

The Seekers Forum Transcript

Stop the Search: An Interview with Gangaji

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The Seekers Forum
Awaken To Your Life

Hello, welcome to The Seekers Forum guest interview for May. I am very excited to have Gangaji with us this month. Gangaji is one of my favorite teachers, and she comes from the non-dual tradition. She was born in Texas, grew up in Mississippi, graduated from University of Mississippi, got married, and had a daughter, had a householder's life. And then in 1972 Gangaji moved to San Francisco where she started to explore deeper levels of her being.

She took bodhisattva vows, she practiced Zen and Vipassana meditation, and she had a career as an acupuncturist in the San Francisco Bay area. But she still longed to explore her spiritual nature more deeply and that led her to India in 1990 where she finally met the teacher she was looking for, Sri H. W. L. Poonja, known as "Poonjaji" or "Papaji."

Today, Gangaji and I talk about the nature of time and how to bring an eternal sense of the present to our every day lives. It was such a great conversation and I hope you enjoy it.

MM: Welcome, Gangaji. It's such a pleasure to talk to you today.

Gangaji: Thank you, Mark. I'm really happy to be here.

MM: Thank you. I'd like to begin with a pretty big question. What is the relationship between present moment awareness and what we call enlightenment? Is there a difference?

Gangaji: Well, I would say, enlightenment – what a word. It's so loaded, corrupted by our ideas, I'm even hesitant to use the word enlightenment. Let's say what enlightenment points to. Enlightenment points to profound awakening to the endless fulfilment that is one's true nature. If that's what we mean by enlightenment, then I would say, perhaps there is a distinction between present moment and fulfilment, because it's possible to be totally fulfilled in your life, totally awakened in your life and also be thinking about past moments, future moments, or replaying the past or future, or re-experiencing, emotionally, something in the past. So, I wouldn't put any constraints on what we're referring to in this moment as enlightenment. It certainly includes present moment, and actually a recognition that present moment also includes thoughts and experiences from the past, and projections into the future. But I think our tendency is to somehow define things by either making them like something or unlike something. Really, what I'm pointing to when I do use the word enlightenment is your own true nature, and that is most easily recognized in this present moment but it doesn't exclude all those moments when it was unrecognized.

MM: I understand.

Gangaji: I'm glad, that's good. (They share a chuckle.)

MM: I see what you mean. I want to get to this idea of time as an illusion, and that until we recognize that time is a man-made concept, it's almost impossible to be present and to know that enlightened self, that enlightened nature. How would you explain this idea of time being a man-made concept?

Gangaji: Well, it's a very useful concept in terms of survival. It's extraordinary actually, that we can map out or delineate a day or a year or an era into segments so that we can actually look at those segments, examine them and see what we think worked or what we think didn't work and so, we get very attached to time because it's a power. Actually, this invention of time is very powerful and we like power. And of course, in our infatuation with any power, but maybe in particular this time power, we like this time power – we lose a sense of ourselves, as you initially said, as this present moment, as the endlessness, timelessness that's here and, luckily, we have always had this present moment to stop and check and discover for ourselves what is always here. Even if we superimposed time on experiences of ourselves, and our past time as children, or adolescents or young adults, we can recognize that this profound – even more than a sense – but this profound *experience* of myself as beingness is always here, as timeless beingness, ageless. So, I think we enjoy time. Sometimes it is the master, and then we don't enjoy it so much, if we're slaves to this concept of time, but other than that it is, like many inventions, very useful.

MM: But, it doesn't touch the timeless; it doesn't affect the self that's beyond time. That self plays with it but isn't contained or limited by it. Am I saying that correctly?

Gangaji: Oh yes, I would agree. I would say what happens is that we get so infatuated with playing with time that we actually overlook the timeless self, and in that, there is suffering, unnecessary suffering and pain of life that gets made into an unnecessary story. For a story of yourself you have to have time, you have to have some sense of “me” in the past and “me” in the possible future and that's suffering. So yes, I think we're right together on this in terms of present as endless, rather than present as relative to past and future.

MM: Beautiful. Gangaji, you don't often use the word God, I've noticed. I'm wondering, what would you say is the importance of faith in your teaching and how would you define faith if you would care to define it at all?

Gangaji: You know, the word God, to me, is like the word enlightenment, it's become so corrupted by our ideas of what God is and what God is to “me.” The word “me” or “I” are also corrupted. It's often very hard to speak of timelessness, or eternal presence without using words that have been corrupted. I know the word faith is actually very beautiful, of course. When you have faith, in my experience, you can actually get through very dark times, very dark experiences. And yet, there is something you are holding on to, so I really encourage people, at least for a moment, to suspend all their beliefs and all their faith, to simply be here with nothing to hold on to. That's really the invitation of direct inquiry that I bring to people from my teacher Papaji and from his teacher, Ramana Maharshi. That direct inquiry needs nothing except the conscious attention to “Who am I?” If you have no belief of who you are, or no faith that you are a child of God or you are perfection itself, if you have no faith, no beliefs, no religions, no ideas, just for a moment of inquiry, then there is this direct discovery of what really doesn't need faith to be.

That's really taking the word faith as some kind of crutch. I know that faith is also a heart-welling and a heart-spilling of love and in that case I wouldn't call it faith; I would call it the experience of love. That is really always here when you're willing to stop. It's tricky talking

about these concepts Mark, because I wouldn't want to denigrate anybody's faith or anybody's concept, even, of God.

But I am really inviting people to a deeper experience. A deeper experience requires that you put everything – that you at least suspend everything – that you have clung to or that you are afraid of. I think faith is a big one, it's like hope. If we are willing to suspend our faith, our hope, our concepts of God, our idea of time, of future, then we have the possibility to actually acquire what is *here*, what is always here. That's really the essence of my invitation.

MM: Is that what Papaji meant when he told you to stop the search?

Gangaji: Yes. Yes. Because the search is beautiful, we long for something, we hunger for something and we begin searching for it. I know I can look in my life and see as a twelve-year-old I was unhappy, and so I began searching for happiness in lots of different ways. By the time I met Papaji, when I was forty-eight years old, I had searched through lots of different practices and some psychological modalities, and teachings, and had benefitted hugely and had been enriched by all of that, my life was bigger because of all of that... but I knew that something still was needed. I was longing for something.

When I went to Papaji, he said, "What brings you here?"

I said, "Freedom." I don't know why I said freedom, because I could have said faith, or I could have said God or anything, but the word freedom came out of me. And he said, "Excellent. If you're looking for freedom then you're in the right place."

My next question to him, which was really a sincere question was, "Tell me what to do." I didn't know if he would give me a special mantra or if he would whisper something in my ear.

He said, "Stop. Stop searching for anything."

I thought he meant stop searching for anything except freedom, but he meant *stop searching for freedom*, then you can tell the truth about what is here. And when you are free enough to stop searching for freedom, you recognize that freedom is always here. It's your nature as timeless presence. That doesn't mean the circumstances are always relatively free, of course.

I actually speak to prisoners through a course that I'm doing with prisoners, but also, I've been into prisons and it's possible for prisoners who are definitely not free in any conventional sense of the word, to recognize that freedom is present. So, certainly each of us can recognize that but it requires that we stop trying to escape, that we stop trying to get anything, that we stop trying to keep anything away. And I had just never considered that until I met Papaji. I had always been trying to get freedom or get God or get love. To stop, well, I'm still just in wonder of that.

MM: Did it feel like relief? Did it feel like loss? Or, did it feel like both?

Gangaji: First it was scary to me. It was like, *what is this man saying?* Because by then I had accumulated lots of good things and I didn't want to go back to that twelve-year-old when I

began my search, so it was scary. But too, I somehow trusted that I was in the right place, and I trusted myself enough to experiment, and I was curious too: what could this mean? In that moment then, I was willing to stop and there was absolutely no loss. I would say my life had been defined by loss until that moment. And it was just a joyous laughter and really, I think it goes back to your initial point about time, because really, what can be lost? You can't lose unless there's time, and in that moment, all time stopped because I wasn't telling a story. I wasn't talking about what I needed, to myself or to a teacher. I am and I am, and in a direct experience, this is fulfilling. So, it's maybe losing the search, but in the loss of the search, what you are searching for is revealed to be the truth of yourself, here in this present time.

MM: I did actually mean the loss of the search, because seeking defines so many of our lives. I'd like to ask you Gangaj about the role of mortality in relationship to awakening. Is it possible to awaken, to know our true self without an abiding sense of mortality, would you say?

Gangaji: Well, I can only speak of my own experience, of course, but I would say death, mortality, has to be faced. The recognition that how I have identified myself with this particular body, this particular mind stream and emotional body, is subject to death, and in fact will die, and is in the process of dying. And even though that's obvious and we see this in all other life forms, we have some mechanism, maybe it's some hardwiring or something, that denies that. So, we have to counterintuitively – and this is what I invite people to do, and is my experience – to actually open to death, to the truth of mortality. This is how Ramana awakened, he lay on the floor and asked himself, “Who dies?” Out of great fear of death.

I'm not suggesting that you have to overcome your fear of death. I think fear of death is certainly hardwired and natural, but you have to be willing to recognize at any moment, death could come. So, in this moment, I invite death. I stop fighting death. I stop denying death or running from death, or glorifying death in a morbid way. I soberly and openly stop the search away death. And in that, yes, there is a recognition that you may not want the body to die, but it will die. But what the body is infused with, which is life force, is everywhere and was here before this body.

I don't mean life as it's defined normally in terms of, I guess the carbon molecule, but life, cosmic life throughout. Everything we know of is infused with this mystery that is called life, and that's the truth of who you are. And then, yes, what dies will die, what is born will die. But what animates everything is the truth of yourself and in that second, that millisecond there is a recognition that the truth of who you are does not die.

I don't mean to say that you still aren't wanting to take care of your body, or wanting to keep it from dying, but it doesn't have the same hold that when you totally identify yourself as the body, or even what we call “soul.” Then there is some either some looking forward in time to some future life, or backward in time to some past life, or some hope of immortality, but to recognize the tenderness of mortality, the fragility of your life form and all life forms, including cosmic life forms, is to be humbled in a deep way that is actually enlivening. You lose your identity, as you mentioned, as a seeker but you gain this recognition of identity with totality, with everything throughout time in all forms, seen and unseen, discovered and undiscovered, microscopic, macroscopic, everything.

And that's thrilling because it's a life of suffering – even our privileged lives – our lives are suffering when our identity is encapsulated into a particular physical, mental, emotional form.

MM: Gangaji, a couple of more questions. When you look at the world, what do you feel? Do you feel hope or despair? Or acceptance? Or wonder? Or, a mixture of all those things? People today are so frightened and stressed out by what they see going on governmentally and environmentally. When you, as someone who has experienced a deep freedom, look out at the world, what do you feel?

Gangaji: Well, I feel all of that, it depends on what newspaper I've looked at, you know. I'm very much of the world. Ramana was a recluse, a sadu, a hermit and Papaji was a householder, and a person who was very much in the world. And I've always been of political consciousness, and I think we live in disturbing times. Not that I would say other times haven't been disturbing in human history, just the whole tumultuousness of life form, but I would never sell short the danger of losing democracy which is such an exquisite relative freedom that allows us to speak as we feel, to speak and to have representative government. That can all be lost and certainly has been lost in the past. I'm somewhat of a student of history and I know civilizations get lost, civilizations are born and they die and so I recognize the tender mortality of our civilization, just like I recognize it of this body, Gangaji's body. So, I'm not separate from the despair of that but I'm also, at a deeper level, not controlled by the despair of that.

I feel it, I have emotional feelings of, yes, even fear. I know many people are in danger, certainly a way of life in many ways is already gone. So, I feel that and I don't trivialize those feelings, they are part of what it means to be human being and I am a human being. And I know that there is this play of life that is out of our control and all we can do is participate. So, I wouldn't say I have hope, but I have faith, faith maybe is word I would use, I have faith in the strength of life itself. Whether this planet is finished or not, I have no idea. I love the planet. I don't know if it's too late to save the planet or not, but I know there is a bigger cosmos and I bow to the mystery of that, is what I would say, Mark. I don't have any answers about that.

I recognize fear in people and I see it. I travel a lot and I see it in particular in our country, our very privileged country, but I think we are getting intimations that privilege is meaningless in the bigger sense of world citizens. So, we're being shaken up. How it shakes down, I really don't know. It's a mystery to me. I am attending it and I support everyone who is experiencing any degree of emotion around it. I support people if they are called to be active and protesting, resisting, working for restoration of more just, at least in conversation, political conversation. And I also support everyone in listening to each other. We're at a very interesting and disturbing time in terms of our civil discourse and it's an interesting time.

I grew up in the South and when I grew up it was in the 50's when I was in high school. We were still fighting the Civil War, still talking about how we could have won if such and such had happened and Lincoln was not a hero. And so, to have left that, and to have come away from that and to see how wrong that was, how mistaken that was, to have seen how we just discounted the horror of slavery and that, and then to see that that is still present in our country, to see the overlooking of other people's suffering for one's own benefit, this is what I mean by disturbing

times. And yet always, in disturbance, things are always shook up and that shaking can lead to deeper maturity and a deeper discourse. May it be so.

MM: May it be so. Actually, you may have just answered my last question. Were I to ask you what your prayer is for the world, what would that be?

Gangaji: That we may learn to love each other in all of our differences, that we may learn to respect each other, that we may see each other and listen to each other.

MM: Beautiful. Gangaji, thank you so much for taking the time, it's fantastic to finally connect with you.

Gangaji: Oh, Mark, I'm really honored, I really appreciate it.

MM: Thank you so much, have a wonderful day then.

Gangaji: Thank you, you too.