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# THE TESTIMONY OF A FORMER TIBETAN PRISONER

**By Tenzin Tsundue**

An idealistic overseas Tibetan learns that his foreign connections may be all that saved him from the harshest treatment afforded by China's justice system.

My name is Tenzin Tsundue. I am a Tibetan, born and brought up in India. I have three recorded years of birth: 1972, 1973 and 1974. My Indian Certificate, the formal refugee paper issued to Tibetan refugees in India, says I was born on May 10, 1973, but I recently learned this is impossible, since my mother was still pregnant with my older sister at that time. I have no horoscope and no birthday to celebrate. My parents were too busy to record our dates of birth, and there was little infrastructure available to Tibetan refugee workers to record these facts.

## Born in exile

My father, Rinzin Choephel, came from Riwoche in Kham Province of eastern Tibet, which was completely destroyed during the Chinese military invasion of the late 1940s. A well-educated Tantric priest from the Kagyu tradition of Tibetan Buddhism, my father took up arms, and with other men in his village, joined the Voluntary Cavalry Resistance Forces, *Tensung Danglang Mak*, while the women, children and old people retreated to the hills. He was separated from his family for nine years while the Khampa warriors fought the well-organized invading Chinese army with matchlock guns they'd used to protect their cattle from wolves. Finally, Mao's Red Guard army poured into Riwoche and overwhelmed the handful of Tibetan Cavaliers. Many were killed, and the remaining Cavaliers escaped to India.

My mother, Sonam Paldon, comes from a peasant family in Lhokha Chongye, which is south of Tibet's capital city, Lhasa. During the Chinese invasion, resisters were openly gunned down in the street, either spontaneously or through organized mass executions that village people were forced to watch. This created an atmosphere of terror in her village.

In 1959, when China finally laid siege to Lhasa, my parents both followed His Holiness

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the Dalai Lama in escaping to India, leaving many of their family members behind in the chaos of flight. My mother and her family first arrived in various refugee camps set up by the India government, being transferred first to Massomary, then to Manali and then to Bir, all in North India.

My father was reunited with his family in Ladakh, North India. There he picked up the Hindi language and managed to secure employment constructing the mountain road from Manali through the Rotang Pass to Leh, the capital of Ladakh. This road, notable as the motorway with the highest altitude in the world, was constructed mainly through the manual labor of Tibetan refugees and other mountain people in the region.

Due to the language skills my father acquired, he began acting as a contractor liaising between Tibetan laborers and Indian government construction firms. He managed and paid small teams of Tibetan manual laborers, and kept track of materials used. Around this time he met and married my mother, who was probably no more than 14. My elder sister and I were both born in a makeshift tent on the roadside of the mountain pass, where we spent our formative years.

My father died in 1974 or 1975, soon after my birth, due to ill health and the harshness of our existence. I don't even remember his face. After my father's death, we were sent to Kollegal, one of the new refugee camps in South India. My mother was 17 or 18 years old, a widow with two young children and no other family for support. The camp was very poor, and my mother struggled without the financial support that had been provided by my father. Eventually she remarried, and she and my stepfather still live in the Kollegal camp today. Her six children grew up and were scattered to different places as we searched for new lives.

When I was around eight, my elder sister and I were admitted to Tibetan Children's Village Pathlikuhl, a boarding school in North India. During my 10 years of schooling, my mother and stepfather lacked the funds to visit us regularly, and I saw them only three times. My separation from my parents and our home in the refugee camp continued after I began my university education. As a result, since my early childhood, I never had the comfort of a home, parental love and care and citizenship, and I have always felt deprived of these basic human needs. From early on I developed a deep sense of loss and yearning to live in my own home, in my own country, with freedom and dignity in life, and resolved to work for the freedom of my country.

## Imprisoned in my homeland

In 1993, after finishing my education at Tibetan Children's Village Dharamsala, I was accepted to study English Literature at Loyola College, Madras University. Following my graduation in 1996, I began teaching at Tibetan Children's Village school in Ladakh, which borders western Tibet. In March 1997, I went to Tibet with the aim of seeing my homeland with my own eyes, and to join our people in their struggle for freedom. I

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walked across the India-Tibet border at the Dumtse section of eastern Ladakh on March 4, 1997, having told no one of my plans. I was alone and carried only a sleeping bag, and felt no need to ask anyone's permission, since I was returning to my own country.

I walked for four and a half days in the mountains with no food or water until, exhausted and emaciated, I was apprehended at Cha-gang by a border policeman disguised as a nomad. He grabbed me by the collar and took me to his house in the village, where he handed me over to the Chinese Army. He was a Tibetan and no doubt handsomely paid.

Two military jeeps came to his house with four armed soldiers—a captain and three other Tibetans. They blindfolded me, and for the next day and a half took me to various army offices, where senior officers questioned me repeatedly. I was never told why I had been apprehended, where I was being taken and on what grounds I was deprived of my liberty. During these initial interrogation sessions my blindfold was removed, but it was replaced before every journey so I did not know where I was going.

Finally on March 10, I was taken to an unknown location in Ngari Town<sup>1</sup> and presented to a group of some 15 people apparently composed of Army, intelligence, police and local Tibetan informers. Here I was interrogated for many hours. Later that night I was thrown into Ngari Town Prison. There were many Tibetan prisoners in the jail, which had an armed guard prominently stationed at the main entrance of the tower. I was put in one of the prison cells, which looked like storage cupboards, and in fact were used to hold meat and charcoal as well as prisoners. It was extremely cold, and my only view was from a small grill above the door that served as the only source of ventilation.

**For the next eight days, I was interrogated every morning for three to five hours at a time.**

For the next eight days, I was interrogated every morning for three to five hours at a time. Throughout these interrogation sessions, they kept asking me who sent me to Tibet, who backed me in my mission, what it was about, whom I was meeting in Tibet, who accompanied me, what weapons I carried, what training I had received and whether I had been sent by the government of India. During these sessions the interrogators, who were mostly Tibetans, would kick me or punch me in the chest, and often slapped my face and hit me in the nose with their fingers. My eyeglasses were always removed during interrogation sessions, and I was made to sit very upright. Although they beat me, they made sure that no marks remained, because I came from outside Tibet.

On one occasion, four days after my arrival at Ngari Prison, I was interrogated in English. At the outset I found this hugely liberating, as I was desperate to make the interrogators understand that the accusations they made against me—of being a spy, of having received specialized training for this mission—were untrue, and I thought that through the English language I might be more successful than in Tibetan. But my interrogator was a Chinese army officer, and his translator was also Chinese. The Army Officer would make long speeches poorly translated by the translator, who stuttered and stammered in broken English. I had no idea of how competently he translated my answers back to the army officer, who was becoming increasingly aggravated.

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In any case, something was going very wrong. The interrogation room was heated by a hearth of burning charcoal, beside which lay a long metal poker. The Chinese army officer became so angry that he picked up the red-hot poker, and gripping my neck with his other hand, he brought the poker close to my eyes and threatening to burn them. A Tibetan officer jumped on him and pulled him away, probably saving me from being blinded. After shaking him off, the Chinese officer he returned to me and punched me in chest. I fell off the bench I had been sitting on, which came crashing down on top of me. Again the Tibetan intelligence officer restrained the Chinese officer, and I was returned to my cell.

The Tibetan officer who had restrained the Chinese officer was subsequently assigned to investigate my case. I learnt that his effort to protect me was a matter of self-interest. The Tibetans understood that I was a Tibetan from abroad, and that since I was a foreigner, they could not leave torture marks on me. If I had been blinded or scarred by the red-hot poker, they would have been obliged to kill me rather than allow me to return to India with such obvious marks of torture.

At another interrogation sessions following this episode, the same questions were repeated. Sometimes after a hard slap I would go nearly deaf, and remained dazed for a long time. These sessions were so intimidating, humiliating and traumatizing that sometimes in the middle of the night in my cell, I found myself crying.

I regret to say that, apart from the head of the interrogation team, the staff were all Tibetans. They were heartless, cruel and calculating in their treatment of me, and seemed to have lost every Buddhist value, preserving only their Tibetan faces.

After three or four days, probably on March 13 or 14, I saw, six prisoners dressed in navy blue prison uniforms, their heads shaved bald. They came from a corner of the prison yard to collect water, and remained silent. They didn't break out of line, and they didn't look up from the ground. I asked another prisoner what had happened to them. He told me that prisoners dressed in navy-blue prison uniforms would be killed the following month, and that seven prisoners had been executed in February. Prisoners were calling 1997 a "black year."

At this point, the fear of execution became very real to me. I explained to this prisoner where I came from and why I had come alone into Tibet. He advised me not to tell my interrogators that I wanted a free Tibet, as I would be executed as an example to the other inmates. When I told him I had already said this to the jailers, he worried that I would be executed, exposed to other harsh treatment. He said that if I stayed at Ngari Prison I would probably be all right, but that if I were transferred to Lhasa, I would be as good as dead.

Other prisoners were robbers, rapists and murderers, but although I had merely crossed the border from India to Tibet without a permit, my case was considered worse than theirs—I was given less food and less freedom, and was kept in solitary confinement. After 12 days in Ngari Prison, I was standing in the sun when the jail guards told me I was being transferred to Lhasa, but that I was not to tell anyone about this transfer

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or about my case. I had been afraid all along, but at this point, the prisoner's warning made me reflect on my fate.

My main regret was that my motivation to come to Tibet had been strong, but my calculations and preparation had been poor; as a result, I had fallen into the hands of Chinese, who now controlled my fate and therefore my ability to do anything for my country and my people.

In Ngari Prison, the food was poor and served only twice a day, leaving me constantly hungry. I was given two steamed buns and hot water for breakfast, and an evening meal consisting of wheat gruel with bones, including the skulls and hooves of animals, mostly sheep. When I was transferred from the jail, I was charged 760 Indian rupees for the food, the same as my monthly mess bill at Madras University, where we ate very well. The money I had brought with me from India was taken to pay this bill, and desperate to survive, I offered no resistance.

During my 12 days in Ngari Prison I was never presented before any court or given any access to legal counsel. The whole process was controlled by prison guards who dictated to me what I was supposed to do, where I was supposed to sign, and what precautions I should take. To protect themselves, they insisted that I should repeat the same story to the next round of interrogators, as they would suffer if I produced a new statement.

The Head of Intelligence at Ngari Prison was called Tsering Dorjee, a tall man who always wore a hat. His assistant was called Wangchen. I was never told the proper names of my interrogators, but learned them later.

In the jeep to Lhasa, the Tibetan officer who had prevented the Chinese Army officer from blinding me, and who had been appointed to investigate me, was speaking to another officer in the jeep. He expressed pride in the fast and fluent English I spoke, compared with the Chinese officer's poor and halting English. It was pride that as a Tibetan, I spoke better English than the trained Chinese translator.

Once reaching Lhasa, I was taken to the Seitru Detention Center, where I was imprisoned from March 26 to May 14. I arrived in the evening, and the interrogation commenced the next morning. The interrogations were long hours of mental stress during which the interrogators asked me the same questions I had been asked 100 times since my arrest at the border. This time, the interrogation was conducted by three people who were all Tibetans. Every day they came with a new set of questions about my relatives and parents and details of my life in India, and I was shocked to find that they knew every detail of my personal life, and seemed to receive updates every night. I suspected that they had informers based in India. After every session they made me sign statements written in Chinese. I don't know Chinese, but I had no choice—I was simply trying to survive.

During the interrogation I was constantly threatened and intimidated to reveal the names of people and organizations I was working with. Since I had no such names or information to give, they threatened to put a bullet in my head or leave me to rot in

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**Jamyang Samten, 15, draws a picture of a cattle prod used to torture him after he was detained by Chinese authorities in September 2006. Photo: Associated Press**

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prison. There were some old Tibetans who served food and did odd jobs in the prison. They were excessively obedient and meek, working like slaves. The interrogators told me that these men were prisoners who had spent nearly 20 years in jail. Faced with the threat of death or an eternity of submission to the Chinese like these old men, deprived of any personal contact, I felt overwhelmed by the claustrophobic atmosphere of the jail.

I fantasized constantly about my release, and returning to my friends and family in India. Sometimes these fantasies came to me as dreams, and sometimes as random thoughts in the afternoon; sometimes I found myself confused over whether it was a dream, a memory or just an afternoon fantasy, and then I worried that I might be going mad.

In this prison, the meals consisted of two small steamed buns and hot water for breakfast, fried rice with small cubes of piglet skin for lunch and rice gruel for dinner. Although my meals left me hungry, I would save half of my lunch for later to stave of the hunger and desire to sleep that would build up through the course of the day. I had to stay awake all day in my cell; we were not allowed to sleep until 10 p.m.—the idea was to ensure that we slept through the night so we wouldn't do anything else. This often resulted in physical and mental exhaustion, however, as the bright lights were kept on all night, depriving us of sleep then as well.

Throughout my interrogations I was continually asked to write confessions. On one occasion I was allowed to write my own confession in Tibetan, rather than signing the unknown Chinese statements prepared for me without translation. The feeling of putting pen to paper gave me a sense of great freedom, and an opportunity of expression

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that was otherwise denied to me. I wrote many, many pages, probably the longest essays I have ever written in the Tibetan language, which contained unnecessary descriptions of many things, of friends in India, and of what I enjoyed in India.

The prison cells were arranged in a single-story row forming a barrack. On one side was a corridor that opened into the cell, and on the other side each cell had a large window, guarded by thick iron bars. Prison guards would pass by the cell window and look in on us, and sometimes I would be found sitting on the bucket toilet with my pants down. It was embarrassing and humiliating to be caught this way by the prison officials, because we were supposed to stand at attention by the window during these random inspections.

At Seitru Detention Centre, I was kept in Cell 3. My neighbor in Cell 2 was a Tibetan who was usually treated badly by the jail authorities; sometimes they deprived him of food, and often of the 15-minute fresh air break in the morning, which the Chinese called *fangfeng*. The prisoner had a small hard face, and when he was allowed his fresh air break, I noticed he walked with a limp in his right foot. Later I learned that his name was Dawa Gyaltzen. For prisoners who spent all their days and nights in one cold locked room, with a plastic bucket for a toilet, uncertain of their future and with no opportunity for communication or personal contact, this 15-minute exposure to the open sky meant a great deal.

Once during a fresh air break, I stood outside Dawa Gyaltzen's window and commiserated with him for not being allowed out. I was paranoid that I would be discovered talking to him, and kept the glass of the window pane at a slant to reflect activity in the passageway so I could watch for the jail authorities while continuing my conversation. In Seitru, prisoners were not allowed to speak to each other, and if caught in the act, jailers beat them up right then and there. My cell mate for 20 days, a middle-aged Chinese man, pointed to two red and blue bruises around his eyes, then crossed his mouth with his index fingers, cautioning me not to talk to other prisoners.

After learning this new trick, however, I often talked with Dawa Gyaltzen in the afternoons, when we knew the prison guards had eaten enough and were feeling lazy. He would often ask me to sing songs about the Dalai Lama and the Panchen Lama, and about the Tibetan families separated on either side of the Himalayas. He said this gave him a great deal of comfort, and I often found myself singing with my eyes full of tears.

He was happy to hear that I came from India, but said that I was too young and naïve, because I had told my interrogators my real reason for coming to Tibet, which was to take part in the Tibetan freedom struggle. He was happy to hear about the awareness and support the Tibetan struggle was receiving in the Western countries, and he couldn't believe that the Dalai Lama had become a hero and role model beloved by people the world over. He had never heard any of these things in Tibet, where the media are state controlled, and the only access is to China's state propaganda.

I found a new world beyond the Himalayas, and in that darkness I found this man who, even without seeing the Dalai Lama, or knowing of Tibet's supporters in India and the

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West, continued to work for the independence of Tibet. Once Dawa Gyaltzen showed me his wrists, and I saw rings of white scar tissue that were clear signs of torture. He told me that when he was first arrested, he was handcuffed and thrown into a dark room without food for 10 days. To keep him alive, his jailors splashed water on him once a day. The handcuffs tightened around his wrists and ate into his flesh, developing sores and puss. When they unlocked the shackles after 10 days, the metal rings ripped skin from his wrists. He said he was not given medical attention, and in the cold prison cell at Seitru, it took many months for the sores to heal, leaving these scars behind.

Dawa Gyaltzen told me that he was from Nagchu Town in central Tibet, about 400 kilometers north of Lhasa. He was arrested for making “Free Tibet” posters that were put up by his younger brother, a monk, and a friend. The police caught his brother and friend with the posters in their hands. They were beaten and tortured to such an extent that the brother gave Dawa Gyaltzen’s name as the mastermind, and he was arrested in early 1996.<sup>2</sup>

He told me that he had studied banking and accountancy in Beijing and later returned to his village in Nagchu to work as an accountant at a bank. He was married, with two children. He said he was 28, and that all the education in Beijing did not make him Chinese, but rather had strengthened him to fight the Chinese occupation of Tibet.

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Today, as I make this testimony, Dawa Gyaltzen is in prison in Tibet serving an 18-year jail term. He has been transferred to the most notorious prison in Tibet, Drapchi No. 1 Prison, where Tibetan freedom fighters are treated the worst. Many prisoners have been beaten to death, tortured by use of electric batons, electric shock, mental torture, rape and deprivation of sleep and food. When prisoners become invalids or ill to the point of death, the prison authorities release them on “medical grounds.” Yet with an unbelievable spirit of non-violent resistance, Tibetans continue to survive torture and long jail terms in the hope that one day Tibet will be free and that the Dalai Lama will return to Lhasa.

Every morning we were supposed to wake up at 7 o’clock, and prison guards came to check on us. This was followed by the blaring of news in Chinese and then Tibetan, broadcasted by Lhasa Radio. The news was always propaganda about the development of Tibet and the new prosperity that was coming to Tibetan nomads, farmers, traders and city folk. Living in the conditions we did within the prison, being forced to listen to the noise and propaganda in the morning, and again in the evening, was both provoking and intimidating. For me, having come from outside and having received an education, the blatant lies in the newscasts were ridiculous, constructing and reinforcing the false world that China had created in Tibet. Many times I would find myself laughing at it, but in Tibet, this has been continuing for the past 50 years, and entire generations have grown up listening to this new world created and reinforced by state media. For them China is the ultimate power and authority, and they know of no other world.



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## Unexpected release

In early May, my interrogators asked me if I wanted to stay in Tibet or leave. They offered me money to stay, but I believed I was being entrapped, and so I refused. They arranged to take me on a tour of Lhasa in an army jeep, showing me the highways that had been constructed, the Lhasa Radio communication tower and the Bank of China. I was forced to pose in front of the Potala Palace and have my photograph taken from the front and in profile, like mug shots. When we reached Bharkor Square in the middle of Lhasa, they told me that all people were free to practice all religions here, and tried to convince me that China had made Tibet a better place to live. Upon my return to Seitru Detention Centre, I was interviewed on video. They asked me for my impressions of the improvements that had been made in Tibet, and what I thought of my time in prison. I replied that I was hungry in prison, and they laughed.

Political prisoners in Tibet are marked as anti-social elements by the police, who harass any relative or friend who maintains a relationship with the prisoner, or who supports a prisoner with money or food. As a result, prisoners usually become ostracized from their communities and are stripped of all social contacts. Dawa Gyaltsen's wife divorced him, and today he is fighting his own case alone in prison. Even after prisoners are released from jail, they find it difficult to mix with their former communities. Many people will not cooperate with former political prisoners. They are unable to find work, housing or solace among their former friends and often end up begging on the outskirts of urban areas. That's why many former political prisoners try to escape into India.

On May 14, Dawa Gyaltsen was removed from Seitru Detention Centre. He dropped his bar of soap—a prized possession in jail—through the hatch in my cell door. I thought he was being released, but as it turned out, that evening I myself was released, and I was taken to India the next day. Throughout my time in Ngari Prison and Seitru Detention Center, I never imagined that I would be free again, much less that I would have the opportunity to reveal my treatment and the treatment of Dawa Gyaltsen and other freedom fighters to a court investigating Chinese behavior in Tibet.

After returning to India, I went to Bombay to study for a master's degree in English literature and philosophy. In January 2000, I was working with a Tibet support group called Friends of Tibet (India), when we invited Phuntsok Wangchuk, a former political prisoner who had recently escaped to Dharamsala, to talk about the struggle for freedom.<sup>3</sup> Phuntsok Wangchuk had been arrested for organizing a student gathering at his middle school in the Lhoka region, and also for possession of "Free Tibet" leaflets. He was beaten, tortured and imprisoned in Drapchi Prison for five years. Talking to him about my limited prison experience in Tibet, I mentioned Dawa Gyaltsen. He told me about a Dawa Gyaltsen whose details, including the scars on his wrist, his limp and his life story, matched the identity of the Dawa Gyaltsen I had met in Seitru Detention Centre. I learned that he had actually been transferred to Drapchi Prison, and not released as I had imagined on May 14, 1997.

In 2003, I met another former political prisoner in Dharamsala who had escaped to

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India after his release from Drapchi Prison. He had been imprisoned near Dawa Gyaltzen until his release, and confirmed that Dawa Gyaltzen was serving an 18-year sentence for “counterrevolutionary activities of splitting the Chinese motherland,”<sup>4</sup> and that his 14-month detention at Seitru Detention Camp was not included in the 18-year sentence.

I later learned of an international cross-border agreement under which individuals who have been caught in another country without documents can be detained for investigation for a maximum of 3 months, and that they should then be released if they are found not to have committed a criminal offence. This international agreement helped to protect me, although I did not know of it at the time of my detention. I also subsequently learned that the Indian government had become aware of my border crossing and subsequent arrest, after my school in Ladakh filed a missing persons report on me. The Indian police and intelligence had traced my footsteps and found I had crossed into Tibet, and had asked their Chinese counterparts if I had been found or detained. After I left Ngari Prison, two monks from Choglam Refugee Camp in India were arrested after making a crossing similar to mine. They heard in Ngari Prison that I had been badly beaten and tortured, and reported this upon their return to India, before my release. They also reported that I had been taken to Lhasa, and that I was feared dead. Indian security officers in Ladakh took this seriously, and apparently Chinese intelligence learned of India’s concern for me. The reports of these two monks and the response of Indian security helped secure my release, I am sure.

I continue to work for the independence of Tibet, which has become the purpose of my life. I work for it as a writer and as an activist, devoting every ounce of energy I have, day in, day out. I strongly believe that no force can continue to control the power of truth. It is only a matter of time before truth will prevail and the broken families of Tibet will once again be reunited to celebrate freedom in Tibet. Until then, I continue to seek inspiration from all the freedom fighters working silently inside Tibet for our freedom.

*Tenzin Tsundue submitted his sworn testimony in July 2006 for a criminal suit filed in Spain’s High Court by three Tibet Support Groups (TSG) accusing former Chinese President Jiang Zemin and former Premier Li Peng of committing genocide and crimes against humanity in Tibet.*

## Notes

1. Chinese *pinyin* for Ngari is “Ali.”
2. For more information on Dawa Gyaltzen, see Free Tibet Campaign, <http://www.freetibet.org/campaigns/stoptorture/DawaGyaltzenNyima.html>.
3. For more information on Phuntsok Wangchuk and his prison experiences, see: <http://www.guchusum.org/AboutUs/Committee/CommitteeMemberTestimonies/PhuntsokWangchuk/tabid/104/Default.aspx>.
4. This refers to the 1979 Criminal Law’s counterrevolutionary statutes, which were superseded in 1997 by the new Criminal Law.