Intention is the heart of metta practice. It is difficult, if not impossible, to live a life of good will unless and until we explicitly set the intention to do so. Intentions are not goals. It’s important to be clear about this because we are vulnerable to conflating the two.

In Buddhist teaching, intention is primary–so primary that the Buddha included right intention in the Eightfold Path, the Path of liberation, along with right view, right conduct, right speech, right livelihood, right effort, right concentration, and right mindfulness. Alas, right goal is nowhere to be found! It’s not that there’s anything wrong with goals; they are important and helpful in many ways, not the least being that a goal can actually help strengthen and focus our intention.

But a goal, by definition, focuses on a future outcome. Intentions are neither oriented toward a future nor an outcome. Their concern is on how we are “being” right now. Right now is not tomorrow, or next week, or yesterday, or 30 seconds from now. It is always just right now.

We do not strive to become peaceful and calm or wise and skillful or any of the other qualities named in the Metta Sutra someday. Rather, we practice our intention *right now* so that it is available and alive in all the right nows of our everyday life. The more we practice and clarify our intentions, the less important any particular result becomes. That is what it means for intention to be primary.

As much as we like to think otherwise, we cannot control whether or not we meet our goals. Circumstances beyond our control—and let’s face it, that covers most circumstances— can and do derail them. But we can control our intentions. It doesn’t mean we will live them perfectly. But it does mean that during a difficult interaction we may be able to sidestep an aggressive or harmful reaction that escalates the situation. When we are grounded in our intention, we are never helpless in how we react to what arises in our life. Thus, learning to protect and strengthen our intention is essential; we can do this by forming the habit of stopping and asking ourselves, “what is my intention?” throughout our day. Every time we reconnect to our intentions, we take a step toward peace and freedom.

One of the simplest methods of practicing metta is to state our intention with very few words, or even a single word. Try it, taking care to dwell in “right nowness” by thinking or saying “right now” after each intention. For example:

Peaceful. . .right now

Calm. . .right now

Wise…right now

Skillful. . .right now

Carry this simple method of metta practice with you throughout your day.