

Sometimes an innocent child can ask a very interesting question, as for example in this anecdote told by Hazrat Inayat Khan. He recounted that a thoughtful child – he may have been telling a story about himself, but he did not say who the child was – came to someone and said, “If God is in heaven, why do we bow down and touch the earth when we pray?” The adult replied, “If He is in heaven, where are His feet? Here on earth.”

This happened in India, where it is a sign of respect and even reverence to touch the feet of another person. Therefore, the answer gave the child a satisfying explanation that there was a purpose in the action, and also reinforced the thought that the Divine Presence is never absent.

A similar question arose recently in a discussion of the path of devotion. For some people, perhaps because of nature, character, education or evolution, it goes against the grain to think they are expected to worship a God ‘up there.’ The religious images of God peering down at humanity from the clouds, with flowing robes and a venerable white beard, do not resonate with them, and awaken no feelings of devotion whatsoever. Therefore, when they encounter the Sufi teachings that the light of Truth is within, that if we shall ever encounter the Divine, it will only be in the sacred chamber of our own heart, it comes as a great relief. Nevertheless, we also have gestures for our prayers, bowing and even prostrating in some forms, movements that seem to be outwardly oriented. The first position of the prayer Saum, hands raised to the level of the head, palms outward, in what is sometimes called the orant gesture, could suggest that we think we are greeting a God who is separate from ourselves. If so, why? Is it some misguided dogmatism that has crept in to our prayers? Or is there some unrecognized purpose?

As the answer to the child in the anecdote indicated, we need not worry that we are far from God. Yes, He is in Heaven – whatever that might mean to us – but He is also present in the earth; He is everywhere. Our bow is for our own benefit, for it helps us to feel reverent, or in other words to put us in the proper frame of mind to approach perfection, and perhaps to recognize it. The same can be said for raising our hands, palms outward. If one adopts that posture and simply inspects one’s inner condition, one will find that it immediately becomes expansive; one feels one’s heart opening, even without any words, and there is more light in the face. Therefore, if we wish to offer praise – whether it be to a child’s drawing proudly placed before us, or to a generously laid table, or to the Divine Source of Love, Harmony and Beauty – such a posture will help to put our spirit in the appropriate state. Our speech will then have feeling behind it, and not be merely mechanical repetition.

Whatever forms we adopt when we pray, it is important to recollect that our prayers are not needed by God. If a grain of dust thanks the infinite Sun for being warmed in its rays, it matters very little to the Sun. Our prayers are simply a way of tuning our consciousness to Perfection, a tuning that is much more effective when thought, word and action are all aligned.