

# Feeling at Home in Our Skin

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*Look at this bottle of water. It is a container and is currently full of water. We could put some juice in it. If it was empty and you were desperate, you could pee in it. You can put anything in this container. The emptiness of the container is the potential of the container. The potential of this plastic container is limited by the fact that it is full of water. But if I empty it of water, I no longer have water, but I have potential. We can put anything in it. Our mind is like this empty container. It is an open potential, yet this is hidden from us by our own habits.*

First of all, it is a pleasure for me to be here. I would like to take the time to say a few things and to leave space for your questions. Our theme is how we can feel at home in our skin and in whatever environment we find ourselves in.

In a closed system like a prison there are many challenges. We suffer separation from the people we want to be with, our families for example, or we are forced to be with people we don't want to live with. Thus, we might feel abandoned and lacking those factors that allow us to be reassured. On the other hand, we might feel invaded, having to tolerate the rules and everything that is imposed from the prison system. Sometimes we are stuck in one mode, while other times we move rapidly from one state to another. One way to deal with being in a situation we do not like is to be like a stone and not absorb anything. We cut off from the outside and close in on ourselves. Certainly, this state provides a form of protection, because we can control what falls upon us, what strikes us, but it also means living in an isolated world. Then there is loneliness, this is a universe where nothing much happens. If we close ourselves off, we end up living in a world where we are absorbed by the past, by memories or by fear or by thoughts. Obviously, this disturbs our mood and mind very much.

The opposite polarity is that of being like a sponge that absorbs everything, and due to this we become hypersensitive and overreact towards other people. We become reactive to their attitudes, their gestures, their tone of voice, to everything about them and then the irritations that arise can be exasperating.

Fortunately, the practice of meditation can provide us with is a slightly more balanced position where we rest in the middle free of extremes. Then, depending on the circumstances, we can be more

permeable or slightly more hermetic. With this we can feel more rooted in ourselves so that we can open up to what we want and to not what we don't want. Obviously, we must take into account that, in a closed place like this prison, we do not have the freedom to do what we want. So it is very important not to collapse into the position of a victim but, rather, to find a way to be true to ourselves, to be authentic, and thus find inner freedom. If we wish to do this, it is very important to cultivate a sense of one's dignity. As I imagine you know well, one of the things that can lead people to prison is that in the course of life experiences one's dignity has been undermined by other people. Dignity is being in touch with a healthy sense of self and, at the same time, being in touch with what happens outside of oneself. If when we are small we grow up in an environment where adults may not care much about us, do not pay attention to us and do not confirm the value of our existence, we can become vulnerable, and not well established in ourselves. There is a taste, a smell of abandonment which pervades all our experience. Or it can happen that we are plundered from our own childhood. Many children have been abused, have been subjected to violence, including sexual violence, or have been insulted, have suffered racial discrimination and much more. The people who disparage us often manage to feel good when they make someone else feel bad. If they identify someone else's mistakes, weakness and vulnerability, it makes them feel better.

In our childhood we can go through periods of great suffering and not feeling welcomed or loved. This leaves us without grounding in our healthy sense of self and so we feel instability and imbalance. Generally, when we feel a lack of balance it is necessary and comforting to find something to lean on, to support ourselves. The more off-balance we feel the more likely we are to look for an extreme form of support such as drugs, alcohol, or selling sex. Other people may see this as self-destructive but if one feels desperate it seems necessary: "Fuck you, who cares! This is where I am." But sooner or later problems will come.

So the question is: how to live in the middle between all extremes? If, for example, I am here in the middle of this room, I find nothing either to the right or to the left to lean on. Not being able to lean on someone who gives me a shape, a help, I have to find support within me. I have to find that verticality, that line of gravity that passes through me, so that I can feel relaxed and balanced, and I can then move in all directions. This verticality is much more useful than an extreme position, because if we build our lives depending on something else, perhaps a drug, the supply will end sooner or later. For example, cocaine, weed, and so on cost money and they do not last. Addiction is another kind of prison. We thus pass from a moment of seeking freedom in which we think: "I want that thing", to feeling trapped and the thought becomes obsessive: "I need it". Now we find ourselves at the mercy of some substance to inject, and as you may well know the pusher will cut it with all the crap imaginable.

With this kind of behaviour there is turbulence, agitation, a lack of settling. The lack of stability in our childhood leaves an imprint, we are off-balance and so continue to live in a non-rooted way. However, there is a different possibility, one that we may not be aware of. We can try to stabilise ourselves and cultivate the dignity of greater autonomy. By autonomy I do not mean being isolated from the world, as if it were a dangerous place. The effort must be to maintain this sense of integrity while remaining in connection with others, and this is only possible if we connect with ourselves.

How we became who we are now concerns our activity in the world: going to school, playing football, climbing trees and so on. This is how we understand our abilities, what we know how to do, what is easy for us to do and what is not. Our identity develops in interaction so that now we say, "This is me, that's how I am." In this sense of self, in my perceived identity, there are the memories of the past, the things that happened, and also the way we experience ourselves now. Moreover, there is also a sense of

the future, of how we could evolve. How our potential develops depends on the way we move between sensations, thoughts, emotions – and this is influenced by how we see or do not see the potential present in the environment.

Right now we sit together in this room and if we were to put all our knowledge together, all the things we know, we could write books. There are people who speak different languages, who come from different backgrounds, have had different jobs. We know many things and this could also give us a sense of our identity, of respect for who we are. Yet we often discount our own intrinsic value as a human being and the functional value of all that we can do. This discounting is also a habit generated by past experiences.

However, although we have been formed by past events we are not prisoners of our past, of our experiences and our habits for there is something strange about being alive. No one in this room knows what he will think in a few minutes time, no one knows what sensation will arise in the next moment.

So, here I am, I'm living my life, it seems that I can be empowered to be fully myself as I'm standing here and looking at you. But I don't know what I'm going to say until I say it. James is talking, but he doesn't know what he's going to say.

Interesting! Life reveals itself through us, for example when we walk here in the corridors, we meet someone, we greet them, and we find ourselves saying something. We did not plan to do this, it just happens. The space of the future, even the immediate future, is open and fresh. We are not actors with a script we have learned. Our life arises fresh, on the spot, in this moment. Now this might seem unbelievable to you. Here you are stuck in prison, the same old prison every day. Yet, I would suggest, the sameness of the situation arises from how you think about it. If you decide that you know how it will be you wrap yourself in this belief and this limits the attention you can give to the fresh flow of what is coming through your senses. If your life is conditioned by 'I know what I see and I see what I know' then where is the space for anything new?

In fact moment by moment you experience what is occurring but this is rarely attended to. Instead we focus on our interpretation of what is occurring. We cook it up, adding the spices of past wounds and insecurities. Then everything seems to have the same dull taste.

Although each of us is the expression of the potential, of the creativity of our own mind, all this impromptu creativity often gets caught up in our strong mental patterns. We may feel anxious, so we repeat ourselves, talk about the same thing over and over. In a closed environment when feeling alone, it is easy to become a bit obsessive. We could develop rituals that reassure us. We want to make our life predictable, so we hide within ourselves. But this cuts us off from communicating with the outside and from receiving the freshness of each moment.

If we want to feel truly at home within ourselves, this begins with exploration, with the curiosity to discover: who am I?

If we sit quietly, the world does not stop, thoughts arrive, and we find ourselves thinking, feeling, remembering. All this is not intentional, yet it comes within us, through us. Thus, what I feel in this moment is at the same time "me" and "not-me". It arrives, it seems to be 'me', and then passes. When we merge with our thoughts, we become one with them, and with this we have a very clear sense of what is happening.

On a good day, we feel ok and, as we tell the story of our life, we are fine, and the story is coherent. But on a less good day, when we feel a little depressed, worried, confused, we are tired of ourselves, and yet cannot escape from ourselves. This can happen often in a prison. When it is a bad day, everything can seem persecutory.

So can meditation and mindfulness practices help us to turn this bad day into our advantage? Well, they can help each of us to become a little more curious about the contents of our mind, that is, about everything that arises in me, as me. Then we can start to investigate what the mind itself is. Am I just what pops up moment by moment? Or is my mind different from my thoughts, feelings, memories and so on?

We can see that the potential of the sky is to be blue and bright, yet the same sky is easily obscured by clouds, which can be light, foamy or dark and dense with rain. In a similar way, our mind is open and empty of its own fixed content. If this were not the case then we would never have the wide range of experience which we all find filling us and then vanishing. Into this open space of experience come our moods which can be light and easy or heavy and depressed. If I fuse with my mood then they seem to be me: I am bad, I am contented. When they are here they are me, but when they vanish who am I? Am I just the next experience that occurs or am I also the openness within which all experiences occur?

We can take a few minutes to think about this question. Let's sit quietly and see what arises for us, the movements of your experience, sounds, silhouettes, shapes, people moving around the room. Sensations, memories, hopes and fears and so on occur. How long do they remain with you? Can these transient experiences really be the truth of who I am?

Do you have any questions, or anything you would like to share about your experience?

**Question:** Teacher, you mentioned dignity, which is a very important concept, both for ourselves and for how the world sees us. What has always intrigued me and what I have also meditated on, trying to find an answer to, is the fact that people seem to have to forcibly pass judgment on others and on themselves. Even those of us who have been judged and understand how bad it can be to be judged sometimes can't help but point the finger at someone else and say, "here, that guy did this, he did that," without having learned the lesson of not having to judge. I can't understand why. How might we be able to override this habit, since we talked about repetitive habits?

This is a very interesting subject to investigate. Before, when we sat quietly for a few minutes, the world did not end, there were experiences. Perhaps we may have perceived that we were a "stream of experience". Sometimes it seems that this pattern is inwardly defined, and at other times it seems to be externally determined. This stream of experiences keeps flowing, it is not stable. There was an ancient Greek philosopher who said, "One cannot bathe twice in the same river." If you live next to a river you might say, "I always go swimming in this river." Because you can name the river, it seems to give it an identity which continues through time: the Tibor is always the Tibor. Actually, every time you enter the water you have a new experience, it is new water. The only reliable thing about this river is its name. Perhaps this doesn't only apply only to the river. Maybe it also applies to us.

For example, if we say "John is a fool" (which is a mild insult) we seem to know something about this "loser and failure" guy.

We often speak in these terms, as if we can grasp the essence of John.

But John is a river!

It may be that, from time to time, depending on how we connect we find John disturbing, so we stick our label on 'John,' categorising him. On the basis of how he talked and what he said you have come to a conclusion about John. You have summed him up. It is as if you have established the eternal truth about John. But this John is 'your John', the one you have created in your mind. Other people will have different opinions about John. 'Ah, but that is because they do not really know him, my John is the real John'. The actual John is gone, he is no longer present in the physical space, but instead "I have caught him, I have understood him, I have him in my grasp." By defining him I also define myself as someone who sees the truth, who knows what is going on. The more I attribute a negative shape to John the more I attribute a positive shape to myself. In every arena of life real power is the power to define self and others. So adopting the position of judge allows us to feel powerful even if we are deluding ourselves. Surprisingly this also occurs when we judge ourselves: "I am such a failure! I have messed up everything in my life. I know what I am." I am splitting myself into two aspects. I am the useless one who is being judged yet I am simultaneously the powerful one who is doing the judging.

Do you really know who you are?

And what are you going to do in five minutes?

How will your left foot move five minutes from now?

You don't know. The claim to have total knowledge of yourself is a false claim. We are not a fixed knowable thing. We are a process of unfolding experience, experience which emerges in relation to the circumstances we encounter. Due to this ever-changing nature of our experience, we might seek definite knowledge and then the belief that I am a total failure could seem "reassuring" to me. We may have hatred towards ourselves, or we may be very proud and confident, but none of those extreme positions is likely to be always true. Judgement based on an emotional reaction is likely to be unreliable because it is based on an internal evaluation – it is not like tasting the pasta to see if it is cooked! We are unpredictable. We have patterns, yet how these patterns will manifest moment by moment we do not know.

Most of the time opinion-based judgement is prejudice, that is, pre-judgment, which means I am judging before the event. But we don't know what that event will be like. "I know I won't like it," but you don't know what it will be like! "I already know I don't like it, trust me." This is the sign of our stupidity, of our encapsulation in our own private world.

**Question:** I wanted to know whether, in your opinion, the real prison is created by ourselves, whether the real prisons dwell within us because we build them, and they have no exit unless we face them. Could this be the basis of man's depressions?

This is a very interesting question. When I was in elementary school, every year there was a music teacher who would come into the classroom, line us all up, and then stand at the piano and play just three notes. We had to sing these three notes because he was checking to see if we could join the choir. He would say to me every year, "You're not able to sing."

His concern was to find people for the choir, he didn't care about a little boy's self-esteem. So I started to feel ashamed of my voice, because from his words I had convinced myself that I was not able to sing, and so I knew that I should not even try to sing.

There, that was a prison for me. If I was with friends, we would sometimes sing, however I didn't make too much noise. This example shows how a belief can develop in us due to particular circumstances. It can develop in relation to another person's plans that were no concern of ours. Due to the negative judgement and the rejection of aspects of ourselves that it encourages, we develop beliefs about what we are or are not able to do. These beliefs become a functional limitation.

Whenever some event leads you toward the activity that has been prohibited for you, you start to experience anxiety and the usual thoughts, such as, "I'm going to expose my limitation to other people. They're going to make fun of me. Maybe I'll be bullied. So I'd better hide."

In this way we bury our potential more and more. Because we live in a world that is based on polarities, good-bad, right-wrong, success-failure, the more rigid the negative definition of our capacity, if we are not big and successful then the more we feel we become small and inept. With this there arises an additional difficulty: we become suspicious of other people. So if you try to help me and say, "Come on, James! Sing a song!", I will not feel helped. In fact, I will feel embarrassed and retreat.

I think this kind of sensitivity affects many women and men who have experienced shame and have learned to protect themselves by adopting avoidance behaviour. You build walls around you and resist the help of anyone who tries to give you a little more freedom, who wants to help you climb over the wall. A wall gives the illusion of safety, even if it is not really protecting you. If I am scared and too afraid to try something new, I will do the same thing again and again because at least that gives me security. Maybe life will start to get boring, but I have no hope that it can be any different. Then it is easy to feel depressed.

There was an American psychologist, Aaron Beck, who represented depression in the form of a triangle in which the angles represented: 1. I am worthless; 2. my situation is hopeless; 3. there is nothing in the future for me.

When these three beliefs are combined together, they form a stable triangle.

To accept a risk you need to believe in something in the future, you need to be willing to reinvent yourself.

"But I am just me! I've always been like this!"

This is not true. It may seem that way to you, but it is not true.

When we are young and grow up in a certain context, we learn due to our ability to internalise aspects of the world, just as the body grows by taking in food and drink. All those beliefs and attitudes that arise as our personality are fed and nurtured by the opinions of people around us. In this way we begin to believe, "Yes, that's me. That's me." Then, as an adult, although the thoughts may change we continue the habit of believing in them: "I threw my life away. I messed up my family. What can I do?"

We believe things that are not true, for our own mind has been trained to delude us. What we believe in becomes true for us. We believe our thoughts tell us the truth and so we operate on a premise that is incorrect.

Two hundred years ago it was very common to think that men were far superior to women. So why give women an education? It is a belief that still dominates in many countries.

When this belief pervades a society, women will not be sent to school and will not learn the same things as boys. The man's status is considered high, while what the woman does is considered lower status. The erroneous deduction therefore will be that "girls do not know important things because they are stupid." This seemingly logical deduction is based on a misconception and in turn it generates further misconceptions.

In the last one hundred and fifty years we have seen three waves of feminism each bringing a style of consciousness raising. This puts established beliefs into question and lets us all see how easy it is to get limited by mind-made manacles and fetters. The same applies to racism, contempt for people with disabilities, for the poor, for the enslaved and so on. These are all prejudices by which people are imprisoned by false knowledge. Meditation and mindfulness practices are also methods of consciousness raising. They question false belief and open the way to accurate perception.

Many of the certainties we have about ourselves and others are not true. Yet when we are encapsulated in a fixed definition that is given to us by someone else, we will find ourselves attending to only two polarities: yes or no? 100% yes or 100% no.

So we need to investigate: can James sing?

Not very well, but, I can sing! I am able to sing. I won't be auditioning at La Scala Theatre in Milan, but I am able to sing.

In most cases, we can have a go, make an attempt – and it will be better than nothing. Our guiding principle can be, 'let's see', 'let's try and see how it goes'.

Meditation can help with this.

Because when we sit quietly, we can notice how our minds are very busy. I am not the fact of being busy. I am present with all this movement.

These thoughts go by. They are thoughts. All thoughts come and go. The more I notice their movement the more still I become.

So when you have a moment you can take note of the thoughts that haunt you the most and observe them and see how quickly they pass through your mind. They arise, they transit, they fade away.

A passing thought arises, I feel like it's really hitting me in the heart, it seems to be defining me. But then it's gone, disappeared, given way to something else. How strange! I feel imprisoned by an impermanent, vanishing thought ... maybe then the walls of my prison are not so thick!

It's a bit reminiscent of being on the beach building a sandcastle. The waves would come and take it away, one piece at a time. We kept building the castle, though, adding wet sand to shore up the walls. Maybe this is what I am doing to myself: I am actively imprisoning myself precisely by means of the thoughts I am relying on. This activity of the mind is something we can investigate and gradually release ourselves from.

**Question:** What are thoughts? Where do they come from and why after experiencing them do they disappear only to be replaced by others?

There are two possibilities here: I can tell you what I know about thoughts, and then you can reflect on my thoughts about thoughts. And then you can tell me what you think about my thoughts about thoughts. In this way together we build a Mont Blanc of thoughts.

The other possibility is that you take a quiet moment, just sit and allow the thoughts to pass through your mind. Allow the thoughts and feelings to manifest as they are. Then you can directly see how fleeting and insubstantial they are. This true insight will let you be less reliant on thoughts. All thoughts are inherently unreliable.

A lot of our lives is spent in indirect relationship with the world. Our experience is mediated by interpretations that happen so quickly and familiarly that we are not conscious of them. We tell the world what it is, and then we get bored with what we think it is, when actually we are bored with the thoughts with which we have covered it. We lose contact with the freshness of the emerging moment because we cover it with thoughts.

To give you a very crude example: someone presents you with delicious food that he has prepared for you, and before you start eating it, you throw up on it, "Oh! Now it tastes like me, it tastes like me!"

This is what our thoughts do. We project our thoughts and assumptions onto the world and define it according to them.

If on one plate we put pure perception, and on the other we put concepts, ideas, prejudices, for most of us it is this second plate that tastes better. We are addicted to mental projections.

Although I feel at home in my ideas and it seems that these ideas allow me to make sense of the world, in fact they are acting as a veil between me and immediacy.

One of the functions of meditation is to be able to relax one's tendency to fuse with whatever is occurring and then see how this occurrence actually is before one interprets it. In this way one has a pre-conceptual experience, a freshness prior to the concept of what I think is there.

If this interests you, you might like to try this: take a sheet of paper, draw a line down the middle, on one side write at the top of the column "things I say to the object I observe," and in the other column write "what the object says to me." Start with a simple object, like a banana or an apple. You stand there, look at the apple and see what you think about it – write down whatever occurs to you.

**Question:** Can you stop for a moment, please? I would like to know about the nature of thought. What is it?

But I have already answered you: if I tell you a thought about what a thought is, I take you away from what a thought is by giving you a thought about thoughts. If you will allow me to finish the description of these two columns, I hope it will be clearer to you. When you have written all you want to say with respect to that apple, you have written all you need to write, have run out of words with respect to the apple, then move on to the second column. Keep looking at the apple and allow the apple to speak to you. The apple will start to show itself, free from your interpretations. It speaks to you completely free of bias. It is as if you go for a walk with a three-year-old child: he is there looking at the puddle after it has rained and he is completely astonished, amazed. So, let's go to that wonderful freshness!



Now that you have had these two experiences, it is clear that the apple generated by your thinking and the apple you simply see there on the table are not the same.

With this we begin to discern what a thought is.

**Question:** Does thinking arise from instinct?

Thinking is an aspect of your mind, a capacity of your mind that has been developed through your education and life experience. Most of our thoughts are formulated in language and so they are influenced by our vocabulary. I am proposing that our mind as the capacity to know and our thoughts which are tools for knowing are not the same.

Look at this water bottle. It is a container and right now it is full of water. We could put juice or iced tea in it. If it was empty and you were desperate, you could pee in it. You can put anything in this container. The vacuity of the container is the potential of the container. The potential of this plastic container is limited by the fact that it is full of water. But if I empty it of water, I no longer have water. However, I have gained access to the potential of the bottle. I can put anything in it. Our mind is like this empty container. It is an open potential, yet this is hidden from us by our habits. At every moment thoughts, feelings, emotions come, and if you fixate on a particular content, you will no longer see the container. If you want water, it is the water you see. You no longer see the bottle. We want the thoughts, the memories, the moods, the feelings. But what about the mind? What is the mind?

A container?

Yes, it can be helpful to see it as a container. If you go to the theatre there will be a stage. The stage lights will go down, the actors will come on and they will play according to the script. Then they will leave. What is it that's left? The stage, on which there is usually a set representing a landscape or architecture. If someone were to nail this landscape to the stage, so that it could no longer be dismantled, fixing it forever, then the function of the stage would be compromised, ruined. The stage is useful precisely because it is empty. It is bare, open. Due to this condition of open hospitality the stage can be used for operettas, operas, comedies, classical ballet, lectures, everything and anything.

If someone is sad, depressed, it's because on the stage of his mind there is a very boring show that is being repeated and replicated over and over again. There is a fixed set and a fixed script and so the actors, our thoughts, recite the same lines again and again.

It can be quite a shock to see how long we have been stuck in the same boring show. The show could be depression or self-hatred, anxiety, anger, fear or pride or any manner of pattern. The key point that meditation proposes to us is to be able to experience the clarity of the opening of the mind. Then we can see that the dramas we are stuck in are actually composed of transient moments. With this recognition we might see that we can live with these occurrences and use them in a dynamic movement of fresh connectivity. There is nothing innately stable or permanent about them. On the contrary, everything is impermanent, and this moment after the previous moment will always be fresh and newly arisen. However when we cling to past moments and reiterate them again and again, shoving them into the present moment, then they appear permanent, stable, hard like old bread, and our life becomes like that. In fact our life is always moments of freshness. So if you let thoughts pass through and do not hold them back, they remain fresh. They come, they go, a continuous movement of the experiences that arise for the mind.

**Question:** It is well known that people change with their thoughts. I ask you for a blunt answer: but do people then change, substantially speaking?

Let's go back to the singing example I gave earlier where the shame I felt at feeling not up to the task intoxicated my mind inexorably. On some days, when I felt more confident, it didn't bother me as much, in fact, when faced with a judgmental comment I was even able to respond that "that's just your opinion." On other days, however, it was enough for me to imagine that I had to sing in front of someone for me to think that that person might look at me in a critical way and pass judgment on my performance. Imagining their assessment impacted me inside, fuelled my shame, and so I felt much, much pain – on the basis of my own beliefs and imaginings.

Depending on the "porosity" of my psychological skin, if I feel a little fragile, a little vulnerable, the external negative commentary and the negative conviction within me will mix together. If we want to change, we have to de-activate and neutralise that negative image within us. This can be quite difficult because of our beliefs and prejudices.

The way dictators manage to keep people under control is to inject strong feelings of fear into the world. If you can put fear in people, you can have a lot of power. When the dictatorship was established in Argentina, they would take people and throw them from helicopters into the sea. Torture centres were located in beautiful houses in the suburban area of Buenos Aires just so that the screams could be heard in the air, and so everyone began to get scared and be terrified. Fear can always pervade human beings.

It is a lot of work to let go of all this fear accumulated in the body and mind. If you want to change your belief system a good support comes from practicing yoga, tai chi and other disciplines that help you let go of the constricted breath. Fear trapped in the body alters our breath triggering the sympathetic nervous system so that the supply of adrenaline increases, activating the "fight/flight" mode. If you can't fight and can't escape either, you have two other options: you either freeze or flop. Flop is what a little mouse does when it is in the mouth of a cat. We humans also do this by losing our energy. "I am hopeless, what can I do?"

Through breathing we can learn to lower our adrenaline level so that we can calmly assess the situation. Then we can make decisions that help us work with the actual situation.

**Question:** I would like to ask for advice. To get to know myself, what could I work on? What do you recommend?

The first thing is to allow yourself to be curious and non-judgmental. To do this we have to be willing to accept how we are. Approach yourself as if you were approaching a person you don't know. Observe yourself in everyday life. For example, when you are standing in line at the cafeteria to get food. What happens? What do you feel? Do you get bored while waiting? Maybe you get irritated if the person in front of you goes too slowly? Try to observe what makes you responsive to different situations. And then start noticing what kind of sensitivity you have. For example, what cheers you up? What makes you feel joy? What makes you angry?

This is very good work you can do every day and on every occasion, for it will help you to get to know yourself. Very often around the heart we have wounds that come from the past. And if you have a wound, a burn, if something touches it even very slightly, your reaction is strong.

If we want to become more free and less reactive, less impulsive, and free from our paranoia and brooding about others, such as "But what is he doing? Why is he doing this?" we need to return to our own skin. We can consciously adopt another thought, another mindset: okay, let others do what they do, I'm not king of the world, I can't control them, it's not within my power to do so. These burns around my heart, these pains, these hurts from past relationships, feel like me and if they are not healed, I will remain hyper-sensitive and reactive. I need these wounds to be healed, I need to heal. So, without blaming myself, without apologising, without judging myself and without shaming myself I want to do an honest, patient search about who I am and how I am.

We can start by looking at what we like and what we don't like. We can apply this to different kinds of foods, different kinds of objects, different kinds of clothing. Perhaps you see somebody wearing clothes that you would never wear for they seem hideous to you. They dress like that because they are not you. Ah, Right! They are not me, and they see the world through their eyes. I, on the other hand, see the world through my eyes and maybe I think I see more clearly than other people do. Herein lies the heart of the matter. Instead of behaving through an automatic, interpretive, universal system that revolves around the thought "I know; you don't know" and arrives at the judgment "you shouldn't do that thing", in the moment of the arising of my judgement I try to observe that the multitude of thoughts that arise are just my opinions. They are not absolute truth, merely my opinion.

These opinions may well arise from past experiences, perhaps from the way your father used to talk to you. If you didn't behave the way he said, he would slap you. And so there may be a lot of emotion, suffering, pain in your opinions. But they are not true. If you start investigating in this way, you might come to the conclusion that much of what you believe about yourself and others is not true.

The town where I grew up in Scotland was a very violent place in the days when I was young. It could happen that even if you weren't doing anything in particular, you would meet another boy, he would stare at you and attack you saying, "Hey you, why are you looking at me!" He would do it just to challenge you. We were all emotionally charged up. The whole world becomes, in these cases, a challenge. You're either on top or you're on the bottom, a nobody. Many men get trapped in this dynamic.

When we look inside ourselves we can see that our sensitive points are linked to our personal history, our family, the school we went to, the parental education we received. There may be episodes from your past life experience that have terrified you, events of which you may still be very afraid, or very angry. These emotions still vibrate within you. They are filters that prevent you from having an accurate perception of what is happening in the present moment. Your interpretation of facts becomes erroneous. Then fear, anxiety, and over-excitement become a spiral that can generate violence, toward yourself and others.

Why practice mindfulness? Why meditate? First of all, in order to relax, so as to be able to connect, moment by moment, with the manifesting world as it is. To have a perception of it as it really is and to have the ability to relate to the dynamics of the world as they manifest. What does it mean and what result do we get from this? We will diminish our mental projections and our attachment to the belief that I can define myself and others. We will stop imagining the world, leaving room for freshness, for interdependence, interconnectedness with others and the environment. We see others out there. This is often easier than seeing ourselves. Yet it is difficult to see others clearly if we do not see ourselves.

By being in this place, in prison, you have a great opportunity to transform yourself. Try to harness the potential of the time you spend here in prison and invest it in a laboratory of "self" investigation.

Investigate how you are, observing how with one person perhaps you tend to relax and with another to be more tense. What is the trigger? Is it on the outside of me or on the inside? This is how, with patience and kindness, you can begin to get to know yourself, to get back inside your own skin. The skin holds and protects our insides. Moreover, it is also the surface of contact with what is happening outside of us, allowing us to participate in the world.

If we are present in our skin, in our senses, we have a basis of freedom.

**Question:** Earlier you talked about the criticism that brings us down. When a criticism is destructive, how do we feel?

Does this negative criticism come from someone else or is it internal?

From someone else.

Earlier I was talking about the flow of experience. This flow is interactive and always changing. There are moments when we experience praise and moments when we experience blame. This indicates that evaluation and criticism is always rooted in a context. Other opinions relate to specific situations and therefore are not absolute, even if they feel absolute to us.

Judgment is the beginning of an assassination process. Judging means that I am defining you, making you an object, depriving you of your relational, experiential and emotional world. If I believe that my definition is the truth of who you really are then nothing you can say will change my view of you. That's how you get to murder, genocide, war: when you catalogue and redefine a person and then whole groups of human beings.

So on our part, it's important to be aware of judgmental people, to feel compassion for them because most probably they are suffering although they hide it by trying to put their fear and suffering into others. We should never belittle ourselves in front of those who have that tendency for that will inflame it. In the knowledge that they are trying to give an absolute definition of what they observe, I in turn will protect myself by observing that their "statement" is solely and only a personal opinion, generated perhaps from who knows what inner suffering. How can I protect myself? They want to define me, so I will accept their statement as their personal opinion and remain clear that it is an x-ray of them and not of me.

In this way you retain your freedom and the ability to discern what is going on.

Our time together has come to an end. However, you actually have a lot of time in which to explore how to truly take care of yourselves. You can do this anywhere, and especially while you live in this place. I'd like to thank you for your openness and for your focussed attention. I thank the Liberation Prison Project, Italy for the immense work they are doing. They offer a great opportunity for all of us to grow. Thank you again.