

Hi everyone. My name is Zac and I use he and him pronouns. I'm a white 38-year-old male with long and thinning medium brown hair. Today I'm wearing a black T-shirt and gray rectangular glasses. Although it's not visible on my camera, I'm seated on a gray and black manual wheelchair.

Two weeks ago was the four year anniversary of the first time I attended Everybody, Every Mind Sangha.

As many of you know, I've rarely missed a week since. Before long, my attendance became volunteering, which eventually led to teaching. I have so much love for this community. I'm really honored to be so involved in making the magic happen at this group.

So tonight I wanted to talk about the importance of disability community, sangha, and what the Buddha called admirable friendship.

Back in 2021, before I had even heard about this group, I was introduced to the dharma through a course called Awakening Joy, which was developed and taught by a man named James Baraz. Concurrently, I was learning about disability, culture, and community through reading books and various forms of social media. I started to see ways to connect these two worlds, not knowing that there are already groups doing exactly that.

When I found Every Body, Every Mind, it was a place that I immediately felt I belonged. This has been a rare experience for me as someone who has grown up disabled. In 2022, I took the teacher training for Awakening Joy and rewrote the class from a disabled perspective. I will be teaching my class starting in January. It will be held every other Tuesday through June 2nd. There's a link for more information on the courts in the chat.

I'd like to start by talking about why community is important for disabled people. Disability studies discusses different models of disability. These are different ways of analyzing disability and the disabled experience.

To very briefly summarize. The medical model focuses on what is wrong with an individual and how to treat our maladies. It emphasizes pathology and being able to name our conditions. It places the blame on individuals for their differences. For example, Zac could not get into the building because he uses a wheelchair.

Whereas the social model argues that society is built in such a way that ignores the variety of differences in human bodies and says that it's society's lack of inclusivity that disables us. To continue my example, Zac, is disabled because the building does not have a ramp for his wheelchair. The social model has some good arguments, but ignores issues like chronic pain and chronic fatigue, which are disabling even when we have all of our access needs met. It's also important to see ourselves reflected in others and to see ourselves as part of a community.

A model that has been becoming increasingly popular is the affirmative model which views disability, not just from the perspective of what impairs us, but argues that disabled people are a distinct minority group with shared experiences, politics, and even our own culture.

The affirmative model is intended to shift both the way that society views disabled people, but also how we view ourselves. It says that disability itself is a neutral attribute, like being tall or having blue eyes. This doesn't mean that there aren't very difficult aspects of disability. It just means that we are defined by more than our struggle. Society at large automatically assumes that being disabled is tragic.

My fellow teacher Anne Finger has told a story about someone taking an empathy test. They were asked how they feel when they see a child in a wheelchair. The correct answer was that it made you feel sad for this child. However, this person themselves used a wheelchair and did not feel sad. Instead, this person said that they would feel a sense of joy from seeing common humanity and representation. They knew the disabled experience is more than tragedy. Unfortunately, from the limited perspective of the test, that answer was incorrect. Their feelings are far from fringe beliefs, though many of us feel that positive attributes can come from the experience of being disabled.

Common examples include empathy and ingenuity from having to adapt to a world that's not made for us. The deaf community uses the phrase deaf gain to show that deafness is more than hearing loss. For example, deaf people can communicate in loud environments or across a room more easily than hearing people can.

These concepts are great examples of what at East Bay Meditation Center, we call both, and. It's not an attempt to ignore our hardship. In fact, that's part of what ties us together. It's simply not seeing things from a singular perspective. A middle path, so to speak.

Of course, participation in the political and communal aspects of disability is optional. Choosing not to engage with disabled community and culture does not mean someone is not disabled. Disability touches all identities and sharing the disabled experience doesn't mean that we will see eye to eye.

Although it would be awfully nice if the whole disabled community shared the same goals and political views. It just doesn't work that way. The governor of Texas is a wheelchair user, and I couldn't disagree with him more. This doesn't invalidate his disability. Whether or not any of you participate in other disabled community just by being here, you know the power of being surrounded by others with similar experiences.

Let's move into discussing what community means in the context of Buddhism. Many of you have heard of the Three Jewels. These are three cornerstones of Buddhist practice. We sometimes say, I take refuge in the Buddha, the Dharma and the Sangha. The phrase the Buddha does not exclusively mean the historical figure, Siddhartha Gutama, but all teachers, both human and experiential. I consider my disability to be one of my very important teachers. The Buddha can also include our own wisdom as we can all be our own best teacher. Similarly, the Dharma can simply mean teachings and doesn't necessarily have to mean teachings of Buddhism. And lastly. Sangha is a group who practiced these teachings together.

One thing that I appreciate about Sanghas is that even when we have one person leading the group, as I am tonight, so much wisdom then comes from the participants. No matter how new to practice they may be. We are all learning together. For me, this overlaps a lot with what I value in the Disabled Community.

Something I've found that is crucial to my survival as a disabled person is to be able to talk about my experiences, not necessarily to receive support, but because it's my reality. It's very isolating not to talk about the reality that you live. Getting seen and heard is so crucial to feeling validated.

I get mixed reactions when doing this with non-disabled audiences. Sometimes I get the feeling that what is liberating to me makes others uncomfortable. And that makes sense, because we all know that disability and illness are uncomfortable topics, especially for those who don't have any proximity to them. Many believe that they can avoid them by ignoring them. While this can be painful, it's noteworthy that refuge and liberation are not objective. We all find our solace in different places. This is precisely why it's important to find your tribe.

I will continue to talk to non-disabled people about my experience because de-stigmatizing disability is extremely important and unfortunately, there's no way to destigmatize something without it being uncomfortable for those who stigmatize it. My end goal is not to make others uncomfortable, but I see it as necessary for me to exist comfortably in my own experience. For a long time, I wanted others to be comfortable with my existence and decided to remain quiet about it. But I paid a price for that.

But what I find is truly healing for me is being able to talk about my disabled experience to people who really get it, people who live it. This is why disabled community is invaluable to me. While we may have very different expressions of disability, there are some very similar threads that we can all understand. Finding groups where I don't feel less than for being unable to work a conventional job, where I can talk about being exhausted without hearing everyone gets tired, and where other members understand the complexities of doctor's visits is so nourishing to me.

This means everybody, every mind meets my desire for community on two levels. It's a place where we study the Dharma together, but it's also a place where I find disability, community and comradery.

One of the things that I love about our Sangha is its dedication to accessibility. We are not perfect in access, far from it, but we do our best. And it's not about performative allyship, but something we do to make this space as inclusive as possible. All of the staff here has experienced exclusion due to being disabled. We all know how much it hurts. We do our best not to repeat that hurt.

Another great example of why it's powerful to overlap Sangha and disability is that sometimes these practices are taught in a very rigid manner. Meditation instructions are a good example of this. Many teachers teach that you must meditate without back support, having a strong back and a soft front. When I tried this, my attention was consumed by pain, making the meditation fairly useless. Eventually, I received instruction that was flexible and emphasized that any posture that encourages relaxation yet alertness was acceptable. Mindfulness and meditation can be adapted in so many ways, and we really value that here.

So what makes Sangha great? It's nice to be on the path with familiar faces, but what is truly powerful is what the Buddha called admirable friends or Kalyanamitta in Pali. Kalyanamitta is not just friendship, but friendship meant to foster growth. Kalyana translates to beautiful, virtuous, or admirable, and mitta translates to friendship. When we see our friends setting an example of how they're living life in wholesome ways, it encourages us to follow in their path.

This is sometimes called the soil principle. We grow in accordance to our environment. The people we spend time around can nourish us or deplete us. Although the word spiritual is often used as an alternative to religion, it can also relate to finding meaning and purpose in one's life. For me, there is a parallel in developing admirable spiritual friends and disabled ones. When I finally experienced people living proudly and openly with their disability, it was a moment of awakening for me. I immediately knew I had to adapt these attitudes. I had no idea where to start, but I was instantly compelled to shift my view.

Social connection and belonging is important. Even if you're an introvert, it might look different for you. For example, one way I access community is from reading books by disabled people. This doesn't require me to interact directly with anyone. Community doesn't have to be large either. It might just be one other person that you connect with. And I'm not saying this is something that you must do simply by being here tonight. You are participating in community.

The phrase spiritual home is often used to describe somewhere where one feels a profound sense of belonging.

Science has found that happiness and unhappiness. Spread through social groups, not just directly, but up to three degrees. Meaning not just your friends, but your friend's friends. So when we surround ourselves with people who are working on navigating their suffering, it can possibly impact not just us, but also our friends and their friends.

This is not to say that we should only surround ourselves with positive connections and avoid unhappy people. Everyone here also knows grief and struggle, and that's important too.

In conclusion, Every Body, Every Mind is a truly unique place. There are only a few other Sanghas that are focused on disability nationwide, practicing Buddhism in community. It's very helpful to grow and strengthen the inner work that we're all doing. Working on the way that we live with and relate to disability is also best done in community. So for me. Combining these two worlds makes a ton of sense. I greatly treasure the ability to do both these things with this group. Whether you've been attending much longer than I have, or maybe tonight is your first time, you are appreciated and add great value to our group.