

[Gangaji Radio](#)

A Conversation With Gangaji Series

Host Hillary Larson

Episode 2

INQUIRING INTO THE CORE OF DEPRESSION

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[00:05] INTRODUCTION MUSIC

[00:07] HILLARY LARSON, HOST: Fear, joy, excitement, inspiration, sadness, boredom, contentment, frustration. There are so many human emotions through which we connect with each other in the course of a lifetime. And for most of us at some point in our lives, depression is one of them. It's almost impossible to describe. There's a dullness, an ache, a foggy, a sense of disorientation or a feeling of disconnection with the rest of the world. There's an unfamiliar sense of time and a persistent feeling that seems like a strange form of claustrophobia. For some it might be barely noticeable while others feel almost paralyzed by it. When depression is present, it's so normal to wish it would go away. And when it goes away there's the hope that it will never come back again. Depression has been analyzed, spiritualized, commercialized and demonized. It has been run from, feared, dreaded and misunderstood. But wonder if depression itself didn't have to mean anything. If we take away the theories of how it got here and how long it will last. If we were really able to do that, what would be left? What if depression is just a misunderstood expression of life itself?

[00:07] GANGAJI: In our focus on what we want to not feel or to get back or to keep, we simply avoid the recognition that whatever we are feeling we can open to that. And that feeling actually reveals what's closer and deeper.

[01:39] HILLARY: I'm Hillary Larsen and this is *A Conversation With Gangaji*.

[01:48] HILLARY: When I was looking at doing this next series I was thinking, that I would do a show on anxiety and depression and we could talk about that. And then I realized that those are two very large topics. And, and some people are maybe more prone to anxiety and some people are more prone to depression and I think a lot of people feel the combination of the two, but I think they deserve their own separate conversations. And somebody actually sent in a question for you and it's a really straightforward basic question. And, that is, in your opinion what is depression?

[02:18] GANGAJI: Such a big question, such a big answer, depression. For years I didn't know really what people were talking about when they talked about depression. So I gave, kinda, my idea of that when people would ask me as a suppression of, of emotion, a kind of numbing out, not consciously, but subconsciously, a withdraw, a kind of misery. And then I reflected on parts of my early life and maybe I would have categorized myself as an anxious child, but I, I really believe in looking back at it, I was depressed. And, so it wasn't so easy then when I had my own experience to give it a kind of glib definition. And I remember that time in particular like a, maybe when I was eleven or something, a difficult year. I remember just, feeling smothered. But smothered without the kinda energy to fight out of it or even knowing how to fight out of it. Sort of a bewilderment that accompanied with it no sense of my own power to get out of it and even, I couldn't locate the depression. It was, it was so total. Course it wasn't really total, you know, I was aware of it and I had some good

moments. But, and, I saw the depression as really big. And I think that our tendency in society is to break things up into digestible bites. And I don't know what the latest psychiatric manual says about depression but, I see it is, as some aspects it's part of being a knowing creature. We know so much and so much of it is unpleasant to know. That there's a shutting down. It's a, an unbearableness. And we don't know how to process it, and we don't know how to meet it, and we don't know how to escape it. And so we, kinda die – it's a kind of living death.

[04:38] HILLARY: I regard depression as its own type of chronic pain. Because it has this, it's a pain, but it's so general you can't really locate it. And some people maybe might feel it more in the head and some people might feel it more in the gut because I know their coming up with more and more research now about there are more neuro-receptor sites actually in the gut then there are in the brain. But, but even so, it has its own pain to it.

[05:02] GANGAJI: Yeah, it's diffuse pain. And it often is chronic, of course.

[05:09] HILLARY: I think the other thing about depression is that there's such a label, I think, that might prevent people from actually meeting it. Because maybe there's a stigma attached to it. But also, there's no such thing really as a depression, in that, I've know people that have depression and it's a hereditary kinda thing. I've know people that have a thyroid problem. I've known people who have food allergies. I know people that have suffered some major trauma in their life and that trauma is submerged and is being communicated through the depression. So there's so many different kinds of depression it seems to me. But, I think the more it's put into a category, in a way, it hinders more than it helps. What do you think of that?

[05:52] GANGAJI : Yeah, I agree. I mean, I think categories are useful at the beginning. And then they get in the way of actually addressing it. And, you know, depression, just by its nature is, is just out of reach, in terms of getting through it, or even knowing that it's there. As I was saying, I didn't know it was there until I really was out of it to reflect back on it. It's like, 'oh, I was depressed', it was showing itself in psychosomatic symptoms and hypochondria and sleeplessness, and anxiety and different things, but, if I got round, got down to it, it was just a deep unhappiness. So if we call depression unhappiness, cause that's what I've seen is present, however the, the red lights may be flashing. That there's at the core some deep – it may not be superficial unhappiness – but deep unhappiness. Dis-ease.

[06:47] HILLARY: This is not meant to be pollyannaish in any way, but, I always pictured depression – because I've gone through some in my lifetime, some fairly severe episodes – and what I matured into was the idea that depression for some people is a purification. Because sometimes there's a way of going about life that's not workable but unless something kind of intervenes and goes 'that's not workable', why stop doing it?

[07:18] GANGAJI : Yes, well that's right. I mean, I know that having been in a marriage where I was unhappy and you know, and, and, just kind of continuing in it until the depression got big enough that it got my attention. I know that with some relatives of mine, the depression and, and sometimes, yes it is a profound call for a change of course.

[07:39] HILLARY: There was a woman that I met one time who, you know, she made her, her rounds into the psych ward. And she kinda realized it was her way of life, you know some people their backs go out and then they have to, you know, they're kinda laid up for a while.

And, and for her, what she eventually realized was they were just signs for her that she was in her pattern again. And her pattern was to take care of other people too much. And there are all these theories on depression. And one of them that I've heard for years is the depression is anger turned inward. And you know, I don't know If you have an opinion on that because you've sat with so many people over twenty years that must have all sorts of stories about depression.

[08:27] GANGAJI: I may have even said that at one time in my life, but I wouldn't define it that much. I mean, anger certainly may be a part of it, and that's part of the resistance to life but I think that, for me, for my purposes, in particular to speaking with people who may be experiencing it, I wouldn't know that beforehand and I would have to, to be with the person and just have them open. Because maybe it's not anger, maybe it's fear, maybe it is just direct despair. And maybe it is *just* hormonal. You know, maybe it is physical, maybe it is that something drastic needs to change in the life. So at this point in my life in speaking with people, I don't know what it is. I have to be part of the discovery that happens with the person.

[09:14] HILLARY: And I think that's so sane. Because it's, it's so particular. You know, there's probably a million different types of depressions because they all have such difference nuances to them and different causes. And, you know the one thing though that I thought about for years, is, when do you know that depression is just depression? And when is it a spiritual call? When is it a dark night of the soul?

[09:42] GANGAJI: Well, I don't even know that they are even different. You know, I mean, speaking of categories, I always advise everybody to get things checked out. To don't spiritualize either emotional or physical symptoms. And then finally we can see that our whole experience in this incarnation as a, a spiritual journey and there are, dark nights in that journey. But there's a way that calling it, or assuming it's a dark night of the soul, I don't know, gives it a kind of legitimacy. And a *kind* of legitimacy could be very useful. It's here so its legitimate in that its present, but what I have seen in people who begin to call it a dark night of the soul is that there is a, an attachment to it in a certain way. And a kind of, I don't know, an indulgence even. And so, I believe I've learned from, you know, offering certain books to people, certainly St. John of the cross and his dark night of the soul. The way he describes the dark night of the soul is a desert. And, as, you know, just this non-communication, this isolation from spirit, from truth, fits depression. So maybe he was just depressed. You know, we could say that, and forget dark night of the soul. If it, if it makes it more possible to meet rather than to follow. Because if we follow our depression, it's the tyrant you know, and if we are willing to meet it, it is, just was is, were just experiencing it. Either in our gut or in our relationships, or in our insomnia or however it may form, and, and then from that there is a possibility of, of the freshness of the true spirit revealing itself.

[11:40] HILLARY: You know I love the way you speak with people because it's so practical. And, you know, I don't think it's uncommon for people to have depression and there's a moment of time when you, you first open your eyes in the morning and there's a moment before its back. And then when its back its just, there just this sense of dread, like ah.

[12:01] GANGAJI: *Dread.*

[12:01] HILLARY: And there's a, there's a different sense of time too. Because you know, for me, my life is good. I enjoy my life. And I wake up and I'm looking at all the different things I

want to do in the course of the day. When I've had episodes of depression though however, the sense of time, it feels like drudgery. You know it's "ugh, I can't wait till it's eleven o'clock when I'm gonna go back to sleep again". So, can you kinda walk me through that? Your, your conversation for over twenty years it's been about stopping. In the midst of depression is that a stopping once fully and completely hopefully? Or for some people is it maybe stopping fifty times in the course of a day?

[12:38] GANGAJI: Well, I, I never even know how to answer that question because that question is actually an avoidance of the stopping. (laughter) So

[12:52] HILLARY: Busted! Yeah well, you know I honestly didn't see that. (laughter)

[12:30] GANGAJI: Good, yeah, good! Why it's useful to not edit, you know, your questions, because then you get to see where they are coming from. And that it seems to me, where that's coming from, is some dread. That you will have to do it fifty times a day or whatever. It's the dread of dread. Just like the worse fear is the fear of fear. And so, as with everything, you'll see that moment when the sense of dread, or the drudgery of life, the tedium appears if we don't get involved in an internal narrative about that "oh, this is here again" or "oh, what am I supposed to do with this", if we don't do anything with that. That, that's our meditation in that moment. That that's here and that's what is, that's like breath. In that moment it's just as normal and just as holy as breath. So then this dread itself becomes the, the inquiry. In the, the meeting of that without the narrative of that, why this is here, THAT this is here is all a deflection of really the fear of the dread, fear of being lost in it.

[14:05] HILLARY: Yeah, then there's that idea of "whoa, I hope that doesn't come back again"

[14:10] GANGAJI: Yeah, of course.

[14:10] HILLARY: All of us who've been through hell and as you say in your book, in the chapter in hell, on hell, that all of us have been in hell or gonna be in hell and then maybe go back to hell.

[14:24] GANGAJI: Yes, of course we don't want it. We don't want to feel bad. We want to always feel good. Or at least, if we can't always feel good, we want to most of the time feel good. Or at least if we don't have that, we don't want to feel horrible. And yet, in our focus on what we want to not feel or to get back or to keep, we simply avoid the recognition that whatever we are feeling we can open to that. And that feeling actually reveals what's closer and deeper.

[14:55] HILLARY: You know, I have a, still a little bit of a fixed idea that, you and I are alike in different ways. You're, we have similar personality traits or backgrounds or whatever but, I still think you're different. Because that's why we're having this conversation. And it so, I use some sort of a measuring stick in some way for me to measure myself in my life with yours is that, prior to meeting Papaji, you maybe had the same orientation to depression and anxiety and pain as the rest of us. And that's an assumption I'm making. But I don't know if you've experienced depression since your awakening with Papaji. And if you haven't is it because you just have a different orientation to thought?

[15:47] GANGAJI: One of the most powerful things Papaji said to me that really seems to me addresses this difference, is he said “throw away your measuring stick”. And so, if I have a negative feeling I don’t, that negative feeling is not something I would measure or say “oh, what does this mean?” “oh, this is back”. Did Papaji ever have a negative feeling, did Ramana, did God, did Jesus? That’s what stops. He pointed it out so clearly – the uselessness of that activity – of measuring or comparing ourselves to one another. Or, or to our ideal of what we should be or what, IT should be. And when we are willing to not measure then, then the differences may be present but they’re, they’re not relevant to what’s the sameness. And that’s so, certainly as a human being I’m subject to moods and events, there are things in my life that go well or badly and I react to them. But that’s all happening in this field of, of peace and fulfillment.

[16:54] HILLARY: I think that’s the what you give to people is that, even if it’s not verbally, there’s a sense of both the good and the bad move through, But they’re moving through and in a plane that’s so beyond words.

[17:11] GANGAJI: Yeah and that’s present in everyone. Because when I was with Papaji and I really heard him stay stop, and one of the the things I had to recognize I was doing was comparing, measuring, and I stopped that. And I had to recognize that this had always been here. Sometimes you may have heard me say it’s retroactive and, I discovered then, when I would reflect back on my earlier days, my days of depression or anxiety or unhappiness, there, that was happening still in this same field – peace and fulfillment. So it’s not that I *got* fulfillment. I recognized the fulfillment that is here at the core. And that’s what perhaps you feel in me recognizing in you.

[17:58] HILLARY: I want to take some time to move on to the next question. Somebody wrote in and ask you this question about, what you do with somebody else who’s experiencing depression and, let me just read what she’s asking you. How do you, can you, or should you try to get someone who is depressed interested enough to open up to what it is you’re offering? What might be offered to respark the spirits?

[18:25] GANGAJI: Well you know, I don’t see it as my job to go out and get people to be interested in this.

[18:34] HILLARY: Let me make sure I have the question termed correctly. And I think what she’s saying is, is how, if you have somebody in your life who’s in a deep depression, and it’s really kinda hard to get in there. How do you get them, maybe not you personally, but how do you get them to open to this consciousness that’s so true for you and so true for many people?

[18:55] GANGAJI Its really, I have to still say I don’t get them to do anything. I, that’s not my role I’m here to support. And so, I, I know people, family members who are depressed and I offer myself and I you know, maybe say a few words, but if they aren’t interested, all I can do is really respect that. And I do respect that. Because I don’t know what the timing in their life is. I don’t know if this depression is not serving them in some way as we earlier spoke about, you know, as a catalyst or some kind of deep change. So I don’t know is really true for me in meeting people, whether it’s family or strangers, or people who come to me in our satsang meetings. And then I, I can ask what do you want. Or is there anything I can help you with and I can receive that. But, but I’m not moving toward the people. I’m not here to get people to be interested in spirit or to even spark people. I’m here to support people. And, and that’s

simply the nature of this teaching. Because of what it is, it's not giving people rules or practices or a formula. And all of that can be quite useful and is quite useful but that's not what this is. This is simply a support in a willingness to open *completely*, to who you are. And perhaps to open completely to who you are is profoundly threatening to someone who is depressed because the worse is suspected. So it's a moment of readiness that I can't generate but I can be available for.

[20:43] HILLARY: Yeah, there's, I think there's. I think one of the barriers you might have to go through when working with someone who's depressed is suicidal thoughts. Because suicidal thoughts are scary and most people aren't going to carry through with their suicidal thoughts. But there's some importance and I think it's greatly important and it's what you emphasize in my mind is the idea of telling the truth.

[21:05] GANGAJI: Yeah. And I have to tell the truth about my limits. I had someone who's corresponding with me a lot, and speaking with me in meetings, and, and then out of the blue, I got this message that she was about to commit suicide. And I, we were not in Ashland at that time. I was having a retreat in the Bay Area and she was there. I didn't know where she was staying. I didn't know how to get in touch with her. And so the next time that we communicated I let her know that, if she's attending retreats with me I need to know where she's staying and if that happens again I am going to call the police. Because, it's out of my realm. And I know that people commit suicide and I know that often even the committing suicide is a cry for help. But it's too late if the suicide is successful. So there's a certain way for me to be in integrity that I have to recognize my limits. And I'm not a suicide counselor, and I'm not here to, that's not my role. But, but, she needed help and actually she never did that again. And she had biological explanations for what was happening but it was, for me, it was really important to realize that, I'm not gonna mess around with threats of suicide and the possibility of suicide. And that's the same thing in my view. How can I know the difference? So it's always back to the responsibility of the person and yet, if that in MY responsibility, as someone who is in communication with that person and so if it's murder or suicide, I have to contact someone who can do something about it.

[22:51] HILLARY: I think that idea of responsibility is such a huge one because it can, if someone's being victimized by their depression or whatever, whatever negative aspect of life, it seems like that just instantly closes the door to the opening you're speaking of.

[23:04] GANGAJI: Yeah, it often does. It really does, and yet, where we have enough examples. I know of someone who was in a psychotic ward and he somehow was able to recognize pure light and happiness in the midst of that horrible experience. And, and so we know that the possibility is always there. And, and we also know it's a great barrier. So, it's grace at that moment.

[23:36] HILLARY: You know you talk about stories so much Gangaji that are so helpful, and I think that whole idea of victimization is, is important in that category. Because there are cognitive, behavioral therapists that would take depression and they would have you look at your negative thoughts. And, and what I see you do, is you do is you actually take a look at the negative thoughts and then, keep taking someone deeper and deeper. Can you talk about that for just a little bit?

[24:03] GANGAJI: Well, the thought really follows the emotion or the feeling. I mean it seems like sometimes the thought is leading the emotion. I'm sure there's a feedback loop there,

but it's initiated by some feeling that arises that then we attach to a thought. This has been proved at a laboratory in Harvard. So I was really happy to read a report that is like, yes, that's right. First there is a feeling, then there is a thought. Because we are so cognitively conditioned we put our attention on the thoughts so my view is just go immediately to the feeling, that that thought is attached to – drop the thought. You don't have to make it more positive, you have to recognize there's a thought there because that can lead you back to the feeling that it came from. So then we're getting closer to the root of this suffering, any kind of suffering, but in particular in this conversation, depression. Or dread, whatever it may be. Just so then to be able to open to that without a thought is to begin inquiry.

[25:10] HILLARY: You know, it seems like the essence of what you're saying with any topic really, is that you're not that thing. You're not that.

[25:34] GANGAJI: Yeah, that's right. Or at the very least you aren't limited to that. That, that may have existence because you are, but you are independent of that. I want to say one more thing about depression. I remember in the seventies when RD Laing was around and he was sitting. Depression is the same response the world today. You know, and that's, because we live in very much of what happens IS depressing. And that's the truth. The fact that we are still doing the same kind of madness as a species ruled by greed and hate and mean spiritedness, unnecessarily, beyond our survival needs, is depressing. And so when we are willing to simply be depressed by that, it doesn't have a hold on us and it's, it can pass. It can, can move. When we fight that, or we identify with that, then it has a power and then that's depressing too.

[26:18] HILLARY: I think if somebody knew that just one thing that you just said, it can make a night and day difference. Because there's, if we go back to the original conversation that when you wake up in the morning, it's like "ugh, there's that thing again", as opposed to "wow, here's the feeling of that thing again", it's a different show.

[26:24] GANGAJI: Yeah, that's right. That's right, you're free.

[26:44] HILLARY: I think that's it for depression and I'm really looking forward to the next time we sit down and we can have a conversation about, some say the other side of that which is anxiety

[26:53] GANGAJI: Yeah, good.

[27:07] HILLARY: You've been listening to *A Conversation With Gangaji*. There are a lot of topics that we'd like to discuss down the road but, we'd also like to hear from you. So if you have a question for Gangaji, or a topic you'd like to hear more about, please write us at gangajiradio@gangaji.org, that's g-a-n-g-a-j-i-radio@gangaji.org. And if you'd like the opportunity to join Gangaji for a live monthly webcast, just go to the website gangaji.org and look for With Gangaji to find out how to sign up for the next gathering. And lastly if you'd like to catch up with us on Facebook, just search for Gangaji Community. The music for this show was generously donated by Timothy Surya Das at harmonicdreams.com. Thank you so much for joining us this month. Until next time be well.