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# Engaged Mindfulness,

## A Talk by Dr. Fleet Maull at McGill University

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On October 5, 2017, Dr. Fleet Maull, Director of the [Prison Mindfulness Institute](#) visited McGill University, School of Religious Studies, as part of the CREOR lecture series [Buddha and the Other](#). In his presentation, entitled “Engaged Mindfulness,” Dr. Maull shared his insights into, and experience with socially engaged Buddhism, which he sees as the most appropriate form of Buddhist practice in the face of global problems such as social injustice, poverty, global warming, the threat of war, etc. Dr. Maull began his presentation by analysing the current commodification of Buddhism-based secular mindfulness training, which caters mostly to a wealthy, graduate, white elite. His own work, in contrast, focuses on “making the transformative power of mindfulness available to the most vulnerable, underserved and marginalized of our fellow citizens,” as the subtitle of his presentation expresses.

Drawing on three different strands of history, he explained “Engaged Buddhism” as the confluence of a philosophy of non-violence (represented by Leo Tolstoy, Mahatma Gandhi, Nelson Mandela, Kofi Annan, Rosa Parks, Martin Luther King, Jr. and others), socially engaged Buddhism in Asia (such as the activism of Thich Nhat Hanh in Vietnam, Dr. Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar in India, the Dalai Lama for Tibet, Dr.

Ahangamage Tudor Ariyaratne in Sri Lanka, Maha Ghosananda in Cambodia, and others), and engaged Christianity (embodied by Dorothy Day's Catholic Worker Movement, Thomas Merton's social critic grounded in his secluded Trappist life, or Martin Luther King, Jr.'s fight for human rights). Engaged Buddhism in the West is thus a conglomeration of various movements that are commonly nourished by the conviction that fierce activism has to be combined with contemplative practice so as to offer a constructive contribution to societies' current problems. Among the many figures that inspired his own work and understanding, Dr. Maull mentioned the influential Tibetan teacher Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche who in the 1970s set out to create an enlightened society in North America, founded Naropa University in Boulder, CO, and other pioneering Buddhism-inspired educational programs in North America. Dr. Maull gave a broad overview of the currently existing US organizations and their founding figures, most importantly the Buddhist Peace Fellowship, founded in the late 1970s by Roshi Robert Aitken, Joanna Macy, Gary Snyder; the Zen Peacemaker Order of Roshi Bernie Glassman; and the San Francisco Zen Hospice that emerged in response to the AIDS crisis in the late 1980s, to name but a few. In academia, a few scholars embodied activism and Buddhist scholarship, such as Jan Willis of Wesleyan University, or Bhikkhu Bodhi—a American-born Theravada monk, translator of Pali scripture, and founder of Buddhist Global Relief. According to Maull, the common characteristic of these organizers is to carry Buddhist ethics beyond the safety of their own hearths. They see the Buddhist message of “sitting alone” as insufficient.

In the second part of his talk, Dr. Maull turned to his own achievements in the field of Engaged Buddhism, which grew out of his early penchant for political activism, but were greatly shaped by his own experience as a prisoner, incarcerated for fourteen years on drug charges in US prisons. During his incarceration, Maull founded Prison Dharma Network (PDN) in 1989, and the [National Prison Hospice Association](#) in

1991, supporting fellow prisoners in the midst of the AIDS crisis, 1987-1999. Today, seventy-five hospice programs are active in state and federal prisons in the US. Mindfulness meditation has become a growing phenomenon in prisons in the US and worldwide, with tens of thousands of participating prisoners. In 2010, Dr. Maull expanded PDN and started the Prison Mindfulness Institute, which is now a leading provider of evidenced-based mindfulness programming in the criminal justice field and hosts a network over 185 organizations and over 2500 individual members.

Maull also worked as a lecturer at Naropa University, where he founded the Center for Contemplative End of Life Care Programs. He served as senior faculty with the Upaya Institute's Being with Dying program, and he co-founded the Upaya Institute's [Buddhist Chaplaincy Training Program](#). Maull showed slides and briefly reported on his many activities as a leader of the Zen Peacemaker Order, hosting Bearing Witness retreats and street retreats in places of deep suffering throughout the world. Bearing Witness refers to annual gatherings at the former concentration camps of Birkenau/Auschwitz, where people from various parts of the world gather in silent sittings to acknowledge the suffering, and induce healing by not turning away from the horror and suffering inflicted and endured at that place.

In sum, Dr. Maull's peacemaking activities range from the streets of U.S. cities, to former concentration camps in Poland, to Rwanda and Israel-Palestine, and the forgotten world inside jails and prisons. With his first-person perspective, Dr. Maull's presentation went beyond the common, academic, emotionally uninvolved discussion of a topic; it was a thought-provoking example of engaged scholarship. Accordingly, the ensuing question-and-answer session evolved less around facts and figures but reflected diverse personal responses to the demand for social engagement, personal responsibility, and contributions to society at

large. Dr. Maull reiterated his perspective on mindfulness being the most recent development of American Buddhism; he sees Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR) by Jon Kabat-Zinn as a contemporary re-interpretation of the Buddha's Four Noble Truths in relevant terms for our time. Dr. Maull's scholarship, social engagement and personal opinion all expressed an optimistic and tolerant stance towards a "mindfulness for all." As an interesting addition to Dr. Maull's talk, which focused on the situation in US prisons, a member of True North Insight in Montreal reported on an existing group of volunteers that is regularly meditating with inmates at the Federal Training Centre of Laval, Quebec.