

## In Cells

Danny Fenster

### Abstract

On 24 May 2021, while waiting to board a flight to Bangkok, Danny Fenster was detained by the Myanmar military and held for nearly six months in Yangon's Insein prison. He was sentenced in November 2021 to 11 years with hard labor for charges including sedition, unlawful association, and immigration violations, but was pardoned a mere three days later. In this memoir Danny reflects on his time inside Insein prison, focusing on his routines, reactions and interactions with the guards and inmates that surrounded him. The essay is taken from a larger work in progress about his time in prison.

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In a walled-off sub-subsection of the prison's fifth ward, in front of two narrow rows of moldering cells, stood what one prisoner once claimed was the guards' office, but what in fact was little more than a tin-roofed pergola with four-foot quarter-walls, a tiled floor, some plastic chairs and wooden pallets, and—on a rickety wooden table pushed against the structure's north wall—a large, Chinese-made flat screen TV. People seem to gather naturally wherever there is a television, even when the power is out; with the military back in charge in Myanmar, the power was constantly out. The space, our central square, was as likely to be occupied by us prisoners as by the prison guards, who seemed anyway to be every bit the captives we were, confined each day to our small lot by the same red brick walls and reams of barbed wire. The tin roof offered the yard's only shade.

Guards would begin their shifts in sharp-creased and sweat-stained prison khakis—initially 12-hour shifts, but later, in an inexplicable effort to limit the spread of COVID-19, changed to

24-hour shifts—and they'd immediately slip their sandals off at the structure's threshold, then step into the shade and begin undressing. As the guards they were relieving rose to re-robe, these new relief guards would strip down to their boxers and cotton singlets, pressed by perspiration into becoming a second skin, then slink into a chair and fan the thick heat from their faces. A command would occasionally squawk from their walkie-talkies and they'd slowly rise, reluctantly don their thick, creased khakis again and trudge off, leaving us with the TV and its military newscasts, wherein paddy yields were always up and the senior general had just completed another congratulatory tour of a melon farm. Approved entertainment programming was dominated by Chinese action movies—shining sports cars chasing one another through the Beijing night—or the over-the-top pageantry of Bollywood musicals. I heard that just months before, prisoners used to while their days away watching the BBC and the Discovery Channel. No more.

The Monk told me about that day in the prison: 1 February 2021, when the Burmese military rolled tanks into parliament and seized back power in an old-school, twentieth century-style coup. Still a free man that morning, I was pulled violently out of a boozy slumber by my roommate, a towering Brit with sharp features, platinum hair and pale skin, who stood in his underwear leaning over my bed, shouting, "Mate! I think you better wake up, mate! I think there's been a coup." I was the editor of a news magazine then, and the days immediately seemed to lengthen to take in all that was newly happening: first tens and then hundreds of thousands of people marching in the streets against military rule, in the cities and then in the hinterlands, photos and videos coming into our newsroom and onto the web; shots fired into crowds, mass crackdowns, a growing civil war; press licenses revoked, editors and journalists arrested. When I was arrested, in May, most of the foreign journalists had already left. Newsrooms have since set up shop over borders and across oceans.

On the day of the coup, the Monk said, everyone in the prison knew something political had happened. Most of the men

in our prison ward were military-allied civil servants, holdovers from the USDP<sup>1</sup> government charged by the NLD<sup>2</sup> government with a potpourri of petty corruptions—a couple hundred thousand kyat for a stamp and a signature, a box of cigarettes to let a parcel through. They could turn the TV on—there was power, the lights were on—but the signal was completely cut. Guards looked around confusedly, and their walkie-talkies crackled and barked with rumor and chaos. When the signal returned, all foreign and English-language programming had been cut. As if time had jump cut two decades into the past, all that remained was state propaganda. These military men—middle-aged and greying, thick in the middle, distantly nostalgic—burst into cheers, the Monk said.

All of them, I like to think, except for Thet: middle-aged but too bald to grey, as thick from calf to shoulder as anywhere, thick through his arms and legs to his tater-tot toes and blood-sausage fingers. Thet was also a military holdover, but he was void of anger or ideology; he seemed merely to have ridden the accidents of birth and chance as best he could. He wore a tank top or a breezy prison shirt with three buttons at the neck and long, loose gym shorts every day, giving him a slightly bummish, bohemian air, and he smiled and bounced on the balls of his feet when he walked. By September, when the prison population thinned, resources dwindled and we began pooling our provisions, Thet would cook for the Monk and I, sweating over a simmer, peeling his prison shirt off and folding it into a towel, first to wipe his face and then to wrap it around the handle of the skillet. His language was a map of the strange borderlands he'd come from, a countrified Burmese that counted in Thai baht and

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<sup>1</sup> The Union Solidarity and Development Party, a military proxy party stacked with former military soldiers and generals.

<sup>2</sup> The National League for Democracy party, Myanmar's largest and most enduring political party. Having won several elections since its formation in 1988, the party has only managed to form and hold government once, from 2016-2021. It comprehensively won the 2020 national elections, but the military staged a coup soon after. Since then, hundreds of NLD members have been murdered, assaulted, detained, tortured and/or forced to flee from the Myanmar military and its associations.

was punctuated with chirped English idioms. “How are you,” “I am fine,” and “such a pretty lady” he picked up from Western tourists at bars along the Thai-Burma border, he said. With the Monk as translator, he told me unabashedly about how as a customs officer he accepted bottles of whiskey for visa stamps, something that one day was standard practice and the next was a crime. “Johnny Walker,” he chirped. “Black Label!”

Thet was also the first to show me that on the back of the flat screen TV panel was an input for a USB drive, and that, for as little as 5,000 Myanmar Kyat or a greasy handful of betel leaves, most guards would happily go home at night and fill thumb drives full of internet entertainments: illicit American films dubbed into Burmese; compilations of YouTube blooper reels and TikTok videos of East Asian girls dancing to pop songs; a single, maddening Taylor Swift video, played on TV on repeat.

I did not find out about the USB drives or the illicit entertainments until, pacing the yard and seeking distraction one day, I thought I heard English voices. Peeking under the tin roof, I saw Thet sitting lotus-positioned in the shade on a wooden pallet, staring fixedly at the TV. It took a moment for me to make sense of what was on screen. Two people inside a log cabin. A powdered wig, a ripped ruffle-trimmed dress. A man thrusting, a woman shrieking. It was an amateur porn video set in colonial America. Breeches down at the knees, bodice torn open.

I glanced back at Thet, who’d turned from the screen to gauge my reaction. His lips parted into a big, toothy grin. He raised one blood-sausage thumb to me.

“How are you!” he chirped.

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In a foreign prison, language is just one more locked gate, and its key is knowledge. Two years in Burma and one expensive language course down and I’d become able to tell a taxi to wait a moment. In prison I found myself constantly locked out of conversations I wanted in on, invited in only at the whim of others, and only if they spoke English. This had its advantages too; not

a single one of the USDP guys, for instance, spoke remotely passable English. But on my side of the gate there were five of us, adulterers and seditionists and gunrunners and terrorists, stuck each day in this brick-bound yard and trying to pass the time.

Doc shared a cell with the Monk. Boyish and barely 30, born along the brackish and impoverished veins of the Ayeyarwady river delta, his medical profession had made his parents prouder than they'd thought possible, but while tending to Burma's sick and tubercular earned in their eyes great Buddhist merit, it earned him very little money. He had other plans for when he got out. Next to his bed stood a tower of English-language books on economics and business management. The Monk taught English every Tuesday and Thursday morning to other prisoners somewhere beyond the walls of our yard; received parcels of fruits and sweets from his Yangon parishioners every two weeks; and took an astonishingly Zen attitude to the predicament we'd all found ourselves in. The last witness in his trial, the Malaysian plaintiff, had not returned to Burma since filing charges against him three years prior; every two weeks, he was summoned to an office at the front of the prison, where he would have the same scratchy video conference on the same, silver brick of a laptop with a township judge: *Did the witness show? No? Has anyone heard from them? Alright then, back to your cell—we'll try again in two weeks.* He was essentially being handed a life sentence one fortnight at a time.

"It is very funny," he once summed up the whole scenario to me, "but there is nothing we can do."

Aung Thet bought arms for the Arakan Army, which has been fighting the Burmese military in the country's west since at least 2015. Maung Maung came from a ruthlessly persecuted minority population, and he was a prison veteran, the longest serving of any of us by far. He was loquacious, with skin like driftwood and a mouth betel-stained red like a vibrant wound. He'd once told me his terrorism charges were solely the result of his ethnic identity, but, on another occasion, when I asked under what circumstances he'd been picked up, he rambled out something like, "I was driving and they pulled me over and

called me a terrorist, they said I had a bomb. Were there explosives in my car? Yeah, there were explosives in my car, I have a whole warehouse of explosives—I'll kill every one of these motherfuckers.”

Not a single guard or police officer or prison warden or official spoke English, and so, slowly, these were the men who taught me how many letters and books I was allowed in prison—one package every two weeks of unlimited letters and between three and five books, unless you could bribe prison officials for more; what electronics were permitted—none whatsoever, unless you could bribe a guard for an electric fan or a reading light or clock, or a USB thumb drive full of porn and Taylor Swift, or just about anything else, so long as it had no SIM card or signal to outside; what foods were permitted—nothing also sold in the prison commissary or in a tin can, though the lids of tin cans could be found bent or smoothed or sharpened into any of countless tools in every cell. They showed me, in roundabout ways, that no rules were absolute, cause and consequence often bore no relation to each other, and justice was entirely arbitrary. We'd gather each morning near the guards' office, glance in at the military news casts, pace the yard. Cell doors opened at 7 a.m. every morning; an hour or so later, two wiry convicts in royal blue robes carried in big tubs of what aspired to one day become lentil soup but was in fact a handful of beans floating in a lukewarm bath of salt water. Only the first few prisoners to queue got any beans. An hour later an even more worn-down pair of convicts in the same blue robes would haul in a massive, steel cauldron of steaming water, hanging from a wooden pole hoisted over each of their shoulders. They would set it down next to the guards' office, and we'd all stand around watching the steam rise and making tea, then pace the yard. Lift weights. Pace some more. Stare blankly at the TV. Pace. Count the military war planes tearing by overhead.

Around 2 p.m., two state newspapers, *Myawaddy* and *The Mirror*, would be brought in, duller and even less informative than the TV news, and Doc or the Monk would translate the headlines for me. Dinner—sometimes a small piece of chicken or

fish but often just more bean water and a bucket of white rice—came around 3 p.m. Lockup was at 5:30 p.m. on weekends, 5:45 p.m. on weekdays. Always, someone was watching TV. Doc and the Monk seemed to be the only ones as uninterested in most of the programming as I was. The day I'd seen Thet watching colonial porn I'd rushed over to their cell, surprised and humored. *What the fuck*, I wanted to know—where had it come from? Also, the log cabin and powdered wigs?

“Oh yes, some of them like that very much,” the Monk said.

But, in an all-men's prison, surrounded by other men, many of whom they shared cells with?

“Right,” said Doc, “because then you have nothing to do with that”—here he made a fist “*energy*.”

“It is very funny,” the Monk said.

“You have to understand,” said Doc, “Thet is really into history.”

The Monk chuckled.

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Does a piece of writing qualify as a Burmese prison memoir if it doesn't include at least one passage about Buddhist meditation? Let me tell you more now about the Monk, who may in fact have saved my life.

Austere in dress and mild in manner, even keeled and self-effacing, the Monk was, in all ways and nearly at all times, everything one expects of a monk. In his third year of on-trial detention for a crime he would never be found guilty of, he smiled, never scowled, walked slowly and spoke meditatively, ate last and always shared. He was almost cartoonishly monkish. Prisoners—adulterers and addicts, seditionists and corrupted civil servants, but also murderers and gunrunners—approached him with their heads bowed and their hands clasped respectfully at their waists. Likely because of the quiet respect he commanded from prisoner and guard alike, the Monk was one of the few, and sometimes only, prisoners in our ward allowed an electric kettle, which he used to boil water for everyone else—several liters

each morning, poured into a pale green thermos embroidered with flourishes of fading, gold-stemmed flowers, set out on the edge of his bathing trough each morning. And every morning, as soon as our cell doors were opened, we'd queue at the thermos with plastic mugs and packets of instant coffee, our heads bowed. He would boil water and refill the thermos during mid-day lockup, and every day, after 2 p.m., leave it out for anyone who wanted afternoon tea. It was among the few mercies I counted that my cell was directly next door. At least twice a day, people would congregate near my cell, and though I did not share enough common language to speak with most of them, I could smile and nod and feel some slight connection to other human beings: *Hey guys! Gettin' coffee? Oh, you drink it black too? Alright! I'll just hang out over here.*

Before Doc left on bail and before Aung Thet was taken to another ward, four or five guys would come each afternoon with their heads bowed and their hands clasped, and they'd line their flip flops outside Doc and the Monk's cell door before ducking inside, at which point I would pace back and forth out front, trying to peek inside. I could see them in there sitting barefoot and lotus-positioned, leaning forward and listening intently. Doc told me the Monk gave mini-lectures on suffering and detachment and Buddhist cycles of lives, lectures on strange cosmologies I was locked behind the gates of language from.

One day, perhaps inevitably, when none of the guys had come to hear the Monk speak, I left my flips by the door and slipped inside. He was seated cross-legged on his prayer mat, as monks are wont to do. The Monk had a cherubic face, rounded and soft, a broad flat nose, and rimless eyeglasses that darkened in the sun and cleared in the cell. Beside his bed was a neat stack of yellowing books, some in Burmese and some in English, Buddhist texts and English phrase books and a random novel or two. A lightbulb, hanging from a wire and jerry-rigged to run from his power outlet, hung loosely over the books. I leaned my back against the wall opposite him and asked him to teach me to meditate.



Meditation is very simple in theory, but can be difficult in practice, he said. Just close your eyes and feel your breath. Feel the air pass, slightly coldly, into and through to the back of your nostrils, then more warmly down and out. If you have to, say to yourself, in... and out. In... and out. Eventually you do not want to think of these words—hot or cold, in or out—because you want your mind empty of all concepts and ideas. You want only to notice the physical sensations of a given second. The air passing over the tip of your nose at the pause between inhalation and exhalation. The tickle on your lip as the hair above it is rustled. If these sensations are too subtle to notice at first, he said, notice the chest or stomach expanding as you breathe in, deflating as you breathe out. And then, for nearly 15 dark and bewildering moments, he was silent.

Enough has been said elsewhere about how hard it is to keep the mind focused on the breath. It constantly wanders and wonders, notices an itch on the inner thigh, grows antsy, feels the actual ants crawling all over the skin, the sleeping pad. Considers what might arrive in the next parcel of books, imagines what loved ones are doing at that moment, when you'll join them again. It's maddening, and it can be made worse by being told not to be mad about these diversions, but to instead simply notice them without judgement, to bring one's focus back to the breath. Do this every morning for 15 minutes, the Monk said, and then for five minutes at the top of each hour for at least the first few hours of each day.

I can't say I was ever able to empty my mind of concepts and ideas. When I focused on the sensations involved in breathing, I noticed each stimulus in terms of hot and cold, tickle, inflation and deflation. My mind still wandered, but gradually less and less. Over several months, I don't think I can say it ever made me feel any more okay with being in prison, but I did slowly become less bored. I paced less, even stopped biting my nails. I could lie down and listen to the drone of rainfall and, after a while, distinguish between the splash of those drops falling just outside my cell and the whoosh of that more distant sea of drops falling farther away, and if I kept listening, I could hear even that

whooshing, distant sea dissolve into a sonic pointillism, hearing single, distant drops, and think they sounded kind of beautiful. Was this madness? Adaptation? I could do this, if not for hours, at least for dozens of minutes at a time, without being driven mad with boredom. People ask me now what prison “was like”. Eventually—not at first, but eventually—this, mostly, was it: listening to the rain, feeling the chest rise and fall, watching the stilted dance two ants perform when they meet head on, hurrying along their paths on a prison cell wall. Zooming attention out to the entire wall, noticing the vast, vascular network of ants moving in tangled and pulsing lines all over your cell. Noticing the patterns in this network, how they resemble the veins in each waxy leaf of cabbage bought from the prison commissary, like so many rivulets spread across the Ayeyarwady delta, like highways spread over continents. Pondering the possible interconnectedness of such things. But then, inevitably, getting bored and going to see what’s on the TV. TikTok. Porn. One day in August, on the state news, Burmese generals were meeting with Russian defense officials. Two days later, photos were splashed across the state papers of these generals in Moscow, shopping missile systems. And soon, competing with Chinese action flicks and Bollywood musicals for TV bandwidth were movies with pale white men in pitch-black suits pointing pitch-black pistols at one another. They were Russian gangster flicks, dubbed into Burmese. I asked the Monk if he’d ever seen Russian movies in prison. He hadn’t.