

A Memorandum regarding the Bone of the Buddha
Han Yu
(translation by B.W. Van Norden; January 13, 2006)

[Translator's Introduction: The Fengxiang Temple had a religious artifact, a finger bone that was supposedly from the Buddha himself. In 819 CE, the Emperor was going to participate in a ceremony in which the bone was to be taken out of the temple and venerated in a long procession that would culminate in the bone being taken to the royal palace. A "memorandum" (表, often translated "memorial") is an official communication to the Emperor. This memorandum by Han Yu is a major statement in the Confucian revival of the Tang and Song dynasties, and expresses the Confucian opposition to Buddhism.]

I, you servant Han Yu, offer the following opinion: I submit that Buddhism is simply a barbarian teaching.

From the Later Han Dynasty it has infiltrated China.ⁱ It never existed in high antiquity. Formerly, the Yellow Emperor was on the throne for 100 years, and lived to be 111 years old. Shao Hao was on the throne for 80 years, and lived to be 100 years old. Zhuan Xu was on the throne for 79 years, and lived to be 98 years old. Emperor Ku was on the throne for 70 years, and lived to be 105 years old. Emperor Yao was on the throne for 98 years, and lived to be 118 years. Emperors Shun and Yu both lived to be 100 years old. These were periods of great tranquility. The commoners were at peace, happy and long-lived. Yet China did not yet have Buddhism. Afterwards, in the Shang Dynasty, King Tang also lived to be 100 years old. Tang's descendent Tai Wu was on the throne for 75 years. His descendent Wu Ding was on the throne for 59 years. The histories do not state how long they lived, but we can deduce that it was probably no less than 100 years. In the Zhou Dynasty, King Wen lived to be 97 years old. King Wu lived to be 93 years old. King Mu was on the throne for 100 years. During this period, Buddhist teachings had still not entered China. It was not because they served Buddhism that they reached such points.ⁱⁱ

It was in the time of Emperor Ming of the Han Dynasty that there began to be Buddhist teachings (in China). Emperor Ming was on the throne a mere 18 years. After

him periods of chaos and destruction succeeded one another, and the periods of reigns were not long. Since the Song, Qi, Liang, Chen and Yuan-Wei, the service to Buddhism has gradually become more strict, yet dynasties succeed one another more feverishly. Only Emperor Wu of the Liang was on the throne for 48 years. He thrice offered to dedicate his life to the Buddha (and only because of the actions of his sons and ministers was he dissuaded). In the sacrifices to his ancestors, he did not use sacrificial animals (as required by ritual), but only used fruits and vegetables. In the end, he was besieged by Hou Jing (who led a rebellion), and starved to death in the Tai palace. The state soon succumbed to decay. People serve the Buddha seeking good fortune, but they just get more misfortune. If we look at it from this perspective, we can understand that the Buddha is unworthy to be served.

When Emperor Gaozu (the founder of the current dynasty, the Tang) first accepted the resignation of the Sui Dynasty, he consulted his advisors about eliminating (Buddhist and Daoist monks and nuns). At that time, the talent and understanding of the assorted ministers was not profound. They were unable to deeply understand the Way of the Former Kings, what was appropriate in past and present, and express the Emperor's sagacious insight in order to relieve the bane of the era. Consequently, the policy was eventually stopped. I, your servant, continually regret this.

I submit that Your Most Royal Majesty's courage and sagacity is incomparable within over a thousand years. At the beginning of your reign, you did not allow people to abandon their homes to become Buddhist monks and nuns or Daoist priests. Nor did you allow the establishment of Daoist temples and Buddhist monasteries. I, your servant, have always thought that the intention of Gaozu would certainly be carried out in the hands of Your Majesty. Now, if it is somehow not to be carried out, could it be that they will be, on the contrary, encouraged to grow unrestrained?!

Now I hear that Your Majesty has ordered a group of monks to greet a bone of the Buddha at Fengxiang, and that Your Highness will observe from a stand as it is brought into the royal residence. And further, I hear that you have ordered all temples in turn to pay homage to it. Although I am quite ignorant, I certainly understand that Your Majesty is not so deluded regarding the Buddha that You pay this respect for the sake of good fortune. It is simply that the people are happy about the abundant harvest, and in

accordance with people's feelings you are preparing a spectacle for the gentlemen and commoners, a simple tool for amusing them. How could You be as sagaciously enlightened as you are, and be willing to believe this kind of thing? However, commoners are foolish and benighted. They are easily confused and have difficulty understanding. Should they see Your Majesty acting like this, they will begin to say that You serve the Buddha with a sincere heart. They shall all say, "The Son of Heaven is greatly sagacious, and furthermore reverently faithful with his whole heart. Who are we commoners that we should begrudge (serving the Buddha) with our lives?" Singeing their heads and burning their fingers, in groups of over a hundred, they will rend their clothes and give away their money, from morning till dusk, contorting in imitation of one another, fearing only that they will be left behind, old and young running to and fro, abandoning their tasks. If this is not immediately suppressed, and (the bone) passes from temple to temple, there will definitely be those who mortify their own flesh in the name of paying homage. Corrupting public morals and making ourselves ridiculous to the world like this are not insignificant matters.

Now, the Buddha was fundamentally a barbarian. He did not understand the language of the Central Kingdom; his clothes were in a different style; his mouth did not speak the doctrines of the Former Kings; his body did not wear the clothes of the Former Kings; he did not know of righteousness between ruler and minister, or of the feelings between father and son. If he were still alive today and came on a diplomatic mission to our court, Your Majesty would admit and accept him, grant him an audience in the reception hall and give him a banquet, then you would present him with a set of clothes, and have him escorted to the border, not allowing him to confuse the masses. And now that he has been dead for a long time, how could it be proper to cause this decayed bone, this vile refuse, to enter the Palace?

Kongzi said, "Revere ghosts and spirits but keep them at a distance" (*Analects* 6.22). When the assorted lords of ancient times conducted mourning in their states, they first ordered the shamans to "sweep away" bad fortune using a peach-tree branch, and only then would they mourn. Now, without reason, we take a filthy object and view it ourselves, without the shamans going first, and not using a peach-tree branch. Yet the assembled ministers do not express their disapproval, and the Oversight Board does not

point out the error. I, your servant, am genuinely ashamed of it. I plead with you to hand over this bone to an official, to be tossed into flame or fire, and completely destroyed. Put a stop to the doubts of the world. Cut off the confusion of later generations. Make the people of the world recognize that what a great sage like Yourself does stands out above the commonplace endlessly. Would this not be glorious?! Would this not be a joy?! If the Buddha really has a soul that could cause misfortune, let whatever tragedies fall upon me, your servant. With Heaven as my witness, I shall not regret it.

With unlimited gratitude and the highest sincerity, this memorandum is respectfully submitted for Your attention.

In awe and trepidation,

Your servant, Han Yu

ⁱ Buddhism came to China some time during the first century C.E.

ⁱⁱ The rulers mentioned in this paragraph have all been revered by Confucians for their virtue and the good quality of their rule.