Han Yu (768–824), Memorial Discussing the Buddha’s Bone

One of Your Majesty’s officers speaks.

I am of the opinion that Buddhism is nothing more than a religion of the outlying tribes. Since the Eastern Han it has made inroads into the heartland, but such a thing never existed in high antiquity. In days of yore the Yellow Emperor sat on the throne for a hundred years and the years of his life reached one hundred and ten. Shao-hao sat on the throne for eighty years and the years of his life reached a hundred. Zhuan-xu sat on the throne for seventy-nine years and the years of his life reached ninety-eight. Emperor Gu sat on the throne for seventy years and the years of his life reached one hundred and five. Emperor Yao sat on the throne for ninety-eight years and the years of his life reached one hundred and eighteen. The emperors Shun and Yu both lived to be a hundred. And in those days the world enjoyed perfect peace; the common people were secure in their happiness and lived to ripe old age. Yet at this time there was no Buddhism in the heartland.

Afterward Tang of the Yin also lived to a hundred years. Of Tang’s descendents, Tai-mou sat on the throne seventy-five years, and Wu-ting sat on the throne fifty-nine years. The histories do not say to what ages they lived; but taking into account recorded spans of years, it seems probable that both lived no less than a hundred years. King Wen of the Zhou lived to ninety-seven; King Wu, to ninety-three; King Mu sat on the throne a hundred years. And at this time too the Buddhist religion had not yet made inroads into the heartland—so they did not achieve such spans because they served the Buddha.

The Buddhist religion appeared only in the reign of Emperor Ming of the Han, and Emperor Ming sat on the throne for only eighteen years. After him, turmoil and destruction were continuous, and fate gave no long reigns. From the Song, Qi, Liang, Chen, and Toba Wei on, devotion to the Buddha became increasingly intense; and reign spans were exceedingly short. There was, of course, the case of Emperor Wu of the Liang, who sat on the throne for forty-eight years. Three times at different periods in his life he offered up his own body as a gift to the Buddha: no red meat was used in the sacrifices in the ancestral temple, and during the day he ate only one meal, which was restricted to vegetables and fruit. But afterwards he was beset by the rebel Hou Jing. He starved to death in his palace compound of Jin-ling, and his dynasty also subsequently perished. He sought good fortune through devotion to the Buddha, but reaped only his own downfall. Consideration of these cases leads us to understand that the Buddha does not merit devotion.

When Gao-zu, the Tang, founder, first took the sacred authority of rule from the Sui, proposals were made to get rid of it. But court officials in those times lacked far-seeing judgment. They were incapable of any deep understanding of the Way of the early kings, or of what is fitting in both ancient and modern times, or of how to expound the matter fully for His Majesty’s enlightened grasp and thereby to preserve us from this scourge. The issue was subsequently set aside, which is something I have always deplored.

In the past several millennia and centuries, there has never been the like of Your Wise and August Imperial Majesty, holy in sageliness, spirited in war. When you first took the throne, Your Majesty did not permit people to take vows to become monks, nuns, or Daoist priests; you further did not permit the foundation of new monasteries and Daoist temples. I had always thought that the intention of the founder Gao-zu would surely be carried out at last by Your Majesty’s hand. Even though this has not yet been accomplished, how can you give them free rein and make them prosper even more than before?

I recently heard that Your Majesty has commanded a group of monks to welcome the Buddha’s bone in Feng-xiang; then, as you watch from an upper chamber, it will be carried with ceremony into the palace precincts. You have also ordered that all the temples take turns welcoming it and paying it reverence. Although I am very foolish, I suspect that Your Majesty has not, in fact, been actually so deluded by the Buddha as to carry out such August devotions in search of blessings and good fortune; rather, at a time when the harvest is abundant and the people are happy, I suspect that you are simply accommodating the hearts of the people by putting on a display of illusory marvels and the stuff of a stage show for the inhabitants of the capital. How could such a sagely and enlightened ruler as yourself bring himself to have faith in this sort of thing?

Nevertheless, the common people are foolish and ignorant, easy to lead into error and hard to enlighten. If Your Majesty behaves like this, they will assume that you serve the Buddha from genuine feeling. All will say, “The Son of Heaven is a great Sage, yet still he gives Buddha his wholehearted respect and faith. What are we common folk that we should begrudge even our lives?” They will set their heads on fire and burn their fingers. In tens and hundreds they will undo their clothes and distribute coins; and from dawn to dusk they will try harder and harder to outdo one another, worrying only that they are not acting swiftly enough. We will see old and young in a desperate scramble, abandoning their places of business. If one does not
immediately strengthen the prohibitions against this, they will pass from one
temple to another, cutting off arms and slicing off flesh as devotional of-
ferrings. This is no trifling matter, for they will be the ruin of our good cus-
toms, and when the word gets out, we will be laughed at by all the world
around.

The Buddha was originally a tribesman from outlying regions. His lan-
guage is incomprehensible to those who inhabit the heartland, and his clothes
were of a strange fashion. He did not speak the exemplary words of the early
kings, and he did not wear the exemplary garb of the early kings. He did
not understand the sense of right that exists between a ruler and his officers,
nor the feelings between father and son. If he were still alive today and, on
the orders of his own kingdom, were to come to an audience with Your
Majesty in the capital, Your Majesty would tolerately receive him, but with
nothing more than a single meeting in Xuan-zheng Palace, the single feast
to show politeness to a guest, and a single present of clothing. Then he would
be escorted to the border under guard in order to keep him from leading the
people astray.

But now he has been dead for a very long time. Is it fitting that you order
his dried and crumbling bone, this disgusting and baleful relic, to be brought
into the imperial palace? Confucius said, “Respect gods and spirits, but keep
far away from them.” In ancient times when a member of the great nobil-
ity made a visit to a state to offer condolences, he would command a shaman
to precede him with a peach branch and a broom of reeds to ward off ma-
lignant influences. Only under these conditions would he offer his con-
dolences. Now for no good reason you are receiving this disgusting and dec-
caying object, and you will personally inspect it—but without a shaman
preceding you and without using the peach branch and reed broom. Not one
of your many officials has told you how wrong this is, nor have your cen-
sors brought up the error of it. Of this I am truly ashamed.

I beg you to hand this bone over to the charge of someone who will throw
it into fire or water and finish it forever, thus putting an end to the confu-
sions of the world and stopping this delusion in generations to come. This
will result in having all the people of the world understand that what a great
Sage does infinitely surpasses the ordinary. Wouldn’t it be splendid! Would-
n’t it feel good!

If there is any divine power in the Buddha that can bring down curses,
whatever calamity should befall, let it fall on me. Heaven will observe me
from above, and I will feel no ill will or regret. Deeply stirred and filled with
the utmost loyalty, I respectfully offer this memorial for Your Majesty’s ears.

Your Majesty’s officer trembles with awe.

Although the memorial here is a serious one and has been treated all too seriously
by the tradition, it is memorable because of its humor. Such humor is closely allied
to Han Yu’s revulsion at pollution—pollution from contact with death and with things
foreign. Han Yu has taken a relic that usually commanded great devotion and has
placed it in a new context, deflating its religious aura and making the devotion
showed to the relic ludicrous: “Ugh, the crumbling bone of a long-dead barbarian.”
One imagines a courtyard full of monks all chanting and the emperor Xian-zong
standing on a balcony watching piously. In the center is a raised reliquary. Into this
scene walks Han Yu in his severe Confucian garb. He steps through the chanting
crowd, opens the reliquary, and, with a look of evident disgust, gingerly picks up
the bone in two fingers and carries it to the nearby river, where he tosses it away.

Beneath the Confucian values he emblazon the Zhuang-zi, with its technique of rad-
ically shifting perspective in order to show the relativity of value. The tacit claim
made by Han Yu in using such a technique is that it will reveal the inherent quality
of things as opposed to the false honor accorded them by custom. In the Zhuang-
zi, Confucian ceremony is often the butt of the act of devaluation; in Han Yu, the
butt is Buddhist relic-worship.