

Hi everyone, my name is Zac and I use he and him pronouns. I'm a white 39-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 like to share that I'm seated on a gray and black manual wheelchair.

I'd like to begin my talk by acknowledging that many people in this group have had a lot of dukkha, or suffering, related to the medical industry. The story I tell is my own, and if you've experienced differently, that's very valid. Our medical system is tragically broken. The point of this story isn't even about the setting as much as how practice supported me through an adverse time where I happened to be in a medical setting.

On December 19th, 2025, I went into the ER with a UTI. While UTIs can often be treated at home with a course of antibiotics, due to being on immune compromising therapy, my case escalated very quickly. Additionally, when you have Multiple Sclerosis, it can be exacerbated by infections, which amplified all my regular symptoms.

From the ER, I went to the hospital upstairs where I stayed for nine days, followed by 19 days in a rehab hospital in Vallejo, California.

For the past seven years, I have been very diligent about meditating daily, missing only a day here and there. As anyone who has been in the hospital knows, getting a guaranteed block of uninterrupted time is difficult. Not to mention that meditation is hard when you're so far out of your element. While I was able to squeeze in a little formal practice, I wasn't meditating anything close to consistently.

As many of you know, I teach a course on 10 themes to help us access more joy in our disabled lives. While in English, joy can be a very strong word, I tend to think of joy more in terms of the Third Noble Truth, a refuge from suffering. Refuge is a complex thing. Often it's not an elimination, but rather a comfort in the midst of suffering. The key to living joyfully is learning how to suffer well.

Although important, mindfulness is only one of the 10 themes in the class. Often when I notice myself out of touch with one theme, I assess whether I'm practicing the other nine themes. When I was in the hospital, I turned to many of these other themes for support. While they weren't all there, and they weren't working all the time, they became a lifeline for me. So I'd like to discuss the other practices that supported me while facing all of this.

The first support I relied on is not technically part of the Accessing Disabled Joy course, but it ties closely to the first theme of the class, which is intention. Its teaching is known as the Three Questions, and although it was developed by a Buddhist. It's not part of the Buddhist tradition. This exercise consists of three questions we can ask ourselves when we're unsure how to proceed with a problem we're facing.

The first of the three questions is, "What am I noticing in and around my body?" This is essentially a form of mindfulness. Where we assess what we're experiencing. Once we have answered this, we can address the second question, which is, "What is my intention?" For me, while in the hospital, my intention was to kindly and patiently make progress towards going home. This intention took time and required that I moved slowly, accomplishing small steps each day. Lastly, taking these two pieces of information in, we can answer "What needs to be done?" These questions allowed me to break my recovery down into small steps. I could notice or identify the biggest issue I was facing on a given day and decide how to move forward with it.

Sometimes this looked like talking to my doctor about adjusting my medication. I had to do this a few times. First up to address increased spasms. Then back down when my spasms improved, but I was experiencing side effects.

Other times, it was talking to multiple nurses about options for washing my hair when I couldn't sit up or get in a shower. It took a couple of conversations to find the right solution, but simply having clean hair was a huge relief. By taking things one step at a time and tackling issues in manageable chunks, I was able to find small comforts and baby step my way back to recovery. If I had tried to tackle everything that needed to be done all at once, I would be overwhelmed and unable to maintain my intention.

In addition to meditation, one of my daily practices is gratitude. I usually practice gratitude by writing three or more things down that I'm grateful for at the end of each day, this practice can be mixed. I've gone through periods where it resonated deeply. These often occur when life has been challenging, and it was supportive to remember all the things in my life that I was grateful for.

I also go through periods where the practice feels rote and dry. I try and push through those tougher periods because it is important to keep consistent. This is why at the end of a meditation I will sometimes say, "There is no report card". Practice is practice. Sometimes it goes well, and others it does not, and that's normal.

Before my hospital stay, I have been going through one of these boring periods of my gratitude practice. One thing I noticed pretty quickly after being hospitalized was that there was a relationship between loss and gratitude. While I wasn't able to write down gratitudes, I was able to spend time just reflecting on them, which can also be very powerful. I'd like to read something I wrote to give some reference for the state of mind that I was in:

"Loss and gratitude are interwoven. When we lose so much in our lives, we become more aware of things that are supporting us. Lying in a hospital bed, having lost the ability to get in my wheelchair on my own, having lost the ability to get to the toilet, having to wonder if I can continue to live in my own home, having lost the ability to take a shower, wash my hair, shave my face, I'm amazingly left with gratitude.

The kindness of the nursing staff. A private room. Contact with friends. Food that is decent in a place like this. A window with a view. The ability to see the sky, some trees, people going about their day.

And I get it. Gratitude can be weaponized against disabled people. We're told to be more grateful or that expressing grief over very real struggles means that we're ungrateful. That's not what I'm talking about. No one other than ourselves can speak to our own gratitude. It's ours alone. But when we're stripped of so much, we can start to notice what remains. Life can take so much away from me, but it can't take away my ability to appreciate what I do have. To notice when my friends check on me. To appreciate a nurse who spends an extra moment talking to me in her busy day who talks to me with a tone that is both kind and caring. To appreciate daylight streaming through the window. Those powers belong to me and they can't be taken away from me. Not by hardship, not by suffering, not by impermanence or loss."

Deb has talked to our sangha about finding gratitude in what your body can do. It's so easy to focus on what we can't do. Thich Nhat Hanh has a similar teaching in noticing what's not wrong. He says, "When we're having a toothache. We notice not having a toothache is a wonderful thing. Yet when we don't have a toothache, we're still not happy. A non tooth ache is very pleasant."

After one of these exacerbations, my body comes back online very slowly. Each day I saw tiny bits of progress. And I focused on celebrating that even when that tiny bit of progress meant I spent the rest of the day in bed.

Another supportive practice was letting go. Hospital life is messy and you have very little control. The practice of letting go is about letting go of the illusion of control. The reason why desire is one of the three poisons is that when we desire what we can't have, we suffer. So letting go is an antidote to clinging.

One thing I had to let go of was dates and timelines. I spent both Christmas and New Year's in the hospital. This was much easier when I just let go of the date and remembered my intention to kindly and patiently make progress towards going home. Rushing things would not bring me home any quicker. Letting go allowed me to be more in the present moment. Whatever day it was outside my hospital room wasn't relevant to what was happening in that room, which was healing.

Another form of letting go is not taking it personally. The hospital staff was generally very responsive to my call button, but in the nine days stay, there were days where they were not. I tried to remind myself that there were other patients in the hospital that needed help sometimes more acutely than me. I let go of the narrative that occasional lack of attentiveness was due to neglect, but perhaps the staff was tending to someone in critical condition. Maybe this was true, maybe not, but it helped me let go of feelings of resentment in these situations.

One of the most important things you can do in these situations is to be kind to yourself. There are many ways to be your own friend. One that came up for me a lot is to allow whatever emotions I was feeling to arise and pass on their own terms. Rumi's poem, The Guest House resonated deeply with me while in the hospital. I joked to some that at times I felt more like a Guest Mansion than a Guest House.

This poem is very powerful. So I think I'll share it now for those who are unfamiliar.

"This being human is a guest house. Every morning, a new arrival. A joy, a depression, a meanness, some momentary awareness comes as an unexpected visitor. Welcome and entertain them all. Even if they are a crowd of sorrows who violently sweep your house, empty of its furniture. Still treat each guest honorably, you may be clearing you out for some new delight. The dark thought, the shame, the malice. Meet them at the door laughing and invite them in. Be grateful for whomever comes because each has been sent as a guide from beyond."

Loving your body when it completely falls apart and betrays you is challenging and yet so important. I wrote to my friend that a mantra that was supporting me was, "This is my body. I love my body." I added, "When I say I love my body, it's not like I love chocolate chip cookies, but a little like I love my family. Sometimes they can be difficult or downright annoying, but I love them anyway." Another mantra that helps me with befriending myself is, Zac, I'm not going to abandon you."

Another important support was community. In this setting, community took two forms. The first was how supported I was by my various preexisting communities. Disability can make community difficult in a number of ways. It's hard to maintain contact with others when we feel unwell. Some of our disabilities affect the way we relate to others, and some of us are just introverts.

In this first form of community, it wasn't about building community in the hospital, but reaching out to the community I already had while I was in the hospital. I want to express deep gratitude

to everyone here who reached out personally or just sent me good wishes or meta, it truly meant a lot.

The second form was to establish temporary community with the hospital staff. I tried just asking them about themselves and getting a little impression of who they were. I can't say if this led to better care, although it made things more pleasant and alleviated some boredom. I do think by feeling better about those providing care, the care itself felt better, even if it was the same level of care that other patients were receiving.

You might think that coming home after this ordeal was a blissful experience, but it was a lot more complicated than that. My practice had shifted to accommodate my surroundings, and then my setting changed dramatically again. The reality is that our practice shifts even without dramatic life events. Due to the nature of impermanence, change is unavoidable.

Although I can't say I practice this well, after making it through the reintegration period, I can only suggest patience and self-compassion during fluctuations like this.

As I was leaving the rehab facility, I heard a nurse say to my neighbor, "Recovery always takes longer than you want it to. You get a paper cut and that's the longest two days of your life."

Okay, that's my talk. Thank you dear sangha.