

Pragmatic Buddhism, Westernized Dharma, 21st-century Sangha

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When I was about fifteen years old, I accidentally ran into some of the classic early meditation experiences described in the ancient texts and my reluctant spiritual quest began. I did not realize what had happened, nor did I realize that I had crossed something like a point of no return, something I would later call “The Arising and Passing Away.” I knew that I had had a very strange dream with bright lights, that my entire body and world had seemed to explode like fireworks, and that afterwards I somehow had to find something, but I had no idea what that was. I philosophized frantically for years until I finally began to realize that no amount of thinking was going to solve my deeper spiritual issues and complete the cycle of practice that had already started....

In 1994, I began going on intensive meditation retreats and doing a lot of daily practice. I also ran into some very odd and interesting experiences, and began to look around for more guidance on how to proceed and keep things in perspective. Good teachers were few and far away, their time limited and often expensive to obtain, and their answers to my questions were often guarded and cryptic....

Frustrated, I turned to books, reading extensively, poring over texts.... I also came to the profound realization that they have actually worked all of this stuff out. Those darn Buddhists have come up with very simple techniques that lead directly to remarkable results if you follow instructions and get the dose high enough. While some people don't like this sort of cookbook approach to meditation, I am so grateful for their recipes that words fail to express my profound gratitude for the success they have afforded me.

—Daniel Ingram, [Mastering the Core Teachings of the Buddha: An Unusually Hardcore Dharma Book](#), 11-12

Last summer, my first sermon from this pulpit was on “Pluralism, Progressivism, and Pragmatism.” And if you visited our website this past week, you saw a particularly *pluralistic* set of offerings for this morning: at 10:00 a.m. a UU Christian service in the Chapel, at 11:00 a.m. a Buddhist-themed sermon, at 12:15 p.m. our Atheist/Humanist/Agnostic (AHA) Discussion Group. And while we still have much work to do in increasing racial and economic diversity, I'm grateful to be part of a congregation and larger UU movement that, for decades, has embraced a robust religious pluralism. **We don't necessarily see any conflict with someone who may want to celebrate Communion with the Christians at ten o'clock, meditate in the Buddhist tradition at eleven o'clock, and dialogue with the Atheists, Humanists, and Agnostics at**

noon. Indeed, having already attended that 10:00 a.m. UU Christian service, if I didn't have a committee meeting after this 11:00 a.m. service, I would be attending the AHA discussion group — achieving what we could call a UU “hat trick” — of attending three different diversity groups back-to-back on the same Sunday.

And if you are looking to maximize your trip to UUCF each Sunday, almost every week there is a group meeting at 10:00 a.m. before the main service: the Friendly Forum discussion group each week in Room 113, and rotating groups in the Chapel: UU Christians on 1st Sundays, UU Buddhists on 2nd and 4th Sundays, and Earth-centered Spirituality (“UU Pagans”) on 3rd Sundays. And after the service, we have been alternating between meetings of the Atheist/ Humanist/Agnostic Group and an Introduction to Philosophy class.

But for now, I would like to transition from a focus on pluralism to a focus on the second and third parts of that sermon title from last summer that I shared with you earlier: progressivism and pragmatism. I'm interested in the ways that *progressivism* (“how things improve”) and *pragmatism* (“what works”) can be applied to the Buddhist tradition here in the West in the twenty-first century.

I've titled this morning's sermon “Pragmatic Buddhism, Westernized Dharma, and Twenty-first-century Sangha” as a play on what are known as the “Three Jewels” of Buddhism: Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha. Loosely translated, we could say that those three jewels are *Awakening* (“Buddha” means “Awakened One”), *Teaching* (“Dharma” means teaching or the path to Awakening or Enlightenment), and *Community* (“Sangha” means the community of Buddhist practitioners). Those Three Jewels of Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha are also known as the “Three Refuges”; they are the three things in which Buddhist practitioners can choose to take refuge: awakening, teaching, and community.

But just like the various other religious groups in this country, there are many different types of Buddhist communities. And it is always interesting to hear stories of people who, for example, flee a conservative Christian church only to discover in shock that **there are strains of Buddhism with similar amounts of rigidity, sexism, and hierarchy as the fundamentalist Christianity they were fleeing.** (Of course, it's similarly fascinating to hear stories of individuals raised in a traditionalist sect of a religion who **come to discover the mystical,**

experiential strands in their own traditions of which they were previously unaware: Sufism in Islam, Kabbalah in Judaism, and the contemplative strains in the Christian tradition.)

My interest this morning is in the type of Buddhism that is sometimes called *Pragmatic Buddhism, which emphasizes what individuals can test in the crucible of their own firsthand experience.* I have an academic interest in rituals and traditions that have built up over the centuries in various Buddhist cultures, but many of these traditions were not practiced by Siddhartha Gautama, the historical Buddha. My much greater personal interest is in *Westernized Dharma*, Buddhist teachings that seek to integrate Western psychology, modern science, and contemporary technology. Likewise, I'm drawn to a twenty-first-century *sangha*, a Buddhist community that is of, by, and for us in this time and place.

One of many helpful guides that I have found is Daniel Ingram.¹ Ingram is an M.D., a board-certified emergency medicine physician with a master's degree in Public Health. He is the author of *Mastering the Core Teachings of the Buddha: An Unusually Hardcore Dharma Book*.² Recently for six months, I facilitated a study of this book twice a month during our 10:00 a.m. UU Buddhist Fellowship. And allow me to publicly thank everyone who persevered through that study. We had some great discussions, but Ingram is, indeed, both unusual and hardcore, and his approach doesn't appeal to everyone. Indeed, I wouldn't recommend that you rush out to read his book. Unless hardcore Buddhist practice is right for you at this time, there are easier and better places to start.³

Personally, I'm drawn both to Ingram's pragmatism and his directness about what, in his experience, does (and doesn't) contribute to the full depths of transformation, concentration, and insight that Buddhism can offer. While there are many great introductory Buddhist books out there, there can be a temptation to stay on the surface of religious traditions. And we Unitarian

¹ To read or listen to **free interview with Daniel Ingram**, see <http://www.buddhistgeeks.com/author/daniel-ingram/>.

² For a **free copy of Ingram's book**, see <http://integrateddaniel.info/book/>.

³ "*easier and better places to start*" — For one of many lists of Western Buddhist teachers, see "**Wanna Check out Buddhism? Top 10 Buddhist Teachers Living in America**," available at http://www.huffingtonpost.com/waylon-lewis/wanna-check-out-buddhism_b_148960.html.

Universalists may be particularly susceptible to that temptation to only experiment with the light, easy, and accessible aspects of the world religions — only rarely delving into the heavier, harder, and less accessible aspects, even though some of the richest parts of religious traditions may only come to fruition through focused practice and study. Thus, on one hand, the wonderful religious pluralism we surveyed earlier of a Liberal Christian service at ten o'clock, a UU Buddhist meditation at eleven, and a Humanist dialogue at noon — all under the same roof — does help keep all those traditions accountable to one another, in conversation, and from becoming too insulated. On the other hand, that same diversity can undercut the benefit that can come from digging deeply into one tradition.

Nevertheless, an argument could be made that a Unitarian Universalist congregation may be one of the best places to explore Pragmatic Buddhism, Westernized Dharma, and 21st-century Sangha. For practitioners interested in stripping away unnecessary hindrances of dogma, ritual, hierarchy, and myth that have built up in some forms of Buddhism, a UU congregation could be a supportive community for those looking to question the value of alleged taboos to explore new frontiers such as the ways that technology might become a help and not just a hindrance in mindfulness practices.

And, for anyone who is wondering about whether my interest in progressive, pragmatic Buddhism is analogous to my interest in progressive, pragmatic Christianity (or progressive, pragmatic Hinduism, Islam, Humanism, Judaism, etc.), the answer is “Yes.” There is a parallel irony that both Buddhism and Christianity, in some quarters, have become dominated by dogma, rituals, and hierarchy that in many cases would be anathema to the historical Buddha or the historical Jesus.⁴ At the same time, I would readily affirm that beneficial innovations have also come to light in the last few millennia of which Siddhartha Gautama and Jesus of Nazareth had no conception. But that’s why I’m drawn to pragmatism. I’m open to using all the tools at our disposal as wisely and skillfully as we are able.

Buddhists refer to that approach as “Skillful means” or “expedient means.” The approach that is useful at one time may not be useful later. As the old Buddhist parable tells us, just because a raft helps you cross a river, doesn’t mean that you have to carry that raft with you

⁴ “*anathema to the historical Buddha*” — see Ingram, 117-120, 126.

forever. **Using a raft to cross the river safely is skillful means. So is too the wisdom to leave that raft at the river's edge once you have crossed.**

So there may be times when ritual, myth, dogma, and hierarchy have their uses, and using them may be skillful means. But many religious communities fall into danger when they forget that those forms are *merely* skillful means and not ends in themselves. There are also times and places where it is wise to leave those rituals, myths, dogmas, and hierarchies by the side of the river in gratitude for their help, but also in recognition that to maintain them would be a burdensome encumbrance if, for instance, the next stage of your journey will take you through landscape (literally or metaphorically) where a raft isn't needed. In the coming days and weeks, I invite you to give some thought to the communities and groups you are involved with regarding what are and aren't skillful means in your life.

Now having introduced Pragmatic Buddhism, I would like to at least briefly give you a taste of Ingram's "Unusually Hardcore Dharma" as an example of what is possible for twenty-first century Buddhist practitioners. First, it may be helpful to name how much of a time commitment we may be talking about. Just as you need to train in increasingly large regular increments to become a concert pianist or Ironman triathlete, so too, most people who seek Awakening or Enlightenment, commit to regular training. And Ingram's rule of thumb is similar to what I have seen in other contemplative traditions: perhaps **only ten minutes per day at first, building up to perhaps twenty minutes twice a day, all the way eventually to 1-2 hours per day.**⁵ This practice allows you to strengthen your concentration skills, which allows you to stabilize what Buddhists call the "Monkey Mind." The most I've ever been able to work into my schedule is 45 minutes twice a day, but that was before starting work on my dissertation. Most of us can't do it all. And **if you find yourself always falling asleep when you try to meditate, the best spiritual practice for you at this time may be committing to 8 hours a sleep a night before worrying about starting a meditation practice.**

If you are currently pursuing an advanced degree, training for a marathon, starting a new job, or becoming a first-time parent, it may *not* be the right time to try to meditate for two hours a day. However, a high stress time could be precisely the time to commit to meditation 10-20

⁵ "1-2 hours per day" — Ingram, 31.

minute a day. I've heard many different busy people say, **"I'm too busy *not* to meditate and go to the gym"** (if only for thirty minutes, a few times a week) because mindfulness and exercise are keeping them sane and grounded amidst a maelstrom of commitments.

But I promised that Ingram was hardcore, so here's an example of what it could look like to take your meditation practice to the next level. Ingram writes:

let's say you could allocate 365 hours out of one year to formal meditation practice. Given a choice, I would be more inclined to take half of those hours, about 182, and **do a ten-day retreat practicing hard and consistently eighteen hours a day with minimal breaks at the beginning of the year, and then spend half an hour meditating each of the other days**. I would be much more likely to cross into some interesting territory early on and overcome some of the initial hurdles than if I spent one hour each day for that year practicing well. The amount of time and effort is the same, but the effect is likely to be quite different.... I recommend greater than five-day retreats when possible.⁶

Perhaps now is also the time to mention that when you start listening to world-class meditators, you start hearing about things like *three-year* retreats — seriously! However, most of us have too many commitments to job, family, or mortgages such that a five- or ten-day retreat once a year would be a challenge, much less a three-year retreat. But here's where pragmatism can helpfully come in again.

As you study religious traditions, it is important to become aware of what is sometimes called a **"Monastic Bias," a prejudice that the purest, most advanced forms of spirituality are only achievable by an isolated individual that is usually some form of hermit, living on the edge of a cloistered monastic community**. But this monastic bias is increasingly being questioned.

I often remind couples whose wedding I will be officiating that **marriage, at its best, is a school for love. The challenge and the invitation of marriage is to continually *choose* to love your partner**. I've, likewise, sometimes heard **children described as little Zen masters**, who are naturally adept at triggering our shadow sides. As you may have heard me quote before, "Our

⁶ "*greater than five-day retreats when possible*" — Ingram, 94.

family members are particularly good at pushing our buttons, because they are the ones who sewed our buttons on in the first place.” The point is that all parts of our life — from neurotic family members and obnoxious bosses and from stressed-out partners to high-demand children — *all parts of our life* are invitations to practice mindfulness and compassion if you choose to bring that intentionality to your experience.

I invite you to consider the possibility that bringing **three-years of daily mindful, compassionate intentionality to your marriage, parenting, work (or any relationship, including your relationship with yourself) could be *even more beneficial* to your spiritual growth than a three-year retreat sequestered in the mountains.** How much easier is it, for instance, to seemingly experience that you love all of humanity than to concretely and patiently love the same messy, complex, complicated set of people day after day, year after year? And I invite you to consider that the point of logging hours on your meditation cushion is *not* sufficient in and of itself if it doesn’t lead to greater mindfulness and compassion in the rest of your life.

Arguably someone who spends three years actively trying to practice mindfulness and compassion in every part of their life may be much better than *living* Buddhism in the world than someone who spends three years meditating in a highly-controlled retreat environment. That retreatant will likely have tremendous insight into reality, but will likely not be well equipped to *reintegrate* and live out those insights in the Western world.⁷ And speaking at least for myself and a growing number of others, my interest not in an esoteric Buddhism, but in Pragmatic Buddhism, Westernized Dharma, and a twenty-first-century Sangha.⁸

Now there’s, of course, a lot more to be said about Buddhism, which is a 2,500 year old tradition. And Buddhists love lists, so we could talk much longer and with great benefit this morning about the 3 Characteristics of Reality, the 4 Noble Truths, or the 8-fold Path, but since we’ve dipped our toes briefly into one teacher’s perspective on hardcore dharma, I want to be sure not to leave you with the frequent misimpression that **if you were to become a hardcore Buddhist practitioner, meditate for 2 hours each day, go on a ten-day retreat each year, and**

⁷ For a model of **how to integrate Buddhist practice and modern life**, see <http://www.buddhistgeeks.com/liferetreat/>.

⁸ “*not in an esoteric Buddhism*” — Ingram, 141.

experience Enlightenment, then you and your life would *not* be perfect as a result. You would presumably lessen your suffering, better understand the nature of reality, and increase your compassion, but neither you nor your life would be perfect. Ingram writes:

if we were to look to the life of Buddha, who by definition is as enlightened as it gets in Buddhism, lots of bad things happened to him, at least according to the texts. He had chronic headaches and back pain, got illnesses, was attacked by bandits, people tried to kill him, his own order broke into warring factions, people harassed him, and so forth and so on.⁹

That sound a lot like the lives of Jesus, Gandhi, Martin Luther King, Jr., and so many others, who had great spiritual insights, but who still had conflict in the world — including in the case of all the figures I named being killed for their beliefs. **We can't control the vicissitudes of the world, but we can learn to *respond* to whatever comes our way with greater mindfulness, insight, and compassion.**

I'm grateful for your presence here this morning. The great hope of this religious community is in, with, and through our diversity with might live our way together into what Martin Luther King, Jr. called the Beloved Community. And whether your path to that Beloved Community is Buddhism, Christianity, Judaism, Hinduism, science, or some other combination, for this morning, I leave you with this Buddhist blessing:

May you be filled with loving-kindness.

May you be well.

May you be peaceful and at ease.

May you be whole.

May it be so. And blessed be.

⁹ “*look to the life of Buddha*” — Ingram, 340.