



TIBET IN CHAINS

THE STORIES OF NINE TIBETAN NUNS



INTERNATIONAL
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FOR TIBET

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*Con il contributo 8x1000
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A NOTE FROM ICT PRESIDENT MATTEO MECACCI

In the early 1990s, Lhasa's notorious prisons held hundreds of Tibetan political prisoners following their participation in demonstrations against China's misrule in Tibet. Among them were a group of fourteen nuns, mostly from Garu nunnery near Lhasa, who were imprisoned in the dreaded Drapchi Prison in Lhasa. On account of their comradeship and solidarity, including in recording a song in praise of His Holiness the Dalai Lama and Tibet, they came to be known as the Drapchi 14. Specifically, in 1994, the nuns clandestinely recorded songs and poems in tribute to Tibet and His Holiness the Dalai Lama from inside Drapchi prison. The recording made it out of Tibet and the international community heard the haunting songs telling the hardships of prison life and the women's undying cry for freedom.

This book tells the story of nine of those nuns and provides a better understanding of the role played by Tibetan nuns in the Tibet freedom movement. Through their personal stories, we are able to have a sense of their life in Tibet, of their motivation to speak up against oppression—despite the certainty that they would be severely punished—and of the importance of Tibetan religion, culture and identity, and why the world should not forsake the Tibetan people.

I would like to thank in particular Ngawang Sangdrol, one of the former nuns, who accepted to coordinate the compilation of the stories. I also wish to express my deep gratitude to all the nuns who took the time to write down their stories of courage and resilience for this book. I also thank Mr. Sangye Tandar Naga for editing the manuscript in Tibetan and Mr. Thubten Samphel and Ven. Yeshe Choedak for translating it into English.

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—Matteo Mecacci
PRESIDENT
INTERNATIONAL CAMPAIGN FOR TIBET



TIBET IN CHAINS

The Stories of Nine Tibetan Nuns

INTRODUCTION BY SANGYE TANDAR NAGA

THIS BOOK IS ABOUT THE STORIES OF NINE YOUNG Tibetan nuns and their experiences, about how they renounced the worldly life and entered nunneries like Michungri, Gari Samtenling and Shugsep Ugyen Dzong around Lhasa that were established in the 12th century. These stories are written by the nine nuns themselves. While in these nunneries, they studied with great enthusiasm and at the same time helped to happily renovate their nunneries, which were destroyed during the Cultural Revolution. Their admission to the nunneries coincided with the era of rebuilding that followed the death of Mao Zedong.

Readers should note that traditionally there was no other important responsibility for Buddhist practitioners other than the wheels of study and contemplation.¹ As said by the Master Vasubandhu, “The only two Buddha Dharmas are the teachings and spiritual realization. The teaching can be preserved by learning, and realization can be cultivated by meditation.”

1 These are part of the three wheels in Buddhism: the study wheel of study; the renunciation wheel of meditation; and the action wheel of dharmic activity or practical conduct;

However, later, the nuns as necessitated by the prevailing social conditions had to involve themselves in the action wheel of dharmic activity, too. While being involved in the study wheel of learning, the renunciation wheel of contemplation, and the action wheel of dharmic activity, forces of the government of the Chinese Communist Party carried out a policy of repression in their homeland which left no Tibetan family untouched and unscathed by violence. Particularly, when they knew and experienced this repression in their own families and realizing that they had no opportunity or the environment to practice their religion, the nuns secretly decided to express their feelings, and openly and nonviolently — at the risk of their own cherished lives — staged protest demonstrations against the armed Chinese forces. This book consists of the stories of the torture and pain the nuns went through because of their nonviolent resistance against Chinese oppression.

The nine nuns are Gyaltzen Dolker, Yeshi Dolma, who goes by the ordained name of Ngawang Rigdol, and Ngawang Sangdrol from Gari Samtenling nunnery; Palden Choedon, Rinzin Choekyi and Rinzin Chonyi from Shugsep Ugyen Dzong nunnery; and Phuntsog Nyidron Sana-chiga, Sonam Choedon and Thinley Choezom from Michungri nunnery.

Their collective and nonviolent slogans are as follows: *Tibet is independent; Don't hoist China's flag on Tibetan territory; Our people are facing the risk of being killed; Long live His Holiness the Dalai Lama; Throw out the Chinese army from Tibet; Tibet belongs to Tibetans; and Release all political prisoners.*

On account of their protests, even though they were nonviolent, the nuns suffered unimaginable beating and torture. All these are made clear in this book. These nuns experienced this in Gutsa² detention

2 Although Gutsa is formally a detention center, some of the nuns refer to it as a “prison” in their stories.

center and Drapchi prison.³ Even while in the prisons, unlike other prisoners, these nuns made every possible effort to express their resistance against the Chinese government. Their resistance was shown in the form of hunger strikes, not showing respect for Chinese prison wardens or prison discipline, not tidying up their beds the way the authorities wanted, shouting slogans for Tibetan independence and for the long life of His Holiness the Dalai Lama, etc. If one nun got into trouble, the others went to her aid, to the extent of being able to save her life.

I believe that all these nuns love their country and their people to the extent they were willing to sacrifice their lives for them. In everyday life, each and every one of them is humbler than the other, but when it comes to the cause of Tibet they are all Tibetan patriots. For this they deserve flowers of praise. Below is an example of the songs they wrote, transmitted outside and sang in prison.

*The melodies that we sang in prison
Buried in the mine of history
Were heard by the merciless rulers
Who transported us to the land of darkness and sorrow
Our feelings of the dark prison conditions
When we sang them in songs
The horse of good fortune fell off the cliff
And we suffered 12 years in prison under chains
In prison while undergoing unbearable suffering
We have always protected day and night
The flame of freedom
While in the dark lawless prison*

3 Drapchi, after its location, about a mile from the center of Lhasa, was also called Prison No.1. Prison No.2, in Powo Tramo, lies to the east of Lhasa. Seitru (Unit No.4), in Sangyip, is the provincial detention center. Trisam, a provincial-level labor reeducation facility, is tucked away in Lhasa's western suburbs. The city of Lhasa has its own detention center, Gutsa, located about four miles east of Lhasa's Barkhor. A facility known as Utritru (Unit No.5), in the Sangyip complex in Lhasa's northeastern suburbs, is also called Lhasa Prison and serves Lhasa and its seven counties.

*When I heard of the passing away of my parents
Tears welled up
That soaked my chest endlessly
While suffering the confines of the sorrow of Drapchi prison
For twelve years
Was to change the fortunes
Of the six million Tibetan people
After traversing many mountains and valleys
We landed up in someone else's land
The tears of memory
Of our homeland
Drained into the endless ocean*

It is not possible for any Tibetan who reads about the stories of the nuns in this booklet not to shed tears of sorrow. Particularly amongst these nine nuns, the parents of Gyaltzen Dolker and Ngawang Rigdol passed away while they were in prison. At the same time, the mother of Rinzin Chonyi passed away while she was in prison. Similarly, the mother of Ngawang Sangdrol passed away a few days after she was released from prison.

Reader, think for a moment about how you feel when you read these tragic stories. For any political prisoner, being released from prison is a happy event. But for these nuns the event is not something to celebrate because they were banned from re-entering their nunneries, required to obtain permission for their every move beyond their home and placed under state surveillance all the time. Because of these reasons, they were compelled to flee Tibet and seek refuge in foreign land.

In 1987 a nuns' project was established for the nuns who escaped from Chinese occupation in Tibet and managed to flee to India. Such nuns were admitted to established nunneries like Geden Choeling and Karma Drubgyu Thargay Ling in Tilokpur. The nuns were also admitted to newly-established nunneries like Dolma Ling, Shugsep and Jangc-

hub Choeling and others. These nunneries provide all the traditional scholarly facilities for non-denominational study of Tibetan Buddhism and by 2018 these institutions had issued Geshema degrees to 36 nuns (equivalent to the Ph.D. degree).

The American Buddhist Bhikshuni, Karma Lekshe Tsomo, in 1988 established Jangchub Choeling nunnery, which provides all scholarly facilities. This nunnery alone produced six nuns who earned their Geshema degrees in 2016. Others like Sakya College for Nuns (a branch of Tsechen Sheddup Samten Phuntsok Ling), a nunnery under Namdroling Monastery, Drikung Samtenling Nunnery, a nunnery under Palpung Sherabling Monastery, Ratna Menling Bon nunnery and others provide scholarly facilities to their nuns according to their traditional lineages.

All these clearly show the contrast in the suffering the nuns went through in Tibet and the facilities the nuns in India enjoy to pursue their studies. Likewise, other nunneries in other parts of India, Nepal and abroad have the same freedom and all the facilities to pursue their spiritual studies.

Some nuns requested to keep some names anonymous for their personal security. Thus names like Tashi Tseringma and Lhajin are pseudonyms.

From the stories of these nine nuns we know the prison conditions of the nuns who presently suffer in Tibet. In conclusion, from the stories written by these nine nuns, we know the repression of religion and culture in Tibet. Because of this, we Tibetans in the free world have an added responsibility to perform our personal duties well as never before.

Sangye Tandar Naga

EDITOR

*You make the path that combines emptiness and compassion
grow clearer and clearer,
Lord of the teachings and beings in the Snowy Land,
To you, the Lotus Holder Tenzin Gyatso,
We pray: may all your wishes be spontaneously fulfilled!*

Unimaginable Physical and Mental Torture

Ngawang Sangdrol



MY NAME IS NGAWANG SANG-
drol. One of the things that I have
in memory as a child is that I was born in
1976. However, the Chinese authorities say I
was born in 1977. Though I became a political
prisoner at a young age, I have no knowl-
edge of politics and history. On hindsight,
my family and childhood background were
the reasons why I became a political pris-
oner. As far as I can remember both my parents were extremely religious.
They always advised us children about the importance of our Tibetan
national identity and the Buddhist religion. When I became of school-go-
ing age I was sent to a primary school in Barkhor in Lhasa where my
second eldest brother, Jampel Tenzin, was studying. My elder brother
was in a higher grade and always took me to school with him. Once there
I had to make my way to the classroom myself. When older boys of the
school bullied me, my brother fought them. Therefore, the bullying did



not occur. Over a period of time thereafter, I stopped going with my brother and instead went with my female friends.

From a young age, my brother, Jampel Tenzin, and I liked to watch movies that showed war between China and Japan. Since we were exposed to only Chinese propaganda and had no knowledge of the real conditions in the world, we sided with the Chinese soldiers as our people and considered the Japanese soldiers as the bad ones. This was the way all Tibetan children spoke those days.

One night, while watching a war movie in which a Chinese soldier was being captured by the Japanese soldiers and being mercilessly beaten, both of us prayed, “O Buddha, save our people!” When our father heard our misguided prayer from his bed, he was shocked and turned off the TV and the lights. In the darkness, our father scolded us for a long time for praying on behalf of those who forcefully occupied our country and killed our family members. That night I first came to know that my eldest brother, Rinzin Gonpo, was shot and killed by the Chinese. I thought then that my parents realized if their children were not given good advice, our minds would be brainwashed by Chinese propaganda.

After that our parents constantly told us about how China invaded Tibet and put the Tibetan people through much suffering. They also told us that the reason why we were not able to see and receive blessings from His Holiness the Dalai Lama, the manifestation of Chenrezig, the Bodhisattva of Compassion, was because of the Red Chinese. Along with this they educated us about Tibet’s religious and political past. Since we were young, we did not remember everything our parents told us. But one thing which struck and stayed in our minds, through the kindness of our parents, was that His Holiness the Dalai Lama was our only refuge and that Tibet and China were separate. Ever since the Chinese occupation of Tibet, like other Tibetans, my parents and elder siblings went through suffering, like hell on earth. In particular, in 1959, my father had participated in that year’s uprising and later continued to participate in the political movement. The suffering my family went



through as a consequence will be described in detail in the memoir that I plan to write.

Some years after we moved to Tengyeling, our parents continued to recount the religious and political past of Tibet. My mother even taught me a prayer. Every day on my return from school, I prostrated three times before the Tsuglakhang and recited this prayer taught by my mother: “May His Holiness the Dalai Lama live for ten thousands of years, may the Tibetan people soon see his face and hear his voice, may the Chinese be expelled from Tibet, and may Tibet soon become independent.” My friends who came along with me also did prostrations. I remember that one day when a friend and I were in the process of prostrations, with our folded hands, before the Tsuglakhang, a foreigner took our photo. When small, whenever my friends and I came across foreign tourists, we always asked, “Hello, Dalai Lama picture?” We were given photos of His Holiness the Dalai Lama many times and my parents were so happy.

The Cultural Revolution had come to an end when we were small and there was a limited liberalization in the policies of the Red Chinese. People’s livelihood was gradually improving and so did our family’s. Thus, eventually Tibetans in Tibet and outside were able to visit each other, and around 1985 my father stopped doing the family business and on the excuse of going on a pilgrimage, visited places all over the three provinces of Tibet. He covertly started involving himself in activities aimed at restoring Tibetan independence and distributed copies of *A Political History of Tibet* and *Guidelines for Future Tibet* and many other related documents. Also, because our parents were highly religious, my father would go into retreats and most of their children were made to become monks and nuns.

Since my father started his political mission and my parents made sacrifices for the cause of Tibet, my family members suffered greatly and were spread asunder, landing in prison or forced to flee into exile. I will be recounting this in the memoir I will write in the future.



When we were in school from grade one to two, there was only Tibetan and mathematics and no Chinese language subjects. In grade two I was recognized as a bright student. In grade three we had Chinese as a subject. On my part, on account of a naïve sense of pride of not wanting to study Chinese culture, I paid no attention to the lessons. On account of this, I did not secure the needed grades in tests in Chinese subjects and thus I lost my bright student status. The other subjects in our class were drawing and songs. The drawings included drawings of TV and ball, etc. We were taught many different songs, including the Chinese national anthem, and other songs in praise of China. Before I was taught the Chinese national anthem in school, back at home I used to see it being played daily on the TV, and my parents always turned off the TV when it came on. Because of this action of my parents, I came to dislike the anthem and refused to learn it when it was taught in school. However, realizing that if I did not move my mouth, my teacher would beat me, I would recite the *Miktsema* [a Tibetan Buddhist prayer]. Later, like me, my friends, too, would recite the *Miktsema*, instead of chanting the Chinese national anthem. Even when we were little, we had immense faith in His Holiness the Dalai Lama and hated the Red Chinese. Because of this, we used to do spiteful acts like toppling the stacked up clothes of the Chinese traders.

Unlike these days, when I was small the children would play together in the courtyard. I liked playing different games. In Tibet, we observed different festivals but no custom of celebrating birthdays. Because most Tibetans paid no attention to their birthdays, many Tibetans did not know their real birthday. However like other Tibetans who paid attention and observed the rest of the festivals, our family observed these festivals too.

For example, the first day of the first month of the Tibetan calendar is Losar, the Tibetan New Year when Tibetans dressed in their best clothes. So did we children but our parents did not really pay attention to dressing. While small I did not really note it, but my mother would tell



me that we should dress in our best clothes when His Holiness the Dalai Lama arrived in Tibet. When later I paid more attention to the issue, I realized that most of the grown-ups did not bother to dress in their best clothes, perhaps for the same reason as explained by my mother.

However, on the eve of Losar, the adults in the family would hardly get to sleep being kept very busy, preparing the *Derka* and *Chemar* [traditional offerings that include edibles that are placed before an altar] decorating the home and preparing a variety of delicacies and food. On the eve of Losar, my parents would give us our new clothes which I would place next to my pillow, and in great anticipation of wearing them the next morning I would spend a sleepless night. These days when I talk about this with my friends of the same age I realize that I was not alone in going through the experience.

On the first day of Losar, we used to get up before dawn and put on our new clothes and exchange Tashi Delek (auspicious) greetings and offered *chemar* [roasted barley flour offerings] to the gods and ate some ourselves. In order to auspiciously usher in the New Year, our mother served us *dresil* [sweet rice sprinkled with different dried fruits and mixed with butter] as a symbol of auspiciousness. Later we were served fried Tibetan delicacies like *khapsé* and three different Tibetan porridges. These three types of porridges included wheat porridge, a boiled concoction made of Tibetan barley wine, and barley porridge. After this, each family in the neighborhood would dispatch two family members to greet our neighbors with *chemar* and Tibetan wine offerings.

The fourth Tibetan month is known as *Saga Dawa*, and includes a religious festival (when the Buddha was born, gained enlightenment and passed away). During that time, from the first to the 15th of the month, all monasteries organize prayer rituals, which include a fasting practice. The Tibetan public goes around the *Lingkor* [the circumambulation path in Lhasa] the whole day and to make prostrations and give alms, more than usual, to gain merit, throughout this month. Like other Tibetans, our family observed this festival by going around the *Lingkor*, and per-



forming similar virtues. Sometimes, I too would accompany my family for making prostrations.

I remember an occasion during this festival when I joined my mother to do prostrations and there was a heavy downpour. I took shelter but my mother despite the downpour continued with her prostrations. Realizing that I would be left behind, I made prostrations in the downpour and so my clothes were so drenched and I became so cold that I was not able to walk. I cried and my mother laughed and picked me up and piggybacked me to home. When we arrived home, my mother despite being equally drenched first took off my clothes, gave me a bath and tucked me in bed. Only after this, my mother took a bath and changed her clothes.

Another date is the 15th of the fifth Tibetan month which is *Zamling Chisang* [world incense day] when the Tibetan public climbed Genbur Ri and Bumpa Ri [two hills in the outskirts of Lhasa] etc., to burn incense.

On the fourth day of the sixth month [anniversary of Buddha's first teachings], circumambulation would be performed around sacred hills. On the last day of the sixth month is the Drepung monastery's Shoton Festival [Yogurt Festival] when a giant painted scroll is displayed to the public.

For three days, starting from the first day of the seventh month to the third day, in the Norbulingka (the summer palace of the Dalai Lamas of Tibet), a three-day grand Shoton Festival picnic used to be held. Later the grand picnic went on for seven days. In the eighth month of the Tibetan calendar, Karma Rishi⁴ arise in the sky and during the night we would go to the river to bathe. On the 22nd of the ninth month of the Tibetan calendar, we Tibetans believe that the Buddha descended from heaven. On this day, we whitewash our homes, drape new decorative curtains on our windows, burn incense and accumulate merit.



4 A cluster of stars that appear in the sky and their light is said to possess special healing powers that bestow all water with healing properties

In the 10th month, we commemorate *Shichoe* [the death anniversary of Jamchen Choje who founded Sera monastery] and *Ganden Ngacho* [death anniversary of Je Tsongkhapa, the founder of the Geluk school of Tibetan Buddhism] on the 24th and 25th of the month respectively of the Tibetan calendar. On these days, we light butter lamps in front of our windows and recite the *Miktsema*. Tibetans in great numbers gather around the Barkhor in Lhasa during night time. On these two days, the monasteries make prayer offerings, light many butter lamps and recite the *Miktsema* prayers.

In the 11th month we go to the Tsuglagkhang to propitiate Palden Lhamo [a protecting deity known as Sridevi]. On this day there is a tradition of the children asking for money in the name of Palden Lhamo and the girls, in particular, are given money by all people. On the 27th of the 12th month of the Tibetan calendar, we go early in the morning to Sera Monastery to receive *phurpa* blessings [a special ritual connected to Sera Monastery].

We observe many such festivals in Tibet and these are just some of them. Irrespective of Chinese police harassment, the Tibetan people would try their best to observe all these religious festivals. My family, too, would observe these festivals.

Since my parents' advice was always related with religion, this inspired me to study religion and as I requested they allowed me to become a nun at the age of 12 at Gari Samtenling nunnery, wanting me to get a good Buddhist education.

That was the time when Gari nunnery, like other religious institutes in Tibet, was in ruins following Chinese occupation. Therefore, during their spare time, the nuns collected donations and were in the process of renovating the nunnery. After my arrival at the nunnery, while we memorized scriptures in the morning and evening, during the day, like other young nuns, I carried a small bamboo basket on my back to fetch soil and sand. We also collected yak dung. Since I was from Lhasa and not having done such type of work, it was hard initially. Doing such work



without any experience also placed me in many hilarious situations.

Our nunnery is located in Nyangra, to the right of Sera Monastery, in a valley between hills and so we could not see Lhasa from it. Even in such a remote small nunnery, the Red Chinese were sending work units to harass the nuns through political re-education, etc. Earlier, because of the kindness of the 10th Panchen Lama political prisoners were not given prison terms and after their release allowed to return to their monasteries and nunneries and their workplaces. However, since the assassination of the Panchen Lama, prison terms for political prisoners were made lengthy and they were tortured and as a result many prisoners died and became injured. Former political prisoners, who after their release were residing in their religious institute, were constantly being harassed. Before I arrived, some Gari nuns were already in prison.

As we nuns missed our parents, we asked for and received permission from our teachers to make home visits. However, the work units would not give permission and hold us back to indoctrinate us in Red Chinese propaganda, showing films that denounced the old Tibetan society and praised the new society under Chinese rule. Also, in total violation of the rules and discipline of the nunnery, they would fire up loud electric generators and randomly fire gunshots in the nunnery in order to threaten us. They would also make arbitrary arrests of many nuns. During these arrests, Gyaltzen Dechen, a former political prisoner, fell from the roof of the nunnery and later died. Despite our nunnery being small and remote, such was the harsh treatment of the nuns.

As I was young, I used to miss my parents as well as Lhasa. Having been born in Lhasa I came to understand the name had deeper meanings. Here is what I have heard. During the time of Songtsen Gampo (the 33rd king of Tibet, the one who first built the Potala Palace), his Nepalese queen Tritsun [Bhrikuti Devi] built the Rasa Trunang Tsuglagkhang⁵ to house the statue of Jowo Mikyo Dorje [which the queen had brought



5 The formal name of the Jokhang Temple in Lhasa

with her]. Thereafter, a statue of Thukje Chenpo [Bodhisattva of Compassion] was sculpted, which was the first statue in Tibet to be made of clay. During the celebrations of the completion of the statue, there were many great auspicious signs, including flowers falling like rain from the sky. As this was seen as the gods actually coming down, the land was considered that of the gods and named Lhasa [Lha = god, Sa = land].

Additionally, that city had the splendid and charming Potala Palace and Ramoche Temple, built by Chinese Princess Kongjo wherein resides Jowo Shakyamuni [statue]. Later, on account of conflicts, the residence of the two Jowos had to be interchanged. Therefore, presently the Jowo Shakyamuni lies in the Rasa Trulnang Temple. Not far from that sacred place are many monasteries and nunneries, led by the Three Seats [a popular reference to Sera, Drepung and Gaden monasteries]. That is the place, which is the capital of Tibet.

Following the invasion of Tibet and due to the Red Chinese's forceful crackdown in 1959 and because of the death, sorrow and destruction wrought during the Cultural Revolution starting from 1966, this paradise-like religious land was reduced to a slaughterhouse or a vast prison. Due to the grace of His Holiness the Dalai Lama, some degree of liberalization was introduced to Tibet. However, the general conditions of the Tibetan people could be likened to a lamp on the verge of the oil being finished. When I looked at these conditions, though I was proud to be born in Tibet, the land of religion, I became greatly distressed at the conditions the Tibetans were reduced to.

When I was small, I used to witness frequent peaceful protest demonstrations in the Tibetan capital Lhasa. In our home, under the leadership of my father, our family initiated different movements for the restoration of the happiness in Tibet. In this environment, I was also inspired to do something for my country. One day, I asked my father, "Pala, if I shouted slogans like others would this help Tibet?" Without hesitation, he said, of course. He explained that all we Tibetans had the responsibility to initiate as many movements as possible for our



country and if these can be done as much as possible, we would be able to expel faster the Red Chinese from Tibet. This advice from my father engendered in me a great happiness and pride difficult to describe in words and made me realize that even I could contribute to the cause of my country, Tibet. At that time I was not able to immediately participate in the movement but later on I participated in peaceful campaigns a few times.

The year when I was imprisoned was 1990. On Aug. 22, 1990 (coinciding with the first day of the seventh month of the Tibetan calendar), the day of the Shoton Festival, I was imprisoned for the first time. How I decided to be an activist will be recounted in detail in my memoir, including the individuals I met to seek advice and the various activities we carried out.

I believe that the reason why I became an activist for Tibetan religion and polity at such a young age, with no knowledge of politics or Tibetan history, was because of the environment provided by my family. That year early in the morning on the day of the Shoton festival we five nuns of Gari nunnery — Gyaltzen Lhaksam, Gyaltzen Dolker, Gyaltzen Choezom, Gyaltzen Monlam and I — went to the Norbulingka, which is the residence of His Holiness the Dalai Lama. There were so many people to observe the Shoton festivities, which included the performance of Tibetan opera and songs and dances. Amongst the Tibetan public were uniformed members of the police and soldiers wearing civilian clothes who kept surveillance on the crowd. That morning we met some nuns from Michungri nunnery. They were Lobsang Choedon, Choedon, Karma Thinley, Lhundrub Sangmo, Gyaltzen Lungrig, Tenzin Ngawang, Tenzin Thubten and Gyaltzen Choedon. They were also going to stage a protest demonstration. Realizing that the police had wind of our plans, we 13 nuns and a lone monk scattered in small groups and staged our protest. Michungri's nun Chodon first shouted that Tibet is independent and immediately we joined her, shouting "Tibet is independent, Long Live His Holiness the Dalai Lama" and "China quit Tibet." While shouting



these slogans, we marched toward the crowd. Immediately, we were pounced upon by many soldiers dressed in yellow uniforms. While beating us on the way, they bundled us like baggage and threw us in a vehicle and drove us to Gutsa detention center.

It was around 11 am and the detention center was probably informed in advance by telephone, several prison guards were waiting for us as soon as the vehicle stopped. We were individually dragged from the vehicle and were punched and kicked. While thus beating us, they dragged us to the courtyard of the detention center and made us raise our hands on our heads with our faces turned to the sun. We 13 nuns were detained, but they had not been able to detain the lone monk, who had escaped. Besides us, another nun and monk were detained, but they were not involved and so were detained on suspicion. After this, each of us was taken to separate cells to be beaten. The beating was insufferable but more insufferable was the cries of my colleagues who were being beaten, which I was forced to watch. The nun who was arrested on mere suspicion was also beaten a great deal on the first day. Not only this, but when Gyaltzen Lhaksam was suspended on a tree this nun was forced to pull the rope. When she did not pull the rope, she was beaten. Even when she pulled the rope she was beaten. After several days, the nun and the monk were released based on the probable evidence that they had no part in the protest.

There were two people who beat me. One was Tibetan and the second was Chinese. The Tibetan was fat, tall and strong. The Chinese was thin and of medium height. They were both brutal. On the first day, the two of them kicked and punched me. Then the two of them tied a rope around my neck and tied my hands with the rope and bound my hands on my back and they shook both ends of the rope which caused great pain, as if my hands were broken. Even when they unbound me from the rope, it felt like I was still bound and I was not able to move my hands. The Chinese who tortured me was Xi Ming. He wrestled me to the ground and held me within his knees. With his one hand he grabbed



my shoulder and with the other hand he grabbed my hand and shook me violently. I suffered great pain as if my hands were dislocated. He then beat me with a black and hard water pipe and though I wanted to stand up because of the force of the water pipe, my head banged on the walls and the edges of table. Moreover, when I was beaten by a white iron pipe, I could smell the blood in my mouth. When I heard the sound of the iron pipe dragged toward me and when it was banged near my head when I lay exhausted on the ground, I became greatly scared.

Likewise, when they beat me with a wet and thin bamboo stick, it was extremely painful. They had several instruments, including electric cattle prods, to torture prisoners. Two electric cattle prods, big and small, were used on me. These instruments were forced into my mouth and all parts of my body and I was beaten with them. When this was done, my whole body shook with painful electric shock which made me scream uncontrollably. Likewise, they beat me with bottles, stones and whatever came into their hands. The small electric cattle prod resembled the handset of a telephone without the numbers. On the side was an iron handle which shook and moved. When this strange cattle electric prod was first used on me, the man asked, "Do you want to call your home?" I said, "We have no telephone at home." He replied, "I'll make you one" and shoved the cattle electric prod on my neck which caused me unbearable pain. The prod was used in my mouth and on all parts of my body. Though all the torture instruments used on us were all painful, I must say that the electric cattle prods were especially painful. When Gyaltzen Lhaksam, Gyatsen Choezom and Gyaltzen Dolker were suspended in the air and kicked and beaten with sticks, this was unbearable for me to watch, realizing that these prison staff had the hearts of demons and had not even one small strand of compassion.

On the first day, it was around twilight after we were beaten and we were made to gather briefly in the main courtyard. I noticed that almost all of us were made incapacitated. Especially, I noticed that Gyaltzen Lhaksam and Gyaltzen Choezom had their bodies shaking and trembling.



As for myself, I was not able to stretch both my legs and was not able to lift my left hand. The fingers of my left hand turned brown and I was not able to move them. When I was beaten, I was dragged here and there. Because of this my trousers were torn apart and I had one piece of cloth to protect myself and no pants to stick my legs in. I had no choice but to wear this piece of cloth. After this each of us were ordered to carry a mat. I tried to do so, but since I could not move my hand, I was not able to carry the mat, and I was left without one.

From the site of our beating, we were taken to the courtyard of the cells where we were to be put. The main person overseeing us was Chungdak, a loudmouthed and extremely scary woman. When Chungdak first saw me, she exclaimed in amazement, “Wow! Here is even a child.” She asked me my age. I said I was 14 years old, recalling the age that I knew from when I was little. She scolded me by saying that though I had not reached my adulthood I had started to follow the separatists.

Earlier, Tibetans paid no attention to the date of birth. Parents had many children and birthdays were not observed and there were no important celebrations related to birthdays. At the beginning of my detention, based on my recall of my age when I was little, I thought my age was 14. One day during the interrogation session, two men asked me some questions during which they said that I was only 13 years old. When I responded saying I was 14, they said according to their own investigation I was 13. According to Tibetan tradition, based on the Zodiac sign at the moment of a birth, a child was considered one year old then itself. I was 14 based on the Tibetan calendar but according to the Western calendar I was 13 and born in 1977. So when they were beating me mercilessly they were doing so targeting a child of 13.

After this, we were taken to the back of our prison cells and each of us individually was taken to the toilet. I was accompanied by a girl called Tseyang, a common criminal. Since I was not able to move my left hand, she helped me to take off my pants. I was not able to move my legs and because of this I wet my pants. I was embarrassed and could



not help myself from crying. Tseyang consoled me by saying, “It doesn’t matter” and helped me to put on my pants. After this we were taken to the cells. The back cells of the prison were filled up, and Choedon, a nun from Michungri nunnery, and I were confined in two separate cells at the front of the prison.

My cell had a huge wooden box. I had extreme difficulty in climbing on the box. But I persisted and managed to sleep on the box. I was not able to sleep on my back because of pain and had to sleep face down, which was less painful. I was not able to stretch both my hands and legs and I was also forced to urinate in my pants for a couple of days.

In the morning of the second day, there was knocking on my cell window, which was accompanied by loud shouts. I became alarmed and looked through my window and saw prison guard Nyima and two Chinese women prisoners who brought me food. When I was awakened from deep sleep, the man was shocked and said, “What a person to even think of sleeping in these circumstances!” He then threw two small steam buns through the window and left black tea in a dirty mug.

While eating the two steam buns, I worried about the conditions of Gyaltzen Lhaksam and Gyaltzen Choedon who were reduced to their whole bodies trembling and shivering.

Before we were given our prison sentences, we were beaten every day. When the prison guards had their hands full of worksheets, I heard the shouts of prison staff calling the prisoners’ names and the sounds of prison cell doors being opened. I thought they were being taken away one by one to be subjected to beatings and torture. After sometime a staff person carrying a piece of paper in his hand opened my cell door and told me to come out. When I stepped out and was near the door of the prison office, I realized the man who called me from my prison cell was the same fat and tall man who had earlier beaten me. The fat and tall man was a Tibetan but he had a Chinese-sounding name, A Shen Li. Later the prisoners called him Dago, probably a nickname.

He was infamous for his severe torture. He took me away and used



all the torture instruments on me and found other ways to torture me. He lifted me by my legs and banged my head on the floor for a long time. Sometimes, he twisted my arms and lifted me up in the air and my body became numb, which forced me to scream uncontrollably. He even joked about it. He told the other prison guards that when he lifted me up in the air that I was doing a ballet dance and played a tune in his mouth. Whenever he lifted me up in the air or dragged me on the ground and I screamed, they simply laughed. Sometimes he lifted me with his one hand and put me on the table and slapped me many times with his other hand. Sometimes he rubbed his rough hair on my face.

Similarly, he hit my hands with an iron instrument which resembled a stamp which bore the year and dates. This caused me great pain. Sometimes, he cozied up to me. He touched the places in my body where there were injuries and my hands where he used the stamp-like instrument and asked, “Do you feel pain here? What’s the point? You are inflicting pain on yourself. Tell me the truth. Who is your ringleader? Tell me the names of people you are connected with. If you confess your mistakes well, there will be lenient policy. If you tell the truth, you will be released at once.”

When he said these words, I suddenly remembered the advice given by a senior nun when we were about to leave our nunnery. She said that “These people will interrogate you both nicely and harshly. Stick to the answers you have given the first time. If you give different answers, you will suffer more.”

Therefore, I responded to him in a similar soft tone, “Like you said, I already told you the truth.”

As soon as he heard this, his face became red and he started beating me much more than before. One day he posed as a palmist and said he wanted to read my hand. After reading my palm, he said, “This year is your obstacle year. Besides, you are a child of counter-revolutionaries.” Since then whenever he addressed me he called me the child of



Tengyeling⁶ counter-revolutionaries. Sometimes he asked me whether Tibet would be independent. When I did not respond, he asked, “Why don’t you answer my question?” and slapped me in my face. Once again he asked me whether Tibet would be independent. I answered and said “Tibet will be independent.” At this he slapped me several times and spat on my face and said, “Before Tibet gets its independence I will put you in the coffin.” After this he began to beat me many times over. I got beaten whether I answered his questions or remained silent.

Sometimes he became exhausted and lit a cigarette and threatened me saying, “You wait. Let me smoke. After this you just watch.” When he was about to finish smoking, it caused me great anxiety and fear because I would continue to receive beatings. Sometimes he was called for other work and there was no beating. But such good times were rare.

One day when he took me with him, there was a female staff with him. When she saw me, she exclaimed, “Oh! She is young.” And he said, “Don’t be deceived by her age.” And he stared at me with an angry, dirty look. After some time, he told the female staff, “I both pity her and get angry with her.” Whatever he said, when he beat me there was no mercy or pity. The beatings went on for a little less than a month. I could also hear the cries of pain of other nuns near my cell.

Under such problem of beating and hunger until sentencing, some old political prisoners, Ama Jampa Dolkar and Acha Chungdak from Lhasa, as well as Ani Kunsang, would disregard the risks and try to surreptitiously deliver to us Tsampa⁷ balls now and then. My detailed experience can be read in my memoir.

After such prolonged beatings, it seemed to be that Gyaltzen Lhak-sam, Choedon and Lobsang Choedon admitted that they were the ring-leaders. They were given the longest prison terms.

Our beating and torture were not just limited to the interrogation



6 Tengyeling was the area in Lhasa where her home was located.

7 Roasted barley flour

stage, but under other situations, too, and these experiences will be revealed in my memoir. One day, the other 12 nuns were taken to the court for their trial. But they were not provided with the opportunity of defense lawyers and were made to accept whatever sentences the Chinese government slapped on them. A few days later, their sentences were announced as follows. Gyaltzen Lhaksam, Lobsang Choedon and Choedon were each given seven years of imprisonment. Gyaltzen Choezom, Gyaltzen Dolker, Karma Thinley and Tenzin Ngawang were sentenced to four years each. Gyaltzen Lungrig, Tenzin Thubten and Lhundrup Sangmo were each given five years. Gyaltzen Monlam was given a three-year sentence. Gyaltzen Choedon was given two years of Reform Through Labor. I did not have a term limit and was considered a juvenile delinquent, called in Chinese as *Shàonián fàn*.

Thereafter, the nuns whose prison terms were decided were put in cells in groups of four and five. I was confined alone since I did not have a sentence. As the cells to my right and left had more than four people, I could hear them talking and singing prison songs. Since I was in solitary confinement, the other young prisoners helped me a lot. For example, amongst them was a boy from Lhasa who had frequent visitors. This boy secretly gave me food, loaned me story and prayer books and paper and pen. I recited prayers every day from the prayer book and read stories from the story book. During the days I would regularly look out of the window. Since I was small, I was not able to reach the window. I would climb on my portable toilet pot to look out of the window. Sometimes, I drew mouth and eyes, with the pen the boy loaned me, on the wrappers of the dry ready-made noodles sent by my family. I stuck the mouth and eyes on the pretty towel my family sent me and made it into a doll and I passed my time playing this way.

Since I was alone in the sleeping area, some nights I would fear that there were ghosts. Sometimes at midnight I would hear loud banging on



the walls and the sound of sand being thrown on the roof. At such times, my heart beat faster and I became drenched in sweat and dared not move at all. At such times I would recite the refuge prayer [to the three refuges of the Buddha, his teachings, and the community of monks].

After about three-and-a-half months of solitary confinement, one day 15 prostitutes were arrested and since they found no place to confine them, I was transferred to the cell of Gyaltsen Choezom and four other nuns. I was so happy that I was not able to sleep that night. The other nuns were equally happy, with nun Choedon shedding tears of joy.

In the days we spent together, I asked them about the beatings they went through. They were subjected to great suffering and hardship. Especially, Gyaltsen Choezom was tortured with the same electric cattle prod used on me. Additionally, her one hand was hand-cuffed behind her head and the other on her back. She was tied against the window. They then poked her two tied hands with the many empty bottles of liquor they had drunk. While telling us this, she showed her hands where the wounds were inflicted. I became extremely sad when I saw the impress on her two arms of the time they handcuffed her and tied her to the window.

In early December, after about four months, except for Gyaltsen Choedon, who was 16, and I, the 11 nuns were sent to Drapchi prison. The 11 nuns were so sad to be separated from us and were in tears. On our part, we could only give them a silent, tearful farewell. Other than that, because of severe Red Chinese oppression, there was no way for us to have the freedom of speech.

While in prison, we were forced to cart away night soil and cut grass and weeds on vegetable fields. We were given meat once a month. It was pork and was given to us on the 15th of the month of the Tibetan calendar [a holy day for Buddhists]. We were also forced to cut grass and weeds on holy days.⁸



8 Such task involved of insects being killed and so considered sinful

After several months like this, I heard some sad news of my family back at home and since I had no freedom, there was nothing that I could do. After having been like this without a clear sentence time for some months, two of the older political prisoners, Ama Jampa Dolkar and Ani Kunsang, advised me to constantly ask the prison authorities about the length of my prison sentence. Otherwise, they would just say that there were many years and let it be like that. They said that in the past, too, there were many prisoners who were left in a similar situation. Thus, I constantly requested the prison authorities to make my prison sentence clear and definite. One day, after 10 months, on the 15th day of the fifth month of the Tibetan calendar, when we were returning after having cut grass and my hands were covered in mud, someone called me by my name. He brought out a piece of paper, all in Chinese, and asked me to sign it and put my thumb impression. He did not explain what was in the document and released me. At the time, one of my Lhasa neighbors had come to see me and I returned with her.

When I arrived back at home, as I had mentioned earlier, my family was going through unbearable suffering. My father, paternal uncle, and elder brother Tenzin Sherab were in prison. My two other brothers, Tenzin Choephel and Jampel Tenzin, had left to escape [out of Tibet] but no one knew their whereabouts. My elder sister who was at home was under constant police interrogation. My mother had just returned a few days earlier after completing a retreat with Namdrol Rinpoche at Tashi Choeling nunnery where my elder sister, Ngawang Choedon, was.

I realized that my mother knew nothing about what happened to my family. She was kept in the dark about the news of our family by my elder sister because my mother had a weak heart. After my release I was able to spend only 15 days with my mother. Because of the oppressive policies of the Chinese and their impact on our family, my mother passed away at the age of only 56. I will conclude here about our family problems.

One day after we observed the one-year death anniversary of my mother, I participated in a Tibetan independence protest demonstra-



tion. I was hauled into prison for the second time. I went through a fresh round of torture and suffering. My two friends and I were given prison terms and dispatched to Drapchi prison. When we were taken to the court, they said that this time I had come of age for me to be given definite prison terms. They waved a document from afar and said that they had investigated my birth information and said I was born in 1975. They said I had come of age to be given prison terms. This was the second time they said they had checked my birth date. Eventually, when I was about to depart for America, they gave me a passport with a different birth year and this is the year 1978. At the time, Tsono and I were given three years of jail time and Dawa Sonam was given five years. After thus sentencing us, in December 1992, we were taken to Drapchi prison, to the north of Lhasa. At Drapchi prison, from the first day itself we were taught that we should reform ourselves through hard labor and re-education. Hard labor consisted of planting vegetables and carting away night soil to serve as manure for the vegetable garden and in the mornings and evenings knitting sweaters.

After several years, as the vegetable garden did not generate enough income, Unit 6 was given the responsibility to weave carpets. Women's Unit 3 was given the task of cleaning, spinning wool. We would perform this during the day and in the morning and evening, we would be weaving sweaters. The details of the labor and suffering we were subject to will be recounted in my memoir.

When we first arrived at Drapchi prison, the living conditions were good. We were given three full meals a day and for lunch we were given meat. A section of the common criminals were put in charge of arranging the living conditions, and for a prisoner the conditions were good. On important occasions, the quality of food was upgraded. But this was short-lived. After some time, let alone there being no meat and oil in our meals, there was not even salt. This condition lasted for a long time. There was a time when we went without our stomach being full. After 2001, our food condition improved, especially during visits



by foreign delegations.

At the time the prison authorities initiated different activities, all designed to inflict hardships on the prisoners. For example, we were made to frequently undergo military drills and cleanliness competitions. Our drill masters were from the Chinese army and they instructed us in Chinese. Those who did not know Chinese and got the drill instructions wrong were kicked by heavy military leather boots on the chest and face. Those who fell on the ground had to pick themselves up and move forward to receive more beatings. If the prisoners tried to avoid the beatings, they were beaten more. If one of the 64 prisoners did not stand in a straight line and stepped out of line, he or she was beaten. If after being made to stand still for a prolonged period of time facing the sun, a prisoner became unconscious and fell on the ground, he or she was left on the ground. If other prisoners tried to help the fallen prisoner, both the helper and the fallen were beaten. These were some of the sufferings we went through. The details of these will be recounted in my memoir.

In prison, we initiated a lot of movements for Tibet (and as a result we suffered a great deal) and here I would like to explain the gist of some of them. At the end of 1992 when I was put in Drapchi prison, it was just a year after the longtime political prisoners of women's Unit 3 had initiated a political movement and severely suffered for it. In the second year of my arrival, we initiated a project of recording songs. For this the prison terms of the 14 of us were increased and we suffered immensely. Normally, we were not permitted to possess tape recorders. In 1993, two of our prison mates were able to borrow two tape recorders from the common prisoners. We took this opportunity to record, turn by turn, Tibetan independence songs at midnight in our prison cells.

On account of the tight restrictions in prison, we were not able to complete the recording project all together at the same time. We took a lot of dangerous initiatives to record these songs depending on the situation of each different cell. When we were penalized for recording these songs and our prison terms were increased, four nuns took the



main responsibility. Their prison terms were increased more than the ten of us. Of the four, two of them are abroad, they are my prison mates Phuntsog Nyidron and Gyaltzen Dolker. Of the two, my prison mate Phuntsog Nyidron spent a total of 15 years in prison and is now in Switzerland. Likewise my prison mate Gyaltzen Dolker suffered 12 years of imprisonment and is now residing in Belgium.

Our movements in prison sometimes filled us with fear and anxiety and at other times were filled with comical situations. The details will be recounted in my memoir. Whatever the case, the impact of our actions on the international community was strong. Among us 14 female political prisoners, on account of the extension of our sentences, some nuns died and others like us who were alive suffered a great deal from year to year.

In 1996, the prison authorities instructed us that whenever the prison wardens visited our prison units, we would need to leave aside whatever work we were doing and stand up in attention. This order was nothing new. However, as the older political prisoners had challenged this order and did not implement it, when we arrived we had to do no such thing.

In 1996, this order was strictly enforced and we realized that there were plans for a new initiative to torture the political prisoners. When we were working in our work places we did not stand up in attention. Since we were large in numbers the prison authorities ignored this form of insubordination in order not to flare up tensions. However, one day my prison mate, Khando, went to the toilet. On the way, she came across Chungka, a prison officer. Khando did not stand aside in attention and respect. Since she was alone, they took this opportunity to drag Khando to the prison office. She was there for quite a while and it was apparent that she was tortured.

Khando was kept in solitary confinement without any food. All of us were saddened by the suffering Khando was going through and angered by the merciless behavior of the prison staff. I thought this was a good opportunity to revolt. The atrocious behavior of the prison staff



made it clear that there would be an incident in our prison. In order to prevent any occasion where the prison authorities were able to inflict suffering on individual prisoners, I thought it was important for all of us to remain united. I visited each cell and suggested that on behalf of Khando we not stand to attention whenever we came across prison staff and not tidy our bed blankets in a neat row as instructed by the prison authorities. All agreed. No respect was paid to the prison staff and no attempt was made to tidy our blankets in a neat row. At first we thought that they paid no attention to our form of insubordination. We had no clue that they knew about our insubordination and had no idea about the drastic plan they had for us.

One day they asked us to pack our belongings and marched us to the hall. We had no idea about the reason for this. We speculated a lot about the reasons for this. Some suggested that we would be transferred to [Powo] Tramo prison. Others speculated that the day of happiness had dawned on Tibet and we would be released. There were a lot of other speculations. Like others, I offered my own speculations. After some time those prisoners in the inner courtyard were made to carry their belongings and were marched outside the main gate. When we saw this, our speculations became stronger.

After sometime, our door was opened and we were marched to the courtyard with our belongings. Our belongings were searched thoroughly. Our names were read aloud. The first name on the list was my name. I was put in the first cell with 10 political prisoners and two common prisoners from the second cell of Unit 3, in the inner courtyard. The other political prisoners were also put in a similar mix. My cell was next to the door of the prison office. After some days, I learned that my cell was the cell for the worst prisoners. I cannot mention the names of the 10 political prisoners who were with me in the cell because they are still in Tibet. When I entered the cell that day, Choezom, a prison staff, said with a great deal of venom, “You will never be able to get out of this cell.” Indeed, just as she said, every year my prison mates were relocated



to different cells as part of their routine to change the position of the new and the old prisoners. Only I was to remain in the same cell without being moved anywhere else for exactly six years.

After Khando was put in solitary confinement, no matter the prison staff's repressive behavior on us, our form of civil disobedience never changed as we knew we were doing it for her. We continued not folding the blankets the way they wanted. Therefore, the next day, seven other political prisoners and I were taken to the courtyard and we were punished by being made to stand up. As far as I remember that day it snowed lightly and the weather was extremely cold. A prison staff, a Chinese woman named Jiang Jung, kicked us on our calves. I showed through my body language that I disliked this very much.

This incident was seen by the prison mates who were working on wool in a room. They came to the courtyard and gently pleaded with Jiang Jung to let us go to our workplace. She shouted in Chinese and told them to go inside and kicked them as well and pushed them inside. At this, I became very angry and I shouted aloud, "If you don't allow us to pay our respect to His Holiness the Dalai Lama, we cannot pay any respect to you." Saying this, I shouted many times, "Tibet is independent." As soon as I shouted these, Jiang Jung ran toward me and grabbed me to take me away. My prison mates grabbed me back and stopped Jiang Jung from taking me away. This created some commotion. The prison guards immediately fired in the air and prison personnel, including officers, waved guns up in the air and wanted to know who caused the commotion. I was grabbed and taken next to the prison office and was kicked and when I fell down I was stamped upon on the stomach and beaten. Later, many female staff members went rushing to our unit and brought with them a prison mate. I came to know later that she shouted with a great deal of pride, saying she also shouted slogans. That was the reason why she was brought outside the courtyard by the prison female staff members. It was clear that her admission was in a way an attempt to see that I did not receive great suffering.



Then the two of us were taken outside the gate of the women prisoners' work Unit 3 and to the inner circle of the prison and confined to a small cell. We were each given a blanket and a thin mat. The mat was so thin that even when it was folded many times to just the size to fit my buttocks, it was too thin on the concrete bed. That was the time when I started to get pains in my waist.

In order to enter our cells, we needed to pass through four doors. The first door was a two-way steel sliding door. The second door was a big shutter that could be pulled from above to the floor. The third door was a smaller one with iron mesh. The last door was a Japanese-style sliding door of thick iron but small in width.

After passing through the fourth door, we entered a dark, windowless cell as deep as a well. The two of us spent six months in these cells. For the first four months, the two of us experienced sufferings like severe and prolonged hunger, cold, fear and darkness. These will be recounted in detail in my memoir.

While the two of us were confined in the cells of the inner prison, we learned later that Norzin and another nun were transferred to the confinement cell in Khando's unit. Each of the three was put in solitary confinement for a little less than a month and was tortured.

In the hope that others would suffer less, I admitted truthfully that the movement was my initiative and I took full responsibility. The higher people's court slapped an additional eight years in prison on me. Brave Khando spent four years in prison. In 2018 at the age of 40, patriot Khando suddenly passed away as a result of many years of torture.

Thereafter, another of the bigger movements we initiated fell on May 1, Labor Day and on May 4, the Youth Day in 1998. In the morning of Labor Day, except for the members of the old women's unit, almost all members of the new women's unit and the Unit 4 of the common prisoners were made to stand in rows in the main prison courtyard. When they started to sing the Chinese national anthem and the Chinese national flag was raised, two boys from the unit for the common prisoners broke



ranks and threw leaflets in the air and shouted slogans saying, “Tibet is independent, long live His Holiness the Dalai Lama.” Many other prisoners started walking toward the outer gate while shouting, “Tibet is independent.”

After a moment, many soldiers and prison staff pounced on the crowd and the sound of gunfire could be heard. Soldiers and prison staff hit the crowd on their heads and everywhere on their bodies. I wouldn’t know whether they were hit by bullets or fell because of the beatings, but many people fell on the ground. Even though they fell unconscious on the ground, the prisoners were beaten and dragged. We saw all this through our prison cell window. When we saw this after climbing on the window, our admiration grew because of their undiminished courage and at the same time we became saddened at the suffering they faced. Because of this, our spirit was lit up like fire and we discussed various ways to initiate movements to show our solidarity with them. I will reveal in my memoir the suggestions I made to further the movement.

Again on May 4, many prisoners were rounded up in the courtyard and there were preparations being made to hoist the Chinese flag. One of my prison mates who participated in our discussion came to me and suggested that it was appropriate that we start our movement today. Because I had made many plans to make the movement bigger and widespread and was convinced of this, I did not respond to her suggestion and all of us continued to look at the courtyard from our prison cell window.

When we looked through the window, we saw many soldiers keeping a watch. To our utter amazement all people in the first row of the unit of the common prisoners raised their fists in the air and shouted, “Tibet is independent and long live His Holiness the Dalai Lama.” Unlike before, the prison authorities were well prepared. Immediately, there were sounds of gunfire and prison staff and soldiers beat the crowd badly. When we saw this, my prison mate who had earlier come to talk to me, smashed the glass window of our prison cell and shoved her fist through the window and shouted, “Tibet is independent.” All of us immediately



raised our fists through the window and shouted, “Tibet is independent. Long live His Holiness the Dalai Lama. Don’t raise the Chinese flag on our soil.”

After a while, many male prison staff came to our cell, equipped with electric cattle prods and leather belts with iron studs. They pulled us down by our legs from the window and flung us on the ground. They dragged us to the courtyard and beat us on the head with the electric cattle prods and the leather belts studded with iron pieces. They beat us mercilessly. My head and hands bled. Likewise, it goes without saying that this was true of my other prison mates. I saw that the whole ground was covered in blood.

Penpa Bhuti, a female prison staff, pulled out the leader of the movement and one of my cellmates and beat them without mercy. I, too, was picked up from the crowd and beaten. Penpa Bhuti said, “She is still cocky.” She dragged me to the middle of the ground and many prison staff ganged up on me and beat me for a long time with sticks and the leather belts studded with iron pieces. I covered my head with my two hands. Besides this, I was not able to protect the other parts of my body. I had no alternative except to close my eyes and face the beating. After a prolonged beating, my prison mates, Gyaltsen Dolker and others, pleaded with the prison authorities to stop the beatings. They feared no beating on themselves but were afraid that I was being killed. At the time this thought did not cross my mind. At the time when I heard their pleas, I raised my head to show my displeasure. When I raised my head to do this, I was beaten on the head like falling rain. Soon I heard no sound and everything became quiet. Later I heard cries of sympathy and my name being called. I was not able to respond. This was Phuntsok Pelyang, who, despite herself being beaten, rushed to my side and buried my head under her chest in order to save my life.

After this, we were locked in our cells. Phuntsok Pelyang and I were not cell mates at that time. After one year she was transferred to my cell No. 1. It was then that she explained to me that after she was locked in



her cell that day, she noticed that her garment was covered in blood. Becoming anxious that her stomach had been torn, she immediately took off her clothes to check. There were blood marks all over her body, but no bleeding from her stomach. She said, "I realized I was soaked in blood from your head when I covered it with my body. I became concerned that you might not live." When I heard this, my eyes swelled with tears at the degree of her sacrifice.

Phuntsok Pelyang was a brave and patriotic Tibetan. When she was released from prison after six years, a Tibetan from Switzerland told her that he would try to take her to India and later to Switzerland. She responded by saying that she preferred to stay and protect her own land, even if she can save only a palmful of it, and that she did not want to go anywhere. After her release, Phuntsok Pelyang passed away when she was in her fifties because of the torture and suffering she was subjected to in prison. The details of her life will be recounted in my upcoming memoir.

Many of us suffered physically from the consequences of our beatings at that time. However, the thoughtfulness of a few of the people who beat us was apparent from their behavior. One particular person comes to my mind whom I do not wish to name today for his own safety. I am very grateful to you.

After the beatings, all the political prisoners were locked in our cells. My cell mates thought that I would be taken to the detention cell and prepared thick mattresses for me. I too thought that I would be taken to the detention cell and prepared for this by wearing thick clothes even when I was sleeping. I was not, however, taken there. But two nuns who were beaten by Penpa Bhuti and two others were taken to the detention cell and left without any food. The sudden movement that day was not initiated by me. However, I was the one who had been suggesting and planning a movement. Therefore, I thought that in times of trouble it was my responsibility to own up to the authorities, particularly in view of the fact that the nun who started the movement suffered from a weak heart.



When I was interrogated and beaten, I admitted that I was the ring-leader and had shouted, “Tibet is independent, long live His Holiness the Dalai Lama, and don’t plant the Chinese flag on our soil.” One of my cellmates was given an additional prison sentence of one-and-a-half year. The people’s high court slapped an additional prison sentence of six years on me, a total of 23 years in prison. I was warned that if I committed any further crimes there was nothing left than to give me the death sentence.

Although many of us prisoners suffered physical injuries, no one provided us with medical treatment and this caused us a great deal of problems. Since then we went through much worse torture and under such trying circumstances, I initiated another movement. All this will be detailed in my memoir.

In all, after serving eleven years in prison during which I had lost all physical energy because of the torture and beatings and was on the verge of dying, on Oct. 17, 2002 under the pretext of medical treatment I was released from prison. This release was primarily due to the grace of His Holiness the Dalai Lama, the efforts of governments and NGOs and people around the world who had supported me for many years. My release came a week before the Chinese President Jiang Zemin was to meet U.S. President George W. Bush. I came to know about all these later when I arrived abroad.

After my release, I spent about five months at home but my movement was restricted to within the Lingkor [the circumambulation road] in Lhasa. When I walked in the Barkhor within the Lingkor, I was followed by minders and at home I was under surveillance for 24 hours a day. Besides this, Chinese intelligence officials would often visit my home and if they saw visitors they were interrogated about the reasons for the visit and where they were coming from. Under these circumstances, I realized that even though I was released there was no freedom. Visitors stopped coming to our home in a visible manner.

One day after four months, in the evening, two officials of the



security bureau came to my place. They said I needed to go with them. My family members persistently pleaded that one of them be allowed to accompany me. Ultimately, they picked a nine-year-old to accompany me and the rest were not allowed. They put me in a taxi and drove me to an office. In it I saw officials who normally visited my home and others. They spoke to me in a pleasant manner. One official said to me that in the past I had expressed a wish to visit Ganden Monastery. He said that it was alright to visit the monastery. Earlier when I expressed this wish, the officials were emphatic in refusing the request. I was surprised by this change of attitude.

Then I was taken to a hall which looked like a conference room for the officials. Around the long and circular table were seated Chinese officials. In the main seat was an *inji* [a Tibetan reference to a Caucasian]. He was John Kamm, an American [of The Dui Hua Foundation]. At a time when I was in a state of anxiety, not knowing where they would take me and what they would do to me, seeing an *inji* all of a sudden made me feel extremely delighted. In fluent Chinese he greeted me and asked me how I was and shook my hand. I shook his hand and responded to him in Chinese. Immediately one male and one female official approached me and said they were the interpreters between the *inji* gentleman and me. I said I did not need interpreters because he speaks Chinese and we can carry on the conversation in Chinese. With this I turned my body, facing him.

He then asked me about my health and what my needs were. I explained to him about all the problems of my health. I also explained to him that earlier I had to obtain permission to visit any place. Now this time I was told I could visit a place for which I was not permitted to go earlier. I explained all this to him. He held my hand tightly and looked at me with kind eyes and with kind words said that he would try to do everything to help me.

After several minutes, I was taken back home. My elder sister, assuming that I had been taken to prison, was praying in front of the



altar and crying at the same time when I walked in. She was very happy to see me, but she was still in fear that I would be taken to prison before long and continued to cry.

While spending five months at home, I was slow in shedding my prison habits. I often referred to my family members as officer. When reading the prayer scriptures in the morning if my family members entered the room, I hid the scriptures thinking that a prison staff had just walked in. These behaviors caused sadness and laughter among my family members. These will be recounted in my memoir.

Even after I met the *inji*, there was no change and I was put under 24-hour surveillance at home and followed by minders whenever I walked out. After five months on this routine, one day a Chinese government official took me out to be photographed but otherwise there was no visible change in my situation. However, one day early in the morning in May 2003, an official arrived at my home and told me that I was to go abroad right now. My sister immediately packed a wheeled box with eatables and clothes. I was about to get into my *chupa* [Tibetan robes] but the official did not allow me to wear it.

My sister borrowed 1,000 RMB from our neighbor and put this amount and a mobile phone in a handbag and said, “Whatever place you arrive at, call me.” She hugged me and cried and while crying said, “Should I be happy or should I be sad?” I too was deeply moved beyond words. As my sister said, the real question was, whether we should be happy or sad at this turn of events. My sister said that my not going to prison again was good news. But it was also difficult to say whether this separation would be temporary or for life. When she said these words, my eyes were filled with tears and I choked. Except for hugging her, I was not able to speak.

My sister, her husband and their children had a great desire to escort me to the airport but the authorities gave permission for them to escort me to their office only. When I boarded the official vehicle, they waved at me and I waved back at them while my eyes were wet with tears.



This was how I had to part from my beloved country.

The account of how I departed from Tibet and arrived in America will be included in my memoirs. As arranged by the American embassy in Beijing, I arrived in Chicago on March 28, 2003. Then I was taken by officials of the State Department to Washington, DC, the capital of the USA and there I was received by the staff of the International Campaign for Tibet and the leaders of the local Tibetan association and a section of the Tibetan public. This is a brief account of my life.

In conclusion, I cannot state strongly enough that whatever movement I was able to initiate in prison was solely due to the spirit of courage and noble intention of my fellow prisoners. Their courage and noble intention gave me the courage. Without exception, my fellow prisoners and partners in the movement were always humble, people of few words and kind hearts and devoted to the accumulation of merit. However, when any movement was launched, all of them remained united, were courageous, very determined and with great noble intentions. Even when I was in prison I rejoiced at their character. Whenever I looked at them and even while they were sleeping, I considered the way they conducted themselves as a source of merit and for me a source of admiration.

Generally, I consider myself a person of no bravery, stamina or courage. While in prison I concluded that what I was going through was an outcome of the negative deeds of my previous life. However, the fact that I am able to experience the fruition of the negative deeds in this life for the cause of Tibet was a source of pride and good fortune. The additional source of courage is that unlike patriots of other countries who consider death as final, our courage comes from the belief that even if we die, we will be born again.



Tortuous Memory of Twelve Years in Prison

Gyaltzen Dolker



MY ORDAINED NAME IS Gyaltzen Dolker and my lay name is Dawa. I was born on first January in 1970 to father Lobsang and mother Shonu. I was born in Mar village in Meldo Gongkar county near Lhasa. I am the youngest of four siblings. The main source of livelihood of my family was animal husbandry. I spent most of my childhood herding animals on hills

and valleys. In our area there were some schools in namesake but no real schools to educate the children of villagers and the masses. Because of this I had no opportunity to undergo a systematic education. At the time I can say that in our area there was no school worth its name. In some villages there were school buildings but the facilities, including that of teachers, were poor.

In 1959 the Red Chinese government invaded Tibet. Gradually Tibet was engulfed by the turmoil of the Cultural Revolution and the six mil-



lion Tibetan people were caught in one dark prison of sorrow. However, none of this erased the spirit of the Tibetan people and their faith and devotion to His Holiness the Dalai Lama and Buddhism. Accordingly, both my parents were deeply religious, relying on the blessings of His Holiness the Dalai Lama. Thus, in the beginning of the 1980s when there was a brief moment of limited liberalization in Tibet, my parents allowed one of my elder brothers to join the Meldo Gongkar Ruthok Monastery as he desired. One of my elder sisters entered Drikung Cholong Nunnery. In 1988 I, too, entered Gari Nunnery north of Lhasa as per my long-held wish to study Buddhism. At the time, the nunnery was in ruins. In the course of the black year of 1959 and during the Cultural Revolution, the Chinese authorities completely destroyed our nunnery. The nunnery we see these days was constructed, brick by brick, solely by the nuns and with donations from the devoted Tibetan masses. As for myself, apart from mornings and evenings, which were devoted to the study of Buddhism, I spent the rest of my day in the construction of the nunnery.

At that time, the Chinese authorities instituted a committee called the management committee in all monasteries and nunneries in Tibet to re-educate monks and nuns on the policies of the Red Chinese government. Communist cadres came to these monasteries and nunneries to exercise political control and to interfere in our spiritual lives. These people also came to our nunnery to start a re-education campaign. The main aim of the campaign was to promote what they called “love the nation and love the religion,” denounce Tibetan leader His Holiness the Dalai Lama, love the Communist Party and obey whatever instructions the Chinese government issued. Under these strict controls the nuns found it difficult to live and study in the nunneries. As I recall, one night armed soldiers of the Chinese government suddenly surrounded our nunnery, and for no reason mercilessly beat the nuns. Some nuns were arrested and the rest were summoned to gather in the courtyard to intimidate us with dire warnings. They searched our cells and demanded that we obey the demands of the Chinese Communist Party, which for



us nuns were impossible to follow. In such circumstances, we found it impossible to remain in the nunnery to study Buddhism.

Thus, in 1990, some of us nuns secretly ran away from our nunnery to the Norbulingka Palace in Lhasa, where the Shoton Festival was taking place, and staged a peaceful demonstration to protest Chinese policies in Tibet. Our slogans were “Tibet is independent,” “His Holiness the Dalai Lama should be welcomed to Tibet,” “Tibet belongs to Tibetans” and “Red China go away from Tibet.” In no time, like hungry wolves pouncing on red meat, the Chinese government’s security personnel arrested 13 of us and bundled us in prison vehicles and dumped us in Gutsa. We were subjected to intense interrogation and trained dogs were unleashed on us. We were also subjected to torture by the use of various modern torture instruments. All these put us in unbearable pain.

After some months, the Chinese authorities instituted an illegal court which sentenced me to four years in prison. At the same time they robbed me of my political rights and transferred me to Drapchi prison. When I arrived in Drapchi, there were many political prisoners. Most of them were in very bad shape, health-wise. When contemplating the prison food and rules, I thought then there would be only few prisons in the world with such conditions. These prisons were built by the Red Chinese government to torture the Tibetan people and the prison guards and wardens used all possible ways and means to subject the political prisoners to pain and suffering, including verbal abuse. In this way, we were subject to both physical and mental suffering.

In 1993, some of us political prisoners recorded songs in tapes telling suffering of the Tibetan people and political prisoners. We did this to leave to history that despite our dying bodies, our spirit was as high as the Himalayan Mountains. Here I would like to repeat a portion of our songs.

*O Land of Snows, Land of Snows!
My beloved country*



*The soul and heart of our country
Is Tenzin Gyatso, my root teacher
The Wish-Fulfilling Jewel
If the six million Tibetans remain united
There will be a time when
The sun will appear from behind the clouds*

Unfortunately, the prison warden came to know about our recording of these songs. We were subjected to unspeakable torture. As for me, I was sentenced to an additional eight years in prison, a total of twelve years. My other colleagues also had their prison sentences raised as well.

*The melodies we sang in prison
Buried in the mine of history
Were heard by the merciless rulers
Who transported us to the land of darkness and sorrow
Our feelings of dark prison conditions
When we sang them in melodious songs
The horse of good fortune fell off the cliff
And we were found for twelve years under chains*

Even though at the time I was sentenced to eight additional years in prison, I suffered no extra pain and sorrow. My other colleagues were in the same situation. However, when we heard that the prisoner who loaned the tapes and recorder was beaten and tortured it brought unbearable pain and suffering to us. That person was in prison because of a minor issue. Moreover, when we asked the person to loan us the recorder we did not tell the real reason. We told the person that we wanted to listen to songs but did not tell the person we were going to record songs. When we heard of what he went through, we underwent extra pain and suffering but were unable to help that person at that time.

When we were slapped with an extra eight years in prison, it was arbitrary and with no due legal process. I and other colleagues did not



accept this arbitrariness.

In 1998 we did not know about plans to hoist the Chinese flag in Drapchi prison. This is because although the political prisoners and common prisoners were in the same unit, it was difficult to know of each other's information. On the day of the Chinese flag raising, the prison authorities forced political and common prisoners from the same unit to participate in the event. The prisoners shouted slogans to display their disagreements with the Chinese government's action. The prison police fired on the crowd. We heard gunshots and crying and screaming. However, we could not leave our cells. When we heard this news, we were deeply moved.

The following week, the prison authorities again forced prisoners to raise the Chinese flag. Once again the prisoners, like before, protested and shouted slogans. We who were in our prison cells shouted protest slogans through our window, adding our voices to the action. The slogans were "Tibet is independent," "Don't plant the Chinese flag on Tibet's soil" and "Tibetans are about to be killed."

Soldiers came and severely beat us up. After this, the prison was subjected to unprecedented restriction and suppression. The authorities reduced the frequency of the monthly meeting with parents and relatives and even reduced the number of blankets in our cells. We were also restricted to our cells day and night, and thus it was difficult for us to catch a glimpse of sunshine.

*In the area of darkness of prison
Although undergoing unbearable suffering
The objective of flame of freedom
Has been protected day and night*

For 12 years I suffered so much in Drapchi prison in Lhasa that it was difficult for me to pass the days and nights. We do not need to speak of the usual beatings and verbal abuse inflicted on us by prison guards



for no reason. While I was in prison, I heard about the sad news of the passing away of my parents. As soon as I heard this news, I fell unconscious for a moment. For prisoners who have served prison terms for a long time, their greatest happiness is the opportunity, when released, to embrace their parents. This happiness was lost to me. In all those years, my greatest sorrow was the passing away of my parents. While I was in prison my parents and other family members also had to undergo great suffering.

*While in the sad lawless dark prison
When I heard of the passing away of parents
Tears welled up
That soaked my chest endlessly
While suffering the confines of the sorrow of Drapchi prison
For twelve years
I hoped for a change to the fortune of six million⁹*

In 2002, my 12 years of prison ended. From a superficial point of view I might have been seen as released from prison, but in reality I remained a prisoner in society. I was not allowed to return to my own nunnery. In fact, on the day of my release I was first taken to an office where I was directed that I must not speak about what happened in prison and told not to travel wherever I wanted. I was then handed over to the office of the county authorities, which handed me to the office of the village head, who finally handed me to my family members. As I was under constant police surveillance, my release from prison brought me no joy.

On account of my poor health conditions, my family members and family friends helped me to recuperate at my home for some time. After this, with permission of the police, I traveled to Lhasa for medical treatment. During those days, I faced severe livelihood problems.



9 Six million is a reference to the six million Tibetan people

In 2004, out of sheer desperation, I decided to escape to India. I thought then that if I were able to escape to India I would first have the opportunity to have an audience with His Holiness the Dalai Lama and inform him of the situation in Tibet and the conditions of the Tibetan people. This would also provide me the opportunity to be free from the fear of being under the Chinese. These reasons compelled me to develop the courage to take the refugee's path. Through a friend of mine I was able to find a guide to India and escaped with two relatives of mine.

A little after sunset, I and my two relatives, leaving behind our beloved country and relatives, rode a cargo truck and left Lhasa, the capital of Tibet. At the time, the five-colored prayer flags above the rooftops of Lhasa were fluttering in the wind. The fluttering prayer flags seemed as if they were bidding farewell to us. We turned toward the Potala Palace and prayed from the bottom of our hearts and took the road with great hope.

On the way, we also traveled on foot through difficult terrain and crossed the Himalayas. Overcoming many obstacles and leaving behind our country and home, we secured the label of refugees after being separated from our homeland and home.

As I was recently released from prison and so was poor in health, I was not able to catch up with the others and got separated from my fellow travelers and my relatives for a few days. However, since I was escaping oppression and because of my determination to keep moving forward, I did not want to return to be under gunpoint again. After trekking for a few days over snow-capped mountains and glaciers, we finally reached Nepal. I have many sad stories to tell of the difficulties we faced on our escape to exile but because of my fear that it will become too lengthy, I have refrained.

*After traversing hundred thousands of mountains and valleys
We landed up in someone else's land
The tears of memory*



*Of our homeland
Drained into the endless ocean*

When we arrived at the Tibetan reception center in Kathmandu, I felt both happy and sad. I thought for a person there was no greater sadness than leaving behind one's country and being confronted by a different language and culture and being a refugee in another land. The joy was to realize that I was treated with the same freedom and rights like any other individual. I then realized that to live regularly without fear is the greatest and real joy.

After staying for more than two months at the reception center, we arrived in Dharamsala through Delhi. After staying in Dharamsala for a few days, due to the grace of His Holiness the Dalai Lama and the Tibetan government-in-exile, I received refugee documents from the Belgium government. I then traveled to Belgium.

Today in Belgium, like other Tibetans, I am in the country as a refugee. Even now my health conditions are not good. This is because of the beatings in prison and not receiving timely medical treatment. It is still difficult to recover my health; I suffer from headaches, sometimes loss of memory because of fear.

Despite this, whenever I have the opportunity to speak, I tell my story and talk about the conditions of the Tibetans in Tibet. My love for Tibet and Tibetans remains unchanged. My ultimate aspiration is the speedy return of His Holiness the Dalai Lama to Tibet and the happy reunion of Tibetans in and outside Tibet. Due to my imprisonment, many people related to me faced many political hardships. I wished to write about their hardships but because they are currently under Chinese gunpoint, there is no way I can tell these stories. Therefore, I would like to end my short story here.



Released from Prison, But Still a Prisoner

Yeshe Dolma (a.k.a Ngawang Rigdol)



MY NAME IS YESHI DOLMA a.k.a Ngawang Rigdol. I was born in 1972 to my father Tashi Phuntsok and mother Dolkar. I was born in Meldo Gongkar near Lhasa, in the village of Yechi, to a simple farming family. I was one of the younger siblings of 11 brothers and sisters.

My village had a small school and because it received no attention from the Chinese authorities, there were only limited times when classes were held. On account of this, apart from learning basic reading and writing from my late father, my education was limited and I had to spend most of my time when I was young in herding cattle.

When I was 14 years old, my parents were kind enough to have me admitted to Gari nunnery near Lhasa. However this nunnery was in ruins because of the devastation brought upon it during the Cultural Revolution. Therefore, apart from memorizing scriptures in the morning



and evening, we spent most of our time in renovating the nunnery. The nunnery we see now is the result of donations offered by the devoted public and the hard work of the nuns.

Ever since His Holiness the Dalai Lama advised the Tibetans not to propitiate Dolgyal (Shugden)¹⁰, I and some of my nun friends distributed leaflets and tape recordings of His Holiness the Dalai Lama's advice on this issue to the monasteries and nunneries around Lhasa. Moreover, there were many nuns who were propitiating Dolgyal in my nunnery. To them we distributed the same leaflets and tape recordings and we strongly opposed Dolgyal propitiation ritual practice in the nunnery.

I and some of my nun friends distributed leaflets highlighting the independent status of Tibet. Similarly, we distributed widely newspapers in the Tibetan language, smuggled from India, in the streets of Lhasa. On account of this, I was constantly interrogated by the cadres of my nunnery's work unit and was nearly expelled.

In 1990, I and my friends, Dogde Pelmo, Kyigu Dagmo from Nagchu, Tashi Tseringma from Phenpo, Shelsangma of Toelung, Miyo Lobsangma of Drikung, Choepen Drinsangma of Nyethang and Tekar Drosangma of Meldo [Gongkar] (*all these names are pseudonyms to protect them*), voluntarily staged a peaceful protest from the main street below the Barkhor to the front of the Tsuglakhang,¹¹ denouncing China's trampling of the human rights of the Tibetan people and its repression, its destruction of Tibetan culture in Tibet and its policy of racial discrimination. Our slogans were Tibet is independent; China quit Tibet; and Long Live His Holiness the Dalai Lama. We shouted these slogans and distributed leaflets of these slogans to the public, and while raising the Tibetan flag, we demonstrated for around 20 minutes.

Immediately thereafter, some members of the Chinese security police, equipped with modern weapons, pounced on us and mobbed



10 A controversial fierce spirit with a history of contributing to a climate of sectarian disharmony.

11 Another name for Jokhang, the central cathedral in Lhasa

and beat us. Three of our friends, Meyo Lobsangma of Drikung, Tekar Drosangma of Meldo and Shakya Dragzinma of Toelung, were beaten severely and were arrested. My other friends and I, aided by the gathering of people there, just managed to escape. Because of this, my friends and I hid for more than a month in the house of a family in Lhasa.

In 1991, my friend, Dogde Pelmo, and I, during the Zamling Chisang [world incense burning day] on the 15th day of the fifth month of the Tibetan calendar, hoisted the Tibetan flag twice on the hilltop of Gyephel Utse in Lhasa. At the same time we distributed leaflets on Tibetan independence and about the advice [of His Holiness the Dalai Lama] on Dolgyal.

On Jan. 17, 1992, I and my friends, Dogde Pelmo, Rigter of Meldo, Lhejin of Drikung, Choejin of Lhasa, Gyajin of Meldo, Mindruk of Lhasa and Chegyemo of Nyagra, while raising and waving the Tibetan national flag, denounced China's repressive policies in Tibet and distributed leaflets all the way from Tromzig Khang to the Tsuglakhang in Lhasa.

At that time, except myself and Dogde Pelmo, all other demonstrators were monks. The focus of the police was on the monks who were being beaten and arrested and because of this two of us nuns were able to escape into the larger public. Those monks who were arrested were Rigter of Meldo, who was sentenced to nine years of imprisonment, Choejin of Lhasa, who was slapped with a sentence of eight years, Chegyemo of Ngyagra, given a sentence of seven years, Lhajin of Drikung, given a sentence of six years, Mindrub of Lhasa, sentenced to six years, and Gyaljin of Meldo, sentenced for five years. Their political rights were deprived. All of them were incarcerated in Lhasa's Drapchi prison and underwent unimaginable physical and mental torture. After their release from prison, they were not allowed to return to their monasteries or be employed in the larger Tibetan society. If they did indeed become employed, they were expelled from their jobs because of pressure from the Chinese authorities. Because of this, even today they live in a very sad and pitiable situation. However, their Tibetan spirit remains



as solid as a rock. Here I wanted to write in more detail the suffering they underwent but because they are under constant police surveillance I have refrained from doing so to protect their personal security.

In 1992, once again Dogde and I joined the demonstration led by Gonme Zejin of Drepung monastery and some of his friends, which went from the Tibetan Medical Institute in Lhasa to the Tsuglakhang. We shouted for Tibetan independence in a peaceful and nonviolent demonstration. Some of the protestors were arrested by the police but some of us managed to escape among the gathered Tibetan public. Since I knew only Jordan and Samdrub among them, I have no idea of the prison sentence terms slapped on the others.

On the 15th day of the fourth month of the Tibetan calendar in 1992, I, Dogde Pelmo, Chogley Namgyal of Phenpo, Shelsangma of Toelung, Kyigu Dagmo of Nagchu and six other nuns (altogether fifteen of us, but I have forgotten the names of the others), staged a peaceful protest, because this day attracted a large number of faithful and foreign tourists who circumambulated the traditional Lingkor route. The police were not able to arrest some nuns. That day we shouted about Tibetan independence and distributed pamphlets and carried two Tibetan national flags. I was carrying one of the two Tibetan national flags, which was grabbed by a Chinese policeman who threw it on the ground and stomped on it. This act provoked my full fury and sadness and I grabbed a walking stick of a beggar nearby and hit the policeman twice on his head. The policeman vowed vengeance on me and tortured me severely. We were detained, bundled into police vehicles and driven away. While on our way, we continued to shout slogans.

When we arrived at the police station, we were interrogated and beaten mercilessly for about an hour. After this we were sent to Gutsa prison and only I was given solitary confinement in a cell that was as large as the size of my two outstretched hands. I was confined in these conditions for three months and 17 days. During this period I had nothing but the robes I wore and no beddings and so I suffered greatly



because of this.

Through Tsazur Shangla [an active community leader], I was released from solitary confinement but instead of putting me in the cells of the rest of the imprisoned nuns, I was confined in the cells of common female criminals who were infected with AIDS. I was confined in this for about nine months. After this, my nun friends and I were taken to the Intermediate People's Court in Lhasa where the trial was held, which did not follow due process as elsewhere in the world and we were given a sentence. Since Dogde Pelmo and I were responsible for organizing the protest, the two of us were slapped with six years of imprisonment and our political rights were taken away from us. Shelsangma of Toelung was sentenced for five years. Kyigu Dagmo of Nagchu and Chogley Namgyal of Phenpo were sentenced for four years and deprived of their political rights. We refused to accept these sentences.

In 1993, we were sent to Drapchi prison in Lhasa. During the six years we had to spend there, we were tortured physically and mentally and subjected to hard labor which brought immense suffering upon us.

In 1994, my health deteriorated to the extent that my eyes became blurry and my hands shook and trembled and I was bedridden for some years. Rather than taking me to the hospital for treatment, the prison authorities would subject me to hard labor when I slightly recovered. During the monthly family visits, Dogde Pelmo had to accompany me because of my poor health conditions. I was reduced to this poor physical condition because of the severe beating and torture I was subjected to.

On June 1 and 4, 1998, when some political prisoners in Drapchi prison raised Tibetan independence slogans, the prison guards and soldiers beat us without mercy to the extent that my arm became crooked. This is visible even to this day. Because of our Tibetan independence sloganeering in prison, some political prisoners' prison terms were extended and some died soon after because of torture and beatings.

During my six years in prison, I was able to meet my mother a few times. Sometime later, I heard the sad news of her passing away because



of deep sadness and depression. In prison my biggest desire upon release was to be able to meet His Holiness the Dalai Lama, my root lama and leader, and my parents. That I was not able to see my mother is the saddest chapter in my life.

In June 1998 my prison term ended and I was released. However, because of the beatings and torture while in prison I had to receive medical treatment for three years with help from my family.

When my health slightly recovered, my friend Dogde Pelmo and I started a small restaurant in Lhasa for our living. Like we had hoped, the restaurant did good business. However, although we had been released from prison, since we were being continuously monitored by the Chinese government, sometime later, Chinese police came to know that we were the owners of the restaurant and they exerted various pressures and the restaurant had to be closed.

After this, through an acquaintance I got a street-cleaning job. For this job I needed to wake up at four in the morning and my monthly salary was 120 renminbi (yuan). For someone who has been released from prison, getting such a job is a good thing. However, I was fired from this job after the police came to know that I was a former prisoner. In 2003, I made a fake residency card and went to Ngari and started a small restaurant and a small shop. However, the Chinese police came to know about my identity and my two elder sisters at home were being visited by the county police members to inquire about my whereabouts and were being threatened. Looking at this from all angles, I realized that I might be detained once again. On Sept. 26, 2006, leaving behind my cherished homeland, my loving family and my sincere colleagues in the struggle, I was forced to flee to India. One reason for this decision was because by that time, I had a husband and child and I wanted to protect their safety, and not to lose my life. The other reason was to secure an audience with His Holiness the Dalai Lama.

When we escaped, my husband, Bhuchung, and I brought along our daughter, Tenzin Dolma, who was one year and six months old. Since the



main road had many Chinese patrols and guards, we could not take any fast routes. Therefore, we had to detour over dangerous hills and valleys. On account of the extreme cold weather, my daughter nearly froze to death. I had to hug her for a long time on my naked flesh to give her warmth, and she recovered a bit. While on our escape we surmounted many difficulties, walking for many days, and in September 2006, we reached the Tibetan reception center in Kathmandu.

In due time, we reached Dharamsala in India. While we were in India for several years my husband and I started a small restaurant business and I had the time to receive medical treatment for my poor health. Due to the grace of His Holiness the Dalai Lama, within several years both my mental and physical health improved.

In 2009, a Tibet support group in France gave me the opportunity to travel there so that I could tell my story. Later, I sought asylum in Switzerland and subsequently my husband and daughter were able to join me through family reunification. Though my general physical health improved a lot, I still need medical treatment for my eyes and feet. Because of the grace of His Holiness the Dalai Lama, in Switzerland I was able to be reunited with my family and face no livelihood problems. However, because Tibetans in Tibet continue to suffer under Chinese rule, and I miss my friends and family, I go through a lot of mental and emotional distress. For these reasons, my ultimate aspiration is to return to my homeland.

MY FAMILY

In 1959, because my maternal uncle Tharchin revolted against Chinese rule, the Chinese authorities accused him of many things. An anti-revolutionary dunce cap was put on him and he was subjected to much suffering and hardship. My elder brother's name is Rigter and he was a former monk of Ganden Monastery. In 1992, along with some of his friends, he staged a peaceful protest demonstration for Tibetan independence. He was arrested and jailed for nine years. Though he has



been released from prison now, he is living a precarious life in Lhasa. My elder sister, Ngawang Yangchen, staged a protest demonstration for Tibetan independence in 1988 with some of her friends. They were arrested by the police and imprisoned for several months. Later released from prison, she escaped to India and is now in Switzerland. This is the gist of my story.



Thinking about the Future of a People

Palden Choedon



MY NAME IS PALDEN CHOEDON. Right from my childhood I never thought that I was without power, let alone being a woman with an old mindset, timid and lagging behind others. However, because of karmic destiny and the times, the best time of my life was stolen without any sense of remorse. Now my past life's path has become a memory of sadness and tears.

Here I narrate a brief account of my life. My birthplace is in Nyemo district. My father's name is Tenzin Sangpo and my mother's name is Tsering Pelzom. I was born on the 18th day of the 10th month of the Tibetan calendar in 1973. My parents raised me with loving kindness and sent me to school to have a better chance in life. Before I graduated from school, both my parents passed away and as per their wishes I entered Shugsep nunnery at the age of 14.

As per the regulations of the nunnery, I collected water and firewood



and performed other tasks as much as I could, and in between memorized scriptures and studied to the best of my ability. I stayed for about two years at the nunnery.

After this, because of the changing times and thinking about the future of a people, in August 1990, I joined five other spiritual friends in a peaceful protest march in Lhasa. We were immediately arrested and taken to Gutsa prison. The beatings and torture we suffered at the time are beyond the imagination of all people. For example, diverse electric weapons on our naked bodies, the very thought of which filled one with fear. After about a month, we were sentenced to three years in prison and dispatched to Drapchi prison for reform through hard labor. Since then, happiness became as scarce as seeing stars in daytime, and joyful life in freedom became more distant as days passed.

At the time the prison conditions were miserable. For example, we did not have even the right to smile at each other. There was no end to work whether in summer, winter, autumn or spring. We were subjected to work even after dinner. Although it is normal for everyone to work, but isn't subjecting people to work beyond limit oppression of a person's health? This question and doubt came to my mind naturally.

The event that I cannot forget took place in 1993. It became a wound in my mind that can never be healed and that I remember vividly even today. The event took place one or two months before my release. There were five of us from the same sleeping quarters: Gyaltzen Choezom, Jigme Yangchen, Ngawang Chokyi, Ngawang Choezom and me. When the information and evidence of the recorded songs connected to Tibetan politics fell in the hands of the Red Chinese, my mind became vividly filled with foreboding. However, on the second day nothing transpired and it appeared to be calm. For 20 days, we were not subjected to interrogation and investigation. The interrogation started on the day when I was scheduled to be released from prison. The day was Aug. 27, 1993. That day I awoke early in the morning, took off my prison uniform, washed myself clean and wore my new Tibetan gowns, and waited. My



cellmates each brought with them notebooks of our shared memory and we waited for the main prison gate to open. The prison gate opened. But from the office of the prison warden I heard this being said casually, “You are not to exit the prison now. You are formally arrested.” At the time I wondered why I was not told about this earlier. I questioned myself about this. The feeling I had then was that this was a great injustice and inhuman thing to do. This was because I had never stepped outside the prison gate, and why were they telling me now that I was actually being arrested? My own sadness at being thrown in prison was swept away by my feeling of the sorrow that my relatives might have felt waiting for me outside the main prison gate.

On the second day when I awoke, due to sadness and sorrow, tears uncontrollably rolled down from my eyes. I tried to console myself saying that some Tibetans have sacrificed their very lives for the victory of our people, and so why should I be complaining about this? I scolded myself and in this way consoled myself to reduce my sorrow.

After a while I was sentenced to five years in prison. In all I spent eight years in prison. I was finally released on Aug. 26, 1998.

It is true that suffering has no end. Even when I was released from prison, there was no freedom. Since there was no freedom even outside the prison, I thought it might be better to seek refuge in India. With this thought I escaped to India in February 1999. Unfortunately on the way, I was re-arrested and sentenced to one year in prison. After my second release from prison, there were more restrictions imposed on me. At the end, on Aug. 1, 2010 I left Lhasa via Dram on the Nepal-Tibet border, and after three days reached Nepal.





The Path to Hell on Earth

Phuntsog Nyidron Sanaschiga



1. PATH OF SADNESS DURING CHILDHOOD

My name is Phuntsog Nyidron. I was born in 1970 to Tashi Wangpo and Pelkyi Dolma in Phenpo Yakrong, where the Kadampa school of Tibetan Buddhism was founded. I had one elder brother (now deceased), have one elder sister, a younger brother and two younger sisters, all together five siblings. My father was from Sanaschiga. My grandfather was killed by the Chinese when they invaded Tibet. My mother was from Yakrong Khangpasarpa. After the Chinese invaded Tibet, they started class struggle and established the Phenpo commune. My father was identified as a member of the upper class and was thus separated from our family and sent to Khartho village to work. The Yakrong work unit told us that we needed to move elsewhere soon because they said the location of our house would be con-



verted into farmland. Our grandmother and mother then requested that we be allowed to move to Khartho village, where our father was. They approved and we moved and soon thereafter, the work unit demolished our house and turned it into farmland.

We, the children, could not see or speak to our parents for a long time. During the day, my father had to go to the hills with donkeys to gather firewood for the work unit. He had to work at night, too. My mother went to work for the unit early in the morning and until late in the evening. My grandmother had to work, but not as long as my mother. At the time our living conditions were extremely poor. We, the children, were raised by our grandmother. Our food consisted of coarse tsampa [*fried barley flour*] and black tea, and there was hardly a day when we had enough to fill our stomachs. Our stomachs were half full and half empty. Our house was next to the barley field. In the fall, my grandmother would cut unripened ears of grain from the fields at night and boil and give this to us. For us, this was tasty and nutritious.

When many children went to school from our village, I, too, wanted to go with them. I asked my elder sister why we were not being sent to school as many children were going. My sister responded that we should go to our grandmother to request her to send us to school. Grandmother patted our heads and said that it is not that they had a desire not to send us to school, but our father was a class [enemy] and the children of such people were not allowed to attend schools. We then came back and played in the dust. I would admire students who carried school bags and went to school, and I longed to do the same.

For a child, Losar [the Tibetan New Year] was one of the happiest festivals. This was a chance to wear new clothes and indulge in eating many snacks. In my case, being the child of a family being identified as a class enemy, all this was just a daydream. Other children wore new clothes and carried in their hands delicious snacks. I had none of this and during Losar wore a patched pair of pants.

On the first day of Losar, our grandmother would give us two tiny



fistfuls of buttered tsampa dough. For me this was delicious. I always remember this. As always, I wore a pair of pants all patched, twice or thrice. I would wonder then when I could wear new clothes for Losar. During the time I was in Khartho, I was herding cows, goats, sheep and donkeys.

After 20 years, demons like Mao Zedong, Zhou Enlai and Zhu De, with spindle-like legs of merit and carrying a huge burden of sin, went to report to the Lord of the Dead. There was a big change in the leadership of the totalitarian Chinese Communist Party and a limited liberalization came about in China's policies. Like the saying that not one flat stone could remain dry if the whole country was flooded, my father's class enemy cap was removed. In 1984, the Phenpo commune was dismantled and land and livestock was returned (distributed) to the private ownership of the masses. Most of our relatives lived in Yakrong and we requested that we be allowed to move to Yakrong and this same request was made by our Yakrong relatives. Our work unit granted permission to us to do so. For two years there, I helped my mother with household chores and on the field.

2. PATH IN THE SEARCH FOR HISTORICAL TRUTH

In 1987, I constantly pestered my family that I wanted to be a nun. At first no one paid attention. Whenever I had the opportunity, I especially brought my desire to the attention of my father. My father said that it was not enough for a nun to shave her head and wear robes. He said the first quality for a nun was to read and write. He said the second was to read the scriptures and to understand the meaning of the texts. He said, "You do not know how to read and write. So you cannot become a nun." I persisted and said I wanted to become a nun. My father said that if I really wanted to become a nun, he would teach me how to read and write. For several months he taught me reading and writing. My father was my first teacher. I studied diligently under his tutelage. I mastered reading and



writing of the Tibetan alphabet very quickly. Thereafter, I was taught to read and write superscripts and subscripts, which is called *Dhoerel*. I learned these quickly, too. Gradually, I learned to spell and read aloud. After this, I started memorizing texts of prayers to the goddess Tara. At the end of the year, I entered Michungri nunnery in the north of Lhasa.

When I entered the nunnery, there were about 20 new nuns. The nunnery was in ruins. As time passed, our teacher divided us in groups and dispatched us to collect donations for the renovation of the nunnery. Six of us went to Phenpo to collect donations. We said, “We are from Michungri nunnery and we are here to collect donations for the renovation of our nunnery.” The people in Phenpo said, “Of course” and gave us a huge amount of wheat and barley and other grain donations. We carted all this in a wheelbarrow from my house to our nunnery without charging fees to our nunnery. Most of the wheat was stocked in my house. As we had a mill, the wheat was grounded into flour by my family members and transported to the nunnery. When on our donation gathering mission to Lhasa, we stayed at Khar-ngya Dong¹² and sometimes at our teacher’s house to count the donations and returned to the places of our hosts.

In 1988 at the time of the Great Prayer Festival in Lhasa there was a demonstration in the Barkhor. At the time we nuns from Michungri were in the Barkhor. There was a lot of confusion. Along with the monks of Sera, Drepung and Gaden, Ngawang Choedon and I participated, shouting, “Tibet is independent, Long Live His Holiness the Dalai Lama, We will push Red China out of Tibet.” Immediately, we were pounded with tear gas and fired upon by Chinese soldiers. Many protestors were killed and injured. The tear gas stung our eyes and brought tears. The tear gas created a great deal of smoke and it seemed as if it was snowing. An injured monk from Sera came near us. Ngawang Choedon and I went quickly to the Tibetan Medical & Astro Institute clinic to get



¹² An area in Lhasa

ointment and other medicines. Knowing that we were nuns, the doctor gave us plenty of precious pills and ointment. Although the soldiers at the clinic's main gate allowed us to enter they refused to let us exit. We therefore climbed over the eastern fence gate of the clinic. We gave pills to the injured Sera monk and nursed his wounds with the ointment. We gave the rest of the medicines to other Tibetans who were nearby. After some days, our teacher told us not to stay in Lhasa because there was a danger that we would be arrested by the Chinese army and we were taken back to our nunnery.

In early 1989, five nuns from Michungri nunnery, including Tenzin Wangmo and me, went to Lhasa to stage a protest. At dawn, we reached the Barkhor and distributed many leaflets proving the independence of Tibet and shouted slogans that Tibet was independent and long live His Holiness the Dalai Lama. Since it was early in the morning, except for a few elderly Tibetan women who were doing the rounds of the Barkhor, there were not many people. The elderly women said, "It is okay, okay. Now please quickly run away. Soldiers are coming after you." We didn't take heed and continued with our sloganeering. One elderly woman then caught my hands and took me nearby the southern Rigsum Gon Temple on the south side of the Barkhor. Our other nun friends were similarly taken away and we became scattered and separated. When I was returning to my nunnery, at Karma Kunsang, all of us nuns met, as if we had discussed the meeting place in advance. When we returned to the nunnery, we avoided the main and usual road and walked through the barley fields. When the nuns who remained at the nunnery saw us coming from below they knew that we were not arrested, and they were delighted and came to welcome us with butter tea.

In July that year, four of us nuns were walking below our nunnery on our way to stage another protest in Lhasa. A family member of one of the nuns, knowing that we were going to stage a protest, blocked our path, saying, "Think carefully. Lhasa right now is under special restrictions [martial law]. If you go to Lhasa, you are literally at the mercy of



the Chinese. If you go, it will become like the saying, catching me, but also plucking my hair. You will be arrested before you stage your protest. If you wish to protest, you might want to do it at a more relaxed time. Now return to your nunnery.” As advised, we returned to our nunnery.

I stayed for about two years at Michungri nunnery. Mainly I helped in the renovation and in my spare time focused on studying Buddhism. In our renovation work, all the material was carried on our backs. As a result, most of the backs of nuns had sores.

Since in 1989 Lhasa was under special restrictions, without exit passes, nuns were not allowed to go beyond the nunnery premises to go to Lhasa. Tenzin Wangmo and I, carrying our exit passes, went to Lhasa to collect stuff for our nunnery. When we reached Lhasa, the people were performing an incense burning ceremony and throwing fistfuls of tsampa in the air. As the two of us didn't know what had happened, we asked an elderly Tibetan man, “What festival is today?” The old man said, “This year's Nobel Peace Prize would be presented to His Holiness the Dalai Lama.” When we heard this, the two of us became overwhelmed with joy. After this, we went to the residence of our teacher. Our teacher said, “At this auspicious time, our nunnery is not even burning incense.” But no nun in our nunnery knew about this news. When we returned to our nunnery, it was twilight. Because of this, some nuns came to help us on the way. We told the other nuns the good news we heard in Lhasa that His Holiness the Dalai Lama would be awarded this year's Nobel Peace Prize. I suggested to Phuntsok Pelmo, Tenzin Wangmo, Tenzin Seldon, Kesang Wangpo and Tenzin Choekyi that it would be good if we staged a protest at the Barkhor. They agreed.

3. THE PATH TO HELL ON EARTH

In 1989, Tibet was the first place where martial law was imposed since the founding of the People's Republic of China in 1949. We, the six nuns, faced great difficulty in entering the Barkhor. Therefore, we decided that we would enter the Barkhor in pairs and meet together at a designated



spot and together stage our protest. When just four of us had assembled, non-uniformed police had already surrounded us. We thought that if we waited for the other two nuns we would not have a chance to protest. Thinking along this line, we staged our protest. We shouted, “Tibet is independent. Long live His Holiness the Dalai Lama.” As soon as we shouted these slogans, the police and soldiers arrested us. I was caught by the hand and dragged on the ground for about five to ten steps. While being dragged, I shouted many times with all my strength, “Tibet is independent. Long live His Holiness the Dalai Lama.” From the sidelines, I could hear people saying, “Oh what a pity! What should we do?” We were badly beaten and taken to a police station. When I was about to get down from the vehicle, a policeman kicked me on my back and I fell flat on my face on the cement floor. At this, a police officer said, “You reactionaries are pampered under the Chinese Communist Party’s good and relaxed policies. You are disturbing social stability.” Saying this, he stomped all over my body and beat me almost to death. After some time a vehicle arrived. It carried the two remaining nuns who had also protested after hearing our protest slogans. We all met together there.

After we were transferred to Gutsa detention center, each of us was locked in a separate cell. The prison guards used different instruments, including electric cattle prods and sticks, to torture us. They used dogs to frighten us. Some nuns were tied and suspended from above. In short, they used many different methods as they began to interrogate us. “There must be an instigator behind you and a ringleader. Who is it? You all grew up under the five-star flag and so would know nothing. Who is the instigator? Tell us.”

I responded, “I am a Tibetan, eater of tsampa. We have no one instigating from behind.” In response, they said, “All six of you cannot spontaneously work together. Amongst you, who is your ringleader?” When they said this, I replied, “I am the ringleader. In Lhasa, I learned that His Holiness the Dalai Lama won this year’s Nobel Peace Prize. I told the five of them about the news and I brought them with me.”



When I said this, two prison guards beat me hard with long and thin rods. While beating me like this, they handcuffed me. While being beaten, I cried out aloud but no tears came from my eyes. At this the prison guards said, “Look at her arrogance! Your heart is bigger than your body,” and beat me again to a pulp. When they handcuffed me, they made me raise my right hand over my shoulder and place it behind my head and forced my left hand behind my back to handcuff me in this way. When my two hands could not join together in this way, they dislocated the joints of my two arms to handcuff me. One prison guard climbed over the table and roughly pulled me by the handcuffs, which was extremely painful. After this, they took off the handcuffs. With this done, my right arm was swinging about like a shirt sleeve. I had no feelings in my arm. After this, they used a shoe-sewing machine to pierce the nails of both of my hands and tortured me beyond human imagination. In the evening, they locked me in a cell. The cell had just a small mat and nothing else. My whole body was covered by bruises. The whole night I rested against a corner of the cell and because of immense pain I was not able to sleep.

After some months in Gutsa Detention Center, the Lhasa intermediate court sentenced me to nine years in prison under the charges of inciting division among nationalities. Phuntsok Pelmo was sentenced to eight years. The rest were each given three years. Phuntsok Pelmo and I were transferred to Drapchi prison.

When we first arrived at Drapchi prison, we had to transport human waste from the toilet to fertilize the vegetables in the greenhouse. When we carried the human waste, we were not even allowed to wear hand gloves. The smell of human waste covered our bodies and seeped into our clothes. After a while, we got used to the odor. When we tell these stories today, they might be considered exaggerated. All this hardship is the real experience which I and other political prisoners underwent. Similarly, the prison authorities looked down upon us to the extent that we could not talk back. Because of this, some common prisoners in the



prison allocated the job of moving human waste from the toilet to the greenhouse to us, the nuns. When we passed the container of human waste to others in the line, a few prisoners made it a point to spill some of it on our heads. Since the prison guards were on their side, we had no chance to complain. In this way since our whole body was covered in smell, gradually we got used to the stench of human waste.

On March 5, 6 and 7, 1988, young Tibetans who grew under the five-starred red flag protested against the injustice and twisted laws of communist China. These three days of demonstration were one of the most important political events and the Chinese authorities considered the period sensitive.

In 1992, the Tibetan New Year (Losar) that year fell on these three days. To commemorate this event, seven of us, Rinzin Chonyi, Phuntsok Pelmo, Acha Chungdak, (the first woman political prisoner who was not a nun), Karma Trinlay, Gyaltzen Choezom, Dawa Dolma (a teacher at the cement factory), and I took off our prison uniforms and wore our personal clothes. The prison authorities considered this gesture politically significant and took Acha Chungdak (a former staff of the Reception Center in Dharamsala, India) and Dawa Dolma to the square prison torture cell, the size of a person's two outstretched hands. When the two of them were dragged to the torture chamber, we said, "If you take the two of them, take us together. We all are the same who wore non-prison clothes." The prison authorities called in soldiers who beat us mercilessly. A few nuns became unconscious. The rest of us who remained conscious were mercilessly beaten and locked up in a ramshackle prison cell. Rinzin Choeying (subsequently a teacher of the Tibetan Children's Village in upper Dharamsala) said, "Wherever you are taking the two of them, take us with them," and she kicked the door of the cell which broke. She was badly beaten because she wore a non-prison uniform and we shouted, "Since you are beating her, beat us as well." As such we were roundly beaten.

Even now I have the strong feeling that we were then saved by Unit



2 prisoners. Seeing that some of us became unconscious and others not able to move, the non-political prisoners of Unit 2, because of a strong sense of Tibetanness, shouted, "They are killing our people." They knew that shouting such thoughts would land them in danger, but they did this through a strong love for Tibet. With this, the soldiers left us and moved toward that unit. I think this gave us a second life. At the time I noticed that one of the nuns had on the back of her body the shoe prints of the soldier who had kicked her.

Our act of disregarding prison uniforms was considered politically significant by the authorities. Because of this, the prison guards and the police not only beat us with belt buckles and electric cattle prods but also shoved these into our mouths and they stomped on us. Despite whatever physical suffering we were subjected to, with unflinching spirit, on the second day we continued to wear non-prison clothes. After this, the prison guards and the police forced us to wear prison uniforms. Following this, the prison authorities locked up Acha Chungdak, Phuntsok Pelmo and Dawa Dolma in the dark cell. In this cell, they were given just a steamed bun and a small cup of tea in the morning and evening.

In 1993, because of the increased number of political prisoners, all of them were locked in one prison dormitory. In May that year, 14 of us nuns sang together a Tibetan independence song. The song was a paean to His Holiness the Dalai Lama, remorse at the death of the 10th Panchen Lama who was poisoned by the Chinese authorities, the fact about Tibet being independent, how the prison authorities tortured the prisoners, the dismal conditions in the prison, and the spirit of the political prisoners remaining as firm and strong as Meru, the king of the mountains, despite whatever suffering they were subjected to in prison.

We recorded our first song. On the second day, while we were recording, unknown to us, the prison guards who had been listening suddenly burst into our dormitory and confiscated the tape recorder. First, they investigated the source of the tape recorder and discovered it came from a non-political prisoner who loaned it to the nuns and he



was badly beaten. We were able to conceal our first tape of recorded song. On the second day, the prison guards confiscated our half-recorded song. If they had laid hands on our first song, more than 14 nuns would have had their prison sentences increased. We wrapped the first tape recorded song in a plastic bag and while working in the vegetable fields, we buried it in the ground. Later, this tape became useless. We were interrogated many times on the meaning of the song. Finally, in October 1993, the 14 of us were taken to the prison hall and an announcement was made regarding our extended prison sentences. Dawa Yangkyi was given nine additional years of prison. Gyaltsen Dolker, Ngawang Choekyi and I were given eight years. Namdrol Lhamo and Ngawang Sangdrol were given six years. Lhundup Sangmo, Ngawang Tsamdrol, Penpa Choezom, Palden Choedon, Ngawang Choezom, Ngawang Lochoe, Jigme Yangchen and Rinzin Choekyi were sentenced to five additional years.

Because of the increased number of women political prisoners, in July 1995, we were divided into two units, Old Unit 3 and New Unit 3. The new prisoners were all placed in the New Unit 3 so that no contacts and communications could be made between the old and new political prisoners.

I was nominated to be one of the four recipients of the Reebok Human Rights Award for making significant contributions to the cause of freedom and democracy under militant government, and was awarded the same in 1995. In April 1996, the prison guards, based on the Red Chinese evil policy, told us that the political prisoners should train and maintain cleanliness like soldiers. But they said that we reactionaries were not able to train and keep hygiene as soldiers. They thus beat us beyond limits. Also, despite our tidy beds, they blamed us on our untidiness and beat us nearly to death. They made many of us to stand near the wall of the prison courtyard and verbally abused us and beat us.

While we were beaten, we collectively and spontaneously thought that all of us were going to die in their hands. So we thought we would better die through hunger strike. For four-and-a-half days, we did not



have even a drop of water. Those nuns who were not in good health fell on the ground on account of their lack of food. On the third day of our hunger strike, the prison authorities summoned us to a meeting. They asked us why we were going on a hunger strike. We responded by saying that we were beaten every day for no reason, that we had no chance to explain things and our lives were not safe from their beatings. As such we preferred to die like this. Assuming that our hunger strike was fake, they said, “Die and die. You can die. You are garbage. You understand this. If you die, we will throw you into the garbage. Did the Dalai separatist abroad come to save you? Were you saved?” They scolded us in this way.

After four-and-a-half days when we were summoned to a meeting, we were not able to get up from our beds and move around. Those nuns in poor health had their eyes turned white and were hardly able to breathe. Realizing the poor state of our health, they said, “Eat food. From today we will not bring soldiers to beat you.” They promised. They brought a medical doctor with them who was astonished by the state of our health. The doctor said that we destroyed our own health. He had each of us helped onto our feet by two non-political prisoners and given an appropriate amount of a spoonful of soup. If we had more food than this, we were told by the doctor, we would die. Accepting the promise made by them, we ended our hunger strike after four-and-a-half days. However, they broke their promise and continued to bring soldiers to beat us.

Between the women’s wing of the Drapchi prison and a school on the other side was a vast field. On May 1, 1998 [Labor Day], they took non-political prisoners to the field to sing the Chinese national anthem. At the time no non-political prisoners were taken from our prison courtyard. When the Chinese national flag was being raised, the gathering, headed by non-political prisoners, shouted that the Chinese red flag was not allowed to be raised and that Tibet was independent. Since we were locked inside, we were not able to see anything. However, we heard the



noise of much gunfire. At the time, I wondered how many dead bodies there might be on the field. We were not able to see, but we heard a lot of shouts and screams. But that day we were not able to do anything.

On May 4, we were still locked up in our cells. We climbed up the cell windows and we could see the flag post. However, as there were glass panes we could not hear anyone. We broke the glass of our window cells and grabbed the iron rods of our windows and shouted that “the Chinese flag should not be raised and Tibet is independent.” Immediately, the prison police rushed into our unit and prodded us outside in the courtyard and beat us with sticks and buckled belts and kicked and beat us with their fists. In this way, they bloodied us. Some had blood streaming from their heads and some from their faces. The courtyard was filled with blood as if it was a slaughterhouse.

After that day, for about three months, we were only given tea two times in a day and not even a drop of water. We were isolated in our cells day and night. According to prison rules and regulations, prisoners are allowed to see one of their family members once a month. We were prevented from doing this for about six months. We bled from our mouths and noses and we dared not look at each other’s faces. Since then we were confined in our cells. Twelve of us were made to share one toilet pot. In the same cell, while others were eating, some had to use the toilet pot when they suffered from diarrhea. Since 12 of us shared one toilet pot, it filled up by mid-day. After this, we had to restrain ourselves from urinating or even when we had diarrhea.

At that time, we were made to knit sweaters. While knitting, we were required to knit each day either one *sang* [Tibetan weight measurement] or two, depending on the thickness of the knitting thread. If we were not able to fulfill this requirement, we were stopped from seeing our family members each month.

We considered the family visits precious. Though we were not able to speak to each other, just seeing the faces of our parents gave us much joy. Fearing that this opportunity would be robbed from us, we knitted



diligently from morning to evening. We saw no sunlight in our prison cell. In the winter, our hands became bruised because of extreme cold. Every day, we sat on a wooden chair. If we cushioned the chair with our own clothes and if the prison guards saw this, we were beaten. Since we sat the whole day and every day on the wooden chair, the skin of my hip came off. Even though I was sick, I was not bedridden. Since the skin of my hip came off, I faced great difficulty and even today I am not able to sit for long on a chair.

From 1998 to my release from prison in 2004, this was my condition in prison. Whatever physical suffering they inflicted upon us, since all political prisoners were united in spirit and speech, our mental problems became much less.

In 1998, the June 4th Anniversary Committee and the China Peace [an NGO] based in the USA jointly commemorated the 12th anniversary [it was actually the 9th] of the Tiananmen Square students' democracy movement. During the commemoration on June 3, I was awarded the freedom and democracy advocate prize. The prize was received by the representative of the Office of Tibet in the United States. I came to know about this in 2007 from publications of the Tibetan Centre for Human Rights and Democracy and Three Provinces of Tibet during a pilgrimage to India. Even today, I don't know how this prize looks like because I don't have it in my hands.

4. COMING OUT OF THE HELL PATH TO THE PATH TO EXILE

In 2004, because of the grace of His Holiness the Dalai Lama, the efforts made by international human rights organizations and Tibet Support Groups I was released from prison after more than 15 long years of undergoing a host of different hardships and sufferings. For about two years, my freedom from prison was only in name and I enjoyed not even a strand of hair of freedom. The police stayed at my house and each visitor to my home had to register his or her name and location. When I



first arrived at my home, my neighbors came to my house with greeting scarves and tea. The police stopped them and those without documents of Chinese citizenship and residential permits were not allowed in. If the visitors had these two documents, they were allowed in and asked to recount their activities for the last eight years. After all these accounts were put in writing, they were allowed to visit me. At home, I was put under surveillance, and I was not permitted to see my own relatives, let alone being allowed to see others. In these conditions for about two years I lived under house arrest with strict surveillance by the Red Chinese without any freedom.

In 2006, again because of the grace of His Holiness the Dalai Lama, efforts made by various human rights organizations and international pressure, I had the opportunity to leave for America for medical care. During my first audience with His Holiness the Dalai Lama, he asked me about the condition of my health and gave me advice with loving kindness. Since 2006, I have traveled to Norway once, Germany once, the Czech Republic twice, Holland thrice and Britain twice to speak about Tibet to the various human rights organizations of these countries, middle schools and universities. To them, I spoke about the state of human rights and religious freedom in Tibet, especially about the unspeakable torture the political prisoners were subjected to. In the Swiss town of Geneva I spoke at the UN at the Human Rights Council by myself thrice and once with patriot Takna Jigme Sangpo about the human rights conditions in Tibet, especially about the torture inflicted on political prisoners. At the Council's sub-committee meetings I spoke about Tibet three times.

In 2007 I made a pilgrimage to India. As desired by the Tibetan government-in-exile, I traveled to the Tibetan settlements and monasteries in south India to talk about the political conditions in Tibet and the unthinkable torture the political prisoners were subjected to.





Mental Re-education is Harder than Reform Through Labor

Rinzin Choekyi



MY NAME IS RINZIN CHOEKYI. I was born in 1970 to Lodro Wangchuck and Dechen in Khemshi village in Gongkar County in Lhoka, Tibet. I was given the lay name of Yangzom. In our family, there were seven siblings. I was the youngest. When young, I had no opportunity to go to school. This was because Tibet was engulfed in the turmoil of the Cultural

Revolution from 1966 to 1976. The whole of Tibet was devastated by the Cultural Revolution and in particular our family was branded reactionaries and our family wealth and land were confiscated by the Chinese authorities. Our two parents along with other elders in the family were subjected to thamzing [a form of class struggle] sessions and made to suffer for many years. At the end, a strict instruction was issued by the authorities that children of reactionaries were not permitted to attend school.



Till the age of seventeen, I helped my parents with field and wool work and herded cattle. At one time, I went with my mother on a pilgrimage to Lhasa. At the time I spotted a few nuns in the Barkhor. Since then I always strongly thought about how happy I would be if I were able to become a nun. When I reached the age of 18, I had the good opportunity to be a nun at Shugsep nunnery. After being admitted, I was given the religious name of Rinzin Choekyi. I started studying Buddhism and also took part in the work of rebuilding the nunnery. At the time the Chinese government's democratic management work committee members stayed on at the nunnery and subjected us to patriotic re-education, which included forcing us to denounce His Holiness the Dalai Lama. We were forced to undergo such intrusive sessions many times and this made us suffer days and nights. Because of these conditions, on a midnight in August 1990, six nuns, including myself, without letting anyone know about it, trekked along many mountain paths to Lhasa. On the way, we spent the night at Ramagang, near Lhasa. In the morning of the second day, we reached Lhasa. The first thing we did was to go to the Tsuglakhang [Jokhang] and pray before the statue of Jowo Shakyamuni. After this, the six of us lined up and my spiritual friend, Woeser Choekyi, carried the Tibetan national flag in her hand and we staged a Tibetan independence demonstration in Barkhor. After barely 10 or 15 minutes, we were arrested.

My comrades in our struggle were Jigme Yangchen, Woeser Choekyi, Palden Choedon, Penpa Dolkar and Chimi Dikiyi. After our arrest, we were taken to Gutsa prison. In Gutsa prison we were constantly interrogated. Besides this, they unleashed dogs upon us and poked cigarette butts and electric cattle prods on us. They punched us with their fists and kicked us. In this condition, we suffered mentally and physically so much so that our bodies became covered with lice. When our menstrual period came, we had no sanitary napkins to wipe away our blood. Although from our prison window cell we heard the sound of the falling of water, but we had no freedom to even drink water.



After four months, we were given seven-year prison sentences and taken to Drapchi prison, the No. 1 prison of the Tibet Autonomous Region. In Drapchi prison, we were allowed a monthly visit from our families. Despite the fact that our old parents and family members were visiting us from afar, the visiting time was just around five to 10 minutes. One time, my mother, who was more than 70 years old, came to see me. At the time, my mother's eyes were filled with tears and she said, "Now I am becoming old. Most probably it will be impossible for me to see you being released from prison. As such, take care of yourself and be careful on all matters. I will pray for you." These words of my mother were like a knife being thrust in my heart.

Before my release from prison, my mother passed away. This kind of hardship was suffered by me and many other political prisoners. Because of us, our parents went through much suffering, humiliation and verbal abuse. Who in the world will be concerned about this?

In 1993 in prison, we sang songs of praise to His Holiness the Dalai Lama and to Tibetan independence. Our recording of these songs landed me an additional five years in prison, in total imprisoning me for 12 years. They also robbed me of five years of political freedom. In general, in Drapchi prison, there were two women's units, Unit 3 (I) and Unit 3 (II). The old prisoners were included in Unit 3 (II), where restrictions were placed through Reform through Labor and mental reform.

From 1990 to 1996, Reform through Labor consisted of growing vegetables in the greenhouse and having these carted to the market as a source of income for the prison. Those who were relatively healthy were given this assignment. This was because the greenhouse was very hot and apart from a break during midday meals, the prisoners had to work in it all day. Some of those who worked in these circumstances suffered high blood pressure and would fall on the ground all of a sudden. Other work consisted of loading tin cans of human waste onto carts and pick-up trucks. This human waste was collected from the toilets of main hospitals and army bases. All this was used in the greenhouse as



manure. Most prisoners were used for this work. At first this kind of work was dirty and we were not able to swallow our food. When we collected the human waste we had to shove the tin cans into the toilets and since the tin cans were big, our bodies were splattered with shit. As such our bodies smelled and so did our prison cells. We carried these to the greenhouse of the women's unit and to the unit of the common prisoners.

Since 1996, we were stopped from working outside the prison and we were made to do wool work in prison. Truck after truck brought wool in the prison compound. While doing our wool work, both cleaning and spinning, we were given specific targets. If we did not meet the targets, we were made to work till midnight and not allowed to return to our cells. After this, we were made to knit sweaters. When we did not meet the knitting target, we were prevented from having our monthly meeting with our family members. Having to do over-knitting led to holes in our fingers.

The prison hard labor was extremely exhausting. However, political indoctrination was more exhausting. Daily we were made to read and study the newspaper, which was full of praise for the Chinese Communist Party and how it brought progress and development in Tibet. Besides this, high officials came to politically indoctrinate us. They said that Tibet was historically a part of China and our daydream of an independent Tibet was like stars in the broad daylight. They said, "Instead of this, it is better for you to abandon your wrong thinking at the earliest. You are stubborn and separatists, trying to separate our motherland and trying to destroy ethnic unity. Your aspirations will never be fulfilled." This was the way they chastised us many times.

In 1996, the authorities tightened the prison regulations and discipline and we were required to stand up and to pay our respects whenever prison guards entered our cells. However, no one stood up. This was because the leaders of the government of Red China criticized and belittled His Holiness the Dalai Lama by referring to him as the "Dalai clique" and referring to the Tibetan government in exile as an "exile



government.” Because of this, we had no desire to show them respect. For this reason, one day all of a sudden, the prison guards took our prison mate Khando to the square torture cell. Representatives from our dormitories met to discuss the development and ultimately decided that until Khando was released we would make our bedding in the form of a square as a form of protest. The authorities became enraged and instead of releasing Khando from the torture cell, they dragged several prisoners into other torture chambers. After this, we decided that unless the others were released from the torture chambers we would go on a hunger strike. For four days, let alone not eating, we did not drink even one drop of water. After four days, those who were in poor health were on the verge of dying. After this, several officials from the court came to us and said, “It does not matter if you will not eat, we will give you injection shots which will not let you die as the Chinese Communist Party has several methods. Some of you walking dead will not be able to pierce the sky with your fingers,” they scolded us.

As May 1 and 4, 1998 were Chinese holidays, on these two days, soldiers, common prisoners and a few units of political prisoners were made to assemble on the vast ground of Drapchi prison where they were made to sing the Chinese anthem and the flag was to be hoisted. The prisoners there then shouted, “Tibet is independent; Chinese go away from Tibet and don’t plant the Chinese flag on the soil of Tibet.”

That day our unit was not taken to the flag-raising ground. But we heard the sound of soldiers beating prisoners and gunfire. We heard all this because just a wall separated our cells from the prison ground. We climbed up our windows and watched. Again on May 4, on the prison ground, a flag-raising ceremony was organized. At the time, we climbed our windows and broke the window glasses and shouted in strong protest that Tibet was independent. Many prison guards rushed into our cells and beat us badly. After this, each prisoner was dragged away and interrogated. When I was dragged away, my body was in fine shape. While they interrogated me, they beat me in so many ways and especially



one soldier kicked my leg with all his might. When I returned to my cell, I was not able to walk.

Since then, they confined us day and night to our cells. The twelve of us had to share one toilet pot. We were only allowed to throw away the waste in the pot once in two days. Therefore, our sleeping area stank of human waste that attracted flies. At the time, the biggest problem was the ban on visits from our family members and thus not having enough to eat, not being able to change our inner clothes and not being able to have sanitary napkins during our menstrual period. The other hardship was being interrogated out of the blue. All these were our biggest problems. During this time, most of the prisoners were stopped from family visits for four months and others for six months.

In September 2002, I was released from prison and I returned to my home. Though released in society at large, I had no freedom in terms of movement. My health was poor because of so many years of imprisonment and I suffered psychologically.

At the time I had a strong desire to return to Shugsep nunnery and so I went there. The nunnery was under severe restrictions like before. Especially, no released prisoner was being allowed to stay in the nunnery. If such an individual was allowed to stay in the nunnery, the orders were to expel the person doing this. One disappointment was that because of this regulation I was only able to spend just a few days at the nunnery.

My jaundice problem became more severe and I had to go frequently to Lhasa for medical treatment. The doctor said I had a stone in my gall bladder and I needed to be hospitalized for the stone to be removed. He said if I was not operated now, I was in danger. If I agreed to be operated on, the medical cost was steep. I had no money. I would have to beg money from my brothers and sisters. I hesitated to do this because when I was in prison, apart from the time when I was banned from family visits, my brothers and sisters came from afar every month for 12 years to meet me. My imprisonment gave them much sorrow and loss of time and wealth. I have one elder brother and five elder sisters.



They have been very kind to me in this life.

One day while in Lhasa I met Lhundrup Sangmo, my friend in our struggle. We discussed and decided to escape to India. After a while through a friend we met a good guide who helped people escape to India. In April 2006, we decided to escape, putting our fate and whatever difficulties we faced on the journey in the hands of the Three Precious Ones [the Buddha, Dharma and Sangha] and His Holiness the Dalai Lama and left behind my beloved parents, siblings and beautiful country. After facing many difficulties in the journey, at last we reached Dharamsala. In Dharamsala I was able to fulfill my long desire to have an audience with His Holiness the Dalai Lama. I consider that day as the day I fulfilled my life's dream. During my two years of stay in India I had the opportunity to visit Tibetan schools and settlements to talk about the conditions of political prisoners in Tibet and my own experience. In 2009, I arrived in Belgium for medical treatment and to talk about Tibet. I sought asylum in Belgium where I am still living.





Died After a Heart Attack Because of Fear

Rinzin Chonyi



MY SPIRITUAL NAME IS Rinzin Chonyi and lay name is Migmar. I was born in 1972 in Tselna township, Chushul county under Lhasa City, to Norphel and Peldron. Altogether I had three brothers and a younger sister. My elder brothers were Dorje Damdul, Nyima, Penpa and my younger sister was Nyima Dolkar.

My paternal grandfather was Wangchuck who served as a soldier when the British invaded Tibet. He was shot in the foot by the British and was for a long time stranded in the battlefield and was not able to return home. My mother was from Lhasa. Prior to the Chinese arrival in Tibet, my maternal grandfather was in the government service, serving as the master carpenter in the 16th Rabjung cycle, when His Holiness the 14th Dalai Lama was constructing the Takten Migyur Palace, which was located in the Norbulingka Palace compound.



Though I was born in Chushul, my maternal grandfather and aunt brought me up in my mother's ancestral home in Lhasa. The reason why I was taken to Lhasa was that it was difficult for my mother to look after my brother and myself, especially when she had to work daily for the village work unit. My brother Penpa was just one year older than me. I remain deeply grateful to my grandfather and aunt.

While staying with my grandfather in Lhasa, I would see the neighborhood committee of Barkhor in Lhasa visiting our house frequently, taking away grandfather to their office and subjecting him to struggle sessions after labeling him as a class enemy because he was in the service of the Tibetan government. This I saw with my own eyes. When I was small I did not understand what this was all about. When I grew up, I asked my grandfather why he had to suffer like this. He would say that this was because Tibet and China were separate and the Chinese soldiers used various pretexts to subject the Tibetan people to suffer in so many ways for no reason. His answer left a first and lasting imprint in my mind that Tibet and China were separate and that China was up to no good.

When I reached the age of eight, I returned to my parents' home in Namgyal Gang in Chushul County and attended Namgyal Gang Community school for around three years. When I graduated to class three in 1983, the Chinese authorities announced a new policy of privatization of land and crops at the end of that year. At the same time, the community school was closed and so classes could not be held. Later, the Chinese started constructing the Chushul highway and based on the size of the family we had to do corvée work for them. At the time my mother had become blind and my father and eldest brother had to look after her. For this reason my elder brother who was 12 years old and I, at the time 11 years old, had to work on the road construction.

Not long thereafter, an unimaginable disaster struck our family. At seven in the evening on the eighth day of the second month of the Tibetan calendar in 1986, my father passed away. Since then my mother and siblings were plunged into the ocean of sorrow. As for myself, I



saw no meaning in worldly life and insisted to my mother and brother that I wished to lead a spiritual life. That year on the fifth day of the ninth month of the Tibetan calendar, my three brothers escorted me to Shugsep nunnery and I was admitted into the nunnery.

That day I began a new phase in my life. In the mornings and evenings I memorized the nunnery's prayers. During the day, I carried out different chores for the nunnery and time passed quickly for almost a year.

In September 1987, led by the monks of Drepung monastery, the people of Lhasa staged a major demonstration for the independence of Tibet. That day coincided with my return from the nunnery to my home. Some people from our village were secretly informing people of how in Lhasa the monks shouted Tibetan independence slogans, what the slogans were, how the Chinese police arrested the monks and how the monks were badly beaten. When I heard all this, I remembered how my grandfather underwent struggle sessions and an unbearable and strong feeling arose in my mind.

When I returned to my nunnery, some other nuns and I had secret discussions many times on the major 1987 demonstration and how His Holiness the Dalai Lama was forced to seek exile. I thought all this was a great injustice and felt very strongly that there was no way except to initiate a peaceful movement. After a while, a few nuns of our nunnery and two monks of Gangri Thoekar [a nearby hermitage] had discussed in secret to stage a peaceful demonstration in Lhasa. My spiritual friends told me about this. Immediately, without consulting my mother and other family members, I decided to join the group.

On the night of May 15, 1988, the two monks and some nuns of Shugsep nunnery walked to Lhasa to stage our protest. On the way, Penpa had breathing issues while I tumbled down from the hill and my whole body was stuck with thorns. We faced much hardship on the way. The next night, on May 16, we reached our branch nunnery of Draklha Lubuk in Lhasa and sought to stay there for the night. The next day on



May 17, the two monks, some nuns of Shugsep nunnery and a few nuns of our nunnery residing in Draklha Lubuk, altogether 13 of us, divided ourselves in groups of twos and threes and decided to meet under the Jowo Utra [the willow tree in front of the Jokhang] in the Barkhor. After gathering in the Barkhor, as planned before, everyone risked their lives and started our protest demonstration. While doing the round of the Barkhor we distributed pamphlets and shouted that Tibet was independent, allow His Holiness the Dalai Lama to return to Tibet, Tibet belongs to Tibetans and China quit Tibet. While shouting these slogans and making two rounds of Barkhor, we reached the front of the Tsuglakhang [Jokhang]. At this point, scores of uniformed Chinese police rushed toward us. Some policemen arrested the two monks before me. Behind me, Rinzin Kunsang was arrested. The Tibetan crowd milling around the Barkhor attempted to hide us in their midst. At this point the police fired tear gas and we were not able to see each other. We also heard the shots of gunfire. I was taken away by an elderly woman and a young girl who hid me behind them on the other side of a giant prayer wheel. I escaped being caught by the Chinese. Our two other friends, Rinzin Dolma and Tsering, were also not caught. Tsering had subsequently returned to the home of her host family for the night. Unfortunately, the Chinese knew where Tsering was spending the night and many policemen went to her place to arrest Tsering. At this the hostess of Tsering had a heart attack because of fear and died on the spot. As for me, the elderly lady escorted me till Lubuk from where I walked alone to Draklha Lubuk. After a while, Rinzin Dolma assisted by her elder sister returned. The manager [of the nunnery] and the elder sister of Rinzin Dolma advised us that it was not safe for us to stay there and suggested to us that we should move to a safer place for the time being. Thus the two of us went to the old Meru monastery. We explained our situation to the monks of the monastery. They agreed to hide us in the monastery and provided us with food, clothes and blankets. We spent quite a while in the monastery. We owe a debt of gratitude to the monastery and the



monks. After two months, we returned to our nunnery. After some time, our friends were released from prison and they returned to our nunnery.

Since then the democratic management committee was established in our nunnery. The nuns who returned from prison were interrogated day and night. They were forced to sign a written promise that they would not protest against the Chinese Communist Party. Tsewang Choedon and a few others who had earlier participated in protest demonstrations were badly beaten by soldiers who said these nuns did not agree to this.

SECOND PROTEST DEMONSTRATION, AND TAKEN TO GUTSA PRISON

In September 1989, some members of the democratic management committee came again to our nunnery and forced us to criticize our root lama and also forced us to do other things which we had no desire to do. Because of this, Kunchok Dolma, Metok, Sonam Choedon, Chonyi Lhamo, Rinzin Choeden and I gathered in my room to secretly discuss staging a Tibetan independence protest in the Barkhor in Lhasa. No one knew about this, especially the members of the democratic work committee who were stationed in the nunnery. On the night of Sept. 21, 1989, we left our nunnery. On the way, while passing through the hill and village of Nyebu Rato, we stumbled and fell in the pitch darkness and were chased by the village dogs. We faced many other difficulties. Early the next morning, we reached Tselna Drukha [a ferry crossing]. At this point, we took rides in vehicles and reached Lubuk in Lhasa where we had our meal at a nearby restaurant. At around 10 in the morning, we went to Barkhor, which was placed under curfew by Chinese soldiers (from March 1 to 10, 1989, on account of the successive demonstrations by the public, a curfew had been imposed and Chinese soldiers had been deployed in all roads and areas of Lhasa including in Barkhor) and started our protest demonstration. We shouted that Tibet was independent, long live His Holiness the Dalai Lama, Chinese soldiers quit



Tibet, Tibet belongs to Tibetans, and release Yulo Rinpoche and other political prisoners. After ten minutes, some policemen (who were not in uniform) stepped out from the crowd and immediately arrested the six of us and took us to the police station in Barkhor. Among the policemen who arrested us, a man with a dark face pointed his finger at me and said, “You are the one who had earlier participated in a counter-revolutionary activity.” He recognized me. After a while, we were bundled into vehicles and taken to the Lhasa Public Security Bureau office. Here they changed vehicles and we were taken to Gutsa prison around noon.

Each of us was handed over to the Gutsa prison authorities. Here we were tortured in many different ways, which included being suspended in the air. We were prodded with electric cattle prods. They demanded to know who had instigated us and who led our protest. They subjected us to inhumane and unimaginable torture. Rinzin Choeden, the youngest among us, had her hands tied behind her back and was suspended from a tree and spun around. We were taken out of our cells and made to watch this spectacle. All of us found this unbearable to watch and we all cried. They threatened us by saying, “We will do this to you too.” On that day, from midday to midnight, they made us stand upright in the prison courtyard. In front of us, they made a big dog monitor us. Even if we made the slightest move, the dog rushed forward to bite us. So we dared not make the slightest movement and we were made to stand upright in both sun and rain. Around midnight, they put each of us in our own separate cells. We were not allowed to speak and meet each other. We were frequently interrogated and badly beaten. After three days, my friends were sentenced to three years in Gutsa itself. I was not given a sentence period, but my hands were chained and they announced that I was formally being imprisoned. Since then, my friends were confined to their cells every day. The prison authorities accused me of being the ringleader of the protest and different officials came daily to my cell and interrogated me to no end. One day, they took me to an official of the police named Kan *Juezhang* [a Chinese title meaning bureau chief]. He



tied my hands behind my back and, as if I were a ball, kicked me many times and interrogated me. Because I was kicked many times, it became difficult for me to breathe.

COURT WITHOUT JUSTICE

On Oct. 5, 1989, I alone was bundled in a vehicle and was taken to the people's intermediate court. That day political prisoners Tsering, Sonam Topgyal and two monks were also brought to the court. The judge announced that I was sentenced to seven years in prison and my political freedom was deprived for two years because he said that I had participated in an earlier protest demonstration and that I was the ringleader of the latest one. As I was about to be led out of the court, the judge asked me whether I had any wish. I replied that I had no other wish except that His Holiness the Dalai Lama was able to return to Tibet. The judge banged his hand on his desk and said, "Shut up!" He ordered the police standing nearby to take me away and I was returned to Gutsa prison.

At the time there were many political prisoners in Gutsa and conditions were extremely poor. In the morning, we were given a bowl of rice gruel and in the afternoon two small steam dumplings and one dumpling in the evening. In this poor condition, because of hunger it was difficult for us to pass away our time day and night. We lived in this condition for almost two months.

FROM GUTSA TO DRAPCHI PRISON

On Nov. 17, 1989, political prisoner Acha Chungdak and I were transferred to Drapchi prison from Gutsa. Acha Chungdak had participated in the protest demonstration in Lhasa on March 5, 1989 and had spent six months in Gutsa, with both her hands and legs being chained. The two of us were the first women political prisoners in Drapchi prison after 1987. When we passed through the gate of Drapchi prison, it was really like entering hell on earth. On the way, there were many prisoners who had their legs chained and the sound of the clang of their chained



legs was unbearable. Among them were famous political prisoners like Lobsang Tenzin, Gaden Tashi and others. One hour after we had arrived in Drapchi prison, Tashi Choedon [a prison official] came to us. This woman was vindictive and had sold her body and soul to the Chinese Communist Party and was a Tibetan who was especially spiteful to the political prisoners. She summoned the non-political women prisoners and made Acha Chungdak and I stand in their midst. She told the crowd that the two of us were saboteurs and rioters who rebelled against the Chinese Communist Party. She threatened the crowd that if anyone of them made contacts with us, they would face serious consequences. Then giving the two of us a copy of the prison manual, we were made to read it for around a month. Simultaneously, they forced us on a daily basis to write our opinion and thinking which caused us immense pain and suffering.

LIFE IN THAT PRISON

The conditions in Drapchi were extremely wretched. Sometimes because of hunger, I would wonder what I should eat. Therefore, every 15th day of the month, when we ate the food brought to us by our family members, the prison authorities would summon us to the office and scold us. “Are you starving to death? Don’t we give you food?” Since then whenever our family members came on their monthly prison visits, despite the extent of our hunger, we had to give the impression that we were not hungry.

The first time when we arrived at this prison, our main job was carrying human waste. Every day, whatever the distance, we had to carry the waste six times. This chore was not easy. Two prisoners had to pull a cart full of human waste and we had to run while doing this. This was because we had to keep pace with the speed of the prison guards, one in front of the cart and the second one behind, riding their bicycles. If we were not able to keep pace, we were scolded and verbally abused. After carting the waste six times, we had to dig the soil in the greenhouse.

Then, for some time, after our evening meals, we had to assemble



for a community meeting during which we had to report and criticize any fellow prisoner who was acting or thinking of anything that went against the policies of the Chinese Communist Party. During the evening community meeting, some would do the criticism and others had to record it in writing. The next morning, we had to hand over the record to the prison guards. If anyone did not criticize or expose others, she was accused of not being sufficiently re-educated and made to read the prison manual and newspapers. This [mutual criticism session] was something very hard for us to do.

Similarly, during the winter for one month, a session called winter study session, a very stressful and trying session would be started. For this session, at the morning assembly of all prisoners we would be forced to listen to writings on topics like opposing the Dalai clique and the separatists, and on the virtues of socialism. In the afternoon, we were divided into small groups and made to discuss these topics. We had to write down our views and submit these to the authorities. In short, the winter study session consisted of criticizing His Holiness the Dalai Lama and other patriotic Tibetans and promoting devotion to the CCP. For us, the political prisoners, this mental torture session was harder to bear than physical torture.

TIBETAN LOSAR IN 1992

Normally on the occasion of the Tibetan New Year, the prisoners were allowed to wear our personal clothes. For the Tibetan New Year of 1992, we were ordered to wear only our prison uniforms. The reason for this order was that that year's Tibetan New Year fell on March 5, which coincided with the important anniversaries of the major protest demonstrations in 1988 and 1989 by the Tibetan people in Lhasa against Chinese policies. Led by Acha Chungdak the nuns of Unit 3 sent secret messages saying that we needed to observe this anniversary in prison. In order to observe this anniversary, some women political prisoners in Unit 3 wore their personal clothes instead of the prison uniforms.



On the morning of the first day of the New Year, some leaders said to be from the Politburo visited our unit. From among them, Wangchuck *Jeuzhang* said that we should take off our personal clothes. He said, “Your thinking is wrong. We are here to correct it.” After this, many of us, including Acha Chungdak, were summoned to the prison office and we were told to take off the garments we were wearing for that day. The next morning on the second day of the Tibetan New Year, prison guard Tashi Choedon came to unlock the door of our cell. She saw that seven of us, Acha Chungdak, Dawa Dolma, Phuntsok Pema, Phuntsog Nyidron, Karma Thinley, Gyaltsen Choezom and I were not wearing prison uniforms, but still wearing our personal clothes to mark the anniversary. The other prisoners were taken to a dance and song performance by fellow prisoners organized and dictated by the prison authorities. We were confined to our cell.

That evening after the prisoners had returned, many policemen entered our unit and handcuffed Acha Chungdak and Dawa Dolma who were taken away to the square stone cell in the fourth area. That is the place where prisoners were subjected to unbearable torture, like in hell. We, the political prisoners, asked, “Why are the two of them being taken away?” We cried and ran after them and the soldiers stopped us from going near the door. Both the prison guards and the police brutally took us to our cell. Many fellow prisoners, including Lobsang Choedon, became unconscious but were not taken to hospital.

That night we shouted that “Acha Chungdak and Dawa Dolma have not committed any crime. They should be brought back.” We shouted the whole night but we were ignored. Next morning, on the third day of new year, when the prison guards came to open our cell door, we again shouted “Where are Acha Chungdak and Dawa Dolma? Bring them here.” Let alone not bringing the two of them to us, the prison guards called for reinforcements of police who beat us and confined us to our cells. At the time, Phuntsok Pema, Gyaltsen Dolker, Woeser Chokyi, Acha Ngawang and I were confined to one cell. Phuntsok Pema, while shouting, repeat-



edly kicked the door of the cell. Seeing this, the prison guards dragged Phuntsok Pema out of the cell, kicked her and beat her with their rifle butts and blood flowed from her mouth and nose. Seeing all this was beyond our patience and forbearance and we shouted from our cell. At the same time, I kicked the door of our prison cell and it broke with my legs going through it. The prison guards saw this and they pulled me by my hair and took me outside the cell and kicked me, prodded me with electric cattle prods and beat me with rifle butts. My whole body was bruised with marks left by the electric prod and my left leg was damaged and I could not walk. Likewise, the prison guards dragged other cell mates and beat them without limits. This beating continued for some time when the non-political male prisoners from Unit 2, seeing all this from their window, out of a sense of Tibetanness, shouted, “Our people are being killed,” and they broke the window of the TV room. Because of this, some of the guards broke away and went to Unit 2. The rest of the guards, while beating us, confined us in our cell. Most of us went out of our senses. While Phuntsok Pema was beaten by the guards, a Tibetan prison guard, Zhangchen Yuezhang, prodded her mouth many times with an electric cattle prod and she was handcuffed and taken to the square stone cell in the fourth area. Tashi Choedon, a prison guard, accused Gyaltsen Choezom of breaking a prison door and handed her over to Zhangchen Yuezhang. He prodded Gyaltsen Choezom many times all over her body and stomped on her hip. Her hip was permanently damaged and even today she can’t walk straight.

After the fourth day of the new year, all of us political prisoners had to help each other when we had to relieve ourselves. As for myself, for almost a month I became bedridden. After about 15 days, Acha Chungdak, who had become senseless due to beating and torture, was returned to our cell. Same was the case with Phuntsok Pema and Dawa Dolma who were returned to our cell after severe beatings. For several months thereafter, considering the above incident politically significant, many Chinese leaders came to our prison and they demanded that we



acknowledge that our thinking was wrong and that we put this in writing and make submission to them. They forced us to do this many times. But we did not acknowledge their demands and said we were wearing the dress because of the Tibetan New Year and we did not err ideologically.

HEALTH CONDITIONS OF PRISONERS IN DRAPCHI PRISON

In that prison, let alone not putting any value on human life, the prison guards always ignored any prisoner however seriously and critically sick he or she was. Sometimes the prison guards accused us of pretending to be ill. Even if they looked into our ailments, they just gave us some medicine for pain relief and no thorough examination of the real causes of our ailment and no timely medical treatment. Under conditions like this, they did not look into or treat my injured leg because of which I was not able to walk for several months. I also suffered frequently from jaundice but the prison guards ignored my ailment and when the ailment was severe they merely gave me a painkiller but no proper medical treatment. At the end, the prison doctor after examining me said I was about to die and he would not take any responsibility. It was then in order to shirk their responsibility, the prison guards called my family members and made them sign a document permitting the removal of my gallbladder and accepting responsibility in case I died in the course of it. I survived the operation, thanks to the Triple Gems [the Buddha, Dharma and Sangha]. On account of the absence of my gallbladder, even today it is difficult for me to digest oily food.

As part of the above mentioned health conditions of the prisoners, the saddest story was the death of Phuntok Yangkyi, my cell mate, due to torture and poor medical treatment. She passed away on June 9, 1994 at the police hospital. Similarly, Gyaltzen Kelsang passed away in the same manner. Enduring these severe conditions for six years, I was released on Sept. 21, 1995. Though released from prison, my health was damaged. Though I wanted to return to my nunnery, I was not allowed.



I was not permitted to move and travel as I pleased. I was isolated in society and restricted and intruded upon. For about a year my family members and relatives looked after me to restore my health. On the night of Oct. 2, 1996, my friend and I escaped Tibet to India after having paid a considerable sum to a guide to help us.

The guide had altogether 18 other Tibetans, besides the two of us, to take with him. We trekked across many mountains and valleys and through Shar Khumbu in Nepal reached India. Because of my injured leg, injured by the prison guards at Drapchi prison, it was difficult for me to keep pace with my fellow travelers on our long trek. However, my friend helped me carry my belongings. While crossing the Gangla [name of a pass], we met some traders from Dhingri with a caravan of yaks on a trading mission to Shar Khumbu. The guide made me pay the Dhingri traders money so that I could ride on one of their yaks. I journeyed like this for some considerable distance.

After we crossed Gangla and while we were marching on the Zari hills of Shar Khumbu my friend and I fell back from the rest for one whole night and day as I could not walk. The guide sent someone to pick us up and he and the rest were also waiting for us. The guide scolded me by saying that because of me the group was not able to travel as planned. I was helpless and in this situation we saw four Sherpa monks coming and I kneeled in front of them and pleaded that they shelter me for some days. Our guide also requested the monks to shelter me for 10 days after which he would come to collect me. A monk named Nyandak offered to shelter me and took me to his house, introduced me to his family and instructed his younger sister to look after me. I spent 10 days in this way, waiting for the guide to show up. But he never showed up.

One day the monk Nyandak took me to a relative of his in Thangme in Shar Khumbu. He told me that in this place there were many Tibetans travelling to Kathmandu and that I might be able to send messages to my friends to pick me up. Although because of my poor health and injured leg, it was not possible for me to walk, I stayed in Thangme for several



days in the hope that I could send a word to my friends. One day when I was in the market where people gather, a Sherpa man approached me and asked, “Are you Rinzin Chonyi of Shugsep nunnery?” At the time I felt both happy and frightened on the suspicion that he might be a man to arrest me. I said, “Yes, I am. And who are you?” He said, “I am a local here. Someone from Kathmandu asked me to enquire about you. You will know the details when you talk with the person by phone.” Saying this he took me to a phone booth and made a call and made me listen. The one who spoke to me on the phone said he was a staff of the Tibetan Reception Center in Kathmandu and asked me whether I was Rinzin Chonyi. As soon as I heard this it was like peacocks hearing the sound of thunder. I cried in joy and replied, “I am Rinzin Chonyi.” The man said, “We have requested the Sherpa man to buy you a flight ticket and you will be taken to the Nepalese capital.” I then became overwhelmed with happiness at the thought that I would reach India and have an audience with His Holiness the Dalai Lama. After two days, the man accompanied me in a helicopter from Thangme to Kathmandu. At the airport in Kathmandu, two Tibetan girls were waiting for me with a small vehicle. They drove me directly to the Tibetan Reception Center. When I arrived at the reception center, as my friends had already informed the center about me, they received and treated me very well.

Later I learned that the guide had asked my fellow travelers not to talk about me having been left in Shar Khumbu to the staff of the reception center for fear that he might be arrested. And he did not come to fetch me. My friend not only reported about me to the staff of the reception center but also to our fellow nuns of Shugsep nunnery who were in Yangleshoe [in the outskirts of Kathmandu]. The nuns of our nunnery immediately organized a prayer session on my behalf. One of the nuns there, Tsering Wangmo, studied under the same teacher that I did in Tibet and she approached the Representative of His Holiness the Dalai Lama and other organizations and, while crying, begged them to search for and find me.



After having informed the reception center and the Representative, the reception center approached the office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, which, in turn, contacted the police in Shar Khumbu and thus I was located. I came to know all this when I reached Kathmandu.

With the assistance of the Tibetan Reception Center, I was taken to a major hospital for the treatment of my leg. The hospital staff examined my leg and said the bone of the knee of my left leg had cracks and my left leg was shorter than the right. That was the day I knew for the first time the real condition of my leg. Unfortunately, the doctor said that because my leg went untreated for long, there was no fruitful treatment for it. Since my leg was injured in prison, while walking on rough roads, I stumbled and fell often because of my short left leg. The doctor explained that not receiving timely medical treatment for the cracks in my left knee was the reason why my left leg was shorter than the right one and the reason why I stumbled and fell while walking. The doctor also explained that the reason I was not able to walk was because the long trek from Tibet to Nepal put immense pressure on the cracks in the bones of my left leg. At the time I learned a lot of my leg conditions from the doctor but because I received no timely medical treatment, I still face difficulties even now.

I spent some time at the Tibetan Reception Center where my overall health improved a bit. In January of 1997, the reception center sent me to India. That month itself I eventually reached Dharamsala. In my early life, the Chinese tortured me to the point that my life was in danger and turned my life into a living hell. Despite this, because of my good karma I had the biggest joy in my life to receive a private audience with His Holiness the Dalai Lama. The Tibetan Centre for Human Rights and Democracy based in Dharamsala requested this audience on my behalf.

During the audience, tears of joy and sorrow flowed from my eyes. At the same time I had the opportunity to brief His Holiness the Dalai Lama of the conditions in Tibet and in prison. In return His Holiness



the Dalai Lama gave me kind advice and asked me what my plans were. At that time I informed him that I wanted to attend school and serve the Tibetan community. His Holiness the Dalai Lama instructed one of the officers to get me admitted to a school. An official of the Department of Security of the Central Tibetan Administration contacted me thereafter and I told him that I wanted to enroll in the Sarah College for Higher Tibetan Studies. As requested he took me to Sarah and I had the opportunity to study. In 2001, I graduated from Sarah College and served as a Tibetan language teacher at the main Tibetan Children's Village in upper Dharamsala for nine years. In 2010 I came to Belgium and since then I have been living in this country.



Mentioning Tibetan Independence Is the Biggest Crime

Sonam Choedon



MY NAME IS SONAM CHOE-
don. My village is Tagphu in Meldo
Gongkar district. I was born on Jan. 10, 1970.
At the time my family had eight members.
They were my two parents, two grandpar-
ents, elder and younger brothers, younger
sister and me. From childhood we were sep-
arated from our parents and lived like
orphans. After a while, our grandparents
passed away and the village commune, pretending to look after him, sent
my elder brother to herd goats and sheep. The rest of us were looked
after by one of our relatives who acted as our foster mother. At the time,
the four orphan brothers and sisters faced immense problems in terms
of food, clothing and love, beyond belief.

At the age of 11, I began working as a babysitter in Lhasa and had to
spend a very poor life with that family. At times when I missed my par-
ents I went outside the house and shouted with all my lungs, “Mother!”



The life of an orphan is really the biggest hardship in the world. It was a life of being deprived of love, which was hard to forget and bear. There was no way to face this hardship except to believe that it was the fruit of the actions of my previous life. After this, I returned to my hometown and served as a servant to my uncle. After several months, I did a little work on the fields. One day I saw two girls of our village returning from Michungri nunnery after becoming nuns, and I wanted to become a nun too. I told my uncle about this. He said that if I did not know how to read and write, there was no way that I could become a nun. He said he would send me to a nunnery later on.

At the time I had never been to school and did not know the Tibetan alphabet.

I promised to learn the Tibetan alphabet and in my mind I was determined to be a nun. Around a month thereafter, I learned that our two nuns would be returning to their nunnery. The next day, I pilfered some eggs from my uncle and went to see the two nuns. I told the two nuns, "I wish to become a nun in your nunnery. Please help me," I cried.

The two nuns replied, "If you really wish to be a nun, we will help."

After three months, I received a message which said, "Come."

After some days, I went to Lhasa. In 1988 I became a nun at Michungri nunnery near Lhasa. At the time, the nunnery was in a process of renovation and we had to work at that and memorize the texts. After one year some of our nuns were in prison. After that, some nine people of the Democratic Management Committee came to our nunnery and imposed huge restrictions on us. They said anyone from the nunnery visiting those nuns in prison would be expelled from the nunnery. Additionally, no nun without permission was allowed to go to Lhasa. Thus the nuns of the nunnery were placed in dire straits. These sessions were held every day and we had no opportunity to study the Buddhist doctrine. They sowed seeds of dissension among the nuns. They always said the Chinese Communist Party was correct and the all-knowing one [the Dalai Lama] was not. They said we were not allowed to go to the prison



to provide food and clothes to the nuns. All this talk gave me a great deal of mental stress.

In 1990, eight of us decided to stage a protest demonstration on the occasion of the annual Shoton [Curd Festival] at Norbulingka. At the time, we met five nuns of Gari nunnery at Norbulingka. At the time Ngawang Sangdrol was the youngest. She came to us and asked where we were going and we discussed frankly.

At the time, there were a great deal of soldiers and police at Norbulingka. It was around nine in the morning and not many people had gathered. As such, we did not gather in a group but scattered individually and we maintained strict vigilance. We agreed to meet around 1 pm and 2 pm in front of the Kalsang Palace. As soon as we decided to stage the protest, I had a lot of mental stress. At the appointed time, we met in a group and shouted, “Tibet is independent. Red Chinese go away from Tibet.” The Tibetan crowd near us scattered away from us. Some cried. We were pounced upon and beaten. Some nuns had their faces covered in blood. After about three or four minutes, five nuns of Gari nunnery and seven nuns of Michungri nunnery were detained and badly beaten and dragged into vehicles and taken to Gutsa prison.

A lot of soldiers arrived at the prison who threatened and beat us. They snatched away our shoelaces, the belts of our gowns and pants and our wristwatches. They forced us to put up our hands on our heads and made us stare at the sun. After this, they beat us turn by turn and we were so badly beaten that we were not able to walk. In the evening, we were given one single steamed bun and a mug of black tea and put in solitary confinement in a cell without mats and blankets. For about several months, we were not allowed to see each other. I felt that if the next day they beat us like this, I thought I would die soon. At night, every part of my body was in pain and I was not able to sleep the whole night. The next morning at sunrise, through my cell window I was given a small steamed dumpling and a cup of tea. After this, someone shouted my name and said, “Come out!” Immediately, they opened my cell door and



interrogated me intensely and prodded me with different electric cattle prods and beat me badly. When I became unconscious, they splashed cold water on my face. When I regained consciousness, they resumed the beating. For about four months, they took us for interrogation twice a day.

At that time on occasions, I saw my friends being taken away for interrogation and I clearly saw that they were badly beaten. One day they took us to the people's court and slapped prison sentences on us. We were then transferred to Drapchi prison. At Drapchi two or three political prisoners were mixed with non-political women prisoners. The prison was highly restrictive. Some prisoners had to work on the vegetables in the greenhouse and some had to carry human waste in carts and scatter it in the greenhouse. In the morning and evening, we had to do wool work and knit sweaters. In this way, we were forced to do a variety of chores. We faced a lot of difficulties during ill health and menstrual periods. Some nuns had more problems then. Despite all this, we had to go to work.

Sometimes the political prisoners were summoned for meetings to discuss topics that went against our standpoints. At these times, we faced a great deal of difficulty. Despite all this, in 1993, we recorded a political song. The prison authorities did not know about the first recording. The second recording came to the knowledge of the authorities and those involved in this underwent immense suffering and their prison sentence was increased. At the time, my prison term was about to end. I experienced no happiness about the prospect of my coming release because the prison sentences slapped on my friends were increased a lot. After four years of my prison term, I returned home. However, I was not allowed to return to my nunnery and had to report to the police even for going to my home.

Since then, my relatives and others faced a great deal of hardship. There were hardly any monks and nuns in our village who did not participate in the protests of 1987 and 1988. Two or three monks lost their lives



in these protests. As such when I returned home, no one dared to come to meet me. They were all fearful of doing this. At the time I had this great desire to see my prison mates but I had only one opportunity to do this. After this I tried to go to India. The reason for this was because I was not allowed to return to my nunnery and it was difficult for me to make a living. In 1994 and 1995 I was able to escape to India. Those days, in order to escape to India I needed a sizable amount of money which was provided for me by my brother, a monk at Drepung monastery who also looked after me when I was in prison for four years. I reached India between 1995 and 1996.

At that time there were 27 of us on the road. With me was my paternal uncle's son who was nine years old. This made the escape that much more difficult. After about a month we reached Nepal. At that time, the conditions at the Tibetan Reception Center in Kathmandu were poor. All the girls were put up in one dormitory. So were the boys in another dormitory.

After spending one week in Kathmandu, we reached the Tibetan Reception Center in Delhi where we spent about a week. In Delhi we were asked a lot of questions about Tibet and the conditions in prison. However, I was at the time reluctant to answer the questions because I had a lot of my friends in prison and I thought my answers would bring them more trouble.

After this, we reached Dharamsala. At the Tibetan Reception Center in Dharamsala, there was a staff by the name of Shilok, who gave the four of us former political prisoners much encouragement and provided a separate room for us. The three other former political prisoners were from Michungri nunnery and were from Gutsa and Toelung prisons. Two of them are in Australia and one is in America. After about a month in Dharamsala, I planned to be admitted to the Dolmaling nunnery because I had known that the nunnery taught Tibetan language and Buddhism and I had a great desire to be admitted to this nunnery.

Prison in Tibet was a place where the Chinese humiliated us and I



was only able to read Tibetan and was not able to write even my name. I regret this very much.

For this reason I went to the nunnery. At the time the nunnery was in a process of construction. While studying, we had to help in the construction.

At the nunnery, I had this great opportunity to study and I felt determined to study hard. I also went through a mix of emotions of both joy and sorrow. I felt great sadness because my fellow nuns were still in prison and underwent great hardship day and night, which made my eyes well up in tears. Sometimes, remembering them made me think of returning to Tibet. The nunnery was maintained with strict discipline and I faced some problems. Whatever the case, without losing spirit, I participated in almost every long march and demonstration. I was bundled off in Indian prison two times. I love my studies and applied myself hard. As the years progressed, I found it difficult to understand Buddhist philosophy and dialectics.

Since then, I became less interested in staying at the nunnery. In 2008, I took part in the great march. There were 12 nuns of Dolmaling in this long march. It took us about three months to complete the march. When I returned to the nunnery, I discovered that I lagged behind in my studies. My health deteriorated and I was not able to apply myself well to my studies. As such, I took a three-months' leave of absence and stayed outside the nunnery. At the time my former prison mate, Gyaltzen Dolker, was living in Belgium. I briefed her about my problems and said I had no great desire to stay on in the nunnery. If I was not able to apply myself to my studies, I had to perform a lot of chores. Also, I had my three siblings who were living in poor conditions. As such I wanted to go abroad in the hope that I would be able to help my three siblings. For these reasons I came to Belgium.

When I was in prison, my elder brother helped me a great deal and I thought I would be in a position to help him financially. However, after arrival here, because of the language barrier and the fact that I



was not that young, it was difficult for me to work. However, I faced no livelihood problems.

I always remember my former prison mates who suffer ill health and many of them had passed away. I always support and participate in movements for the cause of Tibet and the Tibetan people. In the beginning, I had little knowledge of the history of Tibet but knew clearly that China and Tibet were separate. This issue is something the Tibetan people will always find it difficult to forget. Because the cause of Tibet is deeply embedded in our hearts and until this long-felt aspiration is fulfilled, my spirit will never die. My past deeds and the physical and mental hardship I suffered will never be forgotten by me. Like me, my family members and relatives also suffered a lot. One thing truly sad is that I have not been able to see them and my homeland for 24 long years. I live today in Belgium.





The Reason Why I Escaped

Thinley Choezom



MY NAME IS THINLEY CHOE-
zom and I don't know the exact date
of my birth. My mother told me that I was
born in the 12th month in the Wood Tiger
year or it might have been the Fire Dragon
year - she wasn't quite sure. There were no
registry offices when I was born and no birth
certificates were issued. Tibetans would
know how old they were simply by learning
the symbol of their year. My mother gave birth to 10 children but now
only two are alive, my brother and me. I was the third child.

For a long time, I did not know why so many of my brothers and
sisters passed away when they were children, but now I understand it
was partly at least due to lack of medical support. Villages in my part of
Tibet consisted of about twenty families and although there were many
villages scattered over a wide area surrounding my village there was no
doctor and no hospital. There was a nurse but she could only give injec-



tions and medicine though we called her doctor. She didn't have an office of any kind. People simply went to her home if they needed medical help.

I do not want to talk about the details of my childhood life as some of the stories are too personal and sad too. However, I had some happy childhood memories such as growing up in a beautiful village called Drikung in the area of Meldo Gongkar with a beautiful loving family. I was one of the lucky children as I did get a chance to go to school when I was about nine and there I learned how to read and write in Tibetan. When I was 15 I became a nun and my father arranged for me to enter the Michungri nunnery which is perched on the side of a steep rocky mountain about three kilometers northeast of Lhasa, accessible only by a rough walking track. I did not do much Buddhist practice as during that time all the nuns had to rebuild the nunnery, which had been destroyed by the Chinese occupation, so we had lots of work instead of study or practice. I stayed in the nunnery only two years and later in 1992, I joined for a peaceful protest in Lhasa with some of my friends.

PRISON

Four of my friends and I traveled to Lhasa to make our protest outside of the Jokhang Temple. We would stay at a small temple in Lhasa Kharngya Dong overnight and meet up with another friend who was a monk. This was not organized by anyone else; we just decided among ourselves that we would do the only thing we could to show the Chinese the revulsion we felt at the loss of Tibet's freedom. No matter how puny our effort might seem to the Chinese and to the world we were committed to doing our bit for our country. My friends included Lobsang Dolma, Phunstsok Yangkyi, Lobsang Choedon, Sherab Ngawang and the monk called Lobsang Choedak. It was not unusual for both monks and nuns together to take part in the demonstrations.

The purpose of our demonstration was to proclaim a "Free Tibet" and for the Chinese to leave and return to their own country. Our demonstration was quite simple. We stood together in a small group in the busy



marketplace in Lhasa and called out slogans like, “Independence for Tibet!” “Tibet belongs to Tibetans!” “Long live His Holiness, the Dalai Lama.” and “May peace prevail on Earth.”

Before we took part in the protest we knew from previous protesters that we were taking a risk but we yearned so much to change the situation in Tibet that despite the risks we were prepared to sacrifice ourselves for this cause. We knew that we had to take risks if anything at all was going to be changed in Tibet.

The demonstration lasted only fifteen minutes before hundreds of Chinese army and police arrived with guns and tools in their hands. They grabbed us and dragged us into the police station in the Barkhor, and made us stand up there for about an hour and later shoved us into two vehicles that were standing at the ready. Lobsang Dolma, Lobsang Choedon and Sherab Ngawang were thrown into one of the army vans. For them, it was like being in a dark cage surrounded by soldiers. Phuntsok Yangkyi, Lobsang Choedok and I were manhandled into a police car. We sat in the middle with police on either side of us. This frightening experience was exacerbated by the police siren blaring out at full force. Although we didn’t know where we were going at the time the driver was taking us to Gutsa Detention Center. Gutsa, also known as “no. 4 Unit,” is a detention center where prisoners who are “under investigation” are held while they await sentencing. Gutsa is known to be one of the worst prisons for the brutal methods used by Chinese interrogators. During the journey, the driver turned around and snarled at us. “Why didn’t you stay at home with your parents? Why do you want to join a monastery? Look at you now. You are a disgrace. You disturb the peace of the country.”

Phuntsok Yangkyi looked at him and in a calm voice said, “We are not the ones disturbing the country. We are standing up for our rights, for human rights. We are doing this for Tibet. We only want what is right for Tibet.” For this comment, my friend received a slap on her face so painful that her cheek and eye began to swell.



As strange as it may seem, although I cringed and trembled I was not really frightened throughout this ordeal. I was too fired up I suppose. I was too incensed with what was happening to Tibet and with the way the Tibetan people were being treated. I was proud of what we were doing but I was kind of sad, too. No one had ever treated me or anyone I knew like this before.

The drive was not long. Gutsa Detention Center is only about three kilometers east of Lhasa near the Kyichu [River] but to us, it seemed to take an eternity. As soon as we arrived at Gutsa, the police pulled us from the van and literally dragged us to the main office inside the building. Each of us was placed in a separate room and our clothes were removed women guards checked for weapons. This was a humiliating experience for us to be naked in front of prison guards. We were then interrogated individually.

There were six police in the cell. They took turns at beating me with heavy sticks, electric batons and belts. They also slapped me. "Why did you demonstrate?" they shouted. When I told them the truth of why we demonstrated they seemed to get even angrier. One of the men beat me.

"Did your parents send you?" they demanded. When I answered, "No, I joined my friends because it was my own choice," they repeated the question over and over. And every time I answered with the truth, I was beaten again.

"Somebody must have sent you," bellowed another of the men. "You are too young and stupid to do this by yourself."

"No," I told him again I did all by myself and for this answer, I was slapped across the face. "You are a destroyer. You have no sense," the man shouted.

"What do you think you will get when you get independence?" sneered one of the police. On and on the questioning went. The same questions, the same answers. The more frustrated the police got, the more they took it out on me. Yet, through it all, I was not angry, only infinitely sad. I had prepared myself for this. I knew what was going to



happen. I was ready for the beatings and the cursing and the insults. I considered myself lucky because the beatings and torture meted out to nuns arrested like us a couple of years earlier was far worse than what I was experiencing now.

Much later, when we were able to compare notes I found that each of my friends received the same treatment as I did. This treatment lasted all day from early morning until the evening. I was left alone standing in a corner, icy cold, and did not receive any food. Eventually, late in the evening, I was given some Tibetan tingmo (steamed bread) and black tea in a metal cup. Strangely, that upset me. In Tibet, we always drink out of glass or wooden cups. That steel cup made me feel quite sad and homesick. I wanted to stay strong but suddenly I felt the tears coming. For the first time since the start of my ordeal, I longed for my mother and the safety of home.

One of the guards, who was a little more human than the others, said kindly, “You have been standing all day. You can sit down and eat.”

“I can’t,” I said. “My body is numb.”

The guard then took me to a small cell separated from my friends. It was winter and we were given only one thin blanket each. It was very cold. There was ice under my feet. Fortunately, because we had heard the stories of other nuns in Gutsa we came prepared for the cold and wore very warm *chupas* and jackets.

For a few weeks, I was not able to communicate with my friends because we were put in small cells separated from each other. We were not allowed out. From my window, I could see the snow-topped mountain and I longed for the freedom to climb it. In the cell, I was given a bucket with no lid to use as a toilet and during all those weeks only twice was I allowed to go outside to throw away my own waste. Hygiene was not a priority. It was only for a few minutes while I carried out this chore that I got the chance to walk in the sunshine.

After some time I was transferred to a small cell with six or seven other people. The conditions were very cramped and uncomfortable. It



was six months from the time we were arrested till the time we were put on trial and during that time we were interrogated repeatedly.

Eventually, the day came when we were taken from Gustsa to the court in Lhasa, where we were surrounded by hundreds of police.

At the trial many police, lawyers and judges asked us questions about who organized our protest. We told them as before that we had organized it ourselves. All through repeated interrogations and also through the trial we did not change our minds. They did not receive any new information from us.

The judge told us in his summing up that we were the “destroyers of universal peace” and that we were very bad in trying “to separate the Chinese and Tibetans.”

Following the trial, we were taken back to Gutsa. We were not sentenced at the court. We had to wait until much later to find out what sentences were being handed down to us.

Life at the Detention Center was not easy but we were finally given permission to meet outsiders. This was in exchange for doing hard physical work which included cleaning the toilets by hand, a filthy job. We had to empty all the human waste. We also had to carry water from the wells in huge barrels for the vegetable crops which were grown around the prison. When the toilets overflowed we carried the excess from them also to the vegetable crops. It is a Chinese custom to use human waste to fertilize the crops. The cabbages, for instance, are helped to grow big and hearty by depositing a scoopful of excrement in the center of the plant.

This was all strenuous labor that we were doing. We all worked extremely hard. Unfortunately, the food we received in return was poor. Most times it was not cooked properly. As a result, many prisoners became malnourished and were often sick.

For breakfast, we were given one piece of tingmo, for lunch watery vegetables with rice, and for dinner watery broth with tingmo. Often we found flies, hair and rubbish inside our food. The food was always served through a hole in the door. The guards would never open the door



to have any dealings with us. Often the guards would push our food so hard that it came in contact with our toilet bucket. Then the contents of the toilet bucket would spill over our food; as a result, we could not eat our food and often experienced stomach pain from hunger.

Because of the lack of hygiene diarrhea was a very common problem. This was only to be expected when you consider that each cell contained six or seven people and the toilet which all six or seven had to use was an open bucket. When one contracted diarrhea naturally it would spread like wildfire through the rest of us. And with no lid we did our best to find a bit of paper to cover the bucket and when we couldn't manage that we had to resort to using one of the blankets as a cover to try to alleviate the stench. And, of course, there was no water for hand washing. Sometimes, when I look back I wonder how we survived at all, but such is the power of faith and prayer and determination that most of us managed.

About eight months after we first arrived at Gutsa, our sentences were given to us. One day a judge came to Gutsa and called us to a meeting. There the documents denoting our sentences were handed out. The sentences that were given were as follows: Lobsang Dolma received seven years, Phunstok Yangkyi received five years, Lobsang Choedak, the monk, received five years and I received four years. These sentences were to be carried out at the notorious Drapchi Prison in Lhasa, just a couple minutes' walk north of the Potala Palace.

In due course, we were taken to Drapchi Prison. On arrival at the prison, just as had happened when we first arrived at Gutsa, we were stripped and examined physically. We were told that from that day onward we had to "purify our bad deeds; we had to change our minds and our characters." They said that we must change our thinking as we did not act like human beings. They gave us a list of rules to memorize which was supposed to help us to do this. They forced us to read Chinese newspapers, written in the Tibetan language but full of Chinese propaganda. They set up television screens in the hall where we were taken once a week to watch Chinese news. They gave us prison clothes to



wear. We were not allowed ever to wear our yellow and red robes inside or outside the prison because none of the other prisoners and none of the general public were to know that monks and nuns were political prisoners. In fact, whenever we were on the streets outside the prison carrying out prison tasks we had to ensure that not only were our bodies covered but our faces too.

We were told that we would immediately be put to work on the prison farms and the vegetable gardens. The gardens were extensive and the crops were healthy and luscious because, as at Gutsa, they were fertilized by human waste. It was our job to collect this human waste from the soldiers' toilets and from the nearby schools. To do this we had to stand in the excrement which came up above our knees and shovel it into buckets. We would then pass our bucketful on to the next person. Sometimes the feces would splash into our faces and go into our mouths. Once, before I came to Drapchi, the contents of the buckets would be loaded into waste trucks and taken by these trucks to the vegetable gardens. However, in my time we had to empty the buckets into wheelbarrows which we then had to maneuver along the streets back to the prison, one person pushing and another pulling. We had to almost run along the road with our full wheelbarrow because the police would follow us on bicycles shouting at us all the time, "Faster, faster. You are too slow. Move faster."

If ever we were late completing this wretched chore - and inevitably we were at times because the wheelbarrow would tip over and the mess would then have to be cleaned off the street - the guards would send us into the prison buildings to clean out the rubbish containers with our bare hands. They never ever gave us gloves.

And what happened to this bountiful produce that the Chinese were able to harvest at the expense of the prisoners' labor? It was all sold to line Chinese pockets. Not one vegetable or one yuan ever came a prisoner's way.

In 1994, the Chinese decided it was time to train us for the army. I



found this training more difficult than anything I had experienced in prison so far. I understood that the main purpose of the army training was to punish the prisoners, both physically and mentally. We had a very hard time during that time.

The physical exercises were extremely testing also. The final goal was for us to perfect the Chinese military walk, the high step, the straight leg, the swinging arms and the perfect posture. This apparently required constant military-style drills under the hot Tibetan sun. Sun radiation is extremely strong in Tibet because of its high altitude and the thin atmosphere.

Every day we female political prisoners were forced to spend five-and-a-half hours jogging and marching. We used to have to swing our arms and march in perfect step with one another while yelling such Chinese slogans as: “Become a changed person!” and “Protest counter-revolutionaries” and “Preserve the laws.”

Then we were made to stand for another two hours looking straight at the sun with books on our heads; if the book fell we were beaten. If we moved we were beaten or kicked. One day a little bit of hair fell over my face. It felt as if it was in my eyes and I wanted to push it back. I did not think the guard was watching very closely at the time so I moved quite surreptitiously I thought, to shake it back. The next thing I knew, the backs of my knees were being kicked by the guard. We had to stand so straight and tall that all our muscles were as taut as highly-strung wire and the kick caused immense pain. I almost fell to the ground.

Another little drill the military devised was to put paper under our arms and between our legs as we stood to attention once again staring at the sun. If a guard was able to pull the paper out from under your arms or from between your legs that obviously meant that you were slack; you were not standing rigidly enough. That was a good reason to give you another beating. Quite often the combination of hot sun and rigid muscles were enough to make you vomit or faint or both. That happened to me once. And when I fell to the floor I gave the guard another good



reason to kick me. The guards treated us worse than animals. They treated us as toys to be used and abused and discarded at their pleasure. I have no idea what satisfaction they got out of all this maltreatment.

My friend, Phuntsok Yankyi, who took part in the same demonstration as I had been a very healthy person before she went to prison. And like Gyaltzen she had a jolly personality and loved singing. She had toiled beside me when we were rebuilding our nunnery at Michungri where she proved herself to be a very hard worker. She was taken to Gutsa Detention Center with me after our demonstration where, like all of us, she was made to work very hard. One of her jobs was to spray chemicals in the greenhouse with the windows and doors of the greenhouse closed and with no mask or gloves for protection. She was also beaten continually and severely by the guards. I remember seeing her one day with her eyes so swollen they were nearly shut. As a result of this maltreatment by the time she was transferred to Drapchi with me, she was not at all in good health. And it didn't help that she was routinely beaten during the morning military marching exercises.

She grew weaker and weaker but the guards made her work continuously. She began to complain of pain on her right front side and she was limping. She also said she had a pain in her back at the site of her kidneys and she was able to eat very little food. When she reached the stage where it was impossible for her to get out of bed, let alone go to work, a couple of the nuns went to both the Tibetan and the Chinese police prison authorities and pleaded with them to take her to a hospital. The authorities gave in and she was taken to the Public Security Bureau Hospital. The two nuns were allowed to go with her.

After three days the nuns returned to Drapchi. They were crying. They told us what we had already guessed, Phuntsok was dead. We all cried.

The nuns told us that Phuntsok had black spots on her nails, lips and legs which convinced her parents that their daughter had been poisoned. The prison authorities staunchly maintained that she died of a brain



tumor. It seemed strange to us that Phuntsok's body was not given back to her family for burial.

It is so sad that these kinds of things happened so often to monks, nuns and other political prisoners. When we became sick the prison officers would not take us to the hospital and would not give us the proper medicine. We might have a problem with our stomachs – this was common – but we would be given medicine much more suited to the alleviation of headaches or other ailments. Our health was not considered important in the slightest.

I was traumatized by my time in prison. The Chinese used any excuse they could find to beat us up. They would set us exercises to do but not give a clear explanation of how to do them. If we did not respond immediately and correctly to their orders they would beat us up. At one time we had to spin the sheep wool gathered from the sheep that grazed around the prison and prepare it for carpet making. We were given many kilograms of wool to work each day. We would start early in the morning and work until very late in the night. We were put into groups and if one or two members of our group got sick then we would have to work extra hard to cover for them. We were not allowed to sleep until the day's allocation of work was complete no matter how few people there were to do it, which was hard on us all physically. Often, particularly in winter, the wool would cut into our hands and they would bleed. And, again, we would be abused by the prison guards if the work was not completed on time.

We only ever received one pair of shoes for all the training exercises we had to do. If our shoes split or it rained heavily and they became soaked or if we got a hole in the shoe from the constant turning round in the one spot, that was it. The shoes would not be replaced. We were forced to ask our families to send us new shoes and that was an expense many of our families could ill afford.

The prison used to hold competitions in precision marching among the different prison sectors. We women prisoners were Section 3 and



we had to compete against the men from other sectors on their terms. Sometimes we even had to compete against prisoners from other prisons. We were almost always first place. Our officers had been in top ranking military platoons before they became prison guards so they knew what was expected of first-class soldiers. They trained us so hard that we had to become perfect for all our hard work. The officer in charge of us would be highly honored. He would be presented with a trophy and a money prize if we won. It was no wonder he was so ruthless. Every month one of our family members was allowed to visit and they would bring with them donations of food or money from Tibetans of all walks of life. Many of them had no family member of their own in prison but they knew parents who did. They would say, "Take this food for your son or daughter. We are proud of what they are doing and we want to show them that we care." The visiting for political prisoners was very strict and very hard for both families and prisoners because only one of the family members were allowed to come inside the prison gate to meet the prisoners and also one to two police sat with prisoners and family while they were meeting. The police listened to what subject we exchanged with our family members and also searched all the food that our families brought us as they were suspicious that family may bring some information from outside. After I was released I heard that the system of the meetings between prisoners and families were changed and it went from bad to worse because prisoners and family could meet only through the glass and they could talk only by phone. When I heard about it I was feeling so sorry for my friends in prison.

RELEASE FROM PRISON

I was finally released from Drapchi Prison in early 1996. On the day of my release, I was very upset to be leaving my friends in prison. Since we were thrown together so intimately for so long I had made many close and dear friends. My father and one of my father's relatives came to collect me from prison and later they took me to visit the Jokhang.



Inside the Jokhang, I found myself very nervous and uncomfortable being among so many people after being isolated in a prison for so long. I found it very difficult to be out in public at all. I had developed a phobia and felt very unsettled in my mind, kind of depressed and lonely. I felt that something was missing. I was sad and when I reflected on my treatment and the situation in Tibet I was overcome with emotion.

When I saw the face of Lord Buddha in the Jokhang, I was moved to tears as I remembered my friends still back in prison. I also thought of the hardship and suffering that I had caused my family by being in prison for such a long period of time.

Even though I was released from the prison I did not have freedom like normal people because Chinese police called my father to inquire about my whereabouts after I returned to Lhasa. I had been ordered to get permission from the police in Meldo Gongkar if I wanted to travel anywhere at all, even to Lhasa. I hadn't done this. I just wanted to get to the hospital. But orders had to be obeyed. So my father and I presented ourselves at the police headquarters in Meldo Gongkar. The policeman who met us was a Tibetan himself but working for the Chinese government. Many of the Tibetans who work for the Chinese are not well educated but they are given responsible positions and are well paid. The policeman warned me that if I wanted to go to Lhasa I was required to check with him or there would be trouble.

I realized then I was virtually under house arrest. I was forbidden to rejoin my nunnery as a nun. I couldn't find a job as I was an ex-political prisoner and a nun. Chinese would never employ me and Tibetans would be afraid to. I was unable to return to my old nunnery as the police had forbidden this. As well, the Chinese often bribe Tibetan citizens to act as spies and so the authorities were able to keep me under surveillance. The Chinese also have a policy of wearing plain clothes and going to monasteries to spy on people. Due to this difficult situation, I decided to escape to India. In September 1996, twenty-four people and I walked from Tibet over the high mountains to Nepal. I did not know these peo-



ple; we just happened to have chosen the same guide. I stayed in India for seven years and later came to New Zealand.

Now I live in a beautiful country with my beautiful family, and I hope that one day we will go back to Tibet.



Seeing Nothing but the Sky

The Songs of Tibetans Nuns in a Chinese Prison

A recording of the songs sung by the imprisoned nuns was smuggled out of prison and to the West, where it was made into a CD entitled *Seeing Nothing but the Sky - The Songs of Tibetans Nuns in a Chinese Prison* and first released to the public in 1993.

“WE’VE SUNG A SONG OF SADNESS”

*We’ve sung a song of sadness
We’ve sung it from Drapchi prison
Like the happy and joyful snow mountains
We’ve sung this song for the sake of freedom
Previously, a spiritual realm of dharma
Now, is changed to a barbaric prison ground.
Even at the cost of our lives, we Tibetans,
Will never lose our courage.
O, what a sad fate we Tibetans have!
To be tortured mercilessly by barbarians
We don’t have freedom
Under the yoke of these barbarians*

“I LOOKED OUT FROM DRAPCHI PRISON”

*I looked out from Drapchi prison
There was nothing to see but sky
The clouds that gather in sky,
We thought, if only these were our parents.
We fellow prisoners
[Like] flowers in Norbulingka,
Even if we're beaten by frost and hail,
Our joined hands will not be separated.
The white cloud from the east
Is not a patch that is sewn
A time will come when the sun will emerge
From the cloud and shine clearly
Our hearts are not sad;
Why should we be sad?
Even if the sun doesn't shine during the day
There will be the moon at night
Even if the sun doesn't shine during the day
There will be the moon at night*



In 2009, six of the twelve Drapchi nuns were reunited at an ICT event in Amsterdam. They joined to perform a song they'd written and sang together while imprisoned 16 years earlier.

“MAY NO OTHERS SUFFER LIKE THIS”

*Song of sadness in our hearts
We sing this to our brothers and friends
What we Tibetans feel in this darkness will pass
The food does not sustain body or soul
Beatings impossible to forget
This suffering inflicted upon us
May no others suffer like this
In the heavenly realm, the land of snows
Land of unending peace and blessings
May Avalokiteshvara Tenzin Gyatso
Reign supreme throughout all eternity*

<https://savetibet.org/song-of-sadness-from-drapchi-prison-the-official-chinese-verdict-on-the-drapchi-singing-nuns/>



In 2005, Ngawang Sangdrol traveled with ICT on a speaking tour in Europe. Sangdrol (center) is seen here during a light moment with Gyaltzen Dolkar (left), and two other former nun prisoners.

“SEEING NOTHING BUT THE SKY”

*Looking from the window,
Seeing nothing but the sky
And the clouds that float in the sky,
Which I wish were my parents
We, the captured friends in spirit,
We might be the ones to fetch the jewel,
No matter how hard we are beaten
Our linked arms cannot be separated.*