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A Conversation With Gangaji Series

Host HILLARY Larson

Episode 32

DANGEROUS EMOTIONS

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[00:03] INTRODUCTION MUSIC

(clip)

[00:10] GANGAJI: *My purpose in speaking to people, in meeting people, is to loosen that knot of superstitious belief that the anger that courses through you, or the fear, or the joy, or the despair, or the bliss, has anything to do with the truth of who you are.*

(end clip)

[00:32] HILLARY LARSON, HOST: When a strong emotion like anger or fear pops up, there seems to be an automatic impulse to get rid of it or, at least, to manage it. It's as if these feelings of ours are something dangerous - something that might overwhelm us, something that interferes with or even threatens our lives - and if it lasts long enough and is intense enough, perhaps this rage or despair or depression could actually do us in (or at least it feels that way sometimes). Perhaps our deepest hope is to find a way to transcend our emotions, or maybe we can learn how to process them just a little bit better. And then there's one more possibility, and that's to put our attention on not trying to escape from them in the first place. I'm Hillary Larson, and this is *A Conversation with Gangaji*.

[01:29] HILLARY: We did a special live broadcast this month on the subject of emotions and if you missed that - if you missed that live broadcast - you can find it on the radio page of the Gangaji website. It was our great experiment in doing (laughter) a live version of *A Conversation with Gangaji* and I, personally, I loved hearing people's voices. So, there were so many really important points that were made during that broadcast and it inspired me to do something for our regular podcast that we are going to do right here - and so here we are (laughter) talking about our emotions again. But there were a couple things that you mentioned during the live broadcast that I wanted to kind of jump into a little bit deeper and one of them was that you spoke at the beginning of the fact that our emotions and our physical sensations are primitive, and our thinking, our minds, are more sophisticated. But it's the minds that get us into trouble and that was a really important distinction for me because it's not like you're saying, "If you're angry, don't be angry," or, "If you're sad, don't be sad," or, "If you're afraid, don't be afraid." What I hear you say is to really look at what your thoughts are doing with respect to this primitive nature of ours and I was thinking about wild animals, you know, when they're out in the wild, when I've seen them - and I've seen nature shows about them - they'll get injured or hurt or shocked or something like that, and they kind of let it move through their bodies and then they move on. And I imagine they're not sitting there thinking, "Oh my god, I hope this isn't going to be this way my whole life!" And it's a different mechanism.

[03:21] GANGAJI: Well, it's interesting because our primitive emotions certainly have gotten us in lots of trouble, as it does wild animals, and the development, the evolution of the neocortex that allows us to think and manage and judge is actually an improvement because it allows us to suppress inappropriate anger so that we're more likely to survive or so that our mate or child or friend is more likely to survive. So we don't act out our emotions unconsciously, in general. We have this conscious reining in of our more primitive emotion, but we need an upgrade in our thinking too because instead of it just being clear and appropriate, we begin to store up conclusions and then an emotion will appear that will trigger something very primitive, very deep, very unconscious and we have then we have this sort of artillery that we bring to that emotion that is based on conclusions. So that's a convoluted way of saying, "We think too much." But that doesn't mean that thinking is not appropriate some of the time, of course it is. We can be totally possessed of a particular emotion and it can be very essential to think it through, to even. When I say, "put aside your thoughts," it's really so you can experience the emotion and from that experience you actually get a fresh thought about it, an insight. So that the, maybe that is the upgrade that comes. So it's not just past thoughts about particular emotions, in you or in others, as a way of refreshing the cognitive play of these primitive sensations and emotions - cause everything I say about emotions could be said about sensations in the body too, of course. So it's very useful to suspend all the judgment that we have about an emotion, good or bad, and just open to it, experience it deeply, and then usually there is an insight that adds to our intelligence that makes it more likely when a particular emotion comes that that intelligence is present.

[06:01] HILLARY: I want to ask you a question about this survival mechanism. But I also, it's a perfect time for me to add in a question here because Brian - let me see if I can find Brian's question. It had to do with the fact that when he does inquiry sometimes he can't tell if he's actually just working it out in his mind, how sometimes when you're doing inquiry - say I am really angry about something and I let myself feel the anger of that and I go deeper into that and then I have a realization like, "Oh wait a minute! It could be something very practical." Like, "Oh, maybe I didn't read that email correctly." But I think what he's saying is he doesn't know if he's just, like, making his mind sort it out. Does that make sense?

[06:46] GANGAJI: Yeah, but, I don't know, I don't see what the problem is. What if your mind is sorting it out? That sounds like that's a plus for your mind. You don't need to print the block letters every time if you know how to write. And you also can tell the truth. Am I just making up these steps to feel better about myself? And in that then you just open again, you don't know anything. But it's very useful. I think it would be very **un**-useful if we felt that every emotion that appeared we had to, "OK, stop and just feel it and go to the core of it." What a waste of time! Why not take a moment with some really big emotion that haunts you or grabs you or triggers you and open to it and get it so deeply that it doesn't have that same power with you. Then you experience it, you get angry, or you get sad, or you get fearful, and it just passes through you. It's not a process, that's what I am saying. You don't have to process it. We can be free of our process meaning that, if process is necessary, it's obvious. But we somehow think that in our spiritual community that process is holy or, it's not. It's just, it can be very useful, like yoga. It's a kind of yoga of the mind, of really working it out. But if we start to worship it we also enclose our lives in process rather than living in wonder and discovery.

[08:25] HILLARY: I had that written down in my notes (laughter). I wanted to ask you, you must be psychic again (laughter), because I think of those of us on the spiritual path - and it seems to me in my almost thirty years on a spiritual path - there's either one camp that's all about transcending emotion, and then there's the other camp of "I need to process my feelings," and somewhere in the midst of that is what you're talking about, it seems to me.

[08:53] GANGAJI: I think we have to really go back to the beginning of our relationship with our emotions just as we do with our relationship with our physical body or our thoughts and recognize that they have a hold on us because we're superstitious about them. We think they mean something about who we are. So that if we feel blissful it means we're really doing something right, or God is gracing us, or the world is actually a good place; and if we feel the opposite of that we usually have opposite thoughts that accompany it and we believe them. So, my purpose in speaking to people and meeting people is to loosen that knot of superstitious belief that the anger that courses through you, or the fear, or the joy, or the despair, or the bliss has anything to do with the truth of who you are. It's emotions, just like your kidney functioning, or your heart beating, or your lungs functioning, or physical aspects. They have to do with your body, and your emotions have to do with your body, but you are already free of emotions. So if we can, at the beginning, recognize what is free of emotions even in the midst of the body and the mind being caught by an emotional storm, then, then it's not even process or not process, or transcendence or not transcendence, it's something that's never been spoken.

[10:43] HILLARY: There was a question here. These are like they're all just completely set up (laughter) for what you are saying, but there is a question here that came in to our email, Gangaji Radio email, and it's from Susan and she says, "I believe I've heard you say we can't count on emotion to show us the way to enlightenment or pure consciousness. I'm wondering how I know when I've found the joy that you speak of?" (laughter) Shall I continue?

[11:14] GANGAJI: Well that question doesn't arise. When you've found the joy that has nothing to do with any condition, it doesn't have anything to do with any denial that the mind may throw in - "Is this it?" or "Is this not it?" - is irrelevant. Even if you determine it's not it, it's irrelevant, because it's so full, and it's so big, and it's so present.

[11:41] HILLARY: The thing I wanted to say about survival was that there are people who are in the midst of survival who have just gone through a couple of terrible earthquakes. There's that kind of survival. But when it comes to emotion, it almost feels like the same thing in a not so same way that we feel like we have to manage our emotions like it's an emergency. I feel this thing in my body, I feel this emotion, and I have to do something about it now.

[12:14] GANGAJI: I think there's that, and there's also just the sort of carrying the weight of the particular emotion which could be a depression finally, or a sadness, or any of the emotions - carrying it as a weight where it feels like it's a constant thing that's on one's back. And, for both of those situations, and everything in between, you can actually recognize that there's something here and open to it. Not process it, not fix it, not get beyond it, not transcend it, not act it out, not repress it. Just open to it. And that's what inquiry, the word 'inquiry' points to: opening the mind, stopping the management, stopping the control, and meeting whatever is being felt whether it feels like it's been with you all of your life or you feel like your neighbor caused it this morning. Just open to it. Then this is different from how you act on it. You may act

on it or you may not. But to be willing and to have the privilege and the time to not be in an earthquake, to have this moment where your life is not threatened, and just open to whatever is here. If there's an emotion here, just to open to it. It's so simple.

[13:45] GANGAJI CONT'D: But it is so simple that we normally just push it out of the way and make it more complicated, and that's worshipping the cognitive aspect of our brain, and that's why it was very radical for me to meet Papaji and have him say, "just stop." I mean, I totally identified myself as an emotional being. And I either sometimes thought it was my curse, and sometimes I thought it was my blessing - it made me special, it made me deep - and he said, "Stop." And it was just revealed to be much ado about nothing. It doesn't mean emotions don't come through and it doesn't mean that I'm happy all the time. But, you know, it rained twice today and then the sun came out and then the clouds came out. Does that mean nature was absent at any point? Or life was absent? Or this mystery was absent? And that's what I mean when I talk about "superstitious thinking". We are very superstitious about our emotions and in our willingness to meet them that superstition is broken. It's interrupted. It's like meeting your idea of God, or meeting your worthlessness, or whatever it may be; those are ways that we are in bondage. So, it's an invitation to be free.

[15:16] HILLARY: I think there is this relationship between the emotions we just experience in our own private world and then the experiences that we share with another human being. And with some people it's, you know, it's somebody you're never going to meet again and you might have some strong emotions of joy, or love, or anger, or whatever, and then there are people that are in our lives all the time and so you're sharing this exchange of emotion. And you and I have gotten mad at each other before.

[15:44] GANGAJI: Yeah.

[15:45] HILLARY: I realize that, you know. I think that that happens, like, every May. Once a year in May. (laughter) So, but it's...

[15:53] GANGAJI: Renewal...

[15:54] HILLARY: Yes, renewal, purification. But it's a powerful feeling especially with somebody that you love.

[16:01] GANGAJI: Oh 'love', I'm glad you brought that word up because I just want to say that love is not an emotion. That it...love is not affected by any emotion and when we minimize love into an emotion that means feeling good, or feeling open, and not feeling angry, or not feeling fearful, we really diminish this discovery of the depth and the texture. What it means to live as love. And I don't mean that "as love" in quotation marks. I mean, really, as this incomprehensible force of Being that all emotions flood through. You know that sometimes the most compassionate act is actually to kill someone on their deathbed. It's actually to serve them out of love. And the heart can be filled with love and compassion when you actually say, "No" to someone or you say, "I don't like that" or "That was wrong." So, if we remove love from the emotional definition, then maybe the emotions won't have such power on us, they're just like we have a stomach ache. Does a stomach ache mean that that's who we are? It doesn't feel good and we may identify with it, but a stomach ache comes and goes and it doesn't touch the

radiance of Being. We can lose an arm or leg, or use of both arms and legs, and still the radiance of Being is present. The same is true with emotions. You have a habit of an emotion. Does that touch the radiance that's underneath? And in our worship of the superstition of emotions we think it does because we don't open to it to see that the radiance is here. It's always here. And that disengages our attachment to keeping away certain emotions or keeping other emotions around all the time. "Always be happy." "Always be nice." "Always be open."

[18:18] HILLARY: So when you're just furious, when you're just so angry you just want to throw something, are you still in touch with that that holds everything?

[18:27] GANGAJI: I don't know what you mean by 'in touch'. It's not an object. So I'm not 'in touch', and in that moment that anger can be that which holds everything, it's not separate from it. There's nothing separate from that. So it's not like I have to be in a particular state to be free. States, like emotional states, physical states, mental states, come and go. That's not where freedom is.

[19:00] HILLARY: Hmmmm.

[19:01] GANGAJI: So when I'm angry, I'm angry. Oh, and I don't, I'm conditioned. I don't act out my anger and I'm happy for that conditioning. And, I apologize if I do act it out in some way. And people let me know if I didn't even know I was acting it out, if it was some interchange where someone felt my anger was leaking. Cause I'm a feisty person, actually. I think it's the Irish in the blood, it's my mother. But, and I've had to see that and work with that and process that, it's very useful. That's, this is not separate from that, but it is deeper than that. When I was caught up in my identity as an emotional person then the anger would be like being ripped apart by this fire that somehow I felt was real. When Papaji told me, "Just stop", I recognized it's energetically real, but it has no substance. So it's free to come and go.

[20:20] HILLARY: I think that's kind of, probably, the question that comes up for you over and over again, is that, you experience things differently than we do. And I just like the fact that you get angry.

[20:31] GANGAJI: Yeah, I think it's good news, but some people run the other way when they discover that Gangaji, or any other teacher, is still a human being. And I understand that there are human beings who transcend that state. It's a kind of grace or yogic ideal, and yes, wonderful. But it's just not necessary to be free. You still can be fully human, just as we will all get sick and die at some point.

[21:05] HILLARY: I wanted to talk about that idea that I mentioned earlier that there's this fear that if we experience a really strong emotion, that somehow it will take us down, somehow it's deadly, and I think about the subject of depression. Cause depression can feel like that it, it can feel like it kills you or it could kill you, and some people, you know, commit suicide because the emotion is too strong.

[21:33] GANGAJI: Yes, that's right. Yeah, well, I make a very important distinction between experiencing something and indulging it. And to indulge it - and I know 'indulgence' has a negative connotation. But that's one of the reasons I use it, because its, to get the attention. But

in indulging it there is some story connected to it and that that's what's really being attended rather than the experience of the energetic field of the emotion - of actually falling into it - when we bring a story with us. Yes, it can get worse in lots of ways. And I don't want to diminish that certain emotions are horrific and people do commit suicide - we had a conversation about Robin Williams' suicide when it happened - and even if people don't commit suicide they can have miserable lives because the emotions are running the show. But I've talked to enough people who have had experiences of finally stopping running from an emotion and not indulging it with the story of why it's right, or the victimization of why it happened to me, just clearly, soberly opening to what is here and recognizing that in that moment something, some knot of suffering, is loosened. So, I know it's possible for everybody. And, I know when I first met with some emotions that really frightened me, I felt like I would go mad. That was my feeling. I knew there was madness in my family, I have an uncle who used to burn down hotel rooms, motel rooms, you know, it's the Irish blood again. (laughter)

[23:36] HILLARY: I know what that's like. (laughter)

[23:39] GANGAJI: So and it felt like that. It felt like a very deep, dark, murky, scary place, and I think that was maybe a holdover from my childhood embedded memory. Not even memory in terms of events, but just emotion of suffering. It was actually suffering and I felt it as an emotion, and I felt it would swallow me up and I would go mad. And still - I didn't want to go mad, of course - but more than not wanting to go mad I wanted to be free. And I knew that opening to whatever was here, in this moment, was required for freedom, and so I opened to it. And in opening to it, it wasn't there. It was only there when I was running from it. Doesn't mean that if I'm really tired or sick I don't, I can't have this residue of sick emotion, but I don't have to run away from it. I don't have to define myself by it. I don't have to worship it in some negative way.

[24:57] HILLARY: I received a message from somebody right after the live broadcast and they said one of the best parts of the broadcast for them was your willingness to speak about yourself. And sometimes you and I have conversations and you don't that much and other times you do. But I think the fact you've been so willing to talk about your own personal emotions opens the door to some source of liberation for the rest of us.

[25:22] GANGAJI: Good. Yeah, good.

[25:26] HILLARY: Before we end off, we've got a couple minutes left. I was having dinner with a friend last night and she was telling me about an article in the New York Times she had read some months ago. And it was about a man who had depression for years and years and he had tried, you know, medications and hospitalizations and all sorts of things, you know, and he finally got to the point where he was suicidal and his thought was, "I can't do that to the people around me, I can't." So that door was kind of closed. But there was this moment where he actually let himself be depressed, and he didn't know he was resisting it because it's like, "look what I'm bearing." And it changed everything. And I didn't get the sense that the depression actually just went away. I got the impression that it was like, for me, like anxiety. It's like, "Oh! I have an anxious body." But it took me years to be willing to just feel anxiety.

[26:31] GANGAJI: To tell the truth.

[26:32] HILLARY: Yeah.

[26:33] GANGAJI: To tell the truth and in that moment, it may or may not go away but the power - and that's what I mean about the knot, the bondage, the anxiety, or the depression, or the anger - just is loosened.

[26:46] HILLARY: Yeah.

[26:47] GANGAJI: And then you can live. Anxiety or not, there's room for anxiety.

[26:52] HILLARY: Well I'm glad we picked up the pieces of the conversation about emotion that were kind of left on the table and, you know, what a great, one more great conversation with you Gangaji. Thank you.

[27:04] GANGAJI: Always. Thank you Hillary.

[27:16] HILLARY: At the beginning of the show I mentioned the live broadcast that we did this month on the subject of emotions. That one was also on emotions. It's called *When Emotions are Running the Show*. I wanted to let you know where you can find that. It's on the radio page of the Gangaji website. It's gangaji.org. *A Conversation With Gangaji* has been downloaded more than a million times in over a hundred and forty-four different countries at this point. This is our thirty-second episode right here. If you would like to make a donation to support the Gangaji Foundation in making more of these conversations available to everyone, we'd love to hear from you. You can find out more about that by writing gangajiradio@gangaji.org. We were happy to have these conversations about emotions this month. We have an episode on aging and another one on what it means to be yourself coming up in the next couple months. Hope you can join us for those. In the meantime, take care. We'll see you next time.