

Gangaji Radio

A Conversation With Gangaji Series

Host Hillary Larson

Episode 18

WHAT ARE YOU PRACTICING?

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[00:05] INTRODUCTION MUSIC

[00:06] HILLARY LARSON, HOST: The desire to be a better person or sometimes just the desire to seek relief from a racing mind are often the drives with which one arrives at a spiritual practice. There are so many different types of practices, and they are all important, but if we take a deeper look, if we stop and truly inspect the moments of our daily lives, the moments when we are not on a meditation pillow or doing yoga or sitting in retreat, what is it that we are actually practicing?

[00:38] GANGAJI: This is me. I'm this body. These are my wants. This is what I need. This is what I got to have. This is what I miss. This is what – you are that body. This is what you have that I want or I have that you want. This is the meditation. This is what people are meditating on. And it's a meditation of suffering.

[00:59] HILLARY: Also, is a spiritual practice required in order to wake up? When someone has woken up, is treating others with kindness evidence that they're awakening is trustworthy? And finally, is there a solution for a mind that races? I'm Hillary Larson, and this is *A Conversation With Gangaji*.

[01:26] HILLARY: Before we jump right into our topic this month, I want to mention that there are always ways we are looking at to make these conversations feel, you know, more inclusive and that everybody that's listening right now, they feel like they're sitting with you and me. And so I want to just take a moment to give people an idea of what goes on behind the scenes because some time ago, it was about a month ago, somebody asked me if you and I sit down before we have our conversation and if we have a conversation about the conversation. And you know, and it's, I think my answer surprised them because I said that often you don't even know what the subject is before the sound check, and then we do the sound check and I say, "Hey, by the way," and so that also means that, you know, you haven't heard these clips that I've pulled. And so the reason why I felt like that was important in addition to creating a little more intimacy here was that you speak of like a subject or what you're speaking of or what you're looking at being fresh and alive, and I feel like in these conversations, all these different topics, because we've covered lots of them at this point, there is a way that you bring this aliveness and this freshness to these topics that are all going to go in the same place or to the same place, but you always take a surprising route to get us all there.

[02:50] GANGAJI: I'm really glad. We are alive and we are fresh, and so really it's our willingness to open to that and use the word intimacy and that is an intimate opening and this is an intimate conversation that you and I and all of us have together.

[03:12] HILLARY: Yeah, it feels like that, and I just really appreciate that. And so, you know, without further ado, let's just jump into the subject of spiritual practice and what that has to do with our own personal awakenings. And, you know, there are obvious spiritual practices like meditation and chanting and there's different types of breath work and meditations that have to do with sound. There's so many things, but to start off, instead of going right into the subject of meditation, I just want to take an immediate and abrupt but I hope not too jarring shift and talk about the practice between the practice, so to speak.

[03:51] GANGAJI: Oh yes.

[03:52] HILLARY: So I actually pulled a perfect clip that when I heard it, I was like, "Oh." So let me go ahead and play this.

[04:00] GANGAJI: Good.

(clip)

[04:01] GANGAJI: You know, I'm never quite sure what someone means when they say meditation practice. It usually means many different things to many people, mantra, breath or the meditation practice that's perpetuated by most people in the world, which is I am this body. This is me. This is who I am. I am these thoughts. I am these emotions. I am not this body. I'm not that body. This is the meditation practice that is really going on. And then there may be breaks from that where they say, "Om mani padme hum," or some secret mantra, or "I am that. You are that." But then back to the real meditation. This is me. I am this body. These are my wants. This is what I need. This is what I got to have. This is what I miss. This is what... You are that body. This is what you have that I want or I have that you want. This is the meditation. This is what people are meditating on, and it's a meditation of suffering.

(end clip)

[05:14] HILLARY: I just think that clip is so important because I was thinking the other day of you could have a mantra of "Oh I wish this headache would go away" or "When are my kids going to stop yelling at each other?" And rarely do we stop and say, "Oh that's my mantra."

[05:30] GANGAJI: Yes, it's a, it's the unconscious meditation. It's the one we don't recognize as a meditation because we think it's actually a commentary on life, on reality. We don't recognize that it's added to life, and that we are then bound by once again, our thoughts about things – about ourselves, about others, about things. And the truth is it's really impossible to think about life itself. Life itself is too big for thought, but because we are programmed, designed to try to manage life itself, this vastness, this bigness, we learn to compartmentalize and to think of life as objects, and then of course the life that we experience as, as the sense of who we are, we then compartmentalize that as the body or the events that are happening to this body or the emotions. And in that we are perpetually, unfortunately many people perpetually, distracted from the direct and sublime and humbling experience of life itself that cannot be practiced, that cannot be thought. And of course, true spiritual practices are interruptions in our normal thinking practice, our normal day to day meditation, and they're very important interruptions because we

can recognize that sitting in a particular posture or chanting a particular mantra or watching our breath, whatever it may be, we are not then shackled to our thinking meditation, and that's beautiful. It interrupts the pattern, but if we don't recognize that at any moment in the midst of the pattern we can stop, then we compartmentalize our meditation, or our spiritual practice and our living, and these are false compartments. They have no reality. There, there is no separation between you and life. And that's the possibility to directly discover.

[08:04] HILLARY: I remember hearing you speak on one of the your compilation CDs, you were talking about when you met Papaji and he said, "Stop" and one of the things that came to mind for you was like, "Oh I'll slow down my breath." You focused on your breath and then he said, "No, that's not it either."

[08:25] GANGAJI: Yes, it was really stopping because I had learned that with my agitated mind it was actually very useful to begin to breathe deeply, to sit still, to not fidget, and that is useful. But he was pointing to something much deeper. And in a sense it's not even stop, it's recognize what is already stopped, what's already at peace, what's already life, what is already who you are without needing to practice who you are, cuz that's, we spend our lives practicing who we think we should be or rebelling or a practice of rebellion against who others think we should be, or most likely some combination of that. And the invitation from Papaji that is now extended to all is, is to give up that practice, to surrender it, and in that, to recognize what is deeper than can be practiced or even known, but can be directly recognized and is being lived with, with each breath, with every life form and is, is incomprehensible to our thinking brain.

[09:54] HILLARY: Well actually this is a perfect lead-in to your first question from a listener, and this person says, "Dear Gangaji, a lot of my practices, meditation, yoga, hiking, were based around getting somewhere. I'M A DOER," and all that's in capitals, "and therefore really welcomed your invitation to just stop everything, but I can also see now that by not having a regular practice, I'm susceptible to what I refer to as the crazy train. I would like to know if you have ever been on a crazy train of your own, and how you deal with that in your own life?"

[10:32] GANGAJI: Well, you know, I think all of humanity is on a crazy train, and maybe particularly in the west and particularly in our culture because it's all about getting somewhere, getting something, keeping something, and that's impossible. I mean we do get somewhere but we also lose what we get. And so yes, I understand this question and I can certainly relate to it as a human being and as a particular human being, I know this craziness. And as I said earlier, it's very useful to have particular practices that slow that down whether it's hiking or even watching a movie or reading a book or meditating. Whatever it may be, some way that interrupts the habit of reaching for something and the drive to really, finally we're talking about the drive to survive. So I would never say that that's wrong. That's naturally to all life form, but to be willing to take a moment and not follow the drive to survive, to simply be still, to simply be here. Then there is no crazy train. The crazy train is only made real in experience by this activity of the mind to get somewhere, to keep something, to keep something else away, and the scramble of that is endless, and of course we recognize at a certain point that it's impossible, but that impossibility is denied and we just keep scrambling and that is craziness. And it is in each of us, but it's also in us as a collection. The collective us, and we see that. We see that in the perpetuation of wars that are happening all over the planet today and in our neighborhoods the wars and in our families the wars, and in our own bodies. So it's no small invitation to say, "Stop." It's huge, and

it goes against our program, which is GO, because to stop means to court death or to possibly be left or to miss something. And if there's a willingness and a moment, to miss everything, to not get anything. Just to be still. Then we in that moment really are not practicing. If we make that our practice, as I think this letter is pointing to, then that becomes part of our getting something, and it's a trick. It's called spiritual, but it's not spiritual. It's the same egoic drive to survive and it's all about me and mine and to recognize that is once again the opportunity to take *this* moment, this very moment and not get anything, not understand anything, not have anything when this moment is over. Just to be here, and instantly we can experience the relief of that and the peace of that and that is life without our overlay, without our practice, and it's always here.

[14:22] HILLARY: I want to take a little bit of a turn from there, if you don't mind. This one question, I love this question. It is "What is the point of having a spiritual practice or of knowing who you are if it doesn't result in being a better person or making positive changes in the world?" And the reason why I love this question is that just for example, I was sitting in a restaurant the other day and there were two people sitting right next to me, and the man was going on and on about his chanting practice, and he was enlightening his friend on how life changing chanting can be. And then he turned around and was so completely rude to the waiter. You know, I sat there and I asked myself, "What's the point," because just as a coincidence I had just been speaking to a friend of mine who's a Sufi and he has the most dedicated practice of anybody I've ever met. And he was telling me about his teacher who was in India and he's no longer living, and his teacher told him that the most important spiritual practice one could have is the practice of being polite. And I think the Sufis call it being in the Adab. It's like Namaste. It's like if I see the divine in you, then how can I not be kind? And I'm not talking about perfection. I'm just talking about – do you know what I'm saying? When you see the divine in somebody.

[15:47] GANGAJI: Well when you're in love. When you're in love, you overlook all kinds of faults, but here's the trap of this, the way I see it Hillary, is that we have this ideal that we want to be good people. We want to contribute to the planet, to each other and that's a beautiful ideal. And we continue to fall short of that ideal, and then we are unkind to ourselves. And then we hope that if we get the right practice or we get the right punishment, whatever it may be, that that will be corrected and we will be good people. We will always be kind to waitresses or we will always be kind to people who cut us off or who are rude to us. But if we're willing for that to be a byproduct rather than the goal, then there is much more kindness all around, and also kindness for yourself when you do have a moment of rudeness because it seems to me even dogs and cats can be rude. You know that it's a part of animal nature, and we make too much of it, and in our attempt to try to perfect ourselves, and fall short of that perfection of course, we get more and more rigid and we practice harder and harder. And once again we are trying to get somewhere, but in this moment if you are trying to get anywhere, even to kindness, although I totally agree that that's the most significant byproduct and that's the point of it all, but if we co-op the point and put it into our egoic striving, it doesn't serve. So I would say for a weekend or this moment, give up all your ideas of what it means to be kind, what it will look like, what it will feel like, what the results will be, and then you discover that this word kindness is pointing to this spaciousness where there's actually even room for some random rudeness. Whether it's generated by your mind/body or another's, that there is a flexibility of spirit that is not rigid. And often in our spiritual practices, we start with absolutely the best intentions, but we become rigid in our drive that these intentions become egoic goals. So as a possibility of investigation, if you

just give up all your goals and discover what's here, and then discover for yourself in time, the possibility of in any moment just discovering what's at the core, what's at the basis, what is still here, without judging a particular behavior of a moment or if you measured up to your criteria of what it means to be a good person. Because all that is outside this realm of direct and pure and true experience that cannot be practiced, that is already at the core of yourself. So I want to just say again that, yes, I think the desire to be kind, the desire to be loving is what gets us interested in a spiritual practice and that is incredibly valuable and I know that it is, it is the important byproduct, but it also becomes the saboteur because it becomes the benchmark where we measure ourselves and where we beat ourselves up or where we measure others. We could see this chanter in the restaurant and decide, "Well that's worthless, you know. That's no good because he was rude to the waitress," but there's room for that. You know, he could be having indigestion or maybe the waitress was rude to him earlier. Who even knows what the karmic flow of events can be or is. But we can, we can be willing to be still. That's my point.

[20:25] HILLARY: Yeah, and I think that it's so, I don't know, so normal or so human for ego to look at ego because I remember, I think it was a couple conversations ago when you were talking about Sri Nisargatta's teacher being up in a tree just throwing coconuts at people, and I remember when you said that my immediate thought was like, "Well hey, what's up with that," you know. If he's awake, what's he doing being mean to people?

[20:54] GANGAJI: Yeah, just right. That's what he's doing. This is, this is exactly it. We have these ideas, and we super impose our, our ideas on our relationship, on life itself, on our experiences, on our emotions, on our behaviors, and we are then bound by those ideas, but we don't have to be. We can let those ideas go. They have to be practiced. And we're afraid that if we let them go, we will be evil people, we will be bad people. We will be two year old people. We'll be selfish, and so there's a threat of that. It's the fear of our – we're speaking psychologically maybe, the fear of the id, the uncontrolled ego. So the willingness to meet that, to open to that, and to be still. Then there is a great discovery that true kindness, which sometimes is ruthless in it's compassion and has nothing to do with predetermined behavior, true kindness is your nature.

[22:05] HILLARY: I would like to, I think what we're going to end up doing here, and I hope we don't get hunted down by the podcast police, but I think we're going to end up going over because I really want to get to play a clip and I want to get another question in, but I wanted to squeeze this in as well, and that is this misconception I think there is that somebody has to have kind of a prolonged and dedicated spiritual practice in order to wake up, and I was thinking, you know, you had a fairly extensive spiritual practice, but then there's somebody like Byron Katie where just out of the blue in the whole horror of horrors, she had her awakening.

[22:43] GANGAJI: That's it.

[22:45] HILLARY: So I guess the question is it's not contingent upon what we're doing, but there's a way we can make ourselves a bigger target.

[22:52] GANGAJI: Well this is once again, is we have an idea that if we do our spiritual practice, we will get somewhere in that spiritual practice. But if we give up that idea just for an instant, then we discover where we are. And yes, spiritual practice or tilling the field or being kind can all

make you a bigger target, but finally, it's this complete surrender. I mean as I understand Byron Katie's story, there was just this moment where it was clear where she wasn't doing anything. She wasn't reveling in the horror of her life. She was in a terrible place, but she stopped doing anything, and that, it takes care of itself because where we're trying to get in our spiritual practice or in our practice of life or in our practice of who we think we are is the fulfillment that's already here in the core, in the root.

[24:05] HILLARY: There's so much evidence to back that up because I think of, and I'm sure people would join me with this experience, is that the most profound things that have happened in my life were absolutely unplanned and a complete surprise. And you know, I look at your life and I think, you know, I'm sure you weren't thinking, "Oh I think I'll go to India and then I'll have this tremendous experience, and then I'll travel all over the world."

[24:30] GANGAJI: The opposite.

[24:34] HILLARY: I was wanting to get this last question in but I honestly think that you answered it in the first half of this conversation, and it had to do with how do you stop stopping? But you kind of answered that already. But I did want to play this clip and it's you talking about all the different ways that people wake up. And this was taken from a CD compilation called Beyond Practice. The first clip was taken from there as well, and this woman gets up and she's telling you that she went to the website just out of the blue, she didn't know who you were. She went to the website and she read your invitation, and she just instantly got it. And so you had a discourse with her and then you went from that conversation with her into like this beautiful description of the different types of awakenings, and I just want to play that before we go.

[25:28] GANGAJI: Beautiful.

(clip)

[25:31] GANGAJI: Good, good. Yes, my repeating question to you is always will you accept the invitation? Will you accept the invitation?" Here you said, "Yes, I accept it," instantaneous. I heard it, I accepted it. Papaji would talk about people like this as camphor. You know, they catch fire and they burn, no ash left. And then there are people, you know, like paper. Catches fire and burns pretty quickly, a little bit of ash left. And then, you know, there's wood. You have to light, fan it, but it catches fire, burns brightly and leaves a little ash. And then there's the wet wood. (laughter) This is where the repeating question comes in. But catches fire finally. Then there are the stone people. But I have had reports from stone people and once they catch fire, this is molten heart bursting open. This is the center of the earth. So however you think yourself to be, you are subject to burning. Just jump in. Stop keeping yourself cool. It's your nature. It's what you've asked for.

(end clip)

[27:10] GANGAJI: Perfect. Jumping in.

[27:15] HILLARY: So we have jumped into a pretty big subject this past 30 minutes, and I'm going to end off with another clip before we go, but I feel like this conversation is first of all, what I love about it is just this awareness of what we are practicing beyond the spiritual practice, what

we are practicing maybe when we're not sitting in a meditation position, and that in itself can be just a huge awareness and a huge awakening.

[27:45] GANGAJI: Yes. Yes, you become conscious of what you have been unconscious of.

[28:04] HILLARY: I promised you one more clip of Gangaji talking about spiritual practice, and I'll do that in a minute, but first I just want to tell you a couple things. If you are on Facebook and you search for Gangaji community, you can find more information about this show but each day there are also event announcements, video clips you may not have seen before, really beautiful quotes, lots of things, so check that out. If you have a question or a comment for Gangaji about anything regarding this show, you can always drop a line to gangajiradio@gangaji.org. That's g-a-n-g-a-j-i-radio@gangaji.org. And if you like this show and you have a moment, we'd so much appreciate it if you could leave a comment or rate this show on iTunes. And finally, to sign up for Gangaji's monthly webcast. Just go to the website, Gangaji.org and look for With Gangaji. You'll find a lot of other really helpful and enlightening things there as well. In fact some big changes are about to happen with that. We'll make sure to keep you posted. Now as promised, I'm going to leave you with more Gangaji. Thank you for joining us again this month. We'll see you next time.

(clip)

[29:18] GANGAJI: We meet in the spirit of truth. We meet to surrender to truth. The mysterious force that has already appeared in your life and said, "Come here, come home. Rest. Be still." That's what meditation is. That's what practices are. That's what prayer is. That's what rituals are. But Papaji's invitation is not really a prayer. It's certainly not a ritual. It's not a meditation. It's not a practice. It's the immediacy of right here, right now, stopping, looking for anything.