

Sangha Voices: Reya Stevens

CIMC has a rich history of practitioners, teachers, staff, and volunteers all committed to practicing meditation together in community. *Sangha Voices* is way for us to deepen our connections and get to know one another better as we talk with members of each of CIMC's many [Community Groups](#).

This month, Zeenat Potia spoke with **Reya Stevens**, teacher of the **Disability & Chronic Illness Sangha**. Reya has had a disabling illness since she was a teenager, including 20 years' riding a wheelchair and decades spent mostly lying down at home. Meetings are currently held online one Sunday each month from 5:30-7:00pm.



ZP: Please describe the Disability & Chronic Illness Sangha?

REYA: These gatherings are an opportunity to practice together and build community for those who self-identify as disabled and/or chronically ill*. We welcome the great variety of experiences and perspectives this includes, and we seek to view our experiences through the lens of dharma. Most meetings include introductions, guided meditation, small and/or large group discussion, dharma teaching and a brief closing.

ZP: Tell us about your connection to CIMC.

REYA: I was living in Northampton in 1981, and over time I met a lot of people who meditated at IMS; they happened to be people I was drawn to. I moved to the Boston area for work in 1985 and within the first couple of weeks, I showed up at CIMC. It was very different back then.

My favorite funny story is that despite a room full of yogis watching their breath in the main meditation hall downstairs (which is now the kitchen), someone walked up to the library and made off with a couch. Everybody was a little bit more trusting. Now there's a lock on the front door.

CIMC has changed enormously. Even though it was focused on daily life practice, in the early years, people came from retreat culture, so there was no eye contact, and it wasn't conducive to socializing. A lot of energy since then has gone into cultivating sangha. A big taboo in my experience was talking about things like racism, sexism, ableism, and disability oppression. I was told directly that if I wanted to bring up issues, they would be better received as an issue of compassion, rather than civil rights or something of that sort.

In my world outside the meditation center, I hung out in progressive circles where people were talking about these issues, but able-bodied people didn't talk about ableism and didn't take it seriously. They didn't understand that we disabled people saw it as an issue of both structural and interpersonal oppression.

ZP: Tell us about yourself.

REYA: I haven't had the need for a self-narrative, being housebound for so many years. It has been kind of liberating. My practice has been, "How can I open to this?" I mostly just see what life presents me with each day.

ZP: Can you share your essence? Maybe a spontaneous poem?

REYA: Sure! I'll play. REYA: R=Responsive / E=Engaged / Y=Yunicorn / A=Aversive

ZP: Why did you start this sangha and why is it important?

REYA: Narayan and I had talked about forming this sangha for quite a while, and yogis expressed a need, but I couldn't get to the Center. With the pandemic

and Zoom, it all became possible. Disability is an enormous umbrella term, so let me share my two basic ways of looking at it:

a) When I became disabled as a teenager, the disability activists I met did not necessarily see disability as a bad thing or even as a health issue. It was an alternative way of experiencing a body or mind. The issue was the way society treated people with disabilities so that the oppression was the problem not the disability itself. I think this fits for large groups of people.

b) On the other end, chronic illnesses can be very different. I inhabit both disability and illness. Turns out I was misdiagnosed. Rather than having a stable, limited condition, I had a progressive, very painful multi-symptom, multi-system illness.

ZP: What value does the sangha provide?

REYA: I hope we will turn into a true sangha—a supportive, spiritual community—and a refuge. There are people with disabilities and chronic illnesses, and we learn to be with both through the tools of dharma practice and with each other's support.

For example, if you were born blind, it doesn't hurt. You probably learned very early how to navigate the world as a blind person. You don't need me to help you to learn how to meditate with the sensations of blindness—what does that even mean? But you might want to be in the sangha because on a daily basis people are patronizing and condescending, or you are discriminated against in a job search. This can start to wear on you.

Difficult physical sensations are at the core of my illness, and I have cognitive issues too, brain fog and mental fatigue. You can get help with how to meditate with these challenges.

Also depending on how long one's been ill, how much oppression you've had to process, what stage it's at, there can be issues of grief, loss, self-esteem. The sangha as a whole is there to go through all of that stuff together. Additionally, people with chronic illness also experience ableism, so everybody together can support each other around that.

I don't know the answers, but we are going to find out together as we ask these deep questions. We're talking about making our own culture of accessibility. Accessibility as a practice of interbeing. Instead of the law requiring us to do this, what if we do it so it can help us break down the barriers of separation? This would be a paradigm shift to live from a dharma intention of interconnectedness.

ZP: Who or what is inspiring you currently?

REYA: I'm very dharma driven, and I've noticed that in myself, and in other dharma practitioners whom I've known for a long time, significant shifts have happened in our practice and our lives. It is inspiring to see consistent practice bear fruit.

ZP: Thank you, Reya!

**Please note that this group is not geared towards people whose conditions are expected to be fully cured or healed in a relatively brief time (e.g., three months or less).*