

Tenzin Khando
Narrator

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Interviewer

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Minnesota Tibetan Oral History Project

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CL: Today is the 20th of September, 2005. My name is Charles Lenz and today I will be interviewing Tenzin Khando at the Minnesota History Center.

Can you state your name for the tape?

TK: My name is Tenzin Khando. T-e-n-z-i-n. Last name K-h-a-n-d-o.

CL: And how old are you?

TK: Twenty.

CL: And where were you born?

TK: I was born in New Delhi in India in a hospital called Holy Family Hospital. In New Delhi.

CL: And did you live in—did you kind of grow up in New Delhi then?

TK: Yes. Went to kindergarten and I think up to grade two in New Delhi at Junior and Tiny Tots and after that transferred to Wynberg Allen, which is a boarding school in Himachal Pradesh in another area (another state, actually) in India. And from there I came here in sixth grade.

CL: So do you know what year it was when you moved here?

TK: 1997. I'm not quite sure. I should know this.

CL: And how old were you when you moved here then?

TK: I was twelve.

CL: Was there someone from your family who was here before you?

TK: Yes. My father.

CL: When did your father move here?

TK: A couple of years before we did. I'm not quite sure when he came here too.

CL: Was he part of the resettlement project?¹

TK: Yes, he was. He was one of the one thousand or one of the original people to move here.

CL: Do you know when—do you know what wave of the project he was in or was he in the beginning or in the middle or—?

TK: I have no clue, actually. I'm sorry.

CL: So how was it like growing up in India? Did you like India?

TK: Yes. India is a very diverse country so it was always—it was a very good experience growing up there even though you didn't look like everyone who was around you, obviously, because everyone there was Indian. You still felt like it was your country, I suppose. So since you were born there, you know, that's the only country I ever knew. In that sense I was connected. I really enjoyed my childhood, because compared to millions of the Indians living there I had a relatively great childhood. So yes, it was good.

CL: And how was it like when you first found out that you were—when your dad first found out he was moving to America, do you remember any of that at all? Did your family talk about it?

TK: No. Actually, when my dad first moved here I was in boarding school, so I got a letter telling that my dad was going to America and I remember . . . I think he wrote. He wrote like he was going to Minnesota. And I had no clue where Minnesota was, so me and my friends spent like the entire day searching for Minnesota on the map. Couldn't find it because the map of America that we had was incredibly dense. Did you know it had everything listed on it? And it was huge. It was on a—it was in the library covering an entire wall. So it was really big and—gave up. Decided that I'll ask him whenever I see him, which is, you know, because we didn't see our parents for like—went to school nine months in the year.

CL: Did you have the same schedule, like the same school schedule as we do in the West?

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

TK: No. Actually, over there it's the opposite. Summer is shorter. Winter is longer. But I think school starts a little earlier than it does here. And we don't have as many holidays.

CL: So you got a letter from your dad that said . . .

TK: Yes.

CL: So had he already left then by the time you got back from or finished school and was on break time?

TK: Yes. He did. He was gone. But then he did return. Like every year he would come back during my winter break—or no, during my summer break he would come back because then I would be in Delhi and then he would come back and visit. It wasn't like I was not seeing him because whenever I was gone was when he was gone and when I came back he came back. So our schedule worked out. It wasn't as though I didn't see my parents at all, because my mom did visit me like during holidays and whatnot when I was at boarding school. I was there most of the time. It wasn't a problem.

CL: Do you remember what it was like though to suddenly realize your dad was so far away?

TK: Actually, it wasn't that bad. I was like a little disconnected. You know, because you're going to school and when you go to boarding school the first month or two will be really bad. Like you will be homesick and you don't want to do anything. You hate everyone. But eventually you get used to it. You realize the niceties of going to boarding school where you don't have to do anything except study and hang out with your friends. There's no chores. There's no parents nagging at you. It's pretty good, actually, now that I think about it. It's like college except less work and more free play. So it was fun.

CL: So when did you find out that you were going to come to America?

TK: That was during my sixth grade. Summer vacation. Yes. My mom came to pick me up and told me that we were going to America. And I was completely shocked because I was expecting to come back to school. I already made plans with my friends for like the next school year because the next year we would be in—it would be like . . . we were transferring from the Junior School to the Senior School so it was a big period for us. I was really bummed that I wouldn't be able to go to Senior School and like hang out, because they had a lot more things that they could do that we couldn't do. We were restricted because we were younger. But yes, it wasn't as exciting as I thought it would be, because I was totally dwelling on my friends and the stuff that we were going to do together as we entered Senior School together. But we did exchange like addresses and stuff. When your parents tell you you have to go, you have to go.

CL: So you got picked up for—so pretty much you got picked up for summer break and your mom says, “Oh, by the way, we’re going to America.”

TK: Yes. And then it’s like, “We’re not coming back here.” I’m like, “What do you mean we’re not coming back?” “Oh, we’re leaving the country.” And I’m like, “What?” And she’s like, “Yes, I have to go talk to your principal now.” I’m like, “Okay.” So I’m just sitting there with my friends and, “Where’s your mom?” “I don’t know. She’s with the principal.” So that was kind of odd. I think it was better that way, because if she told me earlier I might have like protested or, you know, not wanted to go or something. Because I had it pretty good back in India. Yes, so anyway . . .

CL: So how was it like when you first arrived in the U.S.?

TK: Arrival in the U.S. Hmm. I was greeted by my dad’s host family. Very nice people. Yes. It was fun, I suppose, when I first came. Everything was new. There were a lot of people that I didn’t expect would be here. Like I didn’t know anything about diversity in the United States. I assumed that it was all European people or people of European descent. So shocked to see black people, Latino. So it was just—it was a new experience and it was actually—after a while I realized that that was a good thing because it helped—in a sense, it did help me get in the community because there were already other minorities present. So it didn’t feel like you were the only outsider in that sense.

CL: How long was it in between the time your mom told you you were going to go and you actually got on the plane and left?

TK: It’s like a couple of months. It’s like two months. We had to work for two months like packing and we had to take all our stuff because we had a ton of it. We had to rent like an entire truck. I remember. We rode the truck to my uncle’s place. It’s like another district. It’s like out of New Delhi. I had to ride the truck there and like—that in itself was an amazing experience, by the way. Riding an Indian truck in the back, sitting on a couch. Your driver is playing like Indian music in his small radio in the front. That was pretty cool. Yes.

And another amazing story, too. Like . . . we got stopped by the police, the border police. At night. Because they were like, “What’s in the truck?” I think that was the time when they were having drug problems maybe or something and they were continuously checking all the border patrols and whatnot. My mom pretended to be a judge to get through and our driver actually was a pretty smart guy. He was like, “Oh, you know, this is a judge back there in the truck. This is her stuff.” Of course, my mom doesn’t look Indian and I guess she does have somewhat of an authoritative kind of air to her. So she’s pretending to sit there with a stern demeanor on her face and we got through. So it was pretty cool.

So, yes, the two months . . . it was like two or three. I'm not sure. But the couple months that we spent before coming here were a lot of fun because we were just packing and saying goodbye to everyone and meeting all our relatives. There was a lot of traveling.

CL: So did you have any expectations when you came to the U.S. at all? I mean besides expecting everyone to be white and European?

TK: Expectations? No. Not really. I didn't know a lot about America. What I saw was on TV. So you know like . . .

CL: So *Baywatch*, that was your—?

TK: Yes. Exactly. I knew David Hasselhoff back in India.

CL: That's sad.

TK: Yes. It is. Now that I think about it. I think that was about it. That and *Star Trek*. But *Star Trek*'s not real, obviously, so you can't really judge a culture from that.

CL: There's *WWF*² but that doesn't seem the culture of the Indians.

TK: Oh, that was huge too. Yes. Oh, my God. I used to be a huge Hulk Hogan fan. I used to have his cards and stuff.

CL: You get a bag of chips and you get the wrestling cards in them?

TK: No. We didn't, actually. We just got the cards. And we traded them on campus. Yes. It was big on our campus. Because we had a lot of students from Nepal and we had some students from Thailand. So they would bring—obviously they had *WWF* in their countries, too, and they were bringing the merchandise over and like we would trade and it was a lot of fun. Anyway, no, I didn't have any expectations other than what I was told to expect which was a good education and . . . yes, I think that was it. It wasn't like a huge change. I don't know why it wasn't. Because we had all the amenities that we have here that we had there. So in that sense it wasn't like a big change for me. It was just like a neighborhood change which I've had a lot of in my past. So like, we moved lots.

CL: So what was—by the time you arrived in the U.S. did your dad—I'm sure he already had a job and whatnot and things kind of set up for you?

TK: Yes.

CL: Can you talk a little bit about maybe the way things were when you first got here and what your know your dad went through to get everything arranged?

² World Wrestling Federation.

TK: I know that he had to work like—I think he was working two jobs to make sufficient, you know, to have sufficient funds to come back to India and visit us every year. Because that cost a lot in itself. And when you come, you can't be empty handed. So there's a lot of expenditures right there. Yes. I know that he had a pretty tough time because when he came here they didn't have any transportation so it was like—and you know Minnesota winters and like waiting at the bus stop like four o'clock in the morning or whatever and working like until eleven at night or whatever and just like doing two jobs and stuff. I've heard that a lot. And that's very rough, I think. Obviously. So he had to hustle a lot to get us here.

CL: How was that? Because I know your father was kind of bureaucrat in India. So how was that being a—did he ever talk about his job changes or anything?

TK: Well, my dad . . . the good thing about my dad is that he doesn't really realize his position in India. He didn't really see it as a big deal because he was always in that circle. Like if you're not in the circle and you're included all of a sudden then you realize the prestige of it whereas if you're always in there you kind of take it for granted. So I think that was probably his case. He probably didn't measure it too much or didn't dwell on it.

So that's why when he came here it wasn't like, "Oh, I'm going to do certain jobs because of my previous jobs." So he was pretty open to everything. He seemed to enjoy it. Like he showed us tapes of . . . videotapes of . . . there was some documentary or something done on Tibetan immigrants or something and he was in it. He's sitting in a lawn chair like on some garden. I don't know where. But talking about experiences and they showed him like making bagels at Bruegger's and we thought it was pretty cool because obviously you've never seen bagels before. But, yes, so you know, he was very open to change which was a good thing for him, definitely.

CL: What about for you? I mean, you talked a little bit about how it kind of just seemed like a neighborhood changed, but were there things that you met there in the beginning that—no huge, big adjustments or anything?

TK: Not really, actually. I didn't have a tough time assimilating into American culture. I was kind of just like—I just kind of was more—I had seen it before. I wasn't completely new to it. I had seen it on television and knew it. Like Americans, what they sounded like, what they looked like. So in that sense it wasn't like a complete shock to me. And on the plus side, my school was also like a Westernized school so I didn't necessarily grow up with the strict principles and society life of Tibetans. And always, I'd never been in a large Tibetan community for my entire life. Now that I think about it. So this would be the largest community that I've ever been with, the Minnesota Tibetan community. So always kind of been like people who I don't know around me. I only know a few. So I'm kind of used to that kind of environment. Which is what I found here when I first moved here.

CL: Yes. So you moved back in the summer. So you moved back just in time to start school right away with everybody else.

TK: Yes.

CL: What was that like suddenly going to a brand new school? You were kind of prepared for it anyway because you were about to change school in India, right?

TK: Yes. Definitely. It wasn't as hard as I thought it would be. School was very easy. Like sixth grade here. It was very easy. The teachers were really cool but it was a very different atmosphere. Like students talking back and the regular stuff.

CL: Where did you end up going to school in the cities?

TK: I went to Field Open or Field School. Yes. I went to Field, which was my elementary school. After Field I went to Anthony Middle School. Then I went to Southwest High. Again, lots of school changes along the way. So kind of used to that new environment thing.

CL: How was the—you said the school was easy but the teaching styles I know are very different between here and India.

TK: Yes.

CL: Was that difficult or easy for you?

TK: Yes. That was difficult at first because over here we were actually expected to understand all the concepts that we were being taught and kind of repeat it back in different formats, whereas in India it's like parrot learning. Like you know, you read and you memorize and then you write everything down on the test. It's pretty easy, if you know how to do that well. But over here it was a little difficult because it wasn't about like memorizing. There was no memorization here. I remember . . . even math. Like we weren't allowed—we weren't supposed to memorize anything. We were supposed to understand the concepts and do like several problems to kind of demonstrate our knowledge and in that sense it was a little different. What else? Free time. Yes. We had recess. Sixth grade. That was very different. Having never had recess like during, you know, in the middle of the day. Yes, the lack of—I suppose the lack of like governing and the lack of ruling in the class by the teacher. Very easy going. Very relaxed. That was very different.

CL: How about friends? Did you make friends easy?

TK: Yes. I don't remember any though. Yes. I made friends with the cool group, apparently. Yes. That was pretty cool because—I don't know, I suppose they were nice kids. So it wasn't like we were in the suburbs. We were in the city. We had a very diverse class, too, which I think really helped a lot. We had a lot of African American

kids. We had a lot of Hmong kids. I was the only Tibetan though. But that didn't matter. Yes. It was like a group of us. Like three—I think there were four of us. Yes. There were like four girls and we ended up going to different middle schools because of neighborhoods and stuff.

CL: So it seemed like you fit in pretty easily, pretty quickly.

TK: Yes. Yes. I guess. I guess my previous knowledge of American TV helped out.

CL: So *Baywatch* helped.

TK: Yes. *Baywatch* and—*Star Trek* didn't help, but I think *Baywatch* did and obviously *WWF* didn't, except with the guys. But at that time if you were a girl and you watched *WWF* you were like an outcast, so you don't want to reveal it. I also—like I knew a lot. Like I caught on pretty quick. Like I used to watch TV and stuff because we had a lot of free time in sixth grade. We didn't have a lot of work. And then, you know how kids are at that age. You watch similar TV shows. You discuss whatever it is you discuss about it and you know, you find like, oh, these people have similar thoughts and you kind of get together and have your little clique. It wasn't as hard. No.

CL: How about food? Was there a big—did you have a big adjustment to food at all?

TK: Yes. At first I didn't like cheese at all and that was very hard because everything had cheese on it here. And after that I kind of got used to it and now I love cheese which shows you about assimilation to cultures.

CL: Is there anything you miss about India or—?

TK: Yes. I miss the mountains. I miss the scenery because over here you just have flat lands and more flat lands. I mean the sunsets are beautiful but I've seen a ton of them by now and I do miss the mountains. And I miss . . . I suppose I just miss the canopy of trees that are everywhere in Mussoorie because that's where I went to school for nine months of the year and it's a beautiful hill station. That's where people go to vacation. And now I realize . . . I realize the beauty of the place now because I don't have it anymore. So I miss that. Yes. That's about it, because everything in India you can find it here. Believe me. You have Indian grocery stores. If I said I miss Indian food that wouldn't be true because there are a ton of restaurants here. I'm always going. And it's actually better here because here they have less spices and you know that the food is fresh, whereas in India it's like a ton of spices to cover up the bad food.

CL: Cover up last week's chicken?

TK: Exactly. In that sense, it's actually better here.

CL: But doesn't that make it authentic?

TK: Yes. But you know, authenticity is like . . . sometimes low rated. You know, you just have to kind of go with whatever you find, I suppose. Whatever is better in that sense.

CL: I remember eating a lot of Indian food in India and then being in Delhi in some neighborhood doing something and walking into a restaurant that was twenty dollars a plate in this Indian restaurant and it didn't taste like Indian food at all.

TK: No. They have it all over. So you've just got to be careful where you go.

CL: So what was it like not being in boarding school and living with your parents full time?

TK: Oh! That was very hard. That was the hardest, I think. Because then I missed boarding school even more. Then I was like, "Oh, my God!" At first I was very happy because it was this new experience to be living with my parents all the time. It was a lot of fun. I was really enjoying it. Made up for all the homesickness. Then after that I realized that there is such a thing as too much of a good thing, you know, and then I started missing boarding school and I was just like, "Oh, man, I had it really good. I didn't even realize it," and started missing it. But eventually you kind of forget about the past and you move on. So you get used to what's in the present and that helps you look to the future.

CL: So you graduated from high school here in the U.S.

TK: Yes.

CL: And you went off to college.

TK: Yes.

CL: And you're going to college now.

TK: Yes.

CL: And where are you going to school?

TK: The University of Minnesota, the Twin Cities campus.

CL: And what are you studying?

TK: I am studying child psychology.

CL: How's college?

TK: College is fun. Yes. College is fun. It's a lot of work. I suppose it depends on you. Whether you choose to do a lot of work or not. So I choose to. So I should be okay with it. Nonetheless, I do get to brag. I do get to nag about it. But still.

CL: Was there any adjustment period going off to college?

TK: In college? No. In high school we had—I was with the IB Program, International Baccalaureate. It's a pre-college program. So high school was actually more grueling for me than college was. Because we had to take six college level courses every year whereas in college you only take like three, four classes. You don't have classes every day if you're lucky. So it wasn't that much of a difference.

CL: So you were taking like six college classes a semester in high school and—?

TK: Yes.

CL: That makes sense.

TK: Yes. It was very tedious workload but it paid off so when I went to college I didn't feel like it was a big thing. Like I was used to the teachers, the professors talking and not writing anything and half the students in my class were also not writing anything and I'm like, you're supposed to take notes, you know. Because it was freshman year and people didn't know, I suppose. Like many of the people. I was used to that. We were used to midterms and exams. So it wasn't that big of a change.

CL: So how many years left do you have in school?

TK: Just a year now.

CL: You said you're studying child psychology?

TK: Yes.

CL: So what do you want to do with that once you're done with your bachelor's degree?

TK: Actually, I would really like to get into med school. Go into pediatrics. But considering statistics of people who enter med school, it might take a while, maybe, or if I'm lucky it won't. But if it does, grad school would be good. Some kind of further education, because in this day and age you can't go far with a college degree, I feel personally. So . . .

CL: So what you're saying—it's a fallback plan. You'll settle for a Ph.D. instead of an M.D.?

TK: Yes, I guess so. No. Yes. You make me sound bad right there.

CL: [Chuckles] I'm just joking with you because . . .

TK: You never know. I might like forget about all my missions and go live somewhere else, you know. Who knows? Like I was considering Peace Corps but I found out that they changed it to two years now. It used to be a year, didn't it?

CL: Maybe.

TK: I think so. Like I remember . . .

CL: Yes. I think you might be right. It was a year.

TK: I remember discussing with my friends, like it was a year and now it's two years. Two years is a long time. Yes. I talked to the advisor for Peace Corps. Two years is a very long time, so I'm not sure.

CL: What was it that made you think about joining the Peace Corps though?

TK: I suppose, you know, being a part of something bigger than yourself. Actually being there in the world and seeing what's going on and trying to help it, help the cause, I suppose. Making use of yourself instead of doing things for yourself. Do something for other people for a change. I suppose that would be it, of course, since I do want to go into medicine, like to help people. And I always tell that to my advisors and they're like, "Well, medical school is not the only way you can help people." And I'm like, "I know that, but to me it seems like the best method." I have been urged to go into public health by my advisor several times. Have no interest in public health. I don't know why because it's very similar to med school except you're not a doctor.

CL: Do you think this drive to want to help people that—?

TK: Yes. That's where it comes down to. Yes. Hopefully it won't change to more materialistic things like, oh, I do like to help people but I also like to make much money, like a lot of money. Yes. Hopefully it stays that way.

CL: Do you think that drive to help people has anything to do with being Tibetan?

TK: That's a stretch. I don't know. I've seen a lot of Tibetans who don't have that drive to help people and they're Tibetans so—and they're self-proclaimed Buddhists. I think it depends on the person.

CL: How about the community here? You've lived in the community now for almost ten years. Pretty close now. You've seen the community grow from family reunification, how you came into the country and the community is triple now. Probably a little more than tripled since the first visas were issued. Do you have any opinions or impressions on good things, bad things and the community getting larger?

TK: Having a big community and having a small community have its own advantages. Like if you have a smaller community you're more tight knit. You can help out your neighbors, basically, because there aren't a lot of them to help out. Whereas if you have a large community, you have more impact on the culture or the environment where you live in. For example, more political candidates are willing to come to your functions and give speeches and kind of win votes. That would be one of the pros of having a large community.

Also, you have a lot more people. You know you have more of an impact basically on every aspect of life in your community because you have more people working in more fields. You know, just having more influence. Being able to spread the word or spread Tibetan culture. So I think that's definitely a good thing.

CL: So there's about thirteen hundred, fourteen hundred Tibetans estimated here in the Twin Cities. That's the second largest group of Tibetans in North America. But as cultural groups go, even in the cities, fifteen hundred people is a pretty small group.

TK: Yes.

CL: So do you see the community as a larger group because of its status in North America or is it a small group because, like I said, in the larger scope of things there isn't that many people?

TK: Exactly. It's a large group because it's a large group compared to other Tibetan groups.

CL: Do you think that its place in being number two in North America does have an effect on the community and how the community works together? That it is thought of as a large group?

TK: Yes. Like I said, it seems large because its large compared to the other Tibetan groups that are much smaller, whereas in the grand scheme of things it's not that large a number.

CL: Do you think there's anything that the community is doing really well?

TK: I guess I would say that they've really improved on governing. Like having a sense of government in the community. Having elected leaders. Having a board that struggles with the issues that face the Tibetan community here. That's always important. And they're doing a good job on trying to sustain Tibetan culture and language, which are essential to the survival of any people. And I guess Tibetan people are generally doing well as compared to other minority groups. Although things could always be better.

CL: Is there anything that you think the community needs to do or should do that they're not?

TK: At this point I can't think of anything because, you know, they've done pretty much what any community would start out with. But as your community grows your issues grow. So I'm sure we will be facing several new issues that we hadn't faced in the past. But as of now I can't think of any.

CL: Do you participate in the community? Do you consider yourself an active member?

TK: I'm like midway between active and inactive. I'm not as active politically, I suppose, whereas I do try and attend functions once in a while because it is important to be part of the community. You don't want to be disconnected from it because then you stray and it's very hard to find yourself again. So a sense of community is always important, I think, to a person or for a person. I do try, but it's hard. It's just hard being a part of a big community when you have so much to do in your own life. Yet you do need to remember that you are Tibetan. Regardless of how busy your schedule is. You do have to come.

CL: What do you think that means to be a Tibetan in American culture?

TK: Personally, I think it's like . . . it's a relationship that's forming from opposite ends. It's like trying to bring two magnets together but there's a resistance, a natural resistance, to it. Just because the cultures are so different. But at the same time, all humans do have ambitions, need to prosper, to do well in life, secure your own base. I think that's what we have in common with the American people, obviously. That's the American Dream, right? To get your car and your house. Get your bank account and stuff. These things bring us together.

But larger things like religion and . . . yes, maybe religion I would say, probably, because religion is such a great part of Tibetan culture. Different. Because Tibetan culture, Tibetan religion kind of dictates to not look at those things as the most important things in life whereas here they are. That's what you're trying to do, right? You're working every day. Why are you working every day? To pay your bills. You need to pay your bills because you want to have the stuff that you have. Yes. It is kind of different. Difficult in that sense.

CL: How religious do you consider yourself? Is it a big part of your life?

TK: No. Actually, I don't consider myself religious at all. Hopefully, my family doesn't hear this because—anyway, no. They know that. I have a tough time believing in a lot of stuff that comes from Buddhism, although I do wholeheartedly embrace the idea of compassion to all humans, to all sentient beings. That kind of philosophy really does . . . I do completely agree with it.

However, there are things—in every religion there are certain things that you disagree with. You know, if you blindly believe in something, that's not good for you. You know what I mean? Like you have to be able to question something, whether it is your faith. You learn more from it when you do that. But you know, when I have these talks with

my parents, they tell me that—I tell myself that I’m not religious, but in fact I am very religious for the way I talk and from the way I do stuff in my life. So . . . I don’t think so but . . . you never know. They might be right. They have been. A lot.

CL: You were talking about culture a little bit ago and Tibetans preserving culture. What do you think—if you could in a nutshell to describe culture, how do you think you would describe it?

TK: Describe culture? I guess culture would be like . . . I’m trying to think of an explanation here. Culture in the sense that it’s like the basic threads that bring a community together whether they stem from religion or from social theories. Yes. Culture would be . . . culture would be the things that you grow in your community. Things that you embrace, I suppose.

CL: So there’s a big push now, well, not now . . . there has been for almost fifty years now to really maintain Tibetan culture in exile. Why do you think that that is so important personally?

TK: Well, first off, the facts are that Tibetans are outnumbered by Chinese immigrants in Tibet, so you can see where that would lead to. Probably would lead to a destruction of culture within our own country. Since we aren’t sure of preserving our own culture in our own country, what we can do is we can try and preserve it with the millions of people who are outside our country. You know that that’s . . . that is a tough job, because when you’re outside you’re always in the midst of another culture. It’s always hard to grow your own culture while you are in another culture. That would be the importance of it, I think.

You know, it’s just . . . it’s the whole sense of identity that people have. If you don’t know who you are . . . I think identity is a big thing to it. Definitely. It’s important to know where you come from, who you are. I’ve been told this over and over again. So I can tell it to you like, right, that, but it is true when you think about it, because when you’re little you don’t really think about it that much. You’re like, “Okay, well, my parents are telling me this so it must be true.” As you grow older you realize that there is a grain of truth behind it. So, yes. I think it is important to try and maintain culture, Tibetan culture. That’s the only way of preserving Tibetan identity. We don’t have anything else as far as it goes.

CL: A little bit ago you were talking about what culture is and you said culture is something that you grow. Culture is what you grow and Tibetans in India have changed and obviously Tibetans in America now are changing as well and adapting and finding new interests and whatnot. So do you think that that is growing a new Tibetan culture?

TK: Yes. Definitely. I mean change is inevitable. You can’t fight it. What you can do is you can embrace it and try and make sure that the change does happen but it doesn’t change like the roots. Do you know what I mean? Like the foundations of a culture, of a people, don’t change. I don’t think so. Obviously things will change, but that isn’t like

the primary thing. It's kind of like a secondary factor that changes and that will definitely change over time because everything changes. I think as long as you are able to preserve that root it doesn't matter. Like the secondary factors don't count as much because that will always happen.

CL: So do you think there's anything less Tibetan about this new way of life for Tibetans in the West because it is so different from the quintessential stereotypical kind of like publicized view of Tibetan culture?

TK: Well, what's better? Stereotypical views of Tibetans or actual, real Tibetans? I think real Tibetans are better than the stereotype that's been portrayed in several medias.

CL: But I don't think it's in several medias, either, because I think that, you know, one of the goals of the Tibetan government and especially His Holiness is to educate people on Tibet and largely a lot of push for the resettlement project was to educate and inform Westerners of Tibet. And I think oftentimes Westerners still carry that idyllic stereotypical view of what a Tibetan is.

TK: Certainly. Certainly. I mean, you know . . .

CL: So is it all media outlets that have been projecting this or do you think it is Tibetans that have been projecting this stereotypical view themselves?

TK: Well, I think that in the past the way that we project the Tibetans to Westerners *was* the way we were . . . way back when. Before we lost our country and whatnot. So I think in that sense, it is true. It's not a false notion of being Tibetan. That's not it. But at the same time, now Tibetans, modern Tibetans, aren't like that anymore, and I'm sure several Westerners who are interested in the Tibetan cause know that for themselves.

But as for the image that they're pushing, I mean, think about it. How could you rouse someone who doesn't come from your country, who doesn't have anything related to your country? How would you make them interested in your culture? You have to give them something that they want. People don't want to see other people who are like them who have nothing special about them to kind of—I mean you need—usually what people do is they find things in other cultures that they want for themselves or they wished they had in their own culture. They can't find it there so they kind of try and get it from somewhere else and I think it's give and take, I suppose, in that sense.

CL: Do you think that it's different with Westerners or Americans that they can't or don't just have compassion for someone in need? That they need what you said, something special or something that they want?

TK: No. I think I see compassion in a lot of Westerners. I see church organizations. I see people who really do care. Socialists who—I see several people, actually, who seem to be very caring people who go out of their way to help people in need. That's always there.

But sometimes you feel like things are missing and you might go searching for them when in fact what you want is right there in your own backyard. But while you're out on your travels you do find something that you want. You know, you bring it back with you. That's as well, too.

CL: So do you think like when the community has I think it's called Tibet Day or something down at the Landmark that they do every year and there they feature Tibetan script and they teach Westerners basic Tibetan script. They sell a lot of very traditional looking jewelry, a lot of clothing, a lot of books on the way things were, the Tibetan cause. They feature Tibetan dance and Tibetan dress and whatnot.

We worked with a lot of Tibetans in this project and we haven't once interviewed a person or come across a person that's wearing that traditional dress or things like that. So do you think the community needs to do more to project this idea of what—or to show what Tibetans really are like in the U.S. instead of this other aspect of what Tibetans were like? Do you think they need to focus more on modern Tibetans in America? Or at least showcase them in some respect?

TK: Modern Tibetans like the Tibetans who dress in t-shirts and jeans?

CL: Just like everybody else. You're very assimilated to this culture but, you know, it's some respect that which makes up I think a large part of you, a large part of your identity isn't represented at all when they have Tibet Day. So is that denying maybe a little bit of what Tibetans have become or what Tibetans really are in the West?

TK: I think it's not exactly denying. It's more of a sense of preservation. You want to preserve that. The only way you can preserve that is by showing it in public during the Tibet Day Festival, for example. You can't have Tibetans walking down the street in chubas. I mean you would stand out like anything and you know how it is like standing out in America. You're going to be treated badly. Especially in these days. You want to be a part of the community. You want to assimilate into the American culture. You want to be Tibetan-American. You can't just be Tibetan in America. You wouldn't be accepted. You have to be—like you have to have some kind of American touch to you if you want to do well in the community. I can say that like—I can say that without a doubt . . . I can't even finish my words here.

CL: Do you think that's a clash of identities then? You mentioned identities before. This Tibetan identity and this maybe very American identity. Do you think they're clashing or do you think there's this new hybrid Tibetan that's coming out of it or—?

TK: I think they are—I think it might be they're not exactly clashing anymore because we've kind of figured out the art of maintaining two different cultures. It comes to you with experience, obviously. Now I think it's this kind of—it's like when you're out in the street in your community here you're American. But when you enter like the Tibetan Cultural Center, you're Tibetan. So it's like you keep your identity with you but there are certain places where you kind of reveal that. Certain places where you try not to in order

to fit in. Everyone has their—it's not exactly a secret but it's not exactly something that you can wholeheartedly embrace. Not now I think. It takes time.

CL: So I think you mentioned earlier in the interview that you thought it was easier to maintain or protect that, those cultural aspects, in a larger community. How do you feel about the vast majority of Tibetan communities out there in America that are significantly smaller than here in the Twin Cities or in New York? Do you think a different Tibetan identity is being created in the hybridity being formed between American culture and Tibetan culture?

TK: Specifically in the smaller groups?

CL: I mean, I guess what I'm getting at is that in my own research and traveling around India and Nepal and other exile communities in L.A. and New York and Seattle and whatnot there's this great unity between Tibetans all over the place about a struggle or the cause or protecting culture and whatnot. But if it's easier to grow . . . or it's easier to preserve culture in a larger community and even just America itself being very diverse across the country and different identities mingle and merge and a hybridity is created. Do you think we're getting different Tibetans . . . that sense of unity is changing or somehow being lost in smaller communities?

TK: Frankly, as you said, Tibetans are really tight knit regardless of their numbers. So I think that in itself is a protective factor from being lost in the larger scheme of things. As for maintaining Tibetan culture in a better way, you know in smaller communities, I don't really know. I guess, well, you know, you do have an advantage with numbers for larger groups. When you have smaller groups you know everyone. Like I said earlier. You know everyone. You're a very small group. You know what the problems like other people face. So it's like you're facing the problems yourself.

In that sense it does help you out in, again, preserving your culture. Sometimes I think it doesn't matter. Like the numbers. The numbers don't matter as much. It depends on the people. You can have a very large community and no one could care. They just want to all be American. Then it's lost. Whereas you might have a very small community who are incredibly active and are able to maintain that kind of sense of culture and do very well and flourish. So I can't say like a hundred percent. I'll leave it at that.

CL: Do you see a change in yourself at all? You said earlier that you'd never really lived in a large Tibetan community and then moving to the U.S. Now you're in a large Tibetan community. So do you see a change in yourself on how you construct yourself?

TK: Certainly. Definitely. When I came here I didn't speak any Tibetan. So actually I learned my Tibetan here. Because I was in a large community. When I was in India I only spoke Hindi and English. When I moved here I learned Tibetan when I was mingling. I made Tibetan friends for the first time in like twelve years. Isn't that odd? In India I had no Tibetan friends. I always think that's odd, because whenever I tell people, they're like, "Whoa, what do you mean?" People expect you to lose your culture

when you come here. They don't really expect you to gain it. I gained something from it. I'm sure there are countless others who also did. So that definitely did increase my awareness of being Tibetan because I didn't have that before. Maybe I was too young to realize it but I do realize it now.

I realize a lot of things in Tibetan community which I wasn't exposed to before because I kind of lived in a very protected world when I was younger so when I moved here I became more—I started figuring out like . . . realizing that not all Tibetans live like we did in India. Didn't know that, obviously. Didn't know there were Tibetans living in like big villages and stuff in India, too.

Like, for example, I made friends with a girl in one of the interviews that we did. She lived in a village in India. In like south India or somewhere. And she told me that they had one TV in their entire community. Just like made up of hundreds of people. And I was kind of shocked. And I was thinking, "Oh, my God, this is the exact reaction that an American would have when they hear that." And you can be so . . . disconnected from things. Yes. In that sense I did sort of gain something and add something to my character, to myself. The realization of other Tibetans, how they live, the diversity amongst Tibetans themselves. Certainly.

CL: Let's talk about the project a little bit now. You've been working on the Tibetan Oral History Project here at the Museum for some time now with me, been going out and doing interviews and whatnot. How did you get involved in the project?

TK: I actually received an email from you. Like two. But at that time I wasn't sure what I was going to do over the summer so I didn't respond. After like when classes started for the summer, I was taking summer classes, I realized I had some free time and I was looking for like either a volunteer position or something to fill my time with. Something constructive. I can be doing a lot of things in summer, but regardless, I chose to do something, something that I thought would be constructive. And my friend, Tenzin Yangdon, who is also in the project, I talked to her. She called me up and she said that, you know, "Are you still interested in that Oral History Project because we have space open." So I asked her what it was like. If it needed a lot of time commitment. She said it didn't. At least she thought—like it didn't require that much time. So then I decided okay. And I came in and I had my interview.

CL: Was there something that you wanted to get out of the project at all? Your initial views before we met and things kind of got rolling?

TK: Yes. I was hoping that I would get to hear the stories of other Tibetans living here, what their experiences have been like. I've always wondered about that. Because the more I meet the Tibetan people here and the more I mingle, you know, I realize that we're all so different and we all come from such different backgrounds here. I always wanted to know what their experience had been like but you can't really go up to someone and start asking them, "Hey, what was it like when you first came here?" You have to get to know them and it takes a long time. Most of them aren't as open. But

when, you know, talking about such things unless it's like an interview where you're doing it on professional levels. So I was hoping to gain some kind of insight into the various diverse people that make up the Tibetan community.

CL: Do you think you've gained that from this project?

TK: Yes. I think so. I've tried to choose people from different backgrounds, tried to choose people who are in different fields and I was surprised at their histories and their lives. So I certainly learned a lot or gained insight into what their lives are like and the differences that are present that I wasn't aware of.

CL: How was doing extensive interviews for the first time?

TK: The first time? I was a little—I wasn't exactly nervous. It was more like unsure of myself because I was kind of thinking what am I doing interviewing someone. Like my first interview turned out to be Gyatsho la.³ And he's like this person in like his field and he's known and whatnot. And I was thinking, "Oh, my gosh, he's going to know that I'm a total idiot and I don't know what I'm doing and he's going to disregard me and you know, think of like everything I ask is like fluff." But anyway, that's my thought. Not exactly the most positive thinking but, you know, it was just like kind of self-doubts at that point. That was for the first interview.

CL: Do you think you progressed as it went on and got either more comfortable or more kind of in the groove on how things work?

TK: Yes. As it progressed I did feel like . . . I don't know if I improved but I did feel like it got more easy. It got easier to just kind of ask questions and go with the flow and I didn't feel as odd in that position. I had more confidence, which is always good. Leads you to ask better questions, certainly. So, yes. I did feel like it was more comfortable in that position of—in the interview.

CL: How do you hope that these interviews or this project gets used by the public at large now? Since we're done it goes out into the—all over the place. How do you hope that these will be used in the future?

TK: I hope they'll be used by people who have some interest in all things Tibetan to further their knowledge and to foster their own ideas or their own relationships that they've formed with the Tibetan community and strengthened those, hopefully. Yes. Hopefully they can be of use to someone. Because I have seen a ton of books in the library that sit there and get dust and hopefully won't end up like that. So hopefully they'll be used. I always feel sorry for the books when I see them. That's so sad. Someone wrote them and now they're just sitting there. It's work and it's always gratifying to know that someone is using your work.

³ La, is added to the end of a name as a sign of respect.

CL: Is there anything you'd like to add at the end here? That you wanted to say that hasn't been said?

TK: Not really. I had a lot of fun working on the project, I suppose, and learned a lot from it. Got to hear a lot of interesting stories from several different people in the community who I do know in some way but I don't exactly know them on that level. And I'd like to thank the History Center and you for giving me this opportunity to work on the project and I enjoyed myself a lot and I certainly learned from it. So, thanks.

CL: Good. Well, I was really glad to have you on the project and I want to thank you for coming in and doing this interview with us. That's it. Thanks a lot.

Minnesota Tibetan Oral History Project
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