.

**TK:** Earlier you stated that you moved here from Kentucky. Was it just you or—?

**KP:** Yes. Just me.

**TK:** When did your family arrive here?

**KP:** Well, I had actually had a sister who came like in 1998. Somewhere around there. I don't recall the exact date. So she is basically the only relative that came over. My parents, actually, you know as I told you before, they just actually moved here about a month ago. But I am married with two kids. We met here.

**TK:** Did you return to India any time after that?

**KP:** Yes. I think I went . . . I've been to India three times.

**TK:** For business reasons?

**KP:** Both, actually. I mean I had the opportunity to go as part of the work to a facility called Air India. I worked there actually to—I mean we had to set up the systems there where we do engine aircraft testings and stuff like that. And we had to provide trainings and system support and stuff like that. So basically I went to India two times mainly for the—as part of the job there. And then as soon as I finish my work, took actually vacation to go to Dharamsala to see my other relatives and friends.

**TK:** You stated that you were married here in Minnesota?

**KP:** Right. Actually in Chicago.

**TK:** Oh. When was that? What year?

**KP:** Well, my wife is from Chicago so she used to stay down there and, you know, that's where we met, basically.

**TK:** And then you moved here and settled here?

**KP:** Yes. Yes.

**TK:** Were you involved in any community activities and political groups while you were here?

**KP:** Right. I think, actually, since I moved up here and once I got settled, basically I've been actively involved in this community. First and foremost as the president of the Tibetan Youth Congress Minnesota. I served in that capacity for about three years and that was, I believe, starting like 1997-98. Right around that year. I don't recall exactly the date that it began with but—so for about three years, actually, you know. I mean that's actually what I did. Mainly organizing different seminars, political activities like demonstration when we had one of the Chinese leaders that came in town, and, you know, community educations. Basically helping the youngsters and everybody else actually about what the real situation about Tibet is. So we did a lot of actually events about movies and about Panchen Lamas and about the Tibetan environment and stuff.

Once actually, you know, then after that I got elected to the—I mean I served in the Tibetan American Foundation<sup>2</sup> on the board. First as the coordinator for the political activities and then finally I served as the president and basically we're looking—this building was actually—I mean I had a lot to do with this building in terms of purchasing and stuff. So it was actually, you know . . . I mean we were able to purchase it actually during my time as president here. So I think after about two years ago my term ended and because we have a term limit and stuff and then my job actually requires me traveling and stuff so I couldn't actually dedicate, you know, too much of my time. Plus having two kids. So that was like, more difficult in terms of trying to cope up with. So most of the time I just do like volunteering and helping out here with whatever they need me with. If I can afford the time. Yes.

**TK:** Since you are a father of two kids, did you see your children going through any problems with assimilation into American culture or perhaps too much assimilation into American culture because they were born here?

**KP:** I think actually . . . it's actually a combination of both. You can see like at certain times, you know, maybe actually they are assimilating into the American culture too much. I mean especially when you look at how they look up to the elders and you know we were—in Tibetans we were basically taught to be obedient to your parents, your

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<sup>2</sup> Tibetan American Foundation of Minnesota (TAFM).

elders. And there are certain ways, actually, that you can talk to them. So it's not like you're buddy, buddy, buddy to everybody. So in that sense, I think actually yes, they are different.

But I mean, in other terms, what we have actually in this community, especially where we have here in terms of Tibetan Culture School and we have dance group and stuff like that. So that actually helps for the kids to understand about the Tibetans. We don't expect them to actually know everything about Tibetan just as the kids in India or Tibetan do, but at least these are sort of . . . kind of environment that helps foster the Tibetan knowledge for the kids. So then we try to make sure that the kids actually speak Tibetan at least at home with us. So in that sense I think actually it's okay. But otherwise here with TVs and those kind, I don't know. Maybe even the kids in India have become the same now that they have cables and all kinds. So I don't know if it's like that much difference. But it is—to say the truth, it is actually very different from the way we were actually brought up as a kid.

**TK:** Since you have been active in the community such a long time do you feel like there are particular challenges that this community faces?

**KP:** What was that? Can you repeat that question again?

**TK:** Since you've been in the community for so long, you've been active on many levels, in many groups. Do you feel that there are any particular challenges that are faced, that this community faces?

**KP:** Well, I'm actually not sure. I haven't actually dealt in terms of the kids' or children's . . . I mean issues, actually, out here too much. So I was actually more involved with the office works or the other areas, basically. So I don't really have actually much—I mean, you know, issues to actually talk about on that level.

But I do—I mean I would definitely say that it's actually really quite a challenging environment for them. You know, we don't—like I said before. We don't expect them to be as normal as actually any Tibetans would be in India or Tibet. So it's the kind of environment that we live in. So we have actually—I mean as an elder we have a responsibility but I'm thinking actually my kids will definitely have to have some responsibility, too, in terms of how much they can cope up with certain things.

**CL:** You talked about that during your term as president of the Tibetan American Foundation of Minnesota that you were involved in the purchase of the Cultural Center where we are right now. Can you talk a little bit about that? About like finding the right space and what you had to do with it?

**KP:** Yes. We had actually—I mean not to take any credit away from the others—I mean there were other members actually who served on this board. But we had a lot of dedicated people that were really responsible for getting this far. They were people like [unclear]. Her dad [unclear]. There were a lot of them, actually. I couldn't actually

name all of them. But we almost, at every level actually, every board member contributed quite extensively their time and energy in looking for properties.

I think this was probably ongoing since the visit of the Dalai Lama here, which was in 2002 I believe or 2003. But we had seed money from that visit and then whatever revenue we generated from that visit actually helped us and basically . . . to be able to buy this property. So we—I mean our people actually looked at different parts of the Twin Cities in terms of trying to come up with a space that will be accessible to the Tibetans in general. We're not talking about people who have car, but also people who don't have car and stuff. And it was actually, you know, mainly the community support and their backing. Everybody contributed in their own little ways, basically, to make this happen. Yes.

We had actually, people donating at every level, not just the individuals but also organizations. But the gist of the financing came from His Holiness' visit here. So that really helped us. It galvanized the effort in getting this building.

**CL:** So you got through like ticket sales and stuff like that?

**KP:** Right. Yes. The visit of the Dalai Lama, there actually we have not just like ticket sales at the public events but other fundraising events. So basically whatever money we were able to generate from this, you know his visit here, that's actually what we spent actually on this building, basically. Then actually—also, I mean even though we bought the building, obviously we do have an uphill battle in terms of maintaining the property.

Basically everybody wanted the Tibetan Cultural Center so that there would be a place, a home for the Tibetans to gather and do our normal kind of activities that they couldn't do elsewhere. So I think the last few years that we had this property I think it's been used quite extensively and I think we have like—we have a lot of things to do still in terms of maintenance in the future. So we obviously—I think the . . . what's called the TAFM, actually current TAFM board of directors, have an uphill battle in terms of actually coming up with the financing for future maintenance and stuff.

**CL:** What was this like? Was this your first choice of properties or had you looked at and tried to purchase other things before?

**KP:** No. No. This was actually definitely not the first choice property. First choice property were actually were vast, huge, that would accommodate actually all the Tibetans and where we don't have to like go out and rent a space for any of the big events, basically. There were actually a lot of properties we looked at and a lot of properties we visited and we couldn't basically find property that's suitable for the community in terms of—mostly because of the money issue and the expense, I mean the land cost, the building cost and stuff like that. So that was actually very costly. Beyond actually what we could afford.



Most of the board members made a conscious effort that because we are in revolving terms and we don't actually want to get a loan or anything because then once another election comes and then we have like new set of board members. They may not want to serve, primarily because they don't want to be responsible for the loans and stuff. So we tried to look for a property that we could afford with the money that we have in hand. So I think in the end we had actually great help from non-Tibetans like . . . I mean people who are really influential in getting the money for us fundraising-wise. So that's—like I said, it's not a first choice, but it's actually what we could afford with the money that we had.

**CL:** How was this property when you bought it? Did you have to do anything to upgrade it or to—what kind of condition was it in?

**KP:** Well, this was primarily a building that was used by the American Heart Association or American Cancer Society. One of them, basically. They had several clinics inside.

But we sort of planned that actually if you take down all the cubes and then we'll have quite a sizeable hall where actually we could have like, I mean, day-to-day functions and stuff. There's no way we can hold all one thousand Tibetans in here. But buying such property didn't make any sense at all because then it would be used in quite sparingly whereas in this case you know, you only have about—I mean we'll probably be able to fit in about two hundred people. But then it will be used much better for the, you know, in terms of schools and meetings and whatever. So really that's what it came down to.

**CL:** You've brought a lot of things in. Like you have one room with this kind of a shrine room with very ornate and whatnot . . .

**KP:** My term basically ended after I purchased this property so I mean I didn't have anything to do with overall the upgrade in here. But like I said, the following TAFM board members, actually they did a lot of fundraising. They really did actually good work in terms of trying to come up with money for the shrine and the prayer hall, basically. That's what we call it. And then actually coming up with other funding to expand the main hall and upgrading the kitchen and stuff like that. So that was actually done actually after I left the . . . you know, as board member.

**TK:** You stated earlier that the Tibetan Cultural Center serves the purpose of having Tibetans gather together for activities. Why is that important? Why is it important for the community to be together?

**KP:** Community-wise, Tibetans [are] actually generally known to be actually kind of cohesive, almost . . . even in India. Most people actually know almost everybody. So it's really a close-knit community and primarily, you know, like I believe that it was sort of like forced upon us, primarily because of the difficulties that actually our parents faced coming from Tibet. So we had actually a responsibility in terms of trying to share our culture, religion and whatever Tibetan qualities to the other people. But we can't actually

share that if our own people don't know much about it. So it's actually really up to us to make sure that our kids know the Tibetan language, culture, religion, whatever and then they will be the ones to carry on that effort and basically explain that to the non-Tibetans.

**TK:** You stated earlier that you were—you served as president of the Tibetan Youth Congress and later for the Tibetan American Foundation of Minnesota as well. To my knowledge, the Tibetan American Foundation of Minnesota is responsible to the Tibetan Government in Exile. Is that right?

**KP:** If you actually really—I mean if you really take it in terms of actually the Tibetan government structure in India, actually, you know, most of the places where there are a lot of Tibetans they have what's called Tibetan Welfare Office. I believe personally that Tibetan American Foundation here serves as an extension of that kind of office. Which is really to look after the community and helping out the Tibetans and making sure that we have the Tibetan events actually going on. Then we receive actually all kinds of instructions and informations from the office of Tibet from New York and the Tibetan Government in Exile.

So, yes, I guess we could look at it as an extension of the Tibetan government but I would say it's more like a Tibetan Welfare Office because I think like any other Tibetan Welfare Office there are in India I think we are actually doing much similar work.

**TK:** I know that initially there were two different associations looking after the welfare of the Tibetan people in this community. There was the . . .

**CL:** The Tibetan Association of Minnesota.

**KP:** Oh, Tibetan American Association. Okay. Well, I think it's actually quite a long history to go back. Originally before the Tibetans arrived here the people who really helped with the settlement, resettlement of these Tibetans, are the non-Tibetans mostly and then there were like a couple Tibetans. A couple Tibetans who had been here much before any other Tibetans who came over here. So they already started actually this group called the Tibetan American Foundation of Minnesota which was, I think, primarily to look after the resettlement project. And then it kind of got carried on actually to serve like for example to look after the—help Tibetans with jobs and any kind of social work.

And then actually once the Tibetans came, then we—the Tibetans, like the set up was called the Tibetan Association of Minnesota. That was actually to generally look after the Tibetans themselves, help among each other and basically to stage Tibetan events and explain to the non-Tibetans about the Tibetan situation. So there was actually an entirely Tibetan association, which was entirely Tibetan, actually, and then the Tibetan American Foundation.

Years actually went by. Then many of the objectives kind of actually got similar because now most Tibetans were able to look for jobs themselves. There were no resettlement

issues or anything because it was becoming more of a family coming over where they can actually have—I mean regularly find a place to stay and stuff. So the function of the original Tibetan American Foundation kind of got less and less. So I think like right after the visit of the Dalai Lama everybody made a conscious decision to merge these two.

Because Tibetan American Foundation of Minnesota represents actually more, large community. Not just Tibetans. But it is also including the non-Tibetans. It's sort of . . . the name sort of implies invitation to the non-Tibetans. And then besides that was the name that was actually already registered under the state law. So we kept actually with that name and then discarded the Tibetan Association of Minnesota. So that's why the name. I mean obviously we are Tibetan American Foundation and I think it's probably more fitting mainly because most of the Tibetans who came like more than five years ago have become citizens already. By any standard they would be called Tibetan Americans. And then also it's more open to the non-Tibetans. So I think . . . so now actually, I mean we kind of kept the name so it was conscious actually decision of everybody's part, basically.

**CL:** Do you think that that's a good thing that many Tibetans have sought American citizenship or does that somehow—is that somehow a loss of culture?

**KP:** You mean actually why they claim?

**CL:** Yes. Like getting American citizenship.

**KP:** I think actually when you don't have a country and when you don't have actually a passport to go by, you really don't have much choice. I think it's more of a human choice. So . . . much more than to say, "Hey, I got a citizenship." I think actually for us as a Tibetan it allows us to be flexible when we are traveling anywhere. We can go to India or Tibet quite easily with the American passport.

So really now with more and more becoming actually the U.S. citizen, they are getting actually more and more people basically taking advantage of that to go to Tibet and they are for the first time in a very long time. Most of the elders are able to see the Tibet and the youngsters are getting the opportunity to see Tibet.

Whereas if we were—the people in India where they don't have the citizenship in the Indian nationality, basically, they don't have actually such opportunities. So I think actually it's good. In the end you would actually assimilate into all these different cultures and try to learn from it and be part of it because that's the only way to survive and be able to carry your own identity and stuff. I don't think we can be too stubborn about not being citizens and stuff like that.

So I think there are a lot more advantage to becoming the U.S. citizen than not becoming U.S. citizen, especially for the Tibetans. I'm not sure actually how we can . . . how we compare to other nationalities because them, they have their own countries. I don't know how to compare.

**TK:** You just stated several positive effects of having this dual identity of being Tibetan and being American. Do you feel that there are any negative effects associated with this relationship of two different cultures, two very different—?

**KP:** I think actually generally in terms of my age we don't have that much difficulty like much less actually our elders. My age, actually. All I see is actually mostly everybody's married to a Tibetan each other. I don't know the younger generations how they are going to keep up with, but that's really—I mean Tibetans being a so close-knit community. In the future I really can't say much, but if we could actually share our own experience, the culture and stuff with others, that's well and good.

But part of our actually main problem in Tibet is that there are more Chinese than Tibetans in Tibet now. Especially in Lhasa. And more actually Tibetans who is basically forced to marry the Chinese. They're living—you can actually hear a lot of stories like that. Stories from the people that come from Tibet. So really you're looking at like, is the Tibetan race going to survive?

I mean looking at the larger issues it's not really pretty when you see like these. But personally I really don't have any problem. But I think actually if one can keep up with all this identity, it's well and good. Then you can say at least that you are, you know, "I'm a Tibetan." Things like that. But I think actually there's no way to keep one from doing so.

**TK:** So having this loss of identity is not something problematic to you?

**KP:** No. No. No. What I mean is actually that I don't know actually if one can say that if you actually marry someone beyond your own race that you lost your identity. I mean their kids maybe to some extent, because of the inter-racial thing. But really what I'm saying is that if one is able to preserve one's own culture and identity. And I don't know if identity means actually—I mean you have to be purely Tibetan? That's actually . . . to me that's quite debatable. I mean you could be like a half mix and then be able to keep up with everything Tibetan. That's actually . . . to me actually that's well and good. One can do it. But it's—if one marries Tibetan only, that's really commendable and good, but if not, that person still he can choose to keep up with his culture and the language and stuff. I think that's also to be really appreciated, too. Because even if you look at it in your own people, I mean Tibetan married to other Tibetans, I mean it's not actually all that—that everybody speaks actually Tibetan, everybody is actually trying to keep up with the culture, knowledge and stuff.

You know, there are Tibetans just like any other community, just like any other people of different race, you know. There are actually people who are really interested about keeping, conserving the culture, and then there are people who are kind of like, sort of "I don't care" attitude. You know it's the job of the elders to encourage, but you can only encourage to an extent.

**TK:** You stated earlier that you were president of Tibetan Youth Congress and of Tibetan American Foundation of Minnesota. Now I know personally that the two organizations have very different political factions. They support very different political factions. Since you have served in a leadership position in both factions, how do you go about that? How do you feel about that?

**KP:** Like I said actually at the beginning, the Tibetan American Foundation of Minnesota, I compared that to a Tibetan Welfare Office in India which is really looking for the welfare of the Tibetan in Minnesota. So that's what it is. The main . . . as you see here actually, the kind of events that TAFM is organizing tonight, those are actually more official or the Tibetan events.

Whereas in the Tibetan Youth Congress you are more in terms—more actually engaged in political activities. You are actually—you don't—you're not actually that dedicated to serving the welfare of the Tibetans, you know, the social work. Although we do come up with the projects that are very . . . I mean social service in nature. But Tibetan Youth Congress actually most of the activities we carried out were political in nature. For example, educating Tibetans about the political situation in Tibet, about the young Panchen Lama, about the Tibetan environment and stuff and then basically, you know, when Chinese leaders come to U.S. or elsewhere to make sure actually that the Tibetan agenda is on the front page of the news. So that's really what differentiates, I think, between the two.

It's not so much that Tibetan American Foundation of Minnesota couldn't engage in the political activities. I think actually a lot of times I hear these discussions from the—I mean among the Tibetans where they say like, "Well, Tibetan American Foundation, we cannot actually do any political activities." I think that's really a misconception because I actually had worked extensively with the organization bylaws and structures here and really when—as a nonprofit organization when actually the U.S. government talks about the kind of political activities that you cannot do, they're really talking about these partisan issues. The Democrat-Republican kind of thing. They're not actually really talking about the—I mean the . . . what do you call the Tibetan issues. The politics about the Tibetan issue. That's not what they were talking about. So we can, actually, as the Tibetan American Foundation, that is an organization. We can definitely take up the political activities just like the Tibetan Youth Congress does.

But I think the role of the TAFM actually more—it evolved into work closely in serving the welfare of the Tibetan community, mostly. So that's what has become the difference. But really, like I said, really when they talk about the political issues it's really not that TAFM can't do anything about it. TAFM is actually more than capable of doing any kind of political activities that the Youth Congress could do. It's just that we're actually . . . I think the TAFM is more busy or spends more energy and time in serving the welfare, looking for that.

**CL:** You have a strong Regional Tibetan Youth Congress here. Do you think there's a need to have—for two political organizations?

**KP:** Having Tibetan Youth Congress really actually helped the—I think it's real helpful primarily because Tibetan Youth Congress in India is the largest non-governmental organization among India Tibetan society, basically. It has actually memberships over ten thousand in India. Now we have like more and more chapters actually being set up in cities where there are sizeable Tibetan communities. So like I said, I was giving you actually distinction between these two organizations. What TAFM couldn't do in terms of the political activities Youth Congress can initiate. So you don't actually look at one set of group to do everything. Because that's actually—having served in both, you know, that's really asking a lot in terms of time, energy.

Because even—I mean looking after the welfare of Tibetans here in Minnesota, I guess, is not easy. We have actually over one thousand Tibetans here. We have to look after the school here, cultural dance groups and any other activities of importance. For example, like His Holiness the Dalai Lama's birthday, Tibetan New Year and like that. So those were the functions that TAFM generally tries to do, whereas Youth Congress is mainly trying to engage in the political discussion with the—so that's the distinction and I think actually—so that's an organization, I mean, that's actually entirely political. I mean that's activity is actually mainly involves political. So that really actually helped us and help also the Tibetan American Foundation. I think right now, right now the relationship, it's actually very good between, among the organizations.

**CL:** What about—have you done any work with any of the Students for Free Tibet groups around? Because we have many of them in the state of Minnesota.

**KP:** Right. I haven't actually done as a student but as, like I said, before actually serving as president of the Tibetan American Foundation of Minnesota. And also while serving in the Youth Congress, I actually helped to—like a fundraising issues for the Students for Free Tibet that was based in New York, you know, the main headquarters. So my involvement with that was mostly in terms of fundraising for them. So that's actually as far as I went in terms of helping them out.

**CL:** Because you've been so involved in TYC, which you said many times is a very, very political organization, but it's really an organization for Tibetans. Do you think it's a good thing then that an organization like SFT, Students for Free Tibet, can have more access for non-Tibetans to come in and be political in the same sense?

**KP:** Yes. I think actually that really helps. Like I said, the Tibetan Youth Congress primarily is an offshoot of this big organization that was already established and well known in India. And whose basically membership was extended only to the Tibetans. Mainly so that we could converse in Tibetan. We could actually easily have Tibetans basically give the youngsters the opportunity about actually what kind of activities they could do.

Whereas also I think the Students for Free Tibet is really a marvelous organization that's really open to not just Tibetans but also to like any friends of Tibet, basically. Those organizations could work very well with the Youth Congress in terms of coordinating

political activities, oftentimes. I mean there might be a few clashes here and there but I think it mostly depends on how well one coordinates with each other. Then you have like better results down the road for everybody.

But as an organization I think it's important, actually, because not all the Youth Congress members are students, whereas Students for Free Tibet is generally students. But it doesn't mean actually that once you are not student you are no longer a youth. In that respect—so it's actually . . . it's important to have the Youth Congress there and also—and then besides, Youth Congress actually deals a lot of issues through the main office in India.

**TK:** We've actually interviewed several youth here in Minnesota in the Tibetan community and many of them participated in organizing SFT groups in their own university campuses and schools. As you stated that the Tibetan Youth Congress isn't necessarily for students, it can also be open to people who still qualify as youth though they aren't students, do you feel that by opening it to—by encouraging groups such as SFT which are mainly for students, that you're in a sense discouraging them from joining TYC where then there would be a larger concentration of, for lack of a better word, older people?

**KP:** Yes. I think actually normally when we have different organizations like that, especially when you have like age difference, then, I mean there is actually some kind of a communication gap. So I think actually it's basically for anybody. For example, student. If they are actually—if they feel more comfortable working with the students in an organization like Students for Free Tibet where they could actually talk with other kids or organize any kind of event they would like to do. You know, it's better for them to actually join the Students for Free Tibet rather than the Tibetan Youth Congress.

Like I said, Tibetan Youth Congress is more of a membership driven, more of a structured organization that largely depends on, I mean functions based on this main organization in India. But if one can expend his energy on board that's well in good. I think you can—I mean the idea is basically what everybody looks for in the organization. So whatever ideas one has you can share with the others and stuff.

But really I think it's like wherever you can spend your energy best. I think that's the organization you should go. I don't think you should be bounded by this feeling that you are Tibetan and I should be in Tibetan Youth Congress and then like I'm a student. Youth Congress has a lot of these older people so don't. I don't think that's—I mean that's not really the mentality one should have. It's like you should look at what organizations say. Like how best I can actually expend my time and that's what one should really look at.

I mean I don't actually encourage all the students to join the Tibetan Youth Congress. When I was a part of the Youth Congress I tried to encourage them to be more involved in like student-related activities, like Students for Free Tibet. I think at that time when I was a youth president I worked with the Students for Free Tibet that was in Macalester

College. At that time, actually, there was one Tibetan student there, [unclear]. She was there. So I worked with her on different levels, actually. And then there the Students for Free Tibet worked with the Youth Congress at the same time. So we were organizing some events together and sponsoring like the decorations and stuff together.

But as a member, I think actually one should go where he or she feels he can best spend his time and energy. Because I know actually that once you come to the Youth Congress there are a lot more people who are much older than you and that generally there's this age gap. Actually, that's very difficult for the younger ones to understand. But I mean once they age from the Students for Free Tibet they will come to know all these. So my actually basically—I mean having worked with different kind of organizations like that, you know, my advice is basically just go for one where you feel you can best spend your time and energy.

**TK:** Since you are so active in the community and you seem to know a lot about the Tibetan political issues, do you feel that having such a large number of organizations that all essentially have the same goal is effective or how do you feel about that?

**KP:** Tibetans as a population here in Minnesota or I would say elsewhere in the U.S. and Canada, you know, really when we talk about like one thousand it's really not that much at all. When you compare to like other communities. So it's really a small society and we do try to discourage people from setting up different organizations and stuff like that.

But there are actually . . . I mean there are a few groups that are even acknowledged by the Tibetan Government in Exile like the Tibetan Youth Congress who is actually work . . . is basically well known all over.

So right now these are the two main, and I believe actually there is also a Tibetan Women's Association. But other than that, actually I don't know if there are any other groups. Youth Congress, like I described before, is mainly political in nature and TAFM is mainly more of a community oriented organization. So I mean, I think even the TAFM board members will appreciate actually that have like this other group which is a credible organization to look after when they want to do something that's actually political in nature. But beyond that, actually I don't really recommend setting up so many small organizations that serve the interest of only a few and then it hampers actually the ability of the large organization like TAFM.

**TK:** Going back to your involvement in the Tibetan Youth Congress, I understand that the Tibetan Youth Congress has a different agenda so to speak concerning the political nature of the Tibetan community and whatnot. So what are your thoughts on that? Having this different faction which strives for complete independence, which goes against what is being told or what is being preached by the Tibetan Government in Exile. What are your thoughts on that?

**KP:** Yes. Basically the stand is, the Youth Congress stands for complete independence and the Tibetan Government in Exile actually advocates genuine autonomy which is



actually that you live—you are actually . . . you live actually within Tibet but anything external is actually for Chinese to have. So those are the two distinctions.

But really what it comes down is actually the situation at hand. Youth Congress actually believes in total independence mainly because as a Tibetan that's—once you have total independence, total freedom, then actually, you know, one can exercise one's own stand as a nation. Stand as a Tibetan national. Stand same as other nations. So that's actually what we're looking at.

Whereas actually His Holiness as I say, genuine autonomy. Now you actually—basically living within the boundaries. What His Holiness is asking, is basically for the . . . for us to have the Tibetan exercise their freedom of speech, religion, culture at their own will. So I think that's a basic difference.

**TK:** I understand that the Tibetan Youth Congress is advocating total independence. As their name states, the Tibetan Youth Congress represents the youth of Tibet whereas the Tibetan Government in Exile is more leaning towards the older generation of Tibetans. How do you feel that—do you feel that this is an effect of—on the lines of Western and Eastern youth viewpoints?

**KP:** No. Let me—His Holiness the Dalai Lama actually basically advocates genuine autonomy for all the Tibetans basically regardless of age. He feels that strongly because now, given the situation, given the grim situation in Tibet and the Chinese, I mean their status in the world, basically, so he feels that genuine autonomy is basically, is probably the best for the Tibetans right now. That way we are able to conserve the culture, language in Tibet ourselves and we don't face the possibility of extinction with all the influx of Chinese and nationals in Tibet.

Whereas actually Youth Congress is purely for the independence, mainly because they don't want to have to give anything for the Chinese. So they don't want it. I mean the difference is not really—I don't think it's really East-West issue. It's more of a national issue. It's how strong you feel about your own country and the moderate, you know, liberal issues. That's what really . . . I mean it's up to.

When the Youth Congress actually feels that all these—more than actually forty years China has basically done nothing good to Tibet in terms of—I mean still actually we're talking about human rights abuse. No freedom of speech. And religious practice is restricted. And even actually they banned the photos of the Dalai Lama in Tibet. So those kind of things naturally leads to one's nationalism.

So it's really not a East or West issue. I think it's more of a nationalism issue. Youth actually feels strongly that one should have all the power to oneself. When we have actually—history that proves the independence of Tibet for such long time. Then why do we all of a sudden we—give actually all the historical facts to Chinese and say, “Here, now you take everything and we are under you.” So that's not really what the Youth Congress wants today.

**CL:** You talked earlier that with your job now that you travel around a lot. Do you ever, like when you travel, do you ever go to areas that have other Tibetan communities?

**KP:** Most of the places I have been to there were like a couple of Tibetans here and there but I haven't been actually to a place actually where I've witnessed a sizeable Tibetan community.

**CL:** Do you ever get an opportunity to interact with the few Tibetans that you did meet?

**KP:** If I knew actually that there are Tibetans in a certain place then I try to actually contact them on weekends, you know. See if I could actually hang out with them. So, for example, I went to South Africa and I was there for quite a long time and I learned that there was a Tibet office down there which was not very far from where I worked. So I spent a lot of times, actually, with the families there.

But otherwise like in most of the places I've been to I haven't really encountered any Tibetans who are staying there. I'm quite sure actually like Taiwan and Bombay they have a lot of Tibetans there. But I really never got the opportunity to such places yet.

**CL:** The places that you have been in the U.S. and other places that you have smaller or Tibetan communities or just a few people, how do you think they are functioning as Tibetans? The same respects in the goals and aspirations of the community here strive for. Preservation and things like that. Do you think that that is happening in other communities that you've witnessed as well?

**KP:** I've been to actually few actually communities like Chicago, Madison. And I believe actually overall much like what we do here. I mean in these communities they are doing the same thing. In terms of actually educating the kids about Tibetan language, culture and stuff. A lot of these communities are actively carrying out those missions. So I believe whatever we are doing here most of the communities are doing the same.

**TK:** I know that your parents have recently moved to Minnesota. Could you talk a bit about their experiences here? Their reactions to living here.

**KP:** Reactions in Minnesota or—? Well, when they moved to here I was in Dharamsala and the first call I got from them was actually—actually my brother picked up the phone and they called in the middle of the night in India. It was like one o'clock in the morning and they said they were just learning how to punch the numbers. [Chuckles] So I thought that was just funny, trying to wake us up in the middle of the night. The only thing actually—I haven't actually really sit down and talk to them about how are they feeling every day because I came back from India just like about ten days ago or so.

But what they told me thus far was that they couldn't find much people around here. Once they step outside of the house. Really it's like . . . just houses. Big boxes and not many people at all, whereas in India in the morning they wake up. They would go to the

temples for circumambulate<sup>3</sup> and you find all the devotees there. Out here it's very—right now it's very difficult for them to say, like walk outside and go from here to there. We have to be there basically to take them around. So I think the main shock to them was that they couldn't make the point. They couldn't see any people basically outside of their house.

**TK:** I know that there is a monastery<sup>4</sup> here that serves as the religious [unclear] for the Tibetan community. Have they visited the monastery yet?

**KP:** They haven't visited the monastery yet. Like I said, they have been here only about a month ago. They have visited the Tibetan Cultural Center. So really just that and then surrounding lakes and stuff. But they haven't had the opportunity to visit the monastery yet here.

**TK:** Now you've moved your parents here to Minnesota so they have immigrated here?

**KP:** Yes.

**TK:** So they're permanent resident of Minnesota?

**KP:** Resident. Yes.

**TK:** Do you have other relatives in India anymore or are you completely settled in the United States?

**KP:** No. I have actually three sisters and one brother in India.

**TK:** Do you think eventually they would—?

**KP:** I hope so. I don't know. It might take actually a few years. Right now since the 9/11 it's not easy to come to U.S anymore. But, yes, eventually we're looking forward to have them here.

**TK:** I'm sure that there are other people in the Tibetan community who also have moved large numbers, a large number of their family members from India to the United States. Do you think there's any effect on the Tibetan community having more people move here? Having their entire families being moved to another country and essentially leaving behind India and making America their home completely?

**KP:** Right. I think the main thing was to reunite with the . . . I mean the families that you have here and we wanted—I mean our parents would come over mainly for two reasons. To have them around them and then to have them look after the grandkids, basically. I mean these are actually two main facts, basically. It's really nice having

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<sup>3</sup> In Tibetan Buddhism, kora, or walking kora, is the process of circumambulating a sacred site in order to gain religious merit.

<sup>4</sup> Gyuto Wheel of Dharma Monastery.

them around with the grandkids because at least, you know, they can speak the Tibetan whereas we as the younger generation tend to speak even in English sometimes. So I don't know if doing that the kids are—I mean having more difficulty learning the Tibetan. But I believe actually having the grandparents who strictly speak Tibetan are basically helping the kids.

**TK:** So your parents do actually—I'm sure they do have an influence on your children.

**KP:** I don't know right now. Like I said they have been here only about a month. I'm quite sure they will have a lot of influence down the road here.

**TK:** Going back to the movement of, the immigration of Tibetans on a larger scale from India to the United States. Do you feel that having a larger number of Tibetans in the United States could eventually help the Tibetan movement, the freedom movement by having a higher number of Tibetans pursuing further study, being more educated on the topic, being able to use the opportunities that are presented to them in the United States?

**KP:** Yes. One of the main differences between here and India is actually that you have like, I mean, much more opportunity here to go to school and do your studies. There is basically no age limit or the opportunity is not limited to anything at all. So if one can grab that opportunity then you will accomplish a lot here. So in a sense, I think that helps the—it will definitely help the Tibetan movement because more and more Tibetans will be educated and will be in a position to help out the other Tibetans, the less fortunate Tibetans and so—I mean we only have to look at the Jewish community, basically. How they are helping their own cause. If you look at them, most of the Jewish communities are really educated people and they made actually a lot of money through their contributions. Financial contributions. They have actually supported the Jewish cause and on an unprecedented level. I mean we could actually just look at the Jewish community and do the same thing, basically. We have the opportunity here. We have the young—I mean if our youngsters go to school, do a good studies and become good. They could help actually the community at large. Help out the Tibetans in Tibet and basically when all is said and done it's the education that will help the movement.

**CL:** Is there anything that you think the community needs to do a better job at or anything that they should pursue that they're not right now?

**KP:** Well, it's actually still a learning community here. Like I said, this community started actually way back in the early 1990s with only a handful of Tibetans and most of the—I mean there are still a lot of Tibetans moving to Minnesota from the other parts. We need to do a better job of reaching out to them. I'm not sure actually if most of these Tibetans who move in Minnesota are contacting our office and trying to stay in touch, but I think it is . . . to an extent it has to be the responsibility of the TAFM to try to get in touch with them and then make sure they are.

And not only that, actually. This is actually the first building that we are working with right now. Does it serve the purpose of—for everything? No. It doesn't. We have like

so many students and there are not that many—enough rooms for the classrooms and stuff. So those are things that have need to be looked at. But it's the first important step that we're taking. Hopefully down the road we can be moved to a larger space where we can actually have own stupas.<sup>5</sup> And devotees can go around and circumambulate as they done in India and Tibet.

And then there are actually a lot of other things that we need to improve, but like I said, it's still a learning community. Everybody has job and trying to volunteer their time. Full time is very difficult with all the—when you have all kinds of expenses you have to pay. You have to like, sort of divide your time between here and there and it's really getting difficult. So yes, we have a lot of way to go before we become a really successful organization for our communities.

And in the end, you know, it's not just the jobs of board members but it's also the responsibility of the community members to help out each other. So once we learn how to share and help out each other then it will definitely become more successful. So hopefully that will happen sometime in the near future.

**CL:** We wanted to thank you for being a part of our project here.

**KP:** No problem. Thank you for the opportunity.

**CL:** Thank you very much.

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<sup>5</sup> A specific kind of sacred monument.