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A Conversation With Gangaji Series

Host Hillary Larson

Episode 3

FEAR AND ANXIETY

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[00:05] INTRODUCTION MUSIC

[00:10] HILLARY LARSON, HOST: There can be times in life where it seems as though there is no rest from it. It steals sleep. It pulls on our energy and can drain us of our physical, mental and emotional resources. Sometimes it sits in the background and sometimes its force is so pronounced that it makes everyday life hard to face. I'm talking about anxiety. Aside from depression, it can be the most difficult emotion we experience as humans. From an early age we've been taught about the good emotion category and the bad emotion category, and most would agree that anxiety is in the latter. But is there perhaps, a different way of looking at it?

[00:49] GANGAJI: We don't have much in our culture that says, when you experience any negative emotion, really experience it, it is not there. When you experience any positive emotion, really experience it, it's endless.

[01:07] HILLARY: Financial insecurity, a family crisis, no work, too much work, the well-being of our children, the health of our parents, a personal illness, or just the news of the daily world we all live in. Life brings us never-ending opportunities for anxiety to show itself. During those times when the mind races, the body is in overdrive, and the mantra in our head is to just let go, how do we do that? I'm Hillary Larsen and this is *A Conversation With Gangaji*.

[01:40] HILLARY: So Gangaji at the beginning of this I played that little clip about this idea that we have thoughts of what's a good emotion, what's a bad emotion, but I really want to start this program today on orienting people who may have not heard of you before to your experience and why this conversation I think is unique. And I just want to briefly go over that and, you know, it seems to me that when I hear your story, and I've heard your story many times, that you were, that you were, you were really like most of the people who come to your group, come to your public meetings or your retreats. And, and you remind me of me. You know, I've done many things. I've done many workshops. I've done many things to improve myself. I have a really normal life. And for you, you know, you were married. You had a child. You were an acupuncturist. And you were also searching. And, but what you searching for wasn't good enough. And even though what you did was really extensive and, in 1990 you found yourself in India, a place I assume you'd never imagine yourself to be. Where you met this teacher, Papaji, who, it's hard for me to describe your experience because I've only heard you talk about it. And I think it's almost impossible to describe anyway. But, this complete dismantling of your ego. And I think maybe we can start with just, how do you even define the ego?

[02:59] GANGAJI: Well, in, that's great. Because when you say complete dismantling, people often hear that. I would have heard that. I would have heard that as some kind of process where we deconstruct it – all the aspects of ignorance, or greed, or selfishness, or

negative emotions, and, and got rid of them. It was and it is, much more simple than that. He, he spoke to me and he invited me to stop, to be still. And in receiving that invitation, I recognize the activity of my thinking mind. To always be reaching for something that was good and always be rejecting something that was bad. That's surely not, not limited to me, that's just human nature and it's part of our survival mechanism. And, and, there's nothing wrong with that. But in the, the attention that's given to always be reaching for the positive and rejecting the negative, or you could also be indulging the negative and ignoring the positive, in some kind of activity of thinking. Dealing with, with the phenomena of life, there's an overlooking of this vast spaciousness that, concepts of myself, which is what ego is, appear and disappear in. And so he really just turned my attention back to what is essential in each of us and all of us. That I, of I am, we usually finish the sentence with I am happy or I am unhappy, or I am good or I am bad, or I'm intelligent or I'm stupid. And that varies throughout the day, throughout the decades. And we are reaching for I am good and we are reaching for I am happy and rejecting I am bad and I am unhappy. And that's what keeps the activity going. That's what keeps the ego in play. So I don't say there's anything wrong with ego, it's just a phenomenal experience and it's pretty mysterious in itself. But it's possible, for attention, to return to what is before, and also during, and after any experience egoic or otherwise.

[05:30] HILLARY: It's a good segway cause we'll start with I am anxious. (laughter)

[05:33] GANGAJI: I know that one very well. (laughter)

[05:36] HILLARY: Yeah, I, I was just going to say especially these, these times, I, I hear about anxiety all the time. I certainly experience vast amounts of anxiety in my lifetime. And I was thinking of all of the attempts we make to get rid of it. And I was looking at some statistics on medication and then, the *amount* of medication that is prescribed just in the US and it's, it's phenomenal. And I'm not against medication at all I want, I want to be clear on that but. The thing about medication is, you take it and it's like "ah, relief". And then it wears off, and it's back.

[06:10] GANGAJI : Uh hm, that's right. And sometimes that's necessary as you say. Sometimes all we need really is relief. But after a while we want to know what's the root of this, because, you know, you just keep having to "up the medication". And then, or it doesn't work, or it starts to backfire. And I too really respect medication and in fact, when I was a young child I was given some medication for my anxiety. What they diagnosed was anxiety and what felt to me like it was horrible state. And I was very grateful. Because I didn't know what to do with me. And I took that medication on and off for a decade. And then, for some reason, I just knew to stop, to stop taking the medication. Maybe I'd had a good run where I hadn't felt anxious. And at the same time I had started meditating. I was um, in my twenties then, and then, once in a meditation, and meditation was so difficult for me because my mind was so active – I had to set a timer, and stick to that twenty minutes when I just wanted to bolt the whole time but – it was training my, my attention, to come at least, to, to not move, to not obey the impulse to get up. But I was sitting in a meditation, in a twenty-minute meditation and these waves of anxiety, this old familiar anxiety, where it felt like my body was disappearing. I didn't, I couldn't say I felt like I was physically dying, but I felt like I was ceasing to exist. And it was terrifying, but I was in this meditation posture. And so I stayed in the meditation posture and I simply allowed it to be here. It, it was grace. No one told me to do that. I didn't, I wasn't trying get through it, or meet it. But, it disappeared. I just, it even disappeared and dissipated, sound like process and in time. It just, in an instant, wasn't

there. Years later when I met Papaji, and I'd still had certainly, I'd had anxious moments, but I never had really the periods of anxiety that I'd had before. But, I realized that when, when you turn your attention to simply – *simply*, that's *very* big simply, *hugely* – being here rather than to the instructions that our thinking mind is giving us or get away from this or fix this or 'oh my god what this means' and 'who caused this'. Just the, the noise that accompanies the anxiety or any negative state. When attention is turned back to simply the experience, without moving, that's consciousness on, on an object and that object cannot survive consciousness. Is finally one with consciousness and so me, my anxiety, we could say, was allowed to rest. Was allowed to be. And in being, allowed to be, could simply rest. I, I don't know what the mechanics of are that are neurologically or psychologically, I just can say my experience, in, in that, I stopped fighting myself. And this aspect of myself, I stopped fighting my anxiety. And I stopped obeying it, in that moment. I was one with it. And to be one with it, then it was. The anxiety was liberated.

[09:59] HILLARY: You know it reminds me of a story I was going to share with you and, and, this was years ago. It must have been twenty years ago I heard about a woman who was agoraphobic, meaning, she couldn't leave her home. And she hadn't left her home for seventeen years. And I, I believe she couldn't even go to her mailbox and somehow or another she found her way to this woman who dealt with phobias. And I actually have never heard of anybody since then, that did exactly what this woman did in her own way, outside of you honestly. And, what she did, is she didn't fix it, she actually would take somebody through the core of it. And the idea of it was that somebody would see that it was actually a lie. And what she was afraid of was the panic attacks. So the agoraphobia was built around controlling the panic attack and I want to talk to you about that because I think it comes down to control and the willingness to let go.

[10:53] GANGAJI : It comes down to control and the fact that we know can ultimately cannot control. And so we keep amping up the control. And knowing that will not be enough, if the panic attack is gonna come, it comes. If this anxiety, this anxiety would always arise out of the blue for me. I'm sure maybe if we traced it back there were specific triggers but I wasn't aware of the triggers. It would just be here and, and, so then to control means some kind of twenty-four hour control. And we don't have that capacity. And so we do things like try to control our environment, try to control other people, try to control what we see and our lives start to shrink. And that, that's really no medicine for the anxiety either because we are born to expand. We are born to discover the universe rather than contract from it. So yes, the issue is control and the fact that we at, we know at some level we can't control. So that's the war.

[12:01] HILLARY: Yeah, and I think that anxiety's particularly tricky because it, rather than just meeting it an experiencing it, it's so easy to find other things. Do you know, I used to do this thing I refer to as chasing body parts. Because my body's loud and the expression of the anxiety, it, you know, my body does all sorts of things and I used to totally focus on my body.

[12:22] GANGAJI: Yes, me too. I know that one very well. I was, I was a hypochondriac actually. I mean, I don't even like that word, because that's not the way I related to it. An alarmist, I would say I was an alarmist. (laughter) but I was really somatizing an emotional state, trying to find some locus of it that I could then work on. So I was sick a lot, I was in bed a lot. And um, I mean I do have a sensitive system, maybe it got sensitized with early anxiety, I don't know. But there was a, a way I *added* to that. I added to the sensitivity of the system or maybe the genetics of the anxiety that appeared. By this, attempting to find it

some place in my body, and fix it, or this attempt to just collapse and stop it - sinking spell is what we would call it south.

[13:21] HILLARY: A sinking spell?

[13:22] GANGAJI: Yeah, just have a sinking spell.

[13:23] HILLARY: I like that.

[13:25] GANGAJI: (laughter) There's a place for it anyway.

[13:27] HILLARY: It sounds better than a panic attack, [GANGAJI: yeah, yeah] honestly. Yeah, I, I think also what's masterful about the way anxiety manifests itself is that. It also, it takes so much attention. It's a way of not seeing actually what's causing it. You know, I'm so abrupted in my body I don't. I was talking to somebody the other day and her cat was dying. And instead she was talking about all of these things that were going on in her body and I said, your cat is dying. (laughter)

[13:58] GANGAJI: Did you notice? (laughter) Yeah, yeah. It's very narcissistic in that the whole focus is on ME. And that's suffering. So it doesn't work. You know, and, we just have this hope if I focus better, if I focus more I will catch it and then I'll be able to control it. And as you say chasing body parts its perfect because it pops up someplace else, or in a different way, or. And, I know that some people are prone to anxiety. Some people may not even know what that means. And there are times when it is simply part of the energy field. If we can allow that rather than control it, it's my experience in speaking with people and in my own direct experience, it doesn't have the same power. It doesn't even mean that it won't reoccur. That's not eh issue then. Reoccurrence of anything is not the issue. It's what's my relationship with this that reoccurs or did occur or might occur. What and if it's a relationship of openness and kindness, kindness to yourself actually and willingness to, to discover what hasn't been discovered, without controlling that discovery.

[15:17] HILLARY: That's perfect. And actually I want to make sure we get a couple of questions in because, I get on a roll and I can, you know...

[15:24] GANGAJI: Me too.

[15:24] HILLARY: Talk about losing control, but um, the first question is from somebody, I'll just read it to you. I've had a very stressful situation with my family over the past few months. Sometimes my anxiety level is really high. I know I need to let go, but that feels impossible when my body is racing and I can't seem to stop my thoughts. How can I let go in the midst of high anxiety, it seems easier said than done.

[15:48] GANGAJI: Well, the, the problem I hear it with this question and I also get this kind of question a lot is this concept of letting go. And that, I *should* let go. So then that's just part of the anxiety suit – I should let go, but I can't let go, and I want to let go, and I know if I let go then I will feel better – just forget about let go. It's not about letting go or holding on – *hold on* – hold on tighter, you know. I mean, a good physical remedy may be just to stand in the middle of the room and shake, or lie down on the floor and shake, or, or like a yogic posture is to really tighten everything – *don't* let go. Because let go has now become part of the, the story. Just recognize in the, the center of this anxiety, when this anxiety is *allowed* to be

here, with all of its discomfort. It's different from wanting it to be here even maybe welcoming it, but *allowed* to be here. There can be a curiosity about what it is if you don't put the label anxiety on it. And what it is if you don't think you have to change it or get rid of it, just for a moment. And if that becomes a task and a should, forget about it. And sometimes you just have to get through it. You know, I, I'm not offering a formula for dealing with anxiety. I really want people to recognize that anxiety is part of the spectrum of being in a human form and being conscious of the possibilities of harm, possibility of death, is an anxiety making proposition.

[17:38] HILLARY: It seems as though there's a, and I think you're saying the same thing, there's a, must a, a hidden meaning underneath, just the word acceptance, means I have to like it. And I, I, years ago I heard you say that doesn't mean that at all and it was actually a kinda revelation for me, Because I, thought, that acceptance means I have to like this state. Rather than just feeling the state.

[18:01] GANGAJI: Well that's right. I mean we have these ideas of what it means to be spiritual, or, or even intelligent. And this idea about acceptance I think comes from spiritual conditioning that, if I accept, then it won't be here. (laughter) And so it's, it's a strategy with a particular outcome in view. And, I'm inviting you to not have a strategy, to not have an outcome. Just to be present with what's being experienced, and if it's uncomfortable – and often experiences are uncomfortable – to be present with that, that, without accepting it or rejecting it.

[18:38] HILLARY: You know, I heard an interview with you a couple weeks ago when I was working on this show and in the interview you said that you experience fear, but you're not afraid of fear.

[18:52] GANGAJI: Yeah, fear is part of being an animal, and, I'm a human animal. That's present and fear is very useful. It gets our attention, and loud noises or trucks coming toward you or visuals. So, and sometimes they are just in our imagination and sometimes it's for real – get out of the way, escape, run, hide, fight, whatever it may be. Of course when most people are speaking about fear they're speaking about a pattern that really doesn't have anything to do with the true threat to the being, the human animal.

[19:35] HILLARY: Yeah that's the point that I think you can help people really clarify because. There's a difference between fear, and fear of fear. And sometimes I think it's really hard to tell the difference.

[19:45] GANGAJI: Well they're both fear based. It's just forms of fear, one gives birth to the other. And that's, the fear of fear, is, it's almost like a strategy to deal with fear. You know our ultimate fear as human animals is death, the loss of, of this experience of being and so, the easiest most simple, most direct way is to, in an instant, /ose everything. Lose it all. And if we are fearful of something, we are fearful of losing something, that's our health, or some relationship, or our life, or our money, or our house, or our place in line, or. I mean it can be extremely trivial and it can be deeply profound, but it is about this loss because it all gets back to death. And this is Ramana's great gift to all of us as, as he lay down and face the fear of death. He waked up. And that's the possibility for each of us and in that possibility these moments of fear, of the discomfort of fear, whether it's pure fear, primal fear, or fear of fear can be gateways to the deepest experience. So they are not the enemy, fear is not the enemy.

[21:07] HILLARY: Some people who are listening to this might think that's a really radical concept because it feels like the enemy. But I want to actually while I have a few minutes left I wanna get this second question in and it actually follows along the lines of death. And it's, it's kind of interesting question. Because some people have chronic anxiety and some people have situational anxiety and this woman that wrote in has anxiety that's kind of existential, so to speak. Meaning, she, ah, her husband passed away from cancer just a few months ago and she's left to raise a six year old son on her own, and she's the kinda person who doesn't normally experience anxiety, so let me just pick this up. She had this unconditional love for her husband which just increased as he got closer to his time of death and of course, I mean, I think the average person would be incredibly anxious around that time. But she was just experiencing this unconditional love. The unconditional love I felt for my husband was so profound and brings me great peace when I connect with it now, but being in the world often feels ungrounded to me – so I guess my question is whether you have any guidance for me as I approach the more concrete details of life and decision making, when everything I lean into in the world brings up a sense of anxiety, because it feels so different then that peace of unconditional love and surrender I felt during his dying process. Almost like living in two different worlds, isn't it?

[22:30] GANGAJI: Yeah. It is, and it's, it's also understandable. Her situation, it sounds almost like a posttraumatic stress where she's not really ready to enter into the daily life. So if she was sitting here in front of me I would suggest she ask for a lot of help, in a lot of different ways. Because there's, there's a way that our nervous systems really do need to recover when trauma happens – and bliss can be traumatic to the system. Just like extreme loss can be traumatic. I know when I was an acupuncturist there was a condition that, in Chinese medicine that was diagnosed as an excess of joy. The heart meridian because it was out of balance. So we think, oh yeah, that's great – I'd love an excess of joy, but not really because it throws the system so out of balance that, the daily life is then a, a burden. So there's balance that will naturally happen in her life if she's willing to give space to this fact this is a huge occurrence. And not so long ago and you, you ask for help to get through the hard times. That's, that's why we have each other.

[23:47] HILLARY: It must feel in her situation that she's almost an island by herself because she's the one that's experiencing the unconditional love. And then she's the one going out into the world like they're almost two separate things.

[23:59] GANGAJI: Yeah well, you know, I wouldn't try to fix that, especially over the air. I, I think let them be, two separate things and then there's the possibility if you aren't trying to integrate them, that you discover what the continuum in both already is. But, then it's, you know it can be like the first question, there can be a should. I should be able to go into the world and experience this love, or I should be able to integrate this. And these shoulds are just the, the boundaries, artificial boundaries.

[24:35] HILLARY: I think that key is what you said is the merging. Oh right! (laughter) Anyway, I mean, I think that we could, you know, we're runnin' out of time here and I think that we could easily do a, another segment on anxiety, but at least we kinda caught the high points.

[24:49] GANGAJI: Yeah, it's the, it's the *dis-ease* of our time, of our era. I would say.

[24:57] HILLARY: Yeah, I mean, I've really enjoyed the conversation and I, I. When I'm putting the shows together I always want to put a clip from one of your, I mean you have hundreds and hundreds of hours of recordings from public meetings and retreats and so on. And, and I like the combination of the, the kinda the more formal with that informal because I think it gives people a different, two different flavors. And I'm gonna play a little clip from a, a cd, it's also a dvd, called Open, Unprotected and Free and it's, you're really talking about the illusion of fear as the negative emotion. But before we end off I just want to thank you for sitting down for another thirty minutes with me and, and really investigating this subject of anxiety.

[25:35] GANGAJI: Well, I can relate to this and this is my joy to be here with you like this.

(clip)

[26:50] GANGAJI: When you experience any negative emotion, really directly experience it with no story, just as in this instant, it's so, it's so instantaneous, it is not there. If you think you are experiencing it, and you're, there's still a lot there then recognize there is some story still being told about me and fear. How big it is. How you'll never be able to get rid of it. How it'll always come back. How dangerous it is to experience it, whatever the story may be, endless stories. And just stop. When you say ok fear, come, and you REALLY mean it. And you are REALLY open, fear CAN'T come. Because in that moment you are not telling a story about fear. And fear exists only linked to a story. (laughter) Yes, it's amazing. It's absolutely amazing. It is some huge discovery. But must be like, you know, when the new world was discovered and Columbus or whoever came back and said, there's more out there than we know about. Everybody said, no, no, no, I'm not going there. You know, the demons will get me. I'll fall off the earth, no, no, no. it's the same primitivism that's in uh, human emotional culture. If you are willing to go off the edge of the earth, you will see that it is you yourself that holds the earth. And you cannot go off from yourself. You can only go deeper into yourself.

(end clip)

[27:49] HILLARY: You've been listening to A Conversation With Gangaji. Our topic today has been on anxiety but you can find other shows on topics like depression, and chronic pain by visiting our website at gangaji.org. Oh we always appreciate hearing from you so if you have a question for Gangaji on a particular topic or a comment for us, please write us at gangajiradio@gangaji.org, that's g-a-n-g-a-j-i-radio@gangaji.org. Also if you'd like to join Gangaji for a live monthly webcast, please go to gangaji.org and look for With Gangaji. We'd like to thank Timothy Surya Das at harmonicdreams.com for contributing the theme music for this show. And, we'd like to thank you, for joining us. We look forward to meeting up with you again next time for the next show. In the meantime, be well.