

Yeshi's Story

Yeshi gave this account in the summer of 2008 in McLeod Ganj where she now lives. - ed

I was born in Kam. My people in Tibet are the Dokpa. We never thought of ourselves as Tibetans. It wasn't until much later when I went to Lhasa that I discovered I was part of a country called Tibet. It was even later, in Kathmandu that I learned about China.

We are nomads – I have 3 sisters and 2 younger brothers. We always moved from place to place with the animals, living in a big tent, never in a brick house. Our yaks need fresh grass to graze so we kept moving every few months over the mountains and grassland. There was nobody we had to pay to let our yaks graze. We would come down to a lower altitude in the winter, where we built a stone wall around the tent to protect us from the weather.

Our working days would begin at 5 am. Since it was so cold in the winter we slept in our clothes and wore sheepskin. We kept the animals on leashes around the camp as we slept. Our family has sheep and 200 yaks. My younger brother looked after our sheep.

My mother would wake up first and make a fire and cook breakfast. She made a lot of cheese from our milk. I was always too young to help at that time. As children we don't any heavy work until we are 18.

My mother made a lot of cheese from our milk. There was also a lot of tsampa (*roasted barley flour*) and meat in the winter. Things we didn't make we got from farmers. Though they lived far away they came to us to trade knives, wooden buckets, flour, rice, etc for our meat, wool and butter.

We ate meat but we didn't kill animals, our families hired people to do that and we paid them with meat. These people were old and extremely poor Chinese people around the nomadic sites. They must have been in Tibet for a long time because they spoke Tibetan. We prayed for all the animals and treated them kindly. It was very shocking to see Indians beating their animals. When someone in our family died, we would make offerings of the animals and then for a year after that we didn't eat meat.

Everyday we had morning prayers and chanting led by my father. We called ourselves Buddhists (Nangpa). We saw monks at ceremonies and festivals at the one monastery in our area. (*ed - They were not involved in weddings or births*). Only when someone in the family died would they come to our tent. My family had a picture of the Dalai Lama when I was a child. I thought he was dead, but I only found out the truth when I went to Lhasa and saw him on TV.

White Tara is a very important Goddess to all nomads and to me. I have been praying to her since I was a child because my parents told me about how kind she is. They said she always helps us and saves us from danger. She is why I survived the crossing and got to India safely.

I didn't know anything about the Chinese when I was a child. One day my father said that a man called Deng Xiao Ping had died but that we couldn't say he had died and we had. But I didn't cry.

My sisters left home before me. They went to Lhasa to live with our uncle. I wanted to go too, I wanted to visit a pilgrimage site but my parents did not want to lose their last daughter and they also thought I was too young. But I escaped from my parents to go to Lhasa where I stayed with my sisters for 9 months. A neighbour told me about India.

My friend was coming to India so I went with her. People in Tibet said it was a great place, heaven – warm, and with no real winter. I also came to see the Dalai Lama but I didn't come here for an education. The journey through the mountains was dangerous, we had to hide from the patrols but White Tara saved me.

I got to Kathmandu, where I was inoculated. Then I moved to Delhi and finally to Dharamsala where I got a Refugee Card. In Kathmandu I saw the Dalai Lama's younger brother's wife (*there is a place called "Nelen Khang" for new arrivals from Tibet to stay temporarily-ed*). This woman told us where His Holiness was living, which I didn't know, and that he was in a place called McLeod Ganj. She said, "You have struggled hard to get here and now very soon you will be rewarded and see the Dalai Lama." About 100 of us had a special audience with His Holiness on reaching McLeod Ganj.

We began to learn all about Tibet and China and life in India in Kathmandu. They gave me Rs 500 in Nepal and the bus journey from Delhi to Dharamsala was free of charge.

In Dharamsala (*McLeod Ganj - ed*) I lived and studied in the Tibetan Transit School for free for 3 years. I studied Tibetan and English. I lived with other women in a dormitory. A monk befriended me and looked out for me there. After TTS, I worked for an American woman, Dianne, who was the English teacher of that monk. I shopped for her and looked after her garden for almost 3 years. Her house is on Jogiwara road. But she thought I was too young to only be working and that I needed to study. So now I work for her only on Sundays for less pay. I also get some money from Diane's friend from America for whom I do a little work.

If I hadn't come to India I would either be married or a nun by now, which would have been OK. But now I want to study English and become a tour guide in Lhasa. I think I can return in a year or two. My sister says she can make a passport for me (*one of my sisters works for a Chinese hospital as a nurse and one as a student in a Chinese college - ed*). I think the Chinese will leave me alone because I have never been involved in politics and I will have a Chinese passport then anyway.

My mother wants me to go back to Tibet but I am glad I came because I got an education. India is much warmer than Tibet and I get to see the Dalai Lama.
