

THE BURMESE PRACTICE OF MIDWIFERY.

[THE following letter to the editor of the India Journal of Medical Science is from a medical gentleman in India, and is said by the former to contain an accurate account of the practice described.]

Sir—I am induced to communicate a few details of the Burmese practice of midwifery, in order that you may draw up and send me a set of plain rules and directions, such as the superior knowledge of anatomy and medicine professed by our physicians would point out, and I will have your rules translated into the Burmese language and circulated here. I know not a more benevolent act which I could perform.

About the seventh month of pregnancy a Burmese woman is advised to tie her *t'hamien* or petticoat more tightly and lower round the body, just above the *fœtus*, in order to force and keep it down as low as possible, and prevent its ascending; which if it did, would afterwards, it is supposed, render delivery more tedious and difficult.

When the labor pains come on, the woman is attended by one or two *Woon-zwe* (midwives), and by three, four, five, or even six of her female relatives or friends, who shut all the doors and windows of the room, so as to render it as close and hot as possible. She is in a state of perfect nudity, and being urged to take violent exercise, runs round the room as long as she is able to do so, without or with the assistance of her friends, sometimes stopping and pressing her loins against the posts of the house, sometimes raising a heavy weight with both hands, and forcibly bringing it down, as if pounding paddy, and sometimes falling down and rolling on the floor. All this time also she is uttering such loud and piercing cries and exclamations, as may be heard in the street and several doors off, vowing separation from her husband and wishing for death; which wish the Burmese consider as a proof of bad education and ignorance in any one expressing it. But the poor creature is quite distracted and void of all sense of propriety, and sometimes grossly abuses her husband all the time. He is not admitted near her, and generally sits in the next room or in the street, laughing on hearing himself abused; or if he possesses more feeling, he opens and lifts up the lid of every box in his house as a preventive against any charm that may have been used by any evil-disposed person, and prepares also, in a manner which I shall hereafter describe, some *charmed* or *holy* water which he sends in to his spouse to drink.

The woman's body is smeared with oil, and her attendants, with many speeches of encouragement and comfort, such as, that she will not die, that all women bear children in the same way, &c. press down the child *violently* with their hands, urge the woman to strain, and sometimes put up a foot against her loins, and press against her, holding her arims back.

At last the woman is quite exhausted and falls on the floor. Some of the women still keep pressing the child down with their hands, trying to expel it forcibly; and there are instances, I am credibly informed, in which the woman is placed on her back, and the midwife sits upon her, or stands up and presses against the child with one of her feet! Some of the other attendants, in the mean time, sit round the woman, and

watch and notice, in so loud a voice as to be often heard in the street or adjoining houses, the appearance of different parts of the child.

When the child is born, it is still kept near the mother until the after-birth comes away, to produce which the attendants again press the abdomen of the woman, pull the navel-cord, and sometimes beat her loins with a hard pillow, and force a portion of her long hair down her throat, in order to create an inclination to vomit.

As soon as the after-birth appears, the navel-string is cut, and the child taken charge of by one of the attendants, whilst the others, generally four of them, one to each arm and leg of the woman, take her up, bathe her in warm water, and place her as close to a large fire as possible, smearing her body with turmeric mixed with a little chunam, and making her swallow 2 1-2 ticals weight of salt, 2 of pounded turmeric, and a little chunam. A hot brick and salt enveloped in a cloth, are also pressed against different parts of the woman's body in succession, and often a handful of warm salt is applied and *even introduced*.

This operation of exposure to fire, or rather roasting, as the Burmese women themselves call it (*mi'-ken*), is one to which the woman is subjected for seven days, during which time, and often for a longer period, she is obliged to take the dose of salt and turmeric and chunam in the proportions before mentioned, three times a day, at sunrise, noon, and sunset, in order, it is said, to keep the inside of the body as hot as the outside; and to drink warm water when thirsty, which of course she always is—and once or twice a day, also, she is made to use a kind of vapor-bath, by sitting near the fire with a bamboo frame-work over her, covered with cloths steeped in hot water, or by sitting over a fire covered up and sprinkling water upon the fire from time to time. She is often made also to sit on a heated brick covered with cloth. During the rest of the day and night, she lies on a plank or bamboo stage raised five or six inches from the floor, and only a cubit wide, and placed as close to the fire as possible: she can only just turn her back or stomach to the heat, as she finds it too great on either side. The heat to which the woman is subjected would be intolerable, but that she is every now and then smeared over with pounded turmeric and water. She is kept in a state of profuse perspiration, from which she is gradually relieved on the seventh day. A lady of rank, during these seven days, is known to have burnt as many as 1100 large billets of firewood, but the usual allowance is 2 or 300 billets. The wood of the tamarind tree also is used by those who can afford it, as it is said to make the hottest fire. During the whole of this operation, no bandage is applied anywhere, and at the close of it her skin is quite blackened, and peels off afterwards.

Some of the Burmese say, that a crab half roasted will not keep so well as when it is thoroughly done, and believe, that in the same way, a newly delivered woman cannot expose herself too much to the fire. But from carelessness, or from the difficulty of shutting out draughts of air in a Burmese house, the poor woman often catches cold, and suffers from rheumatic affections of the limbs and other troublesome and lingering disorders; and whenever such cases of illness occur, the Burmese say that they are owing entirely to the woman's not having been roasted

enough! I have, however, heard many Burmese of respectability talk with horror of the customs of their country having subjected their women to such cruel sufferings, and attribute to this practice the cause of many women never having a second child. The principal midwife in this town, an active old Talain woman of 77 years of age, named *Mi-Ngyein*, states that she has followed her profession for more than 50 years, that she has delivered more than 10,000 women; that she is now often called to deliver the great-grand-daughter of one whom she had attended in her early life, and that the average mortality, in her opinion, has been about 10 per cent. This, however, must be much too high an estimate. Her usual charge is four or five rupees.

The diet of the woman during the first days after delivery, consists of boiled rice with a kind of very hot broth, made by a mixture of the liquor of *Nigapee* or fish sauce, a large quantity of pepper, some onions, and the root of a plant called *k'hura*, remarkable for its heating properties. This soup she drinks by itself, as well as taking it with the rice, and it is so hot as to make her eyes run with water; but it sensibly increases perspiration. During the roasting operation, also, a quantity of oil and salt is applied to the top of the head with the hair divided, and it is then held for some time as close to the fire as the woman can bear it. I am assured, however, that during this roasting operation, although the upper part of the body of the woman is always in a state of profuse perspiration, her feet and legs below the knees keep so cold as to be unpleasant to the touch.

The mother is not supposed to have any milk for her infant, until after the third day; and to produce the secretion, her breasts are rubbed and fomented with warm water, and the nipples pulled and scraped with the nails of her attendants. As soon as the child's navel-string is separated, a quantity of pounded pepper is taken by one of the attendants in her forefinger, and rubbed all over the inside of the little creature's mouth, in order to make it throw up any phlegm or other matter which may be lodged in the throat or lungs. Sometimes a little boiled rice is masticated by one of the attendants and forced down the child's throat; but usually a little honey and water is given to it occasionally, which is its diet for the first three days, unless the child cries much, or the parents can afford it, when some woman who is nursing is called in to give the child the breast, until the mother can begin on the fourth day to nurse it herself.

Note.—This *charmed* or *holy* water given to a woman in labor is prepared by a person repeating seven times over a cup of water the following Pali words: *Yatau-hambhaginee ariyaya Zatiya, Zatau nabhi-zanami thetseittsa panau Zeewita wauraupeta, tena thettsena thothi te hawtoo thatti gabat, tha.*—meaning, as I am informed by a Pali scholar, "O sister, from the moment of my having attained the state of an inspired priest of Boodh, I do not know a motive for depriving any sentient being of life, and as my words are true, mayest thou be at ease, as well as the being in thy womb." The Burmese have several *pareit* or prayers used as a preventive of evil, but the above is called *Engooli*

Mala pareit, and was dictated by *Gaudama* under the following circumstances.

A bramin, named *Aheinta-ka* of *Thawotti* (*Spavasti* in Oude), applied for instruction in learning to a celebrated teacher in the city of *Tekkatho*, named *Deitha Pamoukha*. Being a man of bad and cruel character, the teacher was unwilling to instruct him, and proposed to receive him as a pupil, upon condition only that he should present the teacher with 1000 human forefingers, thus setting the Bramin, as Samson of old had been set, a task, the execution of which, it was hoped, would cost him his life. The Bramin, however, proceeded to attack men, women, and children, and killing them, cut off their forefingers and hung them in a string round his neck, whence he was afterwards known always by the name of *Engoolee-Mala*, necklace of fingers. He had collected 999 forefingers, and was in the act of chasing his own mother to kill her and complete his task, when *Gaudama* interposed between them, and converting the Bramin into a Buddhist disciple, made him a Priest and lodged him in the same monastery with himself, near the city of *Thawotti*. *Engoolee-Mala*, however, had become the dread of the whole country around, and the cry that he was coming, or sound of his very name, terrified women and children, and made pregnant women miscarry. For some time after he had been converted by *Gaudama*, whenever he appeared in the streets of *Thawotti*, as he did every morning to receive charitable offerings according to the custom of Buddhist priests, the women and children fled before him, and the men chased him with stones. Having been much bruised one day, he applied to *Gaudama* for protection, and he delivered to him the foregoing Pali words, desiring him to repeat them whenever he saw any woman, and assuring him that they would save him from all further molestation. The words operated as a charm, and they are now always used as a preventive of evil. They are considered of such wonderful efficacy, that the water with which any spot, on which a person may have been sitting or standing whilst reciting the words, is washed, can charm away evil and danger.