



Conscious Life presents

ANXIETY SUPER CONFERENCE

Neuro-somatic mindfulness for healing anxiety

Guest: Dr Fleet Maull

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[00:00:10] Alex Howard

Welcome, everyone, to this interview where I'm super excited to be talking with Fleet Maull. Firstly, Fleet, welcome and thank you for joining me.

Dr Fleet Maull

Well, thank you for having me, Alex. Great to be here.

Alex Howard

It's nice for us to connect in this way. We've moved in some different circles together, but I'm really excited to have the opportunity to dive a little more into some of your work.

Just to give people Fleet's background, Fleet Maull is an author, meditation teacher, and social entrepreneur who developed Neuro-Somatic Mindfulness, a deeply embodied neuroscience and trauma-informed approach to meditation that accelerates healing, integration, and awakening.

He is founder of the Heart Mind Institute, the Global Resilience Summit, Prison Mindfulness Institute, and Engaged Mindfulness Institute. Dr Maull is a Zen Rishi and a senior Dharma teacher in the Tibetan Buddhist tradition.

He's the author of *Radical Responsibility: How to Move Beyond Blame, Fearlessly Live Your Highest Purpose, and Become an Unstoppable Force for Good*.

So I feel like, Fleet, a good starting point is just to give a bit of a broad frame from your perspective around how you see anxiety, both from an experiential perspective but also from a neuropsychological perspective.

Dr Fleet Maull

I think this is such an important topic, which I'm very grateful that you all are doing this Super Conference around it because anxiety, it's just part of the human experience, but it is, in debilitating ways, I think, really endemic and especially among young people these days. So I think it's a really important one to address.

And I don't want to in any way make light of the fact that anxiety can be incredibly troubling and debilitating a phenomena for many people and create tremendous suffering and really limit their lives in very significant ways.

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And at the same time, I'd like to position anxiety more broadly in the human condition and in our life experience. And there is a spectrum of how we experience anxiety, from the normal anxiety that we all experience day in and out, to that kind of anxiety that can become very debilitating.

And I also want to acknowledge that for those who are suffering from anxiety in a debilitating way or really life limiting way, it's not just a mental phenomenon. Sometimes people mistake that and think, well, it's the way you're thinking about things. It's a physical reality. People experience anxiety in the body, and despite how they talk to themselves or any concepts others might give them, it's a physical reality. You can't just think it away.

I'm not saying cognitive reframing couldn't be helpful, but it is very much a physical reality that can become very embedded and can become a neurophysiological pattern or habit that can be hard to break out of.

But I wanted to contextualize it in this broad way because in some ways it's normal to experience some level of anxiety, and it can mean that we're less buffered, it could be in a good way and it could be in a debilitating way. So we'll move on to some of the solutions at some point, but we're less buffered to the actual uncertainty of life. Life is uncertain, completely uncertain, and groundless on so many levels. And of course, we're experiencing that today in today's world. It's in all of our faces.

We used to think of uncertainty about the future, today we're thinking about uncertainty about tomorrow and next week. And there's so much destabilization going on in so many levels across the cultural and political spectrum and the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic and the existential threat of climate change and all the anxiety that that brings up. As well as continued global instability and cycles of war and refugee crises around the world and the current crises and terrible invasion and heartbreaking tragedy that's going on in Ukraine.

So there's tremendous uncertainty and stability. And also, if we take a deeper dive into the nature of reality, the self structure that we have all put together in order to imagine a certain continuity of life and a certain level of certainty from one moment to the next about who I am and where I am and what the deal is and how you play the game, that is a constructed reality. It's a constructed self, and that's just the human condition.

We all do that. We're born very vulnerable little creatures. And at some point, 6 months or so into our life, we can't go back to the womb. We have to begin to individuate. And reality is very groundless and spacious and fluid at that point. And we don't have the capacity to live in that kind of groundlessness.

So we start forming a self structure, and we form it out of whatever's around. And of course, if we have fairly stable and loving, or sometimes what's said, "good enough" parenting, we'll construct a fairly stable self and be fairly well functioning or even high functioning in life.

Of course, if we have a less loving, less stable childhood experience then our self structure may be less well put together, and it can cause us a lot of problems during our adult life.

And we're all somewhere on that spectrum. None of us comes through childhood unscathed. And unfortunately, many people experience way more than their share of adverse childhood experiences

and even traumas. And of course, a lot of that happens around the fault lines of injustice and so forth, which is a tragic, heartbreaking thing that we're all working to change in every way we can.

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But it is part of the human condition. Even if we have a fairly well constructed self and we're fairly high functioning adults, we constructed that in a fear based way to ward off the reality of the groundlessness of reality.

The great contemplative traditions talked about the relative world that we live in and exist in and relate in, as well as our more ultimate reality, which is empty of any permanent self structures of anything, of this and that. Nondual teachings from various contemplative traditions or just the experience of emptiness and these kinds of things. Or boundlessness or vastness, people use different terms, but reality as such.

And so we all create this self structure to be able to navigate that, and that's quite normal. And then with some of the spiritual traditions, the path then becomes to gradually deconstruct that in a workable way so that we can lean into that groundlessness.

So I think in many ways, when we're experiencing anxiety on lots of different levels, whether it's more mental anxiety or it becomes physical anxiety and emotional anxiety, even spiritual anxiety, in some ways, what's really happening is we're less buffered to that uncertain ground and that very fluid ground and really reality as it is.

And I think for many people who suffer debilitating anxiety is because of those issues around the original formation of their self structure, perhaps attachment wounds and so forth, that the groundlessness is constantly poking its head through and creating all that anxiety, maybe conspiring with current events or situations that have happened in their adult life and so forth.

And so the work, on the one hand, is constructive to how do we rebuild a more cohesive sense of self from which we can take our seat and handle the uncertainty of life, but then it's also training ourselves to handle more uncertainty.

The last thing I'll say about it is, an analogy I like to use is that of being, you're at a pool party somewhere and somebody pushes you into the deep end of the pool. Well, if you know how to swim, you might be irritated that your clothes are wet, but you're going to splash around. You'll probably start laughing sooner or later. But if you don't know how to swim, you're going to completely panic. You're really going to panic because you could drown.

And so the issue is, do we know how to swim? Can we learn to swim to be more comfortable in reality as it is, which is very fluid, uncertain? And that's becoming more obvious to all of us these days.

Alex Howard

Lots of good points you just made. I wanted to echo a couple, one of which is this experience of anxiety being in the body. And I've had experiences of actually being relatively calm in my mind and quite rational in my mind, but being in a heightened state of physiological anxiety. And that sometimes can be a very obvious physical thing, like missing a meal and then blood sugar going crazy and hormones going out of balance.

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But I think, firstly, that's a really important thing to recognize because sometimes the cognitive approaches don't work because actually there's a physiological experience that's happening.

And then to develop on from that, the point you made as well around these structures, I remember a number of years ago doing some quite deep psychospiritual work and saying to my teacher, I feel like I'm dying. And not like an idea of that, a physiological sense of disintegration and falling apart. And ultimately recognizing, I'm sure we'll get this a bit later, that actually there was a positive in that.

But that sense of our ego structures often being built on shaky ground and who we take ourselves to be, being these constructs that can move. And that can be quite an unsettling place, can't it, particularly if we haven't got the right frames of reference of what's happening?

Dr Fleet Maull

Absolutely. And it can be extremely difficult because one doesn't have a cognitive frame that makes sense of it often.

And I've had very close colleagues and friends, high functioning people in life, but also suffering from really debilitating anxiety that sometimes would just take over their lives. And it was really a physical thing, and they really didn't have the thought structure to make sense of it.

And it really goes, I think in most of those cases it went back to early childhood experiences and really to attachment wounds and so forth like that. And who knows at what point in life something causes whatever paths together part of our self or neurobiology starts to wear thin and that groundlessness is coming through into the body. And we don't know how to make sense. Why am I feeling this way?

And then people can then experience, anxiety is pretty well known and accepted, but at the same time, it can be somewhat like some of these debilitating constellations of symptomatology that are described as chronic fatigue and some of these things. That people feel like by the clinical world that they're getting a bit gaslighted or something, to use a current expression. They have all these symptoms, they're experiencing this, and people are saying, well, we can't see anything. It's not showing up on a scan or a blood test so it must be in your mind.

And I think anxiety can sometimes be like that for people. That the people around them, lay people and then sometimes professionals they see will assume that the problem is in their mind, in the way they're thinking about their life and their strategies for life. And if they would just change their thoughts and strategies, they'd be less anxious. But it's clearly not the case. It's something deeper than that.

It's not to say there have been, with cognitive behavioral therapy and mindfulness based cognitive behavioral therapy and other variations on that, like acceptance commitment therapy and DBT and so forth, that has helped people deal with anxiety, and it can, but for me I think it's really important to bring the body into it, and it's going to be much more effective with various sorts of body centered therapies as well as just trainings that anybody can train themselves in, to become more embodied and more comfortable in your body and more grounded in your body.

And learn to navigate what feels like a level of physical anxiety that's almost untenable to learn, to actually relate with that and have become much more familiar with it so that it's really just energy and

you're able to flow with it. What before would have completely destabilized you in the moment and made it very difficult to function, becomes the kind of energy you can work with.

[00:13:53] Alex Howard

Many years ago when I was experiencing these very debilitating panic attacks, one of the most powerful things was breaking the panic about the panic. To be able to observe and witness the experience without going into a reaction to the experience. Because otherwise it just becomes a self-generating pattern that you have anxiety, then you have anxiety about the anxiety, and it goes round and round. And there's the sense of moving that relationship to it, which I think can be very helpful.

You touched on in a few places already some of the causes of anxiety, and you mentioned particularly some of the attachment issues and adverse childhood experiences. How do you help people get clarity on what those causes might be for them? What's the perspective that you bring to get that picture?

Dr Fleet Maull

I think it can be helpful for people to get some insight into some of the root causes of their anxiety. One of the fabulous things with the famous adverse childhood experiences study, the ACEs study that I think came out in 1998, was that now we understood that all kinds of behavioral struggles that we're having as adults are not character issues or even sometimes were society looking at them as moral issues or something, but they're actually rooted in these adverse childhood experiences. That we're set up and programmed to have these behavioral struggles and functional issues in life.

And actually the way society is constructed as well, that many of us can have things going on that are driven by those things in equally unhealthy ways, but they're kind of functional in the current society where we could even be rewarded for certain behaviors that are actually grounded in fear and anxiety and adverse childhood experiences. But societies have to reward the behavior, although there are others that you can be penalized for, even end up in prison for.

So there's a mix of that. And I think it can be helpful to get some insights into that. I lead a training, I haven't led it during the pandemic because it's just not something we've figured out how to do online at all. It's an old school training group process. It can be very intense. It's held in a deeply compassionate way in which people do a lot of grief work and also a lot of rage work. And it's a process that takes people very quickly back into their family of origin stuff, so to speak, and can help them shift their relationship to it.

First see it, which can be very helpful, which can bring up a lot of insight and understanding about what they've been experiencing in their life. And then they can shift their relationship, bring that experience into their adult consciousness rather than living from that obvious childhood framework when they actually experienced it, when they were completely powerless, they couldn't run away, they couldn't fight back. And it embeds deeply.

So in the adult, one could see it differently and we even sometimes go through role play, the kind of things that help them complete a process or do what they couldn't do as a child and so forth.

And so the insights there can be very helpful. At the same time, I don't think it's absolutely necessary to have the knowledge of, this is the childhood experience that created this for me. I think there are other ways to work with it neurophysiologically and through embodiment work that we can have the nervous system begin to heal itself.

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I think there's two levels of that which I wouldn't really want to separate. But you mentioned the Neuro-Somatic Mindfulness model that I developed and teach. It's a very deeply embodied approach to mindfulness and awareness meditation practice. And I've developed that further into another model really to address this. And I have a course that's just about ready to come out called Regenerative Self Parenting.

And my experience in working on myself and working with others is that one can actually activate and actualize and open to a sensate field in the body that includes all the sensation ones experiencing on the surface of the skin from head to toe, like one is encapsulated in this field of sensation, which is one's contact with the space around us, which we generally perceive to be empty. But space is not actually empty. It's energy. And we can learn to feel ourselves held in that space.

And then we can really awaken through interoceptive awareness to this profound, vast landscape of somatic awareness within the body based on our entire body as a living organism, all the way down to the bones and including the bones. All containing the cells, all connected to the central nervous system. It's really an endless exploration about how deeply we can awaken interoceptive awareness within the body.

And, of course, even the sensation we're experiencing on the surface of skin and our contact with the energetic world of space around us, we're experiencing that within the body as well through the nervous system. So in doing that, in my experience, we can recreate almost a womb-like experience for ourselves.

And there are some who've talked about the ideal childhood situation for a child to be brought into would be like a fourth trimester. You are coming into the world, but you're so deeply held. In fact, there are some researchers that have basically proposed that the ideal human configuration for child rearing is the historic hunter gatherer clan configuration, which there are still some in Africa and South America and so forth, where a child is born into a set of nested relationships, and they're always held, they're always cared for, they're always attended to. There's literally no gaps. So it is like that fourth trimester.

And so my experience in working with myself on those is that we can recreate that for ourselves through deep embodiment and in doing so gradually and very gently allowing our nervous system to untangle itself, the cross circuits and broken circuits to work themselves out.

I think there's a lot of ways because the deeper you go into the body, you're starting to go into from gross physical sensation and a more subtle physical sensation into what, in some traditions you would talk about subtle energy body, prana body, things like that, and you're really getting into that whole body mind spectrum.

And so I think there's a lot of, in a relatively measurable world, scientific world, we can see and feel and measure, there's a lot of healing and untangling that can happen and rewiring. And there's a lot of neuroscience behind us now that enhanced interoceptive awareness, directly increases our capacity for emotion regulation, resilience, it heals trauma, increases emotional intelligence and so forth. So I think we can go very deep with that.

And then the underlying ground is, in many traditions and in my experience, is actually the ultimate ground of our nature, which has never been injured and is always whole and pure and is the ground

that has been called Buddha nature or Christ nature or Christian nature or my teacher just called it basic goodness, innate primordial basic goodness or wholeness. So even getting one toe down in that, just having a little experience to that changes everything.

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So I think the combination of the embodiment work that even on a visible measurable level there's a lot of healing and untangling that can happen. And then as a result, we can also get in contact with that deeper ground where we have the direct experience of our own wholeness. And that can really give us the ability to swim in groundlessness, the ability to swim in anxiety. It can give us our wings, to be able to fly, to be able to swim by having the confidence that we know on some deep, fundamental level that we are fundamentally okay.

And when you really start to have that experience, I don't know if it's an assumption, but it seems clear that that is something that probably transcends death as well. And of course, death anxiety has been talked about as one of the ultimate forms of our anxiety that we all deal with in the human condition.

Alex Howard

One of the big challenges I think people have in reaching that place of holding is when we're in a state of anxiety, often what we're doing is we're trying to think our way to a feeling of safety. We're trying to think our way out of the place that we're in.

And the problem is that the more that we do that, actually the more that our nervous system speeds up and the further away we get from that ground of being, from that holding and that innate support that's there.

In your way of working with people, how do you help them navigate that to in a sense loosen the grip of the thinking place and open up to more of a place of feeling?

Dr Fleet Maull

Absolutely. And that points to that vicious cycle you talked about before, because with our thinking mind, one, we're trying to deal with the anxiety we're experiencing in the body and we're trying to explain it to ourselves, and maybe we're creating narratives out around what we think is causing it in our present situation. And then we're trying to escape it and get rid of it and get out of it, and all that just accelerates this whole cognitive process and increases the fear and the anxiety.

So obviously, it's about reversing that process. Slowing down, taking a breath, taking many breaths, and beginning to work with the body. Now that can be very counterintuitive because that can be the last place the person wants to bring their attention to is the body, because it seems like the body is the problem.

And of course, this is true with anxiety, and this is also true with various forms of embedded trauma and trauma reactions. And of course, those two things are very associated, but it can be very triggering and unsettling and even unworkable for someone to bring their attention to the body so there needs to be found a safe and workable way for them to do that.

A lot of current effective trauma treatments have to do with how to do that. And of course, Peter Levine's idea of pendulating is a very effective one where we develop somewhere in our body, with

our body in a room with a therapist, somewhere where we have a home base of safety or workability like, I know how to get there. Or maybe a guide or therapist has their hands back on my kidneys or down on my feet. That physical touch or warmth. Or maybe it's my favorite chair or it's a certain posture or it's a certain way of focusing my body that's good, that's workable, that's home base.

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So you develop that place somehow, and then from there just gently beginning to lean into what may feel a bit uncomfortable and just being willing to touch it. Okay. Yeah. And then touching it with curiosity. So what is that energy that I'm so afraid of? Feels so unworkable? What is anxiety, actually? Where is it in the body? Just touch it, then come back to home base. Come back to that place of workability, and then maybe lean in and touch it again. Lean back, lean in, lean back. A very gentle process over time.

And it's really helpful if someone's working with a therapist, clinician or whether someone's learning this in a training, that they're being taught to do this, maybe with assistance to begin with so they learn how to self titrate the experience and they develop confidence that, I know I can lean in, I know I can get myself back. And I'm not going to be reckless and push myself over a cliff. I developed some confidence that I can handle this kind of pendulating, the leaning in, leaning back, leaning in.

And okay, this is a practice. I know how to do this. And I know when I feel well resourced enough to do it. And I know when I don't feel well resourced enough to do it. And I know what kind of surroundings I need and who I need to be with me or not be with me and where I need to do it.

I really learned that. And I may learn that through training, so I may learn it with a therapist so I can develop my own practice that I have confidence in, and then I can gradually do the work of reclaiming the body.

I think Daniel Siegel's framework of the window of tolerance is a very helpful one. It gives a nice map where we have this window where we can be in a responsive relational mode with the challenges of our life rather than getting pushed back into fear and survival based reactivity, anxiety, and so forth.

And when life triggers, life events, circumstances, or the way we're perceiving those is actually what it is, when the way we're perceiving life circumstance, which is not to blame ourselves, it's just having an insight to understand how the body and mind work. When we perceive things in a triggering way, we start to get triggered out of that window of tolerance, and we either start shutting down, disassociating, shutting down, and so forth. Or we get overactive. We get upregulated. The autonomic nervous system is either shutting down with a really strong parasympathetic branch response with almost no sympathetic activity.

Or the opposite. We're getting sympathetic branches going from alertness to stress response to fight or flight. And we're getting overactive. And that overactivity upregulated can go in either fear, anxiety, frustration, anger, and acting out, even violence. Or it can go into rigidity behaviors and compulsions and addictions and all kinds of rigidity. It can go into a total freeze, which is a highly upregulated state, but it's muscle paralysis called freeze. Some people confuse freeze with the shutdown. That's actually a different kind of experience going into a kind of catatonic state.

But anyway, we go one of those two ways. But what we can learn through this kind of embodiment work with a skillful trauma therapist in various trainings and workshops, we can learn how self-trying traits are leading into the edges of our... Because for all of us that window shrinks in our lifespan.

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When we're 1, 2, 3 years old, it's wide open. And then we start having experience in the bumps and bruises of life and experience a disapproval from a parent or something that feels embarrassing or shaming. Well, I'm not going to do that again. I'm not going to do that again. And our life starts to shrink.

And most of us as adults have things that I just wouldn't dream of doing that a lot of people do like public speaking. Oh my God, I would never dream of doing that. So our life shrinks. And there are some people in the high performance world that say that you should do something that terrifies you every day. Well, that's a little bit extreme but maybe we could lean into something that's a little uncomfortable each day.

Because by leaning into the edges in a safe, workable way where we learn how to do it, we have the confidence that we can always bring ourselves back, we gradually can reopen and expand that window of tolerance, or what like I and others like to call, the zone of resilience.

And that's really what most trauma treatments are about. How do we reclaim? And that's reclaiming being in the body to begin with, reclaiming our embodied self.

And the interesting thing, and this could be another part of our conversation, is the deeper we go in embodiment, we now know within general neuroscience, but also in the field of interpersonal neurobiology, that the same neural networks involved in deep embodiment, deep interoceptive awareness, are also involved in our ability to create safety and connection with others and keep our social engagement systems online, in the language of Stephen Porges' polyvagal theory, and to invite others to have their social engagement systems online.

So we've been mainly talking about what one can do individually around anxiety with the support of either trainers or therapists or whatever the situation, or themselves, with self educating on how to do it. But then there's also the social landscape and the work we can do with others.

Alex Howard

I'd like to talk about that more in a moment. Before we do I also want to just really go deeper on this point around, what you're really saying is the way that we approach our healing is important.

Because often what people try to do is they try to solve the problem in the way that it got created. So often if there's a lot of anxiety, often we'll have grown up in environments that didn't have the emotional holding and the sensitivity that we needed. And so we try to resolve our anxiety by being harsh with ourselves and by pushing ourselves. And if the recognition is that we need to go more into the body and that feels uncomfortable, rather than that penduling or that titrating, we're trying to force that process because that's what we've learned to do.

And I really appreciate what you're saying, this sensitivity to how we approach that healing process.

Dr Fleet Maull

Absolutely. Well, another aspect that I haven't addressed is, I think I've been implying that this needs to be happening in a context of tremendous self empathy and self-compassion, and gentleness is always the key. Ambition and pushing and forcing is very counterproductive.

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Now there are some group processes like the one I mentioned before, an old school training where we sometimes do things that are not so gentle, but we do them held in a very gentle space and a person has complete freedom to guide their own process. Because sometimes some breakthroughs can happen by being willing to let oneself get into a really activated state of rage and experience what that's all about, or something like that. But that has to be held in a really safe way.

But in general, the hallmark is always gentleness, gentleness and non aggression and no ambition and no striving. And so it can be really helpful to develop, have access to some basic mindfulness practices, self-compassion practices, self empathy practices of which there's a lot available today. Chris Germer and Kristin Neff's model around mindful self-compassion, with all the love and kindness practices that come out of the Buddhist tradition, Sharon Salzberg's work, just a lot of work in the world today around self-compassion, Tara Brach's work, many others.

And properly done meditation, at least in my view and understanding as it comes from classical traditions, is always done in a context of self-compassion. It's always about gentleness.

I think you're absolutely right. It's very important to contextualize the work in safety, workability and gentleness. And it can be because we're set up to be reactive that we could try to attack the problem in the same way it happened, which was through some kind of aggression. But absolutely, we know that what solves aggression is love. The response to that needs to be love not further violence.

Alex Howard

You mentioned a few times meditation and mindfulness practices. And sometimes the real challenge of people that have strong anxiety is they recognize they need to have the benefits but the very act of practicing meditation can feel excruciating because they're actually just sitting with that place of anxiety. What do you find helps people work with that?

Dr Fleet Maull

Well, basic sitting meditation done classically in silence and sitting still may not be the right starting point for many people, may not be the right starting point at all. It may be some kind of mindful movement practice. It may be some kind of practice that's done in community.

I think having a journaling practice can be a very helpful and powerful thing because it could be a tremendous source of insight. Where we sit down, we make a regular habit of it, and we give it some time every day, and we sit down and we just kind of free associate. And then we come back and revisit what we've written the next day and we write some more and that kind of thing because it can really surface a lot of insight.

And almost with all of the conditions that we might be experiencing that are creating suffering for us and limiting the ways we can engage in life, they all benefit from self awareness and insight. Now you can have some level of self awareness. I'm aware of this, and I feel it, and I'm developing some understanding. I've read books about it. But the problem is still there. So I'm not saying that's going to solve everything, but at least gives us a place from which to begin to do the work and stabilizing ourselves in more of a witness consciousness.

And so there's lots of ways, I think, to stabilize that witness consciousness, apart from just basic sitting meditation. I mean, sitting meditation is a great vehicle for that, time honored, time proven over

thousands of years. But there are other methodologies that can be done, such as journaling, various forms of mindful movement.

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And then, of course, there's all the work that we can do in community, various forms of dialogue work and circling work, and the whole world of group therapy and even training work that's done. I'm really looking forward to going back to live trainings. I just signed on to do a 10 day deep retreat in this kind of work that I do in the spring of next year. I'm so longing to get back in a physical space with people and be able to work in that way.

And when I do trainings, whether they're radical responsibility trainings or different kind of meditation trainings, neuro-somatic mindfulness trainings, a lot of the work we do in dyads and then sometimes in small groups, but a lot of it is in dyads, and helping people get comfortable presencing themselves at whatever level they're able to do. And then learning to presence another and developing the skills to create a profound level of okayness and safety and intimacy with another human being, even a perfect stranger in a workshop in a very short period of time.

Which is really illuminating and gives people a tremendous sense of confidence that you actually know how to invite each other's social engagement systems online, and then you can experience that kind of resonance and deep resonance that begins to happen. And that of itself can be incredibly healing. And learning to do that and learning how to have those kinds of relationships in your life, even in an informal way, that are going to support your healing.

Alex Howard

I think there's something very powerful, particularly actually, if one is in a state of anxiety in that moment, to be with another and just to speak about their immediate experience. That social engagement system, something about just the holding and the presence of another. And often there's a lot of shame or there's even fear about expressing what someone's experiencing. But just that being witnessed in of itself can be very powerful.

Dr Fleet Maull

Absolutely. And obviously this can be done, that really is the job of a therapist in many ways. And it can be done skillfully in trainings. And hopefully we can develop friends, partners and friends and close friends who can do that skillfully with us. They don't have to be professionals, but at least they're able to listen and listen empathically. They're not judging us and they're not trying to change us. They're really willing just to be with us and bear witness to what our experience is in that moment.

That training I was referencing, that group process that I lead, in that often after somebody has done their work, we do things called holdings and liftings. We have a certain way it's done where one person who's doing the whole thing sits down and the other person then sits almost in their lap or in front of them and leans back into them, and they're being held and they just allow themselves to be held.

And then we have them receiving those holdings, like on every break over the next couple of days and just allowing their nervous system to relax back into being held by another human being and feeling that warmth.

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And we train the people doing the holding to do it in a really neutral way. We don't want them massaging the person or trying to mother the person. It's just very neutral but present. They're just experiencing the neutral presence of another human being that's not bringing their own needs into the situation at all. So we really train people to do it in that kind of way.

Or lifting, where we actually have people lifted up and be held by a group of people and allow themselves to just relax into it, really allow themselves to just be held. And there are lots of different ways in which we do this, but these kinds of things can help a person begin to, it's not really a person, it's their nervous system.

I had a conversation recently with Stephen Porges about this. Often what we talk about in terms of trauma and embedded anxiety and embedded trauma and so forth, it's that some experience happened and our nervous system locks on, it gets stuck. It's locked on to that experience.

And whenever it happened, of course, we were in a fight or flight mode of some kind, or it could have been a complete shutdown mode. And either way, whatever that was, the nervous system gets stuck on. The normal off button or the way which we get upregulated into a situation which could go all the way into the extreme of freeze, but then it always starts to come back down.

And it's really interesting to understand that landscape. And looking into Stephen Porges' work is very helpful because it can happen in different ways. We have whole different emotional experiences. We're going up and a whole another emotional experience coming down, which can involve some embarrassment, shaming and so forth.

And understanding that landscape and becoming familiar with it we can then not buy into the cognitive experience or the narrative that may be accompanying it and just begin to experience it energetically and go, oh, I know this. I know what that is. Okay, I'm triggered. I'm going up here and then I know it's going to come back down.

Well, the problem with a lot of embedded trauma, this happens a lot with childhood experiences, is we get locked on or we get locked down here in a shutdown, and our nervous system isn't able to undo that.

In many cases it's creating the safety for the nervous system to literally feel. It's not even so much me as a person, but it's my nervous system. This is kind of personifying the nervous system in a certain way which could have some reality to it. Some of the wonderful modern models of psychotherapy that include this multiplicity of parts or voices, like internal family systems or voice dialogue. So that locked on place is almost like a sub personality there. And it's locked on and it's not going to let go until it gets attended to.

So in some ways, whether we're doing some kind of therapeutic work that may actually be addressing those parts literally in using internal family systems or voice dialogue, or whether we're simply doing the neurophysiological work that allows that part of our nervous system to feel attended to and then unlock itself, to release the locking is a lot of what's happening there.

Alex Howard

I'm mindful of time, Fleet, but I also want to touch briefly on something that you mentioned a little earlier around this idea that anxiety can also potentially, wasn't quite the words you use, but

potentially be a gateway to a deeper transformation. We were talking about some of these ego structures loosening, and actually there can be potential real gifts in that. Maybe just to speak briefly to that as well.

[00:42:19] Dr Fleet Maull

Well, this may be a bit of a leap here. I guess I'll try to set a context for it.

In the Tibetan Buddhist tradition, which I practice, there's a lot of inner yoga work and inner visualizations, and a lot of those visualization practices, one is visualizing oneself as an enlightened deity of some kind. One of the many manifestations of the male and female Buddhas. And there's all these, people may be familiar with Tara, a female deity of peace and love and God.

So there are many different deities that one works with. And one is entering into, in some ways, another dimensional reality. One can see it in psychological terms, and one can also see it in multidimensional terms.

But anyway, the idea is one is jumpstarting one's ability to recognize one's own enlightened nature. Because the perspective is we're all Buddhas and the difference between an actual awakened Buddha and ourselves is the Buddha realizes they're a Buddha, and we do not yet. We're still believing in all of our narrative of our neurosis. We're still believing we're these really screwed up, messed up people.

Which is why having the direct experience, the meditative and neurophysiological experiences of getting into the depth of where we are fundamentally okay, can be so powerful on an experiential level. But these visualization practices are designed to do that somewhat.

And one of the very well known ones, which is considered a semi-wrathful feminine deity is Vajrayogini. I hope I'm not talking at school here, but I know that she shared this publicly before, but Pema Chödrön, one of the most beloved Buddhist teachers out there, was talking with one of her teachers at one point, and she was describing a lifelong anxiety she dealt with. And she's been very public about the fact that she has dealt with that.

So she was describing that to her teacher, and he said, that's Vajrayogini. Now we can take what we take from that, but what he was pointing to was that her experience of anxiety could actually be a portal into experiencing a deeper ground of reality. And it was actually the avoidance of that and the fear of that, which adds anxiety on top of anxiety and takes one further and further away from the ground of our being.

My own experience that I had, I'll try to say it really briefly. Growing up I found myself in adolescence as a young man with a big hole in my gut. Classic angry young man, graduated from high school in 1968, incredibly tumultuous year in US history with the assassinations and everything and the whole civil rights movement. And I grew up in St. Louis. Every year, every summer, we had what we're called race riots, basically the African American community uprising in the face of terrible racism and oppression.

And I was very affected by all that, getting more and more alienated from the culture that I was part of. And even though my family wasn't in any way overtly racist, they were just the prejudice of that era, but exactly actively involved in supporting all kinds of job programs and so. They were relatively enlightened, but they weren't enlightened by today's standards.

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But anyway, I was becoming very alienated from them and everything and just very disturbed by the whole thing. And I had this huge hole in my gut. I think it also had to do with alcoholism in my family early on and kind of Dr Jekyll Mr Hyde experience with my own mother growing up, which is very splitting. And so I was trying to fill that deep hole with everything I could. With experiences with drugs, with sex, with alcohol, anything.

And when I finally did get into recovery, I actually managed to get myself locked up, which if people know my story, I spent a good piece of time in a federal prison on drug charges. And I finally faced that and I'm in recovery where there's a lot of the God language and some of the traditional twelve steps. And I was already, I've been a Buddhist for many years, and I was struggling with that. I was trying to figure that out. What's my higher power?

And I finally discovered or I just had this insight that that black hole that I've been dealing with, which just felt like a bottomless pit, I was terrified to go there, that was my higher power. And that's where I had to go. And that became my path. And that hole is not there anymore. It's literally not there at all.

And I consider that to have been a completely neurobiological healing and neuropsychological healing over many years of the work I was doing in prison and meditative work and so forth.

But just getting that insight, that what I've been avoiding and trying to cope with and trying to fill up or do whatever my whole adult life to that point, that's where I had to go. That was my higher power. That was the portal to my freedom. And that became the case.

Now, that may sound pretty radical to someone who's experiencing tremendous anxiety. So again, safety, self-compassion, good guidance, to begin to do that very gentle self try trading way to even begin to approach that.

Alex Howard

I feel like there's a whole part of this interview I'd love to go into but I'm mindful of time, but I love that as a point that, often the place we most want to get away from is often the place where the potential really lies.

For people that want to find out more about you and your work, what's the best place to do that, what's some of what they can find?

Dr Fleet Maul

Well, there's three basic places. They can go to my basic website, fleetmaull.com and that can be a portal to all kinds of things.

I offer my online courses and the online summits we do through Heart Mind Institute. And that's just heartmind.co. Not com, just heartmind.co. My website is fleetmaull.com.

And if people are interested in the prison work and criminal justice system and public safety work we do where we've been working with at risk, incarcerated and returning youth and adults for 30 years. And in the last 12/14 years, we've been working with correctional officers, probation police, and first response. That's a big part of my work today, working with public safety professionals and first responders. And we have the Center for Mindfulness and Public Safety.

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So there's two websites I'll point to, prisonmindfulness.org and then mindfulpublicsafety.org if people are interested in that.

And then for part of the same nonprofit, another division is our teacher training program, where we train mindfulness teachers to bring mindfulness, especially to individuals and population communities that have been placed at risk, marginalized, under-resourced.

And so we train people in trauma-informed approaches to sharing the practice of mindfulness, teaching mindfulness or facilitating mindfulness based interventions of all kinds. And that's through the Engaged Mindfulness Institute which is engagemindfulness.org.

They can find out about my work in that way or my book, if people are interested in the *Radical Responsibility* book and *Radical Responsibility* is really mostly about the self agency that we can embrace to really begin doing our own healing work and getting the support whatever it is, whatever we need, but doing it from a place of self agency rather than a place of helplessness and powerlessness where we start to almost neurobiologically institutionalize a victim mindset in ourselves which is incredibly debilitating.

So how do we lean back into and get the help we need to embrace agency in our lives and work with our situation whatever it is?

So anyway, people can find out all about that book at radicalresponsibilitybook.com.

Alex Howard

Awesome. Fleet, thank you so much. It's been such a treat and I've really enjoyed having some time with you and I really encourage people to check out those various places. Thank you.

Dr Fleet Maull

Thank you very much, Alex. I have profound appreciation for the amazing work that you all do with your Super Conferences and so helpful and so needed at this time. So I feel very honored and privileged to be a part of this gathering.

Alex Howard

Thanks Fleet.