

**Chaim Wigder**

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# **PRAGMATIC DHARMA AND UNEXAMINED "ENDS"**

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**SNB Magazin 12**

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By Chaim Wigder

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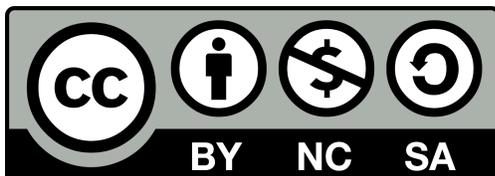
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# Pragmatic Dharma and Unexamined "Ends"

## Preface

I began writing this post as a direct response to the content that made up Daniel Ingram's recent double (by now triple) appearance on Matthew O'Connell's *The Imperfect Buddha* podcast. In the process of writing this, however, I was made aware of a series of posts entitled "Critique of Pragmatic Dharma," which appeared on the blog parlêtre. These posts—which make up what I believe to be the most decisive critique of the pragmatic dharma movement to date—have led to Daniel's somewhat neurotic, several-thousand-word-long response being published as well. I have tried to incorporate Daniel's response here, although the thrust of my thoughts are mainly focused on the recent interviews, combined with vented frustration at the pragmatic dharma movement in general, as well as, well... having consumed perhaps too much Marxist philosophy recently. I hope that there is something here worth engaging with.

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In listening to Daniel Ingram's most recent set of conversations with Matthew O'Connell on the latter's podcast *The Imperfect Buddha*, I have been made aware once again of what I see as the dangers of Daniel's so-called "pragmatic dharma" ideology, of which he is perhaps among the most well-known spokespeople. I want to, therefore, offer a brief response in critique of this ideology, particularly as it is presented by Daniel in these interviews, but also more broadly.

Interestingly, I don't listen to Buddhist or "spiritual" podcasts much anymore, as I find them both tedious and nauseating. However, I've found *The Imperfect Buddha* to be one which remains listenable, as its host, Matthew, is generally thoughtful and critical—even, dare I say,

*self-critical*, much of the time. I noticed that Matthew did attempt somewhat to challenge Daniel on many points, in fact bringing up many of the criticisms which one might find at *Speculative Non-Buddhism*. I did, however, think that Matthew did not push Daniel as much as I know he could have, and perhaps even wanted to. I therefore want to take the time to reiterate some of the criticisms which were raised, pushing them further, as well as responding to some of Ingram's responses to them. I must say that Daniel's performance in these interviews struck me as displaying a disturbing level of intellectual immaturity and spiritual narcissism. I really do not think—*pace* Daniel's insistence to the contrary—that he has sufficiently engaged intellectually in these critiques to really grasp them. As such I do not expect him to grasp my expansion thereof. Still, I hope that others who find themselves gripped by the pragmatic dharma sales pitch might find this exercise useful.

I want to take a brief detour before beginning, to first address what appears to be a large objection leveled by Daniel against criticisms of pragmatic dharma. In his response to parlêtre, Daniel takes great pains to display his frustration at what he perceives to be a tendency of critics to unify, against the better wishes of its proponents, the ideology of pragmatic dharma which is, in fact, according to him, varied and broad. Daniel writes, for example:

If you had started, “I get that Pragmatic Dharma as a loosely defined movement is a broad movement that truly wishes to transcend its own limits, whatever those might be, to truly get to the dream of what works for the reader and practitioner, using whatever concepts, means, techniques, methods, social interactions, practices, and other resources to achieve those ends, and, in this, fundamentally represents a spirit of broad encouragement and empowerment,” then we would have started off on a similar footing, but we didn't. We started with PD being largely reduced to Noting but totally ignoring the many carefully stated frames put in place in an elaborate and detailed attempt to explicitly deal with many of

the problems you yourself raise, and so forgive me feeling what I am feeling as I try to help this conversation crawl out of that unfortunate pit.

I think this particular framing of the response is telling. Aside from the detail fetishism, which, in Daniel's defense, may well often be invoked in an attempt to actually avoid acknowledging important details, there is another strategy at work here which I find to be sneaky and tiring. I certainly understand the frustration of having a broadly defined movement be addressed under narrowly defined parameters. Such approaches can often seem unhelpful, as when a conservative pundit laments anything that could be in any way placed within the general category of "Marxism," or "postmodernism," without attending to the very real differences and nuances in the vast body of works which fall under these (often contradictory) terms. However, I think the case of pragmatic dharma is different, and this difference lies in the ways Daniel himself would fancy to categorize the movement.

The problem is this: If you define a movement loosely enough, and broadly enough, it becomes so indefinable as to be meaningless. What does it mean for a movement to be a "broad movement that truly wishes to transcend its own limits, whatever those might be, to truly get to the dream of what works for the reader and practitioner, using whatever concepts, means, techniques, methods, social interactions, practices, and other resources to achieve those ends"? Defined in this way, pragmatic dharma ends up meaning nothing at all. It means this, or it means that, depending on the specific person engaging in specific practices under specific circumstances. "Pragmatic" here ends up being synonymous simply with some kind of limitless relativism, in which anything goes in terms of concepts, theories, and techniques, as long as they serve to "achieve" the unquestioned "ends" which pragmatic dharma dogmatically prescribes: namely, personal well-being. As such, pragmatic dharma becomes functionally invincible to criticism. Whatever criticism one wages, can easily be met with "well that's not what *everyone* means by pragmatic dharma!" or an insistence that the criticism fails to stay on topic. But this kind of

critique has already been well-established on this very blog. I'm tired of having to repeat it.

How tiring, indeed. In the interest of avoiding this completely tone deaf complaint raised in response to parlêtre, I think that what would be useful is to question the one thing that is common among all “versions” of pragmatic dharma, and indeed, among all x-buddhism: namely, the unquestioned “end” toward which the infinite relativism of “concepts, means, techniques, methods, social interactions, practices, and other resources” are to be employed. Again, to be explicit, this “end” is pretty much invariably some form of an ability to passively accept whatever “sensate experience” arises, under the assumption that there are circumstances under which investigating the social reality of such experiences would be of little or no use. My criticism here, then, will be twofold. First, I want to question the desirability of this “end.” Second, I want to argue why an investigation of the social will always be more important than a solipictic investigation of “sensate experience.” Let us begin, then, with a postulate.

**Postulate: Any critique of x-buddhism must be ideological.**

One limitation of parlêtre's critique, I think, is that it is not an *ideological* critique. We have to be clear about what I mean here. I *do not* mean that parlêtre's critique is free of ideology. There is no such thing. What I mean is that parlêtre is combating ideology with ideology; namely, combating x-buddhist ideology with psychoanalytic ideology. This will likely come off as a personal attack, because all ideological criticisms provoke hostility, as, I think, the history of speculative non-buddhism surely demonstrates.

Rather than a personal attack, however, this criticism is meant simply to do what I am stating I want it to: to expose the presence of ideology where it is not conscious, and to come to some social understanding, through dialogue, of the *function* of our ideologies. The same is true of

my much harsher critique of x-buddhism in general, and pragmatic dharma in particular, that I want to discuss here. This is, in fact, the case for all dialogue that is capable of leading anywhere. As such, dialogue must be a mutual undertaking.

Dialogue must be mutual, and it must be based on shared intentions. Let me be open and state my intention here—which is to say, in part, let me state my ideology. My intention is to locate the real causes of suffering for the vast majority of human beings, and figure out the mechanisms by which these causes can be eradicated. Now, what’s yours?

**Postulate: An ideological critique of x-buddhism must be rooted in the *material* basis of ideology.**

X-buddhists like Ingram will respond that they share this intention of mine. The problem, however, is that we are at a fundamental impasse when it comes to the question of what those causes are. X-buddhists think that these causes are in the last instance determined by the mind. This makes them idealists. On the other hand, I believe that such causes are rather, in the last instance, to be discovered in *material social relations*, i.e. in ideological practices, which are always rooted in the forces and relations of production, which is to say, in economics (I am not referring to the academic field of study, which is also an ideology; I am referring to *material* economic practices—the transformation of nature into material necessities and commodities used to serve humans). This makes me a materialist.

The above is a non-negotiable postulate, as far as I’m concerned. There is no “Middle Way,” no postmodern consideration of all ideas, none of Pragmatism’s never-ending quest to reproduce capitalist ideology. If you think that the proximate cause of human suffering, by which I mean its determination *in the last instance*, is some thing called “the mind,” then you are an idealist, and we cannot engage in a productive dialogue.

## **A preliminary attempt at an ideological critique of x-buddhism. Case study #1: Daniel Ingram and Pragmatic Dharma.**

With that in mind, I want to first attempt an ideological critique of the repression of self that is the goal of x-buddhism in general, and pragmatic dharma in particular. I am including Ingram here, because what he describes is no different from this. Ingram will say that I just cannot understand what he means, because I haven't "experienced" arhatship. Make no mistake, and see this sophistry for what it is: is it anything more than a plain, open, declaration, of a commitment to the very thing that Ingram would deny? Let me try to make this point clearer.

In the way that pragmatic dharmatists describe it, the repression of self sounds to me like a repression of ideology. In both cases of repression, however, these things are still there, they are just not accessible. This is, I think, the point that parlêtre was partly attempting to make, but from a psychoanalytic perspective. I would add that "arhatship" is the worst possible kind of subjectivity, because it is a completely passive acceptance of the relations of production, a complete inability to denaturalize the dominant social formation (i.e. everything "arises/happens naturally," to use Ingram's and x-buddhism's favorite zombified trope).

Let's be clear again. This is not a complete inability to act or engage in ideology; arhats will even insist on as much, and it is the one thing they are absolutely right about. Passive acceptance does not mean an inability to act and make conscious decisions. However, it does mean that those decisions will be made without any real agency, without any awareness of one's ideology. This is where the sophistry comes in: an arhat will insist that she still experiences emotions, that she can still think and make decisions. But, crucially, if you actually listen to what she says, you will notice that what she is saying is that in such a state she is completely incapable of acting with agency, which I am defining as being aware of one's ideology, and being able to understand their

material functions within our social formation, so as to decide whether they are worth participating in. Emotions, thoughts, even “sensate experience,” are inseparable from social formations, because they always have functions which are materially intertwined with production, and with classes. X-buddhists often display an apparent ability to understand this, and yet, if this is the case, then it would be absolutely absurd to desire a state in which you are not constantly aware of the enormous amount of suffering that your daily life is implicated in.

### A preliminary critique of the “pleasant states” (jhanas, “stages,” “paths,” etc.) fetish found in Pragmatic Dharma

This leads us to the cultivation of pleasant states more broadly, which is the same form of passivity formation. This fetish is present in all of x-buddhism, but it is especially characteristic of pragmatic dharma (just spend five minutes on the Dharma Overground forums). I want to argue that any focus on the cultivation of “positive” states is the highest ideological crime. It is to fail to recognize that bad states can also be cultivated, and that they can be done so entirely unconsciously. Crucially, these bad states are cultivated while their associated actions are as well (remember the primacy of material/economic forces, which means that any mind “state” is causally with the material world, including the relations of production).

But isn’t it good if some people find that x-buddhism makes life more tolerable? No. I do not give a flying fuck about the wellbeing of your upper middle class x-buddhist... *as such*. I care about such people’s suffering, but I care about it as much as I care about the suffering of all sentient beings. Therefore, I will not agree to abet in the wellbeing of a minority of the population (i.e. upper middle class x-buddhists) at the expense of the majority of the population (i.e. the kinds of people who cannot meditate themselves into bliss, because they either spend all their time selling their labor to meet their basic (biological) needs, or they are so crippled by capitalism that they cannot function as human beings). By engaging in the kinds of practices that x-buddhists engage

in—and I am using the term x-buddhism here in Glenn Wallis’ original sense, to refer to subjects who are interpellated into any ideology whose *x* shares the unitary identity of all Buddhisms—by engaging in such practices they are necessarily reproducing the dominant mode and relations of production. These practices produce a subject who does not ever need to truly question them.

In other words, these “states” and “skills”—the “ends” toward which pragmatists want us to employ their “techniques”—so sought after by x-buddhists are ideological ones, and they are completely unconscious. Because it is “easier” for them to engage in harmful ideological practices without suffering through it, they will never want to question those practices. And I mean suffering *fully*, not in Ingram’s sense of “kind of,” “sort of” suffering, but not really, because while suffering does arise—okay, at least he admits this—it arises in a different weird and interesting way which makes it more tolerable. No, this is not what I mean. I mean suffering in the sense that every victim of the civil war in Congo, which is fueled by our fucking Tweets, suffers. The way a single mother whose child dies because she cannot afford medicine due to the capitalist healthcare “system” suffers. And so on.

From this brief examination of pleasant states—or for that matter any reduction of suffering that is not brought about by *material, social engagement with the world and with other humans*, but rather only by individual practice and a focus on immediate experience—from this examination we can add one final postulate.

**Postulate: There is no way to truly act in accordance with the bodhisattva vows, to act with agency to address the real causes of suffering, unless one is committed to talking only about the material forces of suffering, which are determinant, in the last instance, of the realm of ideology and of “the mind.”**

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