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A Conversation With Gangaji Series

Host Hillary Larson

Episode 15

THE SEARCH FOR A BETTER ME

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[00:01] INTRODUCTION MUSIC

[00:08] HILLARY LARSON, HOST: It's kind of mind-boggling to even begin to consider the number of messages that bombard us on a daily basis. It probably actually starts the day we're born. They tell us that in order to be fulfilled, we need to be better in some way, that there needs to be some improvement in who we currently are. These messages initially might come from the outside, but they often end up serving as our own sort of perpetual inner mantra: how we look, what we feel, what we have, and how we behave are all a part of life. But in that, are we approaching ourselves as a thing, that constantly needs to be fixed?

[00:42] GANGAJI: The whole preoccupation with working with an image in our heads that's not real to begin with. To try to get satisfaction and fulfillment, it's, you know, it's, it's useless. It doesn't work.

[0:58] HILLARY: If ultimate peace is not found in the next pound lost, the next problem solved, the next dollar earned, or the next teaching understood, then where is it ? and what's wrong with improving ourselves ? Well, absolutely nothing. Unless it somehow perpetuates the search, the search for a better me. I'm Hillary Larson, and this is *A Conversation With Gangaji*.

[1:23] HILLARY: A few weeks ago, I was reading this article by a woman who does Chinese face reading... ? and apparently, in ancient Chinese medicine they used face reading to diagnose people. But you can also use it to analyze a person's personality, and it really seemed amazingly accurate to me. And I'm fascinated by the subject because there's so many legitimate ways for us to gather information about ourselves that can be really helpful. And some people might describe it as karma combined with genetics, combined with, who knows what else, but lately I've been appreciating how we come in a certain way, and we're gonna go out a certain way, with maybe a few refinements but essentially the same. And I don't know why that struck me so much because I've done different things in my life to kind of analyze myself and it always surprises me how accurate those things are. And about a year ago I started thinking, you really brought home that idea of how I have used a lot of my energy to change something that maybe isn't gonna change, and something that's just part of me.

[2:33] GANGAJI: Mmm.. it's always really useful to see [chuckles].

[2:37] HILLARY: So what I wanna do is I wanna really talk about this search for a better me because it's, it gets at the essence of what you're talking about, and... Let me do this, let me start off with a question that somebody had which, which I think a lot of people will relate to. And she says, 'For most of my life, I have felt as though I have been surrounded by stars: people

who accomplish great things, and are noticed for it. I have been at war with the idea that I am not like that. How do I accept that I am not a star, but more of a support person ?’

[3:14] GANGAJI: Well I think we have to roll it back a little bit to get to the basics of what ‘me’ is meaning in this conversation because in general, for people, and it sounds like for this questioner, ‘me’, even who I think I am, is a self-image. It’s an image in our mind. And, so, that image may or may not reflect what we see in the mirror. We can be surprised at what we see in the mirror, or a photograph, but we’re always, it seems to me, preoccupied with trying to correct that image, or augment that image or, inflate that image, to be better. So when this person speaks about wanting to be a star, it sounds like to me she wants to be important; she wants to be recognized, that – stars are recognized, and, and loved. So, if we can go back to what being a star would give her, then, then we have to go a little deeper than the self-image, because why we work on our self-image is, is so that we will get fulfillment. Or satisfaction... or confidence. I mean there are many words for it, but it gets down to is some, some presence in our own skin, and some satisfaction with that. In my own case, I, I could never correct my image enough. I mean, it is a fluid kind of thing, it can look good to you, or feel good, in one moment, and then just fall out of alignment very easily. I mean it, in an extreme case for me at one time, I would walk through a town, and I would check store windows to see how I looked, and you know, store windows vary. So in some of them I looked okay, in some of them I looked horrible. So I was continually checking store windows to see if I could get some congruity. It – do I look horrible, or do I look okay ? And then, it was crazy-making, and it *is* crazy-making, and the whole preoccupation with working with an image in our heads that’s not real to begin with, to try to get satisfaction and fulfillment. It’s, you know, it’s, it’s useless. It doesn’t work. And there’s a certain point in our lives when we can actually accept fully [chuckles] the worthlessness that we’re trying to avoid in generating a better image, a better me. Or meet fully the despair that we have that no one really loves us, or sees us. In other words, we can go to the root of the activity, rather than just adding activity to that.

[6:14] HILLARY: I think it’s so human to see another person and go, oh, I should be like that, because what is over there is better than what’s over here. And I wanna play a clip with you kind of addressing that issue.

(clip)

[6:26] GANGAJI: So I had, you, I just really want you to understand that I’m not talking about changing your behavior. There’s a natural appropriateness of behavior that there’s nothing wrong with: the way you speak to your parents, the way you speak to your children, the way you speak to your friends, or you speak to the desk clerk, the way you drive your car. These are just some appropriate behavior that gets learned. But, deeper inside, there’s often a tension in trying to be something, that that behavior says you are. Trying to be a good person. Trying to be brilliant. And the fear is that if I don’t try to be, I will be the reverse of that. I will be a bad person. I will be a stupid person. Trying to be of worth, or I’ll be a worthless person. Trying to be enlightened, or I will live in hell and ignorance. And so of course what has to be faced, sooner or later, and the suggestion of this message from Ramana and from Papaji is sooner is right now.

[7:40] UNNAMED AUDIENCE MEMBER: *Right now.*

[7:42] GANGAJI: Yes. So when you say human behavior, it's human to compare, I don't know that that's correct. It's certainly the way that we are trained, it's part of our education system, you know, the grading of schools, and I'm not even saying that's bad. I think it has its uses, you can see.... If someone's living a better life, you can compare the actions of that person living a better life and learn something. So I'm not saying comparison is wrong, it's just, how superficial is your conversation with yourself. You know, when I met Papaji, or when I read about the Buddha, or when I read about Jesus or any of the great saints, I wanted what they had. And my tendency, because of the way I was educated, maybe because it's human too, I'm not sure about that part, was to try to get there from the outside. You know to, I mean, at one point, kind of even dressing like Jesus. Or, you know, having an expression – facial expression – like the Buddha's. Certainly sitting upright in a way that the Japanese Buddhists taught anyway. And all of that can be useful in a certain way because we are, we are assuming a certain posture which reflects a certain attitude, which can filter down into a feeling of serenity, or equanimity, or, or peace. But it doesn't really get to the recurring misery that will penetrate if the moment we go out of that posture, the moment we catch our reflection in a store window, or, or we feel an old habit, or we, we recognize no matter how we feel, they don't see me as who I am. So, it just seems that there's a kind of progression and then when we are on the cusp of maturity, we actually get to recognize the futility of trying to find deep and lasting happiness in what can be changed. And certainly our postures can be changed, and our attitudes can be changed, and our behavior can be changed. And often it must be changed. But the deep, true happiness is in the changeless-ness of oneself. And you can't find that in a store window, and you can't find that in a recognition from anyone else. You can find it in the willingness to, to dive very deeply inside, and if there is a fear of what will be met, to be willing to have that fear. And to dive, really with the question not 'who is me' but 'who am I', what is this universal 'I' that everyone uses. 'I'. You know I was listening to Bob Marley, watching a Bob, Bob Marley documentary, it was really good, a celebration of Bob Marley in Africa. He was Jamaican, you know, but I heard, I didn't listen to his music that much when it was popular I liked to dance to it but I never listened to the words. But 'I', 'I', 'I' and 'I'. 'I' and 'I'. They didn't use the word 'me' in the songs, it's 'I' and 'I'. Meaning 'you and I'. 'I' and 'I'. And then we get to see what's beyond comparison. Or closer than can be compared. And it's just a different realm. It's the realm of truth, and it's a realm of satisfaction. And the realm of peace. So not trying to get there by being like anything else ; your own ideas of what you should be or, society's, or popular culture, but who is. That's the whole gist of our conversation.

(end clip)

[11:49] HILLARY: You know when I was talking, at the beginning of this conversation, about the different things that we can do to figure out ourselves, you know, to improve ourselves, there's a, I mean there's something to be said for that. And the idea that, at the end of our lives, maybe essentially we're the same, and, but we've purified some of the, aspects of ourselves that we don't like so much. So for example maybe somebody who has a, a really bad temper, they come in with a bad temper, maybe by the time they die they have refined that. So they know how to manage it. So there's that level, but in the realm of purification, I once heard you say and correct me if I've misquoted you because I think I've done that before, is that you don't have to worry about purification. That when you surrender, purification takes care of itself.

[12:45] GANGAJI: Well, purification in that sense is the fire of life itself. I mean life, the experiences of life, the pain of life, is humbling. And that's really what purification is, is a humbling, a wearing away of the arrogance of mind, and the, the purifying fire is, is the shock of that, or the resistance to that, or the humiliation of that. But the humbling itself is actually quite exquisite, and, and our arrogance of mine or our ego-ic thinking is then worn away in the surrender to, to life as the teacher.

[13:26] HILLARY: I wanna get to this second question. The letter said, 'Dear Gangaji. I heard you once say that you quit teaching the enneagram because people started using it as a way to fix themselves. Could you say more about what you meant by that? And what is the purpose of having information like that if I'm not using it to improve myself? I thank you in advance for your clarification.'

[13:50] GANGAJI: Well, you know, I could say I, I'm gonna stop speaking because [chuckles] people use it to improve themselves, or to try to improve their neighbor, or their husband, or their wife. Because it – in general everything is received as information. And as information relevant to our self-image, and rearranging that self-image and trying to, trying to get that self-image to give us satisfaction. The value of certain information, like the enneagram, or the Chinese face reading, you were saying, is to discover what is intrinsic to the form, like discovering in a rose or a lily what's intrinsic to the form, and then not wasting time trying to make the rose a lily. Just recognizing that they both have very different forms. And then there's the cactus too, it has its own form, and, and in recognizing that we can either recognize that we're trying to achieve something by perfecting the form, or indulging the form, or resisting the form, rather than just recognizing the form and from that recognition there's a possibility to recognize what animates the form. I mean, there's no rose, or lily, or cactus without life itself. Life is the animating force. And that's true of you and me. 'I' and 'I'. And we can recognize that directly. So, I mean, Ramana hardly spoke at all. Certainly he didn't speak the first eleven years. Just because he didn't feel like it. And then when he started speaking, I would say mostly people took it as information – of how to act, how to be, to get something. But that was never what he was saying. He said, 'Be still, and recognize who you are'. So always the invitation is to recognize the mental activity, and, and then return to what animates that. The life force, the conscious life, that is the pure intelligence. And then the, the changes that happen as a result of that. And they are changes, but they're by-products, they aren't the goal. You know even if we have a goal to be better people, which is in itself a sat-fit goal, a good goal, but we have an idea of what that means, and we try to impose that idea on ourselves, or on our friends. Or on our fellow citizens. And it just makes a mess. Because we aren't ideas. We, we really can't be encapsulated by an idea, even the most elevated. We can recognize the, the desire to be good, or the desire to be happy or better, is coming from some sense that we aren't good, or we aren't happy, and we aren't better, and we can actually open to that, and then discover what's under that. We, we assume that's the bottom. And that we have to build on top of that. There's something under that that's quite surprising. And enlightening... and satisfying... and fulfilling. Then the life can follow that, in your unique and particular form. And I'm not saying you will necessarily be a better person. There are people who, who've waked up, who've still kept their misanthropic nature [chuckles] toward their, to other humans. I often use the example of, I think it was Matananda's teacher, I can't remember, maybe it was Nasagarda's teacher, but one of the gurus would throw coconuts at people to get 'em away. It was in a tree, you know, and, so he didn't conform to society's vision of what he should be doing for them. And then other

teachers, like Gandhi, Buddha or Christ, gave their lives to society to, to try to raise society up. Both are good. Both have a place. And there's a whole spectrum of being that's, that we recognize in nature. And that we can recognize that we're a part of that nature too.

[18:30] HILLARY: Before I, I play this next clip, I just wanna ask you, before you quit teaching the enneagram, what was your intention in using the enneagram. I heard, I heard you say, or maybe [chuckles] maybe this is just somebody who said this is what you said, that the, the enneagram, and I'm using – 'cause there are gonna be people listening to this who don't know what the enneagram is --

[18:52] GANGAJI: Well let's say 'any system'.

[18:53] HILLARY: Any system. That it's a way of showing you who you're not.

[18:58] GANGAJI: Well yes, because it shows you the form that is present here. Like for you, you have red, thick curly hair. But you may not be seeing that because of the society is saying that you should have straight, black, hair. And so you're always trying to fix what you have. What the enneagram – and any true system – and the enneagram is a wisdom mirror – shows you the particular form, shows you that you're a rose, or a dianthus, or a cactus, or a fig tree, and it's a shock, because it's so close to us that we don't recognize that, we just recognize somehow we don't fit with those that we are comparing ourselves with. So when we recognize the particular form that genetically is present in this, this life form, just like with, in, other nature – then we can recognize what, what gives life to that form. Just what I was saying before, then you recognize that you aren't limited by your formation. Your formation comes and goes and eventually goes. But the truth of who you are, is, is the consciousness that can meet itself. Not separate from the form, but not limited by the form.

[20:22] HILLARY: What you just said reminded me of a, interview I listened to actually on my way here. And it was the Irish poet John O'Donohue, and I actually think I sent you this interview a couple years ago. It's a fantastic interview, and in, in one of the points he made, it was just, like, oh, so obvious - was that the two of us sitting across from each other right now, that I can see your face, and you can see my face, but we will never see our own faces. I mean, we can look in the mirror, but, but from there, the only thing that arises is perception. And I think it's pretty much what you were just saying. But the other thing that he said, that just completely falls in line with our conversation, is that, he said that – in such a beautiful way – that the body is where the unseen becomes seen. Or the place where the invisible becomes visible. And I think that that just sheds a whole different light on who we are, I mean who we really are.

[21:20] GANGAJI: Well then we aren't separate from the body ever. But because of perception, our sensory perception, we locate ourselves. And we look at our, we locate ourselves as separate from one another. But if, I mean, science, physics, tells us if we actually examine the body, the material form, it's not – it's energy, it's space. And, so there is a mystery that includes the body, the form, and the, the, the habitation that lives in that form. And that's, that's the thrill of life, and often if we're preoccupied with fixing or changing or perfecting or purifying the body or the thoughts or the emotions, or the circumstances, we overlook this mystery that is free of our activities, of fixing. And so while there's nothing wrong with those activities, it can be tragic

when a life is spent preoccupied with those activities rather than being nourished by this mystery.

[22:38] HILLARY: I promise I'm gonna play this clip (laughter), but I just have this other thing I want to say. I had this conversation with a friend a couple weeks ago, and we were talking about – and I don't know if this is, I don't think this is specific to spiritual circles, but that's what I know – is that maybe people become more conscious of what they eat, and they might become more conscious of exercise, more conscious of the body. But even that can turn, as a way of trying to avoid something. So, so that's my example of, of a way to better yourself, to improve yourself. But then if it gets twisted, it's a way of avoiding something. But it may not look like it on the outside, and it may be even hidden from the person that's eating the perfect diet, or...

[23:25] GANGAJI: Well, I think this is really the crux of the matter. It's very skillful to assume that it's all ego-driven. And in that you begin humbled. And so you recognize that your drive for the perfect body or the perfect diet or the perfect behavior is ego-driven, it's a super-ego drive, and, and then there can be a recognition that that's coming from the sense of imperfection, the sense of defilement. And to open and meet that, you can actually discover what is already perfect. And quite often, from that, a natural diet for your particular form is, is just more clear, or natural activities... maybe you're naturally a hermit. Maybe you're naturally social. But it, it's not then being a hermit to get something. Or being social to get something. It's just an expression of the form. And that's the, that's the huge difference, that's a shift.

[24:27] HILLARY: I, I promise I'm playing this clip [laughter]. And the reason why I really wanna get this in even though we're running, time is flying by is that, it has to do with the subject of stopping. [laughter] Your favorite subject! And that, that this idea that if we can just fix our personalities that there's hope that we can get what we want. And, and that, you're saying that that is the resistance to actually stopping so, let me play this for you.

(clip)

[24:55] GANGAJI: My teacher Papaji sent me to you to invite you to stop. To prove to you that it is possible to stop. And to demonstrate to you that it is easy to stop. That, that difficulty and the effort is in the resistance to stopping. That resistance is fed, of course, by hope that the story of who you are will give you what it is that you're yearning for. And if you can just fix the story, emotionally, physically, circumstantially, just mentally, just fix it, just tweak it a little....

[25:39] UNNAMED AUDIENCE: (laughter)

[25:41] GANGAJI: ...make the necessary changes, you will get what you want. And you can change the story, and you can make it a better story. And yes, that's great! I support you in a better story. It's much better to have a better story. [laughs] But my purpose in appearing to you, in your story [laughter] is to invite you to stop. This instant. When you stop telling your story you want to stop telling your story about me. Or him, or her, or them, or us. And in an, less than an instant, you know what it means to be who you are.

(end clip)

[26:37] GANGAJI: Perfect timing, I would say.

[26:40] HILLARY: Yeah, I was thinking about the, the trance of that, how heavy the trance of just being so enmeshed in the – I mean, not even knowing that I'm trying to change my story to get what I want – to not even know I'm doing that and the, just hearing somebody like you say stop, gives some distance for a moment of 'oh, I'm actually doing that'.

[27:06] GANGAJI: Yes. That's self-awareness.

[27:09] HILLARY: I was just wanting to wrap things up with the thought about the unseen becoming seen, and that there's something so magical to me about seeing ourselves from the invisible becoming visible. And, I think it puts the body in, with all its beauty, and all its warts and perspective, and, and to me it's like to be focused on my body and my personality almost feels like, you know, focusing on a dot on the, the floor, when you're missing the whole room. And I just feel like, this conversation of just addressing the search for a better me helps to really put that in perspective.

[27:50] GANGAJI: Yes, it flushes it out. It flushes out the, the hidden agendas, and the hope attached to those agendas.

[28:04] GANGAJI: So in this moment, if you aren't trying to be anything, or any body, or anywhere, or any way, who are you ? what are you ? what is here ? If you aren't trying to be someplace, where are you ? If you aren't trying to *be*, are you ? It's possible you can at least glimpse the extraneous energy and unnecessary suffering which is the attention of your life span, which may be over today or tomorrow or in a year or ten years, who knows, but the attention of your life span is spent unnecessarily, extraneously. So the question 'Where is your attention?' is the same as 'What are you trying to be? Who are you trying to be ? What are you trying to escape ?' Which is the same as Who are you, really ?'.

[29:37] HILLARY: The clips you heard today are from two different CD compilations. They're called *Standing in the Truth of Who You Are* and *The Invitation*. You can find those by going to the website, gangaji.org. As always, I also want to invite you to join Gangaji for a live webcast that happens every month. It's called With Gangaji, and you can register for that by going to the website as well. And if you'd like to drop Gangaji a letter, or ask her a question for this show, please feel free to write gangajiradio@gangaji.org, that's g-a-n-g-a-j-i-radio@gangaji.org. Before we leave, thank you to Jami Sieber for generously donating the music you're listening to right now. You can find her at jamisieber.com. That's jami-s-i-e-b-e-r.com. And special thanks to you for sharing this conversation with others, and till next time, be well.