One of the more vivid images in the Metta Sutra is that of a mother protecting her child with her very life. It’s a lovely image that speaks to our interdependence with one another: When we take care of one another, we take care of ourselves. When we harm someone, we harm ourselves. There’s something else very important about this image. It implicitly upholds the value of sacrifice. So fierce is the mother’s love that she is willing to sacrifice her life. Most of us will likely not find ourselves in a position where are required to sacrifice our life to practice metta. However, we will frequently be in a position where we are required to sacrifice something that may be just as difficult: our familiar thoughts, feelings, attitudes, and views; the habits of the heart and mind that are not conducive to walking the path of peace and good will.

It is easy to demonstrate good will when we are with those we like and respect. But it hardly needs saying that there are times when finding even a seed of good will in our hearts seems beyond our capacity. Let’s face it: sometimes giving in to ill will just feels better or easier, especially in toward those in whom we see few if any admirable qualities. Additionally, giving in to ill will can sometimes satisfy a desire to fit in. Or perhaps we have been hurt and indulging in ill will is the only way we know how to help ourselves feel better.

There is an old saying that is helpful here: “When you find yourself in a hole, just stop digging.” It’s the first and most essential action if you hope to get out of the hole. Sometimes, when we can’t muster good will, it is enough to simply surrender ill will in that moment, even though we have no idea what comes next. We become willing to fall into the wide open space of not knowing. For example, let’s say you’re in a conversation and you realize you’ve joined in with the rest of the people in bashing someone. Falling into the wide open space of not knowing means that you simply stop talking and allow yourself to feel whatever discomfort comes from being in that puddle of silence. You stop digging the hole of ill will.

 Metta practice does not require us to generate a heroic amount of love; that might indeed be something that develops, but it is not a requirement. However, it is a requirement that we *not do* many things we are accustomed to doing. Let’s not underestimate the power of not doing. The Buddha, for example, defined a “wise and skillful” thought, word and deed simply as nonharming.

Please take a few moments to identify an attitude, a habitual feeling, or a thought that you are willing to sacrifice for the sake of metta. A worry, perhaps, or a leftover from an argument, or even a long-standing grudge that’s so familiar you might not realize you’re carrying it. Just for now, see if you can surrender it to that wide open space of not knowing. What we surrender right now we might take back in 5 minutes, but that wide open space is always available and willing to receive.

Offer metta related to building the skill of abiding in the space of not knowing rather than giving in to harmful impulses. An example follows; feel free to use these or your own phrases.

May I do no harm

May no harm come to me

May I recognize and surrender the impulse to harm

May I abide peacefully in the space of not knowing