

[Gangaji Radio](#)

A Conversation With Gangaji Series

Host Hillary Larson

Episode 16

A GOOD DEATH

Released on January 15, 2014

[00:01] INTRODUCTION MUSIC

[00:06] HILLARY LARSON, HOST: For some people, there's a fear of what happens after the body dies. Where do we go? Is there a way we live on in another form? For others the idea of death brings about a feeling of peace, perhaps even a sense of liberation. But what about the fear of a bad death, for either ourselves, or for someone we love? And how can this fear, conscious or not, ironically distract us from the true presence of life itself?

[00:33] GANGAJI: Right now, you are in the last moments of your life. We don't know how long these moments will be. But these are the last moments. How will they be lived? In some kind of hope of avoiding, of some kind of hope the last moment will give you something? *This moment is your last moment. How do you meet it?*

[00:54] HILLARY LARSON: Assisted suicide versus facing the death of the body without the use of any drugs whatsoever, and everything that falls in-between. Is one way more spiritual than the other? And is there anything we can actually do to create a good death? I'm Hillary Larson, and this is *A Conversation With Gangaji*.

[01:21] HILLARY: I wanna talk to you about death today, and I know that it's a subject that you speak of frequently. In fact, I think it may be the core of what you have to say, but I wanna talk about some of the more gritty considerations we have around death. But first I wanna acknowledge the fact that some people are not afraid of dying. They're not afraid of where they're gonna go, about what happens to their body or their soul after they die. But the people that I have spoken to do say that they're afraid of someone else dying, of a loved one dying.

[01:53] GANGAJI: Uh-huh, interesting.

[01:54] HILLARY: Yeah I mean, it's interesting. It's almost like a, it seems like an interesting projection, but for someone else the fear of, of death could revolve around the fear of financial ruin, or being alone. So, I mean, would you say it's safe to assume that everybody has a fear of death?

[02:12] GANGAJI: Well if we broaden our understanding of death to mean losing – because that's what it is, in death we lose, and in physical death we lose life as, as this form, life form, but, and in death of another one we lose the life form of, of that other. But that's, when you broaden it out to financial loss, or loss of youth, loss of health – those are all deaths of a certain kind where something *was*, and then it ends. And even if it hasn't ended yet, we know, in our intelligence, that it *will* end. That's part of being a human being, that we are actually conscious of our own death. In whatever way we frame that: loss of oneself, loss of other, loss of things we like, things we don't wanna lose. We don't, you know, mind losing what we wanna lose, we don't mind losing the horrible parts of adolescence, or adulthood,

but we don't wanna lose the good parts, the power, the, the joy, the vitality, and yet we see all around us that does happen. And we, we see people losing loved ones, and we see people losing their own vitality, their own life, and of course that makes us afraid. Because we are afraid to suffer. And that is in, in many ways, the crux of suffering – is losing. But also, Hillary, it's the crux of the spiritual inquiry. And that's why I speak of it so often. Not in some kind of morbid way of dramatizing loss or death but the capacity to meet that as a human being, consciously, fully, and in that to realize, what is death-less. And I don't mean that as some kind of afterlife or even reincarnation. But the death-less-ness of life itself. So it's a, it is the issue of spiritual inquiry.

[04:31] HILLARY: We can have an obvious conversation about the fear of being nothing, but I wanted to ask you about a more conscious type of human fear and that's the fear of a bad death. I have this friend who, whose husband died of cancer a couple years ago. And it was really important to him to, that he face death fully, so, he opted not to have the option of assisted suicide available to him, which is, what we have here in Oregon, even though the doctors warned that his death might be particularly unpleasant. And it was. His wife had to watch this really excruciating death. And I think this brings up a couple of really important points, one being the idea that if we're spiritual, we might, somehow, dodge experiencing a really painful death. And you know, I actually have that thought in the back of my mind. And the second thing is that if we don't face death fully, then we're gonna miss some moment of purification.

[05:29] GANGAJI: That's a big miss, isn't it (chuckles)?

[05:31] HILLARY: It, it is!

[05:33] GANGAJI: Well, you know I, I often address these spiritual concepts and, this is a big one. And it, it's really – well first of all I would say it's very human to not want to have a bad death, whatever that means to you. Just like we don't want a bad life, or a bad birth. We, we want things to be easy. We want to not feel pain, that is, that's just part of what it means to be a human animal, and to be conscious of what it means to suffer. So, I, I support everyone in having a, a good death, in whatever way that means for you. But I, I've been with several people as they have died, and a couple of those people were very spiritual – identified themselves as spiritual – one was a famous spiritual teacher. And they each reached a point where it didn't matter what other people thought about what they should be doing around their death. They had to choose. And one of them chose to, to have the assisted suicide. And she was, it, it just, it actually wasn't in Oregon so it was done sort of in the way it's often done in many states, where the medication is just upped, the morphine is upped to a certain point where then you can just slip out. But it was very interesting to be a part of that because her husband, and her brother, both had ideas that she was missing some experience. And to me this was just tragic, really, that they couldn't just allow her to, to have her experience of death as she wanted it. And I, I also saw it as a reflection of how our lives are lived based on ideas that either we have taken from others or we think make us spiritual, or that we hope will save us from something, some badness. So I just wanna acknowledge that, with everyone, that there... we have this choice in certain states, in many parts of the world, to be able to face death as we want to, and that choice is not right or wrong. It's simply a choice, you know, for many people the best death is to die in one's sleep. And what can be more unconscious? And yet that's considered the best death. And I think it sounds pretty sweet myself, it doesn't cause other people suffering, it's just a, a slipping away, of, of the form. So, I, I don't have any agenda for how people die. What concerns me with death and the

realization that we *will* die, is that mostly we spend our whole lifetimes avoiding that or dwelling on that to such an extent that we, we lose (chuckles) – which is death – we lose our capacity to live what life we have. So it's a, it's a very interesting dilemma, and in the invitation to, to meet death, fully and completely, then we don't have to be dwelling on death in our minds, that we can actually trust ourselves, that when, that we will know when to say 'enough'. You know, that's, Papaji's last words were 'bas...bas...' And in Hindi, that means 'enough... enough...' And then he was gone, he, they stopped life support. And, and he was gone and, he, he did that. And we each can do that if, if we can. I mean there's stories in the news every day of people who are essentially dead but life support systems are keeping the heart beating and the lungs functioning, and so there, there is a semblance of life but there is no consciousness of life. So it's a complex issue and I just wanna acknowledge the complexity and I wanna also invite people to, to remove the spiritual overlays that somehow already co-opt our lives, and needn't co-opt this very unique experience that we have of, of facing our deaths, ideally, before we are at the moment of death, so that the moment of death, of course, may be quite profound. And it may be filled with pain or it may be quite blissful. But the truth of death has already been met. And so we aren't waiting for some last moment of consciousness to complete us. We have discovered completion, now, and then, and then we are free to, to deal with the sufferings of the body, the pains of the body, the pains of those around us, as we see fit. You know we are free to, to discover that, in the moment, rather than having to decide it beforehand. I don't know if this is an answer to your question, but it seems to me that as complex as death is, we overcomplicate it with our spiritual concepts that are then laid on top of it, for ourselves, and for our loved ones.

[11:08] HILLARY: Yeah I mean it also seems like a hope that we maybe don't have to (chuckles) go through the hard part, and there's, there's a subject of assisted suicide, and there's also the subject of prolonging our lives, by trying (chuckles) every means necessary to keep our bodies going. And, and I wanna play this clip for you right now. And it's about a woman who was sharing her grief with you about her dog being sick. And she's facing the grief of the loss of her dog, but she's also struggling with the decision to put her dog down, and so many of us have been in this exact same position.

(clip)

[11:42] GANGAJI: *What are you experiencing?*

[11:46] UNNAMED AUDIENCE MEMBER: *The knowing that it's a part of, just the process.*

[11:50] GANGAJI: *Mm-hmm.*

[11:51] UNNAMED AUDIENCE MEMBER: *And, experiencing some peace in that.*

[11:56] GANGAJI: *Ah-hah.*

[11:59] UNNAMED AUDIENCE MEMBER: *It's harder, though, when there's a, could be a decision involved, you know?*

[12:04] GANGAJI: *You mean, whether to put her down, or...?*

[12:06] UNNAMED AUDIENCE MEMBER: *Yeah.*

[12:07] GANGAJI: *Yeah, yeah, there are decisions in life that are hard.*

[12:10] UNNAMED AUDIENCE MEMBER: *(deep sigh)*

[12:12] GANGAJI: *That's why, if it is more about you than about the love, the decision gets really hard.*

[12:20] UNNAMED AUDIENCE MEMBER: *Mm-hm.*

[12:23] GANGAJI: *Well listen, if it gets to the point, I'm telling everybody here, if it gets to the point where this old dog gets really suffering, and oh, you put me down.*

[12:33] UNNAMED AUDIENCE MEMBERS: *(raucous laughter)*

[12:34] GANGAJI: *Okay? You have my permission, you put me down, okay? Don't say, 'oh, we have to keep her around a little longer because look, she's so beautiful, she's translucent....' No, I don't – put me down! Put me down!*

[12:50] UNNAMED AUDIENCE MEMBERS: *(raucous laughter)*

[13:02] UNNAMED AUDIENCE MEMBER: *I'm afraid, though, that her spirit, it still has a spark.*

[13:08] GANGAJI: *It does! Where is that spark? I mean, you know it's in her body, but it, isn't it also present in you? But this is the, this is the paradox of creature's existence. Spirit animates creature. Oh, how beautiful! And what potential. And then, spirit leaves creature. This is, this is the law of this universe. There is a spark of spirit, and will be a spark of spirit, until it is totally gone. Do you assist in that, or not? This is an ethical question. I mean, that's why I wouldn't tell you what to do with your dog, truly. I told you what to do with this one.*

[13:51] UNNAMED AUDIENCE MEMBERS: *(laughter)*

[13:53] GANGAJI: *I don't know what I would do with my cat. I don't – who can say? There's a moment where there's a decision that is made that is, when there's clarity. That comes when it comes. But the surrender to love stops the, the discussion. The clarity doesn't come out of the discussion, is what I'm saying. It comes out of the surrender to love. The love you have for her, creature to creature. The love she's given you. And the love that can never die.*

[14:28] UNNAMED AUDIENCE MEMBER: *(deep sigh)*

[14:31] GANGAJI: *Even though the preciousness of the body is gone, is going.*
(end clip)

[14:35] HILLARY: *First of all I just wanna check in with you. That clip was taken from 2006, do you (chuckles)... have you changed your game plan at all, (chuckles) just so we can get it on record?*

[14:43] GANGAJI: *No, I, you know, I, I have, I'm fully in support of assisted suicide, first of all let me say that, because there may be many listeners who are not in support of that. And I think it's a, exquisite how humane we are to our suffering pets, who it's quite clear aren't*

gaining anything by continuing to suffer, and it's an amazing gap to me that we, we don't have that same humanity toward each other. And it's, I, I think the key word in that exchange was surrender. There's a way that we fight death, we fight the loss of the form, and in fighting that, we actually do a great disservice to the form. So when I invite people to meet their death before they die, that's not, that's not what is imagined; in order to actually meet death all imagination has to stop. And what's called for is surrender. If you are willing to surrender now to the, the truth of your death, or the truth of a, a loved one's death, that is it's, is surrender. And there's a vast opening that appears that is so mysterious, and so beyond our figuring out, and our control. And, and that's where the lucidity, or the clarity is. And from that then we can choose when, or, or how, whether it's for our own bodies or whether there's some kind of advanced directive, or if it's for our animals, dogs - bodies, or whatever. But really the, the importance is, is to not wait for that moment, that end moment. To not be hoping that some end moment will give you what is present right here. That the opportunity is to meet this now. And when we lose pets, or loved ones, or, or health, when we are sick, when we have a financial loss, or, or we begin to see that we lose our youth, our, the vitality that we had as adolescents is no longer here. That in itself is a catalyst for actually recognizing that there is something at play here that is so much bigger than our control. That surrender is really the only intelligent option. It's not a resignation; it's not a blind surrender, it's a, an open, clear-eyed, willingness to bear whatever arises in that surrender. And that's where the, the great mystery then shifts to one of the bounty of life, rather than, bounty as in, rather than life as an avoidance of death, life as an avoidance of loss. The bounty of what is here when things are lost. Because certainly everyone listening to this has experienced loss of some kind or, and or, fears loss of some kind. That's experiencing death, and or fearing the experience of death. To surrender to that is to simply open to it and it's not, it's not a trivial matter. It's huge. It determines the quality of one's life. We can no longer go back to being as we were before we recognized that death was here. To some infantile or, or child-like space. Because we *have* recognized it's here. So it's not a matter of regressing; surrender is not a regression. It is this, (chuckle) this discoverable capacity to open to, and bear, what seems unbearable. What is simply, perhaps the biggest mystery of all, that, that we are as form, and then we are *not* as form. That 'other' is as form, and then it is *not*. That's, that's the truth. But to open to that, it's not an existential opening, even though the existential fear or angst can, can lead to that opening. It is a vibrant, alive, exuberant opening. And you, you know this from people who have sat with dying people, or, been in the room with someone who's died. I mean, so often the reports are an explosion of grace and light. That's the surrender. And we needn't wait for that last moment, even though it's quite beautiful when it occurs in the last moments. But it, right now, you are in the last moments of your life. We don't know how long these moments will be. But these are the last moments. How will they be lived? In some kind of hope of avoiding, or, or some kind of hope the last moment will give you something? *This* moment is your last moment. How do you meet it? What's here?

[20:18] HILLARY: Huh. Actually I hate to even move on (chuckles) after that, that was so huge. But I so much appreciate, Gangaji, in these conversations, that what you have to say with regard to these topics is not abstract. And one of the points I wanted to make was, as, there's several times where you, you have mentioned your experience when you heard that Papaji had died. And, this is part of the gritty-ness of death that I wanna to talk about. Is that, here's a man that you loved in this human form, and then his body was dead, and then you talked about, actually, his dead body, and what that meant to you. So, so let me play this for you.

(clip)

[21:02] GANGAJI: *I remember when Papaji died. And it was a time of great sadness to me. Because his form was beautiful, and powerful, and I loved it. And there was a video of his funeral – which in India is a burning – so I got to see a video of his body burning, crackling, and... there's a, a moment where they come and break the thigh bone, so that it can really burn. It's beautiful. It's a very civilized way to see death, because it penetrates whatever hope we have of then in heaven there'll be all these bodies coming together.*

[21:45] UNNAMED AUDIENCE MEMBERS: *(laughter)*

[21:46] GANGAJI: *'Hi!' 'Oh, hi!' (laughter)*

[21:48] UNNAMED AUDIENCE MEMBERS: *(laughter)*

[21:50] GANGAJI: *(laughter) It's, it's hard. It, it penetrates, this beautiful body, and it's gone. And there are tears and there's sadness, there's grief. And then later someone asked me what's the most important moment of your life. And I had to say that there were two. And that was when I met Papaji and that's when Papaji died. They were together. So, the birth of Papaji, into my consciousness, and the death of Papaji. So that I could see what is changeless. So this particular, huge form, pointed me to what is changeless. And then that form changed, was gone. And that's the perfection of birth and death.*

(end clip)

[22:43] HILLARY: I just wanna be honest with you. Every time I've heard you tell that story about Papaji's body burning, I, you know, I cringe. The, the thought of that does not feel liberating to me. And I wonder, let, let me put it this way, before you met Papaji, did you have that same orientation? When, if, if somebody would've died, and you would've seen their body, did you cringe, or were you, are you just not a squeamish person? Or was that your own liberation that allowed you to see that with that kind of beauty?

[23:17] GANGAJI: Well the first body I saw was my mother after her death and, but when I saw her it was at the funeral. I had seen her in, in the last weeks of her life. And then I had gone back to California, and she had died, and I had gone then back to Mississippi for her funeral. And they had so painted her up, I mean I've laughed with people, I said she looked better than I'd ever seen her look. So it was her body but it was a mannequin, it was a doll. It was a doll-like representation of her body, and that's very different from then later when I was with this spiritual teacher I was mentioning earlier, I actually watched her die. Where her cheeks began to sink in, and her, the jaw muscle dropped, and the skin color turned ashen gray, and, and I mean you could just see the moisture leaving her form, the life force leaving her form, and at first it was horrifying to me. I mean I, I don't know that I'm a particularly squeamish person, I, I don't faint at blood or anything. But it was horrifying, it was scary, to see a dead body, just like when we're children and we see ghosts or we see the walking dead, it's horrifying to us. And that's based on the, our own fear of our own death, of course, that we could actually end up like that, or that could possess us, and, and we could live like that. And so, there was a way that I had to just sit there with her. I mean, she was willing to die, and willing to allow me to be in the room, and so I, I wanted to run. I wanted to bolt. And then, but I didn't. I stayed with it. And then the next person I saw was a member of the sangha who was precious and he died in his sleep in the night. And then, and the next

morning some of us went by there to sort of prepare his body, and he was curled in a fetal position. And it was beautiful. It was tender and sweet. So I, I don't know if seeing this woman die had, had somehow prepared the way for that. But I know that then, later, I, I saw the videos of Papaji's death and, and it wasn't really about the body and, and it's loss of spirit, or loss of animation, it was just about the, the finality of that body itself becoming dust or ash. And it was tremendous. So I, I see that they're all part of it, and that's why I, I think maybe in the West we are in such denial about death, because we don't usually see the progress of death. And I know that's not true for many people – hospice workers, and, and people who've had close loved ones die, but mostly we, we stay away from it. We don't even like to look at old people, we don't like to see age, or, or people who are disabled. It, it, is too threatening to us. But in our willingness to see it, our willingness to see deformity, our willingness to see loss of ability, our willingness to see disease, and ageing and death, then we have a capacity to open to it and we see it as not horrifying. It is a part of the spectrum. It may not be in itself joyous, but the joy that is always present is still here. And if we don't shun it in others and in ourselves, then, then it's recognized as part of this mystery that we inhabit, and that inhabits us, that is so beyond our, our control and our management that really all we can do is surrender. And then the surrender is one of, of joy, and mystery – rather than horror.

[27:30] HILLARY: Well, it always amazes me how quickly twenty-eight minutes rolls by. But I wanna make a point as we're leaving, and that is, people that know you, that have come to see you, that have heard you, are, are so aware of your humor in the midst of discovering these parts of truth within our own lives and, and obviously this conversation about death could be very serious. But there's a way that you are sober about subjects, but you're not somber about them. And in that, there's this capacity to see even the joy in death.

[28:06] GANGAJI: Yes, yes this unconditional joy. And that's the truth of who you are.

[28:25] HILLARY: We're running a little bit short on time here, so I just wanna mention a few quick things. Any comments or questions that you might have can be sent to gangajiradio@gangaji.org. That's g-a-n-g-a-j-i-radio@gangaji.org. There's also a Facebook page where you can get more information about Gangaji, just search for Gangaji Community. At the end of every show, I always like to mention the live webcast that Gangaji does every month, it's very much worth checking out, it's called With Gangaji. For more information on that, please go to the website, gangaji.org. And before we go, it would be so much appreciated if you could go to our iTunes page and leave a comment or rate *A Conversation With Gangaji*. Thank you so much for sharing this show with others. I'm Hillary Larson. We look forward to next time.