



Conscious Life presents

TRAUMA SUPER CONFERENCE

Radical responsibility for trauma healing

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 my friend, Fleet Maull, and we are exploring some really interesting pieces. We'll be talking about the importance of personal responsibility and showing up to the healing journey. And Fleet will share a little bit of his story, including 14 years in federal prison.

We're also talking about the importance of growing resilience and our own capacity, alongside those places of sensitivity and vulnerability to go to those challenging places. To give you a little bit of Fleet's background, Fleet Maull PhD 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 the founder of the Heart Mind Institute, the Global Resilience Summit, Prison Mindfulness Institute and Engaged Mindfulness Institute. Dr Maull is a Zen Roshi and a senior Dharma teacher in the Tibetan Buddhist tradition. He is the author of *Radical Responsibility: How to Move Beyond Blame, Fearlessly Live Your Highest Purpose and Become an Unstoppable Force for Good*. So Fleet, welcome. It's always a pleasure to have some time together.

Fleet Maull

Great to be with you, Alex. Thank you for having me.

Alex Howard

So maybe just as a general frame to start with, from your perspective when we're talking about trauma, what is trauma and what are some of the different kinds of trauma that we can experience?

Fleet Maull

Sure. Well, I won't go into this too deeply because I'm sure many of your speakers have addressed this, but trauma is basically an injury of some kind. It can be physical, we call it physical injuries trauma, and physical injuries can produce emotional trauma. But mostly, usually when we talk about trauma, we're talking about emotional injuries. And we've experienced something that

overwhelmed our ability to cope with it in the moment and it overwhelmed our defense structures, our coping structures and so forth.

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And one of the reasons that childhood traumas are so egregious and really stick in the nervous system so deeply is because when we're really stuck in a situation that is overwhelming us, physically or emotionally, mentally and so forth, and we can't escape from it, we can't fight back, we can't escape. That's when it embeds really deeply. And of course, that is the situation that children find themselves in. But of course, adults can experience trauma as well. And it's basically an injury. It can be physical, emotional, it can be a mental injury, it can be a spiritual injury, it could be a moral injury that overwhelms us.

And what really happens there in neurobiological terms or neurophysiological terms, is that we get stuck in a fight, flight or freeze response. The alarm bells are going off in our nervous system and trigger us to go into either protecting ourselves, running away, or standing and fighting or just freezing. And that gets stuck in our nervous system. Our nervous system gets stuck in a fight, flight or freeze response on some level and then that can be very associated, it can be very state-specific. So a certain memory could trigger that or a smell could trigger that or something we see could trigger it. Whatever was associated with that event or events that deeply embedded a trauma, can then trigger that trauma.

And our nervous system is still as if it was happening right then, we're back in that locked nervous system situation. So these can be single incidents that can cause this. Of course, it can be growing up under extreme poverty or racism or any kind of oppression related to gender identity, sexuality, anything like that. We know a lot more today about ancestral trauma and historical trauma. So it can be the result of growing up under really difficult kinds of oppression and suffering. And we also know today that the expression of our genes, there's an epigenetic factor that can be passed on.

So we pass on trauma through our interactions from parent to child and societally, human beings through generations, but it can also be passed on in an epigenetic way. So there are many different kinds of trauma and on the broadest level it's basically the human condition, it's human suffering and none of us are free of it. And at the same time, some people experience extreme forms of it that can be very debilitating until they find a way to heal it.

Alex Howard

And one of the things that Fleet, I know, that you and I have spoken about previously is that as much as the growing cultural awareness around trauma and the kind of medicalization of trauma has its place, there's also a danger in pathologizing trauma. And I know that you speak about the importance of our own basic goodness, so I'd love to hear you unpack that piece a little bit.

Fleet Maull

Yes, well, the increase in trauma awareness is actually really important because previously we weren't that aware of trauma per se, especially the various kinds of complex emotional traumas and things like ancestral trauma and historical trauma. What we focused on was the symptomology of various mental and emotional challenges, and then we started categorizing those and creating the diagnostic manual. We're up to five now or something and really pathologizing people around

these constellations of symptoms and then really marginalizing them for it. And we know today that all of these mental and emotional challenges are the result of previous traumas.

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And rather than treating the underlying causes, treating the trauma, we treated the symptomology. And at one point, I guess maybe in the 70s or so, we decided that these are all brain chemistry related and they're basically imbalances in brain chemistry and we're going to treat it by adjusting the brain chemistry. And I remember back when I was doing my early training in psychology in the 70s and thinking it really seems like a chicken or egg thing. Is the imbalance in brain chemistry the cause of the emotional or mental challenge or is it the result of that? And clearly we know today that it's more the result in most cases and the underlying ultimate cause is really the trauma.

So trauma awareness is moving us away from that kind of crude diagnostic approach to pathologizing human challenging behavior that we all struggle with. But then again, trauma itself can then become another way to pathologize. Although, I really don't want to diminish in any way the incredible value of our radically increased trauma awareness over the last decade, especially the many different types of trauma, not only the single incident traumas and childhood traumas, but the historical and ancestral trauma and so forth. It's critically important.

And at the same time we tend to go too far with anything. We love fads as human beings, so we always take it too far and then it has to swing back to the middle a little bit. So we've developed a view of human fragility and kind of wanted to hold people in a bubble, and have some idea of a world where we could have a bubble where people wouldn't have to experience trauma. Trauma is part of the human condition. And although it's really important for us to become more and more sensitive and sophisticated around how to hold people in trauma and deliver things in trauma-informed, trauma-sensitive ways, at the same time, I firmly believe we also need to train people in what I, and others sometimes, call antifragility or weatherproofing, because we are naturally resilient as human beings.

It's amazing how resilient human beings are and we need to encourage that resilience because we can't protect ourselves or others from the traumas of life. We can try to make the world as just and trauma-free as we can, but we're never going to make it completely so. And it might not even be a good idea, because this is not to romanticize human suffering in the slightest but it is part of life and it actually does leverage our growth. We grow when we're challenged. What causes us to grow mentally, emotionally and spiritually and even our brain evolves into greater complexity to solve greater problems.

So we're challenged by life to grow and evolve and our brain becomes more complex and more differentiated, but then also more synchronized and connected. So our ability to evolve as human beings is related to our experience of challenges and suffering. And we've learned a lot about post-traumatic growth. Now when someone experiences trauma we want to make sure that they get the resources so that that trauma, rather than keeping them debilitated in some way, can be eventually a pathway to healing and to post-traumatic growth.

Not just to get back to where things were, which may have been okay but maybe not that great to begin with, but actually to leverage these experiences for growth. And so I think it's equally important to focus on resilience and antifragility, if you're willing to go with that term, as well as the trauma sensitivity and trauma awareness. There's a balance of the two.

[00:10:19] Alex Howard

It's interesting, isn't it? Because balancing those two pieces can be challenging. Because often what happens is that for one to be able to really go to those difficult places inside of ourselves, we have to really own that fragility and that sensitivity and that vulnerability and to really open up and go to those places, because that can be part of the healing. But as you're saying, the challenge can be that then becomes a new identity. It's almost like we start to define ourselves as those places and then actually the impact is we become less resourceful in our lives, not more resourceful. And that can be a real problem.

Fleet Maul

Yeah, absolutely. And that I think comes back to, you brought up this idea of basic goodness, which is the way my first spiritual teacher kind of described our basic human nature. And it's not so much good as opposed to bad, but it's that at the very essence of our being is fundamentally good and pure and workable. And there's a level of our being, and many point to this in Dick Schwartz's Internal Family Systems Model. They talk about behind all the parts is the self with a capital S. Very similar idea to basic goodness, actually. And there's that part of our being that is not damaged by trauma, that has never been damaged by trauma.

And so being able to touch into that being, then we can work with the aspects of our self, our personality, our mind, our physiology that have been touched or damaged or at least impacted or injured by trauma. And so it's important to get in touch with that level of our being. And the danger of either having the medical model and mental health system diagnose us and categorize us with a particular mental illness, and then we naturally begin to identify with that and have an identity around that.

Or if we identify around certain classes of being victimized and traumatized, that identity can obscure that deeper ground of our being from us. We think we are our trauma or we are this mental affliction or emotional affliction, rather than realizing that what we are is much deeper than that. And so the world's wisdom traditions have offered many vehicles for getting in touch with that deeper ground. And some of the more advanced therapy models today, like Internal Family Systems and others, help us get in touch with that deeper ground as well.

And that really is the ultimate source of our resilience. And you brought up that point. I think this is a really important one to understand that part of our resilience is being in touch with our vulnerability. So I think we need to be careful how we talk about fragility and vulnerability, because there's a sense of when we talk about our vulnerability in a positive sense, it's our open heartedness, our willingness to feel our emotions, to feel joy, to feel sadness, to feel pain, to really feel the depth of the human experience and to open our hearts to ourselves and open our hearts to each other.

To let our defenses relax and so we can experience the depth of life. So that quality of vulnerability and openness, the willingness to share what we're feeling. And the sense that we are as human beings, we do have a certain emotional fragility or openness where we can be wounded. So that's all very true. When we're talking about resilience and strength and antifragility, we're not talking about the opposite of that. We're talking more about actual physiological strength. We're actually talking about a physiological strength in our being which touches into the grounds of that being, but actually neurophysiologically, neurobiologically we're fairly powerful beings designed to thrive. And we're amazingly resilient as human beings.

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And we know life can be ephemeral and anybody can die of an illness or an injury. Things can happen. But at the same time, it's amazing how we recover from things. I mean, our bodies are amazingly resilient, and the more in touch we are with that deeper ground, the more resilient we become. And one of the ways we get in touch with that deeper ground is through opening our hearts. It's funny how we use words like vulnerability and fragility. I think we have to be careful because in one way they are the pathway into that deeper ground and a deep resilience, but there's a difference when we talk about a fragility that's a kind of hypersensitivity or brittleness or not being able to handle our lives.

That's a kind of different fragility and not the kind of fragility we want to encourage. So the vulnerability you're talking about takes us deep into our strength where we're able to feel pain. We're able to be with our suffering and the suffering of others. And there's tremendous strength in that.

Alex Howard

There is. And I'd love to hear you share a little bit about some of your own journey with this because I know that, like a lot of people doing this work, this was born out of some of your own traumas and your own difficult life experiences.

Fleet Maul

Yeah, it's obviously true for all of us on one level or another, and it's true for many of us that are drawn into this kind of work. So I grew up, in many ways, a good family, a middle class Roman Catholic family in the Midwestern United States. But we had alcoholism in our family, for many generations, on both sides. It afflicted different aspects of both sides of my family, but in my immediate family, it afflicted my mother. And she was what's often called an episodic alcoholic. Most of the time, she was this wonderful mother, very artistic, very intelligent woman. There were five of us children, I had an older brother, three younger sisters. They often called me the favorite. I think it was probably true to some degree, in terms of my mom.

But then that also meant when she was drunk, I was the one that she would go after sometimes. And when she drank, and it could be once a week, it could be once every other week. I don't think it was ever more than about once a week. There might have been a rare week when it happened twice a week. But when it happened, like you get home from school, this started when I was quite young, you get home from school and you could tell she'd been drinking already. Her words were a little slurring and it was kind of emotional and she'd be saying she loved you and things like that, but you knew uh oh mom has been drinking and it would just go darker and darker and she would go into this rage.

And often, by the time my father got home from work, the whole house just went into complete chaos. And she was raging at my father and dinner would just be complete insanity. And eventually she would pass out in bed. And then we'd all wake up the next morning to come down to go to school or whatever, and there would be mom making breakfast and there would be dad and the perfect 'Leave It to Beaver' kind of household, middle class household, as if nothing had ever happened and no one talked about it. And this happened on a weekly basis and no one talked about it.

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My family, they were kind of middle class, kind of moving up a little bit, I guess. And appearances were very important, the twelve step work just wasn't as available. You had to be really almost a skid row drunk to find your way into twelve step work back in the 1950s. And it was really just emerging and so, you know, she wasn't getting that help and it was like it was a big family secret. Although people know because even at social functions sometimes she had too much to drink. So it wasn't like people didn't know. So we live with that family secret and that family lie and that creates this real psychic splitting in you.

So I arrived in adolescence with a huge hole in my gut, this raging black hole that I was trying to fill with anything and everything, graduated from high school in 1968, going headlong into the counterculture and all the craziness of that time. Fortunately, I was always a spiritual seeker and I found my way into the Buddhist path and a lot of deep healing work and I did a three-year clinical training program and training myself as a therapist. But I still had all this shadow stuff going on and hadn't healed it completely and was still caught up in the shadow of the drug world. And had lived out in South America as an expat for many years because I was so alienated from our culture and everything politically.

And at any rate, I found my way into a federal prison sentence before I could straighten it all out. And I spent 14 years at a maximum security federal prison hospital in the heights of the AIDS crisis. So they had some really incredibly positive things because fortunately when that happened, that was the big wakeup call for me. My son was nine-years-old at the time. I was devastated over what I'd done to him, and I just made absolute commitment to get all the negativity out of my life, transform my life and I'd received a lot of good. I mean, I'd received a lot of good from my family of origin as well as the problems, and I trained with an incredible Tibetan Buddhist teacher for ten years and I kept this other life secret from him and our community.

So I had a lot of strength. I had a master's degree in Buddhist and Western psychology, a deep clinical training program. So I arrived in prison with all these resources and made that commitment. And so I was able to do a lot of good in prison. But I lived in this complete hell realm of a world, really scary world, for 14 years, both doing deep spiritual work and transformative work on myself and with others and starting the first hospice program in a prison anywhere. And several national organizations and movements have come out of that work. So it was a very powerful, transformative time of my life.

But I was also living in this very scary world for 14 years, so there's a lot of trauma there. I still have a pretty strong startle response if my wife touches me when I'm sleeping or something. Because I slept every night for 14 years knowing that you might not wake up. Because we did have locks on our doors. And the littlest guy in the joint, if he wanted to get you, could wrap a lock in a sock as they call it, padlocks you have on your lockers, and you're dead. Or you could be attacked any night, so you slept very lightly.

I have that experience, and then more recently, I lost my son about two years ago. He went through his own traumas. He grew up with his dad in prison from the time he was nine-years-old. We worked through a lot on that, and we were close, and we kept working at it throughout his life, and he was very artistic and very creative, but he just had a hard time getting his life going. He stayed out of trouble, fortunately, and stayed away from the drugs. But he struggled off and on.

And at one point in 2008, he was beaten nearly to death down in South America and was in a coma for ten days.

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And crazy time of my life when my then-partner, my beloved Denise, at that time, was dying of cancer and my son had this horrible frontal lobe head injury. And even once we got him out of South America, he was completely crazy with this frontal lobe head injury and totally out of control, and none of the hospitals could help him. And I finally got him to a retreat center that a friend of mine has in Montana, and the community there was able to hold him while I'm taking care of my wife who was dying of cancer. And he eventually came out of it and was okay.

But about six years later, he started having seizures due to the scar tissue in his frontal lobes from the injury. And we don't know what happened. And he died two years ago. He had moved back there to be where his mom lives, and she just found him one morning. And we think it was related to a seizure. You don't usually die of a seizure, but they can trigger a respiratory event. It could have been COVID-related. We don't think so, but we don't know. And the authorities insisted on him being buried the next day because of COVID. This was right in the middle of the pandemic.

Growing up with my mother's situation, spending those years in prison and then more recently going through the death of my son, have been these kinds of very deep traumas in my life. But I feel very fortunate that I've stumbled my way into a spiritual path and into deep spiritual work in the Tibetan Buddhist tradition and the Zen tradition, and also a lot of deep psychological work in the various therapy traditions I've trained in, that have allowed me to really leverage all of these experiences to become more and more resilient and to have more to offer to others.

And I'm not saying that I don't still deal, I still deal with all this stuff. I'm still very much involved in the process of grieving the loss of my son. It's all still very present, but it's more the richness of my life. And fortunately, I work hard at leveraging this trauma and suffering for resilience and gifts. I really work hard at it. It doesn't just fall off a tree. I use all the skills I've been learning for 50 years every day so that these experiences lead me into growth, rather than them becoming debilitating or triggering old coping mechanisms and triggering my old addictive patterns or so forth.

Alex Howard

Yes, quite the story, Fleet. Let me ask you, one of the things that I think often people can struggle with trauma healing is not having the ideal environment to support the healing, and thinking I need to have the ideal scenario to then be able to go to those places. And what strikes me is spending 14 years in a kind of fundamentally unsafe environment while still doing your own healing work, what made that possible? Like what held you or what supported you in that process?

Fleet Maul

I think fundamentally it was the training I'd received from my teacher, Trungpa Rinpoche over those ten years. He was the person who really affirmed for me my own innate goodness and I feel very fortunate. We had a very close relationship and he would sometimes even hold me, hug me, shake me. And I remember that scene from Goodwill Hunting where the psychologist, I won't be able to pull the name down.

[00:25:28] Alex Howard

Robin Williams.

Fleet Maul

Robin Williams is shaking Matt Damon, trying to get through to him that he was okay. And my teacher literally did that with me. I felt in many ways that he did get through to me and I got the blessing from him that I couldn't get from my father. My father was a good man but just generationally it didn't work and I got that from my teacher. And plus all the skills, the practice skills, the training and these deep practices in a Tibetan Buddhist tradition. And then in prison, I got very involved in twelve step work and dealing with my own substance abuse issues.

At first I struggled with the AA program, especially as it was founded in a kind of a Christian milieu, even though it's not a Christian program per se, but has a lot of the God language. And I was a Buddhist, kind of recovering Catholic Buddhist. So I was struggling with the concepts and language and I decided at one point to not try to figure it out and just let the two bounce around up there in my experience. But at one point I discovered what my higher power was. In the twelve step work, we talk about turning our lives over to a higher power, surrendering to that higher power. And I realized for me, my higher power was that hole in my gut which was very visceral to me, had been for a long time, that there was like this abyss there and if I went there I was just going to disappear into the abyss.

And I've been trying to fill that with drugs and alcohol and sex and everything I could for years and years and years. I realized that's where I had to go. And fortunately I had the meditation practice and the psychological training to go there and hold that. And it was by being willing to go into that abyss and being held within that community of that twelve step program there and the wonderful sponsors we had from the outside, but it wasn't like they were able to do that for me. It was just a community. So I felt affirmed, I felt held but I really had to do my own work. I had to do my own work on a daily basis in my prison cell of being willing to go into that darkness and that's where the healing was. And that's completely gone today. That hole has not been there for a long time.

It was really just having the contemplative tools, the psychological tools, to work with my own experience, but also feeling the loving support of the community in that crazy environment. We had our meditation group. Every now and then we had somebody come in from the outside and that was very wonderful and helpful. But that weekly twelve step group, the volunteers that came in were amazing and they were just fellow drunks, fellow addicts, and it was a complete human-to-human thing. And when you were up in that room where we had our meetings, I'd be up there for an hour getting the meeting ready and then the hour of the meeting. It was like for those two hours I wasn't in prison, I was in a completely different environment. That was incredibly helpful.

But I also received a lot of support from my outside meditation community. I was in a very isolated part of the country, so I got a visit once or twice a year from somebody. But people stayed in touch with me by correspondence and I just knew there were people out there that cared about me and cared about my wellbeing, as well as my family of origin and so forth. So that helped a lot.

[00:28:48] Alex Howard

It also strikes me that there was something around kind of showing up to the path. Something around that it sounds like you made a decision that you needed to use what was a very difficult experience for positive. And it kind of goes back to a little bit of what you were saying earlier around that kind of fragility that can happen. Sometimes the place in us that is fragile wants everything around us to be comfortable and easy. And yet somehow there was a place in you that was like, I might not want this experience, but I'm going to use this experience rather than have it use you.

Fleet Maul

Yeah. I'm incredibly grateful for the grace. I had a moment actually. I had been convicted on all five counts. I only went to trial because one of the counts I was indicted on was the so-called Kingpin Statute and I didn't feel I was guilty of that at all, but I was the one who wouldn't testify and so everyone else makes deals and you end up being the Kingpin. That also happened to a colleague of mine who was tried separately because of various circumstances. And it wasn't like I was trying to be a stand up guy. I'd been a Buddhist for a long time and I just couldn't see how somebody else is going to do time and their family is going to suffer instead of me.

I just felt I had to. I wasn't inclined to testify. I went to trial, because I didn't feel I was guilty of that one charge. If they had just indicted me on the smuggling counts and so forth that I've been involved in, the drug trafficking. I would have just pled guilty and put myself at the mercy of the court. But anyway, I went to trial. US versus you is a very intense experience. They bring the full force of the US government and they play hardball. So that was quite an experience. And I was convicted on all counts.

And then I'm awaiting sentencing, and they can sentence me anywhere from ten years to life with no parole, which means you're not parolable. And if you got life with no parole, if I had gotten life with no parole, I'd still be there, because the only thing that'll get you out of that is a presidential pardon, and that's not going to happen. I would still be there today if I had gotten the life. I got 30 years, and my knees buckled when I got that sentence. My lawyer had to kind of hold me up. I was hoping for less, although they'd been threatening me with 30 or 40 years.

But the night before my sentencing, they had me in this isolation cell in a county jail, ostensibly under suicide watch. I wasn't at all suicidal. I was anxious, but I wasn't suicidal. But the lights were on, I couldn't sleep. I was under lights and a camera, and I couldn't sleep. Close to dawn, I just really had this urge to see the night sky. And there was this tiny little window up high. So I had to stand up on this kind of stainless steel toilet sink that's built into the cell. I stood up there, and I was able to peer out this little window. I could see the stars in the sky and I just looked at that and something came over me.

And then I just very calmly stepped down, sat down on the side of the bunk. And I just had this wave of absolute certainty come over me that I would not give up on myself. I would not give up on my son. I would not give up on life. No matter what happened, even if I was sentenced to life the next day and spent my entire life in prison, I would not give up on life. I wouldn't give up on the Dharma. I wouldn't give up on my son. This wave of confidence came over me, and it really feels like some tremendous grace.

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And that combined with at the same time, after I was sentenced, being absolutely devastated, going through a dark night of the soul over the realization of what I'd really done to my son. The fact that he was going to grow up without a dad. I just became radically committed to transforming my life. And I was just lucky I had the skills to do it. But being in prison, most people come out of prison worse than they go in. And your whole being is under assault, almost 24/7.

On a good day, you might only have a half dozen really demeaning experiences, interacting with either the correctional law staff or with your fellow prisoners that are just an assault on your own humanity. You're just considered a number, a thug, a sub-human. So you're living in that all the time, and it takes tremendous strength. Most prisoners just armor up with their bitterness and their anger to protect themselves. I was lucky that I had the training and the skills to really believe and practice confidence in my own innate goodness and realize that I needed to stay vulnerable, I needed to stay open in this journey.

And I was also doing these inner practices in Tibetan Buddhist, these kind of inner practices, that were after the first couple of years, really practicing intensely and even being able to do kind of an isolation retreat. They give you a vacation from your job in prison. So a couple of weekends and a week off my job. I taught school for 14 years, which was my day job. Helping other prisoners learn to read or get a GED and so forth. So I was able to spend nine days in a deep retreat.

And there, I actually had the experience of my teacher being there. It was amazing being around him. He was a renowned teacher, one of the most renowned Tibetan teachers that came to the west in the 20th century, regarded as one of the great Mahasiddhas by his contemporaries in Tibet. And being around him, he had this oceanic mind, and he was always telling us, I'm not some sow, get off the tit. I'm giving you these practices for you to realize this and benefit humanity. It's not just about hanging out with me, but me being the addict I was, I was wanting to just hang out with him and get the contact tie.

Here I was doing the practices, and now in this prison cell, he's died. He died two years into my time, 1987. He's gone. And here I am in this place where there's nothing to feel good about and I'm practicing, and I find my way into that same state of kind of vast awareness and almost bliss that was like being in his presence.

And I realized I was generating that independently through my own being. That gave tremendous confidence to be able to navigate that environment. But I feel very fortunate because without the transmissions I'd received and that growing confidence in my own innate goodness, my own innate worthiness, that assault that you're under the whole time in prison, the only way to survive it is just to become angrier and more bitter and tougher in a way.

Alex Howard

It's like the experiences that you'd had gave you some reference points. Even though it would have been, I imagine, very difficult to get back to those places or to move into those places, that you'd had enough of a taste to know that it was possible.

Fleet Maul

And I think the contrast actually in the prison environment was very helpful for me.

[00:36:04] Alex Howard

Fleet, for someone who's watching this, who's wondering, well, what were those practices? Or to maybe put it slightly differently, of all your personal experience, but also what works professionally? What do you think on a more kind of tactical day-to-day level, are the practices that are most helpful, particularly in the context of trauma work?

Fleet Maull

Well, certainly the ground practice is basic mindfulness of body and breath meditation, mindfulness and awareness meditation. In Tibetan tradition references, Shamatha and Vipassana. But you know, here in the west, a lot of people get involved in Vipassana Buddhism from the Theravada traditions or the Goenka model of Vipassana. A lot of people get involved in Zen, some people get involved in Tibetan. They all share the same basic meditation practice, training the mind to cultivate greater mindfulness awareness, with the core practice being mindfulness of body and breath. That's foundational in all these traditions. And certainly it is.

And my teacher, Trungpa Rinpoche, really emphasized that deeply. Now, Tibetan Buddhism also has all these liturgical practices, these deity yoga practices that involve a lot of visualization and the deeper and somewhat more secret parts of that. They're not secret just to be secret. But it's like you have to study arithmetic and geometry and algebra, before you can study quantum mechanics. It's just like that. And so these inner yogic practices require a lot of training and study before you're introduced to them. But they really have to do with working with our inner physiology, both that which science can recognize in terms of our neurophysiology, but then the subtle energy body that science is kind of somewhat open to but not sure about yet, but it's correlates of our inner neurophysiology.

And the more subtle you get into it, you get into the subtle energy. And basically a lot of these inner yogic practices are mimicking what eventually is said, at least in a Tibetan tradition, but also in other yogic traditions, of what actually happens when we die. That the kind of male and female essences come together again and there's a process of death, and then there's actually a moment of realizing that nature of mind. But then if we're not prepared to hold that, we just go into unconsciousness. And then you go into what are called the bardos before taking a rebirth, and then just driven by the forces of karma of our previous actions.

So in the inner yogic traditions, you're actually using through physiological processes and awareness processes and various visualization processes. You're training yourself to go into that experience and bring about this kind of deep unification within your own body. And you're also working with the kind of energy and grace and blessing and this kind of multi-dimensional world. It's a little hard to describe. It may just sound like a lot to someone who hasn't been introduced to that, but it's a very high-tech world of inner psychology and inner spiritual work, and it has correlates in Hindu Tantra and in various Vedic traditions as well.

But anyway, all that conspired to be a very deeply healing journey for me, and it's one that I'm very deeply involved in still to this day. For those who have some understanding about the Tibetan Buddhist tradition or other Buddhist meditative traditions, the ground is always basic mindfulness of the body, mindfulness of breath and stabilizing your mind. Then you go into various forms of deity yoga practice, inner yogic practices, I mean, even in a given session. And then when you come out of that, it all dissolves and you come back into open awareness. And so you're working

with the sense of both the relative and the absolute. You're opening your mind so you can stabilize your mind and open awareness, and then you work with generating because of the fluidity of life, you can generate a kind of visualized world, but then you're always letting go of that back into just open awareness.

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It's kind of working with the world of form, the world of formlessness and the in-between, which is a world of potentiality and possibility. And many spiritual and shamanic traditions throughout human history and all human cultures have had their ways of entering into these various kinds of dimensions of our spiritual, psychological beingness and experience. And the Tibetan Buddhist tradition just happens to offer some really deep and advanced technologies. And I've only dipped into parts of it. It is so vast, there's so many different lineages of it. But it was a very important part of my own healing journey and continues to be.

Alex Howard

Yes. And I know that you wrote a book called *Radical Responsibility*, and I was just thinking, as you were talking about the practices and I'm sure that's why you called the book what you did, that really that for me is one of the central themes in a lot of what you were sharing around that we may not be able to determine the circumstances that happen to us, but we can choose the way that we show up to those.

And I think that really ties back to that point you made earlier about fragility and around becoming identified with the wrong kind of fragility. And I'm just curious for you to say a few words around why taking responsibility is so important, particularly when it comes to the practices and the discipline to follow through with those practices.

Fleet Maull

Yeah. So for me, the whole journey of life is all about embracing self-agency, ownership for our own experience and what we're going to do with it. We either do or we don't. Then that's really going to characterize our journey. The human condition is what it is and it's very challenging. And of course, some of us end up with more challenges than others. And sadly, some of the traumas and the challenges follow the fault lines of various kinds of oppression and injustice and so forth. Of course, we're dealing with this whole reckoning around racial justice in our western cultures today, and very importantly so. But the human condition is one of challenge and suffering.

And we either are going to feel like life is something happening to us and feel victimized by our life, or we're happy when life seems to be going well for us and when it's not, we feel victimized by our life, but we don't really feel like we're in a co-creative relationship with our life. Or we make that shift and realize we are in a co-creative relationship with life. And we can assume a tremendous amount of self-agency and we can make the choice to just embrace life as it is and live that choice and realize that we're continually making choices, and it's really the choices that are going to characterize our life and our destiny.

And these are not new ideas. The wonderful meditations of Marcus Aurelius, one of the historic philosophers, often called the last good Roman Emperor. He obviously embraced a high degree of self-agency in his writings and meditations, and I'm paraphrasing here, but one was something like

most of us feel like our destiny is created by our circumstances. And he said it's not at all. Our destiny is created by our response to those circumstances.

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And so interesting, even in the Internal Family Systems work, I've been studying that lately. I had a wonderful opportunity to be on a retreat recently with Dick Schwartz. And he talks about by developing more awareness about these systems of our inner parts and sub-personalities that he calls parts. And one of the realizations is that there are no bad parts. There are parts showing up in really problematic ways, but they're doing so to protect unhealed other parts of ourselves. And when we really work with including and healing the whole thing, we begin to get in touch with this energy. And the awareness that can be aware of the parts and work with the parts is what he calls self with a capital 'S'. And he talks about self-energy.

And I think it's the same thing as basic goodness. In other work I do, we just call it the adult energy and it's grounded in oneness, but that self-energy starts showing up and that is the energy through which we're able to embrace ownership for our life and live at choice and live with a greater degree of agency in our life. And it doesn't mean that we can control life. And we're not always going to be able to control ourselves. And in fact, we really need to heal ourselves because when we don't do the inner healing work, we're fighting with ourselves all the time because we got all these different parts of ourselves and they're ganging up on this, they're fighting this. And trying to just take a frontal assault with all of our issues doesn't work. They just fight back.

We need to do the inner healing work, but gradually we can develop the ability to really develop ownership over how I'm responding to my life moment to moment and learn to live with less reactivity and more responsivity. It's like, how much of my day, 24/7, as well as in my dream life for that matter, if you go into those inner practices. But certainly in our daily life, in our waking life, how much of my day do I spend in a responsive, relational mode? A conscious, responsive, relational mode with my life and the challenges of my life? And how much time do I spend in a less conscious, more reactive, defensive mode which is just being driven by my conditioning?

We all have our childhood conditioning that we had nothing to say about. We got most of it by the time we were seven, a lot of it by the time we were three. The family brings up like one of those dump trucks with the hydraulic lift, and then in goes seven generations of unprocessed family dynamics and they look at us and say, good luck, have a good life. Maybe you can work out the stuff that Grandma Susan and Uncle Joe and so forth weren't able to work out yet. And that's what we all get. And I think our job is to work with it and try to pass on something a little more processed, a little more healed to the people we influence and to our children, the next generation. That's our job as human beings. We all get what we get.

We can lament it and feel like we got a bum deal, but we all get the hand of cards we get to play in life. And then it's up to us what we do with it. When we start to embrace that, life becomes something that's happening with us and for us. And we're engaged in life. And no matter how challenging it is, it's a really kind of exciting thing rather than kind of cowering, and I hope some good stuff happens to me, but probably the bad stuff will happen.

And I'm living in this very disempowered kind of life of being in a victim position. And it's understandable that people get pushed into that position. It's the human condition. But that's why my teaching work, my passion in life, is to help as many people as I can to get out of that position

and to embrace their lives. And that's where all the joy, excitement and growth and possibility is when we embrace that kind of ownership and self-agency.

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But it's really important to realize this has absolutely nothing to do with blame. It has nothing to do with blaming others, obviously, but it has not even one iota to do with blaming ourselves. Ownership is not blame. It's simply me living in possibility. Where are my choices? Yeah, this is really hard. This is really scary. This is horrible. This shouldn't have happened to anybody. Okay, what am I going to do with it? At some point it's always the question, what am I going to do with this? Am I going to let it take me down?

Or am I going to find the most creative way I can respond to this to move forward in my life? Which may include seeking help and seeking justice, but doing so from an empowered place of choice, rather from that place of retreating into some kind of victim mindset. And I'm not diminishing the fact that people are really victimized in life, but the path to healing and transformation is always through choice and embracing ownership.

Alex Howard

Yeah. It's not our fault that it happened, but it is our responsibility to do something to transform it and change it.

Fleet Maul

Yeah. And if we're not even able to do that in a moment, I mean, we need to have tremendous compassion for ourselves and tremendous compassion for everyone, because stuff happens to people that it's heroic that they can find their way back into some kind of choice. But what I don't want to get in somebody's way when they maybe have a possibility of emerging back into choice and I'm saying, oh no, you're a victim, stay there.

But at the same time, I'm not going to go to somebody and say, you need to get out of your victim mindset. We really need to respect everyone's journey and our own journey. But we can aspire and pray and wish and hope that we can all find our way back into whatever level of self-agency we need to just move forward in our life and get the healing we need and do the work we need to embrace life and move forward.

Alex Howard

Yeah, that's beautiful. Fleet, I feel like we're only just getting started but we're out of time. So for people that want to find out more about you and your work, what's the best place to go? And what's some of what they can find?

Fleet Maul

Well, they can go to fleetmaull.com, my basic website. And that's a good starting point to find out a lot about me and my work. I do a lot of online courses and, like you, put on a lot of big online summits. We just did one on psychedelic-assisted therapy, there's actually a replay happening this month and we have a big one coming up in January. People can find out about that at Heart Mind Institute, which is heartmind.co. That's the Heart Mind Institute.

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If people are interested in the prison work I do, it's prisonmindfulness.org, or the work we do with public safety professionals is mindfulpublicsafety.org. So that's probably enough for people to get started. People who are interested in the radical responsibility model in that book, there's a website for the book called radicalresponsibilitybook.com and you can get a free chapter if you go there.

Alex Howard

Fantastic. Fleet, as always, it's a real treat to have some time together. Thank you so much for sharing today.

Fleet Maul

Well, thank you very much, Alex. Thank you for the great work you do and for this incredible summit that you put on each year. It's really a gift to the world.