“Song of Lhasa Memories” by Shelkar Lingpa (ཤེལ་དཀར་གླིང་པ།)
Translated by Geshe N. L. Nornang and Lawrence Epstein

Note from the Editors: Geshe N. L. Nornang and Lawrence Epstein originally translated “Song of Lhasa Memories” by Shelkar Lingpa (Shel dkar gling pa, 1876–1913) in the mid-1980s, likely based on the third revised edition of the Tibetan text published by Tibet Mirror Publications in 1965. The Tibetan text has been added mainly from that source. The translator's notes below were part of Nornang and Epstein's original translation. See the introductory essay “Notes on the ‘Song of Lhasa Memories’” in this issue of the Journal of Tibetan Literature (Volume 2.1, 2023, 73–84).

Things produced by any proximate cause
are naturally emptiness.
But you, O lamas, who teach the truth of cause and effect,
Omniscient ones, please regard this humble one with compassion! [1]

I am confused; I know and have achieved nothing.
The straightforward heart of the matter is that I miss Lhasa too much;
this song records whatever comes to mind. [2]
I miss Lhasa: The rippling sounds of the great stream Kyi, slow circling to the right, where many cranes and geese disport; its garlands of glittering waves soaring to the sky. [3]

I miss Lhasa: its warm and glittering sheen, its foundations in a broad and level basin adorned with garlands of verdant grass and trees; the sun and moon pursue each other across its pleasant path. [4]

I miss Lhasa, embellished with the ornaments that follow one another: unlike here, where gloomy darkness never clears away, never without a swirling overcast; Lhasa's warm when it should be cool in winter, and it is cool in summer. [5]

I miss Lhasa, beautiful, fortunate place: on the bare ground the eight-petal lotus, the flanks of the hefty hills replete with the eight signs of good fortune, the heavens round like the shape of the wheel. [6]
I miss Lhasa: its women showing off their smiling faces in the crowded streets of the roiling marketplace; delighted in the thousand actions of their supple forms, their collective beauty, none omitted. [7]

I miss Lhasa: going around the middle circuit again and again, bargaining while looking in the shops; here and there the uncountable wealth of elegant goods, that vie with Vaiśravana's treasury. [8]

I miss Lhasa: its careful and dependable ways, not awhirl with busyness like here; its casual folks' calm dispositions, mulling over their meals and doing honest work. [9]
I miss Lhasa, with its sound of whistling arrows:
When the flowers free their abundant blooms,
to picnic we go and enjoy ourselves;
the music of the transverse flute and other instruments, trala, tralee. [10]

I miss Lhasa: the crunching sounds of mealtimes,
the formal settings of tasty preparations of Chinese food,
raised on high and respectfully offered before one;
and then taking up whatever one wishes to eat. [11]

I miss Lhasa, where one is served with respect:
those flower-like beauties, the wine-serving girls as beautiful as goddesses,
their fluttering eyes flying darts of sidelong glances,
saying drink, drink the alcoholic drink. [12]

I miss Lhasa, where offerings and charity are given:
ah, the economy and power of the righteous kingdom
seems as if it filled every place under the blue sky;
a place where charity is given even to mice and tiny creatures. [13]
I miss Lhasa, where things are done immediately and perfectly: the officials dressed in long brocades choosing the best ideas, discussing them in detail, and quickly writing them down for both governance and religion. [14]

I miss Lhasa: the governmental law, yoking strictness and kindness, like Brahma’s ruler, is without crookedness; officials, unable to accuse just anyone, left or right, Looking at the way they have executed the law. [15]

I miss Lhasa, where nobles’ servants gather here and there in great numbers to enjoy themselves: their cup-sheaths hanging down with silken tassels, their heads covered by the shaking fringe of the Mongol hat, their long earrings hanging down. [16]
I miss Lhasa, where young girls gather:
their beautiful songs of a thousand tones,
their long-toned voices that steal away one's thoughts,
the touches of their soft hands giving happiness. [17]

I miss Lhasa's many festivals:
sometimes religious dances, sometimes pageants,
the many shows of graceful dancing motions;
each making one's eyes redden or droop with looking. [18]

I miss Lhasa, where down any street or shortcut one might go,
even the beggars—poor, crippled, blind or old—
get drunk on wine, sweet or dry,
and go reeling, or they sleep. [19]

O fathers, listen! There's more to tell!
I miss Lhasa, where dwells my doctor
who looks after this dear body of mine,
my dearest friends who love me, my kind parents. [20]
I miss Lhasa, where one murmurs prayers:
imidst such offerings as butter lamps,
The two Buddha statues—the glory of their Buddha's marks aflame—
with one's friends who piously go to make offerings. [21]

I miss Lhasa, where in the temples of the peaceful and wrathful Śrīdevi
the roars of *ki* and *so* make even Mt. Meru shake;
the votary flags wave,
the incense smoke is sent aloft. [22]

I miss Lhasa: 'tis there! Look! The House of the Infinite Ship!
As soon as one sees the living statues that fill it,
the tears of faith that fall from one's eyes
trickle down involuntarily. [23]
I miss Lhasa: great and good lamas sit on their thrones, and when the rain of the profound Mahāyāna falls, many people join their hands in prayer and quietly listen in the monastery courts. [24]

I miss Lhasa: filled with crowds of many old men and women going bent-backed, prostrating and circumambulating, on the Outer Circuit, even though their trembling legs are scarcely able to support their bodies. [25]

I miss Lhasa: the tantric services play with crash of drum and cymbal, the smoke quavers, rising, the sundry grains dispersed; the hum and phat of mantras defeat the feral demons’ army; cringing, they are banished far away. [26]

I miss Lhasa, where many people spin their prayer wheels: where the round prayer wheels, great and small, and the voices of the tinkling bells exhort, “Come, come” for the benefit of beings. [27]
I miss Lhasa, where sundry clergy and laymen with faith and the other exalted jewels, do prostrations upon flat stones and planks, whenever they have time, before the gorgeous gates of the Cathedral; the rubbing sound of their full-length prostrations accumulating. [28]

I miss Lhasa, where, to increase the offering-libations from all directions, the lake of merit of the people that gather, though it is shaken, does not overflow, all swirling into one. [29]

I miss Lhasa, the place where excellent liberation is achieved: where one recognizes that the human form is difficult to get once in a kalpa, one’s short lifetime is unsteady, suffering and going to a bad rebirth. [30]
I miss Lhasa: lamas and dākinīs assemble—it’s not just talk—
living in that land, like a heap of clouds that shades;
little creatures like me as well
they lead quickly on the path of liberation. [31]

I miss Lhasa, where from the houses of those sincere in doing virtue,
are novices who don’t malinger.
They shave their black hair, put on saffron robes,
clearly wear red and yellow robes. [32]

I miss Lhasa: the monastery courts where thinking on the meaning of dharma is
heard,
when in the midst of assemblies monks and geshés debate,
the sound of their clapping hands
clears away all doubts. [33]

I miss Lhasa, where the clergy, expert in governance and religion,
arrange themselves in rows and in one voice
if one just hears them pronounce the sounds of dharma,
One will not fall into fearsome bad rebirths. [34]
I miss Lhasa: here and there in solitary retreats, which make them happy, straight-bodied meditation masters’ delight. Without the faults of obscuring ignorance or wild rage they meditate harmoniously. [35]

I miss Lhasa: midst the hectic tumult of widespread things of sensuous pleasure, even if one has but little to do with religion, one automatically has thoughts of such things as deliverance, despair, and compassion, that come directly to one. [36]

I miss Lhasa, where, not barring unclear visions and doubts, all the different kinds of foggy thought into the vale of emptiness, the dharma itself, will later disappear, liberated to their own place. [37]
I miss Lhasa, where those who believe in duality, saying “I” and “mine,” will go into the emptiness of the unconditioned sphere; unclear, unreal appearance and the form of emptiness proclaim emptiness’ echo clearly. [38]

I miss Lhasa: even stupid roosters like me mount their roosts on high and puff up the feathers of the two goals fluttering, they crow their praises in their outstretched throats. [39]

I miss Lhasa in Central Tibet, that happy land replete with the ten virtues, where though this ignorant one was not born, was cast by previously accumulated karma; clearly it comes into my mind. [40]

Look here how I sound, choked up from the poem in my throat! And watch, wide-eyed, moving your gaze to the heavens in that direction, to see what life in Lhasa was like! [41]
Yes, but nowadays the Lhasa where
the one god, Avalokita, dwells is here;
because nothing is certain except one thing,
O friends, rely on here! [42]

We were surrounded by the Chinese army.
The body, taxed by running, torments the mind.
Since the Chinese kill for voicing even a little criticism,
now, even for the region of the gods, my longing is little. [43]

At the end of this short life, in solitude,
I have gradually abandoned worldly deeds to their own place
and the continuous, uncontrolled practice of falling to bad rebirths.
I’ve prepared the way of looking peacefully with soft eyes. [44]
May I become one who swiftly leads
to nirvāṇa, without leftovers or traces,
all the beings equal to the limits of the sky,
the mothers, who, for many kalpas, give us our bodies time and again. [45]

I, old man, who relates this in the language of the street,
have neither innate skill nor the fruits of learning;
to gauge this, see these writings:
ha, there will be some who laugh. [46]

The Song of Lhasa Memories, composed by Miwang Shelling, is done.
Translators’ Notes

In this translation, we have taken a few liberties with the verse structure. Most verses end with a run-on adjective and the phrase “Lhasa dren” (ལྷས་དྲན།) — “I miss Lhasa, where . . .” We have placed this phrase at the beginning of the verses. The original verses also contain, for the most part, reduplicative nouns and adjectives at the beginning of each foot. While aesthetically pleasing in Tibetan, this would not be the case in English.

The following is a sample (verse 3) with a close translation.

Place of happy playing (for) many cranes and geese
The garland of flowing, glittering waves soars to the sky
I miss Lhasa [where] the great river, the Kyichu, calls out [the sound of ripples]
“lhung, lhung,”
leisurely, leisurely circling to the right.

Verse 5. The ornaments . . . , to wit, the sun and the moon.
Verse 5. “Here,” refers to Darjeeling throughout the song.
Verse 6. The lotus and the wheel are two of the eight signs of good fortune.
Verse 10. “Whistling arrows” (བི་ཤུ།) are used at picnics, etc., in archery contests.
Verse 21. This refers to the statues of Shakyamuni brought by the Chinese and Nepalese princesses housed in the Ramoché (རྣ་མཆེ།) temple and the Tsuklakhang (གཙུག་ལག་ཁང་།) respectively.
Verse 22. Kwi and swo are syllables used to mark the end of certain prayers.
Verse 23, line 1. To wit, the Potala.
Verse 28. That is, the major characteristics of belief in Tibetan Buddhism.
Verse 28, line 3. To wit, the Lhasa Jokhang.
Verse 33. Debate, of course, is an important part of monastic training for advanced degrees. It is carried out with stylized gestures, amongst which is hand clapping.
Verse 39, line 2. That is, *ngé dön* (ཌེ་དོན) and *drang dön* (དྲང་དོན), absolute truth and ontological truth.

Verse 42. Which is to say, Darjeeling, where the Dalai Lama presently resides.