

Developing Empathic Listening in Counselling Practice: Insights from the *Karaniya Metta Sutta*

Tharindu Dananjaya Weerasinghe¹

Introduction

Empathic listening is widely recognized as one of the most fundamental competencies in counselling practice. It enables counsellors to understand clients' emotional experiences, communicate acceptance, and establish therapeutic relationships that facilitate psychological growth and healing. Carl Rogers (1957) identified empathy as one of the core conditions necessary for effective therapeutic change, while contemporary counselling literature continues to emphasize empathic listening as a critical determinant of counselling outcomes (Elliott et al., 2018; Howick et al., 2025). Recent studies further suggest that empathic listening contributes to client satisfaction, emotional disclosure, psychological safety, and the development of a strong therapeutic alliance (Wampold & Imel, 2022; Howick et al., 2025).

Despite the extensive discussion of empathy within Western counselling traditions, there remains considerable potential to explore empathic listening through the lens of Buddhist teachings. Buddhist psychology offers a rich understanding of human suffering, compassion, and interpersonal understanding that can contribute significantly to contemporary counselling theory and practice (Germer & Neff, 2019). Among Buddhist teachings, the *Karaniya Metta Sutta* provides a relevant framework for understanding and developing the attitudes that underlie empathic listening (Howick et al., 2025).

The *Karaniya Metta Sutta*, found in the Sutta Nipata (Sn 1.8), presents a comprehensive discourse on loving-kindness (Metta), compassion, non-harming, and universal goodwill. The Sutta advocates the development of mental qualities that enable individuals to relate to others with acceptance, understanding, and genuine concern. These qualities closely resemble the attitudinal foundations required for empathic listening in counselling.

Accordingly, this study examines how the teachings of the *Karaniya Metta Sutta* can contribute the development of empathic listening skill among counsellors. By integrating Buddhist perspectives with contemporary counselling literature, the study proposes a conceptual framework/pathway that positions

¹ Department of Human Resource Management, Faculty of Commerce and Management ` Studies, University of Kelaniya, Sri Lanka. dananjaya@kln.ac.lk

Metta as a foundational psychological disposition supporting effective empathic engagement throughout the counselling journey.

Objectives

This study aims to:

Examine the relevance of the *Karaniya Metta Sutta* to empathic listening in counselling practice.

Identify specific teachings within the Sutta that support the development of empathic listening skill.

Develop a conceptual framework/pathway illustrating how Metta-based qualities contribute to effective counselling relationships and outcomes.

Present the implications for counsellor education and professional development.

Methodology

This study employed a qualitative conceptual analysis design. Primary textual analysis was conducted based on the *Karaniya Metta Sutta* as the principal source of Buddhist teaching. The analysis focused on identifying concepts related to compassion, non-judgment, emotional understanding, and interpersonal sensitivity that are the ingredients of empathic listening (Howick et al., 2025).

Secondary data were obtained from contemporary counselling, psychotherapy, and Buddhist psychology literature. Peer-reviewed publications addressing empathy, therapeutic alliance, compassion-based interventions, and mindfulness-informed counselling practices were reviewed. Thematic analysis was utilized to identify conceptual relationships between the teachings of the *Karaniya Metta Sutta* and the core dimensions of empathic listening. The conceptual framework/pathway developed through this analysis links specific teachings of the Sutta with attitudes and behaviors commonly associated with empathic listening in counselling treatment plans.

Results

The analysis revealed four major themes within the *Karaniya Metta Sutta* that contribute to the development of empathic listening among modern counsellors.

Universal Goodwill and Unconditional Positive Regard

One of the central teachings of the *Karaniya Metta Sutta* states: “*May all beings be happy and secure; may they be happy-minded*” (Sutta Nipata 1.8; Bodhi, 2017).

This statement reflects an unconditional orientation of goodwill toward all individuals regardless of their characteristics, behaviors, and circumstances. In counselling practice, this principle closely resembles Rogers’ (1957) concept of ‘*unconditional positive regard*’. Empathic listening requires counsellors to suspend judgment and accept clients without criticism or prejudice. The development of universal goodwill enables counsellors to remain open to clients’ experiences while creating a psychologically safe environment for self-disclosure.

Non-Harming and Non-Judgmental Presence

The Sutta further states: “*Let none deceive another; nor despise any person whatsoever in any place*” (Sutta Nipata 1.8; Bodhi, 2017, p. 215).

This teaching discourages negative evaluation, hostility, and interpersonal domination. Empathic listening requires counsellors to avoid imposing interpretations, moral judgments, or personal biases upon clients. Recent counselling literature indicates that non-judgmental therapeutic presence enhances trust and facilitates deeper emotional disclosure (Norcross & Lambert, 2019; Adam et al., 2025). The principle articulated in the Sutta encourages counsellors to develop an ‘*accepting stance*’ that supports ‘*authentic empathic engagement*’.

Compassionate Concern for Human Suffering

Perhaps the most powerful passage in the Sutta states: “*Just as a mother would protect her only child at the risk of her own life, even so let one develop a boundless heart toward all beings*” (Bodhi, 2017, p. 216).

This verse reflects profound compassion and emotional responsiveness to the suffering of others. Compassion represents a critical component of empathy because it involves both understanding another’s pain and responding with genuine concern (Germer & Neff, 2019). Counsellors who develop compassionate awareness are better positioned to recognize clients’ emotional struggles and respond in ways that communicate understanding and support (Palumbo et al., 2024).

Boundless Awareness and Deep Attentiveness

The Sutta further instructs practitioners to develop “*a boundless heart toward all the world*” (Bodhi, 2017, p. 216).

The concept of boundlessness suggests openness, expansiveness, and freedom from restrictive judgments. Empathic listening similarly requires counsellors to maintain full attention to clients’ experiences without prematurely categorizing or evaluating them. Recent research demonstrates that mindful attention enhances empathic accuracy and therapeutic effectiveness (Siegel, 2020). The cultivation of boundless awareness described in the Sutta therefore provides a psychological foundation for emphatic listening.

Based on these findings, a conceptual pathway emerged as depicted in figure 1.

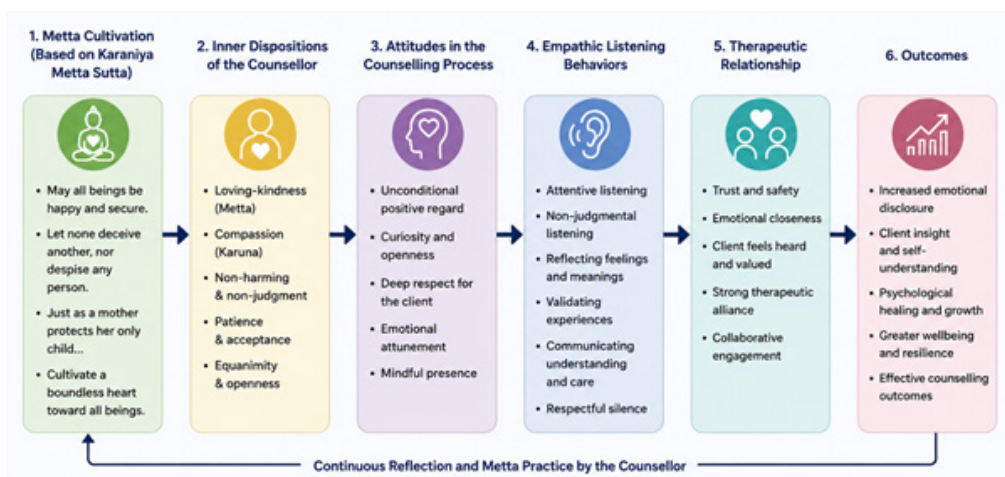


Figure 1: Conceptual Pathway

Source: Author, 2026

This pathway suggests that empathic listening may be understood not merely as a communication skill but as the behavioral expression of deeper ethical and psychological qualities deliberately developed through Metta practice (Adam et al., 2025).

Discussion

The findings indicate that the *Karaniya Metta Sutta* provides a valuable Buddhist framework for understanding the development of empathic listening in counselling practice. The teachings of universal goodwill, non-harming, compassion, and boundless awareness closely align with contemporary counselling theories concerning empathy, therapeutic presence, and unconditional positive regard (Palumbo et al., 2024; Howick et al., 2025).

Empathic listening involves attentive presence, non-judgmental acceptance, caring, and the communication of understanding (Weinstein et al., 2025). The analysis suggests that empathic listening extends beyond technical communication skills and involves the cultivation of particular inner dispositions (Palumbo et al., 2024). The *Karaniya Metta Sutta* emphasizes mental qualities that foster openness, acceptance, and concern for the wellbeing of others. These qualities support the counsellor's capacity to listen attentively, understand clients' experiences, and establish trusting therapeutic relationships. The therapeutic relationship is characterized by empathy, mutual respect, and a non-judgmental attitude that creates a safe space for clients to discuss their concerns openly (Opland et al., 2024; Howick et al., 2025; Adam et al., 2025).

The study contributes to the growing fields of modern counselling by demonstrating how ancient contemplative teachings can enrich contemporary therapeutic practices. The findings further suggest that Metta meditation and related contemplative exercises may serve as practical methods for enhancing empathic listening competencies among counsellors. Future empirical studies should investigate the relationship between Metta-based training programs and measurable improvements in empathic listening skills, therapeutic alliance, and counselling effectiveness. Such research would strengthen the evidence base for integrating Buddhist contemplative practices into counsellor education and professional development.

Keywords - Buddhist Psychology, Counselling, Empathic Listening, Karaniya Metta Sutta, Loving-Kindness

References

- Adam, B., Thompson, R., & Williams, J. (2025). From theory to practice: A critical review and meta-framework of person-centredness, therapeutic alliance, and empathy in mental health care. *Patient Education and Counseling*, 131, 108356.
- Bodhi, B. (2017). *The Suttanipāta: An ancient collection of the Buddha's discourses*. Wisdom Publications.
- Elliott, R., Bohart, A. C., Watson, J. C., & Murphy, D. (2018). Therapist empathy and client outcome: An updated meta-analysis. *Psychotherapy*, 55(4), 399–410.
- Germer, C. K., & Neff, K. D. (2019). Self-compassion in clinical practice. *Journal of Clinical Psychology*, 75(8), 1278–1291.
- Howick, J., Moscrop, A., Mebius, A., Fanshawe, T. R., Lewith, G., Bishop, F. L., & Mistiaen, P. (2025). Uncovering the components of therapeutic empathy: A systematic analysis of definitions and applications. *Patient Education and Counseling*, 128, 108–119.
- Norcross, J. C., & Lambert, M. J. (2019). Psychotherapy relationships that work III. *Psychotherapy*, 56(4), 423–430.

- Opland, C., Brindley, P. G., & Krenzischek, D. (2024). Psychotherapy and therapeutic relationship. In *StatPearls*. StatPearls Publishing.
- Palumbo, A., Reeves, A., & Cooper, M. (2024). The empathetic landscape: Examining the role of empathy in the well-being of psychotherapists and counsellors. *Counselling and Psychotherapy Research*, 24(3), 890–903.
- Rogers, C. R. (1957). The necessary and sufficient conditions of therapeutic personality change. *Journal of Consulting Psychology*, 21(2), 95–103.
- Siegel, D. J. (2020). *The mindful therapist: A clinician's guide to mindsight and neural integration*. W. W. Norton.
- Wampold, B. E., & Imel, Z. E. (2022). *The great psychotherapy debate: The evidence for what makes psychotherapy work* (3rd ed.). Routledge.
- Weinstein, N., Itzhakov, G., Legate, N., & Kluger, A. N. (2025). Empathic listening satisfies speakers' psychological needs and strengthens self-connection and social connection. *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*, 116, 104680.