

A Story of Lay Training
Yeh-lu Ch'u-ts'ai (1189-1243)

Rev. Kōten Benson

[The following article was first published in the Autumn 1990 issue of *The Journal of Shasta Abbey*, and is reprinted here, with permission.]

*To do something by ourselves, without copying others,
is to become an example to the world and the merit
of doing such a thing becomes the source of all wisdom:
do not criticize; accept everything.*

In the 13th century the Mongol armies of Genghis Khan conquered most of Asia. Whole cities were destroyed in the space of a week, entire states were devastated and the world was turned upside down.

In 1215, after a ten-month siege, the capital of the state of Chin in northern China fell to the Mongols. A month of looting followed in which thousands were killed and a great part of the city was burned to the ground. All the treasure of the capital, as well as the civic leaders, was rounded up and sent off to Genghis Khan in Mongolia. Among them was a young man whose family had served the Chin for generations although they had originally been enemies. His name was Yeh-lu Ch'u-ts'ai.

Yeh-lu had been born on August 3rd, 1189, in that city now in ruins. His father having died when he was two years old, he was raised by his mother, a scholar, who personally took care of his formal education. He entered the civil service and held various minor posts. Deeply affected by the suffering of the siege, he had sought out the great Ch'an Master Wan-sung Hsing-hsiu, had become his lay disciple and entered the monastery for three years. During that time he had experience of enlightenment, which was certified by his master. It was shortly after this that he had his first encounter with Genghis Khan.

Yeh-lu refused to condemn the Chin, whom his father and grandfather had served, simply because he was now in the presence of the conqueror, Genghis Khan. Impressed by the fearlessness and integrity of this young man, Genghis Khan took him immediately into his service where Yeh-lu rapidly became the chief minister.

When modern lay trainees think that they have a hard row to hoe training in this present world, they should perhaps think of this man who found himself chief minister to someone responsible for the slaughter of thousands. There is an old Chinese story of an

official who, disgusted with the corruption all around him, went to the river to drown himself muttering, “All the world is drunk and I am sober; all the world is crazy and I am sane”. Just as he was about to do the deed, he heard a herdsman singing a folk song, “When the Yi River is clear, I’ll wash my hat ribbon; when it is cloudy, I’ll wash my feet”. The official gave up the suicide attempt and returned to his post. I hope the meaning of this story is clear. Like this official, Yeh-lu was in a very difficult position. In Buddhist training there is just one solution to this particular kōan and that is to sit very, very still, to remember that each his own karma makes and to act fearlessly. Yeh-lu did just this and few people individually have had such an impact on history. The more conservative element among the Mongols proposed to exterminate the entire population of northern China and level all the cities to provide grassland for the Mongol herds. Knowing that appeals for mercy would fall on deaf ears, Yeh-lu opposed that policy on the grounds that keeping the cities intact and sparing the population would ensure tax income for the Mongols, as well as food for their armies. So he was put in charge of this and set about saving as many of the educated people as he could on the grounds that he needed help in administering the new tax system. He opposed regarding the conquered population as just a source of revenue to be exploited to the full and instead set up a fair system, taking control from the Mongol military and putting it in the hands of representatives of the conquered. We must remember that in these cases his was the only voice raised against wholesale slaughter and oppression, as he was the only one with the ear of Genghis Khan who felt this way. Fearlessness is essential in such circumstances.

Always his appeals were based on practicality and common sense. In Persia he told the Mongols how many troops they would lose in taking each city and thus, with so many cities, it would be more practical to negotiate and offer protection. This policy again saved lives and resulted in the spread of the Mongol empire with the minimum of slaughter. This is not to say that the conquest did not often continue to be bloody, but that Yeh-lu was doing the very best he could in an impossible situation.

Another point in Buddhist training under such circumstances is having long-term vision. Yeh-lu set about educating the sons and grandsons of Genghis Khan and putting into their minds doubts about the joys of devastating the earth and interest in the culture of the peoples that they conquered, always appealing to that part of their nature that was just slightly better than what they already knew. In Buddhism, to help the world it is essential to first of all train oneself and then to be of help out of that training; otherwise, it is just those who can’t swim trying to save the drowning. Also it is essential to train where you are. Yeh-lu did not seek out the service of Genghis Khan, but once he was in it, he consumed himself in doing the best he could for all beings and that included the Mongols as well as those they conquered.

Helping all beings took unusual forms. Yeh-lu saw to it that the family descended from Confucius was protected and honoured, thus keeping alive the very symbol of the continuation of Chinese civilization. He also arranged for the head of the Taoist Church to visit Genghis Khan, a move which resulted in the protection of that aspect of Chinese culture as well. He accomplished all this without compromising his

integrity as a Buddhist layman.

He also collected and published geographical information on the lands that had been conquered, as well as establishing publishing houses and translation bureaus to help with communication.

Everywhere he could, peace and stability were encouraged and measures of the future put into place. When Genghis Khan died, it was Yeh-lu who exerted all his influence for a peaceful transition by encouraging the reluctant successor to take the throne and his rivals to make submission for the sake of the empire.

It is said that the Mongol rulers were most impressed by Yeh-lu's ability to see the course of future events and interpret present signs. When a fabulous animal was seen in the Himalayas, Yeh-lu told Genghis Khan that it was Kio-tuan, the Chinese unicorn, who only appeared to warn great rulers to abandon bloodshed and turn back from conquest. There is in this no evidence of dissembling, as this was the traditional and correct interpretation based on Chinese tradition.

Yeh-lu served the Mongols for twenty-five years and in that time, like someone who changes the course of a river by cutting a small channel and leaving the rest to the force of the water, the course of the Mongols was altered so that when Genghis's grandson Kublai was of age, he mounted the throne of China as the Son of Heaven without vast destruction. Yeh-lu had died more than twenty years before, but what he had set in motion continued.

Near the end of Yeh-lu's life, the Mongol rulers became impatient with his slow ways and set about trying to raise the taxes beyond what the population could bear. When his protests were unheeded, Yeh-lu died. Believing that he must have accumulated great wealth in serving the Khans, his enemies ransacked his house but found nothing but musical instruments, maps and documents that he had saved from the destroyed cities.

To live fully, to die fully and leave no wake—is this not true training?