In Buddhist practice, every virtue or wholesome quality has what we call a “far enemy” and a “near enemy.” A far enemy is the opposite of the wholesome virtue or quality; thus, for example, the far enemy of compassion is cruelty. That’s easy to see. A near enemy, on the other hand, is much harder to spot because it superficially resembles the virtue or wholesome quality. For example, the near enemy of compassion is pity—feeling sorry for someone in a way that contains a touch of superiority and serves to distance and separate rather than connect in mutuality.

It’s important to learn to recognize near enemies because they actually corrode the quality they’re masquerading as. When we fail to see these imposters for what they are, we become vulnerable to spiritual bypassing—misusing spirituality to sidestep or avoid facing our own wounds or unresolved emotional issues.

Ill will—actively condemning or wishing harm upon another—is the obvious far enemy of metta. One near enemy of metta is sentimentality, which we can define as being emotionally inauthentic in a maudlin, or soppy, way. The metta practitioner who falls into sentimentality places an undue importance on making themselves feel good with little actual regard for others, who become merely a screen on which to project their own imaginings and desires.

Another near enemy of metta is attachment. It masquerades as lovingkindness but communicates, “I know what is best for you, I know what your path should be.”

In our practice it’s important to stay alert to falling prey to these near enemies. If we do become entangled in them, *it’s not a failure!* It is simply an opporunity to get to know our hearts better. We simply acknowledge that we’ve missed the mark and patiently explore what we can learn about ourselves and our heartmind. If we realize we are motivated by attachment, for instance, we can acknowledge that, just as we appreciate when others do not assume they know what is best for us, the person to whom we’re offering metta deserves the same; we might explore whether fear of abandonment is at play and how we might heal it. We stay with ourselves and keep practicing. Practicing with near enemies can help deepen our capacity to be honest with ourselves with good will and kindness.

Near the end of the Metta Sutra, the Buddha refers to the “pure-hearted one” who has “clarity of vision.” Being pure-hearted does not mean being perfect. It means having a willingness and the skill to live with a limitless heart. This requires that we recognize the rough edges of our hearts that can cause us to close in on ourselves. Clarity of vision means understanding that our practice is a universal, non-discriminating caring grounded not in our own feelings and attachments, but in realizing the profound connection among all beings. We have an opportunity to nurture our pure-heartedness and clarity of vision whenever we see sentimentality or attachment arise.

I invite you to offer metta in your own words, paying particular attention to your internal response and meeting whatever arises with good will.