The Metta Sutra instructs us not to be “swayed by the emotions of the crowd.” The original translation uses the word “clan” instead of crowd. Clans, or tribes, were a basic organizing unit in Indian society at the time of the Buddha. The Buddha, for instance, was born Prince Siddhartha Gautama into the Sakya clan, which was ruled by his father the king. (He relinquished his destiny as future king when he left home on his search for enlightenment, eventually becoming the Buddha.)

Clan identity was a badge of belonging. At their best, clans imparted values and a sense of place in the world; at their worst, however, they were a source of social disharmony and discord. Clans frequently went to war with each other in order to defend their territory, their power, and their name. The instruction not to be swayed by the emotions of the crowd cautions us against getting whipped into a frenzy in the service of the clan ideology at the expense of social harmony and peace. In modern parlance, we could say that the Buddha was warning against Groupthink.

We don’t have a formal clan structure in our society, but we certainly take on badges of belonging: religious, political, gender and racial, to name a few. The danger for us lies not in the identity itself but in our tendency to *grasp* identity to the point of sacrificing peace, communal harmony, and even our own values in the name of defending our “crowd.” One way we know that we have succumbed to the “emotions of crowd” is when we assume we know all there is to know about someone based on what group they identify with. Even more pernicious is that we can come to see *ourselves* primarily through the lens of our crowd—we look to our tribe to tell us what we should think and feel, thus running the risk of ignoring and becoming alienated from our own true heart. When we hold identity lightly and with awareness, it can be a source of belonging while still allowing freedom to unfold.

Suggested metta phrases to use with this reflection follow, or formulate your own.

May I know my own heart.

May I learn to trust it

May I be free from the constriction of rigid views

May I see all beings as Buddha