

The Metta Sutta

Metta is a Pali word that describes a pervasive open-hearted attitude of loving-kindness, which we can cultivate as our essential posture as we encounter the world. This applies to the world around us, to be sure, and also to the inner world of our experiences; our feelings, memories, emotions and thoughts.

When fully established and refined its meaning differs significantly from such terms as “love” and “friendliness” as we commonly use them. It differs in being free of both taints and constraints. Metta knows no self-interest, and possesses no hint of exclusionary emphasis or bias. It is, at its fullest, a universal posture. It pervades the entirety of our being and is directed at the entire universe – which is to say, paradoxically, that it is completely *undirected*.

This will become clear as we closely examine the Metta Sutta, the Buddha’s core teaching of metta. The point can be missed, however, by those who are first exposed to metta through Metta Practice as it is commonly taught these days. I say this because metta practice is commonly taught as distinct and limited, when in fact it is best understood as a preparatory training; vital, to be sure, and at the same time *mere staging* for the extensive relaxing of the mind and opening of the heart which is metta’s full reach. That is, while traditional metta practice may be very rewarding, I urge you to not view it as an end to itself.

This standard Metta practice is taught as a loosely guided meditation. It is very rich, and most certainly deserves – and will be given - a through elaboration and discussion. And yet it is a transitional practice, designed to be transcended and transcendent. Especially because it is rich, I feel it important we begin by first considering the metta sutta itself. This will take us straight to the very heart of what metta is about. Coming to know this, we will be better able to fully appreciate the rewards of the training practice, and the way it serves to move us past itself, without becoming distracted or confused by its richness.

There are many translations of the Metta Sutta, easily found on the internet via a browser search. The version I will use here is:

"Karaniya Metta Sutta: The Buddha's Words on Loving-Kindness" (Sn 1.8), translated from the Pali by The Amaravati Sangha. Access to Insight (BCBS Edition), 2 November 2013,
<http://www.accesstoinsight.org/tipitaka/kn/snp/snp.1.08.amar.html> .

The sutta is not long, but I believe you will find it rich, sweet, powerful and poetic. Please read through this in its (brief) entirety. If you wish, please read it a

number of times. You may find certain phrases or sections stand out on different readings, and/or take on different or additional meanings.

Here we go!

This is what should be done
 By one who is skilled in goodness,
And who knows 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 or 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 upwards to the skies,
And downwards to the depths;
 Outwards 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.

In my own practice, I found myself coming back to the sutta so often I decided to memorize it. I reasoned that in this way I would have it with me, and could reflect on it or recite it to myself (or, occasionally, to others) whenever I wished. I've found this very rewarding and recommend it highly.

One of the benefits of the memorizing process was that I got to reflect deeply on the precise wording of each phrase. This led to considering why each thing was said in the precise manner chosen, and how these pieces fit together into a whole. This consideration made the meaning of the sutta much clearer to me, and I came to see both the individual elements and the rhetorical flow as these fit and work together, brilliantly.

So, what I'd like to do next, given that you are now at least briefly acquainted with the sutta, is to offer a line-by-line commentary on the sutta, to share with you what I believe I have gleaned from these reflections.

I am not suggesting these thoughts are necessarily definitive. The Buddha pointed out that even his teachings have limitations. They are, he said, like a finger pointing to the moon. For persons who might not know where to look, and especially for those who might never have seen the moon before, such pointing might be extremely helpful, even essential, to discovery and recognition. But he cautioned that no one should mistake the finger for the moon.

In the same spirit I most certainly hope you find my annotations helpful; but encourage you to question whatever you like, see if they make sense to you, and by all means delve and reflect on the sutta for yourself – in this or other translations, or even, should your ardor take you in this direction, by learning Pali and studying it from a more primal source.

More cautions: I chose to delve into a particular translation, which means that I may have been penetrating the thoughts and linguistic choices of a particular group of translators (since this was a group effort) comingled with or overlaying those of the Buddha. And, of course, I am a particular person whose mind has its own blend of gifts and limitations. So, there are possible distortions arising from both source and process. These are pitfalls, to be sure, but I don't see a simple path around them. All I can do is assure you I have done my best, as I am sure the translators did as well. So, my bottom line, as I launch forth, is to offer you a borrowed 12-step slogan: *Take what you like, and leave the rest.*

That said, perhaps tediously, off we go!

**This is what should be done
By one who is skilled in goodness,
And who knows the path of peace:**

It would be easy blow right past this introductory line. Superficially it sounds like a ritualistic invocation. But please, look deeper.

First, the Buddha is telling us that this – i.e., the whole sutta – is not *just* a reading, a teaching, a reflection, or even a poem – it is meant to be actual practice instruction; things “to be *done*”. Don’t just read it, reflect on it, or even savor and appreciate its beauty; put it to work. ***Do it!***

But as you carefully read further, you’ll see he’s not saying it’s for everyone. Rather it’s meant for persons who are, first, *skilled in goodness*. Whatever does *that* mean?

Many of us think of goodness as an inherent trait, a dyed-in-the wool characteristic of our being. You may, for example, like to think of yourself a good person; good through and through, born that way; while other, lesser beings, are, well, weak or simply bad. Nothing to be done about it. That’s certainly one view of goodness, but it’s not The Buddha’s.

To The Buddha, goodness is a skill-set; something we can think about, study, practice and refine. Through such effort, one can – all of us can - become *skilled in goodness*. Doing so, mastering this to the point where goodness comprises a wholesome set of both conditioned and mindful responses to the various choices life presents us, is taught as the first major stage of the spiritual journey.

Morality, or ethics, is one of three broad, interrelated categories for training and purifying the mind. The Buddha teaches these as a means of minimizing and ultimately being delivered from suffering. The three are Wisdom, Morality and Mental discipline. Morality is a broad category, comprising three of the elements taught as the Noble Eightfold Path: Right Occupation, Right Conduct, and Right Speech. For “householders” (non-monastics), which is to say for most of us, the core teaching of Right Conduct is *The Five Precepts*. Appendix 1 presents a copy of these; as well as a version of Thich Nhat Hanh’s *Five Mindfulness Trainings*, an exquisite and expansive elaboration of the precepts, offered for deep reflection and training.

This first sentence of the sutta clearly says that mastering the skills associated with goodness, at the very least to a degree, is a prerequisite for understanding and

practicing metta. And, at the same time, it indicates that doing precisely this – learning about and practicing metta - is what we should do after attaining this core mastery.

In a very real sense, then, this portion of the first line declares that metta is not a beginner's teaching. Rather, it can be seen as a second major step on a journey that begins with first developing a base of ethics and morality; a base that resonates in our thinking and shows forth in our actions.

I see this as a subtle invitation for us to consider where we stand regarding morality. That is, do we meet the clearly stated criteria for moving on with this teaching? Are we *skilled in goodness*?

If we are not familiar with *The Five Precepts and The Five Mindfulness Trainings*, perhaps we really should pause to go back and cover this material, and then consider where we stand with it. We don't need to be perfect – seriously, how could we be? – but if we obviously fall short of being ethical in our actions, or if on examination we see our morality stems exclusively from a relationship to external authority – hope for reward or fear of punishment – we might want to focus on this topic and cultivate further development on this crucial first level before delving deeply into metta.

This may sound harsh, and I don't mean it to. Indeed, the fact that you are studying this sutta suggests you have been looking into Buddhism for some time, and you probably would not be *here* without have passed through *there* already. But, I do feel the sutta posits an ethical base as a prerequisite, at its very outset. Without this, the sutta certainly will not bring us to harm, but our appreciation of it will likely be only an intellectual exercise. Both it and we can be much more than that!

A second prerequisite - still in the first line! - is that he (we) “knows the path of peace”. This too is an interesting turn of phrase. The sutta doesn't say we need to know (i.e., have attained) peace directly, but rather that at this stage of our development we must merely know the path to it. This treats peace is something of a destination. It may be ahead of us, possibly even far distant; but the good news is that there is a recognizable path to it, and that we can know something of that path even if we haven't yet traveled it.

So, the sutta begins by saying there is something we must do, a journey we are able to take once we have attained a degree of ethical clarity as *de facto* preparation, and that we must have at least some sense of the direction in which we will be traveling. The journey on which the study and practice of metta practice will take us is, in fact, that very path of peace.

Let them be able and upright,

This is straightforward, and at the same time sets a pattern we see throughout in this section. The first key word seems clear, but in fact may be so simply worded that our understanding of it is subject to our conditioned, habitual patterns of understanding. The second term helps refine and clarify that understanding.

So, here, the word *able* implies skillfulness and capability. We may infer, correctly I believe, that this points back to our understanding ethics and conducting ourselves in a morally straight manner. But the second term, upright, refines this by suggesting we do this with dignity. We could be skillful in a hunched over, nose to the grindstone manner. We could be fiercely ethical, which is to say puritanical or self-righteous; but the Buddha is suggesting we approach it with a quality of nobility.

Straightforward and gentle in speech,

This clearly brings in the topic of Right Speech. Again, the first word establishes the key thrust, while the second helps assure our actions arise from wholesome intention.

Truthfulness is the foremost characteristic of Right Speech. This is clearly stated in many places throughout the Buddha's discourses. Here, he counsels his son:

... Rahula, when anyone feels no shame in telling a deliberate lie, there is no evil, I tell you, he will not do. Thus, Rahula, you should train yourself, 'I will not tell a deliberate lie even in jest.' – MN 61

At the same time, in the absence of Right View – when we are insensitive or caught in greed, hatred or delusion - truth can be used as a weapon. Truth can confront, embarrass and shame individuals; divide and disrupt the harmony of groups. So, we should speak in a manner that is gentle and kind – sympathetic to others' needs, compassionate for whatever suffering we see.

It *is* possible to be both truthful and gentle, and it is tremendously worthwhile to find the middle path that incorporates both virtues.

Humble and not conceited,

What do we accomplish through bragging and arrogance? These can intimidate, or inspire defiance and rebellion. Neither is remotely wholesome, for others or ourselves. So, the Buddha, while telling us to be “able and upright” cautions us to avoid being be prideful and overbearing about it.

The phrase “not conceited” may seem like merely another way of repeating the term “humble”, but on examination is far more rich. To the Buddha the word conceit describes any self-view with which we might be identified, attached, invested in sustaining or “selling” to others, and so forth. Of course, a conceit might be a puffed-up and proud self-view. But it equally well might be any of a vast range of others, including those with negative pride; such as the sense of being a martyr, victim, survivor, or simply being “worthless”. A conceit is *any fixed view of self*, regardless of the qualities associated with that view: be it “better”, “worse”, or even “no different” than.

So, when the Buddha says “humble and not conceited”, the message is rather expansive; but most assuredly is warning us not to adopt humility as an affectation. Avoid pride, even when wrapped in worn burlap.

Contented and easily satisfied,

I find this line to be one of many pleasant surprises in this sutta. Did you see contentment coming? Was is an obvious next element, or step? Not to me, and even with many repeated readings I enjoy letting this touch me as a little surprise!

I believe the Buddha is suggesting here that contentment should be our default position in life; how we meet the “worldly winds” that inevitably buffet us about. He is not speaking here of shallow or highly conditional forms of contentment – neither the hazy bliss born of ignorance and denial, nor the fleeting sense of fulfillment we feel after stuffing ourselves at a banquet (just before discomfort and drowsiness set in). Rather, he’s speaking of the wise, fully informed contentment we call equanimity; that understands that life’s ups and down are integral to it.

We may not welcome every event and experience equally. We may even work ardently to improve the things we can. But, we know that all things have their place in this world. We strive to cultivate peace and ease in living with their presence, and with their ebb and flow.

Equally important, when we find ourselves dealing with disappointment and disharmony, when we drift or are yanked away from contentment, we find our way back to it, with a quality of tolerance, understanding and resilience. Things don’t have to be restored to a state of absolute perfection for us to resume living from our default position of contentment. When frustrated, we are “easily satisfied”.

Unburdened with duties and frugal in their ways.

I see two meanings in the first of these phrases. At its most extreme – where duty itself is minimized or abandoned - there is reassurance for the monastic, and encouragement for the disenchanting householder to “go forth into homelessness”; to take vows and become a monk or nun. Perhaps the surest way to unburden yourself from duties is to have none. But is this extreme interpretation realistic, even for most monastics? One can simplify one’s obligations, to be sure; but can these be eliminated entirely?

The other interpretation makes more sense, I believe, for the vast majority of us; who choose to maintain a household life but wish to purify and harmonize it to the very best of our ability. For this “us” there is the idea of honoring and fulfilling our duties, but doing so with mind and heart free from any sense of burden. We embrace these willingly, wisely appreciating our role in the order of things, free from envy or others and resentment for our challenging lot.

To complete this line, of verse and thought, we have the additional idea of being frugal. The Buddha, as we know, promoted a practice that finds a “middle path” between extremes of over-indulgence and ascetic austerities. So *frugal* here refers not to embracing deprivation, but to living a life of modest means and mindful consumption.

Frugality in this sense supports the ethos of being unburdened with duty. A lifestyle of expansive consumption often requires major and near constant effort to maintain. In many cases it drives people to desperate, even unethical measures to sustain themselves and their loved ones. Consumerism, as a driver of the economy and as an element of personal identity, derives from discontent and a sense of deprivation. The Buddha advises us to “right size” our household to fit sustainable means.

Peaceful and calm and wise and skillful,

Approaching the end of this first section, which describes the state of being we should cultivate and sustain to move into the specifics of loving-kindness as a practice, these two paired phrases suggest a wholesome progression from attitude and outlook to state of being. An outlook inclined towards peace leads to our being calm. An outlook that embraces wisdom promotes our becoming skillful in our actions.

Not proud or demanding in nature.

This of course alludes back to the topics of humility and avoiding conceit, only here the Buddha describes these in terms of how these selfless states would manifest in our actions, and how we treat others.

**Let them not do the slightest thing
That the wise would later reprove.**

This sentence concludes the section by invoking the presence of guiding mentors and wise friends, urging us on in embracing this high but gentle morality by reminding us we are not alone. To be sure, it harkens to the setting of monastics and “noble companions”, where a senior monk is charged with interpreting the teachings and, when necessary, pointing out to the novice when and where s/he strays from the path.

“Reproving” in this sense is not condemning but is, rather, akin to a blacksmith tempering a blade to make it stronger and more resilient. Moreover, the Buddha is encouraging practitioners – us – to be the guardians of our own practice, so that there be no need for such reproof.

It may be stretching the point, but it occurs to me that when he speaks of “the wise” the Buddha may be pointing to our future, hopefully perfected selves, looking back at today’s actions. In a sense, he may be saying, “Don’t do anything today that might make you uncomfortable tomorrow.” Just a thought.

**Wishing: In gladness and in safety,
May all beings be at ease.**

Here we begin the sutta’s second major section, which elaborates on wholesome, metta-based intentions. This begins with a simple, profoundly gentle and vastly expansive thought; wishing ease - a pervasive sense of well-being and comfort - to all.

Of interest to students of contemporary psychology, the Buddha describes kind thoughts as originating, or flowing from, “gladness” and “safety”. This harkens to Abraham Maslow’s theory of the hierarchy of needs, which argues that certain essential human needs must be met – ideally will have a developmental history of being met – before we can function on higher, more “self-actualized” and spiritual level. That is, people living in painful scarcity cannot be expected to act out a spirit of generosity. People whose being is physically and emotionally threatened will not be trusting and care free; nor are they in a good position to wish this for others. So, while this section begins propelling us forward into wishing kind thoughts for others, the Buddha takes just a moment to ground us properly; by describing the state of being we must be “coming from” for this to really flow. The gladness and safety of which he speaks resonates with to his wanting us to be “contented, and easily satisfied”.

**Whatever living beings there may be;
Whether they are weak or strong, omitting none,**

The great or the mighty, medium, short or small,

Here, knowing the tendency of so many of us to resist the very expansiveness that is so essential to our spiritual growth, the Buddha elaborates – possibly with some humor but most assuredly with compassion – on what he means when he speak of “All”.

Perhaps the first thing to notice is that this kind wish is not to be restricted and held back to benefit only certain *special* people. In fact, it’s not limited to people at all! The Buddha here speaks of “all living beings”. He doesn’t even limit the offering to beings which scientists or others have catalogued; he speaks of ***whatever*** they may be!

Even after this, we may have a tendency to parse, to establish a hierarchy of interest or worth. So, he continues: wiping away not discernment, but judgements. That is, he notes and lists various differences, but doesn’t use the awareness of these distinctions – weak vs. strong, for example – to justify preference. “Whether they are ...” or are not; all they must be is living beings.

Ah, but then we come to a word that might offer the selfish mind, or the mind beset with thoughts of kindness as a limited resource, some escape from this universality: “omitting ...”! Perhaps the mind eagerly awaits the Buddha’s list of exceptions: the unworthy, the venal, the crawling things that bite us or spread disease. Surely, he will offer us some outs. But, then, how does he finish the thought? “... omitting ***none***.”

Darn!¹

The seen and the unseen,

This continues the elaboration of what the Buddha means when he speaks of *all* beings.

What are your thoughts about giving? Wishing that beings be at ease is like giving them a gift. And, if I’m giving something valuable away, surely it’s reasonable to know to whom I am giving it!

¹ As you read this and other suttas, there is a revealing mind game you can play. I call it “That’s Why He’s The Buddha!”. Here’s how you play: when you come to a rhetorical pause in the sutta, whether it’s a direct question the Buddha asks his followers (i.e., “There are four ways a person might do such and such. What four?”) or when you come across a key word that indicates the Buddha is about to explain or list something; pause and reflect on what you believe the Buddha will say next. When you have that worked out in your mind, continue reading or listening to the sutta, to see what he actually said. How close did your thoughts come to being in line with the Buddha’s? In my personal experience, I often don’t come very close; but, I find this a great way to shake myself free of my conditioned thinking – and my pride therein. Give it a try

But the Buddha wants us to let go of just such tendencies to discriminate, select, direct and control. So, he speaks of the “giving” to the unseen (and thus the completely unknown) as well as to those we see (and at least *tell* ourselves we know).

Note that the unseen may be unseen for several reasons. There may be obstacles between us and “them”; barriers of a physical nature to be sure – walls (how often do you contemplate the lives of those in retirement homes, orphanages, prisons, and so forth?), architectural barriers (in the U.S, how fully were our “mainstream” lives integrated with those of the handicapped, before the American’s With Disabilities Act began removing accessibility obstacles?) – and “soft” barriers, such as social class, economic status, education level, race, religion, ethnicity; and countless others.

In addition to barriers, there are those who are unseen because we cannot or do not choose to look. Can you open your heart to “the unseen”?

In addition to persons unseen, there is the matter of other beings? When we shop for food, for example, do we “see” the animals that have been bred, raised, slaughtered and antiseptically packaged (in appearance, if not reality) for our consumption? There are, additionally, birds, insects, microbes and the like, many literally too small to be seen with the naked eye, that populate our world; comprising ecological systems on which our very survival depends.

Can you open your heart, if not your eyes, to see these “unseen”? What do you give up when you pause to wish them well-being and ease? Can you open your heart to “the unseen”?

Those living near and far away

This is another simple set of criteria, but a very powerful one when truly considered. If kindness and generosity of spirit are limited resources, to whom shall we give them? It’s natural – certainly within the animal realm of existence – to “take care of our own”. We begin with ourselves, and then move outward, assuming supplies hold up, in small concentric circles. We roll generosity outward to include our immediate family, and then continue with the extended family and various social circles with which we have direct affiliation – perhaps our neighborhood, religious center, high school or college-mates, where we work, village, town or city, and so forth. What do we have left over for other groups, living in other locales, state, or even countries?

Those “far away” are really just another group of those “unseen”. Can you open your heart to “those far away”?

Those born and to-be-born

Ah, my favorite of this set.² Rhetorically, the preceding stanzas work with opposites; “seen” vs. “unseen”, “near” vs. “far away”. Looking for him to maintain this logical sequence, what do you think the Buddha will offer as an anthesis to “born”? The mind stumbles a little contemplating this. What is the opposite of “born”?

It’s hard to come up with a clean opposite in this case, but I believe the Buddha is being a little playful here; albeit with a grand purpose. Those “born” puts the mind in the realm of thinking about what is conducive to the well-being of those around us: how to care for them. This is totally well and good, of course, but consider the shift in thinking that occurs when we consider those “to-be born”. It moves us past thinking about immediate needs and direct care-taking, to considering the stewardship of creating, as best we can, an entire world of extended sustainability. It moves us into the realm of concern for the environment and world ecology. How can we, today, best care for future generations, from now until the end of time? Clearly, this consideration fills us with concern not just for future lives, but for the home in which these future lives will unfold; the planet.

This thinking, among other things, redefines frugality. We do not live modestly just to preserve our resources for our future needs. We live frugally to preserve our resources for the needs of all of those yet to come. This is the final thought that illuminates the closing iteration of this section of the sutta; the resounding and infinitely expansive wish:

May all beings be at ease!

**Let none deceive another,
Or despise any being in any state.**

With this couplet the sutta moves us from the internal realm of cultivating kindly intentions, to consider how we can purify our actual behavior towards each other – guiding us in how to actually bring about the universal ease and well-being for which we are encouraged to aspire.

This starts at an almost shockingly low level, by asking us to avoid manipulative, hateful behavior; and then to reject the emotions and thoughts we use to justify acting this way. Here the Buddha is asking us to dispense with any tendencies

² ... another good place for playing a round of “That’s Why He’s the Buddha.”

towards hypocrisy, and to recognize the deep levels of purification required for authentic metta practice.

How can we claim to truly wish blessings upon others if we are in fact treating them, any of them, badly? How can we fully open both mind and heart to *all*, if we despise *any*; any *groups*, any *individuals*, at any *time* and in any *settings, circumstances or states*? As much as renouncing hurtful behavior and hateful thought seems like a minimal “ask”, the expansiveness and universality of the extent of this charge is, on reflection, astounding!

But it points to a remarkable and obvious spiritual truth. If we are to be free, truly free, we cannot be constrained in any way. A person with only a wrist staked to the ground in an open field is just as imprisoned as someone completely walled-up in a dungeon. Despising anyone, even if only on a part-time basis, imprisons the spirit.

**Let none through anger or ill-will
Wish harm upon another.**

This couplet closes out this brief section on our actions towards others, shifting and extending the emphasis from the external – actions, such as deceiving others – to the internal realm of our intentions. Even *wishing* ill for others is harmful, if not for them then certainly for us; tightening and constricting both mind and heart.

Another somewhat subtle shift in this whole (albeit tiny) section is the reach of the wishes expressed. The Buddha is not simply telling us as individuals to avoid these harmful behaviors, nor does he limit this to those who are on the Path; he couches the thought as applicable to all. These have almost the flavor of commandments: “Let none ... [act thusly...!]” Or, rather than commandments, perhaps this section should be viewed as a continuation of the lengthier preceding section, as an extension or elaboration on the thought “May all beings be at ease”; as if to say “this is what it will take to bring this about.”

In any event, the universality of the wish has the flavor, or perhaps sets the stage for the later prominence, of the Bodhisattva aspiration; of wishing blessings and liberation for all (and, by extension, *by* all).

Stepping back from these musings, I think it’s clear that the sutta is saying that acting kindly towards others begins, at the very least, with abandoning thoughts and actions fed by ill will.

The next section moves us, gloriously and poetically, out of this profound yet mundane level of aspiration and attainment, into the realm of truly transcendent open-heartedness.

He begins with the vivid and highly accessible phrase:

**Even as a mother protects with her life
Her child, her only child,**

Here the Buddha immerses us in an archetype of what it means to hold something supremely precious and dear: the image of a mother completely dedicated to protecting the life of an only child.

Through this image we easily grasp the idea of preciousness, and the sense of specialness that justifies it to the mundane mind. There is only the one child, so *of course* it is held as special, and *of course* it needs to be protected. This only makes sense.

But the following phrase, which completes the thought, catches us with a dazzling shift in focus: from the one to the all.

**So with a boundless heart
Should one cherish all living beings;**

He would have us retain the sense of preciousness, but apply it not to our one child, or to any *one* anything; but apply it, instead, *to all of living creation!*

Let's step back and be honest here. The mind tends to rebel against the very idea of such a huge, transcendent shift. "This is way too much to ask! How can I focus on and then protect one being after another? You can't seriously ask me to extend an umbrella of protection to every living being, everywhere? That's too much to do!

Radiating kindness over the entire world:

Wait. What?

What's the Buddha getting at here? What is he suggesting?

How do we get from *cherishing* to *radiating*?

This is tricky to follow, especially for the craving-conditioned mind. We tend to approach the idea of cherishing by associating it with "having and holding." We think of it in terms of selecting, grasping and possessing. Cherishing, that is to say, is viewed as something we deliberately *do*.

In considering the idea of radiating, think of the sun. The sun radiates its heat and light, its essential energy, with no selectivity whatsoever. Its energy flows effortlessly outwards in every possible direction. It makes no effort to selecting, channel, guide or restrict its flow. It makes no choices, has no concern for who or

what is worthy to receive its outpouring. It holds nothing back from the undeserving. So, *all* of that energy is released, unfiltered, unattenuated. None of it is expended – shall we say *wasted* - on establishing influence or control.

This is the radical thought the Buddha would have us manifest: you cherish *all* by abandoning any consideration or second thoughts as to who or what is deserving, what rewards you will reap in return, how you will appear to others. You abandon all constraints and deliberations. You simply let loving-kindness flow out of you, mindlessly.

This frees the heart. Kindness ceases to be an action you perform, a manifestation of *doing*; and instead becomes an effortless and unrestrained expression of your *being*.

Where does this outpouring go? Who does it touch? How does it feel?

**Spreading upwards to the skies,
And downwards to the depths;
Outwards and unbounded,
Freed from hatred and ill-will.**

That's it! At the very heart of this teaching is the idea of liberating the heart from the "guidance and protection" of the self-preserving mind. Let your goodness shine forth, with no restraint or effort to limit or control its outpouring, its radiance.

To the mind afflicted with the hindrance of doubt, that whispers – or possibly even shouts – a concern that love and kindness are limited resources, that these must be guarded at all cost, held back lest they be exhausted; there is this simple response: the same openness that allows loving kindness to flow out, to all, allows it to flow in, from every quarter. To quote one of my own poems: "The universe is made of love, and you are part of that."

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

As the sutta approaches its conclusion this is a final reminder that, ultimately, this is not just a collection of pretty thoughts or poetic writings; this is practice instruction.

The Buddha cites the classical "four postures" to address the question of "when shall I practice these instructions?" Keep this in your mind, he says, whether you are in motion or being still, and whatever you are doing. In order to manifest in

our actions, these teachings must perfuse our intentions. Keep them in mind at all times.

The Buddha asks us to dedicate ourselves to arousing sustained effort to keep these transcendent teachings ever present in our mind. Make these your shelter, your home. And, know that the state of mind which you are embracing, and which will come to embrace you, is genuinely sublime.

**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.**

In the final thought of the sutta, The Buddha pulls us back and out of the personalized interior view of our thoughts, intentions and actions. He returns to the external view embraced in the opening section. He describes the liberated being he would have us be, first and foremost by characterizing them/us as liberated from attachment to views fixed.

Holding to fixed views is like looking out at the world from a narrow slit in the wall of a sealed chamber: you only get to see a single view, one perspective; and you only get that see even that limited view by never moving from your fixed position in front of that narrow slit. You not only fail to see the world in its full breadth and richness, you are essentially imprisoned. But by not holding to fixed views, you become free of that.

The practices espoused here are inherently purifying. They enrich our view of the world, eliminating the distorted filter and emphasis of specialness; which deludes us into exaggerating the value of some while denigrating all others. Seeing without this distortion gives us clarity, allowing us to appreciate the vast diversity that characterizes each and every person, object and experience. Knowing this, and seeing the constant arising and passing away of all things – pleasant, unpleasant, neutral – frees us from cravings – the vain struggle to alternately grasp and avoid what comes and goes in any event – and leaves us ... free.

This freedom is described as being “not born again into this world”, and expression you might find arcane and puzzling.

The idea here is that grasping and pushing away can come to define our life and the world we experience through it. Each action that manifests craving creates its own tortured subjective reality, however paradoxical that term may sound. It is, in a very authentic way, a creative act – albeit a negative one – and it is fair to describe this as being born into a world; a world of suffering born of delusion. This is the “this world” of which the Buddha speaks, the world of samsara.

Of course, those who embrace the idea of life-to-life rebirth will see this in the expression as well. The two interpretations are equally wholesome, and are compatible with each other. Regardless of which we favor, or perhaps we embrace both, we should be careful not to treat these thoughts as rewards, to drive our practice. Let this freedom come as a natural consequence of wholesome intention and skillful action, rather than making of it yet another object of craving – however refined and appealing it might be.

So, these are my thoughts on the Metta Sutta. I sincerely hope you find something of value, perhaps even inspiration, in them. I find it a truly radiant teaching. May you do so as well.

With metta,
Jon Yaffe
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Appendix – The Five Precepts & The Five Mindfulness Trainings

The Five Precepts

1. Abstain from taking life (non-harming) – cultivate a protective, compassionate view of life
2. Abstain from taking what is not given – cultivate generosity and respect towards others and self
3. Abstain from sexual misconduct – cultivate and protect the safety and integrity of those around us
4. Abstain from false speech – cultivate and honor the truth and speak with friendliness and compassion, to create well-being and unity for those around us.
5. Abstain from fermented drink that causes heedlessness – this extends to drugs and all forms of intoxicating stimulation

The Five Mindfulness Trainings

The First Mindfulness Training

Aware of the suffering caused by the destruction of life, I am committed to cultivating compassion—both for myself and for others. I am committed to learning ways to protect the lives of beings of the world. I am determined not to kill or to support any act of killing in the world, in my thinking, and in my way of life.

The Second Mindfulness Training

Aware of the suffering caused by exploitation, social injustice, stealing, and oppression, I am committed to cultivating loving kindness and learning ways to work for the well-being of all beings. I will practice generosity by sharing my time, energy, and material resources with those who are in real need. I am determined not to steal and not to possess anything that should belong to others. I will respect the property of others, but I will prevent others from profiting from human suffering or the suffering of other species on the earth.

The Third Mindfulness Training

Aware of the suffering caused by sexual misconduct, I am committed to cultivating responsibility and learning ways to protect the safety and integrity of individuals, couples, families, and society. I am determined not to engage in sexual relations without love and a long-term commitment. To preserve the happiness of myself and others, I am determined to respect my commitments and the commitments of others. I will do everything in my power to protect children from sexual abuse and to keep couples and families from being broken by sexual misconduct.

The Fourth Mindfulness Training

Aware of the suffering caused by unmindful speech and the inability to listen to others, I am committed to cultivating loving speech and deep listening in order to bring joy and happiness to others and relieve others of their suffering. Knowing that words can create happiness or suffering, I am determined to speak truthfully with words that inspire confidence, joy and understanding. I will not spread news that I do not know to be certain and I will refrain from criticism and condemnation unless I am positive it is just and warranted. I will refrain from uttering words that can cause division or discord or that can cause the family or the community to break. I am determined to make all efforts to reconcile and resolve all conflicts, however small.

The Fifth Mindfulness Training

Aware of the suffering caused by unmindful consumption, I am committed to cultivating good health, both physical and mental, for myself, my family, and my society by practicing mindful eating, drinking, and consuming. I will ingest only items that preserve peace, well-being, and joy in my body, my consciousness, and in the collective body and consciousness of my family and society. I am determined not to over-use alcohol or any other intoxicant, or to ingest foods or other items that are toxic to body, heart and mind. I will work to transform violence, fear, anger, and confusion in myself and in society.

These are The Five Mindfulness Trainings. If you wish, you can undertake to study them and practice them. These are the basis for the aspiration to live life in the Bodhisattva Way. If you work with these trainings every day, your understanding will grow deeper every day.

*Dedicated in love to the Three Jewels—the Buddha, the Dharma, and the Sangha.
Adapted from The Plum Village Chanting Book by Thich Nhat Hanh*