

## Tsultrim's Story

*Tsultrim gave this account of his life in the summer of 2008 in McLeod Ganj, seat of the Tibetan Government in Exile and home of the Dalai Lama. He came to McLeod because he was ill. He said that being in McLeod was like a vacation. He says it is like the climate in Tibet in as much as it is colder than South India where he normally resides - ed*

Tsultrim's family were nomadic herdsmen in Eastern Tibet. They kept yaks, sheep and horses. They moved around all year, on a regular route following the grazing. They had a permanent house in winter, which is when they stocked up on supplies that they didn't produce themselves. The neighbours in this settlement were also nomads. They lived far from the farming communities, whom they traded with.

Being one of the oldest children he had to work early on and couldn't get an education. There was a school in the winter village but he only got to study there for 6 months throughout his childhood. No one knew how to read or write among his family.

His grandmother brought him up; she lived in a house and didn't move around with his parents. He lived with her until he was 8, when he became a monk. His grandfather died when he was nine.

She supported him in his decision but his parents were not keen. They thought it was too early and they needed help with the work. Eventually his father relented and he went off to the monastery, some days away from his grandmother's home.

His family had always had a lot of respect for monks of Lamas. There was a small monastery in Shinzon, and some of his neighbours had become monks. They were not in regular contact with the monastic community but monks occasionally came to the settlement when someone died, or to do special pujas. If you needed the monks to do a puja then either you went to the monastery or you invited them to the house. There was no payment but it was customary to make them an offering.

Tsultrim was very happy to become a monk; monks were well respected and liked by everyone so he had no concerns for his future. He wasn't homesick, twice a month he got to see his family and his father often dropped in.

One of the reasons his father had been opposed to him joining the monastery was that they would have to support him as a monk. Monks were not fed by their monastery, unless food was donated in a special puja, they depended on their family for supplies. Monks going to monasteries that were far from their familial home had to take large quantities of provisions with them.

He came to India because he wanted to be with his root Lama, the root Lama of his Tibetan monastery. This root Lama had left for India before Tsultrim joined the monastery.

He "ran away" to India without the permission of his parents. The first step was to get to Lhasa. It was there that he and a friend met up with a businessman who arranged for them to get to the border. They gave him Indian Rs 2000 equivalent and in return they were taken to the border with Nepal. They had forged documents saying they were going there on business; a Tibetan driver who always did the route took them along. They were stopped by the Chinese but they satisfied the patrols.

A guide arranged by the Lhasa businessman met them along the way. They stayed in a secure house for 2 days. The following night they began the border crossing in the dark – it took 5 days on foot. They slept in the day and walked at night to stay hidden. The terrain was mountainous but free from snow. The paths were steep and dangerous; there was an ever present danger of falling.

The guide took them to a spot near the Nepali border where a vehicle was waiting for them. It took them to the reception centre for Tibetans in Kathmandu.

When they got to Kathmandu they gave the driver a letter to say they had arrived safely. He passed it on to the man who had guided them across the border. The idea was that when he showed this letter to the Lhasa businessman he would get paid.

At the Reception Centre in Kathmandu officials asked which route they had taken, but not why they had come. They were given some food and money and a seat on a bus going to Delhi, arranged by the Centre. Tsultrim and his friend travelled in a group with other people who had crossed the border separately. They were accompanied by a man who looked after all the documents. In Delhi they reported

to the Reception Centre, where they were despatched to Dharamsala without documents.

All newcomers from Tibet get an audience with His Holiness the Dalai Lama in McLeod Ganj. The people in his group were all very excited, some of them were weeping in anticipation. Tsultrim said he had goose bumps and almost cried. H.H. the Dalai Lama addressed them as a group, and asked them if they wanted to be monks or go to school. However, His Holiness was a bit difficult to understand because he spoke "posh". *(HH's dialect is Central Tibetan dialect, but Tsultrim was from Eastern Tibet and the only people in his region who spoke or understood the Central dialect were the richer people and the bureaucrats - ed)*

Tsultrim continued on to his ultimate destination, Ganden Monastery in Mundkot South India, travel funded by the Reception Centre in McLeod. There are 100 monks in his "section" and the monastery has two sections. This is the monastery founded in India by his root lama, who was once Director of the Tibetan Library in Dharamsala. The monastery takes care of him now; it supported his application for a Refugee Card *(this is the Indian documentation that allows him to stay in India; it has to be renewed every year. It is the only legal status that he has in India; even Tibetans born in India do not get Indian citizenship - ed)*

He likes the warm climate at Ganden and is grateful to finally have the opportunity to study Buddhism properly. He lives in his Rinpoche's quarters and the monastery provides food. He doesn't see his Rinpoche very often, maybe once or twice a year, because his Rinpoche lives in McLeod.

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