THE RELIGION OF SIAM.

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BUDDHISM cannot be clearly defined by its visible results. There are more things in that subtle, mystical enigma called in the Pâli Nibbâna, in the Birmese Niban, in the Siamese Niphan, than are dreamed of in our philosophy. With the idea of Niphan in his theology, it were absurdly false to say the Buddhist has no God. His Decalogue² is as plain and imperative as the Christian's: I. From the meanest insect up to man thou shalt kill no animal whatsoever. II. Thou shalt not steal. III. Thou shalt not violate the wife of another, nor his concubine. IV. Thou shalt speak no word that is false. V. Thou shalt not drink wine, nor anything that may intoxicate. VI. Thou shalt avoid all anger, hatred, and bitter language. VII. Thou shalt not indulge in idle and vain talk. VIII. Thou shalt not covet thy neighbor's goods. IX. Thou shalt not harbor envy, nor pride, nor revenge, nor malice, nor the desire of thy neighbor's death or misfortune. X. Thou shalt not follow the doctrines of false gods.

Whosoever abstains from these forbidden things is said to "observe Silah"; and whosoever shall faithfully observe Silah, in all his successive metempsychoses, shall continually increase in virtue and purity, until at length he shall become worthy to behold God, and hear his voice; and so he shall obtain Niphan. "Be assiduous in bestowing alms, in practising virtue, in observing Silah, in performing Bavana, prayer; and above all in adoring Guadama, the true God. Reverence likewise his laws and his priests."

Many have missed seeing what is true and wise in the doctrine of Buddha because they preferred to observe it from the standpoint and in the attitude of an antagonist, rather than of an inquirer.

²Translated from the Pâli.
To understand aright the earnest creed and hope of any man, one must be at least sympathetically _en rapport_ with him,—must be willing to feel, and to confess within one's self, the germs of those errors whose growth seems so rank in him. In the humble spirit of this fellowship of fallibility let us draw as near as we may to the hearts of these devotees and the heart of their mystery.

My interesting pupil, the Lady Tâlâp, had invited me to accompany her to the royal private temple, Watt P'hra Kêau, to witness the services held there on the Buddhist Sabâto, or One-thu-sin. Accordingly we repaired together to the temple on the day appointed. The day was young, and the air was cool and fresh; and as we approached the place of worship, the clustered bells of the pagodas made breezy gushes of music aloft. One of the court pages, meeting us, inquired our destination. "The Watt P'hra Kêau," I replied. "To see or to hear?" "Both." And we entered.

On a floor diamonded with polished brass sat a throng of women, the _élite_ of Siam. All were robed in pure white, with white silk scarfs drawn from the left shoulder in careful folds across the bust and back, and thrown gracefully over the right. A little apart sat their female slaves, of whom many were inferior to their mistresses only in social consideration and worldly gear, being their half-sisters,—children of the same father by a slave mother.

The women sat in circles, and each displayed her vase of flowers and her lighted taper before her. In front of all were a number of my younger pupils, the royal children, in circles also. Close by the altar, on a low square stool, overlaid with a thin cushion of silk, sat the high-priest, Chow Khoon Sâh. In his hand he held a concave fan, lined with pale green silk, the back richly embroidered, jewelled, and gilt.¹ He was draped in a yellow robe, not unlike the Roman toga, a loose and flowing habit, closed below the waist, but open from the throat to the girdle, which was simply a band of yellow cloth, bound tightly. From the shoulders hung two narrow strips, also yellow, descending over the robe to the feet, and resembling the scapular worn by certain orders of the Roman Catholic clergy. At his side was an open watch of gold, the gift of his sovereign. At his feet sat seventeen disciples, shading their faces with fans less richly adorned.

We put off our shoes,—my child and I,—having respect for the ancient prejudice against them;² feeling not so much reverence

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¹ The fan is used to cover the face. Jewelled fans are marks of distinction among the priesthood.

² "Put off thy shoes from off thy feet, for the place whereon thou standest is holy ground."
for the place as for the hearts that worshipped there, caring to display not so much the love of wisdom as the wisdom of love; and well were we repaid by the grateful smile of recognition that greeted us as we entered.

We sat down cross-legged. No need to hush my boy,—the silence there, so subduing, checked with its mysterious awe even his inquisitive young mind. The venerable high-priest sat with his face jealously covered, lest his eyes should tempt his thoughts to stray. I changed my position to catch a glimpse of his countenance; he drew his fan-veil more closely, giving me a quick but gentle half-glance of remonstrance. Then raising his eyes, with lids nearly closed, he chanted in an infantile, wailing tone.

That was the opening prayer. At once the whole congregation raised themselves on their knees and, all together, prostrated themselves thrice profoundly, thrice touching the polished brass floor with their foreheads; and then, with heads bowed and palms folded and eyes closed, they delivered the responses after the priest, much in the manner of the English liturgy, first the priest, then the people, and finally all together. There was no singing, no standing up and sitting down, no changing of robes or places, no turning the face to the altar, nor north, nor south, nor east, nor west. All knelt still, with hands folded straight before them, and eyes strictly, tightly closed. Indeed, there were faces there that expressed devotion and piety, the humblest and the purest, as the lips murmured: "O Thou Eternal One, Thou perfection of Time, Thou truest Truth, Thou immutable essence of all Change, Thou most excellent radiance of Mercy, Thou infinite Compassion, Thou Pity, Thou Charity!"

I lost some of the responses in the simultaneous repetition, and did but imperfectly comprehend the exhortation that followed, in which was inculcated the strictest practice of charity in a manner so pathetic and so gentle as might be wisely imitated by the most orthodox of Christian priests.

There was majesty in the humility of those pagan worshippers, and in their shame of self they were sublime. I leave both the truth and the error to Him who alone can soar to the bright heights of the one and sound the dark depths of the other, and take to myself the lesson, to be read in the shrinking forms and hidden faces of those patient waiters for a far-off glimmering Light,—the lesson wherefrom I learn, in thanking God for the light of Christianity, to thank him for its shadow too, which is Buddhism.