

Hi, everyone. Well, it's July again, which means it's another Disability Pride Month. As many of you know, this is my third year discussing disability pride here. I just find it to be such an important topic, and one that connects to a lot of different Buddhist concepts, some directly, and others more subtly. It's a form of survival, and I think it can be adapted to encompass many forms of marginalization.

The Buddha's First Noble Truth is perhaps the thesis to all his teachings. It says that "there is suffering in life". Often, this is mistranslated as "all of life is suffering". Consider the difference between these two. The second makes life sound pretty miserable. The first normalizes the reality that life isn't easy, and we all struggle. This ties directly into how I think about disability. Of course, disability contains suffering, sometimes a significant amount. But this does not mean that disability is an experience synonymous with suffering.

Disability can contain laughter, camaraderie, and creativity too. Another foundational teaching from the Buddha is anattā, which says that self is not a fixed concept. This is because everything is changing all the time, including ourselves. We're not defined by rigid molds of who we were yesterday. Disability is much the same. It's not a fixed state of being. It's always changing. Disability pride is a celebration of all that disability holds, the difficult and the wonderful.

For those who are not familiar with the term, I'd like to start by defining disability pride. There's a lot of misconception of why we need disability pride and what it even means. Disability pride is a form of self-care. Grief is a necessary part of disability, but our struggles do not define our worth. We are valuable members of society who are often left out. Disability pride is about making us visible and asserting that we deserve to take up space.

Disability pride addresses a few different things. The first Disability Pride Month was a celebration of the Americans with Disabilities Act, which was passed on July 6th [1], 1990. Of course, this was an important moment in our history, but disability pride encompasses so much more. We are currently seeing erosion to rights that were established decades ago, but that is all the more reason to celebrate disability pride.

Because disability pride is also an affirmation of our humanity and a celebration of who we are. Non-disabled people often tell us not to let our disability define us because they view disability as a negative attribute.

Admittedly, when I first heard that people were proudly identifying as disabled, I was confused. Up until then, disability had only been a negative aspect of my life. It was about shame, pain, and isolation. Disability pride is a recognition that

disability is not a negative identity. The difficulties of being disabled are not bad, wrong, or something to hide. Our struggles do not make us less than

it's a common experience for disabled people to feel invisible. Disability pride says that we're worthy of being seen in our wholeness. Disability pride is a rejection of the idea that we can only experience joy when we can separate ourselves from our disability. We can also be expected to put a sugarcoating on our struggles and not let our situation get us down. This is wholly unrealistic. Sometimes, disability pride means embracing our grief about being disabled.

At the same time, disability pride is not toxic positivity or looking on the bright side of our struggles. Disability pride does not mean we love all aspects of being disabled. In fact, it asks us to be honest about our experience. Disability pride is about acknowledging that two realities exist at once. Suffering isn't shameful. That is why the Buddha's first noble truth that all lives contain suffering is so powerful. None of us get out of here without hardship. Disability pride asks, "Why is our flavor of suffering so stigmatized?"

Disability pride is also an appreciation of other members of our community who both contribute to disability history and disability culture. Although most of you haven't learned about it in school, our rights have been hard-earned through advocacy and communal action, much like any other civil rights movement.

The term disability culture is often used to reference art and entertainment created by disabled people. But it can also be the feeling we get when we talk to other disabled people who have had similar experiences to ours. Sometimes it feels like we speak our own language.

Non-disabled people benefit from disability culture more than they're aware. Several everyday items, such as electric toothbrushes, audiobooks, and closed captions, are used by countless non-disabled people every day. These all started as accessibility tools made for and by disabled people. So pride is also a reminder that everyone benefits from accessibility.

The duality of disability pride is very Buddhist, more by coincidence than design. The dualness actually makes it really powerful. We're embracing the whole experience, the sorrow, the isolation, the joy, and the community, and saying, "Yes, this too belongs."

Viktor Frankl was a survivor of the Holocaust who spent three years imprisoned in four different concentration camps. Both before and after this, Viktor was a psychologist who developed a branch of psychotherapy based on finding meaning in one's life. Frankl believed that, quote, "There is nothing in the world

that would so effectively help one to survive even the worst conditions as the knowledge that there is meaning in one's life." End quote.

Disability pride helps me find meaning in not just life, but in being disabled as well. By growing community, sharing knowledge, and mutual aid, my life has deep meaning, even when there isn't a lot I can do within the constraints of my illness. It's important to find value in a difficult life. It doesn't change that our lives are difficult, but we can find purpose and joy alongside suffering. When we are told that disability is only a negative thing, it's very hard to find meaning within our own disabled lives. But if we can open up to the possibility that disability is a vast experience filled with all kinds of emotions, meaning is more accessible.

There's a TED Talk I love by Nigerian author Chimamanda Adichie that discusses what she calls the single story. Single stories happen when people tell stories about another group of people that they don't belong to. When we tell stories about other groups of people, we can easily miss important details because we can't know the full extent of their existence. Unfortunately, these single stories often become definitive of how we see other groups of people. She says, "That is how to create the single story. Show a people as one thing, as only one thing, over and over again, and that is what they become." End quote.

In her talk, she talks about how she has been on both sides of single stories. Single stories are told by people more powerful than the people they are about. In her own words, "Stories are dependent on power, how they are told, who tells them. Power is the ability not just to tell the story of another person, but to make it the definitive story of that person."

One very important aspect of disability pride is changing the narrative on what it means to be disabled. We live with a lot of grief and pain. We are discriminated against, and many of us are isolated. Here's another quote from Chimamanda: "All these stories make me who I am, but to insist on only these negative stories is to flatten my experience and to overlook many of the other stories that form me." When you hear stories only of our struggles, you miss the stories of our joys, our moments of laughter, the people we love, and those who love us.

Disability pride is an important tool for combating the single story. If the dominant culture are the only ones telling our story, they become the ones who define us. When we proudly tell our story, both the good and the bad, we can create a fuller picture of what it means to be disabled. I'm not suggesting that you should sugarcoat your story, but we can weave more complex and interesting stories when we take control of the narrative. You can tell your story

to as many or as few people as you'd like. Even simply telling yourself a broader story about disability is important.

A helpful tool in being able to see a more complete story is one of the East Bay Meditation Center's Agreements For Multicultural Interaction, Both/and. The agreement describes Both/And in the following way: "When speaking, substitute and for but. This practice acknowledges and honors multiple realities".

When I first heard this description, I wasn't quite sure what it meant, but it's really one of the most important agreements. To me, this wording makes it seem like it's instructing us in right speech, but Both/And goes a lot deeper than that.

Both/And can be viewed as the opposite of Either/Or. Instead of seeing things from a perspective of one of two opposing realities, one right and the other wrong, Both/And believes that two opposing ideas can both be true. It's not only that conflicting realities are true within the same person, but also that sometimes, two people can have conflicting truths, both valid.

While disability grief and pride seem to be in conflict with each other, both are very valid parts of our experience. The truth is often found in the shades of gray rather than black and white.

One way of framing our struggles that fits into this model is focusing more on how we feel in the present moment than applying broadly sweeping statements to our lives. "Right now, I'm experiencing a lot of grief over the loss of being disabled and how it limits my life" versus "my life is a constant state of grieving due to the limits of being disabled". It's easy to slip into binary thinking when we're experiencing grief. So when it happens, don't take it personally.

The reality is you may not feel pride and grief in the exact same moment. Our goal is not so much to always feel a balance of the two every second of our lives, but to try to always remember that both are valid parts of our experience. When you are feeling pride, don't tell yourself, "Oh, good! I figured out how to escape the pains of disability." And when you are feeling disability grief, don't tell yourself, "This is how it's gonna be forever." Disability pride is remembering our feelings about disability are ever-changing and impermanent.

So how do we work with all of this? Equanimity is a really important tool to help support us during duality. Equanimity is often mistakenly understood to be indifference, but we're not numbing out to our experience. Equanimity is not being afraid to be afraid, not shying away from our grief or our anger, and letting it all exist. Disability is an incredibly dynamic and diverse experience, so a big

part of disability pride is just allowing our experience of disability to be whatever it is in the present moment

Another important tool is to remember impermanence. Your disability itself is probably not impermanent, but how it manifests and how you feel about it does fluctuate, at least for me. When the hard times come, just remember that they pass. And when the good times are here, don't forget that those pass as well. This is very helpful in preventing us from crashing so hard every time things get difficult. This isn't about grimly reminding yourself that nothing good stays, but holding it lightly and not clinging onto it. The best way to accomplish this is just by checking in with yourself throughout the day and see how you're feeling. Notice the subtle fluctuations and give them space to be however they are.

Another important tool for being with multiple realities that I've been learning about recently is called Pendulation. With Pendulation, we find a place of ease within our bodies, and once we've developed a sense of comfort and safety, see if we can find a place of discomfort or tension. Then we gently alternate between the two, being careful not to go too deep into our discomfort.

As is always true with this type of exercise, it's best to start with tolerable discomfort. We don't wanna touch into ten out of ten pain or grief before we're ready. With practice, we can slowly build this muscle and eventually be more ready for more difficult situations.

Ultimately, disability pride is about self-love and self-compassion through the ups and downs of our experience. Allowing our experience to be whatever it is in the present moment helps us achieve that. Although this month is also about recognizing the significant contributions some disabled people have made to our laws and society, many of us are just regular people who are simply existing, and this month celebrates us too. Illness and impairment do not detract from our value. We are all valuable, no matter how society defines worth.

Everyone's relationship to pride is different. Tonight, I've spoken about mine. Perhaps it resonated with you, perhaps not. Either way, your experience is valid. I'd like to close with a few lines from disabled poet Laura Hersey's poem, You Get Proud by Practicing.

"Remember, you weren't the one
who made you ashamed,
but you are the one who can make you proud.
Just practice.

Practice until you get proud, and once you are proud, keep practicing so you won't forget.

You get proud
by practicing."