Hi, everyone. My talk tonight is called The Disabled Brahmavihāras. We've discussed elements of the Brahmavihāras in this sangha a lot recently. My talk tonight focuses more on how they are supportive to me as a disabled person, rather than an overview of the practices. If you're looking for a more in-depth dive, there are tons of resources out there, as this is one of the most popular teachings of the Buddha. I suggest searching Dharma Seed for talks. Also, Sharon Salzberg wrote a wonderful book titled "Loving Kindness," which is about all four of the practices. There's also another book called "The Boundless Heart," by Christine Feldman. This is just to name a few.

As a brief overview, the Brahmavihāras are often translated as the Four Immeasurables, The Divine Abodes, and The Heart Practices. They're acts of goodness that activate a quality of tenderness in our hearts.

We're going through some dark times, collectively as humans, communally as disabled people, and also individually. All this darkness tends to bring up aversion, which the Buddha listed as one of the primary causes of suffering. The most common response to aversion is to turn away from it when we experience it. The Heart Practices ask us to do the opposite and turn towards the darkness with an open heart. This does not mean that we should put a candy coating over these difficult aspects of life and pretend to enjoy them. Instead, we want to become a lighthouse and help others find their way through the darkness. When others see us responding to the world with an open heart, it can inspire them to open their own heart. The more light we have in the world, the less room there is for the darkness It takes a lot of heart to live with disability.

Sometimes it feels like I am constantly being bombarded with difficulty and grief. This can be really frustrating, and sometimes when I'm really struggling, I know I'm not the best version of myself. When I can open my heart to the experience lovingly and without getting down on myself, it becomes more easeful.

Buddhist practices also take a lot of heart. Intention, non-judgment, and non-clinging are not acts of sheer determination, but things we must do with kindness and understanding. Forcing them is not only antithetical to the practice, but also will never lead us to our intended outcome. When I started approaching meditation in a loving way that allowed my mind to drift into thought and kindly bring it back with patience, my practice became so much more supportive.

The Brahmavihāras have both formal and informal versions. During the formal versions, we may repeat a phrase over and over like a mantra. Some people really like this, and at times I find it very supportive. But they can also be practiced just by embodying the spirit of the teaching. One of my teachers says

there are three different ways to practice the Brahmavihāras. One is by using the phrases, one is with imagery that evokes the quality of the teaching, and one is more with a feeling. Only one of these qualities needs to be present. So if you're just saying the phrases and not feeling much, that's actually okay. The phrases can help us reprogram our brains without having a particular feeling attached to them.

The first of the Brahmavihāras is Metta, which is often translated as loving kindness. Metta is the foundation for all the Brahmavihāras. It's kindness for the sake of kindness. There's a lot of hate and anger in the world today, and it's so easy to respond to that with more hate and anger. Metta calls on us to respond to this darkness with kindness. This can really have an impact on our surroundings.

However, Metta is not akin to the teaching from Jesus to turn the other cheek. It's not really kind to allow mistreatment or injustice. Metta requires boundaries, and in fact, is a great boundary in itself. Metta is saying, "I don't want to engage with you, but I wish you well."

Wishing someone well does not mean that we wish someone to continue causing others harm without punishment, but knowing that continuing a cycle of anger is equally unproductive. Sometimes we can understand a person is reacting unwholesomely because they are suffering. That doesn't excuse mistreatment, but it can affect how we respond to them.

Originally, the Buddha taught metta as an antidote to fear. In my own practice, I found it to be very useful during times when I'm feeling afraid. One thing many people struggle with when practicing the formal phrases of metta is that the phrases can feel dull and mechanical. I can experience this too, but I try and leverage it to my own advantage. When my brain is running wild in papañca, otherwise known as proliferation of thought, where one worry can cascade into another and another, the nature of these phrases being hypnotic can distance me from my rumination. Each time my mind gets pulled back into these thought patterns, I start back with the formal phrases, "May I be safe and protected from inner and outer harm. May I love myself completely, just as I am. May I take care of myself and receive care from others joyfully. May I be happy and deeply peaceful." Before too long, I have successfully distracted myself from the harmful thoughts and replaced them with positive ones.

Another way I found support from Metta is when I'm struggling with a particular symptom or issue related to my disability. In this case, I open my heart and try and do Metta for all people struggling with this issue. This accomplishes two things. First, we're reminding ourselves that we are not alone in what we're

facing. And second, we are opening up with compassion to all who deal with this issue. Because it's so common to be more compassionate to others than ourselves, I find it really helpful to access that compassion before I turn it towards myself.

Loving kindness for ourselves is one of the most important forms of the practice. The Buddha came from a different culture where kindness for oneself was more common. He believed we should begin the Metta practice focusing on ourselves so we could open up that kindness and then spread it out to others.

However, our culture has taught us to be very unkind towards ourselves, so it's a little bit different. I think this can be addressed in two different ways. You can either start with someone else who brings up strong qualities of kindness within you. Or, similar to the metaphor of putting on your oxygen mask before you help someone else, we can cultivate kindness for ourselves before spreading it around to others.

When Metta meets suffering, it becomes Karuna, also known as compassion. Karuna is an interesting quality because while suffering itself is not a sublime state, the care that it causes can elicit a sublime state. One thing I think about often is that in Buddhism, we wish all beings to be free of suffering, but if that were truly possible, would there still be a need for Karuna?

Another definition of compassion is to suffer with another. This definition resonates more with me. Although it's important to point out that one of the near enemies of compassion is despair. We do not want another's suffering to cause us to suffer. Despair makes it so that the grieving person has to comfort the person who they are supposed to be receiving compassion from, and that's never a good feeling. I see this definition more like accompanying another person during their suffering.

Disabled people can have a complex relationship with compassion. On one hand, some people project suffering onto us or try and help us in ways that we do not need. Personally, I've had strangers push my wheelchair without even asking or introducing themselves. Unfortunately, this is a very common experience for wheelchair users. I've heard other people describe similar situations, such as strangers coming up to them and starting to pray over them without consent. I'm sure many of you have had some of these experiences of your own.

Here's a quote on the topic from author Rebekah Taussig: "I'm a magnet for kindness. Like the center of a black hole, my body attracts every good deed from across the expanse of the universe to the foot of my wheelchair. I move

through parking lots and malls, farmers markets and airports, bookstores, and buffets, and people scramble to my aid. They open doors and reach out their arms to help. They offer prayers, grab my handlebars for a push, watch over me, and hold out wads of cash."

This is not true compassion, but it's another near enemy of Karuna, which is pity. Pity can look like compassion, but also has an element of aversion. Compassion draws us closer to others, while aversion divides us.

But the suffering that we experience as disabled people can also make us very compassionate. We understand what it's like to live with various obstacles and symptoms, and we can support others who live with similar experiences. So compassion is a powerful community-building tool, and I would say one of the very wonderful qualities of this group that we're in tonight. True compassion involves listening to the other person and not just providing them with what you think they need.

In addition to the ones I already listed, another compassion practice that I find helpful for navigating disability is a compassionate body scan, where we wish each of our body parts well. If you prefer, you can also just focus on the parts of your body that need the most attention.

A formal phrase for Karuna practice could be, "May you find ease from your suffering. I care about your suffering. May you hold your suffering with compassion. May you find peace."

When Metta meets happiness, you get the third Brahmavihara, which is Mudita, also known as sympathetic or appreciative joy. Mudita is delighting in others' well-being. It is said to increase friendliness, compassion, generosity, and tolerance.

All of the Brahmaviharas are antidotes to the negativity bias. The negativity bias is our brain's innate tendency to have stronger memories of negative experiences than positive ones. This can make us feel like things are a lot worse than they really are because we gloss over the good and remember the difficult more vividly. Mudita is a particularly good tool in navigating the negativity bias because it asks us to have our radar out for the good things, not just in our own lives, but in the lives of those around us.

Mudita is a very strong antidote to jealousy. It's common for disabled people to feel that we've been left behind. Goals that most people have, such as finding a romantic partner, settling into a career, living independently from your family, can

be inaccessible to us. This can be grounds for resentment when we see our friends experiencing these goals.

For me, it's important to remember that my friends are not accomplishing these goals in order to hurt me. They are just living their lives. There is not a limited supply of happiness out there, and just because they are happy does not mean that I am unable to find joy in my own life.

Mudita is not just feeling happy for someone because you feel obligated to. I've heard Mudita described as a happiness you experience when you see a puppy who is just filled with joy. It's a contagious feeling, a free joy ride. As I said before, there's lots of darkness in the world right now, so Mudita is a celebration that there's just a little more joy in the world.

Another way that I've heard the practice of mudita described is being in the cheering section of all your friends and loved ones. We want our friends to succeed, and hopefully, they will be in our cheering section when we are succeeding as well.

A formal phrase could be, "May your happiness continue and grow," or, "Thank you for bringing happiness to me."

An informal practice I really love is listening to other people talk about what brings them joy. Oftentimes, I can't really relate to what makes them happy, but hearing them talk about it so passionately and seeing the expression on their faces can bring happiness to me.

When practicing Mudita for yourself, we can celebrate that we're feeling happy. For me, happiness can be a limited resource, so when I'm feeling it, I really wanna drink it in and appreciate it.

Equanimity or Upekkhā in Pali is the key to the whole thing. We can open up our hearts with kindness, be compassionate, and bask in the joy of others, and yet life can still be hard. Karma is a very nuanced thing, and I believe that some things happen in our lives for inexplicable reasons. You could call it either "good fortune" or "bad luck" if you'd like. But to put it in more Buddhist terms, Joseph Goldstein says, "Anything can happen at any time."

Equanimity is how we stay afloat during its unpredictability. It's a non-reactive state where we maintain a balance in the face of change. Balance doesn't mean we love every part of change or that we're unfazed by it, but that change is not unexpected.

Impermanence is one of the three factors of existence. If there's one thing we can expect from this unpredictable life, it's that everything will be changing all the time. Equanimity is coming to terms with our lack of control, and that things will not always work out the way we plan.

This is why it's so important to differentiate between having a goal and having an intention. Goals are concrete, whereas intention just states the direction we wanna head in and allows things to play out differently than we imagined.

As someone with a very dynamic disability, I have days where I feel much better or worse than my baseline. When I'm able to access it, equanimity allows for these shifts and sees them as part of my overall illness.

I often want to consider questions like, "What did I do right or wrong to make myself feel differently today?" This guessing game can be really painful, and so often it's fruitless. Equanimity reminds us not to play this game, and allow ourselves to just be with however we're feeling. Sometimes we can do everything right and still feel badly, and that's okay. It's part of life.

Okay, that concludes my talk on the disabled Brahmavihāras for now. Thanks everyone for listening.