

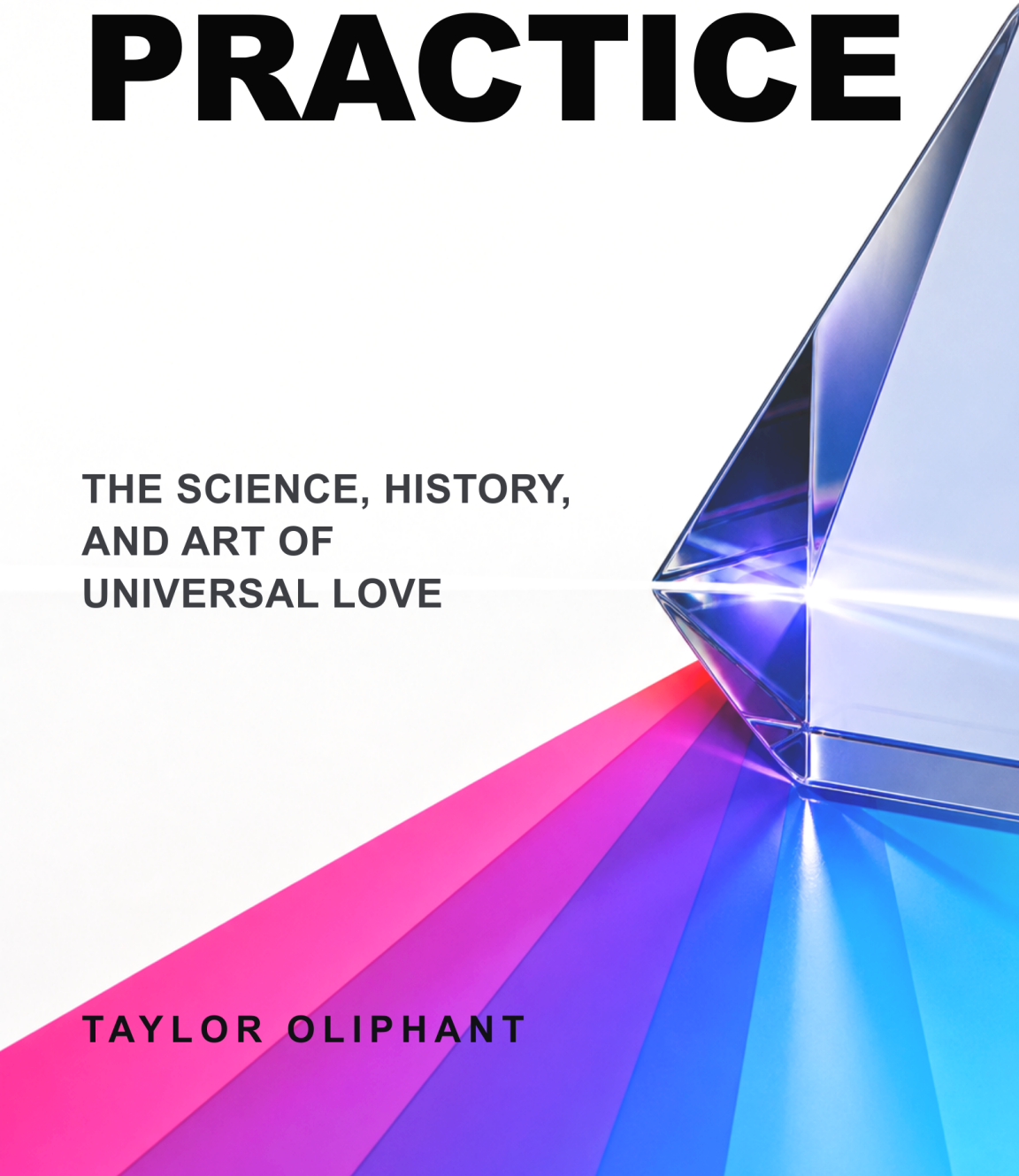


EVIDENCE-INFORMED MENTAL TRAINING

METTA PRACTICE

THE SCIENCE, HISTORY,
AND ART OF
UNIVERSAL LOVE

TAYLOR OLIPHANT



Metta Practice

Metta Practice

The Science, History, and Art of Universal Love

Taylor Oliphant

Metta Practice: The Science, History, and Art of Universal Love

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To Kukuripa's dog — and in that spirit, all dogs.

May all beings look on me with the eye of a friend.
May I look on all beings with the eye of a friend.
May we look on one another with the eye of a friend.

Vājasaneyi Saṃhitā 36.18 (White Yajurveda)

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Before We Begin

Metta practice begins with a startling possibility: the mind can be trained so that love becomes its home.

Metta itself is larger than romance, steadier than approval, and stronger than a pleasant mood. Metta is the ancient Pali word usually translated as loving-kindness, friendliness, or benevolence. This book mostly leaves it untranslated because no single English substitute carries the full meaning.

Metta means the felt love and sincere wish that beings be truly happy. Here, truly happy does not mean getting whatever one wants or feeling pleasant all the time. It means being deeply well: safe from the causes of misery, able to flourish, and at peace. Metta can feel like affection, but it is not limited to affection. It includes kindness, but it is stronger than ordinary niceness. It includes oneself, but it does not end with oneself. At its fullest, metta is universal love: a mind and life oriented toward the true happiness of all beings.

The Metta Sutta, the short ancient poem at the center of this book, makes an even larger claim. It says that when this boundless love is remembered while standing, walking, sitting, or lying down, "this is the divine abiding here."¹

Abiding translates the Pali word *vihāra*, which can mean a dwelling, an abode, or a way of living. Put simply: metta can become home, the place the mind learns to live.

Metta practice is more than a meditation technique. It is the way of making universal love the mind's home.

The old teaching is that a person can learn to live from this place: to stand in it, speak from it, expand it, return to it, and train the mind's ordinary habits around it. With practice, metta becomes more than something the mind visits. It becomes the atmosphere of experience: a steady field of love that can make ordinary life feel clearer, lighter, safer, and more alive.

This book examines that possibility carefully: through evidence, history, the Sutta itself, and practice.

In Chapter 1 the science puts practice on solid footing. Modern studies of loving-kindness meditation and related compassion practices point in an encouraging direction: metta can be trained. Even simplified forms of the practice can increase positive emotion, soften self-criticism, support people under stress, improve social connection, and change how other beings are perceived.

In Chapter 2 the story gets bigger. Buddhism preserved the Metta Sutta, chanted it for centuries, and carried it across the world. But the vision it gathers belongs to a wider ancient Indian world, where voices were already asking to see every being with the eye of a friend. Metta is larger than any single lineage, and the history is an invitation: this love belongs to anyone willing to practice it.

In Chapter 3 the Sutta itself is short enough to memorize and large enough to organize a life. It shapes a person first, then expands love to every being, in every direction, through every posture of the day: "the divine abiding here." In plain English: metta becomes home.

Chapter 4 turns the poem toward ordinary life. It offers one simple method: find metta where it is already real, strengthen it as much as possible, expand it as far as possible, and return to it whenever you notice it has slipped away. Those four acts are the practice: the way metta becomes the mind's home.

The appendices offer a wider map of techniques and source texts. They are there for readers who want more. The center of the book is simpler: learn the Sutta, practice it directly, and let metta become home.

Chapter 1: Why Metta Matters

Metta practice is the training of universal love.

That can sound impossibly large until we make it practical. Human beings are always training the mind. We lie awake rehearsing an argument. We replay an insult on the drive home. We return, again and again, to the thought that something is wrong with us. Fear, resentment, and shame are not just feelings; they are practices.

Metta practice trains the mind in another direction.

It begins with a wish the mind already understands: may this being be truly happy. The practice repeats that wish until metta becomes easier to find. It starts with moments of friendliness, gratitude, tenderness, or protective concern, then strengthens them on purpose.

The tradition promises more than any study can measure. Research can still ask a practical question:

When people practice loving-kindness, does anything change?

The answer is yes.

For a practitioner, the science is easy to summarize. Studies suggest that metta practice and closely related approaches can increase positive emotion, soften self-criticism, support people with anxiety, depression, trauma, and stress, improve social connection, and change how other beings are perceived. The science points to something immediately useful: metta is trainable. A few sincere minutes can become real mental training, and real training can change where the mind returns.

A mind that has spent years practicing fear, shame, resentment, or contempt can begin practicing another direction. Universal love can be rehearsed. Attention can be shaped. Emotional habits can soften. Other beings can become more real.

That is enough to begin with confidence and energy.

Metta practice also has a rare practical advantage: it is portable. It requires no equipment, no expensive setting, no perfect mood, no religious identity, and no life already arranged around healing. A person can begin with a few sincere minutes. With repetition, those minutes become real training, and metta becomes easier and easier to find.

This chapter gives a readable overview of the science: enough to practice with seriousness, patience, and hope.

What Researchers Study

Researchers usually study metta under the name loving-kindness meditation, or LKM. Most studies use a simplified version of the practice: phrases such as "May I be safe" or "May all beings be happy," directed toward oneself, a loved person, a neutral person, a difficult person, or all beings.

The ancient practice is larger. Early Buddhist sources describe metta radiated in every direction: above, below, around, and everywhere, free from hostility and ill will.

That difference matters. Modern studies often measure simplified forms of a much larger practice. Even so, the findings hold up. If simplified forms of metta can change mood, self-criticism, stress, and social perception, then the full practice deserves energy and attention.

The modern research landscape is broad: positive emotion and well-being, self-criticism and self-compassion, anxiety, depression, trauma, and stress, social connection and bias, and a growing frontier of brain, body, healthcare, workplace, and long-term-practice studies.

Researchers often group metta with compassion and self-compassion practices. That matters for reading the science, but the center of this book remains metta: universal love trained deliberately.

The Encouraging Pattern

Across the field, the pattern is encouraging: metta practice is associated with more positive emotion, more compassion, and a kinder relationship with oneself. And it requires no money to begin.

A 2024 systematic review and meta-analysis in Clinical Psychology Review supports that pattern. It found improvements in mindfulness and compassion, increases in positive emotion, reductions in negative emotion, and improvements in psychological symptoms compared with waitlists and other passive control groups.²

These are not abstract outcomes. They are the places where many lives hurt: mood, shame, stress, isolation, threat, and the habit of meeting pain with more pain.

The practical message is strong and simple: what the mind rehearses becomes easier to find.

It Builds Positive Emotion

Metta practice strengthens wholesome feelings while reducing painful ones.

Many people first notice emotional relief. The body relaxes. The face softens. The mind stops tightening around the same old story. A being who was abstract becomes real enough to wish well.

Barbara Fredrickson and colleagues conducted one of the best-known early studies in this field. Participants who practiced loving-kindness meditation reported increases in daily positive emotions. Those increases predicted growth in personal resources, including mindfulness, purpose in life, and social support, as well as reduced self-reported illness symptoms; those gains later predicted greater life satisfaction and fewer depressive symptoms.³

Positive emotion here does not mean forced cheerfulness. It includes affection, interest, gratitude, hope, amusement, awe, and love. These states broaden attention. They make possibilities visible. They help a mind build resources instead of only defending against the next threat.

A 2015 meta-analysis also found beneficial effects on positive emotions across loving-kindness studies.⁴

One of metta's great strengths is that it gives the mind somewhere better to go. It does more than interrupt painful habits; it replaces them.

It Softens Self-Attack

For many readers, the hardest being to include is the self.

It may be easy to wish a child, friend, teacher, partner, or animal well. Then the phrase changes: may I be well. Something tightens. The body contracts. The mind objects. A private voice says: not you.

Metta answers with disciplined inclusion. The self, too, belongs inside the circle of beings worthy of care.

Clinically, this is important. A harsh relationship with oneself is linked with shame, anxiety, depression, burnout, and emotional avoidance. A meta-analysis focused on loving-kindness meditation found a moderate overall effect on self-compassion in adults.⁵ A newer review of loving-kindness and compassion meditations also found self-compassion to be an important outcome.⁶ In a randomized trial with highly self-critical people, a loving-kindness meditation program reduced self-criticism and depressive symptoms while increasing self-compassion and positive emotions, with benefits maintained at follow-up.⁷

That sounds modest until you imagine a day without inner cruelty.

It Helps People Meet Distress

The mental-health evidence gives real reasons for hope, especially when practice is paced well.

A 2023 review found that loving-kindness and compassion meditation can reduce anxiety, with effects varying by study design and comparison group.⁸ That fits the practice. Anxiety organizes the world around threat. Metta rehearses safety, connection, care, and the wish for beings to be truly happy.

For depression, the evidence is also promising, though some reviews study metta together with related practices rather than metta alone.⁹ Practices that increase care, reduce isolation, and soften self-criticism can help people carry depressive suffering differently. For a person trapped in self-attack, that difference can matter enormously.

The trauma evidence deserves special attention. In one randomized clinical trial with veterans diagnosed with PTSD, group loving-kindness meditation was statistically noninferior to group Cognitive Processing Therapy for PTSD symptom reduction over six months.¹⁰ That is a remarkable finding. Loving-kindness meditation belongs in the serious conversation about healing, resilience, and mental training.

For someone who is suffering, this matters. Metta practice can work alongside therapy, medicine, friendship, and other forms of help, and it can also stand as a real daily support when the mind needs a direction it can practice again and again.

It Makes Other Beings More Real

Metta also changes social perception.

In one brief experiment, a short loving-kindness meditation increased explicit and implicit positive feelings toward strangers.¹¹ In a widely cited study, six weeks of loving-kindness meditation reduced implicit bias toward Black people and homeless people; a discussion of loving-kindness did not produce the same effect.¹²

Practice mattered.

That is the difference between an opinion and a trained orientation. Many people already believe that all beings deserve care. Metta practice trains attention, intention, and feeling until care is easier to find under pressure.

Recent reviews suggest loving-kindness and compassion practices may reduce negative interpersonal attitudes, though effects are often small and context-dependent.¹³ Studies have also tested brief loving-kindness or befriending practices in relation to political polarization, with intriguing but still limited results.¹⁴

It Trains the Whole Person

The body participates in fear, contraction, connection, and care. If metta changes attention, emotion, intention, and social perception, the body and brain are part of the training too.

Early findings point that way. In one study, two weeks of compassion training changed both generous behavior and the brain's response to images of suffering.¹⁵ Neuroimaging work on loving-kindness and related practices suggests changes in networks for emotion regulation and social understanding, though the literature is young and findings are mixed.

The practical finding is already powerful: when a person becomes more at ease in the body, less trapped in self-attack, more connected, and more able to return to metta under stress, the practice has reached the whole person.

The Field Is Growing

The field is no longer limited to asking whether people feel kinder in a quiet room. Researchers are now testing compassion-centered support with hospital patients, measuring loving-kindness programs in workplaces and classrooms, delivering the practice digitally to people who may never attend a retreat, and studying long-term practitioners to learn what years of practice actually build.¹⁶

The pattern behind these studies is encouraging: the training of care is now being tested where people actually live and work. The deeper value remains larger than any program: the deliberate training of universal love until metta becomes home.

What the Evidence Shows

The evidence supports practice.

It is also still developing. Studies vary, samples are often small, and interventions may mix metta with mindfulness, compassion, psychoeducation, therapy, or group support. Effects are often stronger against waitlists than active alternatives. Neuroscience findings are fascinating and easy to overinterpret.

Early evidence suggests that metta may hold its own alongside recognized forms of psychological support, while offering something rare: a free, portable, meaningful practice that people can begin almost anywhere.¹⁰

The tradition's own claim reaches further than any study can measure. Within Buddhism, metta has been honored as a complete path: for some monastics, the whole of practice. The science does not prove a claim that size. It does something more useful for a beginner: it shows the path is real, and that walking it helps.

Hard conditions call for care. Readers in acute trauma or severe distress should not treat this book as a substitute for professional help; if they practice, shorter sessions, a steady anchor, and real support are the cautious course.¹⁷

Taken together, the evidence supports practice: serious training for ordinary life, gradual, embodied, and capable of changing where the mind returns.

The Takeaway

The science gives a clear practical message:

Metta can be cultivated.

Training in metta can increase positive emotion, soften self-attack, support mental health, change social perception, and give the body and mind a better place to return under stress.

That is reason to practice with real energy.

When fear leads, the body tightens. When contempt leads, people shrink into categories. When shame leads, the self becomes an enemy. When metta leads, the whole situation changes.

Speech has another option. The body has another signal. Another person can appear as a being rather than a category.

If money is tight, margin is thin, or hope is scarce, the practice's portability is part of its power. It can begin today. One sincere wish, repeated patiently, gives the mind something real to return to: a direction, a refuge, and a way of no longer abandoning itself to fear or contempt.

Science gives metta credibility and momentum. History deepens it.

Chapter 2: Where Metta Comes From

Most people meet metta as a Buddhist meditation. That is true, but incomplete.

The Metta Sutta belongs unmistakably to Buddhism: preserved in Buddhist collections, chanted in Buddhist communities, explained by Buddhist teachers, and carried through the world by Buddhist lineages. But the practice it gathers is older and wider than any single tradition.

The Buddha himself remembered it that way. In the discourses he describes boundless metta as a good practice handed down through an ancient royal lineage long before his time, and he recalls practicing it for seven years in a distant past life. When young brahmins asked him the way to union with Brahma, he answered in their own vocabulary: metta, radiated in every direction.¹⁸

The Buddha taught in a world crowded with seekers. Brahmins preserved ancient ritual and recitation. Renunciants left home in search of liberation. Jain communities made non-harm absolute. Forest meditators, wandering debaters, and householders all pressed the same urgent questions: suffering, karma, rebirth, divine life, release.

Metta belongs to that world, and its history can be stated plainly:

The Karaṇīya Metta Sutta is a Buddhist poem that gathers an older Indian stream: friendship toward all beings, non-harm, Brahma-like life here, and the possibility of a divine destiny after death. The Sutta preserves that stream as a complete system of metta.

Knowing this history changes how the poem reads. Metta practice is an ancient answer to a direct human need: to meet life with love.

Friendliness Before Technique

The word metta comes from the same family as Pali mitta and Sanskrit mitra: friend, ally, one who is not an enemy.¹⁹

The root is practical. A friend is a source of safety: trustworthy, faithful, and inclined toward your welfare. Metta takes that quality and trains it into character.

The wider Indo-Iranian word-family around Mitra and Mithra is older still, bound up with covenant, alliance, truth, and social order.²⁰ This is resonance, not direct borrowing. But it lets us hear the word at its full depth: metta carries an old force of friendship, expanded beyond tribe and preference.

To practice metta is to train universal friendship.

The move is radical precisely there. Metta does not stop at being kind to the people we already like. It trains the mind to organize life around friendship in the deepest sense of the word, and a mind organized around friendship does not build itself around enemies.

The Eye of a Friend

One of the most striking glimpses of this vision comes from the Vedic world.

The Vājasaneyi Saṃhitā of the White Yajurveda is a collection of ritual formulas from ancient North India. A later layer of the collection preserves a short, startling prayer: may all beings look upon me with the eye of a friend; may I look upon all beings with the eye of a friend; may we look upon one another with the eye of a friend.²¹

The prayer is not the Metta Sutta. It asks rather than trains. But it shows something immense: beyond the Buddhist tradition, India knew how to imagine a whole world seen through friendship rather than enmity.

The vision behind metta belonged to a wider Indian history.

Metta as Divine Living

The word brahmavihāra joins Brahma with vihāra, a word for dwelling, abiding, or way of living. In the plain language of this book: metta can become home.

In the ancient Indian world, Brahma-language carried enormous religious force. Early Buddhist texts preserve that force directly: Great Brahma is

described as lord, maker, creator, and father of beings. This is the scale of the Metta Sutta's claim. To call metta a brahmavihāra is to lift it far above ordinary kindness: boundless metta is life lived here with the force and dignity of divine life.

And the Sutta places that claim in daily life, not in the afterlife. After telling the practitioner to keep metta present while standing, walking, sitting, and lying down, it says: this is the divine abiding here.²²

A person established in boundless metta is already living a divine life, here and now.

This older language keeps the poem at full size. Metta gathers the great Indian ideals of friendship, non-harm, boundlessness, divine life, and liberation into one practice, offered to anyone willing to train.

A Practice That Travels

Ancient metta was thoroughly religious. It lived in worlds of karma, rebirth, Brahma, unseen beings, renunciation, merit, gods, liberation, chanting, ritual, and monastic discipline.

But it was portable. It did not depend on birth, status, or membership in a single institution. It could be preserved inside Buddhist scripture and practiced by monastics and householders alike. It could be understood ethically even where its cosmology was not shared. It traveled, and it still travels, because its first requirement is not identity. It is practice.

The Metta Sutta itself is strikingly open. To begin, it asks for one thing, and anyone can offer it: character. Be capable, be honorable, be gentle, be content. Deceive no one, look down on no one, wish harm on no being.

That openness is part of its genius. The poem has Buddhist depth without asking for Buddhist identity. If you want peace, become a person who can carry metta. Include all beings. Keep returning. Make universal love the place you live from.

How the Poem Was Preserved

If metta's roots are older and wider, Buddhism's role is still immense.

Buddhism preserved the Metta Sutta. It chanted the poem for centuries, commented on it, embodied it in living lineages, and carried it across the world. An ancient stream of friendship, non-harm, and divine aspiration could have scattered and been lost. Instead it survived, compact and complete, as one of the clearest poems of universal love the world has.

Now we can read it.

Chapter 3: The Metta Sutta

The Metta Sutta is short enough to memorize and large enough to organize a life.

In English, it is often called the Discourse on Loving-Kindness or the Discourse on Friendliness. Its Pali title is the Karaṇīya Metta Sutta. Karaṇīya means "what should be done." From the first word, the poem is practical: if you want peace, this is what to cultivate, and this is how to live.

The poem does not ask the reader to accept a theory first. It begins by shaping a person: capable, honorable, gentle, content, easy to support, free from contempt and cruelty. Then it expands. Love extends to every being, in every direction, through every posture of the day. The Sutta calls this the divine abiding here.

That is why the poem has traveled so far.

The Metta Sutta appears in two places in the Pali canon: Sutta Nipāta 1.8 and Khuddakapāṭha 9.²³ It belongs to an old collection of Buddhist verse, and it also became a text for chanting, protection, meditation, and daily devotion.

It has moved through monasteries, forests, homes, hospitals, retreats, classrooms, psychology programs, and ordinary rooms where people sit down because they want another way to live.

At its center is a wish simple enough to remember and large enough to reshape a life: May metta become boundless.

The Text

One who is skilled in goodness should do this
to realize the state of peace:

Be capable and honorable, deeply honorable,
easy to speak to, gentle, and humble.

Be content and easy to support,
not too busy, living lightly,
alert, with senses calmed,
courteous, without greed or sycophancy.

Do not do the slightest thing
that the wise would disapprove of.

May all beings be safe and at peace.

May all beings be happy.

Whatever living beings there are,
with none whatsoever excluded:

strong or vulnerable,

large or small,

long or short,

fine or substantial,

seen or unseen,

living far away or near,

those already born

and those not yet born:

may all beings be happy.

Let no one deceive another.

Let no one look down on anyone anywhere.

Even when provoked or aggrieved,

let no one wish harm on any being.

As a mother would protect with her life

her child, her only child,

so with a boundless heart

one should cherish all living beings.

Radiate metta everywhere:

above, below, and all around,

unbounded,

free from hatred and ill will.

Standing, walking, sitting,

or lying down, whenever awake,

keep this constantly in mind.

This, they say, is the divine abiding here.

Not holding limiting views,

virtuous, accomplished in insight,

free from base desires,

one is not born again in this world.

The Story in the Forest

The commentarial tradition gives the Metta Sutta a vivid origin story.

A group of monks went into a forest to meditate. The local tree spirits, disturbed by their presence, frightened them with unsettling sights, sounds, and smells. The monks became afraid and returned to the Buddha. Instead of sending them somewhere easier, he gave them the Metta Sutta and told them

to go back. They did. They practiced and recited the teaching. The spirits were pacified, became friendly, and protected them.²⁴

The forest story works on more than one level. In the traditional Buddhist world, the forest is alive with visible and invisible beings, and protective recitation matters. In psychological terms, the story is precise. Fear makes a world hostile. Hostility contracts the mind. The monks do not conquer the forest by force. They change the mind they bring to it.

The change moves outward.

Metta changes how one enters a room, a conflict, a memory, a relationship, and a forest. Speech changes. Conduct changes. The body changes. Other beings may not respond as hoped, but the practitioner is no longer organizing the whole situation around threat.

This protective dimension helped the Metta Sutta become a paritta, a protective chant. Protection can be understood religiously and psychologically: a mind established in metta is less available to panic, cruelty, contempt, and ill will.

Character Comes First

The Sutta does not begin by telling us to radiate love.

It begins with character.

Be capable. Be honorable. Be easy to speak to. Be gentle. Be humble. Be content. Live lightly. Calm the senses. Be courteous. Avoid greed and sycophancy. Do not do even small things the wise would disapprove of.

A life crowded with manipulation cannot easily settle into metta. A mind desperate for approval will bend love into performance. A person who cannot be corrected will turn every disagreement into danger. A person who is careless with small harms will not suddenly become reliable in universal love.

The poem is practical. If metta is to become home, the groundwork is part of the practice.

Character is the foundation.

Not perfection. Not a spiritual personality. The poem asks for something more ordinary: someone who can be spoken to, trusted, corrected, supported, and lived with. Metta practice begins here because universal love becomes unreal when ordinary conduct remains careless.

The Wish

Then the poem gives the basic wish:

May all beings be safe and at peace.

May all beings be happy.

The wish is simple, but it changes the mind's orientation: the mind rehearses a friendly relationship to life.

Not only to people we like.

Not only to people who agree with us.

Not only to people who have earned tenderness.

All beings.

The word translated here as "happy" points beyond pleasant circumstances. This is what "truly happy" means in this book. It does not mean getting whatever one wants. It means being well in body and mind, safe from the causes of misery, and established in a happiness not entirely dependent on conditions going one's way.²⁵

Metta is wise care. It does not wish for every craving to be satisfied. It wishes for beings to be truly happy.

All Beings

The Sutta then stretches the imagination:

strong, vulnerable, large, small, long, short, fine, substantial, seen, unseen, far, near, already born, not yet born.

The list is contemplative training.

The mind usually loves by category. It cares for what is close, visible, familiar, attractive, useful, or connected to identity. The poem names categories and then breaks them open.

Do not stop where habit stops.

The list refuses a familiar narrowing: visible life, hidden life, nearby life, distant life, present life, and future life all enter the field.

"Unseen" beings and beings "not yet born" belong to the poem's ancient cosmology, and they stay. Whatever a reader makes of that cosmology, the practical force is unchanged: metta refuses to let bias define moral concern.

No Deception, No Contempt

Then comes the ethical edge:

Let no one deceive another.

Let no one look down on anyone anywhere.

Even when provoked or aggrieved, let no one wish harm on any being.

Here metta becomes stronger.

Saying "all beings" is simple. The practice becomes real when the mind meets conflict: a rival, a critic, an enemy, a public figure we dislike. Metta does not ask us to approve of them. It asks us not to build our happiness on their suffering.

The Sutta leaves room for clarity and strength. A person practicing metta can say no, leave, tell the truth, protect, and support consequences. Metta can oppose harm without becoming ill will.

The Mother Image

The poem's most famous image comes next:

As a mother would protect with her life

her child, her only child,

so with a boundless heart

one should cherish all living beings.

The mother image is a feeling instruction: love all beings with the intensity of a mother protecting her only child. But the image is stronger than sweetness.

It is overwhelming love, intensely felt.

The mother image gives metta force. This is not abstract kindness. It is care joined to courage: alert, protective, stronger than fear, and willing to bear real cost for another life.

The next step is the impossible-sounding one:

All living beings.

Metta is not the private possession of the people we prefer. The image gives intensity; the all-beings instruction gives scale.

Together they form the center of the poem and prepare the reader for boundless metta.

Boundless Metta

Here the poem becomes immeasurably vast:

Radiate metta everywhere:

above, below, and all around,

unbounded,

free from hatred and ill will.

This is the Sutta's scale: metta without any limits or restrictions.

Until now the practice has had recipients: one being, then more beings, then all beings. Here even that scaffolding falls away. Nothing is selected, because nothing is excluded. The mind stops sending love toward chosen targets and becomes, for a while, a field of metta with no edges: above, below, and all around.

The effort of choosing ends. What remains is metta itself, facing every direction at once.

Standing, Walking, Sitting, Lying Down

The poem now brings metta into the whole day:

Standing, walking, sitting, or lying down,
whenever awake,
keep this constantly in mind.

This is the turn from meditation to daily life: universal love comes first, whatever you are doing.

Metta is not reserved for meditation periods. It is meant to be remembered while standing in a line, walking into a meeting, sitting with someone who annoys you, lying awake at night, and reading news that pulls the mind toward factions and enemies.

The method is based on repetition and strength. Bring metta to mind. Feel it as strongly as possible. Lose it, notice, and return.

At first this takes effort. With practice, the return becomes easier. The feeling becomes familiar. It starts appearing sooner, sometimes before you deliberately call it up.

That is how metta becomes home. What begins as deliberate recollection becomes familiar, then available, then increasingly present.

The aim is not uninterrupted emotional intensity. The aim is steady recollection: bring metta back again and again.

Human beings forget. We get tired. We react. Every return matters. Recollection becomes habit. Habit becomes home.

The Divine Abiding Here

Then comes the phrase this whole book keeps returning to:

This, they say, is the divine abiding here.

The Pali is compact: brahmam etaṃ vihāraṃ idhaṃ āhu.

This is the poem's boldest sentence.

Metta, established in this way, is Brahma-like life here and now.

Not merely after death.

Not merely in belief.

Here.

Standing. Walking. Sitting. Lying down.

Metta can become home here: a life trained in universal love, described in the ancient language of Brahma.

For a traditional Buddhist reader, this phrase belongs to a living world of Brahma, Brahma-worlds, rebirth, merit, protection, and liberation. A nonreligious reader can still hear the historical force: the poem uses the strongest ancient language available to describe a life organized around boundless metta.

The No-Return Ending

The final lines are easy to soften, but they should remain startling:

Not holding limiting views,
virtuous, accomplished in insight,
free from base desires,
one is not born again in this world.

Modern metta teaching often stops before this ending because the language of views, desire, insight, and rebirth is harder to translate into contemporary psychological terms.

But the ending is part of the poem's power.

It prevents us from reducing metta to emotional hygiene.

The Sutta's final practitioner is not merely calmer. This person is virtuous, accomplished in insight, free from limiting views and base desires, and beyond return to ordinary birth.

That is the scale of the poem. It does not offer metta as a small emotional exercise. It offers metta as the organizing principle of a liberated life.

Metta here is a whole path of life: conduct, non-harm, universal love, boundless meditation, all-day recollection, divine abiding, insight, and release.

That is the metta meant here: not a sentiment added to life, but a life gathered around universal love.

A Complete Path

The Metta Sutta offers a complete path in concentrated form: conduct, meditation, insight, and release gathered around one central transformation.

Be honorable.

Wish all beings well.

Strengthen metta until it becomes overwhelming and boundless.

Remember it all the time.

This compact teaching can take a lifetime to understand. It can also be memorized in ten days: one verse each day, spoken aloud, until the poem travels with you. People have carried it this way for more than two thousand years.

Chapter 4: One Simple Practice

The Metta Sutta gives a clear and radical instruction: radiate metta everywhere, all the time.

The way to begin is simple.

Find metta where it is already real. Strengthen it as much as possible. Expand it as far as possible. Return to it throughout the day.

The whole practice can be remembered in four movements:

Find it.

Strengthen it.

Expand it.

Return to it.

Those four acts are the practice.

The whole practice can be done in one minute, in five, in twenty, in whatever time you have. There is no correct amount. The aim is to go as far into the feeling as you can, as often as you can.

A steady shape for most days: one formal practice in the morning, one at night, and quick returns through everything in between.

Before starting, it helps to detach, breathe deeply, and let everything go as much as possible.

The Sutta asks for metta radiated everywhere, unbounded — a field with no edges. Attention stops at whatever the mind is holding: an unfinished task, a replaying conversation, a plan for later. Where attention stops, the field ends. Everything the mind holds is an edge. Setting it all down, even for a moment, makes room to radiate.

Total letting go is not always available, but begin anyway. Aiming at boundlessness helps even if the goal itself seems impossible. The more you do it, the more attainable the goal becomes. Often a couple of deep breaths are enough to start.

1. Find It

Begin by focusing on the being who evokes the strongest feeling of metta in you.

For many people, the strongest clear anchor is a baby or child, a beloved animal, someone who has loved you, a trusted teacher or elder, or a sacred figure if that is real for you.

The right anchor makes metta obvious: felt love and the sincere wish that this being be truly happy.

If the strongest feeling is mixed with romance, grief, resentment, or fantasy, use the next strongest clear anchor. The first task is to build and stabilize metta you can truly feel.

Most people settle on one anchor and return to it daily. Switch only if a clearly stronger anchor appears.

No anchor is too humble. The love you can actually feel is worth more than the love you think you should feel.

2. Strengthen It

Once metta is present, give it your full attention.

Strengthen the feeling as much as possible before moving on.

Words can help when they make metta easier to feel. The simplest phrase is: may this being be truly happy. If more detail helps, use: may this being be safe, may this being be happy, may this being be free from suffering.

Think of metta as a mantra you feel rather than say.

Try to feel overwhelming love as fully as possible. If it does not come immediately, keep practicing; with repetition, the feeling becomes easier to find and easier to sustain.

If you find only a small sincere wish, stay with it and strengthen it.

If the feeling is strong, make it stronger. Use empathy to deepen it. Teach the body what metta feels like.

Make it strong. Make it joyful. Make it obvious.

3. Expand It

When metta is vivid enough to recognize, expand it.

Ajahn Sona, a strong modern teacher of this approach, emphasizes felt metta over repeated phrases.²⁶ In one retreat talk, he uses unforgettable language: "Crank it to 11, Include the Neighbors."²⁷

Turn the feeling all the way up. Then expand it.

Begin with the anchor. Keep the same felt wish and let it include more: yourself, a neutral person, an appropriately difficult person, and finally all beings: near and far, seen and unseen, born and not yet born.

The order can change. The intention and feeling are what matter.

Include yourself the way the tradition does: as one being among all beings, no more and no less.

With a difficult person, be clear about what the wish is and is not. You are not approving, trusting, or inviting anyone closer. You are wishing a being free from the causes of misery, including whatever made them difficult, and you are refusing to give ill will a home in your mind.

Feel metta for every being in your awareness, then radiate it everywhere. As the Sutta says: above, below, and all around.

Do only one thing: radiate metta everywhere. Stay as long as you can.

4. Return to It

This is where the Sutta becomes daily life.

Standing, walking, sitting, lying down: the Sutta names every posture a day contains. There is no moment outside the practice.

A formal sit gives you something to return to. The day gives you hundreds of chances to return.

The deeper aim is to make metta the guiding priority of ordinary life. Not only in meditation, and not only when conditions are easy. Whatever you are

doing, and whatever is happening, the practice is to keep returning to metta until universal love becomes the mind's default state. When metta is sincerely prioritized again and again, it changes how we experience the world, and it changes what the world receives from us.

To return, pause for a few breaths, recall the anchor, and feel metta as strongly as possible. Use words if they help: may this being be truly happy. Then bring that metta to the person in front of you, the task in your hands, or the moment you are living. The return can be brief; what matters is that metta is felt again.

When you notice metta has slipped away, return.

Each return makes metta more familiar.

The more often you bring metta to mind and truly feel it, the more it becomes home. Eventually, after enough practice, you may notice it is simply there.

How It Looks

One-Minute Meditation

Use this when one minute is what you have.

Seconds 1-20: find it.

Seconds 21-40: strengthen it.

Seconds 41-60: expand it, and radiate metta everywhere.

Five-Minute Meditation

Use this for a short sit, a clean reset, or a daily minimum.

Minute 1: find it.

Minutes 2-3: strengthen it.

Minute 4: expand it.

Minute 5: radiate metta everywhere.

At night, the same five minutes work lying in bed; let the last movement of the mind incline toward universal love.

Twenty-Minute Meditation

Done in the morning, it gives the day a clear direction.

Minutes 1-3: find it.

Minutes 4-8: strengthen it.

Minutes 9-14: expand it.

Minutes 15-18: radiate metta everywhere.

Minutes 19-20: let the feeling settle into the body, and carry it into the day.

If the timing feels artificial, ignore the clock and follow the four movements.

Returns

The day offers three kinds of returns. Hard moments call for the return. Empty moments make room for it. Good moments meet you halfway.

In a hard moment, the return is a repair. A message arrives that stings, and the reply is already writing itself. You notice the heat: metta has slipped away. One breath. Recall the anchor, and the wish comes with it: may this being be truly happy. Then expand it one step, to the person behind the message. Nothing has been agreed to. Nothing has been resolved. But the reply you write next comes from a different mind than the one that began it.

In an empty minute, the return simply fills it. A line, a red light, a kettle coming to a boil: each is long enough to find the anchor and quietly hand the wish to whoever is near.

In a good moment, the return is already half-made. The world keeps offering anchors: a dog in the park, a child laughing at nothing, an old couple holding hands. Metta rises on its own. Joining it is the return.

During the day, return many times. Countless returns are better than one heroic effort.

This is how the practice becomes continuous. Formal meditation builds the feeling. Daily returns make it familiar. Night practice lets the mind fall asleep in the direction of metta.

Return so often, and with so much sincerity, that metta becomes the mind's home.

The Early Days

In the beginning, practice is uneven. Some days metta arrives in seconds. Other days the words feel mechanical and the feeling stays faint. The mind wanders. The night practice turns into sleep. All of this is normal, and none of it is failure.

What you are building is not a perfect feeling. It is the habit of prioritizing metta. Once you have that habit, the practice has something steady to build on. Metta grows exactly this way: found, strengthened, lost, and found again.

The Practice at a Glance

Find it. Bring to mind the being who evokes the strongest feeling of metta in you.

Strengthen it. Feel it as fully as possible: may this being be truly happy.

Expand it. Include yourself, a neutral person, an appropriately difficult person, and all beings.

Return to it. When you notice metta has slipped away, return.

Morning: twenty minutes. During the day: countless returns. Night: five minutes in bed.

Metta becomes home.

Afterword: The Will to Metta

This book began with a promise: with practice, metta can become home. The science showed that the mind can be trained toward it, the history showed how long people have trained, and the Sutta turned the training into a way of life. What remains is the question underneath all of it: what is a life for?

The modern world inherited three great answers. Nietzsche answered with the will to power: life wants strength, agency, self-overcoming. Freud answered with the will to pleasure: life wants desire met and pain avoided. Frankl answered with the will to meaning: life wants a purpose large enough to suffer for.²⁸ Each answer is right, and everyone knows it from the inside. We want to be capable, we want to feel good, and we want our lives to matter.

Metta is an older answer to the same question: life wants to love.

The wanting is not the problem. The problem is wanting without metta. Power without metta hardens into domination, and other beings become obstacles, tools, or enemies. Pleasure without metta becomes consumption, taking whatever can be taken and ignoring what the wanting costs. Meaning without metta curdles into cruel ideology, because a person can find meaning in revenge, in superiority, in the worship of a private story.

Metta does not ask us to want less. It makes the wanting sustainable. With metta, power becomes the capacity to protect and serve life, pleasure becomes the joy of a mind no longer at war, and meaning becomes participation in the welfare of beings.

This is the will to metta: not strain or force, but the direction a life keeps choosing until choice becomes character.

A life pointed this way still has to be lived. Metta will not say exactly when to forgive, when to confront, or when to walk away, but it steadies the mind in conflict, betrayal, and grief, and it gives every ambition a single test: does this serve metta? The answer will often be mixed. That is fine. The practice never required purity. It requires return.

Before sending the message, return. Before turning the news into a theater of enemies, return. Before giving up on yourself, return. Before harming others

with power without care, pleasure without conscience, or meaning without love, return.

The practice begins the moment you close this book and meet the next being: may this being be truly happy.

May metta become home.

Appendix A: Overview of Metta Techniques

Chapter 4 is enough to begin. This appendix is a map, not a complete manual.

Teachers differ, and their methods overlap. Still, most serious approaches answer the same three questions:

How does metta become felt rather than merely verbal?

How does it expand beyond preference until it includes all beings?

How does it become continuous enough to shape standing, walking, sitting, lying down, speech, conduct, and ordinary life?

How Metta Becomes Real

Every method needs a way to make metta more than an idea. Some teachers begin with words; others begin with a felt anchor that makes love immediately real.

Phrases

Phrases are the most common modern form of metta practice.

May I be safe.

May I be well.

May you live with ease.

May all beings be happy.

The words vary by teacher and often overlap with other techniques, but the function is consistent: phrases give intention a shape.

This is especially useful when the mind is scattered or dry. A person may not feel universal love yet, but they can still practice the sincere wish; the phrase gives the mind something steady to hold.

Sharon Salzberg, Gil Fronsdal, Greater Good in Action, and many others present phrases as supports for intention, not incantations.²⁹

Phrase practice is accessible. It can be done in formal meditation, in traffic, before a meeting, while standing in line, or before sleep. It requires no elaborate visualization and no special mastery.

The pitfall is mechanical repetition: a phrase can continue while the body remains untouched and the mind is elsewhere. When that happens, simply reconnect the words with feeling.

Feeling-First Metta

Bring to mind the anchor that evokes the strongest metta you can feel: a child, a teacher, a sacred figure, someone who has helped you, a beloved animal, a person whose goodness is obvious, or the mother-child image from the Sutta. Clarify the feeling and strengthen it as much as possible. Then expand it.

Ajahn Brahm often teaches metta through a kindling process: begin where kindness is already available, then feed it. Ajahn Sona teaches felt metta with vivid, practical instructions for strengthening it. Jack Kornfield often begins with a loved one, pet, or clear image before expanding. Materials from TWIM (Tranquil Wisdom Insight Meditation) also emphasize finding a recognizable feeling of metta and returning to it.³⁰

For some people, an animal is the clearest anchor. A dog greeting you with love may teach the body what a paragraph cannot.

The test is whether the anchor strengthens the feeling of metta or weakens it. If the chosen anchor brings up longing, grief, fantasy, sexual desire, resentment, or a complicated story, choose the simplest anchor that makes metta clear.

How Metta Becomes Universal

Once metta is recognizable, the practice must expand. Different traditions use directions, categories, recipients, and difficult-person work to keep the heart from stopping at preference.

Radiating Metta Everywhere

The earliest standard descriptions of metta often begin with vastness.

A practitioner pervades one direction with a mind of metta, then a second, a third, and a fourth, and finally above, below, around, and everywhere. The mind is abundant, expansive, immeasurable, free from hostility and ill will.³¹

This style stays closest to the Sutta's own instruction: radiate metta everywhere. It keeps metta from shrinking into private mood management. The goal is a boundless heart.

Vastness still needs a way to become real. A beginner may hear the instruction and feel inspired without knowing how to begin. The methods that follow supply starting points.

Systematic Pervasion

Classical Theravada practice developed more detailed ways to make boundless metta repeatable.

Traditional manuals and practice texts extend metta by directions, categories, and classes of beings: all beings, all breathing things, all creatures, all persons; beings in the east, west, north, south, above, below; women, men, noble ones, ordinary beings, deities, humans, beings in difficult realms.³²

To modern ears, these lists can sound technical. Their purpose is imaginative discipline.

The mind thinks it includes everyone until it is asked to be specific. Then its habits appear: some beings feel vivid, others far away; some categories evoke sympathy, others indifference, fear, superiority, or disbelief.

A list of categories is only a scaffold; the living practice is the steady feeling of metta moving through it.

The Ladder

Many modern readers know metta through a graduated sequence of recipients.

The order varies. A common version begins with oneself, then a benefactor or loved one, then a neutral person, then a difficult person, then all beings. Classical sources such as the Visuddhimagga offer related but not identical structures, including careful warnings about which recipients may be unsuitable at the beginning.³³

The mind is partial. It does not love all beings equally on command. It knows near and far, safe and unsafe, mine and not mine, liked and disliked. The ladder does not pretend those categories are already gone. It works with them.

Start where metta is possible. Recognize it clearly. Then expand.

The ladder has traveled widely in modern Insight Meditation, through teachers such as Sharon Salzberg, Gil Fronsdal, Jack Kornfield, and Bhante Gunaratana.³⁴ It gives a clear route for practice and a practical way to approach the difficult-person stage without beginning there.

Difficult People

Metta eventually meets the people who make metta difficult. Here the practice proves its seriousness.

The classical ladder includes hostile or difficult people. Modern teachers often advise beginning with someone mildly difficult rather than a traumatic figure or active danger. Many use a common-humanity reflection: remembering that even a harmful or irritating person wants happiness, fears pain, acts from causes and conditions, and is not reducible to one role.³⁵

This stage tests metta against resentment, fear, envy, political anger, family pain, and memory.

Clarity is crucial here. Metta does not require liking, trusting, reconciling, staying near harm, or approving behavior. It means the mind refuses to make ill will its home.

You can wish someone free from the causes of cruelty while refusing them access to your life. You can support consequences without enjoying degradation. You can tell the truth without needing hatred as fuel.

This is demanding. Keep strong boundaries, and seek serious support for work with major trauma or active danger rather than attempting it alone.

The goal is freedom from enmity and the training of universal love.

Self-Metta

For many modern readers, the hardest being to include is oneself.

Self-compassion research bears directly on this stage. Kristin Neff, the Center for Mindful Self-Compassion, Greater Good in Action, and many meditation teachers have helped modern practitioners work with shame, self-criticism, and inner hostility.³⁶

Some people feel grief, disbelief, or numbness when they offer themselves metta. In that case, many teachers begin with a strong external anchor, establish metta there, and only later include the self.

Self-metta is not self-absorption; it removes the false exception that says everyone deserves freedom from hatred except me. A person who secretly hates themselves may turn love for others into performance, rescue, control, or exhaustion. Including oneself steadies the whole practice.

The center remains metta for all beings, and the self is one of them.

How Metta Becomes Continuous

The Sutta points beyond occasional kindness. Metta has to return in ordinary life, recover after interruption, shape conduct, and become home.

Daily-Life Recollection

The Sutta names standing, walking, sitting, and lying down. In modern terms: waiting, driving, reading a message, entering a room, preparing to speak, and recovering after losing the thread. Every one of them is a place to remember metta.

Sharon Salzberg's "Street Lovingkindness," Gil Fronsdal's daily-life metta instructions, Ajahn Sona's all-day emphasis, and Plum Village teachings on loving speech and deep listening all belong in this approach.³⁷

Formal meditation gives the day a reference point. Daily recollection lets that reference point reach ordinary speech, conflict, work, family, news, money, and fatigue. When it does, metta approaches the Sutta's scale.

The aim is returning often enough that metta becomes familiar in ordinary conditions.

Whenever you notice metta has slipped away, return.

Repair Loops

A real practice needs a way back.

The mind will leave. It will become irritated, numb, busy, righteous, ashamed, distracted, afraid, or bored. Without a repair method, people conclude they are bad at metta. With a repair method, the interruption becomes part of the training.

The TWIM tradition, associated with Bhante Vimalaramsi and Dhamma Sukha, is especially explicit about this. It teaches the 6Rs: recognize, release, relax, re-smile, return, and repeat.³⁸ Other teachers use different language, but the underlying movement is common: notice the interruption, let go of unnecessary tension, reconnect with metta, and begin again.

Repair methods also bring the body into the practice: the jaw, belly, chest, face, shoulders, and breath often reveal whether metta is alive or merely verbal.

Keep the repair loop clear enough to use while irritated, embarrassed, or in motion.

Metta in Conduct

The Metta Sutta begins with conduct: metta lives in how we speak, listen, refuse, consume, apologize, protect, and live with others.

Thich Nhat Hanh and Plum Village teachings make this especially concrete through loving speech, deep listening, non-harming, mindful consumption, and the ethics of everyday life. Christina Feldman's work on intention and wise attention belongs alongside them.³⁹

Metta in conduct looks like the email not sent, the apology offered, the boundary set clearly, the listening that does not interrupt, the refusal to turn a person into a category, and the decision not to intensify a room already under strain.

Conduct can slide into moral scorekeeping. The practice is simply to make metta real in thought, speech, and action.

Resting as Metta

Some teachers describe a maturing of practice: from doing metta to being metta.

At first, the practitioner may need phrases, images, recipients, categories, or directions. When metta is established, the work becomes simpler: instead of producing the feeling, one rests in it.

No one can repeat phrases every waking second, yet the Sutta asks for metta in every posture, all day. Resting closes that gap: with enough practice, metta is simply there, no words needed. It becomes home.

Bhikkhu Anālayo's work, Gil Fronsdal's teachings on the continuity of metta, and Christina Feldman's writing on the boundless heart all point in the same direction: practice matures into a way of living.⁴⁰

Without an established feeling of metta, there is nothing to rest in.

Choosing Methods

These methods are different emphases inside one practice. Use what helps metta become stronger, more expansive, steadier, and easier to return to in daily life.

Appendix B: The Metta Sutta in Pali and Translation

This appendix gathers the Pali text of the Metta Sutta, the book's translation, and comparison translations used for study.

Original Pali

Source note: Pali canonical texts are ancient and not subject to modern copyright. This text follows a common chanted and printed form of the Karaṇīya Metta Sutta. SuttaCentral's Mahāsaṅgīti edition and other editions preserve minor variants, including forms around anavasesā, sūjū/suhujū, and vineyya/vinaya.

Karaṇīyam-atthakusalena,
yan-taṁ santaṁ padaṁ abhisamecca:
sakko ujū ca sūjū ca,
suvaco cassa mudu anatiṁānī,
santussako ca subharo ca,
appakicco ca sallahukavutti,
santindriyo ca nipako ca,
appagabbho kulesu ananugiddho,
na ca khuddaṁ samācare kiñci
yena viññū pare upavadeyyuṁ.
Sukhino vā khemino hontu,
sabbe sattā bhavantu sukhitattā!
Ye keci paṇabhūtatthi
tasā vā thāvarā vā anavasesā,
dīghā vā ye mahantā vā,

majjhimā rassakā aṇukathulā,
diṭṭhā vā ye ca adiṭṭhā,
ye ca dūre vasanti avidūre,
bhūtā vā sambhavesī vā,
sabbe sattā bhavantu sukhittā!
Na paro paramṃ nikubbetha,
nātimaññetha katthaci naṃ kañci;
byārosanā paṭighasaññā,
nāññam-aññassa dukkham-iccheyya.
Mātā yathā niyaṃ puttāṃ
āyusā ekaputtam-anurakkhe,
evam-pi sabbabhūtesu
mānasā bhāvaye aparimāṇāṃ.
Mettañ-ca sabbalokasmiṃ
mānasā bhāvaye aparimāṇāṃ,
uddhaṃ adho ca tiriyañ-ca
asambādhaṃ averaṃ asapattaṃ.
Tiṭṭhaṃ caraṃ nisinno vā,
sayāno vā yāvatassa vigatamiddho,
etaṃ satim adhiṭṭheyya,
brahmam etaṃ vihāraṃ idhaṃ āhu.
Diṭṭhiñ-ca anupagamma,
sīlavā dassanena sampanno,
kāmesu vineyya gedhaṃ,
na hi jātu gabbhaseyyaṃ punareti ti.

Book Translation

This is the book's translation. It draws on the author's earlier unpublished translation and on public-domain and CC0 comparison texts, with the Pali consulted at key points.

One who is skilled in goodness should do this

to realize the state of peace:

Be capable and honorable, deeply honorable,

easy to speak to, gentle, and humble.

Be content and easy to support,

not too busy, living lightly,

alert, with senses calmed,

courteous, without greed or sycophancy.

Do not do the slightest thing

that the wise would disapprove of.

May all beings be safe and at peace.

May all beings be happy.

Whatever living beings there are,

with none whatsoever excluded:

strong or vulnerable,

large or small,

long or short,

fine or substantial,

seen or unseen,

living far away or near,

those already born

and those not yet born:

may all beings be happy.
Let no one deceive another.
Let no one look down on anyone anywhere.
Even when provoked or aggrieved,
let no one wish harm on any being.
As a mother would protect with her life
her child, her only child,
so with a boundless heart
one should cherish all living beings.
Radiate metta everywhere:
above, below, and all around,
unbounded,
free from hatred and ill will.
Standing, walking, sitting,
or lying down, whenever awake,
keep this constantly in mind.
This, they say, is the divine abiding here.
Not holding limiting views,
virtuous, accomplished in insight,
free from base desires,
one is not born again in this world.

Bhikkhu Sujato, 'The Discourse on Love'

Source: SuttaCentral Snp 1.8, <https://suttacentral.net/snp1.8/en/sujato>.
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Those who are skilled in the meaning of scripture
should practice as follows to realize the state of peace.
Let them be capable and upright, very upright,
easy to speak to, gentle and humble;
content and unburdensome,
unbusied, living lightly,
alert, with senses calmed,
courteous, not fawning on families.
Let them not do the slightest thing
that others who are wise would blame.
May they be happy and safe!
May all beings be happy!
Whatever living creatures there are
with not a one left out—
frail or firm, long or large,
medium, small, tiny or round,
seen or unseen,
living far or near,
those who have been born and those about to be born—
may all beings be happy!
Let none deceive another,
nor look down on anyone anywhere.
Though provoked or aggrieved,
let them not wish pain on each other.
Even as a mother would protect with her life

her child, her only child,
so too for all creatures
unfold a boundless heart.
With love for the whole world,
unfold a boundless heart:
above, below, all round,
unconstricted, without enmity or foe.
When standing, walking, sitting,
or lying down while yet unwearied,
keep this ever in mind;
for this, they say, is a divine meditation in this life.
Avoiding harmful views,
virtuous, accomplished in insight,
with desire for sensual pleasures dispelled,
they never return to a womb again.

Laurence Khantipalo Mills, 'Loving-Kindness'

Source: SuttaCentral Snp 1.8, <https://suttacentral.net/snp1.8/en/mills>.
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What should be done by one
who is skilled in wholesomeness,
to gain the State of Peacefulness is this:
One should be able, upright, straight and not proud,
easy to speak to, mild and well content,
easily satisfied and not caught up

in too much bustle, and frugal in one's ways,
with senses calmed, intelligent, not bold,
not being covetous when with other folk,
not even doing little things that other wise ones blame.

(And this the thought that one should always hold):

"May beings all live happily and safe,
and may their hearts rejoice within themselves.

Whatever there may be with breath of life,
whether they be frail or very strong,
without exception, be they long or short,
or middle-sized, or be big or small,
or dense, or visible or invisible,
or whether they dwell far or they dwell near,
those that are here, those seeking to exist—
may beings all rejoice within themselves."

Let no one bring about another's ruin
and not despise in any way or place;
let them not wish each other any ill
from provocation or from enmity.

Just as a mother at the risk of life
loves and protects her child, her only child,
so one should cultivate this boundless love
to all that live in the whole universe—
extending from a consciousness sublime
upwards and downwards and across the world,

untroubled, free from hate and enmity.
And while one stands or walks or sits
or lies down still free from drowsiness,
one should be intent on this mindfulness—
this is divine abiding here they say.
But when one lives quite free from any view,
is virtuous, with perfect insight won,
and greed for selfish desires let go,
one surely comes no more to be reborn.

V. Fausböll, 'Metta Sutta'

Source: V. Fausböll, *The Sutta-Nipāta, Sacred Books of the East*, Vol. 10, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1881. Public domain by age. The text is lightly modernized here: the translator's editorial parentheses are removed, and spelling, punctuation, and occasional archaic phrasing are simplified for readability.

Whatever is to be done by one who is skilful in seeking what is good, having attained that tranquil state: let him be able, upright, conscientious, soft of speech, gentle, and not proud.

Let him be contented, easily supported, with few cares, unburdened, with senses calmed, wise, not arrogant, and without greediness among families.

Let him not do anything mean for which the wise might reprove him; may all beings be happy and secure, may they be happy-minded.

Whatever living beings there are, feeble or strong, long or great, middle-sized, short, small, or large:

seen or unseen, living far or near, born or seeking birth, may all creatures be happy-minded.

Let no one deceive another. Let him not despise another in any place. Let him not out of anger or resentment wish harm to another.

As a mother at the risk of her life watches over her own child, her only child, so let everyone cultivate a boundless friendly mind toward all beings.

Let him cultivate goodwill toward all the world, a boundless friendly mind, above, below, and across, unobstructed, without hatred, without enmity.

Standing, walking, sitting, or lying down, as long as he is awake, let him devote himself to this mind. This way of living, they say, is the best in this world.

One who has not embraced philosophical views, is virtuous, endowed with perfect vision, and has subdued greed for sensual pleasures will never again go to a mother's womb.

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V. Fausböll, 1881: public domain by age.

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Notes

Before We Begin

1. Snp 1.8 / Khp 9, Karaṇiya Metta Sutta. The translation and source notes used in this book are collected in Appendix B.

Chapter 1: Why Metta Matters

2. Julia Petrovic, Jessica Mettler, Sohyun Cho, and Nancy L. Heath, "The Effects of Loving-Kindness Interventions on Positive and Negative Mental Health Outcomes: A Systematic Review and Meta-Analysis," *Clinical Psychology Review* 110 (2024): 102433, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cpr.2024.102433>.
3. Barbara L. Fredrickson et al., "Open Hearts Build Lives: Positive Emotions, Induced Through Loving-Kindness Meditation, Build Consequential Personal Resources," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 95, no. 5 (2008): 1045-1062.
4. Xianglong Zeng et al., "The Effect of Loving-Kindness Meditation on Positive Emotions: A Meta-Analytic Review," *Frontiers in Psychology* 6 (2015): 1693.
5. Emily B. Reilly and Corri L. Stuyvenberg, "A Meta-Analysis of Loving-Kindness Meditations on Self-Compassion," *Mindfulness* 14 (2023): 2299-2310, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12671-022-01972-x>.
6. Jing Lv et al., "Effects of Loving-Kindness and Compassion Meditations on Self-Compassion: A Systematic Review and Meta-Analysis," *Clinical Psychology: Science and Practice* 31, no. 1 (2024): 19-35, <https://doi.org/10.1037/cps0000177>.
7. Ben Shahrar et al., "A Wait-List Randomized Controlled Trial of Loving-Kindness Meditation Programme for Self-Criticism," *Clinical Psychology & Psychotherapy* 22, no. 4 (2015): 346-356.
8. Yuan Zheng et al., "Effects of Loving-Kindness and Compassion Meditation on Anxiety: A Systematic Review and Meta-Analysis," *Mindfulness* 14 (2023): 1021-1037, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12671-023-02121-8>.
9. Jing Lv et al., "The Effect of Four Immeasurables Meditations on Depressive Symptoms: A Systematic Review and Meta-Analysis," *Clinical Psychology Review* 76 (2020): 101814.
10. David J. Kearney et al., "Loving-Kindness Meditation vs Cognitive Processing Therapy for Posttraumatic Stress Disorder Among Veterans: A Randomized Clinical Trial," *JAMA Network Open* 4, no. 4 (2021): e216604, <https://doi.org/10.1001/jamanetworkopen.2021.6604>.
11. Cendri A. Hutcherson, Emma M. Seppala, and James J. Gross, "Loving-Kindness Meditation Increases Social Connectedness," *Emotion* 8, no. 5 (2008): 720-724.
12. Yoona Kang, Jeremy R. Gray, and John F. Dovidio, "The Nondiscriminating Heart: Lovingkindness Meditation Training Decreases Implicit Intergroup Bias," *Journal of Experimental Psychology: General* 143, no. 3 (2014): 1306-1313.
13. Jingyi Zhou et al., "A Meta-Analysis and Systematic Review of the Effect of Loving-Kindness and Compassion Meditations on Negative Interpersonal Attitudes," *Current Psychology* 42 (2023): 27813-27827, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12144-022-03866-6>.

14. Otto Simonsson, Jayanth Narayanan, and Joseph Marks, "Love Thy (Partisan) Neighbor: Brief Befriending Meditation Reduces Affective Polarization," *Group Processes & Intergroup Relations* 25, no. 6 (2022): 1577-1593; Lena Ramstetter et al., "Meditation, Not Information? A Survey Experiment Probing the Effects of Meditation Practice on Affective Polarization and Pro-Environmentalism," *Mindfulness* 16, no. 2 (2025): 507-524.
15. See Helen Y. Weng et al., "Compassion Training Alters Altruism and Neural Responses to Suffering," *Psychological Science* 24, no. 7 (2013): 1171-1180; Sofie L. Valk et al., "Structural Plasticity of the Social Brain," *Science Advances* 3, no. 10 (2017): e1700489; Kiren Bashir et al., "Loving-Kindness Meditation: Systematic Review of Neuroimaging Correlates in Long-Term Practitioners and Clinical Implications," *Brain and Behavior* 15, no. 3 (2025): e70372; and Caitlin Baten et al., "The Functional Neuroimaging of Meditation: A Quantitative Whole-Brain Meta-Analysis and Systematic Review," *Neuroscience & Biobehavioral Reviews* 186 (2026): 106709.
16. See Jose Ramon Yela et al., "Frequent Loving Kindness Meditation Relates to Lower Anxiety in Long Term Practitioners through Higher Self Compassion and Cognitive Flexibility," *Scientific Reports* 16 (2026): 10722, <https://doi.org/10.1038/s41598-026-46387-z>; Stanford Center for Compassion and Altruism Research and Education, "Research," updated April 2, 2026, <https://ccare.stanford.edu/research/>; Jennifer S. Mascaro et al., "A Randomized Controlled Trial of a Compassion-Centered Spiritual Health Intervention to Improve Hospital Inpatient Outcomes," *PLOS ONE* 20, no. 3 (2025): e0313602; Rong Wang et al., "Loving-Kindness and Compassion Meditations in the Workplace: A Meta-Analysis and Future Prospects," *Stress and Health* 40, no. 1 (2024): e3273; Andrea Alcaraz-Córdoba et al., "The Efficacy of Compassion and Self-Compassion Training Programs for Healthcare University Students: A Systematic Review and Meta-Analysis," *BMC Medical Education* 26 (2026): 687, <https://doi.org/10.1186/s12909-026-08956-8>.
17. Willoughby B. Britton et al., "Defining and Measuring Meditation-Related Adverse Effects in Mindfulness-Based Programs," *Clinical Psychological Science* 9, no. 6 (2021): 1185-1204; Miguel Farias et al., "Adverse Events in Meditation Practices and Meditation-Based Therapies: A Systematic Review," *Acta Psychiatrica Scandinavica* 142, no. 5 (2020): 374-393; Nicholas T. Van Dam et al., "Mind the Hype," *Perspectives on Psychological Science* 13, no. 1 (2018): 36-61.

Chapter 2: Where Metta Comes From

18. MN 83 (Maghadeva Sutta), where boundless metta with the other divine abidings is a "good practice" handed down by an ancient royal lineage — one the Buddha says leads only as far as the Brahma realm, while his own good practice, the noble eightfold path, leads to full liberation; AN 7.62, where the Buddha recalls seven years of metta practice in a past life; DN 13 (Tevijja Sutta), where all-direction metta is taught to brahmins as the path to companionship with Brahma. On the brahmanical background of the brahmavihāra vocabulary, see Richard Gombrich, *How Buddhism Began: The Conditioned Genesis of the Early Teachings* (1996), and *What the Buddha Thought* (2009).
19. On metta/maitrī and the mitta/mitra word-family, see the Digital Pali Dictionary entries for mettā and mitta; T. W. Rhys Davids and William Stede, *The Pali Text Society's Pali-English Dictionary*, entries for mettā and mitta; and Monier Monier-Williams, *A Sanskrit-English Dictionary*, entries for maitrī and mitra.
20. Hanns-Peter Schmidt, "Mithra i. Mitra in Old Indian and Mithra in Old Iranian," *Encyclopaedia Iranica*. On the disputed primary sense of the word-family (contract/alliance

versus friendship), see Paul Thieme, Mitra and Aryaman (1957), and Jan Gonda, *The Vedic God Mitra* (1972).

21. Vājasaneyi Saṃhitā / White Yajurveda 36.18. Chapters 30-39 are generally treated as a later stratum of the collection; absolute dates for Vedic text layers remain approximate, so no exact date is assigned here. For Vedic textual chronology, see Michael Witzel, "Tracing the Vedic Dialects" (1989) and "The Development of the Vedic Canon and its Schools" (1997). The renderings of this verse in the epigraph and in Chapter 2 are the book's own, after Ralph T. H. Griffith's 1899 public-domain translation.
22. Snp 1.8 / Khp 9, Karaṇīya Metta Sutta: brahman etam vihāraṃ idhaṃ āhu, often rendered as "this is the divine/Brahma abiding here." For early Buddhist use and critique of Brahma as maker and creator, see DN 1, Brahmajāla Sutta. For all-direction metta as a path to companionship with Brahma, see DN 13, Tevijja Sutta.

Chapter 3: The Metta Sutta

23. The Metta Sutta appears as Sutta Nipāta 1.8 and Khuddakapāṭha 9. The Pali text and Bhikkhu Sujato's CC0 translation are available through SuttaCentral.
24. For the traditional forest-spirit story and commentarial background, see Piya Tan, "Karaṇīya Metta Sutta," Dharmafarer SD 38.3, and Bhikkhu Bodhi, *The Suttanipāta: An Ancient Collection of the Buddha's Discourses Together with Its Commentaries* (Wisdom Publications, 2017). This chapter paraphrases rather than reproduces those copyrighted discussions.
25. The Pali sukhittatā points beyond external comfort toward inward happiness or being happy in oneself. Comparison translations vary: Sujato has "happy," Fausböhl has "happy-minded," and Mills has "hearts rejoice within themselves."

Chapter 4: One Simple Practice

26. Ajahn Sona, *Meditations on Breath and Loving-Kindness* (Birken Forest Buddhist Monastery, 2018), <https://birken.ca/wp-content/uploads/2019/03/Ajahn-Sona-Meditations-on-Breath-and-Loving-Kindness.pdf>. See also Ajahn Sona's Virtual Metta Retreat video series on YouTube.
27. Ajahn Sona, "Virtual Metta Retreat (7): Crank it to 11, Include the Neighbors," YouTube, 2020, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ThSafPdN_BM.

Afterword: The Will to Metta

28. This afterword uses Nietzsche, Freud, and Frankl as broad modern reference points rather than technical summaries of their full systems. The framing of a "will to pleasure," "will to power," and "will to meaning" as rival answers follows Viktor Frankl's own presentation in *Man's Search for Meaning*. For Nietzsche, see his mature writings and the contested posthumous tradition around *The Will to Power*. For Freud, see *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* and his broader metapsychological writings on pleasure, desire, and psychic life.

Appendix A: Overview of Metta Techniques

29. Sharon Salzberg, *Lovingkindness: The Revolutionary Art of Happiness* (1995), and her guided loving-kindness materials; Gil Fronsdal's Insight Meditation Center metta course; Greater Good in Action, "Loving-Kindness Meditation."
30. Ajahn Brahm, "Ajahn Brahm's Instructions for Loving-Kindness Meditation," *Lion's Roar*; Ajahn Sona, *Meditations on Breath and Loving-Kindness* and *Virtual Metta Retreat* talks; Jack Kornfield's *loved-one* and *beacon-style* metta instructions; Dhamma Sukha/TWIM materials on finding the feeling of metta.
31. On early all-direction metta practice and immeasurable meditation, see Bhikkhu Anālayo, "Immeasurable Meditations and Mindfulness," *Mindfulness* 10 (2019): 2620-2628.
32. Nāṇamoli Thera, "The Practice of Loving-Kindness," *Access to Insight*; Ācariya Buddhārakkhita, "Metta: The Philosophy and Practice of Universal Love," *Access to Insight*; Sujiva, *Loving-Kindness Meditation*.
33. Buddhaghosa, *Visuddhimagga*, chapter IX, "The Development of Loving-Kindness."
34. Sharon Salzberg, *Lovingkindness: The Revolutionary Art of Happiness*; Gil Fronsdal, "Introduction to Metta Meditation"; Henepola Gunaratana, *Loving-Kindness in Plain English*; Jack Kornfield, *Lovingkindness Meditation: A Complete Guide to the Practice of Metta*."
35. Sharon Salzberg, Jack Kornfield, and *Visuddhimagga* metta instructions all treat difficult-person practice with some form of graduality.
36. Kristin Neff, self-compassion practice materials; Center for Mindful Self-Compassion resources; Greater Good in Action, "Self-Compassion Break."
37. Sharon Salzberg, "Street Lovingkindness"; Gil Fronsdal, "Continuity of Metta"; Ajahn Sona, *Virtual Metta Retreat* materials; Plum Village, "Discourse on Love" and teachings on loving speech and deep listening.
38. Dhamma Sukha / TWIM materials on the 6Rs and metta practice, including "The 6Rs," "Metta Barebones Booklet," and *radiating-to-the-directions* materials.
39. Plum Village, "Discourse on Love"; Plum Village Five Mindfulness Trainings; Christina Feldman, *Boundless Heart*.
40. Bhikkhu Anālayo, "Cultivating the Brahmavihāras," interview, Barre Center for Buddhist Studies, 2015; Christina Feldman, *Boundless Heart*; Gil Fronsdal, "Continuity of Metta."