

AN OPENING BOW

When I found myself becoming a Buddhist monk in a forest monastery of Thailand over thirty years ago, I had to learn how to bow. It was awkward at first. Each time we entered the meditation hall we would drop to our knees and three times respectfully place our head between our palms on the stone floor. It was a practice of reverence and mindfulness, a way of honoring with a bodily gesture our commitment to the monk's path of simplicity, compassion, and awareness. We would bow in the same way each time we took our seat for training with the master.

After I had been in the monastery for a week or two, one of the senior monks pulled me aside for further instruction. "In this monastery you must not only bow when entering the meditation hall and receiving teachings from the master, but also when you meet your elders." As the only Westerner, and wanting to act correctly, I asked who my elders were. "It is traditional that all who

are older in ordination time, who've been monks longer than you, are your elders," I was told. It took only a moment to realize that meant everybody.

So I began to bow to them. Sometimes it was just fine—there were quite a few wise and worthy elders in the community. But sometimes it felt ridiculous. I would encounter some twenty-one-year-old monk, full of hubris, who was there only to please his parents or to eat better food than he could at home, and I had to bow because he had been ordained the week before me. Or I had to bow to a sloppy old rice farmer who had come to the monastery the season before on the farmers' retirement plan, who chewed betel nut constantly and had never meditated a day in his life. It was hard to pay reverence to these fellow forest dwellers as if they were great masters.

Yet there I was bowing, and because I was in conflict, I sought a way to make it work. Finally, as I prepared yet again for a day of bowing to my "elders," I began to look for some worthy aspect of each person I bowed to. I bowed to the wrinkles around the retired farmer's eyes, for all the difficulties he had seen and suffered through and triumphed over. I bowed to the vitality and playfulness in the young monks, the incredible possibilities each of their lives held yet ahead of them.

I began to enjoy bowing. I bowed to my elders, I bowed before I entered the dining hall and as I left. I bowed as I entered my forest hut, and I bowed at the well before taking a bath. After some time bowing became my way—it was just what I did. If it moved, I bowed to it.

It is the spirit of bowing that informs this book. The true task of spiritual life is not found in faraway places or unusual states of consciousness: It is here in the present. It asks of us a welcoming spirit to greet all that life presents to us with a wise, respectful, and kindly heart. We can bow to both beauty and suffering, to our entanglements and confusion, to our fears and to the injustices of the world. Honoring the truth in this way is the path to freedom. To bow to what is rather than to some ideal is not necessarily easy,

but however difficult, it is one of the most useful and honorable practices.

To bow to the fact of our life's sorrows and betrayals is to accept them; and from this deep gesture we discover that all life is workable. As we learn to bow, we discover that the heart holds more freedom and compassion than we could imagine.

The Persian poet Rumi speaks of it this way:

This being human is a guest house.

Every morning a new arrival.

A joy, a depression, a meanness,
some momentary awareness comes
as an unexpected visitor.

Welcome and entertain them all
Even if they're a crowd of sorrows,
who violently sweep your house
empty of its furniture.

Still treat each guest honorably,
He may be clearing you out
for some new delight.

The dark thought, the shame, the malice,
meet them at the door laughing,
and invite them in.

Be grateful for whoever comes,
because each has been sent
as a guide from beyond.