

A BUDDHIST PRIEST'S VIEW OF RELICS.

BY THE EDITOR.

(Containing a Communication from the Rev. Seelakkhandha.)

SINCE THE PUBLICATION of *The Gospel of Buddha* I have been in receipt of many tokens of recognition from prominent Buddhists of various countries,—from His Majesty the King of Siam, from representative leaders of Japanese sects, and from several priests of Ceylon. Among the latter, the Rev. C. A. Seelakkhandha has shown me much politeness and a kind willingness to assist me in further studying the faith of Buddhists in their old sacred literature, as well as in the living mind of the present generation. A short time ago he sent me a casket in the shape of a dagoba. The casket contains another casket, also in the shape of a dagoba, and on opening the interior casket we see a little silver lotus containing a green gem in the centre, on a golden foil. Underneath the golden foil the tiny relic, not larger in size than a pea, lies hidden.

The donation of this relic was accompanied by a correspondence as to the conception of relic-worship among the Buddhists, which may be of general interest.

When some time ago the Rev. Seelakkhandha, on sending me a number of Pâli books, offered to procure for me a Buddha statue, Buddhist pictures, relics, or Pâli manuscripts, etc., I replied with reference to relics :

“In case you can let me have relics, I shall be very grateful to you, but I do not think that I would care for relics of human bodies, bones, teeth, or anything of that kind.”

The Rev. Seelakkhandha wrote back :

“We do not regard the bones, etc., of ordinary human beings. But relics of Buddha and Arhats—lasting monuments of their virtue—are more valuable to us

than any worldly possession. These are very rare, too, and are obtained from the ruins of ancient Dagobas. I have with me a relic of Buddha found in a golden casket within a Dagoba (now in ruins), built 2,000 years ago. If you are willing to have this, I shall send it to you as a token of the regard in which you hold Lord Buddha and his religion. These relics are not used by us as ornaments, but they are held most sacred. There is nothing more valuable to a Buddhist than a genuine relic."

Thinking of the collector's interest that genuine relics possess, I wrote to Rev. Seelakkhandha: "As to caskets with relics enclosed, I expect that I should like to possess one of them, because it shows the reverence in which the Ceylonese hold their master and his saints." But I regretted having accepted the offer as soon as the letter had left my hands, and I wrote another letter the next day, which reads as follows:

"I wish to add a few words to my letter of yesterday with reference to the relics. I feel that if you were to send me one of those relics which you from *your* standpoint with good reasons consider so dear to you, you would be deprived of a treasure which would be less to me than it is to you. I would value these relics for historical reasons only. They would in my eyes be an evidence of the reverence in which you hold the memory of the Buddha and his saints, but otherwise they would only be to me objects of curiosity. According to my conception of Buddhism the most sacred relics we have of the Buddha and his saints are the words which they left,—the Sutras and all those ideas which can be verified in experience as valuable truths. Words, thoughts, and ideas are not material things, they are spiritual. It is true that they are transferred by material means in books and manuscripts, and by the air vibrations of sounds, but it is not the paper of the book, or the fibres of the manuscript, or the sound-waves, that are sacred, but the ideas which are conveyed by them. Thus, all the treasures which I regard as holy are spiritual, and not material. The worship of relics, be they bones, hair, teeth, or any other substance of the body of a saint, is a mistake. They do not possess any other value than the remains of ordinary mortals. The soul of Buddha is not in his bones, but in his words, and I regard relic-worship as an incomplete stage of religious development in which devotees have not as yet attained to full philosophical clearness. Now, it certainly is of interest to me to have evidences of the religious zeal of Buddhists. The keeping sacred of relics is a *symptom of their devotion*, but that is all I see in the use of relics. And considering that these relics are more to you than to me, I feel that I should not deprive you of them. Therefore, do not send me relics except it be on the stipulated condition that you know what I think about them. Otherwise you might regret afterwards having sent them to a man in whose conception they possess no religious value.

"In the hope that you understand me and do not misconstrue my objections to relic-worship, I remain, with kind regards, etc."

Rev. Seelakkhandha once more and at greater length explained his views of relics in another letter, as follows:

"When Lord Buddha entered Nirvâna about 2,440 years ago in the Park of Opawattana of the Mallawa Kings at Kusinagara, he wished that his bones (with the exception of the bone of the forehead, the four big teeth, the two jaw-bones,

and the chief bone of the neck) be scattered away from the body and remain unharmed on its cremation. He did this in order to leave some mark of remembrance to his followers who may with their help meditate on the personal virtues of the departed Teacher, because His life on this earth was comparatively short, i. e. eighty years. It happened according to his wish, and these bones or relics were of three kinds: (1) the largest about the size of a seed of rice and golden-colored; (2) the medium about half of a pea and pearl-colored; (3) the smallest of the size of a mustard seed and of the color of jasmine. There were sixteen measures (the Magadhan measure being little less than half a peck) of these relics which were distributed equally among eight kings who built Dagebas enshrining them in their respective dominions. Among these was King Ajatasatru of Rajagaha who buried his share of relics in Dagebas with the pomp and magnificence proper to such occasions. As it had been predicted that thereafter the pious king Asoka would be a participator in the benefits derived from these relics, Ajatasatru caused the greater part of them to be buried in the city of Rajagaha itself. King Asoka (a lineal descendant of Ajatasatru) who reigned at Patna about 2,222 years ago, caused these relics to be unearthed, and he is said to have built 84,000 Dagebas in different places in India enshrining them. He was a friend of his contemporary King Devanampiya Tissa of Ceylon about this time (2203 years ago), and he sent his son Mahinda, a Buddhist monk of renown, to this island [viz., Ceylon] to introduce Buddhism, which he accomplished with the co-operation of his royal friend and convert Tissa. Relics were now necessary to build Dagebas,—the usual monuments of religious zeal.

“Sumana Bhikkhu, a grandson of Asoka who accompanied Mahinda to Ceylon, was sent to Asoka to procure some relics. He brought with him as a present from Asoka to Tissa some relics in the very alms-bowl which Buddha is said to have used in His life-time. Tissa paid the usual honors to the relics and built Dagebas for them in many places in the island,—chiefly at Anuradhapura, his capital. Most of these are now in ruins, and when the relics contained in them are consequently unearthed, the process of building Dagebas is repeated. Some of the relics thus obtained are kept in the possession of people instead of being enshrined in Dagebas.

“The relic I am sending you is one thus obtained from the ruins of a Dageba at Apura and has been kept with me with great veneration,—offering flowers, incense, etc., morn and eve. I believe this to be a genuine relic of the Buddha. We reverence Buddha's relics as a mark of gratitude to Him who showed us the way to salvation and as a token of remembrance of the many personal virtues (bhagavat, arhat samyaksambuddha) which His life illustrated; and those of His disciples (i. e., Rahats) for similar reasons, and also to keep us reminded of their noble exemplary lives as results of Lord Buddha's invaluable doctrine.

“We do not believe that by ‘worshipping’ relics we attain Nirvâna, obtain any remission of our sins, or gain even merely any worldly benefit. These advantages are effected only by persevering in the path of virtue. But having in close proximity to us any monument or relic to perpetuate the memory of one who has been a unique example of virtue and benevolence, does, I venture to say, remove many obstacles in our way and make us inclined to follow that great Teacher. But one whose life is buried in sin, however enthusiastic he may be with regard to the outward ceremonial of religion, will not attain salvation.

“An example: During a season of drought even the foul water is taken for drinking purposes after purifying the same. The purification is effected by removing the mud and filth from the water and putting a kind of gem (*osakaprasada*) into the

water. The gem will not cleanse the water if it had not been first separated from the filth. In order to purify our heart it must be first freed from sinful thoughts.

"Again, as a fan helps us to feel the refreshing breeze, and a musical instrument to feed our ears with melodious sounds, so the relics, be they of Buddha or of his holy disciples, give us courage in our attempt to alleviate our misery. The mere keeping of the fan without fanning, or the musical instrument without playing, will give us neither the breeze nor the music.

"The biographies of great men help the rising generation to follow their footsteps, but the lesson is more impressive to a person of ordinary intellect by the presence of some material object connected with them. Also, it is usual that children, on the demise of their parents, preserve some articles used by them during their life-time as a token of the regard they entertain towards their beloved, and as a mark of gratitude. When you consider what I have said above, I hope you will get rid of any erroneous impressions which 'the image and relic worship' of the Buddhists may have left in your mind."

CORRESPONDENCE.

A VINDICATION OF M. ST. CÈRE.

To the Editor of The Open Court.

I do not pause to think whether my testimony can be of any value, but I think that it is a duty whenever one hears an accusation raised which one *knows* to be false, to say so.

I have just read M. St. Cère's letter in No. 486 of *The Open Court* and cannot resist the impulse to tell your readers that I have carefully followed the lawsuit in which—on M. Max Lebaudy's death—M. St. Cère has been entangled. He was the victim of a gross calumny, and all the vile accusations that were printed against him in the reports of the press, and which were founded on *no facts* whatever, were proved to be erroneous. M. St. Cère has been declared innocent by the magistrates, and whoever reads the documents of the trial will see that the acquittal was not only due to the negative want of proofs, but to the positive certainty that the accusations were mere gossip.

M. St. Cère is no friend of mine; I know on the contrary that he is an adversary of the principles of international peace which I defend, because he is an ardent French patriot—whether his extraction be French or not—and fervently wishes to see France raised from her last defeat before she may lend her hand to universal pacification. The infamous accusation of being a *spy* is the very last that would have been believed by those who knew M. St. Cère, though it *was* raised, as it always is by a certain jingo press when the persecution spirit is let loose against some individual or other.

BARONESS BERTHA VON SUTTNER.

HERMANNSDORF, AUSTRIA.