

Gangaji Podcast  
Being Yourself  
Episode 22  
Host Barbara Denempont  
Meeting the Roots of Racism Within – Part One  
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[00:00] MUSIC

[00:03] GANGAJI: The *American Masters* series did a segment on Toni Morrison that was thrilling, and she has some very heavy books out there. *Beloved* is really heavy; but to read that book as a white person and knowing you're a white person ... to read that, that a mother would slit her child's throat rather than to let that child be taken as a slave and be brought up as a slave—that tells you how big this issue is. This is not just some inconveniences; this is huge and we must look at it, and look at it deeply. And tell the truth.

[00:48] BARBARA DENEMPONT, HOST: Hello and welcome to *Being Yourself: Self-Inquiry with Gangaji*. My name is Barbara Denempont. You may not know that Gangaji grew up in Mississippi, raised a Southern girl in the segregated town of Clarksdale. Dismantling her own racist conditioning first began when she was in college at Ole Miss. Recognizing and understanding that conditioning was really the first step on her spiritual path to opening her mind.

I usually pull material from the archives, but Gangaji and I decided that this topic is so incredibly important we really needed to sit down and have a conversation about how we can meet the roots of racism within us.

Let's take a listen to Part 1 of this conversation.

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[01:37] BARBARA: Welcome, Gangaji. It's such a joy to be together this way.

GANGAJI: Thank you. Thank you, Barb. Happy to be here.

BARBARA: Our podcast last month was called *Reckoning with a Cruel White Legacy*. And that was our first jump into this topic that's just on fire in the world right now, and especially in America. What that really focused on, that particular piece, was about truth and reconciliation. Because I felt like where we could begin is really on the topic of denial, because that seemed to me the very first place to start, which is on Truth.

We definitely got a response that surprised me a little bit, at least ... a little bit. So I really kind of wanted to come back to that particular theme of denial.

GANGAJI: Good.

BARBARA: Because, you know, there's the outright denial; but then there are some other comments that came through about, "Wow that's just a negative mantra, you know, what does *Advaita Vedanta* have to do with that?" So, maybe we can speak to that.

GANGAJI: Well, I read the comments, too, and I was actually quite surprised. And for many of them I can say I really didn't even understand what they were saying. I don't know about *Advaita Vedanta*. Papaji never mentioned that phrase when I was with him. I know that people assigned *Advaita Vedanta* to Ramana because it's a non-dual philosophy and religion. But the essence of the teaching that I bring from Papaji and that he transmitted from Ramana was that there's no separation anywhere, in anything—that the totality of the inner and the outer worlds are one reflection of one Self.

And so to me the topic of racism and as you approached it in the last podcast was really a reflection of that—here's something in the totality of our being, something in our attention, that has been going on for quite a long time now, at least since slavery, that is calling for attention. And it's in a certain way similar to if you had a heart attack; you wouldn't go, "Well, *Advaita Vedanta* says this doesn't matter—it's just the body." But it's notable and you deal with it, and you deal with it hopefully from the wholeness of your Being. But you pay attention to something that is extreme and, I mean, we're in an extreme time that maybe has been delayed or suppressed for many reasons. And what I heard on your podcast is that we weren't suppressing it and we were actually inviting people to include—besides the recognition of denial—to include the possibility of forgiveness and love.

So I don't know what, what to say about the comments. I don't know that we even have to say anything. I only read them that one day and there were, I think there were 11 comments; but they were all negative, from one side or the other. One person mentioned "white fragility," and it's like, I just didn't know where that was coming from. White fragility because we're mentioning this, because ... So, here we are, speaking about it again.

BARBARA: Part of the comments was, you know, who's this woman wrapping her political views around Gangaji?

GANGAJI: Being you.

BARBARA: Being me. And for me, this issue is profoundly spiritual. While I'm ... I am politically oriented, but what we were really speaking to in that moment is—and perhaps the thought, the part they thought was political was saying, watch the testimony of George Floyd's brother so that you can really receive what this is, as part of the truth of the matter. Because I think that's for me what has been so powerful—for me personally, as somebody who has felt so sympathetic or so empathetic around this police brutality and feeling the crime of it, and yet realizing or recognizing myself standing by and not standing up. And there was a number of things that helped me just recognize my own failure to respond.

GANGAJI: Well, we have to recognize that, you know, I mean, even if we, even to continue the analogy of the heart attack—when we don't respond to the signs that there's trouble, then the attack is more deadly and it's more harmful. And we haven't responded. I mean, we have made

responses, but we haven't responded strongly enough that actually it's been cured or it's, it's shifted. And that's, you know, at least since the Civil War.

As I have told you before, having grown up in the South and in Mississippi ... the Civil War was still being fought. I mean, it was still being discussed when I grew up. And what we as Southerners should have done in a particular battle or ... And Lincoln was the anti-hero in that narrative. And this was the way I was educated, and any number of people were and are still being educated. So we have to address these things; it's part of our ignorance. And we have to address them personally and universally.

I saw in the paper today that Mississippi has just voted—the legislature—just voted to change the flag. Well, finally—the last state in the union that had a Confederate flag as part of their state flag will take that off. Because that's ... you know, it gets romanticized in things like *Gone with the Wind* or the beautiful South and the graciousness; but all of that only existed because of slavery and the suffering of people. And it was not taken care of at the time of emancipation, so it's still here. And it's up to us because we're here, to deal with this directly.

So I really salute your using this Gangaji forum and the teachings to point out what's here, what's in our face. If we don't deny that and we don't spiritualize the denial of that and if we don't overly dramatize it—if we are able to just really, really get the horror that so many people have experienced for so many years that we have been free of, relatively ... If we get that, then we are not free of that either; we have joined that. And then we, we are speaking really as one Self.

You know, I did have a podcast with Prince Ea—Hillary had a podcast with Prince Ea—and we did speak of racism somewhat. It was a different time and the notion of color-blindness came up in that conversation, as I recall, as if that were an ideal. But to me that's another form of denial. It's like, not seeing what you see. We see colors; that's part of what we see. What do we make of what we see—that's where the conditioning is and that's what we have to address. We have to.

BARBARA: The wonder and the beauty of diversity ...

GANGAJI: Yes.

BARBARA: That's like when you really do see all the colors of everything—it's extraordinary, it's exquisite. And what a loss to not recognize your own self everywhere. And then on the flip side, how we mentally create these compartments and concepts and projections. And so I really do want to dive into that, because for me this first part was about denial. And even being relatively well read and educated, never viscerally making the connection between the brutality of slavery and the brutality of what's happening in policing. Like not really seeing the continuum of that. And that's why I used the word *legacy*; and the reason why that is important to me as a human being is that that's what we have to address. And where to begin in our own personal systemic inward experience of racism is kind of where we can address the external. But how do we address the internal.

GANGAJI: Well, I think this word you're using, *brutality*, is so powerful and relevant. Again, growing up in the South and in Mississippi and seeing very poor Black people and having Black people work in my home—and loving these Black people who worked in my home, so it wasn't based on hate—but it was based on this ... I mean, the conditioning is so subtle that there are not really words about it, but I can remember—when I would feel just total dislike for myself and for my family and for my situation—I can remember actually saying, “At least I'm not Black.” Because I knew that that was the worst, that was the bottom. And so that in that there was some human scrambling to be on top, to survive, really, and to survive by somebody being on bottom and going for the top. And so that's really pretty basic to our human nature; I think we see that everywhere—in tribes and individuals, in enslavement and suppression.

So in that there's an invitation, really, to be on bottom, you know. And I think that's what I'm hearing you say about when you heard George Floyd's brother speak, that it threw you into the experience of, what does it mean to be on the bottom of society because of the color of your skin. That's a step most of us don't ever take. We may have benevolent feelings for the bottom and we may want to lift the bottom; but to actually—except some of the great saints, well, maybe like Jesus and St. Francis and the Buddha, different people actually went into the bottom of society, to recognize, to speak about, to preach that there is no difference between where you are and where the bottom is—but that is ... those are words. But to actually experience it is really the willingness to give up your story of privilege or your story of better than or your story of “at least not that.” And to recognize, well, you didn't escape. It's here. And it's calling to be met. And it's serious.

BARBARA: It's my own Self.

GANGAJI: Yes. This is my own Self.

BARBARA: Yeah.

GANGAJI: Just like this. That's, that's non-duality. Not a retreat from that, but the recognition of that and the meeting of that, in the meeting of the brutality that is perpetrated in the name of that separation.

BARBARA: And that's the stop.

GANGAJI: There it is.

BARBARA: A deep stop.

GANGAJI: Yeah. I see no separation in that. I know in our conversations and certainly in my meeting with people, I don't usually initiate political discussions, but certainly if they come up, they're not unwelcome. Because there's no aspect of our lives that's separate from the Truth of ourselves; you discover the truth of yourself perhaps in retreat from all aspects of your life, but that's the beginning. In the deepening of that you recognize there is no aspect, no thought, no action, no body. And that's also the, the white people that we wouldn't like to identify with, all, as one Self. And that's a mystery that commands surrender.

BARBARA: There is this learned hatred that is racism, that reveals itself through racism-

GANGAJI: Let me just interrupt you. It's not necessarily hatred. Hatred is a kind of extreme ... that can be there, but I never had hatred for Black people, but I had profound prejudice against Black people that was conditioning. And I never saw that in my parents, and my parents were raging racists. But it wasn't hatred; it was self-protection and it was self-elevation. And it was inclusion; I mean, as I have spoken before, it felt like ... there was a Black woman who took care of me who saved my life. I loved her. I was bonded to her. I remember her breast and putting my head on her breast and being saved. I loved her. **But** I saw her as inferior to me. So I think if we put it just in hatred, a lot of us escape.

BARBARA: Yes. Yes, and actually I was also going to say that there's ... like the hatred seems like it's on the surface. And that the aspect of power or the desire for power is what's really when we're looking at something systemic, that's really what we're looking for. And of course that desire for power ultimately leads us to a conversation about survival.

GANGAJI: Yeah.

BARBARA: And that's finally what we're really talking about is a means of survival.

GANGAJI: Yeah. That's it. And that is so hardwired into us that it really requires, if we're going to honestly look at that, it requires a willingness to see what we haven't seen. And to be able to make a choice that is counterintuitive to our survival.

So we live in Oregon and there are Black people in town; there's no threat to survival. But what gets ingrained in people—and I know I'm speaking a lot about the South because that's my experience; that's where my conditioning happened and it's in the news with the Mississippi flag—there was a sense of threat because there were at least as many Black people as there were white, and in some parts of the county I lived in there were more. And the white people actually were not unintelligent so that they knew that there was suffering and maybe cheating of land that some of these Black people should have gotten. Certainly they never got the 40 acres and the mule that they were promised. And so that's in the consciousness of people and I think I can generalize that into white people in the United States; it's—we know that we did wrong by this group of people, and that's intolerable. And so we—we're back to denial, of course—and so we have to cover that over, because to see that either means we have to make reparations within ourselves and inclusion, or just meet the horror that we're capable of such brutality within our own little peaceful selves.

BARBARA: You know that makes me want to read this quote—it's probably the piece that hit me between the eyes before I did the last podcast—it's from James Baldwin. And it was from an article that was published in *The New Yorker* in 1962. And I saved this quote on my phone because I had to sit with it. And here it is: "White people were and are astounded by the Holocaust in Germany. They did not know that they could act that way. But I very much doubt whether Black people were astounded—at least in the same way. For my part, the fate of the Jews and the world's indifference to it frightened me very much. I could not but feel in those sorrowful years that this human indifference, concerning which I knew so much already, would

be my portion on the day, that the United States decided to murder its Negroes systematically instead of little by little in catch-as-catch-can. I was, of course, authoritatively assured that what had happened to the Jews in Germany could not happen to the Negroes in America. But I thought bleakly that the German Jews probably believed similar counselors. And again, I could not share the white man's vision of himself for the very good reason that white men in America do not behave toward Black men the way they behave toward each other. When a white man faces a Black man, especially if the Black man is helpless, terrible things are revealed. I know."

That's the reckoning. And ... for me at least. And I feel like that is a reckoning in understanding the scope of what we have to meet. But that we actually have that capacity to meet that.

GANGAJI: That's what we're here for with each other, that we have that capacity. And that's what these teachings are about; they've never been separate from that. We have that capacity and in that we are then conscious of how we participate in that continuance or how we stop. How we're willing to own up to our own legacy of conditioning, known and unknown, and to stop.

BARBARA: Why would we not want to be free of that conditioning?

GANGAJI: Only for some old survival issue, under some rock in the psyche.

BARBARA: When this hit me, I did have this experience of shame; but I actually felt a healthy shame is how it appeared to me—like, well of course you should feel shame of that. And then of course there's this issue of white guilt, you know, you're just feeling guilty, get over it, or-

GANGAJI: Well, why get over it?

BARBARA: It was like, no, I felt, it felt appropriate.

GANGAJI: Yeah.

BARBARA: It would be different maybe if I languished in it and didn't address—even just by having this conversation—didn't address like, what's, what is this conditioning?

GANGAJI: Well, this was, I mean, I'm so happy that James Baldwin mentioned the example of the Holocaust. And it was really interesting and enlightening to be in Germany in the '60s and then to go back to Germany to teach in the '90s, and to recognize with younger German people coming up how they were willing to really look hard at how it was possible that such a horrendous act had happened. And that their grandfathers and fathers had perpetrated it. So how was it possible—that was the opening, and we had some of the deepest meetings anywhere. Because they were willing to face the horror of what was done in their name, I mean, it was their lineage.

But in order to face it they had to stop wallowing in "Oh, oh, me". They had to—"Oh my God, this really actually happened". And many of them would take trips to the different camps that are open for you to come in and, you know, to see the rooms of shoes and ... like baby shoes and

grandmother shoes, and would of course be profoundly moved and weep. But in that there was a reckoning that they, they took charge of what they had done and met it fully. And it's, it's a different society; it's a much more open society. And there was a healing. And so it's that healing that really hasn't happened in the United States. And so that wound gets irritated by something happening on the Black or the white "side." And it just festers; it doesn't really get healed.

But for it to be healed we have to be willing to see there is a wound there; it's a national wound—it may be global, but we know it's national anyway—and to take responsibility for that is the willingness to, to not be in denial of it and to not be into a sentimental reaction of it, but to really face it. What we are capable of, what our fathers are capable of, our mothers, our grandfathers, our grandmothers. Just so that we can actually experience that there is a possibility for a reconciliation, for reconciliation and freedom, which was part of our last podcast with Desmond Tutu in reporting on the councils on amnesty, where people could come forth and really say, "I did this, I did this, at such and such a day at such and such a time," and ask for forgiveness. As it was said in the podcast, sometimes forgiveness was not given and the crimes were so horrible and there was punishment. But there was at least truth telling. And so always, all spiritual teachings are finally about truth telling. And wherever we try to partition off telling the truth, that's where we make ourselves smaller than we are and separate from the bigness that we are.

That's what I hear from James Baldwin; James Baldwin is thrilling to read. And I was just telling you that PBS had a ... their American Masters series did a segment on Toni Morrison that was thrilling. And she has some very heavy books out there. *Beloved* is really heavy; but to read that book as a white person and knowing you're a white person ... to read that, that a mother would slit her child's throat rather than to let that child be taken as a slave and be brought up as a slave—that tells you how big this issue is. This is not just some inconveniences; this is huge and we must look at it, and look at it deeply. And tell the truth.

BARBARA: So part of that desire is the desire for the freedom from oppression, but there's a deeper desire of freedom that all of this is really pointing to.

GANGAJI: That's right. Yes. And the freedom from oppression has to be met. I mean, some people are actually feeling oppressed that this is in the news. It's "not all this again." I mean ...

BARBARA: Oh, boy.

GANGAJI: Yeah. That's the privilege of ... the privileged oppression. But to be willing to recognize what that is within yourself—to take responsibility for that. And then the, the depth is there also, and the possibility; there's still possibility of discovering freedom which includes all, which welcomes all. All of yourself, all of other.

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[26:49] BARBARA: Well, that feels like a natural place to end Part 1 of this conversation with Gangaji on racism. And of course we are just two white women sharing our experience, and that's only a tiny sliver of this huge conversation that we human beings need to have. There are

so many voices that need to be heard, and I am so profoundly looking forward to hearing so many more voices on this subject.

And let me just preview for you, on the next podcast I'm going to bring you the remainder of our conversation. And in it we talk about punishment, self-hatred, and what it means to not just want your freedom but to want freedom for all.

And before we go, I'm just going to mention that if you want to know more about Gangaji and the programs she offers, please visit the website at [gangaji.org](http://gangaji.org), that's [gangaji.org](http://gangaji.org). And you can write to me, Barb, at [info@gangaji.org](mailto:info@gangaji.org) with suggested topics, or if you simply want to share your report.

Thanks for listening. Until next time.