

# Mettā Sutta (4 of 5) Cultivating a Boundless Heart

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## SUMMARY KEYWORDS

loving-kindness, cultivate, mind, open, awareness, unlimited, mother, protect, child, receptive, room, love, hate, ill will, radiance

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This talk is the fourth one on the “*Mettā Sutta*,” the discourse on loving-kindness. My translation of the sutta is on the IMC website at <https://www.insightmeditationcenter.org/metta-sutta/>. In my first talk, I said I would divide the sutta into four parts. I may do that, but I will give five talks. Today’s section of the sutta is about the cultivation of loving-kindness.

The first section of the sutta is the wholesome qualities of heart and mind that we cultivate on the path to liberation. The second section is the wish for all beings to be happy and safe. The third section is working with our aversion, anger, and resentments. These limit us and narrow the scope of awareness and the mind. They involve our preoccupation to be angry and resentful. When we are preoccupied, there is no room for taking in others and the world in an open-hearted, open-minded way.

With that as a foundation, the sutta goes on to emphasize cultivating a boundless heart. To cultivate and develop with loving-kindness an unlimited heart and mind. The point of loving-kindness is not simply having wishes of *mettā* or repeatedly saying phrases. The phrases, if we say them, are there to support an open awareness – an openness of heart that includes others – without contracting, resisting, or getting caught up in desires, aversions, and fears.

It is a very simple state of mind. The mind is open and available to absorb, take in, and receive experience. The mind is so open and boundless that experience does not stick with us. It is almost like we are transparent, and things go right through us. Not because we are dismissing things, but the limitations of the mind are sticky. We contract and get preoccupied. We get caught in the world of other people and our reactions. A free mind has no stickiness in it. Things are fully experienced, but they go through or do not stick anywhere. This is called an unlimited, boundless heart and mind.

The fourth section of the sutta goes like this:

*As a mother would risk her life  
To protect her child, her only child,  
So toward all beings should one  
Cultivate a boundless heart.  
With loving-kindness for the whole world should one  
Cultivate a boundless heart,  
Above, below, and all around  
Without obstruction, without hate, and without ill will.*

For some people, the idea of a mother risking her life to protect her child is a touching metaphor. It does not involve a preoccupation with self. When I was a parent of young children, I did not feel so important. I was willing to put aside all kinds of personal needs. It seemed like my child – this baby who could not take care of itself – was much more important. Most of the time, there was a wonderful, healthy feeling in giving myself up for the welfare of my child. When done well, I could feel it was good, and I was not trying to benefit myself. When done in unhealthy ways, that would come back to bite me – that did not really work.

The metaphor in this sutta of a parent protecting their child does not mean that we are supposed to risk our lives to protect other beings. Rather, it is a letting go of self – a boundlessness. In loving-kindness practice, we are cultivating lots of space in our hearts to include others. We are developing not only through loving-kindness – but also through the path of liberation. The mind is no longer limited, contracted, preoccupied, resistant, or shut

down. It is completely open and receptive. Like an open window, the wind can go right through. Or a baseball, thrown by a kid, does not break the glass because it just goes right through.

So we cultivate a boundless heart. Cultivate is a powerful word – it does not mean that we are supposed to automatically do that and we are bad if we don't. It means we practice. This is what we are working towards. If our practice has a quality of openness, the more we practice, the more we move in that direction – of relaxing and being receptive, not getting tight and forceful, not having unwholesome movements of needing, wanting, expecting, and pushing away. As we practice, it has a quality of opening, releasing, and making more room for things.

When people become mature in Buddhist practice, their minds have lots of room – infinite room – for things. Sometimes you can feel that spaciousness in others – their minds do not move as much. You do not see the mind jumping around. You do not see agitation, restlessness, deflecting, or turning away. There is openness and quiet – a willingness to be here in open stillness.

*With loving-kindness for the whole world should one  
Cultivate a boundless heart,*

This part refers to the upper reaches of real loving-kindness. In the privacy of our meditation, it is relatively easy to love everyone and feel that universal love is a great thing. When we work, engage, and share lives with people, the idea of loving all beings sometimes gets lost. It recedes from importance because of the drama, preoccupations, irritation, and injustice of whatever is happening in the moment.

We are going in the direction of cultivating a boundless heart with loving-kindness for the whole world. We are learning not only how to let go a lot – but also how to live safely and wisely in our complicated world so we can have boundless loving-kindness. We do not want to have boundless loving-kindness and be naive or easily victimized by what goes on around us.

*With loving-kindness for the whole world should one  
Cultivate a boundless heart,  
Above, below, and all around,  
Without obstruction, without hate, and without ill will.*

Hate and ill-will are two big obstructions – ways the mind is limited – to our capacity for love. They are strong words, but they can have very subtle manifestations. Sometimes it is the subtlest manifestations that are the cutting, growing edge of our practice. We do not overlook even the subtle ones. We do not say, "It does not matter," or "It is easier just to go ahead and do it." We discover how to live without the subtlest forms of hate and ill will.

*Cultivate a boundless heart  
Above, below, and all around,*

Some people experience this as radiance, glow, or warmth. It can be a sense of clarity and openness that feels like radiating light.

Loving-kindness is based on an intention. This intention does not have to be a mental exercise of repeatedly saying, "May all beings be happy." These words can be useful, but as the heart becomes more boundless, there is a glow, clarity, or openness that we can feel going out in all directions. The attention is not focused narrowly on something. It is opened up 360 degrees with kindness, goodwill, and friendliness – a radiant glow of kindness – above, below, and all around.

The human capacity to dwell in love, goodwill, kindness, and friendliness is phenomenal. That we can have this be the predominant mood, field of attention, and flow of concern is phenomenal. To be integrated and harmonized – centered in *mettā* – is a phenomenal capacity. It is fantastic that we are born with this capacity.

We can cultivate and grow our capacity for goodwill. Sometimes we can do this intentionally through *mettā* practice. Sometimes it is a byproduct of mindfulness practice. As mindfulness frees us from the limitations of the mind, we can begin to recognize that love and goodwill have been living and waiting for us in our hearts. Then it is a matter of making more space for it. Just as you make space for more people in your heart, you make more space in your heart for love.

Thank you. We have one more talk on this sutta tomorrow.