

Hi, everyone. For those who don't know me, my name is Zac, and I use he/him pronouns. I'm a white, 37 year old male with long, medium brown hair. Although it's not visible on my camera, I am seated in a gray and black manual wheelchair. I live with both genetic and acquired disabilities. In 2022, I became certified as an Awakening Joy Teacher and love the intersection of disability and Dharma.

For those who don't know, July is Disability Pride Month. If you're just hearing about Disability Pride for the first time, you may be wondering what that is or how it's possible to be proud of something that causes a lot of suffering in your life. I sure did. On July 26, 1990, the American with Disabilities Act was signed into law by then President George H. W. Bush.

While this is a landmark legislation that far from addresses our needs, it was revolutionary at the time of passing. It gave disabled people rights to be active members of society that we didn't previously have. Although the passage of the ADA was the reason behind the first Disability Pride March and month long celebration, Disability Pride is about something much bigger than a celebration of the ADA.

A lot of people struggle with the idea of being proud that they are disabled. We live a challenging existence that none of us choose. It can be painful and isolating and many rightly wonder what we have to be proud of. So I'd like to talk a bit about what I think Disability Pride is and how we can use the Dharma to connect with Disability Pride.

Disability Pride is a bit different for everyone. While my ideas have been shaped by many others, I'm not an authority on the subject. So if you have a different take on the subject, it's totally understandable, and I welcome you to share during group sharing, including that you think Disability Pride is not for you.

Often when we discuss pride in relation to the Dharma, we are talking about something involving ego. In this context, we might think that we're better than others simply based on factors that we can't control. It's likened to such words as arrogance, vanity, and conceit. Nationalism is a good example of this kind of pride.

Interestingly, the Buddha also listed thinking that you were less good as other people than as another form of pride. I think this is worth mentioning because it's so easy as disabled people to feel inadequate. The point I'm trying to make here is that comparing ourselves to others is not helpful, both when we think we're better, but also when we think we're less than.

While, from some perspectives, Disability Pride seems incompatible with Dharma. There are many practices in Buddhism that are very much in line with what I consider to be at the core of Disability Pride. For many of us, Disability Pride is a messy experience. It's not simply being proud that we're disabled.

Disability Pride does not ignore or glorify our struggles. In fact, it's allowing them to exist. Sometimes that can mean feeling anger or sadness about your disability. And that's okay. It's completely understandable given our circumstances. For me, Disability Pride is about working with that grief around being disabled.

Because pushing away grief is an act of shame. When we meet our grief head on, We can acknowledge its presence and learn to live alongside it. It's being comfortable in our own skin, even when we live in skin that's uncomfortable. It's loving ourselves just as we are. You may have heard the Buddha quoted as saying, "You can search throughout the entire universe for someone who is more deserving of your love and affection than you are yourself, and that person is not to be found anywhere."

Disability is a complex experience, and that means acknowledging the hardships alongside the joy. This idea is very much in alignment with EBMC's Guideline for Multicultural Interaction, Both/And, where something can hold opposing qualities at the same time. Disability both contains suffering and moments of joy. I feel both pride for my disability and at times wish I wasn't disabled.

For those familiar with teachings from and inspired by the Buddha, you may be getting an idea where the links between Disability Pride and Dharma can be made. While the list I've compiled is by no means exhaustive, here are a few that stand out to me.

One connection is LovingKindness, also known as Metta. Holding ourselves with LovingKindness is so important, and often much harder, we are often so much harder on ourselves than we are on others. This is especially hard because we often achieve things on a different timeline than non-disabled people, or simply have different achievements in our life.

So we're showing ourselves compassion when we recognize and validate what we have achieved, both over the course of our lives and day to day. Some days, taking a shower is a big achievement for me. I think many people in this room know what that's like. It's hard to be proud of taking a shower, but I can at least have acceptance that I did what I could on any given day.

Another link between Dharma and Disability Pride is equanimity. Equanimity is a state of seeing things just for what they are without wishing they were any different. Instead of convincing ourselves that things are okay, we are acknowledging that things being not okay is a part of life. In her book titled Radical Acceptance, Tara Brock writes, "Clearly recognizing what is happening inside us and regarding what we see with an open, kind and loving heart is what I call radical acceptance. If we are holding back from any part of our experience, if our heart shuts out any part of who we are and what we feel, we are fueling fears and feelings of separation that sustain the trance of unworthiness."

The third aspect of Disability Pride is Refuge in the Sangha of Disability. Appreciation for all the amazing Disabled people out there and what they've done for us.

While sangha commonly means a spiritual community, such as the one we're meeting in today, it can also just mean community. When talking about disability, this can be broken down into two categories. The first would be making friends and connections with people who are disabled and chronically ill. Everyone here is in community with each other. Community is a place where we can feel safe to bring our whole selves.

The second kind of community is learning all the amazing contributions disabled people have made to the world we live in. This includes participating in Disability culture, following people on social media, reading books, and learning the history of disability rights. There are so many people to name in this category, and I wouldn't even try in this short talk. One name I will mention is disabled poet Laura Hershey. In addition to her poetry, Laura was a fierce activist who was a member of ADAPT and a leader of the movement that publicized the exploitive nature of Jerry Lewis' telethon.

Laura was not a Buddhist, but one of her most famous poems speaks to another connection between Dharma and Disability Pride. So I thought I'd share a few lines from that. The poem is called You Get Proud by Practicing.

If you are not proud
for who you are, for what you say, for how you look;
if every time you stop

to think of yourself, you do not see yourself glowing
with golden light; do not, therefore, give up on yourself.
You can
get proud.

This brings us to one of the most important lessons in any practice, which is setting an intention. Practice and intention are intertwined. When we set an intention, we have to practice it over and over. It's something we develop and cultivate, not a landmark we reach. I don't think anyone has simply heard about Disability Pride and fully embodied it right from the get go.

It's daily work and it takes practice. Intention works in the same way as an anchor does in meditation. You start out by trying to focus your attention on a specific anchor, such as your breath, and before you know it, you'll find yourself thinking about what you want to eat for dinner. When you notice you've drifted away from your anchor, instead of berating ourselves, we're instructed to gently guide ourselves back to that anchor.

And as we've all experienced, Our concentration may only last a few short seconds before our mind drifts again. This is totally normal, even for advanced meditators. Drifting is not just okay, it's the nature of our minds. In fact, it's the process of noticing our minds have drifted and bringing it back kindly that makes meditation so important.

I think intention is one of the most foundational teachings of Buddhism. This is because it allows for you to get off track from whatever you're practicing and return when you're ready. It acknowledges that perfection isn't possible. And it emphasizes noting when you're not in alignment with your intention and returning back to the practice.

If we approach practice from a mindset of doing it perfectly all the time, we're setting ourselves up for failure. This leads to feelings of aversion for ourselves, which leads to constriction rather than growth. Whether you've been disabled from birth or just became disabled, you have been flooded with messages on the worthiness of disabled people your whole life. This has a profound effect on how we see ourselves and a huge hurdle to being proud.

As we practice, these messages will creep in. Accepting that these messages surround us, but rejecting their validity, is a big part of Disability Pride. In Buddhism, we talk about near enemies, where a state of being looks like a wholesome one, but is in fact not. The near enemy of intention is a goal. A goal is something you accomplish that you can cross off a list when it's done.

On the other hand, intention is not a destination, it's just a direction you want to head in. I'd like to close by reading a few more lines from Laura's poem.

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.