The Metta Sutta says, “Whether standing or walking, seated or lying down, free from drowsiness, one should sustain this recollection.” In other words, the practice of metta is not confined to a particular time or place, posture, circumstance, or mood. The time and place to practice metta is always here and now, regardless of conditions, our mood, whether we are alone or in a crowd. The sutra asks us to make the practice of metta a priority.

Hand in hand with forthrightly generating thoughts of good will is the necessity of recognizing and overcoming the habits of heart and mind that undermine it. Greed, attachments, blame, resentments, fear, jealousy, anger and other afflictions stand always at the ready to hijack our best intentions if we aren’t vigilant. In fact, many Buddhist teachings refer to these afflictive emotions as thieves, because they rob us of peace and the ability to be of benefit to others.

One of the essential skills to cultivate that can help us subdue these thieves is refraining— refraining from giving free reign to anger, to the desire for revenge, to jealous impulses and aggression. We may not be able to control the arising of these emotions, but we can deprive them of oxygen by seeing them clearly for what they are. Learning to refrain requires learning to pause long enough to do this. Pausing gives us a chance to recognize when harsh and negative thoughts about ourselves or others are taking hold; instead of filling up space with our habitual reactivity and internal chatter, we simply stop and pay attention. My teacher, Diane Martin, recommended a practice called mind-sitting. It begins by literally stopping for brief periods of time throughout the day. We tune in to any reactivity we feel in our bodies-–a butterfly in the stomach, the heat of annoyance beginning creep up our neck, a heavy heart, the buzz of being in a constant state of rushing, a dull sense of overwhelm, to name a few. We train ourselves to just stop and wait. We refrain from all speech. We say nothing to ourselves, not even “what is this?” We do this because, as Diane said, “there’s a clear, sparkling awareness that will come up when we just shut the damn mouth inside of us.” We cultivate an alert, receiving, allowing space, devoid of words and commentary. It’s a transformative experience to simply pause instead of immediately filling up space. By waiting, we begin to connect with our fundamental spaciousness right in the midst of our fundamental restlessness. These are not mutually exclusive; we experience the truth that space pervades all beings, all phenomenon, even restlessness and constriction, and we tap into it. We begin to tame the wild elephant of our mind by noticing that she stomps and huffs around in wide open space. Pausing for even 10 or 15 or 30 seconds at a time throughout our day can bring us back to our senses and help restore us. I like to mark the end of my little mind-sitting exercises with the words “I wish you well,” with the “you” being no one in particular and everyone in general, including myself.

Let’s do some mind-sitting right now. Let’s refrain from all speech, all internal chatter. Notice your thoughts let them fizzle out by shifting your attention to the space between the words. Just like looking at the sky and shifting your attention away from the clouds to the space between the clouds. Do your best to simply hold the silence, hold the space. If you can do this for 10 seconds, you can do it for 20. When you can do it for 20, you can do it for 45. Be careful not to ask too much of this space. Let it reveal itself to you by respectfully waiting for it. You can learn to tap into this openness and spaciousness within you. This is the spacious, expansive mind of metta.

**Repeat these intentions for yourself, for someone it is easy for you to appreciate, for a neutral person, for someone with whom you have difficulty, and for all beings without exception. Use these words or words/no words of your own**

May I/you have the mind of lovingkindness throughout the day.

May I/you overcome greed, aggression, fear and ignorance..

May I/you see all beings as deserving of kindness and good will.

May I/you abide in spaciousness.