

A selection of essays on metta, by Jason Espada

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Metta as the most useful method of meditation for people in the West today,  
by Jason Espada

Most people these days don't have a lot of time for meditation. They often have the stresses of work and caring for their family, as well as their relationships. These are common to all of us. From what I can tell, all methods of meditation can help with these. There are a few ways, however, that metta, or Buddhist loving kindness meditation *especially* matches our needs here and now.

The first is that it helps us to be on better terms with ourselves. A lot of people have the problem of not liking or respecting themselves, and metta includes methods of developing kindness towards ourselves. Since we're always with ourselves, any amount of a greater acceptance, or goodwill we can generate will improve the quality of our life *right there*.

Not content with only proposing an ideal, such as 'just be kind to yourself', metta is creative in its approach to developing a sense of kindness for oneself. Although it's traditionally the first category used for cultivating metta, teachers in the West have been adapting this to meet our needs. We're encouraged to start with whoever is *easiest*, and *least complicated* for us to have feelings of kindness and well wishing for. Once we've developed some experience of directing thoughts of goodwill to them, we can return to ourself. Slowly, we can begin to offer ourselves the same quality of kindness that we direct to our most loved ones. One dear friend said that being kind to herself is like medicine. We all need and deserve this.

It's said that one of the traditional benefits of metta is that it helps us to settle comfortably, with a clear mind in meditation, with a fundamental goodwill towards ourselves. This is an important point, and one that is often overlooked in how meditation is taught and practiced in the West these days. Have you noticed?

If we are not on good terms with ourselves, we won't be able to go very deep in meditation. We may escape into fantasies to avoid what is difficult to be with, or we may develop a 'spiritual ego' that is not very stable. There's no way around this. We need kindness towards ourselves to do the sometimes difficult work of deepening our self understanding, healing and transformation.

Another reason metta practice is especially needed by us today is that it helps us to know our connection to others. It's in our makeup that we need the support and love that comes from being connected to friends, family, teachers, and all others. In our modern society, people have become more and more isolated, and metta counters that.

We can re-awaken our connection to friends and family, and learn to have more warmth, attentiveness, goodwill and concern for all others we meet. This is pretty radical stuff because it goes directly to the quality of all our relationships.

We are so diverse here in America. It's a point of pride for us, in fact, something we identify as a real strength. The shadow side of it, however, is that we may have trouble finding common ground.

Which brings me to the third reason why I'm thinking that metta is the most useful method to know about, and practice, and share with other these days. Metta is universal. It can be taken up and understood by people everywhere. You don't need to be Buddhist to practice metta meditation. Of course, people are free to explore the tradition this method comes from, but that's a personal matter. We should do whatever works for us, and follow the path that will lead to the fulfillment of our deepest aspirations.

I have one more reason why I'm looking at metta as having the greatest value for us today, and that is that it's the teaching and practice of what has true human value. This is the complete opposite of the materialism and self centered indulgence, narcissism, pettiness, avarice and aggression that are so common these days.

Metta is just the method we need when we meet fear and mistrust, self-denigration, and the denial of the worth and rights of others. Metta can actually heal us, and our world, and for this reason, in times of despair, it offers hope.

I know a lot of people will appreciate how quickly we can see results from loving kindness practice. After just a week or two of regular practice, each day, in any circumstances (to and from work on the train, for example), if we are attentive, we can see an improvement in our temperament, and relationships. We may notice, for example, that we are a little more patient

when standing in line at the bank, or at the post office, which is surely a gift of kindness to ourselves.

Metta is inherently enjoyable, and, together with this cycle of positive reinforcement, the practice naturally develops. For people with an affinity with metta, it's natural that they'll want to make it a part of their whole life. As with other methods of meditation, the more we practice, the more we'll see the results.

As the Buddha taught in the Kalama Sutta, also known as the Buddhist Charter of Free Inquiry,

*Don't believe something because it sounds good,  
or because it's part of a tradition;  
or because a famous person said it,  
or because it agrees with your opinions,  
but try it out and see –  
if it works to bring you greater satisfaction in your life,  
greater peace, well being, and happiness,  
then accept it,  
cultivate that practice,  
and share the benefit of it with others*

My friends, this is what I've found to be most useful for us as lay practitioners, in these times in the West. I've seen the good that can come from it, and so I'm glad to be able to share this.

May all people everywhere find methods of practice, and ways to live in this world that bring them peace, health and well being, and happiness for all their days.

The practice of smiling to oneself, by Jason Espada.

One of the ways our goodwill is communicated is by smiling. We usually think of this as a social act, but in fact we can also smile warmly to ourselves.

I first heard about what the Taoists call the inner smile from Thich Nhat Hanh in the late 1980's. At that time he combined meditation on the breath with smiling to oneself, with an appreciation of each part of our body. So, for example, he taught that we can think: 'breathing in and out, I am aware of the hair on my head... breathing in and out, I smile to my hair... breathing in and out, I am aware of my eyes... breathing in and out, I smile and am thankful to my eyes...' This can be done a few times. Going through the body from head to toe, when we find a part of the body or ourselves that needs extra kindness and attention, we can stay there for a while, with love and care.

The effect of such a practice can be felt right away. Kindness is like a balm for whatever is struggling or suffering. A smile communicates encouragement, patience, acceptance, warmth, understanding and compassion, gentleness, respect, and a shared joy. That we can give this gift to ourselves at any time is really something remarkable, and it's something we should all learn to do.

Especially when things are not going well in some areas of our life, this basic attitude of acceptance, encouragement and unconditional love and support becomes even more important. I remember Thich Nhat Hanh being asked, 'But what if I don't feel like smiling?' (this was from a woman who was pregnant at the time) and he said, 'You should smile anyway. If you can smile now, your baby will receive that nourishment from you. He also said that "sometimes your happiness is the cause of your smile, and sometimes your smile can be the cause of your happiness"'. He called this, only half-kiddingly, 'mouth yoga'.

Think of the warm smile of a wise elder, or of a teacher that you know. What is communicated with that expression is their experience, patience, and natural, effortless generosity. Often being with someone who is older and wiser than ourselves resets our system. Our restlessness and anxiety melt away in their kind presence, which feels like a gift to our whole person.

We can also access the wisdom-self we have within, and that we know in our better times, when we take up this practice of smiling to ourselves. When we do this, it gets easier to access this source of joy and healing energy we all have within, and to share it with others as well.

Smiling and being kind to ourselves may not always be the very first step in developing on the path of love, but at some point it becomes essential. We do need to be comfortable being close to ourselves to really understand what we carry with us, what we still struggle with, what it feels like to hope and to dream and to be a human being. This gradually becomes easier when we develop genuine kindness, and heartfelt well-wishing for ourself.

We all know that some people go through their entire lives avoiding what is difficult to hold. They are divided in themselves, diminished, out of touch with their own pain and tender selves, and, more often than not, they are lacking empathy, compassion and forgiveness for others. All this stems from their not having received enough loving care from others, and never having fully learned to unconditionally love themselves. It is a great work, and something that's truly essential for us to live whole, integrated, fulfilled lives. One way or another, how we are with ourselves over time becomes the basis for the quality of all our relationships.

Smiling is a simple practice, but it has such far reaching effects, that I'd like to recommend it to all my friends. It graces our days and nights, and helps us create beauty in our lives, and in the lives of all those we love.

## A letter introducing metta

Hi friend,

I'm so glad to be able to share these writings on metta with you, as this practice has meant a lot to me over the years, and especially this last year on retreat. As I mentioned when we were chatting, this has really helped me to have the feeling of being connected to others while I've been here, which is something I wasn't sure about how I would handle. It's been surprisingly effective for this, actually.

These methods have always worked somewhat for me, from when I first came across them, but now I can see how we really have to focus for a time on any meditation practice we want to do to get its benefit.

I was trying to think of anything I didn't say in the writings that I'm attaching, and what came to mind first is this phrase I heard, quoting the Buddha, in a talk: 'That joy connected with the wholesome, I call an equipment of the mind to ward off all aversion and hostility.'

I liked this when I heard it because I could see how it can be true sometimes – when we're feeling well and have some joy in our life, it's like we're immune to things that might otherwise bother us.

It's said that one of the traditional benefits of metta – loving kindness practice is that 'one is not harmed by fire, poisons, or weapons'. This is a way of talking about the delusions – of anger, desire, fear, sadness, and all those states of suffering. We're neither harmed from within, or from without, when others have these states of mind.

Maybe you've had this experience too, that sometimes we're immune to those negative states – it's like when our mind is filled with wonderful things – there's much less (or no) room for other emotions. Or, if we have some time when we get down or upset for one reason or another, we recover more quickly. All that's because we have something positive going on in our life.

Enter metta. There's a lot of talk in religions and spiritual paths about love, but I don't often see it laid out, step by step, how a person could go about cultivating love, in a way that makes sense, and that accounts for our ups

and downs, and unique personalities. The way the metta teachings are set out though, it's pretty clear to me that we can always move towards having more gentleness, patience, joy, strength, and meaning in our life. What good news! What a great thing this is!

I'm thinking more and more that a practice like this is what is most needed these days in the West. The simple reason is that we need something we can do in our everyday lives, and this certainly fits the bill. It doesn't take long, and the positive effects can be felt by most people almost right away.

Another reason I'm thinking we need metta or some loving kindness practice, is that we, as Westerners, so often have a hard time being kind to ourselves. This is especially true of people in the USA – you'll have to tell me if it's the same there in Australia. I'm convinced that this is something we all need, whoever we are, for any kind of meditation, just to be comfortable enough with ourselves to sit, or walk, and get to know ourselves more deeply.

Of course, this method or approach may not be for everyone – in fact there are a lot of funny stories of people being put off by it, only to return to it later and see its value. Often it turns out they become the people teaching the practice. (Ha!)

As more than one person has said, this is a very personal matter – what will work for us. Fortunately, there's a lot of room for creativity in how we go about any meditation practice, including metta.

A couple of things I don't say in the essays, that I'm sure you'd find your way to, but I just thought to mention, are that we can use lists, of people we regard as friends, or who we have a good feeling when we think of them (hint: you and Giny are on one of my lists! – I always feel happy when I think of our time together in India!). I also have some photos from my travels that I look at from time to time.

Sometimes I like to think of a number of people one at a time (in the 'friends' category), and send them good wishes, and then at other times just one individual, or a few. At some point, I was feeling like maybe I was neglecting the others, (yikes!, oh no!) but then I remembered what a Lama in San Francisco taught – and that is, that we can use one person, or a few

people, to represent all the others. You can do what you like, whatever works best for you.

There's also this element of metta being a concentration practice, that isn't talked about that often. It is that as well, and so if our mind is moving around too much, we need to settle down and focus a bit more (for example, by using fewer people, or phrases). Fortunately, it helps that metta is an enjoyable practice. This in itself helps to calm, collect, and clarify the mind. It's said that when one practices this 'the mind concentrates easily'.

Another list I keep with me, and sometimes set in front of me is a list of the phrases I use to cultivate loving kindness. Most teachers I've heard say we should just have a few, like three or four phrases, but it seems to work for me sometimes to have a longer list of 'metta wishes' to look at. When my mind wanders, then I can look again at the list, and continue.

I go by how I feel, in terms of whether to use words at all, or an image, or just a phrase or two to guide the mind, or four or more phrases. Once you have a feel for how you want to go with the practice, I'm sure you can make it your own.

I also like to alternate metta with calm meditation, either watching my breath, or doing walking meditation. This seems to be a way to really get the full benefit of the practice, on all levels, mental, emotional, and physical.

Perhaps you already have a method or two that works for you, and so I won't go into details here, but let me know if you'd like some basic meditation instructions, and I'll be happy to send them along to you as well. No problem.

One more point: I mentioned while we were chatting that you don't need to be Buddhist to do these practices. In that way they are truly universal – accessible to all. In another sense though, there is an advantage, without a doubt, if a person has an affinity with Buddhist teachings, and is able to see the metta teachings in the context of the whole range, and the aim of Buddhist practice, which as I understand it, is both liberation from suffering, and enlightened activity.

As the Thai meditation teacher Ajaan Maha Boowa said, 'For an enlightened being, there is no other response to the human condition, than compassion.'

Everyone is so different, in our needs and interests, but it makes sense to me at least, to try to understand what is meant by happiness, in the Buddhist sense of it – the path and the fruition of a right practice.

I think that's about it. I'm so glad to be sharing this with you. Let me know how you like it, or if it's useful to you. Also, feel free to share this with anyone else you think might enjoy these things.

May this bring you benefit!

My wish for you is that you have every happiness, that you enjoy peace and good health always.

Jason.

## The Benefits of Metta Practice

It's said in one of the teaching traditions of Tibet that before we start a practice of meditation, we should know its benefits. This is what initially inspires us to take up, and to continue with the practice. In what follows, first, I'll give the Traditional eleven benefits that are associated with the cultivation of metta – loving kindness, and then I'll give my own list of some of the advantages I've found, with a short description of each.

The traditional benefits for one who practices metta are listed as

1. a person sleeps well
2. he (or she) wakes easily
3. he has good dreams
4. people love him
5. the devas (angels) love him
6. the devas protect him
7. his mind is calm
8. the expression on his face is serene, and beautiful
9. poison, fire, and weapons do not harm him
10. he dies unconfused

and,

11. he is reborn in a heavenly realm

Some of these are readily apparent, even when a person first starts to practice.

Two that I'd like to say a little about are number 7, and 9.

‘His mind is calm’, or, sometimes, ‘His mind is easily concentrated’ comes from the fact that metta produces in us a feeling of ease and well being. We feel comfortable, and have a light to the mind. This makes it easy to direct the mind to whatever subject we take up.

The phrase ‘poison, fire, and weapons do not harm him’ needs a little bit more explanation: practically speaking, it’s referring to the inner poisons, of greed, anger and delusion, which can be expanded to include such things as jealousy, pride, impatience, sadness, and any other difficult emotion we might experience.

It may sound hard to believe that one practice can transform, or render us immune from such a range of negative emotions, but, think about it- imagine one by one what love does to anger.... attachment... pride... and so on...

That we are not yet free of these states of mind just means we haven’t cultivated the methods that put an end to them. In terms of the positive emotions we know, love is supreme.

Here is my own list of the benefits of metta practice, with a few words about each one.

1. metta brings health
2. metta brings strength
3. it brings optimism
4. there is joy
5. metta brings an appreciation of beauty
6. with metta, we are at ease with ourselves
7. metta brings peace
8. metta brings patience

9. there is forgiveness

10. in metta there is understanding

and,

11. through metta practice, we know our connection with others

metta brings health

I think for anyone who spends time regularly reflecting, and getting in touch with how they are feeling, knows there is a connection between the body and the mind. When we are feeling well mentally and emotionally, we are resistant not only to bad states of mind, but also to physical imbalance. This is something anyone can prove for themselves – we don't need a pile of studies to tell us it is so. It's obvious. Metta is a healing energy. It's a cool balm to ease the sufferings and pains of living.

When a mother reaches out to her child with pure love; when a friend comforts a friend; and when we are able to offer ourselves gentleness and care, these are metta. This is something we can all know for ourselves.

metta brings strength

When we talk about strength, we know there is physical strength, and there is inner strength. Metta brings both. The mind is brightened and uplifted by this practice, and that translates to having more energy.

it brings optimism

This is a practice that introduces us to our own depth, our own capacity, our resources of intelligence and creativity. When we are doubtful, it's because somehow we've gotten out of touch with these elements in ourselves. Metta brings with it a fresh sense of possibilities.

there is joy

Think about all that's there in a state of love: there is gratitude, generosity, gentleness, a sense of humor, a sense of the preciousness of life, and a bright and clear mind that is naturally celebratory. All of these have an element of joy to them. Metta means more happiness.

When we think of a loving person, often the image we have is of someone smiling – there is a real happiness being shared, and this is something we can know, this is something we can become .

metta brings an appreciation of beauty

This kind of sensibility sees the beauty in others, all around us in the natural world, and in ourselves. That a greater awareness of beauty can and should be developed is almost never taught in our culture, in these times. But here is the fact: that we will see more of the blessings of life when we cultivate love for one another, and for this world we live in. See for yourself! It really is so!

with metta, we are at ease with ourselves

This is one I know a lot of Westerners need. A lot of people here have a hard time being kind to themselves, or accepting themselves. Many people feel that, whatever they do, it's not good enough, or that, they are not good enough. Metta changes all that.

We can know our own worth when we practice metta meditation. It may be there under layers of our wrong thinking, but we do all have genuine value that we can, and really do have to know for ourselves.

Think of the qualities you admire in others, known personally, or from a distance, like someone who is a hero or heroine to you... where do their excellent qualities, of generosity, or courage, consideration, integrity or loyalty come from? They all come from something fine within them, and that same source of all good qualities is in all of us. We may not express it the same way, but our own inner richness is something we can know, and share with others, just the same. No question, metta helps us to do this.

metta brings peace

If we're cultivating an attitude of tolerance for what's not easy, in ourselves, or in others, right there, there is more peace, a little more space and light;

if we are developing gentleness, right there, there is a little more ease than before. This is so practical, so immediately useful to us, and the peace that metta brings to us personally, and in our relationships with others only increases the more we develop it.

metta brings patience

Think of how many times you have gotten upset with something not going the way you wanted, or not moving along as quickly as you would have liked. Impatience is never comfortable, or enjoyable. Now imagine if you were relaxed instead, or even half way to relaxed, half of the times you had to wait on line somewhere, or contend with someone you didn't have time for just then.

A regular meditation practice of any kind will teach a person a lot about patience, but it's especially true of metta meditation. Just cultivating *the intention* to wish ourselves and others well plants the seed for us to be more tolerant, easy going, and supportive. And, as time goes on, we can be comfortable in all kinds of situations – lines at the bank, in traffic, and with different people too...

there is forgiveness

In metta, when we cultivate kindness for ourselves and others, naturally we'll come on times when we or another person has not acted skillfully. We have examples we can remember of being forgiven for some small offense or irritation, and this is something we draw from and increase, so that we don't hold grudges.

Imagine how much lighter people would be if they were able to let go of how they were wronged in the past. Metta is a very present feeling. Where there has been injury, it naturally becomes compassion, and gentleness.

We all make mistakes, and in the mind of metta, loving kindness, there is room to hold all of this.

in metta there is understanding

Thich Nhat Hanh said that to love someone properly, you have to understand them. We cultivate this ability when we do metta loving kindness meditation. Whether it's for ourselves, or for another, we're not pushing away whatever feeling is there. Naturally, there is the wish to understand ourselves or another more fully, and as our intuition gets engaged in the practice, this caring becomes informed with heart knowledge.

through metta practice, we know our connection with others

In these times, of virtual lives, and an atomized society, there is nothing more meaningful than our real connection with one another. Whether we are by ourselves on retreat somewhere in the mountains, or with others on a train on the way to work, metta helps us to know our relationship to our friends, family and to all others.

Metta can bring us to that place that is simply more fundamental, more real than all the artificial distinctions people have thought up, that divide us. We can know our own original ground, of universal love, and belonging. This reunites us with our greater family.

All this, and more, is possible through the cultivation of metta - loving kindness. I'm sure that anyone who takes up the practice, will be able to make their own list of benefits, just from looking at the effect it has on their own lives.

It's a joy to share this. If you are reading this, wherever you are, my best wishes to you in your practice. May you be well and at your ease.

## Getting started in metta meditation – the dear person category

When we first hear the instructions on metta practice, telling us we should begin with someone we naturally feel love for, it's easy for the mind to go to those we feel the closest to, such as our family, or best friends. The teachings go further though, and add that it should be an easy, uncomplicated relationship. There's a good reason for this, as we'll see.

Our closest relationships are usually complicated. And while there is metta, or pure love in these relationships, it's mixed with conditional love, and subject to change. Isn't it so?

It's suggested that we try out different people for this first category, of most dear person, and see the differences for ourselves. What we're looking for is the feeling of spontaneous joy, warmth and well wishing when we think of that person. Some teachers talk about using a pet, or some lovely animal they see. Others speak of having a public figure, such as a teacher, that inspires us as the dear one.

When we try out different people, we can tell that some are easier than others to have metta for. Some evoke abundant feelings of love. I had the great pleasure a number of years back in Taiwan, of tutoring three children, two brothers, Willie and Mickey, and their sister, Emily. I went to their home once a week for five years, and got to see them grow up. Having never raised children, teaching them, and caring for them and the other children I taught, gave me some sense of what parents and grandparents feel. (I think of Maggie, Demi, and Alice...and others...I think of the children of my long time friends...) When I bring them to mind, naturally, my wishes are for their whole lives.

*'Dear ones,  
May you always be well, and at your ease...  
May you have every happiness...'*

There is this process that extends throughout the entire practice of cultivating metta, that involves 'borrowing' from what we develop in one category or towards one person, and then seeing if we can direct or cultivate that same feeling towards others. This is something in fact we are encouraged to do right from the beginning of the practice.

The idea of trying out, or ‘auditioning’ different people for the start of cultivating metta may go against our conditioning, but when we see the point of it, I think we’ll gladly do it. The idea is that we take the path of least resistance.

After we’ve found who we feel natural, spontaneous, abundant unconditional love for, when we then turn to those we would have chosen before to come first, we can notice something interesting. We do have metta, pure love also for these people, but often, not only is it mixed with attachment, but it’s also difficult to tell the difference between the two. Starting with the easiest and the least complicated, we can clearly see what is metta, the well wishing for another person’s whole life, that doesn’t change with conditions. This way of practicing first with what is easiest actually increases the pure love we can offer to those closest to us.

That same joy we find here can also accompany us on our journey of cultivating loving kindness for ourselves, our close friends and family, those we don’t know personally, the ones we have difficulty with, and finally all beings.

The Discourse on Love by the Buddha teaches that

*Just as a mother loves child,  
we should cultivate love to offer to all...*

*May everyone be happy and safe, and may their hearts be filled with joy.*

The first step here is something we can experiment with, and see what works best for us.

I offer this with the wish that other’s metta practice will go smoothly and easily, and that we will all be able to share the best kind of love with one another.

## The method of Loving kindness practice

### Introduction

There is a light in the mind when we love selflessly, no doubt about it. Love is what lets us see beauty. Delighting in others is a kind of enlightenment, we could say, and that light is sustenance; it brings happiness and well being to the heart and mind.

If you are interested in this as a formal Buddhist practice, my favorite book on the subject is still *Lovingkindness*, by Sharon Salzberg. I'm also very glad to be able to recommend the website called *dharmaseed*, which is a great treasure trove of talks on many aspects of Dharma practice.

*What a time to be alive!*

On the next pages you will find the Metta Sutta, the teaching on Loving Kindness taught by the Buddha, followed by two traditional methods for cultivating Metta, the second with some personal variations added, of course. They are essentially the same meditation.

The first method offered here I received in 1998, at a monastery in Thailand called Wat Asokaram, from a Western monk there named Phra Ingo. It uses a simple visualization.

The second method uses phrases to generate loving kindness, to guide the mind and keep it on track. These can be combined, of course, whatever works best.

Sometimes (like today) I feel like, 'enough with words!' At these times, just bringing an image to mind is enough to enjoy this meditation.

When we practice metta, we're doing something very simple. We're getting in touch with and awakening the heart's innate capacity for love. So there's no need to make it complicated, or to have any doubt that this is something we can all do.

Then, when it comes to using metta phrases for the cultivation of loving kindness, some teachers say that the fewer phrases the better, but this is

something we can experiment with for ourselves, and see what works best for us.

Whatever method we use, I think Ajaan Passano explained the aim of metta practice very well when he said: ‘In reality, the cultivation of loving kindness is not the actual repeating of the words – I mean, you use those words and phrases, but it’s about the feeling, that feeling of loving kindness, the feeling of warmth, the feeling of acceptance, the feeling of openness, the feeling of the heart, including and concerned for the happiness of oneself or others, and that’s about generating the feeling.

‘In terms of meditation, it’s that – directing attention to the feeling, or emotion, that sense of kindness, *well-wishing*, and then finding ways to support that, and to shore that up, and allow that to become stable, and then to start to suffuse one’s own being, and then allowing that to spread out... and that requires mindfulness, and attention...’<sup>1</sup>

However we approach it, this is such a worthwhile practice. Don’t you agree?

The Buddha taught that, ‘Having seen that all beings, like ourselves, have a desire for happiness, one methodically develops loving kindness for all beings.’

This Buddhist loving kindness practice naturally leads us to what are called The Four Brahma Viharas, or Divine Abidings, of Universal Love, Compassion, Delight, and Peace and balance of mind born of the strength of dedication (also called Equanimity), so I’ve also included a few verses that express this.

Enjoy! May all beings benefit!

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<sup>1</sup> From the recording of the 2008 Metta Retreat, available from Abhayagiri Monastery

## The Metta Sutta

This is what should be done  
 By those who are skilled in goodness,  
 And who know the path of peace:

Let them be able and upright,  
 Straightforward and gentle in speech,  
 Humble and not conceited,  
 Contented and easily satisfied,  
 Unburdened with duties and frugal in their ways,  
 Peaceful and calm, and wise and skillful,  
 Not proud and demanding in nature.  
 Let them not do the slightest thing  
 That the wise would later reprove.

Wishing: in gladness and in safety,  
 May all beings be at ease.  
 Whatever living beings there may be;  
 Whether they are weak or strong, omitting none,  
 The great or the mighty, medium, short or small,  
 The seen and the unseen,  
 Those living near and far away,  
 Those born and to-be-born—  
 May all beings be at ease!

Let none deceive another,  
 Or despise any being in any state.  
 Let none through anger or ill-will  
 Wish harm upon another.

Even as a mother protects with her life  
 Her child, her only child,  
 So with a boundless heart  
 Should one cherish all living beings;  
 Radiating kindness over the entire world,  
 Spreading upward to the skies,  
 And downward to the depths;

Outward and unbounded,  
Freed from hatred and ill-will.

Whether standing or walking, seated or lying down,  
Free from drowsiness,  
One should sustain this recollection.  
This is said to be the sublime abiding.

By not holding to fixed views,  
The pure-hearted one, having clarity of vision,  
Being freed from all sense desires,  
Is not born again into this world.

## Metta Bhavana - Loving Kindness Meditation

To begin with, I sit upright, and relax. I close my eyes and allow myself to settle, becoming more calm, relaxed and harmonious.

I let go of thoughts, feelings, and sensations.

I observe how the breath is flowing in smoothly, and flowing out easily; free and harmonious.

Now I see a wonderful sun over my head, shining with warm, golden light.

This bright light of loving-kindness is streaming throughout my entire being. I can feel it; I feel well, and I am happy.

I. First person: Now I imagine one person who I love the most.

I see the warm, golden light of loving-kindness streaming to that person.

This wonderful bright light is flowing through this person. This beloved person is surrounded by this light of higher love and kindness.

I can see the smile on their face. This beloved person feels well, and is very happy.

II. Second person: Next, I imagine one person who I like and respect.  
... (as above)

III. Third person: Next I can see one person toward whom I have a neutral relationship. ... (as above)

IV. Fourth person: The last person I think of is one whom I have had difficulties, or someone who I dislike. ... (as above)

Now I see all four persons together, with the sun above them, and I see them all receiving the same amount of this warm golden light of loving-kindness.

They all feel well; they are all smiling, and they are all shining, and happy.

Then I let them go I peace and happiness.

Now, once more I see the warm sun above my head, and once again I am filled with feelings of happiness and well-being.

(optional:)

If necessary, at this point, I practice equanimity meditation:

Now, I allow myself to feel calm, and peaceful.

To conclude, I take a deep breath, and exhale slowly. I come back to the here and the now, and slowly open my eyes.

May all beings be happy.

## Metta - loving kindness practice

*Traditionally, metta practice is first done toward oneself. Then one cultivates metta for one's parents, family, friends and benefactors (including teachers<sup>2</sup>), to neutral ones, or those we don't know, to those we've had some difficulty with, and then to all beings. The general principle is that we start with what is easy, and go from there, and that we go patiently, and gradually<sup>3</sup>.*

*In general, fewer words are better, but we should have a clear idea of what the words we use mean to us.*

*For different people or groups, different lines may seem more appropriate to reflect on. You're welcome to select from these, to use lines from other sources, or to write your own metta phrases.*

*Sometimes one or two lines are enough.*

*Here is a model. Use your intelligence and skill to adapt meditation, as you see fit. The feeling is the important thing, and the clear intention.*

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<sup>2</sup> When it comes to teachers, offering them the same wishes at times seems like 'carrying coals to Newcastle', or water to the river, since they are the source of so much of our happiness, and peace. So, when it comes to them, in addition, or instead, I may offer such phrases as, 'May your lives be stable, and May all your holy wishes be fulfilled', 'May you live long, and continue to teach'; and/or, 'May I, and all your students practice in the way that pleases you the most...'

<sup>3</sup> I've been using the categories of self, family and friends, those I don't know, and then all beings. For me, this has become inclusive of the category of 'those I've had some difficulty with', as metta – loving kindness naturally includes forgiveness. Experiment and see what works best for you.

## Phrases for metta loving kindness practice

Here is a version of the traditional phrases that are used:

May they be happy  
 May they be healthy  
 May they be peaceful  
 May they live with ease

....

And here are my own phrases:

May they be entirely well and at their ease.  
 May they have every happiness.  
 May they always be safe and protected  
 May they always know themselves to be greatly loved and cared for

May their heart be open to all the beauty and wonder of life.  
 May they have all they need and wish for  
 May they have every blessing  
 May they have all of the good things that this life has to offer,  
 every success and all joys.

May they have happiness  
 May they be healthy  
 May they have peace,  
 happiness and harmony in all their relationships

May they know freedom,  
 the highest happiness, and fulfillment.

As I mentioned earlier, you can also write your own metta phrases – and I encourage you to do so. Make the practice your own. These are just offered as an example... you're welcomed to use whatever works best for you...

## The Four Brahma Viharas

Metta practice is done step by step, through the different categories, understanding their purpose, and then all together, as taught, until one reaches the Four 'Brahma Viharas' – the 'Divine Abodes', also called the Four Limitless States, of Universal Love, Compassion, Sympathetic Joy, and Strength and balance of mind

The Four Brahma Viharas can be expressed, and reflected on in a number of ways, including this four line prayer, from the Tibetan Tradition:

*May all beings have happiness and the causes of happiness...*

*May all beings be free of suffering and the causes of suffering...*

*I rejoice in all happiness and good fortune ...*

*In all situations, and at all times, all are equal in deserving our love and our care...*

Here follows my own version of a traditional teaching called the 'Suffusion with the Divine Abidings

## Suffusion with the Divine Abidings

{I. Loving Kindness}

I will abide  
 pervading the world  
 with loving-kindness,  
 all around and everywhere,  
 and to all as to myself

I will abide  
 pervading the all encompassing world  
 with loving-kindness,  
 abundant, exalted, immeasurable,

with unconditional good-will,  
 thankfulness,  
 warmth, gentleness,  
 appreciation and respect,  
 supreme well-wishing,  
 and encouragement for all

I will abide  
 pervading the world  
 with loving-kindness -

May all beings be entirely well  
 and at their ease!

From the ants on the ground,  
 to the birds in the sky,  
 the fish in the waters,  
 animals,  
 and people everywhere,

young and old,  
 rich and poor,  
 weak and strong,

male and female,  
realized and ordinary people –

May they all be entirely well  
and at their ease!

all around and everywhere,  
and to all as to myself –

May all have happiness,  
health, and peace!

I will abide  
pervading the all encompassing world  
with loving-kindness,  
abundant, exalted, immeasurable,

with unconditional good-will,  
thankfulness,  
warmth, gentleness,  
appreciation and respect,  
supreme well-wishing,  
and encouragement for all

{II. Compassion}

I will abide  
pervading the world  
with compassion,  
all around and everywhere,  
and to all as to myself

I will abide  
pervading the all encompassing world  
with compassion,  
abundant, exalted, immeasurable,

with a heart of complete solidarity,

engagement,  
 joy, courage,  
 and real strength

{III. Joy}

I will abide  
 pervading the world  
 with rejoicing,  
 all around and everywhere,  
 and to all as to myself

I will abide  
 pervading the all encompassing world  
 with rejoicing,  
 abundant, exalted, immeasurable,  
 always truly caring, and celebratory

{IV. The Strength and Peace born of dedication, also known as Equanimity}

I will abide  
 pervading the world  
 with stable, impartial love,  
 all around and everywhere,  
 and to all as to myself

I will abide  
 pervading the all encompassing world  
 with stable, impartial love,  
 abundant, exalted, immeasurable,

at all times with a love,  
 that is steady, joyful,  
 even, and serene

Raising up, and evening out our responses to life through loving kindness practice

*{When I first wrote what follows, I was most clear about two principles: first, that we start with what is easiest, and, second, that we go on from there, that is, that we develop or cultivate the practice. Since then, it seems there's a third essential idea in metta, or loving kindness practice, and that is that we always start from wherever we are now. As I'm sure we'll find if we take up metta practice, this is an act of kindness we can offer to ourselves throughout the day, and however our practice happens to be...}*

I.

The basic idea of the cultivation of loving kindness, or metta practice is that we start with what is easy for us, and go from there. This is something we can all grasp right away, and yet it has a range of applications that are truly marvelous.

First, when we're told to begin with whoever is easiest for us to feel kindness towards, what we're doing is identifying some feeling we've had that is more gentle, more joyful, warm, appreciative, and noble than our usual attitude. We're lifting our heart and mind to a higher level, for even those few brief moments, when we lovingly bring to mind a child, a family member, or dear friend. That the feeling fades is a natural part of training, and so we lift up our mind again, and, with words and images, we cultivate this sense that we already naturally have, of wishing them well.

Loving kindness is an interesting thing in this way – it can be there before any words about it, and then when we think of its meaning, and put it into words, the feeling itself can become more clear, it can shine more brightly within us.

We lift up our mind, and produce a genuine, natural feeling of well wishing, supporting that with phrases from the heart, such as, 'May I be well and at my ease...', or, 'May you be well, and at your ease, 'May you have every happiness;' 'May you be happy, healthy, and peaceful'. (sometimes I add their name, or say, 'Dear one...')

## II.

The teachings say we should do this first towards ourselves, a benefactor, a family member, or whoever is easiest for us, and only then, over time, to proceed to neutral and difficult people.

If it's not easy in the beginning to direct thoughts of good will to ourselves, we can choose another person, understanding that returning to ourselves is an essential part of loving kindness practice. Here's why: it's from our own response to kindness, whether it's something we remember, or cultivate in meditation, that we know how natural it is to want happiness. Based on that, we can develop these same wishes, for all others.

The Thai teacher, Ajaan Lee, had a colloquial way of describing how we can train the mind and heart. He said that when we're learning from a teacher, it's like we're watching and listening to them describe how to make a basket. We then try ourselves, and, after some attempts, we have a reasonable enough basket, that we ourselves have made. This then becomes our standard. We try again, to replicate that, or to do even better. Then, when we do exceed our earlier attempts, we can set aside that first model basket, and have a new, and better standard.

It's the same way with training the mind and heart. We have some good and some awkward first attempts, but then, gradually, we have an idea of what we can do, the feelings we can cultivate, and we then bring that to mind when we meditate.

This is the first instance I can see of evening out the mind. We have some standard, some idea of how we can be towards ourselves and another, and, even if we are not able to reach that same degree of kindness, we know it's possible, and, gently, patiently, we just aim to go in that direction.

On some days it will be easier than other days, and sometimes one person will be easier than another. That doesn't matter. We start wherever we are now, and we just keep intending to go in the direction of our best efforts, of what produced the best results in the past.

The genius of the Buddha's teachings is really evident here. To start with what is easiest, such as was taught in the Metta Sutta,

*'just as a mother cherishes her child, her only child, so one should cultivate loving kindness..'*

- what could be more natural than that?

I'm sure even mothers have times when it's easier than other times to feel love for their child, but what the Buddha was pointing out was that best quality, the most unconditional, freely flowing, abundant heart quality that we all have felt sometimes, of loving at its best. If we can again find this quality in ourself, we already have the standard. Bringing it to mind, we lift up our heart.

### III.

Mindfulness and clear comprehension are a part of every Buddhist meditation. How these work in metta practice is in holding the object in mind, and then in watching how our heart and mind are responding.

Just within a few minutes we can notice some fluctuations in our feeling of loving kindness – sometimes it will be there, for ourself or for another, clear and strong, and other times, less so.

Since our aim is to lift up our mind, and to keep and improve this quality, we can then be skillful, using whatever phrases or images work for us. Sometimes, for example, I find the image of a beautiful, brightly shining sun to be very helpful.

At times it's skillful, if we're cultivating the feelings of kindness towards our family or friends, to go back to ourselves. Or, if having kindness for ourself is not easy, we can begin or go back to those for whom it is easier, such as children, kind friends we're grateful for, our beloved teachers, or even pets.

When we're practicing, the working idea is not only that we start with what easy and go from there, but that we keep returning to what feels natural and comfortable for us, and, using that as a basis, we continually move towards more evenness in our responses to the different categories, and we go in the direction of greater and greater inclusiveness.

## IV.

We can see next, that when contemplating the category of our friends, some are easier to send metta to than others. The idea is that we even out this response, until we're able to have the same quality and depth of feelings of genuine well wishing for them all. With practice, we're able to slowly wear away our resistance to doing this.

One method is to start with whoever is easiest, and then to bring others to mind. Someone mentioned the idea of seeing them together in a 'group photo'. I sometimes imagine a party, where family and friends and loved ones have been invited, and I'm greeting them, and talking with them, and wishing them well, guiding the feelings with words such as

*May you be entirely well and at your ease, my friend!  
May you have every happiness...*

One of the interesting things about cultivating such qualities, aiming to even them out towards ourselves, benefactors, family and friends, difficult people, and eventually towards all beings, is that we can actually see it work. We can feel when there's some shift, and it gets easier to wish another well unconditionally, with more and more of that same quality we have towards our most beloved ones.

## V.

The category of what they call 'neutral people' has always been an interesting one to me. When I first heard about it, I thought it was fascinating that there were some I didn't feel much about, one way or another – neither attraction or aversion. When I went out looking to see who I was neutral towards, it was surprising to see that most people I had some feeling about, one way or another, but there *were* some I didn't notice at all.

Recognizing these people, as people, is a first step, and maybe the hardest one. That some people are invisible to us tells us something. We've not yet opened our eyes and heart to them. Once we see them, or are able to bring them to mind in our meditation, it gets easier from there. All we need to do then is to reflect on their fundamental humanity- how they are just like

ourselves, and our loved ones, in that they want to be happy and not to suffer. They too have dreams, difficulties, talents, needs and wishes, just like all of us. We can lift them up in our thoughts, hold them also in our heart, and sincerely wish them well, the highest good.

Indifference is an absence of seeing what is actually there. We have the saying ‘to know them is to love them’. If we were to actually see the unique human being that is there, naturally we’d wish them every happiness in the world. This range of cultivation of friendliness is evening out our responses to those we may have seen, but don’t personally know.

I divide the neutral category into two: those I see somewhere, or remember – I call them ‘the known, but unfamiliar’, and those I don’t know at all – ‘those unknown to me’. Evening out the feelings of love for them then involves first thinking of how these that I do see around have the same needs and wishes as I and my family and friends, truly wishing them well, and then extending that same feeling also to those I don’t know.

This can feel like leaving a small pool of water, and entering a great ocean. After all, we only see and know a relatively very few people. When we open our heart to this category of people, that of those we don’t know, it’s a great expansion of the field of our practice.

We can test how we’re doing with this cultivation of loving kindness in our responses, when reading the news, for example, about someone in our town, or in the next town or country over. We can see if the feeling of wishing them well, the highest good is there, or if it fluctuates. Right there is the place of continued practice.

Did you lose the thread? Aah, no matter. Just begin again, and continue.

## VI.

The last category we’re taught to consider in the Traditional metta instructions is that of the difficult person. The literal translation of the Pali term is ‘the enemy’, but some people prefer to soften the sense of who we’re dealing with here.

To include our own participation, sometimes it's useful just to call it the person we've had some difficulty with. Again, this can be an interesting category, in that there are degrees of difficult person, or situation. And, as before, we're encouraged to start with what is easiest, and go from there. So, instead of starting with the most difficult person, the one who we feel has caused us the most harm or problems, we can start with someone who's been less of a problem.

I would take it even further, as a practical means, and say that, if we can identify, and then cultivate kindness towards those very mild irritations we have for people, circumstances, and ourselves, it greatly eases the way to transforming our relationship to those progressively harder cases.

Many people want to start with what is most difficult, but this is only because those people or situations have caused us so much suffering, and we naturally want to be rid of that. But, being really skillful here means that we just do what is most effective.

I heard one teacher suggest thinking about difficult people on a scale of one to ten, with ten being the most difficult. Then he said, instead of choosing the people or situations in the nine to ten range, we can more productively work first with those who are maybe around five or six on the scale.

One morning after hearing this, when I got to considering the category of difficult person, I looked, and thought to myself, 'Well, I don't really have anyone I'm feeling in conflict with right now...' '... not even in the middle range of the scale...' Then I heard myself ask, 'What about the lower range?, like about two or three?', and I found there were a couple people I could think of, where I could clearly identify some resistance to offering them the same kindness.

This illustrated for me an important point, and that is, not to get complacent, but to keep making progress whenever we can, towards gradually offering all others the same quality of metta. Certainly introspection, gentleness for oneself, and self honesty are essential here.

In working with the category of the person we've had some difficulty with, sometimes it can be useful to go back to directing thoughts of loving kindness towards ourselves, our friends, the categories of what were

formerly neutral people, and then to those we have only had some slight problem with. This lets us gather some momentum. Over and over, we can go in this direction, of cultivating the wish for all to be well, happy and at their ease.

Another way to approach the truly most difficult people or situations is to go on to the next step, and then come back to this category. We can cultivate the aim for all beings everywhere to have happiness, health, peace and joy, always. Then, when we come back to these, sometimes confused, conflicted people, it can be easier to wish them well, the same happiness, in fact.

One teacher, Kamala Masters, pointed out that often the cultivation of kindness towards for those with whom we've had some difficulty often turns into compassion, either for ourself, or for the other person, or both. Developing greater understanding and forgiveness enters into it here too.

No one intends to cause harm to themselves or others who is right in themselves. The aggression, greed, arrogance, or indifference are just the afflictive emotions of people who are not yet liberated. If they were simply afflicted, and by themselves, or engaging others, should that make them any more or less worthy of our compassion?

If their problem were physical, rather than psychological, would we react to them with any amount of aversion at all?, or any lack of kindness? What difference should it make? A suffering person is just that, no matter what level it's on, and when they reach a certain point, their problems are bound to carry over and cause problems for others. That's just the way it is. How can we respond to them? What is the best we can offer?

How would we like to be treated if we were in their situation? Or, if it were a loved one of ours who was lost and confused, how would we want them to be treated? With kindness, of course. We know this is what we should extend to difficult people. It may not be easy, but that's exactly why we need to practice, because it's not easy.

Our reflections may stir very mixed feelings, some kindness, then anger, disappointment, then compassion, which is a part of the process. Acting

skillfully here means keeping the aim in mind, of eventually being able to include all beings in our love and care, no matter who, or what, or where. We then cultivate this whole field of practice, as needed to fulfill that aim.

## VII.

There's a sub-category here that could be called 'the impersonal difficult person, or situation'. This is something that, while not directed specifically at us, is hard to bear. It is in the range of the unpleasant, irritating, or, for some reason, difficult to hold in awareness.

For example, it can be how a person treats someone else, or how a public figure acts. It can be what we see or know about those who cause harm because of their lack of ethics. Or, it can refer to how advertising affects us, even though it's not directed just at us. Any of these can be unpleasant, hard to experience without at least some aversion, and so they fit in this category.

All that went before applies here too. In this case though, it seems we're combining something of both the neutral and difficult category. As with the neutral person, we can reflect on the people behind these actions as human beings, and cultivate goodwill for them like we did before. Then, like the rest of the difficult person category, there are degrees of how these things effect us, and so, again, we can start with the people or situations that are easier to have feelings of loving kindness towards, and go from there. The aim is to be at peace with them, and eventually, to really wish them all well. This is possible.

## VIII.

An interesting take that I heard on the categories of people is to look at all these as describing aspects of ourself. So again, we have 'the most lovable', 'the liked', 'the neutral', or 'that ones we don't see or are indifferent towards', and 'the ones we have degrees of difficulty with'.

This is useful because we're always with ourself, and we can always simply incline the mind towards kindness. We can just aim to go in the direction of

having more appreciation and unconditional love. Whether or not we feel any change right away doesn't matter that much, what matters is the intention we hold. In time, this is what gradually brings results.

Again, as before, we can see the different degrees of these responses we're having, and, working from what is easiest, we go step by step, gradually becoming more inclusive of all our states. If we want to be free from major annoyances, the way to do that is shown right there – we start with what is easy, with what we feel are only very minor problems, and go step by step. Eventually we can handle even the bigger challenges.

## IX.

The basic idea for how to cultivate metta is simple and straightforward enough for anyone to take hold of, at any place, at any time, and, simple though it is, it can have far reaching effects, both personally, and for our world. Some people like just having ideals, while others can't be bothered with them, and just want to stay with what seems immediate and practical. Metta brings together these two – we have an ideal to move towards, and of necessity, we can only take the step that is right in front of us.

It can be very encouraging to see that change is possible, even in very small ways. Maybe we can become *just a little more kind* towards ourselves, or *just a little more friendly* to our neighbor, or family. Such progress should be celebrated. Then, if we can bring more patience, calm and composure to some small area of life, we know we can also do it in other ways.

We can sense that, step by step, it's possible to transform the mind, and our responses to life, gradually becoming more kind, and inclusive. From wherever we are now, this is a great gift we can all offer, to ourselves, and to our world.

A few thoughts on having kindness towards ourselves – from a letter to a friend

When I think about it, what I want to encourage most of all, is for you to keep going with the aim to be kind to yourself. The reason I say this is that, over the years, it's become more and more clear to me just how necessary this is.

As you said, it's not easy, which tell us something. I think it's because we're closest to our own suffering, and we've heard it all before so many times, and because of that we're not as patient as we are with others. But I wonder how far we can take a quality such as this, moving towards having a more unconditional kindness and compassion for ourselves.

I recently heard one teacher saying that, any kind of meditation, or reflection we do will result in our having more kindness and compassion for others. He said the reason for this was that we'd be closer to our own suffering and difficulty, and so naturally be able to relate more to what others go through.

I'd heard this before, and I've watched this too in my own experience, and, from what I can tell, it's true. The extent to which it works though, depends at least in part in how we are towards ourselves. Have you ever heard something like the saying 'a pot drips what's in it'? Maybe the Bible says it as 'out of the treasure of the heart the mouth speaks'

How I relate to these sayings here, is that there's something really valuable in listening to the thoughts we have about ourselves – we may be unaware, and surprised when we hear the tone of them.

I like the thought-experiment of imagining a person you feel close to, with nothing but kind feelings for, and the intention to help them, and thinking of what you'd say to them, or how you'd want to support them if they were struggling. This is one way to identify the capacity you see in yourself of unconditional love and compassion. This is what we need for ourselves too.

I don't know if you saw it, in one of those essays I sent you, I think it was the one on anger, Ani Tenzin Palmo said, 'Treat yourself as you would treat your dearest friend. Speak to yourself words you would speak to someone you really cared for.'

That this is difficult to do, or, more exactly, the difference between how we would speak to someone we cared for and how we speak to and treat ourselves, shows us just how much we need to cultivate this quality, of love for ourselves.

I know you have much of this experience towards your children, of patience, and encouragement, gentleness and sympathy for them when they struggle or are uncertain about something. How wonderful when we can have these same qualities for ourself.

I've had this image for a while, of what it's like to either be kind towards ourself, or to be aggressive, impatient and rough: It's like – someone is behind a door, and if we're aggressively shouting at them to come out - they're likely to barricade the door. But if we speak gently to them, encouragingly, expressing sympathy and unconditional support, from the sound of our voice they can feel that, and eventually they'll open up the door and come out.

It's more subtle though, for us, when it comes to how we talk to ourselves. If we're not kind to ourselves, there are levels to the mind we get used to not looking at, out of long habit. We can become divided against ourselves. This comes to mind for me now because I know we all have old wounds to be cared for. In our own way, in this life, we're all on the path of healing, of making our way to health and wholeness.

Most people don't get to address the deeper causes of suffering in their lives, and for them, there is only endless covering over, or running away, or numbing out, and that never entirely works.

Love can be like a medicine, just the right medicine. It can be like nectar. And this is what we all need in our lives. We need this from others, but most of all, this is something we need to give to ourselves. I wonder what you think of all this.

Please be supremely kind, gentle, patient and forgiving to yourself. Please be greatly compassionate (not just compassionate, but *greatly* compassionate), and encouraging, as you would to your children, or your dearest friends. Just as you would be to them, let your love be a gift to yourself, for your whole life.

There's a saying, 'Life is so hard – how can we be anything *but* kind?' I know it's not easy, which is all the more reason to do it – *because it's not easy*... Understanding this, we can smile to ourselves with real sympathy.

We don't talk about much about these things, but I think it should be said. This opens the way to so much that would otherwise not get attended to, and so much then would not be born in our lives.

I'm nowhere near perfect at this, I have my good days and bad days, good hours and bad hours, but I am sure of the importance of this – kindness and compassion for myself, and so I aim to keep trying. Maybe you will find these thoughts useful to you in your life, I don't know, but I do hope so.

Here is a part of a poem by Galway Kinnel, called 'St. Francis and the Sow' that so beautifully expresses the necessity of love

The bud  
stands for all things,  
even those things that don't flower,

for everything flowers, from within,  
of self-blessing;

though sometimes it is necessary  
to reteach a thing its loveliness,  
to put a hand on its brow  
and retell it in words and in touch  
it is lovely  
until it flowers again from within,  
of self-blessing...

May it be this way for all of us!

## The Great Bridge to Universal Love

Of the categories in metta, or Buddhist loving kindness practice, of self, friends and those closest to us, neutral people, those we have difficulty with, and all beings, the one that gets talked about the least is clearly the neutral person. This is understandable, after all. The dear person category is easy, and enjoyable, and everyone who takes up metta practice wants to at least lessen their aversion to the enemy category. ‘All beings’, also, feels good even just to think about. But where does that leave the group of those people we don’t know personally? As we’ll see, all the categories in metta practice are important, and have an essential role to play.

When we think about it, this category of metta for neutral people forms the bridge between those we know and care about, and those we do not, and almost certainly will never know personally. This expands the field of our metta practice immeasurably.

Of the three obstacles to metta, those of attachment, aversion and ignorance, attachment is purified, or removed by having pure metta towards dear ones; aversion is removed by cultivating metta for those we have problems with, and ignorance, manifesting here in this category as indifference and neglect, is removed by developing metta for the so-called ‘neutral person’.

I’ve thought of this last group more as – those we don’t know personally, that we see, or who are known to us, and then, those who are unknown to us. This brings it closer to home. As with the other categories of metta, there is a step-wise progression we can follow to develop well wishing and care for this entire group.

We start with those we see, and reflect on how they are like ourselves, and our family and friends too, in that they want only happiness, and not even the slightest suffering for themselves, and their friends and family. If we can meet another in this way, then they are not a stranger to us. We can treat the clerk at the convenience store as a human being, as we would want ourselves, and our loved ones to be treated.

We can tell if this is working, or not, by how we then respond to those we don’t know on such places as public transport. If it is working, we should be able to notice some difference in how we spontaneously feel towards them.

When we find we are warming up to these people, then we can take the next step in the practice.

From there, it's much easier to begin to extend care also to *those we don't know personally, and who we don't meet directly* (which is by far the larger part of this category). We reflect that those people too have wants and needs, and like ourselves, friends and family, and just like those we don't know that we *do* meet, they also deserve our respect and care.

There are many ways we can extend love towards this larger group. Thinking of others can start out as a concept, but it's important that it doesn't remain there. So that it doesn't become a vague abstraction, we can always aim to learn about and become more familiar with how others are living. Organizations like Kiva can be a big help here. They facilitate micro-loans, via the internet, to people in Third World countries. There are short biographies, and pictures to help us get a more grounded sense of who's out there;

Or we could take up the cause of animal rights, basing the extension of our care on what we feel for the lives of the animals we do know and see.

We may say that the lives of those without health care in our country are not our business, *but we can make it our business*; or that the way people live in the slums of Rio, or in Kenya, or in America is none of our business, *but we can make it our business*;

We may think it's beyond us to be concerned with the availability of basic medicines in the Third World, *but we can, in fact, choose to make it our business*; we might think that Monsanto introducing untested, genetically modified food into the market, without letting people know is not our business, *but we can make it our business*;

We may not pay attention to the economies and environment in China, India, and Latin America, and how the people's lives in those places are effected, *but we can make it our business* to know and find ways to respond to it...

I know some people are bound to object here and say it's all too much, and that there are too many needs in our world to give time and attention to them all, and they do have a point. What we can do though is to take care of ourselves well, and then to identify a few causes where we feel we can make

a difference, and do what we can right there. It's important though that we don't shut out the rest of it from the overall way we see our lives. We should learn as much as we can about this whole world of living beings that we share, and then try to be responsible human beings.

One of the precepts of Thich Nhat Hanh's Order of Interbeing says, 'do not close your eyes before suffering', and *of course, this isn't comfortable*, but our humanity calls us to it. If we can live with this awareness, although we won't be able to solve every problem right away, in time we might be able to find a way to make a difference. Now isn't that something?

These are all ways we can extend metta in the category of those we don't personally know. I'm sure we can all think of other ways, if we spend some time with it. In each case, we can ask, What would love have me do here? or, How would I respond if this were happening to those I know and care about? This is what actually makes the bridge, to all-inclusive love.

I think part of why we may not give much attention to this group is because of how it's been named. I mean, 'neutral person'? – not too spicy, eh? So, I would like to kick-start the campaign to increase interest in this category, and propose 'The Great Bridge to Universal Love', or something like that. Really, I'm only half kidding here, because it *is* this, after all.

We can make others' concerns our own, and their joys and sorrows something we register, and respond to, and when we do this we find that our metta has grown by that much.

To aim to go in the direction of really having love for all is truly a most noble aspiration, and the great advantage of the method of metta practice is that it shows how we can actually accomplish this. Now, how amazing is that? Once we know the metta teachings, the way is open for those of us who want to take it.

May all beings,  
 known and unknown,  
 seen and unseen,  
 be entirely well and at their ease,  
 and may they have every happiness.

## No Place for Anger

Forgiveness is a very Western word and idea. It makes some assumptions that are not there in Buddhism, and, as a method, in the way it's usually practiced, it often only goes so far. In Buddhism, the insight that is offered into wrong or hurtful actions is that they arise from ignorance. This includes actions motivated by people's greed and attachment, and people's angry or violent words and actions. Looked at this way, there is no place for anger.

Shantideva says that when we're hit with a stick, we don't get angry at the stick, but at the person wielding it. By the same token he says, we shouldn't direct our anger at the person, but at the delusions that are controlling them. Far from what we usually think of as anger, this is right directed intensity of action.

Look at the wrathful deities in Tibetan Buddhism: it's taught that this is not anger, but the manifestation of great power directed towards ending suffering and its cause.

When once asked what he thought about the actions of another person, Lama Yeshe said, 'How can I get angry at them – they're a sentient being'. Clearly, that emotional response was foreign to him because of his training and accomplishment of the teachings.

There's a scene in the movie *The Killing Fields*, where the reporter is reunited with his friend and interpreter, who he had left behind in Cambodia many years ago. He immediately says, 'I'm sorry!, Forgive me!, Forgive me!', and Dith Pran says, 'There is nothing to forgive!' Now, this kind of mind, I know, is so seldom known in the West that it takes some investigation to see what is at work there.

We feel justified, when someone harms us or those we love, in wanting that person to suffer in turn, or at least in holding onto the feeling of that person or group as being eternally wrong or evil.

We want them to pay, somehow, or at the very least, we'll exclude them from our thoughts and considerations. If they're in trouble, we'll feel

justified in not responding. At least this much we carry as resentment, directed outwards. Every level of anger, bitterness, and resentment toward people or groups also has its effect on our own psyche-soma. We, ourselves, suffer physically and mentally.

There's a good reason why the afflictive emotions are called poisons the Buddhist teachings. The three poisons are greed, hatred, and delusion. We can see the effect of these in our own lives, and in the lives of others. To some extent, the effect is always toxic.

Sometimes these three are extended to five, including then jealousy and pride. I've taken to thinking of this teaching as referring to all afflictions, so I add fear and sadness to this list. They all effect us negatively on every level. These are what we should work to become free from, and help others to become free from.

On a spiritual level, we can say that anger or unforgiveness blocks the flow of grace in our lives. It blocks the light. It can sour our experience. They say that when a person has vinegar in their mouth, that everything tastes bitter, but when they have the taste of honey on their tongue, their experience is sweet.

If we observe and experiment, we can tell in our own lives how the habits of our own thinking colors, or obscures our mind. We can also see how our thinking can cause these veils to lessen, and how the world can become bright again.

Much worse than the moments of pride or anger are the habits of mind we cultivate over the years. We all know people who don't see beauty anymore, and frequently their anger is not only coming from this state of deprivation, but causing it as well.

We can cloud our mind with anger or resentment, even a little, and we can free ourselves from this. When we do this, the mind's true nature reveals itself as clear, bright, and joyful.

To the extent that we have wisdom seeing how wrong actions are caused by ignorance and nothing else – and that there's no agency in there somewhere

that needs to be punished, anger and bitterness dissolve and do not rise again.

One thing people always do, when trying to justify their anger and resentment, is that they bring up the most extreme examples of cruelty, as if that proves their point. But what this does, almost without fail, is that it stirs up the mind of the speaker, and often the listener too, so that the roots of harmful actions can't be seen. Being whipped up emotionally, the nature of wrong actions isn't considered. Such people don't really want to listen, or dialogue, they just want others to agree with them. But *what if* all wrong and harmful action was of a kind? What then?

The flaw in this thinking that feels justified being angry is that it can be extended the more you think about it. There can be no peace in such a mind, only the dredging up of past events, and endless rehearsal for conflict, and for war.

I remember reading a news story once, and how it suddenly occurred to me how so many stories of crimes take the implicit stance that 'here is this normal person, and *look* at what they did'. Instead of seeing them as confused, or sick, or deranged, or deluded, and in need of help, we treat them as though there is something wrong in how they behave that will be remedied by punishment. What foolishness!

This has got to be the cruelest irony, that we seek redress by punishment. A confused person is not helped by being treated as if there is something fundamentally wrong with them that can be changed by force, or if they only were coerced and agreed to change.

If they were instead treated all along the way with the insight that there is nothing fundamentally wrong with them, they could be helped toward that goal of awakening to a fundamental goodness and dignity.

I agree with Ani Tenzin Palmo here, when she said that the Western concept of good and evil, and man's 'fallen nature', is an unimaginably harmful, destructive idea – 'It's wicked', she said. That paradigm only goes so far. If people believe in a just and loving God, they can let go of anger based on the knowledge of how much forgiveness they themselves have needed in their lives, and based as well on the commandment to forgive. But there often

lingers the idea that ‘that person did this to me, or my group’, and instead of treating the whole situation as a tragic mistake, born of ignorance, like something done by a blind, drunken, mad person, it’s treated as something that could have been avoided if only that person chose to be good instead of evil. Such thinking reinforces the suffering, and perpetuates it with a strong ego identity that is wrapped up in being the victim.

A Buddhist method by no means justifies what we call evil, or sin, harm or wrong doing. This approach gives us a more profound way of dealing with injury and grievous harm. It aims to go to the root, and to offer a remedy to suffering, for ourselves and others. This way of working doesn’t give the ‘thrill’ or gratification of anger, but responding with anything less than a full understanding, and instead reacting with threats or punishment only goes so far. It doesn’t bring the lasting change that we can, and should all seek.

A line that’s helped:

‘Buddhas do not blame sentient beings who are flawed,  
but with great compassion,  
they help free them from the round of suffering’

Thich Nhat Hanh said, ‘When a person suffers, that suffering will spill over, and harm others...’

In the framework of Buddhist thought and practice, there is the idea of

Devotion to all Buddhas and Bodhisattvas,  
and compassion for all sentient beings.

and that covers everyone.

This way of thinking is more workable, because it is based on the reality that we all have the potential to live sane, balanced, healthy, naturally respectful and spontaneously ethical lives. We can also, in our ignorance, cause harm to self and others. We have this potential too.

If we do not find this out about ourselves, there is no way we can see and extend this kind of regard to others. Forgiving ourselves and moving on

means then, to a Buddhist, having compassion and seeing that what we did came out of confusion, unknowing. Our offence was based on ignorance.

We need much love and compassion, patience and kindness for ourselves because we know our own faults and delusions, how many times we have failed, and harmed ourselves and others so much better than we know the faults of others. We are closest to ourselves.

This may be why we Westerners have so much difficulty being kind to ourselves. Often I've been surprised to find the nicest, gentlest people, treating themselves alone harshly. But kindness and compassion for oneself is so necessary.

Ani Tenzin Palmo said, 'Treat yourself as you would treat your dearest friend. Speak to yourself words you would speak to someone you really cared for.'

And Lama Yeshe, 'Treat yourself with kindness. If you are kind to yourself, you will be kind to others.'

This is the root, I think, of not harboring enmity, not even a little, towards others. We can understand how hard it is to be a human being, to struggle and to suffer, to be unaware and deluded, to be afflicted and to act out of that, and all the problems it has caused ourselves and others.

Uchiyama Roshi made this outrageous sounding statement 'Everything I encounter is my own life'. It sounds off the charts, until you think about it in light of one's very own life. It takes a depth of committed contemplative practice, for sure, to arrive at this kind of insight, but, there it is.

Seeing our own faults, in light of what we could be, how can we not repent right then and there and vow to do better?, and at the same time, how can we not respond to others' suffering with compassion? Doing so starts within us.

That root of kindness and understanding, no longer using the word 'forgiveness' ('nothing to forgive'), that root needs to be deep in us, to that the shade and fruit we offer to others can be real, profound, and abundant.

Seeing and understanding the source of problems in our lives, and not giving rise to anger, is not something that happens once, like flipping a light switch (except perhaps for a very few, very ripe individuals). To get to that level, so that, all throughout our knowing, we can say, ‘How can I be angry at them? – they’re a sentient being’, this takes both time, and the intelligent application of our best discernment of causes and their results, and of compassion.

To fully free ourselves of even the last remnants of wrong view and afflictive emotions, such as anger, almost all of the time is a gradual process of learning, looking again and again, and integrating that realization.

May it be so for all of us.

Loving your enemies – returning good for harm

for Dom Laurence Freedman,

by Jason Espada

The idea of responding to being insulted or abused with non-reactivity, and then even with love doesn't come along in Buddhist practice until what they would call an advanced stage. By contrast, it's right there, plainly spoken in the Christian teaching, as loving one's enemies.

To me, there's something beautiful about this, in that the goal, of having a universal kindness and goodwill is taught by Jesus right from the beginning in Christianity. At the same time, there's a great benefit to having a step by step method to work with, to cultivate such love, that would otherwise seem unapproachable. It's like having a map through the terrain to where we would go.

We hear the ideal in the Scriptures,

*Love your enemies,  
bless those who curse you,  
do good to those who hate you,  
and pray for those who spitefully use  
and abuse you*

*only then can you be called children of your heavenly Father...*

and

*For he makes the sun to rise on the good and evil alike, and sends rain on both the innocent and the wicked.*

*If you love only those who love you,  
what reward can you expect? Even the tax collectors do as much as that.*

*and if you greet only your brothers, what is so special about that? Even the heathens do as much.*

*There must be no limit to your goodness, as your heavenly Father's goodness knows no bounds.*

These can be so inspiring to think about. Or, sometimes, and for many, this can seem impossible. *How does one actually go about getting to that state? How does a person develop to the point where they can love all equally, even those who cause harm to them or to their loved ones?*

I think that Buddhism has something truly significant to offer here, as it has teachings that lay out the stages of development of such an all embracing love. It's as if the two Traditions are mighty rivers, joining together to point to the goal, and the method of arriving there. Magnificent!

The metta teachings lay out five general categories for the gradual cultivation of loving kindness. They begin with oneself, and then those friendly towards us, including family, benefactors and teachers. The third and fourth categories are those of the neutral persons, or those not known to us personally, and those who are hostile to us, sometimes called the category of the difficult person.

Taking a step by step approach, we start the intentional cultivation of the quality of loving kindness with whoever is easiest for us, and go from there. In metta practice, it's only after a person has developed some of that pure quality of care and genuine well wishing for these four different categories of people that they arrive at the fifth, which is the cultivation of loving kindness towards all beings, a true universal love. Before that, it's taught, there's still bias, indifference, or even aversion to be overcome.

Each of these different groups are a rich field of inquiry and investigation. Each one has a place, it would seem, in the progress towards universal concern and active care.

In the West, especially today, it's so clear that many people need to develop more kindness and compassion for themselves. Surprisingly, some of the nicest people we know judge and treat themselves quite harshly. There are many reasons we should be good to ourselves, but here, in the context of developing metta, I'll just mention a few.

When we say, ‘do to others as you would have them do to you’ – how would we know the wish that others have for themselves, for happiness, safety, and peace, unless we were in touch with that in ourselves? And this is not a one time thing to be glimpsed, or just understood intellectually. We can see how it is, that, when we are in touch with our own tender selves, through a practice of meditation, or some other way to be closely aware of how we are feeling inside, then naturally we are more considerate of others we’re in contact with. We know what it is to be a human being, and we can’t help but meet them also as fellow travellers here.

A second reason for developing greater kindness towards ourselves is that it allows us to settle down easily in our meditation. When we’re comfortable with ourselves, which is one of the results of this meditation, we can be at ease physically, and in our mind and heart.

Metta also brings joy, and clarity and brightness to the mind. Any further study or development we then undertake goes smoothly.

Just to mention one more reason for developing our capacity for kindness towards ourselves relates to the theme of this paper, that of extending love even to those who are hostile towards us. With any type of consistent meditation practice we do, there are going to be ups and downs – good days and days when nothing seems to work. That’s when we need for love to come up in us as compassion, gentleness, and even an greater care than before.

Life can be hard, so, what to do? When we really do see our confusion, our impatience, and our mistakes and shortcomings, how can we hold all this? This is the real test and measure of our gradual progress. Here, as with the other categories, as we go, naturally, we find our limitations, and, right there is where we can take the next step, and the next. Right there is where we can work. All this takes patience, and persistence, but it is entirely worthwhile.

The ‘friend’ category too adds something unique to the progress of developing love. We start with those closest to us, although sometimes it’s recommended that we choose a person with whom we have an uncomplicated relationship. There’s a good reason for this, in that with them we can feel our simple, heart-felt love for another. It is pure.

There's something to be said though as well here for working with those closest to us in the first place, even if the relationship is more complex. We learn love in this matrix of family. The unconditional love of a mother or father, sibling or other close relative has a reliable, enduring quality to it that we may not find so readily in our friendships.

This is the ideal, of course, and there's a lot of variety in how people's family relationships have turned out. The method is clear about this – we can experiment and choose whoever is easiest to feel gratitude towards, and are happy to hold in our mind with thoughts of good will.

Sometimes we can then go back and forth, creatively using the method of cultivating metta, as it is suggested we do. It's interesting to experiment here as well. The idea is to find that feeling of easy, genuine good will, and then to direct it to ourselves, family and friends, benefactors and teachers, and then perhaps back to ourselves again.

When we have developed the sense of good will towards a few of our close friends, we extend that also to those we are less close to, and then to those we don't know. The saying of Jesus spells it out clearly for us:

*If you love only those who love you,  
what reward can you expect? Even the tax collectors do as much as that.*

*and if you greet only your brothers, what is so special about that? Even the heathens do as much.*

In the Buddhist approach, there's the use reasoning in times of reflection, which I think is implied in the above passage. When we turn to our less-close friends, and then to those we don't know (sometimes called the 'neutral person' category) we reflect on how they are like ourselves, and like our close friends and family members, in that they too want only happiness, and not the slightest suffering.

Just like ourselves, they too want to be appreciated, and to feel that they belong. They suffer, even as we do, from having bodies that are sometimes not too reliable, from moods that can overtake them, from loneliness, fears, and so on. They too appreciate it when someone is kind to them, and when they meet with success in their lives.

We can see how this builds. From ourselves, or someone it's easy to feel loving kindness towards, to those we are close to, and then gradually to those we don't know as well.

They suggest we choose specific people to represent this category, of someone we don't know personally, and cultivate good will towards them. It's only slightly a problem that, after a while, we will feel genuine, spontaneous kindness well up when we think of them. It just means we have to look for someone else we may have overlooked in the past, or not taken into consideration. Likely, there will be plenty to discover.

Only after cultivating in this way is the general category of enemy, or difficult person introduced, and even then, within this group, we are advised to go step by step.

We can, and often do want to start with the difficult category – and even the most difficult person – the one who has caused us, or someone close to us the most suffering. Though we can try to go directly for developing kindness for that person, it's not recommended, because it's not usually effective. In fact, this is where we meet that 'no, it is impossible' feeling. It means that, though we have a good aim in mind, we're going about it in the wrong way – too directly, instead of step by step. This is like trying to go up a mountain without using the path. We might just look up and say, 'no way'.

There is something organic about the development of love. Some people have a lot of it already, and so, even when they meet with some difficult person, or situation, they can respond from their abundant inner resources of generosity, patience, and kindness. Most of us though, will have to find our way there gradually.

Within the category of difficult person, again, there are degrees we can work with, like with lifting weights, or developing a skill, such as playing music.

I learned some things in classical music study that apply here. In classical training, they say that 'slow is fast', meaning that careful, attentive practice will get us to our goal in the most effective way. There is also the tradition, in music pedagogy, of training progressively with studies, so that the more difficult techniques can gradually be mastered. With this under their belt, a person can then play pretty much anything they want.

It's much the same way in cultivating metta for the difficult person, or situation. Standing in line at the bank, or in traffic, are usual ones I can point to, that has no one to blame, in particular, but that gives us some opportunity to develop even a bit more patience, respect for others, and goodwill as we're standing, or idling there.

There are times also when we may feel like our friends or family are not there for us, or have been unkind in some way. Forgiving and letting go of any feelings of recrimination is maybe easiest with this group, because after all, they have done so much for us. Again, we start with those for whom it is easiest for us to let go of past perceived wrongs, and renew the relationship. Then we can gradually extend that skill we've developed.

It's useful, maybe even essential, to include ourselves in the so called difficult person category. There will definitely be times when being with ourselves is not easy – for whatever reason. It could be an uncomfortable feeling in the body, or some difficult feeling, such as anger or irritation that has arisen.

Taking it further, when we look into our lives, we can see how much we need acceptance, kindness, tolerance and forgiveness. That is the basis for extending it to others.

*'Let he who is without sin cast the first stone'* and so on.

Grace and barbarity

I've been thinking lately of some of the Christian terms, such as sin and salvation, and especially of grace. It seems we don't have an equivalent for grace in Buddhism, although I do sense it there as well.

We can talk about karma, and look at it as a kind of cosmic justice – in that wrong actions bring suffering with it, but when it comes to the love we receive, and share with others, it seems to me that this is something we can't begin to measure out, or say is deserved, or not deserved.

Love seems to me to be a gift, the supreme gift, that trumps even cruelty, barbarity, and injustice. It 'keeps no account of wrongdoing', and it has the capacity to wipe the slate clean, so we can begin again.

How can we even start to measure something like this? It is truly radical, and of another order altogether from what's bargained back and forth in our so-common, selfish relationships.

The love that is cultivated step by step, following its organic development, can reach the stage where even those who are inimical towards us are treated with kindness in return.

The term 'enemies', as in 'love your enemies', I think of these days as some pretty clever marketing, designed to get our attention. After all, if someone is our enemy, by definition, they are someone we don't love, and probably even someone we hate back in turn. Isn't that the way it is? It's clear, after some reflection, this is saying that, from our side, not to have enemies. It's about how we hold this person who is threatening, or abusing us, or someone we feel close to.

Do we see them as evil? As irredeemable? Maybe we do if we have the notion of 'unpardonable sin', or 'original sin' or 'eternal damnation'. In Buddhism though, the whole group of those who cause harm is viewed differently, and in a way that can be worked with much more effectively, for all our sake.

First, we don't assert original sin, but rather original goodness, or purity, called in teachings called our Buddha Nature, (or Divine Nature) that is the basis for the potential for change. If we don't see this, or at least acknowledge it as a possibility, then those who are doing wrong will be seen as always being the way they are, with no chance of change. Then of course, what choice would we have other than to set ourselves in opposition to them forever? But seeing the potential for change, we're not so set in our attitude towards those who are doing harm. We're more optimistic, based on what's taught, and also something that we can know in ourselves.

Secondly, when dealing with the difficult person, the greed and anger people show comes from ignorance. They may be powerful, or in a position of authority, but they are no less playing out the very same dynamic we find in ourselves, and in those who give us a hard time in our every day lives.

This doesn't mean we don't get out of their way, or defend ourselves or our loved ones, not by any means, but the whole context of what we are doing

changes when we see these two points – that the harm people would cause comes from their ignorance, and, that this can change. Now we are ready, I think, for loving even our enemies, or those who or those who are hostile towards us.

### Nazis and Jews

I know it comes up so often as an example of how it is impossible to return good for harm, that it may illustrate the principles at work to use the example of what happened mid twentieth century, as the National Socialists in Germany set themselves against the entire Jewish people.

The idea of these groups seem so set in our minds. The moral lessons that seem so clear cut to many often include the implied idea that it is impossible to love some individuals, or groups of people, and, in fact, it would be foolish to do so, and cruel to ask another to, as well.

These days, we can probably substitute the Jewish people and the Palestineans, or Klan members and blacks in the South in the 1960's. {or the Japanese in China in the Second World War; the Tutsis and the Hutus in Ruwanda, or the US military and the Native population here}.

Looking back we can ask, in every case, have there been former Nazi's or Klan members, or others who have changed their views, or regretted their actions? Haven't some racists overcome their prejudice?, We all know that some have, and, if this is so, then what does that tell us about all those who committed such crimes? Two things: *that they were deeply ignorant, and, that they had the potential for change.*

Ultimately not taking sides, there is hope for the future. How do you not take sides when good and evil are so obvious? You do it by regarding humanity as one; one in noble birth and heritage; one in our sacred destiny, or divine potential. The mind that sees this is far from the mind of racism, or class superiority, or exploitation, and this is exactly what is needed. It is true medicine, and sustenance for all our days.

In the end, looking back, what I can say is that 'these are things that were done to the people of my own human family', and 'these are things that were done *by* the people of my same human family - '

May everyone here awaken from such ignorance, and may I be a cause of that!

To dial it back some, because we can probably continue to judge the wrongdoers in history without an end to it, we can look at whatever instances of wrong have been done by our own country, by ourselves, or to ourselves.

Where does forgiveness in each case come from? It comes from understanding, and from the intention to move forward, knowing how much better we can be, and how much more we can do for one another, when our lives are based on what has true, eternal value, based, namely, on love.

In the book, *Mount Analogue*, the narrator says we should keep in mind the summit, the goal of our journey, while watching the step that is right in front of us, and that while keeping to the path, we shouldn't lose sight of the goal.

The immediate principle in metta practice is that we start with whatever is easiest for us, and go on from there. There is another key piece to this, however, that that is, that we always start wherever we are just now. This gives us plenty of room for our difficulties, and is the most encouraging aspect of it for me. Such a high aim as universal love and compassion is achievable, and this should inspire us. On some days though, may we look up, or look at our own mind, or at the world we live in, and get discouraged at how far we are from any kind of ideal at all.

This essential principle, of always starting from wherever we are now keeps us on course. We don't get carried away if we seem to be making progress on some days, or dejected if we slow down, or stop or even seem to go of course for a while. I heard this phrase, that, when walking someplace, resting does not mean turning back.

I like very much that Jesus spoke of going beyond our own family, or clan, when developing our love. This is surely something that is possible, if we set ourselves to go in that direction. Step by step we can get there.

I feel a great enthusiasm when I so much as get a glimpse at this possibility. I try not to get too carried away with it, after all, since there is still so much to be done here. Still, once in a while, to go to the mountain top, to take in

the great vista, and fill our lungs with clean air, this is something we will surely carry with us everywhere we go.

Universal love, the ground and culmination of our practice

When we first hear the ideal of universal love for all beings, our reaction might be one of disbelief, or doubt that we could ever approach such a state. We have a hard enough time even liking, let alone loving ourselves, and getting along with just our friends, family and co-workers is a challenge too. Universal love? Come on! We could also have the response of holding this as an ideal and then going no further with it. It can stay just as a concept, and become an ego trip.

In the Metta Sutta, the Buddha taught

*'just as a mother loves and cherishes her child, her only child,  
just so we should cultivate boundless love to offer to all...*

and,

*'our love will know no obstacles...*

All religions teach this in some form, and what the Buddhist tradition contributes is the method to gradually develop such love. This is something that doesn't happen by itself, or by just wishing it to be so, or without a cause, and that cause is the meditation that brings real love more and more into our relationships.

Surprisingly, there is something of universal love in us right from the beginning of practice. This is the ground of our common humanity, our divine nature, also called our Buddha Nature. We may not believe in it, and may doubt that we can love even ourselves, let alone another person, or all, but that potential exists in all of us, waiting to be known and revealed.

Right from the beginning, it's this potential that we tap into when we start anywhere to have metta for self and others. As metta increases in our lives, directing pure well wishing to family, friends, and the strangers we see, it gets easier in all ways. This is because this love is one.

Love reveals our true identity, and our real family. As we practice this kind of meditation more and more, our sense of identity shifts from the surface, history, form, and culture, to the more universal ground, to what is fundamental to us all.

We find we share a common heritage with those in this, and in other places and times.

I remember one teaching where Thich Nhat Hanh was saying how a Frenchman, standing on French soil, could also see himself as standing on the continent of Europe, or on the one earth we all share, and if he was able to do so, his feeling of who he was would grow by that much. So it is with metta. We don't suddenly lose our relative identity, but we can find that it is held within a greater truth, and that is what we more truly are. This is the ground we draw from all along the way in our practice.

How can we tell if we're really progressing towards an all-embracing, universal love? I think the signs are that we gradually become more respectful, patient, encouraging, and supportive of ourselves and others. We can sense a greater consistency in our responses to our own problems, and to what we meet in other people. We're not as up and down, sometimes accepting and at other times negligent or aversive.

What's more, we can see the quality of how we are with our own inner state, and with others improve gradually, step by step. There's more joy, and forgiveness; and generosity flows more readily, and in greater abundance. This is bound to be inspiring to see and think about. It leads us to wonder what more we are capable of. The ideal of universal love, at last, can start to seem conceivable.

Love would have us go carefully, not hurry, and not leave out any steps. Though the ideal is so appealing, and so much what we need in our lives and in the world, there's the danger that we may gloss over the inner work that needs to be done to arrive at a real love for all. The line, '*our love will know no obstacles*' is significant here because it points to something we have all had experience with, of becoming more able to love, and it is onward leading. Where there was once some keeping back, a change took place, even slightly, and we were able to take the next step, and the next in loving. If we go gradually, and continue in the practice, like a river, metta will find its way to the ocean. We will arrive at all embracing, universal love.

The joy of this ideal is always there, no doubt, but it is tempered with the truth that it takes dedicated work to get there. To remove the obstacles to love, we need a deep familiarity with its practice.

That universal love is both the ground and the goal of spiritual practice for us all is really something to honor and celebrate.

Hafiz says:

*a divine seed,  
the crown of destiny,  
is hidden and sown  
on an ancient fertile plain  
you hold the title to...*

and Rumi adds:

*you are the secret treasure bearer,  
and always have been...*

*If you knew yourself for even one moment,  
if you could just glimpse  
your most beautiful face,  
maybe you wouldn't slumber so deeply  
in that house of clay.*

*Why not move  
into your house of joy...*

When love is real, it has the very texture of your life: inclusive, pragmatic, creative and adaptive. It is the well-spring of all the good we do. It is what brings hope when it's not yet light outside.

This is what awakens gratitude and celebration in us. Everywhere there is love, good things happen. The world delights right along with us, and we find we have all we need and more to live well, and to share our lives richly.

Culture, religion, class, gender, age, history, political party, accepting this, rejecting that – so many ways we build walls. Metta instead builds bridges, until we arrive at the joy of knowing how we are made for each other. Something so fundamental as this needs to be entered into to be understood, but when we do, we find we have a life giving vision, strength, courage and joy.

We can say that somehow, love is the invitation, and it's also the road we take to get there. There's a journey to be taken, to be sure, and arriving, even for a time, we find this same love revealing the deepest truth, and being universally understood. To whatever extent we know this, our living then becomes the expression of this truth, an overflowing joy, and righteousness. There is peace, and satisfaction, light, and increasing generosity.

May we all realize this our true home

May we awaken and learn well to be practical and inclusive in our loving, so that, in the words of the Metta Sutta,

*Whatever living beings there may be;  
Whether they are weak or strong, omitting none,  
The great or the mighty, medium, short or small,  
The seen and the unseen,  
Those living near and far away,  
Those born and to-be-born—  
May all beings be at their ease!*