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A Conversation With Gangaji Series

Host Hillary Larson

Episode 4

FREEDOM FROM ADDICTION

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[00:02] INTRODUCTION MUSIC

[00:07] GANGAJI: With any addiction, the impulse is so strong to get rid of the craving, to get rid of the fire, how, how, how? And there're millions of ways how. But instead to *not* get rid of it, not go numb with it, to let it burn, burn, burn, this is the fire! This is what Buddha goes through with all the temptations. This is Christ in the desert, everyone has to experience this. Oh my God, I'm dying, ok I'm dying, I surrender, I surrender, and there's peace, and there's freedom, and you recognize what never left, always here.

[00:48] HILLARY LARSON, HOST: The subject of addiction is clearly beyond the scope of one conversation. It seems to touch every aspect of human life. Some lives are destroyed by it, while others seem to escape relatively and apparently unharmed. Or is that even true? Time and understanding have revealed that addiction doesn't necessarily have to do with a substance or a thing. There are obvious addictions to drugs, alcohol, food and sex. There are addictions to other people, ideas, relationships, religion, spirituality, healing and even to thinking itself. But the bottom line is this: I'm doing something that feels good, and when it starts to feel not so good, when it starts to affect my life in ways that are painful, then I can't seem to stop. Addiction – it seems and feels like a prison. But could it also carry the possibility of resurrection? Is it possible that this aspect of human existence, which in its weakest form is frustrating, and at its worst is deadly, is actually a deeper call to return home? And what does home really even mean? I'm Hillary Larson, and this is *A Conversation With Gangaji*.

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[02:03] HILLARY: Gangaji I wanted to start this conversation on addiction with more of the obvious addictions. You know I think drugs and alcohol are what come to mind for most people. But you know as we go through this conversation I wanted to move into the more subtle ones, I think the ones that maybe are more habitual and more difficult to see, but I think that when people do hear the word addiction, I think they think drugs and alcohol. And I don't wanna get too deep into the physiology of it, but I know there's a lot of brain science right now that's, you know, really understanding anxiety and depression and addiction more, and that's not really the purpose of this show. But I don't also want, I don't wanna dismiss that, because I think it's important, and when we talk about addiction I think in the world of therapy, they look at, you know, a couple of things. They look at predisposition genetically, they look at your environment, you know, was there a lot of alcoholism in your environment? And they look at trauma. I think those are probably the top three, and you know, you and I both grew up in the midst of alcoholism. But you seem to have dodged that bullet.

[03:13] GANGAJI: Okay...

[03:14] HILLARY: Do you, do you, do you know what I mean?

[03:15] GANGAJI: ...yeah, I do understand. I just wanna back up, just a touch, in that I also agree we have to deeply, profoundly respect the biochemical components of all of it. And while we don't have to get into it – or you and I perhaps aren't equipped to get into it – we can recognize and support anyone who happens to be listening to this to really, if this subject in any way affects them, to really look into that or, or to consult with somebody who's looked into it. Because everything I say is really not coming from a therapeutic point of view. I'm not trained as a psychotherapist, I'm not trained as a biochemist, so I'm, I'm speaking really from the perspective of what appears to be an obstacle to your total fulfillment. And the irony, or the horror of addictions is that it's both a seeking for fulfillment, and it then is the obstacle for fulfillment. So it's, in that sense for me addictions are very broad, and as you said, we can speak certainly specifically – alcohol, drugs, sex, shopping – whatever it may be that's some attempt to distract one from the abyss that lies in wait for all human beings. It's not that addicts are the only ones with the perception of this abyss, it's just that perhaps addicts are tuned in in a particular way to seek relief (chuckles) through something else. I mean some people just are magnificent in their capacity to deny this sense of the existential abyss, but perhaps addicts aren't so good at denial. So they seek escape which is another strategy of mind.

[05:12] HILLARY: I think that also with addiction, and this is just my own theory on it, because I've always been really open with my past addictions. And, and it seems like for me I, I'm really sensitive to the chemicals in my own body, for example. And I think I told you some time ago that, you know I had alcoholism in my family so I, you know, I loathed alcohol, and I was certain I would never end up like that. I was absolutely certain of it. And, somehow when, you know, when I was twelve I was with some people and, you know, we ended up drinking. And it, and I have to say, in that moment I went from – maybe not even being fully conscious that, conscious of that abyss – but I went from that to this opposite extreme of being whole, suddenly.

[05:59] GANGAJI: Yes, well, it, it melts separation. I, I also came from an alcoholic family but I was drinking with my family. I mean, in the South you smoked with your family, you had drinks very early, maybe like they do in some European countries with wine. We had drinks, so by the time I was a, certainly by the time I was eighteen I would sit down and have drinks with my parents. And, and it felt good, it was actually a way to relate to my parents, where we could be intimate in a way that we couldn't be sober, or we weren't, I don't know if we could or couldn't be. And then that was true, everything. I mean I danced in a way, when I was drunk in a way that I couldn't, or I didn't perceive I could dance when I was sober. I was funnier, I was smarter – everybody else was too. And, and I of course found that on, with other substances too later. So that is the trap, I mean there is this, this release of inhibitions and this melting of separation that is very sweet. And, and I think alcohol serves that purpose throughout history. And other substances too, certain mushrooms, certainly cannabis, throughout history. It's not located in our modern times, it's a, it's a door for people to get out of their constrictures of sobriety into something that is alive and free. And the problem is, of course, when it becomes addictive, and then it's not just a door, it's a trap, and you're on a cycle of *having* to have a drink to, to live. And then of course there's the biochemical component. But I, I see it also with people *having* to shop, or people *having* to go on the internet, or *having* to read a newspaper. So addictions can be small but in any way that we *have* to do something, we rob ourselves of the opportunity to actually discover what's underneath that 'have to do this' and the fear that's underneath that and often the despair, and the hopelessness. But most importantly for our conversation, the total fulfillment that's under all that. So I, I don't wanna demonize substances, in any way, or even have it

sub- sub – I don't wanna demonize anything – but we have a habit – especially those of us who have lived in alcoholic fam – with alcoholic families – or have experienced alcoholism – of then making all of that wrong. And I, I think it's useful to really look at it not in matters of right and wrong, although of course there's much wrong that can come from addiction, but to actually go in a little deeper to what the, what the personal mechanics are. Not so much the biochemical although we've spoken of that a couple of times, but the, the personal ones. And that's really an invitation to anyone who's hearing this to participate by examining for themselves: where are my addictions? Let's assume we all have some addictions. We all have the strategy of escaping, it's a useful strategy. As well as denying, which is useful. Or indulging, which is useful. But when any of those is out of balance, all, all three of those lead to addiction.

[09:36] HILLARY: Yeah I wanted to actually talk about that issue of distraction. Because unless you do it it's just a theoretical conversation. So I wanna talk about the abyss. So, for me, it's one thing to distract myself from the abyss. And, and you know I think that people just habitually replace one addiction for another. But the actual true meeting of that abyss is easier said than done. Because I have to say that with all the, the work I've done on myself and all the, the different addictions I have shed, when I really sat with it, that thing that I was originally running from was still there.

[10:14] GANGAJI: That's right, that's right because in a, a true shocking sense it is part of what it means to be a human being, and to be a conscious human being. And with that consciousness comes the consciousness of death, and suffering, and the, how quickly a life span is lived. Whether that's sub-verbal – it comes, it could come when you're twelve, it can come when you're five, it can come when you're thirty-five – but there's a, something that is so much bigger than the individual, and that we as individuals are somehow aware of and that can of course be a beautiful catalyst to meet the bigness. But quite often it is perceived as a, the despair of an abyss, and I mean I understand what you say, what you mean when you say 'easier said than done'. But really if we look at it reasonably we will see it's actually much harder to fight the abyss; we spend lifetimes fighting the abyss. And as you said, it's still here. So really the easy way is (chuckles), is to recognize there is an abyss – and maybe that term fits, maybe it doesn't. I perceived it in my psyche, as just a murky, dark, field of energy that was really a reflection of the truth of who I was. So all of my activity on top of that was to somehow escape the truth in my mind, 'cause I could layer on with affirmations or, or get popular, make friends, succeed, but that was all on top of this truth of myself. And so until I was willing – and I wasn't willing until I was in my twenties, late twenties – to actually in meditation turn and, and not do anything with the truth of myself. To let it be here. In that it, it actually began to lose its power. And I was able, naturally – we are all able in that moment – to be in the ease of being, that doesn't deny the abyss or the, or death, but recognizes something that is present in the face of that, regardless of that. And that's the truth of being.

[12:45] HILLARY: I wanna have a deeper conversation with you about that, and, and specifically about your meeting with Papaji. And meeting the true self-doubt, that covers that truth that you speak of. But right now I've, I wanna just align this conversation so that if somebody's actively participating in addiction right now, if we could just take a, a moment to look at this aspect of insanity when it comes to addiction. Because I think everybody's witnessed somebody who has an addiction where, you know, something terrible happens, you know, they, they lose their health, they get in a car accident. And then the logical mind goes, 'well, then don't do that anymore'. But it seems to me there's just this, there's this

other aspect of addiction which has to do with that denial. Because if the denial wasn't there, the addiction wouldn't be there. We would do stuff and it would be painful and we wouldn't do it anymore.

[13:39] GANGAJI: Well, what you're talking about is one of the strategies of mind, one of the movements of mind, denial then becoming so out of balance that it is the root of addiction. The same could be, I mean you mentioned self-doubt; self-doubt is based on fear and the avoidance of fear. Avoidance is one of the strategies of mind, and so, taken out of balance that leads to in, addiction. Indulgence is one of the strategies of mind, and that leads to addiction. So it's all the same conversation. I, I'm not sure we have to wait to get to self-doubt, because self-doubt is a part of denial. Self-doubt is intolerable, and we move into denial because of it. So, and, and these are all just the ways that we have as conscious human beings of dealing with something that is bigger than, than we are, rather than surrendering to it. So it's big, big difference in surrendering to the abyss, or surrendering to this vastness, and managing it. And we attempt to manage it, and one of the ways that we attempt to manage it is through addiction. Until we recognize that we can't manage it, and then we're actually available already to stop and to meet it.

[15:01] HILLARY: The management that you speak of and the, what I would refer to as the merciful surrender that follows the exhaustion of that. In recovery programs they refer to that as being sick and tired of being sick and tired, when you've, you, the actual defense of it, the struggling against it, is worse than the thing itself. Also in recovery programs they speak of this essential moment, this acknowledgement of powerlessness. It's the moment of surrender, when you finally say, 'you know what' (chuckles), 'I've done everything, I've tried to trick myself in every way, and I can't do it'.

[15:36] GANGAJI: And that's a readiness too, as you, as you know, whether it's in recovery, or in self-inquiry, or a spiritual search, there has to be a readiness to recognize this is bigger than what I can manage, this is bigger than what I can do. And we have the experience of that every night, when we drop into deep sleep. We are tired enough or weary enough that we give up our management of life. But when an addiction has taken over the waking live, life, and when someone is seeking enlightenment or fulfillment, there has to be this same willingness that occurs in falling asleep, and yet, staying awake, to be conscious. And that can release an onslaught of reasons why not to, or the horror that will be felt, and the, the demons can be released when someone says, 'I'm ready to stop, I'm sick and tired of being sick and tired', and, and that's why we have support everywhere. That's what this show is in support of, and that's what recovery programs are in support of. And that's what spiritual inquiry is in support of. Because really, finally, what spiritual inquiry uncovers is the addiction of the power of identity of myself as an individual. And that's an addictive power. And it's a power that arises, and it has a biochemical component, and it is a, a door, and it is not wrong. But when we become addicted to it, it takes over our lives and we don't get to experience ourselves as yes, an individual, but so much more.

[17:25] HILLARY: Yeah, that's so true. And I really wanna honor this power of craving and the momentum of the addiction, and, well, you know what, let me do this. I would love to, at the beginning of the show I played a, a little bit of a clip, from a, it was a compilation CD that you did, it was called 'Moment of Choice'. And, I actually would like to play the whole thing, 'cause it's about addiction, and to me it, you know, if we only had three minutes to do this show, I would use this, you know, for the whole thing. Because to me it's just an incredibly powerful statement on these cravings.

(clip)

[18:03] GANGAJI: With addiction, you have, there has to be a point where you see perhaps the desire is out of your control. Maybe it's physiological. Maybe it's been practiced for so long that it's, it has its own groove. So that's out of your control, I'm not saying that's in your control. But what is in your control, absolutely, is this willingness to not move when it appears. This willingness to not indulge. This willingness to not repress. This willingness to be in the fire of this impulse of thousands of years. It certainly at least all the years of this lifetime. In that moment, actually, there's a willingness to die, because an addiction can be so strong, and certainly the addiction to mind, or habits, is so strong that there is the sense, 'I will die'. And so there is a willingness because of maturity of the soul: 'okay, if I die, I will die, but I am not going to follow this demon again, down this road again.' Then it feels like a descent into hell, because with any addiction the impulse is so strong to get rid of the craving, to get rid of the fire, how, how, how? And there're millions of ways how. But instead to not get rid of it, not go numb with it, to let it burn, burn, burn, this is the fire! This is what Buddha goes through with all the temptations. This is Christ in the desert, everyone has to experience this. Oh my God, I'm dying, ok I'm dying, I surrender, I surrender, and there's peace, and there's freedom, and you recognize what never left, always here.

(end clip)

[19:56] HILLARY: Wow! You know I refer to that as a barn burner, because you know it bypasses all the management strategies, and just goes, you know because I think that in the world of addiction, there's good advice. There's good advice, to, you know, take up exercising, or change your diet or something, to try to do something to manage that craving. But I love that your invitation is to say, 'open to it completely, without moving'.

[20:22] GANGAJI: Without moving is the key (chuckles). And I, I spoke of it in that clip as a demon, but also of course it can appear as a god with promises of, 'just this time', and 'this will, this will be fine', 'everything is all right', it's 'you don't wanna be too hard on yourself'. I mean, the forms of the groove that we have built in our lives to follow the craving morph into whatever seems to work. So I think we have to be aware of the demon, and the fear of this descent, that if we don't, if we don't obey this demon we will descend into hell. And if we don't obey the promises of this false god. So it's a, it is a moment of choosing perhaps to be completely alone, and yet not doing it by yourself. So it seems paradoxical. It's a, it's a sublime surrender. It's a, a conscious surrender – you're not waiting until you die to surrender, or not even waiting till you go to sleep that night, certainly not waiting till you pass out, or not waiting till you're high. In this moment, whatever is being felt, this is the moment, this is the moment to open, no more postponement. And what happens in the minor addiction of, or addiction to thought or addiction to ourselves as only individuals, is that we use our power of mind to postpone. And that takes effort, and that's what makes opening seem hard. Because we are addicted to postponing this moment of choice.

[22:05] HILLARY: There's so (chuckles), there's so many questions I wanna ask you (chuckles) on this subject, 'cause it seems like we just opened the door, and now we only have, you know, three or four minutes left. So, let me get to a question really quick. And that's this question of secrecy, because I really do think that there are some addictions that, you know, they may be more socially acceptable than others, and some are very hidden. And people, they're afraid, if somebody finds out that I'm doing this thing, you know I don't

know what the consequences, maybe my life will be ruined. And so this question is kind of an indirect question, and it's, 'What do you say, Gangaji, to somebody who's currently practicing an addiction, and they're caught in that cycle of self-hatred because the addiction, quote unquote, makes them feel better, then they hate themselves for doing it?' Whether it's addictions around food, addictions around pornography, addictions around shopping, addictions – I mean I don't really care what they are. It's that feeling of being alone, and needing to keep a secret. What do you say to somebody who's in that, that hell realm that you describe?

[23:06] GANGAJI: Well, I'm not sure how it relates to keeping a secret, because you certainly have permission to keep it a secret, in fact you *are* alone. And the moment of choice that the clip was referencing was this willingness to be alone. And in that, the willingness to discover what is the motivating force of this promise that will be fulfilled if you go for the addiction. And of, quite often, as you say it, it is a self-hatred, and I think that is maybe the biggest secret that, that human has, most humans have self-hatred at the core, which in a way is no different from the abyss, it's a sense of oneself as hateful, as unlovable, worthless, unwanted. And that's the door, if we are willing to experience that and open that, to that, without indulging it as a dramatic narrative and without denying it and just covering it with some sentence of perfection, and without avoiding it by escaping into something that gets us away from it. Just open to it, this existential angst, this, this horror of being such a, a hateful, flawed creature. Then that opening miraculously and even effortlessly reveals (chuckles) what cannot even be imagined, coming from the place of addictive identity, to oneself as simply this individual, this animal, this creature. So it is a, it's a moment of truth but it's also walking off a ledge because you don't know what the truth is that will be revealed. I mentioned in my case I was certain what would be revealed would be more darky, murky, energy, and it was quite surprising that there was actually a limit to that, and what was revealed under that very quickly was spacious, open, ease. And this was what I had been trying to get to in my particular addictive behaviors. And it was here, when I stopped the internal movement that led to addiction.

[25:33] HILLARY: It's so counterintuitive, that the thing that you think is gonna kill you, if you just be with it, is the thing that actually will set you free.

[25:41] GANGAJI: Yes, it's amazing. That's what keeps it, a, a secret, and what makes it seem hard (chuckles). But the direct discovery is, 'oh...oh...wow' (chuckles).

[25:57] HILLARY: Surprise (chuckles).

[25:58] GANGAJI: Mmm... always a surprise.

[26:00] HILLARY: Gangaji we have so many other questions here regarding addiction, and you know, we could, we could probably do two or three more shows on it. But I just really wanna take this time to thank you for really giving people a different opportunity and a different orientation to addiction. Because as I've said before it just seems like just the slightest shift in orientation can, can make the biggest difference for somebody and, and I have to say to you that, that clip, I've listened to that clip I don't even know how many times. I've probably listened to it fifty times in the course of the production of this show. And in my own humanity there's this, every time I hear it I think it gets more powerful, but it's this freedom of like, (sighs) yeah, just to let go.

[26:40] GANGAJI: That's it. That's the invitation to stop.

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[27:00] HILLARY: You've been listening to *A Conversation With Gangaji*. Today's subject was on addiction, but we'd love to hear what topics you'd like Gangaji to address for future shows. So please write us with your suggestions as well as your comments to [gangajiradio@gangaji.org](mailto:gangajiradio@gangaji.org). That's [g-a-n-g-a-j-i-radio@gangaji.org](mailto:g-a-n-g-a-j-i-radio@gangaji.org). For more information and for Gangaji's complete event schedule, you can also go to the website. And you can also find us on Facebook, just search for Gangaji Community. And finally, if you would like to join Gangaji for a live monthly webcast, you can find that information on the website as well. Just look for With Gangaji. It happens every month. Music for this show was generously donated, composed, and performed by Timothy Surya Das at [harmonicdreams.com](http://harmonicdreams.com). Thank you for listening, and be well.