

THE PRISON MONK

An interview with Buddhist activist and former prisoner **FLEET MAULL**

In 1985 Fleet Maull, a Buddhist practitioner and senior student of Tibetan teacher Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche (1939–1987), was indicted for cocaine trafficking and sentenced to a prison term of twenty-five years without parole. Despite the obvious challenges of pursuing meditation in prison—the overcrowded conditions; the violent, chaotic atmosphere; the lack of personal space—Maull committed himself to a path of Buddhist practice. While incarcerated, he ordained as a novice monk and completed the foundational practices of Tibetan Buddhism, which include over one hundred thousand prostrations.

Maull spent much of his sentence in a federal prison in Springfield, Missouri. It was there that he founded the Prison Dharma Network, an international organization that supports Buddhist and contemplative prison ministry, as well as the National Prison Hospice Association, which develops end-of-life care programs for terminally ill prisoners. Following his early release from prison in 1999, he has served on the faculty of Naropa University, where he teaches courses in meditation, Engaged Buddhism, contemplative social action, and peacemaking. *Tricycle* editor Peter Alsop spoke with Fleet Maull in December of 2003.



Fleet Maull, 1999, shortly after his release from prison

I'd like to begin by asking you about your own journey. How did you find yourself in prison? I came of age during the cultural revolution of the sixties. I'd been on some kind of search since childhood, ever since the magical connection I felt with the world very noticeably disappeared, probably about the time I started ele-

mentary school. I discovered both Eastern philosophy and LSD as a sophomore in high school. I graduated in '68 a culturally alienated, politicized, angry young man and fell headlong into the counterculture of that era at a large state university—antiwar politics, drugs, sex, and rock 'n' roll. I got into hard drugs for a time and entered a really troubled period in my life. I knew I had to get out, but I couldn't turn back. I came from a basically good family, but I just couldn't relate to their

world or values at that time. I had always dreamed of traveling to South America, so I took off to Mexico with a friend, ended up living on a sailboat in the Caribbean for nine months, and eventually found my way to Peru. That was an incredibly healing time for me. I lived in a remote valley, at over twelve thousand feet, in the Peruvian Andes, and worked on a small farm, living among the Quechua people. I started meeting other travelers who were on some kind of spiritual search, who'd been to India, who had practiced meditation and

yoga. I began to pursue my high school interest in Eastern ideas and spirituality in earnest. I was reading Gurdjieff, Taoist and Buddhist texts, especially the Evans-Wentz Tibetan classics, and trying to learn to meditate on my own.

And it was while you were in Peru that you got involved in drug trafficking? Yes. Eventually I ran out of money and I fell into an opportunity to find a source for someone who was down there trying to purchase cocaine. I made a little money, and it became a pattern. I could make five hundred or a thousand

He who puts an end to former crimes
By taking up the way of peace,
Illuminates the world
Like the moon freed from a veil of clouds
—The Buddha, *Angulimala Sutta*

dollars at a time and live for six months. I lived this way until, in 1974, I read an article in *Rolling Stone* magazine about Naropa Institute, a new Buddhist college in Boulder, Colorado, founded by a Tibetan teacher named Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche. Something in the article just grabbed me. I knew I had to go there.

I visited Naropa [now Naropa University] the following year and moved back to the U.S. in '76 with my then-pregnant Peruvian wife. Our son was born in Colorado, and I eventually enrolled and graduated from Naropa in 1979 with an M.A. in contemplative psychotherapy. At Naropa I became a student of Trungpa Rinpoche's.

My involvement with drugs continued sporadically. It was a crazy life, mixing drug use and trafficking with active involvement in a spiritual community. After graduating, I would spend about half the year participating in intensive meditation and dharma study programs and the other half pursuing the life of a smuggler and drug user. I experienced a lot of inner turmoil about the whole thing, but my answer was to further self-medicate with drugs and alcohol. In the early 1980s I was somehow fortunate enough to become a close personal assistant to Trungpa Rinpoche, but I continued to maintain another "secret life," disappearing once or twice a year to smuggle cocaine from Bolivia in a backpack, making enough money to avoid having a regular job. My marriage was falling apart, so I also used the money to keep my marital problems at bay, maintaining two separate households. I somehow kept this whole involvement with drugs a complete secret from many of my friends, from the sangha, and from my teacher, until it all caught up with me in 1985. I'd stopped smuggling two years earlier, but friends I'd been involved with were arrested and they

pointed to me. I was indicted, my property was seized, and I was threatened with spending life in prison.

Could you have fled? Yes. I considered it. I was terrified. My son was nine years old; I genuinely thought I might never see him outside of a prison. I sent word to my teacher, finally telling him everything, and I asked him what to do. He took a little while to think about it. When he got back to me, he said that I needed to stay and face my situation. He said that even if I was in prison, I could still practice the dharma and be his student, but that if I was on the run that would be very hard to do. He was a very practical kind of person! *{Laughs.}* I took his advice; I turned myself in.

You spent fourteen years in prison. Did you ever second-guess that decision? No, never. I have always been grateful that I made that decision, that I finally followed my teacher's advice, for once.

Tell me about your first few days in prison. What was your state of mind? I was sitting in a county jail cell in Missouri facing a possible life sentence. I'd finally hit a wall. Everything that I had not been dealing with hit me like a ton of bricks. I'd let down my teacher, my community, myself, but the most devastating part was what I'd done to my family, my son and his mom. I'd left them with nothing.

I spent seven months in that jail going through trial and sentencing. It was a time of terrible fear, darkness, and despair.

What were the conditions like? It was an incredibly chaotic environment. Five two-man cells, a concrete floor, and everything else welded steel: ceilings, walls, bunks, urinals, sinks. The cell's all one piece—no

PRISON MONASTICISM

Meditating in a modern-day charnel ground

It may be helpful at times to regard prison as a monastery, especially to the extent that it helps you see it as a total practice situation and as a potentially beneficial experience. In prison, as in a monastery, one is isolated in a separate community apart from the world. One's life is simplified. There are no bills to pay and few responsibilities other than doing what one is told and fulfilling the duties entailed in one's prison job. One is also not involved in family life directly, although some prisoners try to remain as active in this regard as possible by means of correspondence and the telephone. Most prisons, like most monasteries and nunneries, are single-sex environments, at least in terms of the prisoners themselves.

But apart from the similarities, prison is nothing like a monastery or any other environment designed for dharma practice, and it could be just a fantasy trip to view it as such. Noise and chaos are its most pervasive qualities. Next come anger and hostility, and finally there is anxious boredom and an attitude of seeking entertainment and "killing time." There is also a feeling of hopelessness that casts a pall over the prison population, especially during the long winter months when the recreation yards close early and there is less to do.

Although it is difficult to do formal practice in prison, the environment may be ideal for an ongoing

discipline of mindfulness. Prison is so intense and inescapable that if one has any experience of awareness practice at all, it becomes a constant reflection of one's state of mind, moment by moment. Instead of a monastery, a better metaphor for the prison practice environment might be the charnel ground of Indian and Tibetan Buddhism. Over the years, the charnel ground has become a metaphor for any extreme practice situation full of obstacles. It is said that if one can practice under such difficult circumstances, the potential for realization is greatly increased. I have the utmost respect for prisoners everywhere who make any attempt to practice the dharma. Although Buddhism and meditation are still regarded with indifference and even outright suspicion in most prisons in the United States, we are nonetheless fortunate to be allowed to practice at all. Our dharma brothers and sisters who are political prisoners in a number of Asian countries are forbidden any outward form of dharma practice under penalty of torture and death. That these courageous men and women maintain their inner practice and keep the essence of their vows for years under such adverse circumstances is the greatest inspiration to my own small efforts at practice under much easier circumstances. ▼

—Fleet Maull

From the forthcoming book *Dharma in Hell: The Prison Writings of Fleet Maull*. A version of this essay originally appeared in the Winter 1992 issue of *Turning Wheel*. Reprinted with permission.

windows, just a steel door with a meal slot. There was almost no room to walk. Prisoners could have radios and televisions, so they would keep these going twenty-four hours a day. There was a crew that stayed up all night watching movies, another that watched cartoons in the morning, and another that watched soap operas in the afternoon. Constant noise. People yelling and screaming, fights, people badly beaten. It was very much a hell realm. And my mind was just nuts. I couldn't sleep. Eventually I was sentenced to twenty-five years without parole. Even with good time, if I stayed out of trouble, I knew I would be in for fourteen years, and that felt like an eternity. There was really no light at the end of the tunnel.

And in this situation you began to meditate. Did you have any doubts that you would continue to practice in prison?

None. I was so devastated by what I had done to my son, by the waste I'd made of my life. Practice became my lifeline. I knew from the minute I got locked up that I had to pursue it with great seriousness. I began to sit two, three, four hours a day.

I had an experience early on in the county jail that proved to be quite valuable. I was meditating on my bunk one night—I must have been sitting for several hours—and I suddenly noticed that my mind wasn't moving. It was just completely clear and stable. I was aware of all the noise and commotion surrounding me, but my mind wasn't being pulled by any of it. I'd had many experiences like this in intensive meditation

retreats, but never in the midst of such chaos. I really saw for the first time that this could be workable. I had a practice. I was scared to death of what lay ahead, but I knew I could survive. I eventually came out of the darkness, determined to mature in my practice and to eradicate any kind of negativity from my life.

What was your practice? When and where would you sit? My basic practice was *shamatha-vipashyana* meditation [calm abiding and insight meditation]. In the county jail, I would sit on my bunk. I would sit at night or early in the morning—in part because the jail was extremely hot. In the summer, they sometimes had to hose down the walls because of the heat.

Then I moved to a maximum-security federal prison. For the first two years, I lived in a dormitory crowded with bunks and inmates. It was claustrophobic, filled with bodies and noise. I would sometimes do my practice late at night, when it was quietest, but I also discovered a walk-in trash closet. I would clean it up, set all the mops and brooms and trash barrels outside so somebody could get to them, and I would sit in the closet on a folding chair.

One practice that was of great help was *tonglen* [the practice of taking on the suffering of others and sending them relief]. Prison is a world of anger, and I certainly had mine. I had a lot to be bitter about: Some close friends had turned me in; I felt that I had been intensely over-prosecuted. But I was committed not to go there. I did not want to end up an angry and bitter person. It was not who I wanted to be. I really worked on transforming all that and on cultivating an attitude of lovingkindness through *tonglen* practice.

How did the other inmates react? There'd be curiosity. I'm sure there were times when people made fun of me, but generally in prison if you do something consistently and with discipline, people will begin to respect you. And some actually showed an interest. There were men who ended up coming to the meditation group I started because they saw me practicing and then asked about it.

At some point you began to do the *ngondro*, the foundational practices in the Tibetan tradition, which begin with over one hundred thousand prostrations. I had begun the practice before I entered prison, but I had finished only about twenty thousand prostrations. I didn't

have any place to do it in prison until I got a single cell, in June of 1987. Trungpa Rinpoche had died that April, and I was absolutely devastated. I was so full of heart-break that I just threw myself into the practice. I would get up at 3:30 in the morning and do prostrations before too many people were around to notice. The guards would come by—my door had a small window in it for counts—and I'm sure they thought I was completely crazy. It's an intense and very physical practice, you're pouring sweat. It often triggers a lot of anger. You feel completely out of control, and that's the last way you ever want to feel in prison.

Within a year I finished all of the preliminary practices—prostrations, mantras, guru yoga. In 1989, Thrangu Rinpoche, a very important Kagyü lama, kindly came to the prison to give me the *Vajrayogini abhisheka*, a *sadbhana* [in this case, deity visualization] practice empowerment. I also took novice vows in the Tibetan monastic tradition—I wanted to live as best I could as a monk for the remainder of my time in prison. My practice really began to deepen, in part because I was able to do a retreat each year. They give you a week's vacation from your prison job. So I'd buy a week's worth of food from the commissary, and I'd lock up in my cell and do a full retreat for nine or ten days, twelve hours of practice a day.

Four or five days into my first retreat, something extraordinary occurred. At various moments in my life—in the presence of my teacher, or at times in Peru, or in fleeting moments of drug experimentation—I have felt a direct connection with the world, what might be called an authentic quality of being. A sense of complete nonseparation between myself and the world. Here on retreat, in prison of all places, I began to experience this connection once more. The practice had brought me to this place; it didn't matter what my surrounding conditions were. That was a profound realization, a turning point. Even though I continued to experience moments of great sadness and pain, practice sustained me. I discovered a cheerful, joyful state of mind, which became the overall context for the rest of my life in prison.

You say no prisoner wants to feel out of control, but isn't that precisely the place that practice will bring you? If you sit down and pay attention to your life, you come face-to-face with real anguish

and suffering. Why counsel a prisoner to do that?

Most prisoners are doing everything they can not to experience being there. They consider their time in prison down time, as if it doesn't really count. They find a routine: a job, some exercise, a favorite TV program, cards, bed. People are trying to kill time. But I didn't want to throw away fourteen years of my life. I was determined to be present, to learn everything I could from this, to use this as an opportunity to wake up. And I was determined to keep my heart open.

Yes, meditation opens you to pain and your own vulnerability, but it also brings peace of mind. Prisons are chaotic and stressful. There's hardly any place where you can find quiet. To be able to experience some kind of peace is a tremendous relief.

More importantly, practice offers freedom. If you sit down to meditate, you see that there's a continuum of thoughts, mental formations, moods, emotions, impulses, behaviors, consequences. And most prisoners have been living consequences their whole lives, wondering how they got there. Even if they understand something about the pattern, they've felt helpless to change it. Suddenly, through meditation, they actually see this process. They catch themselves in the midst of some negative habitual pattern. They've been driven by impulsive behavior and suffering its consequences, then suddenly they see they have choices. That's incredibly powerful.

You've said that the prison system in this country is designed to destroy the human spirit. In what way?

The whole structure of incarceration is shame-based. It is a process by which you are continually forced to die to every aspect of yourself that gives you dignity. Guards are constantly derisive. Regardless of whether you're in prison for tax evasion or murder, the message is the same: you're subhuman, you don't count. It's in your face all day long, every day. You're buried under a mountain of guilt and shame. It's almost impossible to connect with genuine feelings of remorse or responsibility, because you're just trying to survive. And most do that by arming themselves with anger and bitterness. When you treat people like animals, they tend to act like animals, and they begin to treat each other that way.

And it's not just the inmates who are affected by these hellholes, it's the prison staff as well. The rates of alcoholism, child abuse, spousal abuse, and suicide are all off the charts among prison workers.



If you were in a position to reform the system, what steps would you take?

First of all, I think that about 70 percent of the people who are incarcerated should not be. There is no reason to incarcerate nonviolent offenders. We have community corrections programs—halfway houses, daily reporting programs, probation and parole programs, community service—that have proven effective and inexpensive compared with incarceration. Are they perfect? No. You're going to have some people mess up. But the numbers are simply undeniable. If you can have a hundred nonviolent offenders on probation and parole, and if only ten or even twenty of them re-offend, that's tremendously successful. But the media and the politicians jump on the ones that re-offend and say, "See, we shouldn't let anybody out." So we lock up the 80 or 90 percent that don't need to be locked up at all and we spend thirty thousand a year on each one, to say nothing of the cost of prison building and maintenance. It's a ridiculous system, and it's destroying lives. Incarceration should be for violent offenders only.

Moreover, it's racist. We lock up people of color, especially African Americans and Latinos. We lock up

How very happily we live,
free from hostility
among those who are hostile.
Among hostile people,
free from hostility we dwell.

How very happily we live,
free from misery
among those who are miserable.
Among miserable people,
free from misery we dwell.

How very happily we live,
free from busyness
among those who are busy.
Among busy people,
free from busyness we dwell.

How very happily we live,
we who have nothing.
We will feed on rapture
like the radiant gods.

— *The Dhammapada*, 197–200

poor people. We lock up people who are addicted. We lock up people who are undereducated. We've all heard the statistics: In our society, one out of three black men between the ages of eighteen and twenty-nine will enter the criminal justice system. They lose their right to vote, and they end up in prison working for slave wages. We should be up in arms about this. It is tantamount to the re-enslavement of the African American male in this society. And it's depleting our resources—state budgets all over the country are being gutted to build prisons, and the money is coming right out of education and health care.

A common response to that is, "Well, why should we treat this horrible person humanely? Why should we care about them after the crime they've committed?"

Yes, but I say: Look at what it does to us as a culture. Every time we submit to this desire for vengeance, every time we dehumanize people, we lose something of our own spirit and dignity. And our country's standing in the world is not enhanced by the fact that we have the highest incarceration rate anywhere; that we have a growing, self-perpetuating, and racist prison-industrial complex;

that we are one of the last industrialized countries to have the death penalty. We are a fear- and shame-based, violent country, and our prison system reflects that.

In some of your recent writings, you've discussed a new model for justice, based not on a punitive response to crime but on a transformative response.

What is "transformative justice"? The punitive justice system perpetuates two illusions: first, that vengeance alone provides relief and healing for the victim and the community; second, that punishment actually corrects behavior. But negative reinforcement is a very ineffective method of reform, and there is little evidence that crime deterrence is related to punishment.

Where there's been a crime, there's been a tear in the community fabric. How do we repair that? This is not a question that punitive justice is concerned with. The transformative-justice model, like the restorative-justice approach that it includes, is interested in the victims, in their healing, in the healing of their family, and in victim-offender reconciliation. It is also interested in healing the offender, and the offender's family and community. How can we invite the offender into genuine personal accountability and rehabilitation without offering healing as well?

Transformative justice is also interested in the causes and conditions out of which crime arises. When a crime has been committed, the phenomenal world is speaking to us: It is saying something about our community, our social fabric, our culture. Abusive or criminal behavior does not happen in a vacuum. People have to take responsibility for their actions, but we cannot ignore the causes and conditions out of which their behavior arises. We have to look beyond the crime itself.

Transformative justice is an integral, holistic approach to justice, and it requires much more than prosecution, sentencing, incarceration. It requires involvement at the level of the individual, the neighborhood, the community, and government.

Yes, this is hard work. Yes, it will require our collective energy and intelligence. But what is the alternative? To continue to turn a blind eye to the failures of the system? There are six million Americans in the criminal justice system right now, to say nothing of the number that have already passed through it or that will. The system is not working. ▼