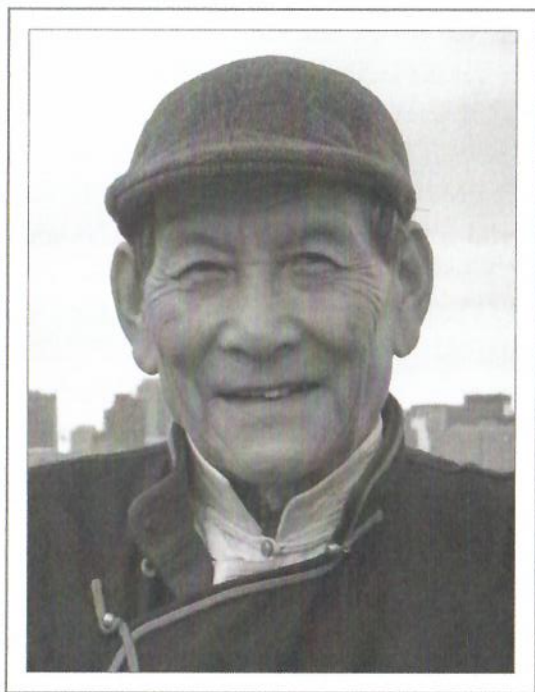


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KUNCHO PALSANG དཀོན་མཚོག་དཔལ་བཟང།

BORN 1937, ARRIVED IN U.S. 1965



Born in Katsel, Medrogonkar, in central Tibet, Kuncho Palsang escaped to India with his brothers, uncles, and cousins in 1959. A few years later, he met an American family living in India, and in 1965, they sponsored him to visit Boston on a tourist visa. Kuncho was the first Tibetan to arrive in the Boston area. For more than forty years, until his retirement in 2009, he worked at the Roxbury Latin School in West Roxbury, MA. Kuncho has visited Tibet three times since he escaped. First, in 1980, he visited with his late elder brother Kunchok Choephel Jamyangling and discovered that his father and elder relatives had been black-hatted and died at the hands of the Communist Chinese oppression and his twin brother imprisoned for twenty years. His second visit, in 1987, occurred right before the beginning of the largest protests by Tibetans inside Tibet since the March 1959 Uprising. His third visit, in 1993, was with his wife Yeshey Dolma Palsang and children.

Today, Kuncho lives in Roslindale with Yeshey and his younger daughter Tenley, her husband, and their young son and daughter. His older daughter Jampa lives in nearby Somerville, MA, with her hus-

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band and teenage son. Since retirement, Kuncho and Yeshey spend several months each year in India on pilgrimage and visiting relatives.

My hometown in Tibet was known as Katsel, Medrogonkar. I was born a twin. It was believed in my town that twin brothers wouldn't live very long, and so at the age of two or three, such kids were ordained as monks. My twin brother and I were made monks at Katsel Monastery. Then when we grew up a little, my twin brother stayed at the monastery and became a teacher. But I wouldn't do that. I would leave the monastery to help my mother at home a lot. I'd herd the cattle and horses. Later, I would also do a lot of work in the field. During planting season, after the ground was ploughed and the seeds were spread, I would cover them with the soil. When the crops began to grow, I'd water them, and when it was time for harvest, I'd help with the harvesting. In this way, I used to do a lot of chores.

People would say, "How wonderful it would be if Kuncho Palsang was a girl!" This was because I would do all the housework. I collected the cow dung, milked cows, and did everything. We had two workers, a man and a woman, but they worked in the field and not at home. My mother and I had to cook the food and take it to them. During harvest time, we would have a lot of people working in the field and I had to cook food for all of them. At home, I had one sister who was very young but other than her, there was no daughter helping our parents. We had nine sons and one daughter in our family, and all of them would be busy with their own work and wouldn't help at home.

I also got to live in the nomad region in the north, ten days by foot. It was not for any kind of a work, but just to live with one of my uncles for about two years. I wasn't very big at the time. I looked after the cattle because there were many wolves in the north and they would kill the animals. The place where we lived belonged to the Katsel Monastery, which prohibited hunting. There were many big-horned sheep there, and they played a lot near the rocks in the night. The leopards would only suck the blood out of the sheep till the carcass was still left, and this would either be collected by the nomads or eaten by vultures. We would never hunt the big-horned sheep and would only get the meat through these means. The first time I ate this meat, it was very tasty but my stomach became bloated.

It was so delightful there. It was also very cold. The water would be so cold and we couldn't swim. My hair became long and wild, and I had lots of nits and lice (laughs)! When I returned home, even our dogs would come and bite me because I had been away for a long time, and at first they did not recognize me.

Then the Chinese started coming to Tibet. We Tibetans knew when the Chinese were here in Tibet because the Chinese would pay with *dayangs*, or Chinese silver coins. At the time, there was a kind of two-wheeled wagon we Tibetans made called *therka*, in which we put two or three loads of firewood. The wood sold very well with the Chinese. I used to sell these in Lhasa and would get a thousand dayangs for a full load of firewood.

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Lhasa. Finally they reached our hometown—Medrogonkar, the province. I left with my three uncles, two brothers, and two younger cousins. My father told us to go to Lhoka for the time being, and that Tibet would not be lost and we could return.

When we escaped we had our own horses and mules because our uncles were pretty well off. When we reached Lhoka Palace, we were stopped. We were young, able-bodied men carrying guns, so some members of the Chushi Gangdruk told us we couldn't go on. Then my three older uncles, my cousin-sister Genyen, cousin-brother Soenam Tenzin, and I continued on our journey with our uncle and two other companions. My two other siblings stayed back at the monastery, Yarlung Phortang, with my uncle's helper. My uncle told them that we'd wait at Nyen because Potala Palace would be captured.

When we reached Nyen, we heard that the monastery was lost to the Chinese. They must have arrived there right after we left, but we didn't see them. From there, we moved toward Tsona, but because the Chinese had already arrived in Tsona, we walked over the mountains and spent the night in the snow. I don't remember how we got through the night. I truly felt we were going to die because everything was completely covered with snow—but if it's not time to die, people don't die, even if left bitterly cold in the snow. The next day, we could see green fields of Pangjen below—a part of the Monpa homeland. We reached there but the Indian border security stopped us, probably for a month. His Holiness had

arrived there only a week before. When the order came from Prime Minister Nehru to allow Tibetans in, we were finally allowed to enter India.

Because my elder uncle was ill, we spent about two months in Mon Tawang. While they were there, I was sent into the high mountains about a day away because I had to graze our fifteen horses and mules. I was alone up there for those two months and had no shelter until I found a woven bamboo sheet and pitched a kind of tent at the top of a raised piece of land. That first night it rained heavily, and by morning I was covered in leeches—my head, my clothing, all over. All my animals were nowhere to be seen and I had to corral them back to the plain. They too had leeches all over and I had to take a stick and pull the leeches out of their nostrils to free their airways. I was lucky that some Monpa herders came up to the plain and told me that by spreading ashes around the sleeping area it would keep out leeches. And it did. There were many other scary nights and days.

I still have nightmares about that time.

We traveled to Missamari. From there, although people my age could not get into Mussoorie school, which had just opened, my younger sister Genyen and brother Soenam Tenzin were accepted there. Five hundred young people like me and my other brother were sent to Dalhousie, where the government gave us allowances, but the only education given was vocational training and nothing else. One day, we were called and asked about our interests. We said we'd like to learn to shoot machine guns or to fly airplanes or all sorts of dangerous

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or violent things (laughs). We were told that we couldn't do these but we had to learn some vocational skills such as thangka painting, carpet weaving, paper making, shoe making, knitting socks. At the time, I don't know why, I chose sweater knitting (laughs). I must have stayed there for a year, and the winter was very cold and it snowed a lot.

Since I didn't want to stay in Dalhousie, I was sent to learn English at this place called the Literacy House. At Literacy House, there was a woman called Welthy Fisher, who was its founder. I met her on the way and she was very happy to see me. She cried, "Oh, Tibetan boy!" and kindly showed me the house where I'd stay and eat. She didn't require me to work at all. Instead, she wanted me to learn. In the daytime, an Indian lady would tutor me and teach me ABCs. I knew absolutely no English. I wondered where money would come from, because I had none. Then I noticed a Western family working nearby. Their names were Mr. and Mrs. Mayo-Smith, and they were in India as part of a major global education initiative. Mr. Mayo-Smith was on sabbatical from Phillips Exeter in the U.S. and had volunteered to help develop a curriculum at the Literacy House. They had three children, a little daughter and two sons. One day the mother was walking down the hall, wearing a scarf around her neck, and it fell. I picked up the scarf and followed her to give to her. She went into her husband's office. I told her she dropped her scarf and she said, "Oh, thank you!"

After a couple of days, the father came to the place where I lived, and said, "My wife wants to see you." I went there

and she asked, "Can you help me? We'll help you." I didn't know what help they wanted from me because I had nothing to offer (chuckling). I asked her what she wanted me to do and she told me to come in the morning and water the flowers and clean the car. And she said that in the evening, she would teach me English, and secondly, she would pay for all my expenses at Literacy House because I was living there, eating there, and being tutored. I agreed. Then that summer, she told me that the family was going to the mountains in Kashmir. They suggested that I go to the hill station in Dalhousie where my uncle lived, and she gave me 100 rupees. It was a lot at the time. They then went to Kashmir and told me that when they returned, they would send me a letter asking me to come back to Literacy House. Later I received the letter and we were all together again at the Literacy House.

Then by the end of that winter, they told me that their work was over and that they were going back to the U.S. I told them I wanted to go to the U.S. with them.

Mrs. Mayo-Smith asked me if I really wanted to go, and I told her that I did. She said, "Don't you have to ask your uncle and your brother?" I told her I'm not obligated to do so. Then she asked, "How about asking the Dalai Lama?" I said, "You should know best about what to ask the Dalai Lama." Then one day soon after, she told me she had written to the Dalai Lama who had answered, "If you treat him well, you can take him." So she asked me if I wanted to go, and I said that I did.

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I returned to Dalhousie and waited there for quite some time, but nothing happened, so I went to my brother's place in Mussoorie. He was working as a businessman for the Tibetan Homes Foundation. Finally, I received a letter telling me to come to Delhi and that the papers were ready. I asked my uncle for some money. They were pretty well off and sent me 500 rupees. That was a lot of money, and I used it for my medical checkup because that was a requirement. But also on food, taxis, and a place to stay.

When all the requirements were completed, the Office of Tibet dropped me at the airport. I was wearing my Tibetan dress and just had a small bag and nothing else. I had a 100 rupees left and I changed that at the airport and got \$15 (laughs). I put the \$15 in my pocket and left. Now I didn't speak any English, and in the airplane, I wondered where I was being taken. I remember thinking that when an airplane flies in the sky, you don't feel it moving. You only see the sky and hear the engines roaring.

When I reached New York, my American mother, Nancy Mayo-Smith, was waiting there. We took another flight to Boston and then we drove to New Hampshire, where my American parents were living at the time. Then they moved because Dad became the headmaster of the Roxbury Latin School, a private all boys school in West Roxbury. The family was given a big house there. That was in 1965. At that time, I was not allowed to work so I was only doing small chores at their

place. Now their food was not enough for me, so when I was hungry, I'd go out and would see apples on trees. I climbed the trees like a monkey and ate the apples (laughs). Otherwise I didn't know how to get around. I didn't know the language and unless someone guided me, I would get lost.

In 1966, I was told that I must return because I was on a tourist visa for one year. But I thought, *I'm not returning*. I had nowhere to go in India, I had no country, no parents, and I wanted to stay. I told my American parents I wanted to stay, but they said that I must leave, that my duration of stay had expired. They offered to help me in every way in India.

I thought about what I should do. There was a couple working in their school and I told them I wanted to write to President Johnson. When I asked if that was okay, they said, "Yes, you can. Why not?" He had said that if anybody had a problem, they can write to him. So I went back and wrote him a letter saying, "I am a Tibetan, the Chinese took away my country, I went to India, I left my family and I have nowhere to go. I have no parents, no country, nothing. The Chinese took away my country, India is not my country. So please help me, President Johnson." I wrote my American family's name and address. I showed the letter to the couple. All the spelling was incorrect. The man I was working with corrected the letter and I went back and wrote everything again and sent the letter.

Two or three weeks later, I received a reply. While I was doing some work outside, Dad called, "Kuncho, Kuncho, did you write a letter to President Johnson?" I said, "Yes." He said,

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"Why didn't you tell me?" I apologized for not doing so. Then after two weeks, I received a second letter. Dad took me to the John F. Kennedy building, and I was given a green card. The man who gave me the green card told me that he was seeing a Tibetan for the first time. Now that I had a green card, I could work, and I was given a part-time job at Dad's school.

I asked my brother in India to send me two handmade yak dolls. He sent me the two yaks. I wrapped them up and sent them by post to President Johnson as a Christmas present, and President Johnson sent me a New Year's card. He sent me another New Year's card the next year. When he finished his term in office and went to Texas, he continued to send me New Year's cards for two years. After that, he passed away.

So that's how I came here.

In 1966, after I got my green card, I was able to attend night schools, first at Roslindale, and then also Boston University. At that time, there were no Tibetans in Boston, but there were Tibetans in New York, and so on weekends, I'd take the bus to New York. Although I didn't yet know the language well, my brain was very alert. I had their addresses and I showed them to the taxi drivers and they'd drop me off in the right spot. There were six Tibetans in New York that I knew of at the time. There must have been others but I didn't know them.

In Boston, I worked part time in the kitchen of the Roxbury Latin School where my adoptive father was headmaster. I'd work for about six hours a day because I also had to help at home. The children in school were very fond of me. I had

a Tibetan sling, a *gurtok*, and with it I'd be able to hit the horizontal bar of the field goal at the end of the football field. They'd be amazed (laughs).

But in the general area of where I lived in West Roxbury, the children looked down on me a lot. I'd get into lots of fights. It was during the Vietnam War, and some kids must have thought I was Vietnamese. I was different. Sometimes when I'd go out, some people would throw stuff at me from behind. I would see the stuff flying past me. I'd turn around and they'd all be quiet. They weren't always kids. They were sometimes adults. West Roxbury was a white neighborhood, mostly Irish. There were no blacks living there and also no Asians to be seen. I think I was the only one. They were very prejudiced. There was a case where a black family bought a house and it was burned down before they moved in. That's how it was.

Then I moved with the Mayo-Smiths to live with them in their new home in Boston's Beacon Hill. Dad told me not to leave the job at the school because it was a good place to work. I agreed. Now that I had some money, I continued to go to New York on the weekends, meeting many Tibetans. Then came a group of Tibetans who had been hired by a paper company in Maine to work as lumberjacks. At that time I knew Janet Gyatso, who is now teaching at Harvard, but at that time she was a student at Boston University and very supportive of Tibetans. She told me that these men hired as loggers were coming and suggested we offer them tea. So we took tea and went to receive them at the airport, but had no time for tea

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because the moment they arrived, they were taken in a bus. I didn't get to see them properly. After about a year, I think the company went out of business and the lumberjacks were told to travel wherever they wanted. A few of them ended up in Salem, and I would get together with them on the weekends and we'd all have a good time. I also knew a Tibetan named Tenzin something going to school at Amherst whom I'd see sometimes. This was around the early 1970s.

When I was a little older, around 1976, I visited India, back in Mussoorie. When there, I heard that my relative Soenam Tenzin was seriously ill and that there was not much hope. I learned he was in the hospital and went to visit him there. Soenam la was lying on his bed with tubes in his nose. His wife Yeshey was there. I had never seen Yeshey la before. She looked like a little girl and she must have washed her hair, for she was standing there, her hair wet, and she came up to us and said she was Yeshey la. Then she left the room, and Soenam told me that he wanted me to marry Yeshey la, that his disease was not going to spare him, and that he had no regrets if he died. However, if he lived, he felt no attachment to the mundane life.

I asked him if he was serious. He said he was. I then told him to be happy and assured him that I'd do everything he wanted me to do. He said that was great and that Yeshey and I should go back to the U.S. and get married. But I told him it was not right for me to marry his wife while he was in the hospital. I asked what I should do. He told me to go with Dawa la, the settlement leader, to the police station and get a mar-

riage certificate. I agreed to do this, and the next day, we went to the police station. Yeshey la was seeing me for the first time, and I was seeing her for the first time (laughs), but because my brother had requested me to do this, I couldn't say no, and she too must have thought that she would honor her husband's request and that life would be better in the U.S. Without any disagreement, we arranged to get a marriage certificate.

After one week, I had to return to the U.S. Then I applied to get my wife over to the States but I was told that if the husband was alive, a divorce certificate was necessary and also that we needed an adoption certificate for Yeshey la's daughter Jampa.

When I went back to India, Soenam had managed to get accepted to treatment in a hospital in Denmark, where he had been a student, and his health had improved. With the help of my cousin-sister Genyen la and her husband Tashi Tobgye, who were working for the Tibetan government in Dharamsala, I filled out the right papers and then I returned and applied to get Yeshey la and Jampa over here. It took a total of four years and three trips to India until they were finally here with me.

I continued to work in maintenance at the Roxbury Latin School and stayed involved with the Tibetan community. In 1981, His Holiness the Dalai Lama gave teachings at Harvard University. At that time, Chogyam Trungpa Rinpoche invited His Holiness to his center in Boston, where I noticed His Holiness kneeling down, undoing the laces to his shoes and removing them before sitting. After the teaching was over, I noticed again how cumbersome it seemed as he kneeled over to tie his

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laces. At that moment, I immediately thought, "Wouldn't it be wonderful if I could offer him a pair of shoes that were comfortable without laces, so it would be easier for him?"

The next day, I went to a shoe store in downtown Boston and found a beautiful pair of brown shoes. However, I didn't know his size, so I guessed. I also bought a soft-lined pair of house slippers. I bought a larger box that would fit both shoes and wrapped it up to bring to him that day. Being a handful of Tibetans, we had the fortune of having an audience with him in a room at Harvard. I offered the gift and he asked, "What have you brought in this large box?" I replied, "I have two pairs of shoes that I'd like to offer to you." He joked immediately, with his arms extended widely, "They are not Western-sized shoes this big, are they?"

I asked if he would allow me to place them on his feet and he replied, "Yes, yes." He turned and sat down on a small sofa. I first untied his left shoe and placed the new brown laceless shoe on. His Holiness stood up with the new shoe on his left foot, the old shoe on his right foot and began to walk up and down the room, saying, "Yes, it fits, it fits, thank you, thank you." I felt very fortunate and felt so happy. The one thing I always regret was not asking him for his old pair.

By the late 1980s, there was a Tibetan support group, called the U.S. Tibet Committee, though the members were all Americans—Americans helping Tibetans. They would arrange a table at some sort of a fair on which they had leaflets giving information about Tibetans and they distributed them to people. Yeshey and I joined them, but the Tibetans living

in Salem were too far away to come. Around this time, Ed Bednar was in Boston and we had our first meeting in Beacon Hill at the house of one of the members. He said hello to us, and later he came to our home at Roxbury Latin School. When he asked if any other Tibetans lived in Boston, we told him no, and he asked why. We explained that many Tibetans lived in India, but it was not possible for them to come here because they could not afford the plane tickets and it would be very difficult for them here. Besides, it would be extremely hard for them to get a visa.

Later when we met, Ed Bednar asked, "What would you think if I tried to get more Tibetans over here?" We said we'd be very happy. He told us that the U.S. brought thousands of people from different countries every year and asked why they did not bring Tibetans over. We replied that we had no idea, and we advised him to contact the representative at the Office of Tibet. I think Ed Bednar contacted them and the Tibetan Resettlement Project was born. Soon after, the community we have now began to join us, and we've tried to do everything possible to hold on to our Tibetan culture and language.

Yeshey la understands Buddhism very well and takes a lot of interest in it. She is much better than me. When we came here, we put up a shrine in our house. We get up in the morning, make water offerings and butter lamp offerings, and do prostrations. I have a seat near the door. I sit there and do everything I know. That takes about two hours. After all this, I read the scriptures and I feel I am blessed. I have no worries at all. In 2008 I retired after working at Roxbury Latin for

over forty years. It was my first and last job since coming to the U.S.

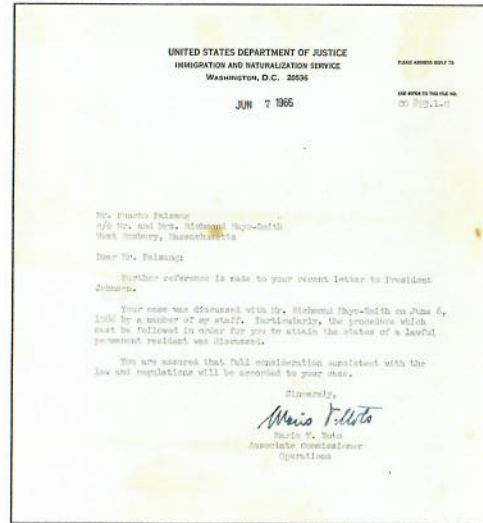
It is most important to focus on preserving our language and also our tradition and script. If our children don't understand these things, then it's difficult to preserve Tibetan heritage. When Tenley was a toddler, her mother spoke to her only in Tibetan. She speaks very good Tibetan. And Jampa came to the U.S. when she was just eight and she also speaks very good Tibetan. At home, we used to speak only Tibetan, never English. At the time there were no Tibetans here, we sent Tenley to Lama Jorden la to learn Tibetan. He used to live here—a Sakya lama who is now a khenpo, an abbot, at the Sakya Institute in Nepal. So now both girls know how to read a little and to speak Tibetan very well. If we lose our tradition, then we are finished.

When I was young, I faced a lot of difficulties—I lost my country, my parents, and brought nothing with me, and in India I lived a life of scarcity. But when I came here, there was everything in every way. This is because of the grace of His Holiness. If he hadn't gone to India, India would not have allowed us in, and we'd be left in Tibet under the Chinese. Because of His Holiness, after detaining us at the borders for one month, Nehru gave us refuge in India. Without him, we'd not have managed to go to India and we'd have no choice but to live under the Chinese. Because of His Holiness, I feel I am blessed. Isn't it a blessing? It's my karma.

KUNCHO PALSANG



Kuncho, at the home of Richmond and Nancy Mayo-Smith, dressed in the chuba he wore when arriving to the U.S.
West Roxbury, MA. 1966.



Kuncho's letter from the U.S. Department of Justice, Immigration and Naturalization Services, assuring permanent residency in the U.S. June 7, 1966.



Christmas with the Mayo-Smith family.
Boston, MA. 1984.



At his childhood home during his second visit to Tibet.
Playing a game of "Sho" with his late brother and identical twin, Kuncho Jorden.
Katsel, Tibet. July 1987.



Kuncho with his wife Yeshey and daughters, Jampa and Tenley, at the top of Chokpori, across from the Potala Palace. Lhasa, Tibet. July 1993.



Kuncho with his family at his retirement party thrown by Headmaster Kerry Brennan and the Roxbury Latin community. Celebrating over forty years of service to the school. West Roxbury, MA. September 2007.