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A Conversation With Gangaji Series

Host Hillary Larson

Episode 1

FACING CHRONIC PAIN

Released on October 12, 2012

[00:05] INTRODUCTION MUSIC

[00:11] HILLARY LARSON, HOST: The great Sufi poet Rumi wrote the cure for pain is in the pain. For those who are intimately connected with pain, there's a very human idea that when and if the pain subsides or at least lessens in some way then we can get on with our lives in the way we wanted to or we'd hoped to. Sometimes that thought brings relief, but it also carries with it its own form of suffering. The Idea that life can get better if and only when certain conditions would just change. Or better yet, go away. But wonder if there is no escape. Is it possible to find freedom when absolutely nothing changes? Not as some esoteric or spiritual idea, but as a true experience. Today we are talking about chronic pain. The pain that sometimes comes with being in a human body, whether it's a migraine, the all-encompassing pain of fibromyalgia, the pain of fatigue, the pain of arthritis, the pain of watching the suffering of a loved one, or an emotional pain that seems resistant to all forms of comfort. If we are brave enough, or tired enough to abandon hope for relief or a cure, is there something that will reveal itself to us? Something larger than the mind? Something even bigger than the word freedom or peace? When there's no thought left to fight against, but just to face the pain itself, perhaps the true cure is right in front of us or more accurately, within us. The cure to pain, is in the pain. I'm Hillary Larsen and this is *A Conversation With Gangaji*.

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[01:55] HILLARY: I was doing a little research on the subject of chronic pain and I came across a few websites that had some statistics, and this one website, I think it was a government website said there are 116 million people diagnosed with chronic pain in the US. And when I look at the comparison, there's 28.8 million diagnosed with diabetes, and 16.3 million with coronary heart disease so, that's 116 million, that's a lot of people suffering. And then, right after that I was kinda looking at how that relates to the epidemic in the use of pain medication. And I remember back in the 80's there was the war on drugs, but the war on drugs was about street drugs. And now it feels like things have really flipped. And part of that flipping is evidenced by the fact that, one of the statistics I came across was the fact that there are more accidental deaths from opiate pain medication then from cocaine and heroin combined now.

[02:54] GANGAJI: It's a huge subject. I would like to start just by you said, you know after you gave the statistics for the chronic pain, you said there are that many people suffering, but I would like to make a distinction between pain and suffering. Certainly, many people who are experiencing chronic pain are suffering with that, that experience. AND, there are those who are experience chronic pain and not suffering. That there is the possibility always, to open to the sensation, to what we label as pain, to actually open to it and with the attention go inside it as energy or vibration. And discover that it is just energy. It's just vibration, and it's not a, a personal attack. It's not a definition of who you are. And I don't mean this to be esoteric in any sense. This is, this is available for everyone. And I also don't in any way want to demean the severity of pain, whether it's chronic or acute. And the

necessity and intelligence to take care of that in the best ways possible including opiates, I mean, thank god for opiates, it's a, they've helped many people get through a difficult phase so that they can live fruitful lives. So it, I, the statistics were very interesting of course many of those people who are experiencing chronic pain also have heart disease or diabetes and, and many other things and then there, there's another issue in which, I don't know if it's the scope of this particular show but, there's the emotional chronic pain that people are in and, self-medication for that in all kinds of ways. Which really ties into our addiction program. So, it's a big subject and I'll rely on you to hone it down a little.

[05:04] HILLARY: I mean I definitely think that emotional pain is definitely part of this show and I don't really think there's any need to separate the two. And I feel like the forms of medication, it might be technically a different type of medication, but really, it's the same thing. And I, I don't want to harp on what society says but I'm gonna do it anyway. And I think that society, our culture, is kinda designed to reject pain as if it's not normal.

[05:32] GANGAJI: Well everybody is designed that way, animals are designed that way, it's society, it's a reflex. Because pain is an alert system, it's a, it alerts the nervous system. It's usually a signal that something is wrong. And so, it's a very useful signal. So let's don't make wrong, wrong. (laughter) And certainly if society didn't make it wrong there would be as much help as there is available. Because there are some societies where pain is literally just a part of life and, and, people are in a lot of pain because they don't have access to certain medicines, or certain therapeutic interventions, physical or emotional. So I think society here is simply a reflection of our animal nature. "Pain is bad. We don't want pain. Let's get rid of it". Then when we deepen the question, we can actually bring to our pain, what is present that has nothing to do with survival of the animal creature. Nothing to do with your survival. And that when it's possible to meet what appears to be a threat to that survival, in this case pain. An alert system. A noise, something saying "fix this". So, that's where we get into the inquiry aspect of dealing with chronic pain. And of course, that's just one aspect of the show. That's my perspective. Because I am not a health practitioner. I was a health practitioner for some years. I go to health practitioners. If I have a pain I try to get it attended to. I don't like pain. I don't glorify pain. I don't think it's a spiritual attribute. But my, my role, as a teacher, and a, as a friend with people who come to me in a particular way is to really invite, invite you into discovering, what is inside the pain. Then it's inquiry.

[07:46] HILLARY: You know in order, I think, to do that inquiry, it seems as though it's pretty essential to actually even know that you are telling a story? And I was thinking of, you know all the stories that just come. Kind, they seem like they come organically: I wonder if this gets worse, I wonder if this pain is like this a year from now, Wonder if I can't take care of my family. And it's, it's almost kinda so automatic.

[08:11] GANGAJI: Yes

[08:12] HILLARY: The idea that you say "quit telling the story", I think sometimes can be a huge revelation for somebody.

[08:15] GANGAJI: It is. It's a huge revelation always because, it is, it happens so quickly because of course, our thinking mind is in support of our survival. That's why we have evolved into this cognitive creature that we are. They're linked, I mean, they've done research now and they've discovered that actually a sensation or an emotion appears and then a thought appears to match that. To make sense of that. And that's what our thinking

mind is about, is to, to make sense of reality, to make sense of the universe and, and pain is a noise, so we have to make sense of that. And, if we are willing, just for a moment, to not make sense of that, then we have the, the capacity to go inside it. And that's the willingness to not tell the story. And that's not making the story of pain wrong. It's very valuable, it is part of our evolution as an animal. But it's also limited. It's not the end of it. And I think that's what we're dealing with here.

[09:19] HILLARY: Yeah. I'm, I'm sitting here smiling because it's so. When I came across that with you a few years ago it was so revolutionary to me, the idea that I am not this thought, I am not this sensation. And, nobody had suggested that to me before and I see other people experience that with you. And it's, it's such a, I mean, it's kinda hard to describe the feeling, but, I mean – talk about freedom.

[09:44] GANGAJI: Yeah. It is free. That's right. And it, I'd never heard it before Papaji. Maybe it has been said and there's a kinda readiness where you can actually hear it. When I heard it (breath), well, it's, it's night and day.

[10 :03] HILLARY: It's funny I was doing a radio interview the other day for the Foundation and what I heard myself say was so great, because I said, that I didn't even know I was on a frantic search until somebody said stop.

[10:15] GANGAJI: That's right.

[10:16] HILLARY: Surprise.

[10:17] GANGAJI: There you are. Yeah, because it's, it hasn't entered. You know, it's not search. This is just my life. It's not a story. This is, this is, my pain. And, and, "what am I gonna do with it tomorrow?" and what if it DOES last, what if I can't. So those are all valid points, but there's the spaciousness of inquiry that gets overlooked in fixating on those points of the story.

[10:44] HILLARY: Yeah, there's the thing about pain that I think it comes so close to the subject of death, I mean so directly with the subject of death, because – I remember one time I had a kidney stone, and the pain of a kidney stone is extraordinary and, there was this feeling, that like it was a terror that came over me of like – wonder if this pain goes so out of control I lose my mind or I die. Whichever one, I don't know which one I was more afraid of but there's that feeling of being out of control [GANGAJI: Yes] when it comes to pain.

[11:13] GANGAJI: Yes, it's kinda explosion. It's the fear of the big bang. (laughter) And of course, we're laughing, but of course, when you're in it, you don't laugh much. It's terrorizing, it's a, it's a miserable situation. It's a kind of hell. So we don't need to deny that and say "oh pain is fine" or "it's all perfect". We don't need to overlay that with another story. We can recognize in this moment – *I'm in hell*. And I can actually fight that hell, or deny that hell, or indulge that hell, with the drama or story, or I can surrender, in this moment to hell. And in that there is, at the very least, a relief in the body and the nervous system can rest. More than it can when it's fighting or fleeing what's here.

[12:10] HILLARY: I was thinking of the example between somebody who knows they're going to experience a significant amount of pain for two days, a week, there's an opportunity

to surrender there [GANGAJI: Yes] that's merciful. But wonder if somebody knows they are going to be in pain for twenty years, it's a different type of confronting, it seems to me.

[12:30] GANGAJI: No it is. It's, it's, it's more sobering. And I have spoken to people who are in that situation. There's this amazing woman I met when I was in England once, she was so beautiful, so physically beautiful and soulfully beautiful, young woman with a young child and the first time I saw her she's just this, obviously, athletic woman. And then the next year I came back to meet with this group of people, she was there in a wheelchair, and she'd had a horrific car accident. She had been crushed between the car that was moving and another car. And she was in enormous pain and then there was, there was, no outlook for the cease of this pain. And she was absolutely radiant and beautiful. And she was there with her daughter. And she was there simply to provide testimony for the other people that you can bear whatever life gives you. And some of what it gives us all is pain in one degree or another. And when you recognize, at least the possibility, this can be born. I can bear this. Then there's another possibility. You can feel the whole body starts to open to that. Not only can it be born, but I can meet it. And she was the living testimony of pain being met. Not being wanted. Not being denied. But being met. And in that she was still radiant. She was still herself. And she had some extremely uncomfortable moments, and she was taking medication on and off. But it was extraordinary and hopefully it was captured on film, part of YouTube or something because it was so obvious. And this was a young woman. This is not someone at the end of their lives. This is a young woman looking at the possibility of raising her children. And many years ahead, but no one was saying, you will be pain free. She wouldn't be pain free, but she was free.

[14:43] HILLARY: You know there is such beauty in individual stories. That's part of the reason why we are asking people to write in and ask you questions because I think that one person's question, serves everybody in one way or another. So, if you don't mind I'd like to do that right now as I am inspired by the story you just told. Know this is kinda an interesting thing because this comes from two people in the same situation. It's a brother and sister. And this gentleman is 47 years old and when he was younger he was extremely athletic. And then, 17 years ago he was diagnosed with three different degenerative illnesses and one of them was Reiter's Syndrome and one of them was Rheumatoid Arthritis. They were all kinda illnesses revolving around arthritis. And what he's stating in this email was that the progression of his illnesses what such that his joints start to fuse. And his organs are fine. His mind is fine, but his joints are frozen. And now he has movement in two fingers on his right hand. And at this point he needs care around the clock. So his question to you is, he would like help to find life purpose within this long physical decline. And is there anything he can do to improve his outcome? – I'm thinking on a mental, spiritual level. There's two parts to this question so that was the first part.

[16:12] GANGAJI: Yeah, will let me – unless the other is directly related, this is already really a big question. Because it, it seems to me, this is the crux of what is feared with pain, and, and disease. Is that the life gets shrunk. So clearly his physical life has shrunk. He, if he can only move two fingers, that's the physical life he had before is gone – has died. But, he hasn't died. And the possibility of his contribution hasn't died. I mean, he's contributing right here, just by bringing this question and touching whoever is listening to his question, not even necessarily the answer. Just being moved, so the heart is moved open. And you know, and I am sure he knows, there are so many examples of people who have lived with nothing functioning, and yet, they have contributed. Not only to one other, but to many others, to all of us. And so that's the possibility without knowing *how* that will be. Again we are brought

back to this powerful state of not knowing, and yet being conscious and being open. Being willing to discover, how can I be used? I, I don't have the physical life I had. I'm dependent on others for my physical needs, the most basic and on. And, how can I be used? And so rather than answering that yourself, you make that question the living openness of your, your inquiry into life, and there is a discovery then. How *am* I being used? How can I surrender more to being used? Because that's what I hear when I hear 'purpose'.

[18:06] HILLARY: There was a teaching one time that you did which really had a profound impact on me and, and, it used to be on your website and I don't think it's there anymore but, it was titled, 'The Courage To Give Up Hope'.

[18:16] GANGAJI: Um, yeah. Well hope is very beautiful and then it becomes a poison. Because it's something about a future and it's some magical thinking about a future, and that has its place. But, when it takes us out of the present moment, and when we tell the truth we don't know that there's any more to our future, then this present moment, then it becomes the, it becomes the saboteur – hope becomes the saboteur of a life rather than the promise of a life. And, I think you have to examine that for yourself to see if hope is really supporting you in your inquiry, in your discovery, in your recognition of where a fuller life is, or if it's really simply a way of distracting you. If hope in itself has become an addiction that's distracting you from, from meeting what must be met now, however uncomfortable or painful that may be. And then the discovery of what's under that.

[19:22] HILLARY: This next question from his sister is something I think we can all relate to. Somehow as a sibling and a caregiver for these and watching these seventeen years of decline, she's experienced the full array of challenges and emotions of witnessing this. And, she was asking about hope, but you just answered that question, so beautifully. She's asking about being more realistic about her future and his future, and I think the crux of the question and I understood it in the email, was: you know, sometimes life doesn't turn out exactly the way we planned it, and her life, in certain ways, sounds like revolves around him. And as a caregiver, there's some resentment maybe. You know, I'm just gonna interject that, but it, it sounded from the rest of the email that I didn't include here is. I think the kinda nature of being human is that as some point we will suffer, and at sometimes we will witness somebody else's suffering. And so on the other side of it from her perspective, how do you reconcile yourself with the idea that, you know, maybe she had other plans in her life, and she's gonna be, and has been, in service to her brother. Which in this one way is beautiful. But in another way is, maybe there's anger there.

[20:39] GANGAJI: Yeah, usually there is anger, or resentment, which is a form of anger when we, we feel thwarted in some way from our dreams manifesting. And that's part of maturing, is to recognize the anger and, you can be humbled by the anger. It proves we are human, that we did want life to go a different way, and of course there are many people who are in really horrible situations, and I, I count this as a horrible situation, even though she may be doing it beautifully. I would assume she's doing it beautifully or she wouldn't have even written in, but it's not the life she planned. And that's heartbreaking. It brings us back to heartbreaking. We can be broken hearted for your brother, can be broken hearted for yourself, you can be broken hearted for people suffering, across the globe, lives that are stopped too soon, or crippled too soon, or I mean, life, in life form is a heartbreaking business. And that's not just true of humans of course, that's true of all life form. It's, it one sense it's heartbreaking that all life form ends. But that life form is, is maimed, before it ends, or is tortured before it ends is, is doubly or triply heartbreaking. And this, in the deepest

sense, is nothing we can do about that, and nothing we need do about that. We can allow our hearts to break. And in the heart breaking, there is a recognition of how big the heart is, what it can bear. Because it is bearing it all. So, the resentment is the tip of the iceberg. Under the resentment is some fear and under that is some despair. Both for her brother and for herself, both for oneself and other, whatever the situation and, we don't need to fix that. We can actually open to that. It's the despair of being a conscious human animal. That we actually can see with consciousness what happens to us, and to other. And so it is part of the price of having an evolved brain. If we are not willing to not fight that, as I was just saying, we recognize the, the capacity to open to that, and in the opening to that, the mystery of the peace that meets it all, meets the suffering, the pain, the death, the untimely death, the timely death, it's still, still painful, still loss. Because that's finally what we are speaking of, is loss, whether it's chronic pain and the loss of the movement of our body, or the loss of the athletic power of our body, or the loss of youth, or the loss of health, or the loss of life, or the loss of dreams. So to be able to meet loss directly, the emotions of that without the narrative of that, or the blame, or the being victimized or victimizing with that, we are expanded in mysterious ways. And so that's, that's my invitation is to not fix it, to meet it deeper and deeper.

[24:09] HILLARY: I so much appreciate the orientation that you give us all to what is so human in all of us and, and this subject has been about chronic pain and as we go down the road we'll be talking about other things. But, I know there are other beings on the planet that have had the experiences you have that you're, so, so clear on who you really are, and as a result that resonates for people that you come in contact with and hopefully this has given people you know, a different way of looking at chronic pain that, that chronic pain doesn't have to be about "this is who I am."

[24:42] GANGAJI: That's the really, the meaning we assign to anything and even if we assign meaning to release from chronic pain – this is who I am – it's still limited. When we can recognize that we are the totality, we recognize what's deeper than painful or pain free. We recognize that the heart

[25:16] GANGAJI: We have all experienced healing and the need for healing in the body. And we've experienced healings coming and we've experiences healings not coming. If we attach our desire or our intention for truth onto the healing of the body, then invariably, we overlook what is, by its nature, whole, pure, free, at ease, in peace. This is the simple truth. The complication arises because of these avenues of escape that have been etched into the mind, grooved into your particular mind, your particular ways. There may be like someone else's ways, but they have your twist or distortion to them. It is possible, in an instant, to recognize the attempt to escape, the impulse to escape, the command to escape, and in the face of that to stop, to actually turn and face what it is that is attempted, is being attempted to escape. It may be physical, it may be mental, it may be emotional. It may be death, it may be life. It may be the deepest fear, it may be the deepest bliss. It may mean facing the notion of who you are, it may mean facing the notion of who you're not. What it does mean for everyone is recognizing the impulse to escape. And also recognizing, that in the midst of that impulse there is a choice. And that choice is to say no to the escape, and yes to the facing of that demon or that god. This choice is the most supreme power of mind and it is used daily in many trivial matters. And some matters that aren't so trivial, but this choice is a whole different realm from any other choice ever made. And once it is made truly, fully, giving every bit of your power of choice to the choice of stopping the escape, then choicelessly, exquisitely, effortlessly, with some pain, with some pleasure, the revelation that is the

treasure of your being reveals itself as the truth of who you are. Discovering yourself as that truth.

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[28:58] HILLARY: You can find other audio and video clips, as well as Gangaji's complete event schedule by going to [gangaji.org](http://gangaji.org). And if you'd like the chance to join Gangaji for live monthly webcast, please look for With Gangaji – it's on the website as well. Well thank you so much for joining us. If you have a question, a comment, or you'd like Gangaji to address a particular topic, please write us a [gangajiradio@gangaji.org](mailto:gangajiradio@gangaji.org), that's g-a-n-g-a-j-i-radio@gangaji.org. The music for this show was donated by Timothy Surya Das at [harmonicdreams.com](http://harmonicdreams.com). Well this has been *A Conversation With Gangaji*. We look forward to meeting up with you again next time. Be well.