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A Conversation With Gangaji Series

Host Hillary Larson

Episode 52

KARMA AND CHOICE

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[00:03] INTRODUCTION MUSIC

[00:13] HILLARY LARSON, HOST: Cause and effect, karma, fate, destiny, all of these things bring up the question of how much control we actually have in our lives. Some people seem to have the luck of the draw, while others carry a lot of burdens in life. Generally, we have a mix of both. Was all of that decided before we were born? For the sake of argument, let's say it is. Then, what good is it really trying to change the things that are already meant to be?

[00:42] GANGAJI: It just adds to the suffering, it's unnecessary suffering, it makes karma. And we don't have to make karma. We can stop, and that stopping, then, we are, all karma is actually coming and then finishing. Karma itself is liberated.

[01:00] HILLARY LARSON: How much choice do we actually have? Do we have the power to change our karma or destiny? That's this month's inquiry. I'm Hillary Larson, and this is *A Conversation With Gangaji*.

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[01:18] HILLARY: I wanted to talk to you about karma and choice. Let me read the dictionary definition of karma so we are all starting from the same place. Webster's Dictionary says, 'the force generated by a person's actions held in Buddhism and Hinduism to perpetuate transmigration and in its ethical consequences to determine the nature of the person's next existence.' In secular terms, I think that is just cause and effect. Maybe we don't project it into future lifetimes or past lifetimes, but maybe it's even in the span of a day...

[01:57] GANGAJI: Yes, absolutely.

[02:00] HILLARY: ...so...

[02:01] GANGAJI: So it has relevance, really, for our conversation.

[02:04] HILLARY: ...yeah. And there's this thing about 'How did I show up in this lifetime in this particular circumstance?' I was driving to work the other day, and I live outside Portland, I don't live right downtown. And there's a lot of homeless people in Portland it's, it's bad there right now and, so as I was driving out of my neighborhood – we don't see the homeless people in my neighborhood because it's so far away – and this woman, this older woman walked in front of my car and it was cold outside and she had her blankets and, it shocked me. And I sat there in this moment thinking 'Why am I sitting in this nice warm car on my way to work and why are you walking across the street with just blankets?'

[02:48] GANGAJI: Yeah I think that the concept of karma (chuckles) gives us a relief from that question, you know? It must be her karma, it must be my karma, and then we don't have to consider the, the agony of not knowing, or, or the recognition of absolute bad luck and

absolute good luck. And often with good luck we feel as guilty as we do when we have bad luck. We feel like, 'What, I didn't do anything to deserve this, why am I in this warm car, in this privileged life?' And if we find ourselves in a bad situation we are just, either feel cursed by God, or feel like, 'Oh my God, I, this is a reflection of me and my, my bad karma, my bad life'. So it's all based, even in this Buddha sense on what I do. Really there's a possibility of taking that a little deeper, and being responsible for how I am in this life in this moment, and then the, the doing in terms of action, follows that or doesn't follow that. But really your choice is how, how are you being in this life? It doesn't mean you get out of your car and give her your car; you may do that, if you choose. But we look for these easy places, give me a formula that I can do, and there's some beautiful formulas that have helped many people, the, the whole Christian formula of 'Do unto others as you would have them do unto yourself.' Well, I think it was Jewish before it was Christian, but how beautiful that is! And then we are actually expanding this sense of ourselves but still we're left with the unbearableness of not knowing how it is I am in this situation and this other person is in so much worse a situation. My counsel on that would be don't touch it, just be willing to, to open into this mystery of where you find yourself. We could, we could talk about genetics or we could talk about your hard-working father, or, or disease, or craziness, or whatever we want to talk about but the, the fertile ground is really in this, this openness to this mystery. And then how, how do you respond to your karma? To your life? To others' bad karma, to their lives?

[05:38] HILLARY: It seems to me that, in a, in kind of a strange way that waking up is actually interrupting karma.

[05:48] GANGAJI: Yeah, I agree. Or at least, Papaji used to talk about, he used this phrase, 'Prarabdha Karma', which is the karma that happens by its own thrust of cause and effect. But because it's happening and you're aware of it happening it doesn't have the same power over you. You aren't identified with the karmic thrust of your life, with the, perhaps the propensity for certain diseases that are in your gene line, it, it doesn't define you as a person. So, in that sense you are free of your karma. It doesn't mean karma doesn't continue, cause and effect is the law of the universe. It continues but it doesn't have anything to do with who you truly are.

[06:39] HILLARY: I was just reading something this afternoon about Ramana. And somebody had asked him about destiny, if he believed in destiny and, and he said yeah, I mean, he does, he did believe in destiny, but that our lives are gonna happen and the, the karma will carry us down all sorts of different roads. But it's the choice to not identify with the body, is the difference.

[07:10] GANGAJI: And when Ramana speaks about the choice to not identify with the body, that's a particular Eastern way of talking about it. And really a particular Eastern way coming out of miserable experiences of the body. I think for us as Westerners and, and given the audience here and, where the body is really not that bad a thing, it's not in complete misery and wracked with disease, except at certain points, it would be more not to identify with this thought of, 'I am this body. This is my doing. This is, I caused this. I did this.' This 'I' is a false 'I'. And the true 'I' includes that, but is so much bigger, and includes every other body as well.

[08:04] HILLARY: A long time ago I heard a, a teacher from India talking about life being a train, in like you're on board the train – he might've said an airplane – and that you can, and

you're on, like you're just on, and you can choose to be frantic and run up and down the aisles or you can sit down and enjoy the ride. But I have to say that some people's train ride is filled with maybe a chronic illness or, or serious financial issues. And so what, what about if you're on that kind of train?

[8:36] GANGAJI: Well, it, especially if you use the, if you change it to an airplane, what are you gonna do? You know, definitely there's nothing wrong with making yourself as comfortable as possible, and finding whatever help is available. But then what? Are you gonna open and surrender to what's here, or are you gonna run up and down the aisles? And our impulse, our animal impulse, is often to run up and down the aisles. But we've been on enough trains or enough planes and have experiences with, with diseases to one degree or the other that we recognize that doesn't help. And in fact it just adds to the suffering, it's unnecessary suffering, it makes karma and, and we don't have to make karma, we can stop. And that stopping, then we are, all karma is actually coming and then finishing. Karma itself is then, is liberated. You are the point of liberation.

[09:44] HILLARY: What if the train is more a privileged train, is there a responsibility? I mean, in, in your way of thinking, for those who are more privileged to be serving those whose train ride is not so easy.

[10:03] GANGAJI: Well, it, I, then I think the metaphor falls apart. Because you're on a train or an airplane, there's really nothing you can do. But when the train stops, or you get to your station then, that's where you have choice. Then it's a different, different story. It's, it's the story of, you're walking down the street, or you're knocking on your neighbor's door, or you're voting in an election. It's a, it's a different, it's a different metaphor. How are you living your life when the train comes into the station?

[10:38] HILLARY: Somebody was talking to me last night about, Oprah Winfrey was, was talking about a time when she was little and they, it was Christmas and they had no money, and so they, she was worried about going to school the next day because people would be talking about, you know, what they got for Christmas and it was painful for her. And then these people showed up from The Red Cross, some organization, with presents and food and, and she was just talking about what a huge, I mean, all these years later she still remembers that kindness.

[11:11] GANGAJI: Mmm... it's beautiful. That's, that's really good, from one train station to another. To really, I mean, she's letting us know it helps, it helps to give.

[11:23] HILLARY: Yeah. You know, I know you and I really both love documentaries and history and so on. And one of the reasons why I love that is that you get to look at a, not just a piece of somebody's life, you get to see the whole thing and you get to see the amazing choreography of it, even the hard parts, really. And I, I don't know I look at, I look at your life and I think about destiny and I wonder was there a moment in your life – I'm moving on to the subject of choice now actually – where you made a decision that really altered the course of your life?

[12:02] GANGAJI: Yeah I would say there's several moments, and maybe the first one I remember was when I was about eleven and I was really unhappy in my home life, and I remember sitting on the curb in front of my house and just really – I mean I could see it now as a prayer but it was more of a, an exclamation – 'I want out of this. This is not what I want.

I want a different life.' And from that there was an intelligence to see, 'OK, what can I do about that?' And, you know, I was eleven years old, I was on a particular train that kept me in that household until I, at least till I went to college and I, I made choices based on that. I, I got, I got smart to how I was generating more suffering even than was there inherently, that I was adding to it. And I, I began to divorce myself from my home that I was brought up in. And I began to choose other ways of being. And then, there were many, many choices after that, I would say the next big one, and the one that I'm still riding on now, was in college and having a history professor. Really, he was a history professor who'd come down from, from Harvard to teach at, in Mississippi for a semester as part of some, some program that was happening. And, and he really challenged all of us about our racism, and the way we were brought up. And, and I got it, I got that, that I didn't have to fall in line with that, even though I had strong beliefs that were racist, I saw how flimsy they were, how insubstantial. And that turned something in me that, that really allowed me to live a life that I was not destined to live. I mean maybe you could look at my astrology chart and say 'Oh yes you were', but you could also have looked at it then and said 'Oh yeah, this is your life'. And, and certainly none of the people in my family thought that this was my destiny and were very upset when I turned my back on my destiny, because in relative terms it was a very good destiny. So what do I mean by walking out on that. But I think that that's true for most people who are listening to this, is some moment, where there's been some essential choice that has to do with 'No, I will *not* do that, I won't go there, I *can't* go there'. And we could say it was the destiny of me to say no, but, you know, you, we could just go in circles like that. For me it was a choice. And it was perhaps facilitated by my karmic destiny of being in that family at that time.

[15:01] HILLARY: It's interesting 'cause I, you know I don't think about this topic all that often, every once in awhile it comes up and when I was really kind of digging into it, there was a way that was just really a, a spin, it was just a mind bend of like, 'Well, what about, what about the fact that maybe we are making choices but in reality that's choiceless too'? You know, it, it, it's like I was asking myself, 'How is that even serving me?' It, it's not serving me at all. It's actually just, it's just kind of mental gyrations.

[15:36] GANGAJI: That's right, because then we're really telling the truth, both choice and destiny. Or choice and free will. Or free will and destiny, or simply notions of the mind. But that's part of our conversation, I mean we are dealing with the, the mind, and, and the, the possibility of the mind surrendering and I think that those are the two avenues that we finally just stop going down. And then we're back at the mystery. You can then discover, what do you choose in this moment?

[16:16] HILLARY: I wanna make sure I get a question in here from, actually Susan and Lucia had the same question and I hope I'm, I hope, I'm always hopeful that I'm articulating somebody's question right, because I'm, I'm being a surrogate. And I hope I'm doing an okay job of it. So their question if I understood them correctly was basically going through life and listening to your heart, or some people might say, God's voice, or however we receive information, and making a, a decision, how do you know when that's just more illusion?

[16:55] GANGAJI: Well, I'd say it's really good to assume it is illusion. And then illusion itself is here to teach you. And it's either teaching you yes, yes, this is, you're being true to something that's, that even illusion serves. Or no, you're at a dead end, and even the illusion goes no further than this. So you either make a mistake, or it's the right, right thing for you.

[17:26] HILLARY: Yeah I wonder about mistakes too. Because I wonder if, if there is such a thing as destiny, really no matter what we decide we're gonna be moving in a certain direction ultimately anyway.

[17:40] GANGAJI: Yeah I mean...

[17:41] HILLARY: Maybe we're working too hard?

[17:42] GANGAJI: ...this is, this is definitely a point of view of many people, and many people will quote Ramana as supporting that point of view, but Papaji used to say, "Choose, and then you can talk about it being choiceless."

[17:58] HILLARY: (laughs) That's good (laughs). I think about, for the purpose of this show, really, about being concrete, and, and what we do, and we wake up in the morning and we go through the course of the day, how this moment of choice that you speak of works, how it shows up in life. And I was remembering a, a time I, I had been through like a very serious episode of anxiety, and there was a certain pattern to it. And it kind of eased off, but then I felt it move back in again, and it had a, a, part of the pattern was to ask for help. And in this sense it wasn't a good thing. And I could feel the karma, the momentum, the whatever, fate, whatever you wanna call it, I could feel it pushing me into going down that road. It was so clear. And I remember I was walking up my, the stairs of my house, so clearly feeling the momentum of that, and I just went, 'No, I'm not going down that road'. Because I was denying myself. I was assuming I wasn't trustworthy with that level of anxiety, somebody outside has to help me, and it was like, I'm not going down that road again. And I wanted to use that example for all of us because we all have our own examples of how we make these choices moment by moment.

[19:28] GANGAJI: Mmm, that's to me a, a, really a great example of strength of character. And our character can become more and more strong when we're willing to be that, that true to it. That's true resolve, that's where 'no' is really a 'yes' to yourself, no matter what the pain may be from that 'yes'. Because in that moment you weren't seeking to escape the pain, you were actually being responsible to your life. And I'm sure you can tell me moments that came from that then, or a whole life direction that came from that.

[20:09] HILLARY: Very much like when you were eleven, sitting on the curb, of I, like I don't wanna do this anymore.

[20:14] GANGAJI: Mmm-hmm. That's it.

[20:15] HILLARY: And then I think that brings in the whole subject of our responsibility, because the thing about it was is that in that moment, I said 'yes' by saying 'no'; I said yes, but it wasn't like oh, all of a sudden I felt spacious and peaceful. It wasn't! It was like I was flying against my own karma and saying no to that, and it was not an easy road, it wasn't like suddenly oh, I made a decision and I moved on. It was like, I made the decision, I didn't change my mind, but still there was, I had to create a new groove.

[20:47] GANGAJI: Yes.

[20:48] HILLARY: There was nothing mystical about it.

[20:49] GANGAJI: Yeah there's, then it's not about ease or, or lack of pain, or release, or ascension into heaven, it's simply this, this is, this is correct. This is right, this is your own intelligence speaking then, in a strong way. And that's where the, the character comes in. And your character in this Leela is stronger for it, and then also stronger for the pain, or the suffering that led to it, because it's not an abstraction for you. You've, you've experienced that. You've experienced these depths of suffering, mental suffering, emotional suffering. And you have said, 'no' to the forces within you that... oh it's addiction, that's what we're speaking of, it's addiction.

[21:39] HILLARY: That's exactly what it is, yeah.

[21:41] GANGAJI: And that's where responsibility is. No one can stop that *for* you, but you. And it's not an easy stop, but it's an essential stop, and each of us can be responsible for, for where our addictions are taking us into realms of suffering that are unacceptable to this lifetime.

[22:04] HILLARY: I was thinking about astrology. I had a Chinese astrology chart done last year, and it was like, whoa, like that's crazy accurate. So that made me start thinking about like, well, my chart's my chart, it's always been there, so I guess my life was just supposed to be going this way. I think about that. I think in some forms of Chinese astrology that there are people that can tell you the day you're gonna die. And I started thinking about that going, whoa...

[22:35] GANGAJI: Well...

[22:36] HILLARY: ...would I wanna know that?

[22:37] GANGAJI: (chuckles) ... I think your chart probably changed when you said 'no', that that, since it's all a hologram anyway, that at that moment your, everything changed in your life including all charts, all, rather all interpretations of all charts.

[22:56] HILLARY: Hmm. I don't know what else I wanna say about karma.

[23:01] GANGAJI: Well maybe if we don't say anything about karma, if we just, karma, the whole issue of karma is really useful at the beginning of your inquiry. You're beginning to see, oh, I caused these things, or my history caused these things, or God caused these things but then we, it's a loop as you said. So what if we forget karma? What if karma too is just made up? If karma is the illusion, that really it's, it's never happened and it's not happening? What's left? And this idea that we will fit it all into a notion, even though this notion is sophisticated – the karmic notion – it's still not sophisticated when you look at the hugeness of it all.

[23:55] HILLARY: Maybe at the very most, karma is, is just a, a wakeup call of a pattern or a momentum whether it's a family pattern or cultural pattern or... at some point along the way I learned the word karma. But before I learned the word karma, I realized that there were certain tendencies that I had, certain ways that, a trajectory based on ways I would think about things, or be angry about something, or be afraid of something, or be excited about something. There's a certain force in me that would move in a certain direction and I didn't call it karma at the, at the time, I just said yes or no (laughs), I just said yes or no.

[24:44] GANGAJI: Yeah. But really the great manifestation of karma to you and everyone listening is that somehow there rules within you, some desire to be free. Some thing, some seed matured in you, we could say karmically matured, so that you could, you could say no at a pivotal moment, or yes at a pivotal moment. And that's, that's really beyond our understanding.

[25:17] MUSIC

[25:37] HILLARY: For this last part here, I'd like to delve back into the subject of choice. The choice of not denying ourselves. What is our responsibility regarding that? Here's a clip of Gangaji talking about choice and choicelessness.

(clip)

*[25:54] GANGAJI: You have no choice about being the truth of who you are. You already are that. And the way you do have choice is in the willingness to investigate, well really, what is that? Or who is that? And part of your being here this morning is your choice that way. You, you're actually choosing with your body, with your time, with your money, to actually investigate. But that's not enough, it has to be full, it has to be complete, your whole life has to be dedicated to that choice, because you're looking at tens of thousands of years of refusing that choice. So there has to be a willingness for that, all those tens of thousands of years to be meaningless in the face of you at this point, this lifetime, now, this weekend, this morning, choosing without even knowing what it is you're choosing by definition, but choosing to be who you are. Choosing to open to the core of the truth of who you are. And taking responsibility when you deny that choice, when all of a sudden you are (groans) it's like, whoa, what am I choosing right now? 'Cause it's a continuation, you're either feeding it, the victimhood, or the, they or it or me or never or loss, or, or you're stopping.*

(end clip)

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[27:52] HILLARY: We've got one more clip for you to wrap up this month's conversation, but first I just wanted to say that last month here on Gangaji Radio we released a brand new Epiphany episode, that's our new show. In case you missed it, we featured Craig Johnson and the Grammy nominated music he composed about the nineteen-ninety-eight murder of Matthew Shepherd. It was a hate crime that rocked the world, and many of you probably remember it. It's a tough subject for sure, but the reactions we've been hearing about how that incredibly painful incident changed Craig's life has been both inspiring and moving and it's really well worth listening to. You can find all of the episodes for Gangaji Radio on the Gangaji Radio tab on the website, [gangai.org](http://gangai.org). We have other really great Epiphany episodes coming up. And on *A Conversation With Gangaji* our next episode is called The Space Between Thought. And, before we drop into this last clip, if you love Gangaji Radio, if you've shared it with other people you know, if you listen to the episodes over and over again, without your help we wouldn't be able to bring you Gangaji Radio, so if you'd like to find out how you can help us bring more of these out into the world, we're at [gangajiradio@gangaji.org](mailto:gangajiradio@gangaji.org). This music, this incredible music you're listening to right now, is from Jami Sieber. Here's more from Gangaji. Thanks for being here with us. We will see you next time.

(clip)

*[29:17] GANGAJI: That's really taking responsibility for your own majesty, as Papaji would say, for your own brilliance, your own enlightenment, your own awakening. It's not doing anything, it's actually **stopping** doing what have been doing to victimize yourself, to devalue yourself, to dismiss your own awakening. And that's coming home. We think of coming home as then we'll be just held back at mother's breast, no worries. Coming home is really assuming your rightful place as an adult, free and awake, aware of what you have no control and no choice of, and willing to meet what you have complete choice in.*