

Collaboration in Science

Interviewer: Paul Verschure (Convergent Science Network)
Bhavani Rao (Amrita Labs)

Welcome to the Ernst Strüngmann Forum podcasts—a series of discussions designed to explore how people collaborate under real-life settings. Joining us in the series are high-profile experts from diverse areas in society, whose experiences will lend insight to what collaboration is, what it requires, and why it might break down. This series is produced in collaboration with the Convergent Science Network.

P. Verschure This is Paul Verschure and today, together with colleague Bhavani Rao, we're speaking with Swami Shantamritananda Puri. Welcome Shanti to our podcast. Thank you that you could join us. So, before we really delve into the substance around collaboration, it would be helpful that maybe you give a little sketch of your life trajectory that brought you to where you are today as Swami Shantamritananda Puri.

S. S. Puri Yes. Okay. Well, it really started in college because I was focused on the humanities and it was more philosophy and religion, but my focus was on Asia, including Japanese. But what happened is at the end of those four years I became very inspired by the classical concept of justice as being like the ideal of perfection in human relationships. So what that did is that took me to apply for officer candidate school in the armed forces because I wanted to protect justice; that was my concept. I was accepted, but then I ended up taking an offer to work for the Japanese government in a rural fishing village because I spoke the language and there I learned a lot about international collaboration, intercultural, interlingual collaboration, which really taught me quite a bit. And after some time, though, I found myself being pulled towards my deeper roots, and that would be my roots in philosophy and religion. So it was, I think I was about 25 when I joined a traditional ashram in South India and began a new life in a hut on the Arabian Sea, and that ashram ended up blossoming into a worldwide humanitarian mission. And we have people collaborating with us in every country of the world practically. I started off by training as a novice monk, and I lived there for 10 years before I was sent somewhere. And during those 10 years, I became very involved in a variety of collaborative projects. The first one was the construction of a 1,500 bed hospital and a project to build 100,000 houses for the underserved people. And then I was dispatched to Tokyo for 10 years and that was where I got involved in our projects in Kenya, the disaster relief in Japan and in the Philippines, a public health project in Papua New Guinea. And a lot of interfaith activities with the Buddhist community. And the most recent decade has landed me in the Chicago area, where I've been involved in a lot of collaborations in the fields of youth activity and the environment, online education, and scientific research. So these have all become part of my duties as part of that massive humanitarian organization.

P. Verschure And currently, where are you located?

S. S. Puri At this moment, I am in India.

P. Verschure OK. But your home base where your work is now Chicago.

S. S. Puri Chicago. And that's where a scientific research center is going to start soon.

P. Verschure So thank you very much for that summary. So to open, what is collaboration and what is it good for?

S. S. Puri That's what I think I was asking myself the same thing. I was thinking, I'm not qualified to offer a definition, but it was funny because when this invitation came along, I asked myself, what is it, and because it didn't approach, it didn't, initially evoke an immediate image. But then I gave it a little thought. And it seems to me it's similar to cooperation but feels different. It's not quite the same, and I knew that much. And but what I can say is, what cooperation feels like and what, collaboration looks like to me. So for me, cooperation is like if there's one guy doing a task and if you give him three more people, then the task can be done in one quarter of the time. That's what cooperation seems to feel like to me. Whereas collaboration, this feels really different. It's like through that collaboration we become stronger and we're

well rounded. We have more talents, we have more resources, human or otherwise. And so we become more adaptable to the circumstances and that those resources that are brought in by the participants, I feel that they yield more intangible benefits that wouldn't have been achieved otherwise. And that's basically my uninitiated sense of the concept. But when I looked at the concept of collaboration even more, I came to the conclusion that basically my whole adult life has been a conglomeration of various collaborations. And if we include these intangible goals and rewards, we could even say that everybody's life is kind of compromised by variegated and overlapping collaborations; and the whole world. From a holistic perspective, I felt like it was very difficult to come up with an example that doesn't qualify as a collaboration of some kind.

P. Verschure But now what are these intangibles?

S. S. Puri The intangibles that I'm thinking of are, one would be intangible in the sense of you cannot detect it with your five senses. So it would be like personal growth. It would be trust. It would be a deeper understanding about other cultures and yourself. And a lot of other such experiences, but you can't quantify them so easily. Like revenue, or promotions, or something like that.

P. Verschure But now you've been involved in a number of really big projects that have collaborative aspects, but could you maybe take one or two examples where you say, look, it is by virtue of these following features that these projects as large-scale collaboration succeeded?

S. S. Puri I have been fortunate in a lot of ways that most of the people that I collaborate with have shared some similar values, I guess you could say. And in general, we all have felt that these intangible results and goals were important. We tend to give, or I do at least, as much importance to those intangibles than compared with the physical or concrete results. So I'll give you a few examples. That 100,000 house building project; I found that I learned how to be sensitive to the subtle cues that people are giving when they don't feel happy with their experience. And then we can adapt that project and what we're doing every day, to take that into consideration. Initially, I didn't quite get it. I wasn't sensitive enough to people's exhaustion or their cultural reactions and the culture shock. But over time, I learned a lot more about that and how to understand people's emotional state based on some external cues. And also, I learned the importance of having a big heart. And the more people we have that have big hearts, the better the project does.

P. Verschure But can you make that a bit more tangible for us who weren't there in your project?

S. S. Puri So what I would say is when these intangibles are very striking, then we get more people to participate the following year. For example, we listen to them and we listen to them and we don't judge them. They're really here...some people come with the intention of just trying to get a job and have it on their resumes, so when they go back to Japan or wherever it is, they have a better CV or a bio. But my goal is to have them have a really profound experience when they join, for example, the housing project and so that they can learn more not just about other cultures, but about themselves. And then so when they go back, yeah, it looks good on the on the bio, but also it changes their life and they will tell other people and other people will come and we will have more participation, more transformation. So these to me are, it's hard to quantify that because, the reason why it increases is not due to like advertising or we invested more money it's because somebody was inspired by participating and they influenced other people.

B. Rao I have a question. So you think that this kind of transformation could not have happened without collaboration and because you said, I mean, what if there was no collaboration? Maybe there was an individual that was actually going into the field and not a bunch of people. So I'm just wondering, how do you, these things about being sensitive to whether somebody is happy or not, being the intangibles that you had mentioned? Can you not pick them up without collaboration?

- S. S. Puri Of course you can. I mean, that would be more...but it depends on how sensitive that person is and how sincere they are, but how much focus they have on those in the first place. But I think a lot of people learn about it through the collaboration because it stimulates different parts of their individuality when they interact with people who are different from them, and who have different values. But there's always a coalescence of some of those values. And so once you realize this person is also just as sincere as you are, then you can say, well, I'm wondering why he or she values such and it is so important, so much. I want to understand that better. So I feel that that collaborative effort really opens our eyes to deeper levels of our own selves, too.
- P. Verschure I'm confused about this still, I'm sorry. But what is really interesting now, collaboration, as you described it earlier, means that you have a bunch of individuals who also coalesce around a common goal. Right? But now what you are describing is the trajectory of a single individual to be pulled into that process because of their self-interest to be pulled in; like my CV will look better. And in some sense, I could even argue that the coordinator of the collaborative process has their own interest of opening their mind to a broader perspective of reality. But we're still not talking about collaboration now, because this is how tens or hundreds or thousands of people together in space and time in some way, achieve that common goal, and I have not understood yet how you then manage that part of the project to actually build your thousands of houses.
- S. S. Puri So you're talking about the logistics of it, or the strategy behind it or...?
- P. Verschure Yeah. Well, in the end, look, you have, I don't know, tens, hundreds of people working together at any point in time in the project, right? How do you keep them working together in order to achieve that common goal of building these houses? And of course, then meta level, you can of course say, yeah, but building the houses is more like a metaphorical act to come to...but I would like that to unpack that better.
- S. S. Puri Sure. Well, I mean, that's a little more of the, we could call it sort of the logistics of it and how we put together the teams and actually do that. Is that an example of what you're looking for?
- P. Verschure Well, yeah, I would like to understand how you have these hundreds of people working together.
- S. S. Puri Well, one thing is definitely trust is a big factor because I don't have, I'm not involved in, all the dozens of countries that the people are coming from. So we're assuming that they're... we have guidelines to bring the people over. So that part I don't really get involved in, but we trust that there's somebody who is coordinating it on that side. But before all the people come, someone like myself or another person will go there and make sure everything is prepared and that it's going to be...
- B. Rao Swami, I think maybe he's looking more in the direction of once the students from Japan are actually there on the ground. How do you actually get them working on the project with the Indians. How does this work?
- S. S. Puri That's where a lot of language issues come in because especially Japanese people, they don't speak even English. And so we have, I mean, I translate, other people translate, and we divide them up into groups of about 10, depending on the site and depending on how many tools we have. And usually there's no transportation, so they have to walk, and I walk to like 5 to 10 worksites and then I'm constantly running around checking in on them. Did the mason arrive when you said he did, because if he doesn't arrive, they're just sitting there and doing nothing, because they've got the tools and everything, but they don't know how to lay bricks. So sometimes the person who is in the house, they want to communicate something to people, and if they can do that, it will make them, the participants, overjoyed and then give them a great experience and then they resume the work. So there's always something. We have to be constantly visiting every work site so that we make sure that people are able to

do one, that the work that they came to do, the tangible work, and also have a good experience, so that they can communicate with those people and feel the impact that they're making and learning why. And for the people on the recipient side, are the beneficiaries, they also want to understand why these college students came all the way from Japan with their hard-earned money that they don't, they worked a part time job. And so why have they done that? And there has to be both the physical part of providing them with the tools and help they need to build something as well as, I guess you can say, the tools to have a good experience.

P. Verschure But now, in the sort of minimal interpretation, you could say, well, look, we take a bunch of people with good intentions and we just put them together and then by virtue of the good intentions, things will sort of work out because you get the tools and the bricks and something will happen. But I would assume that there's some additional coordination on top of that. I don't necessarily mean like top-down direction, but there must be additional, especially to deal with intangibles of the process. There must be, let's say, communication, information playing a structuring role. Could you explain that?

S. S. Puri Sure. So one thing you said made me want to fill in a little blank that I left there, is that structurally we have people, making sure that these houses are not going to fall over tomorrow and that they make sure that the roof is done properly with the concrete and all that. There are people who are watching that. But in terms of the rest of it, basically is someone like myself is making sure that all those things take place.

P. Verschure Does this always work out or does it sometimes also fail this process?

S. S. Puri It fails, it fails sometimes. I have a few examples. It's often due to lack of communication between two coordinators on our side or their side, the people who are coming from foreign countries. And one case, we were doing it on an island that had no vehicles on it anywhere, and it was very remote, and the only way to get the raw materials there was by boat. Like those Venetian boats, which you punt, and for miles and miles, and it was really tiresome. And the Japanese college students that year, they had just unloaded a bunch of boats and they were totally exhausted. But this one other coordinator from the project, who was a little senior to me, he insisted that they wake up in the middle of the night and go and do it again. And then I knew at that point that it was not going to work. These guys are just going to say, no, I'm not going to like it at all. And but then I said, if anybody wants to come, they're welcome to come. And I said, I'm going to go, I'm going to load the boat and unload it and if anybody wants to join me, they can. And a few people came, but it left a very sour taste in their mouth, and they didn't come to the next year's actually. It took a year for them to recuperate from that.

P. Verschure But so intangibles in the end have to be constructed, right? So we have to in our mind, assign a label or a construct or a process, or a value, a rule to be adaptable. And as you mentioned, trust. So how do you manage trust then in this situation, like in the case also of these students who might feel in some sense abused?

S. S. Puri Sure, they probably felt a little bit vulnerable and not...probably I should have protected them a little bit more, because I'm, for them, I'm the protector from outside influences. But really, over the next few years of our collaboration with them, and this is not just the housing project, other projects as well, we built up that trust through our own actions. That's what I feel is most important. We see that people are ready to make some kind of sacrifice of their own to further this noble project, whatever it may be, and then we share that same value and also showing some humility, showing some flexibility, some maturity. All of these qualities go towards us really trusting the character of that person and then say, look, I trust you fully. At one point, we can just say whatever you say, we're going to go with that. And then they say, OK, on your side, you take care of all that. We trust you.

P. Verschure Now, do you see a tradeoff here between trust, which is in some sense also a given, right, and the need to explain objectives? Because you could say the more trust you lose in the

situation, the more in some sense, you have to cajole your participants by explaining why this is all very relevant and important. Do you see a tradeoff there?

- S. S. Puri Could you say a little bit, one more time, I'm trying to understand what the trust...
- P. Verschure Trusting goes. If someone loses trust in leadership, then leadership could respond by saying, oh, I will explain in more detail why this is super important for the whole world, and everybody, and you included. Therefore, you should follow my lead. If I trust the leader or the coordinator blindly, you don't need to tell me anything about what you're planning on doing because I'll just follow you. So do you see a tradeoff between goals, explanation, and trust?
- S. S. Puri Yes. I as a leader of sorts, I've learned to ask a lot of questions before I ask them to follow me. I need to know what their limitations are, what their goals are, and all that and make sure that I can help them achieve those, and they ask me a lot of questions also. So I think clarifying those goals ahead of time is really important. And then after that, once we're in the thick of it, it's a lot of just, you could call it blind trust. But there's also every night—another thing I should point out—every night we have meetings about how the day's work went. And then, even the students, everybody participates in groups and then we talk about how it went. Was it successful? What didn't work? And then if it didn't, then the next day, we don't do it. We don't wait for the whole project to end.
- P. Verschure So that also means there is a collective, if you want, interpretation and a meaning generation stage. Would that be a good way to describe it?
- S. S. Puri Yes. I mean, the meaning, what they learned from that day, we tend to look at it sooner than later. So we understand what did we learn and then we can leverage that for the next day. And also funny stories. And it's a time to kind of relax and get out of your head and get out of that exertion and then just sit and reflect without any judgment. And so I find it's very helpful for us,. any collaboration.
- P. Verschure But then how many people have gone through this process?
- S. S. Puri Thousands. Just the housing project alone. Somehow I got engrossed in that topic, but there's a lot of other examples.
- P. Verschure But how many different cultures?
- S. S. Puri For the housing project, or...?
- P. Verschure Let's start with housing and then in general?
- S. S. Puri OK, so the first few projects alone in the housing, were each time about 10 to 15 countries, and we got up to about 20 countries. And I think our biggest group was about 200 people at once. And this is another challenging one. They landed in Ahmedabad the day that the Godhra incident took place. Are you familiar with that?
- B. Rao Yeah, the Godhra incident, do you know about that Paul? It is a very controversial thing. This is when a train got burnt out, that was having Hindu pilgrims; supposedly by the Muslims. And then the Hindus attacked the Muslims in the state of Gujarat, and thousands were killed in civil unrest. I mean, they were lynched and it was like, really, it was a bloodbath. And it was a communal fight between the Hindus and the Muslims in the state of Gujarat. Very, very, very, very difficult time.
- S. S. Puri And that took place as the Japanese students and other people from around the world were on the airplanes to land right in ground zero. So we hid for three days in the city, and then we drove to that place where we were building the houses and it was scary in the beginning, but what happened is, everybody wanted to come. They said even if you had told me before we got on the airplane, we still wanted to come. home. And then very hard work, but they bonded with the local people and they learned a traditional dance. And then actually, when the governor of the state came, who is now the prime minister, they, before him and Amma,

who is our inspiration, about a hundred and fifty students were doing a traditional dance in the traditional dress, and that was the thing that made them so happy.

P. Verschure Because what I want to get to is individual difference and cultural difference. That's why I will look a little bit at the numbers. So in this whole process, as you now describe...how many if you want, individual failures, are there? People who just drop out of the process? They cannot keep up, they cannot adhere; what's your dropout rate?

S. S. Puri Not so high, actually. There was one woman who came after the tsunami in 2004. She came for rebuilding houses in the southeast of India, where the tidal wave hit, the tsunami hit. And she came to the site once and then she just never came again. And it was too hot for her and I didn't know that she had a psychological problem that she didn't notify us about and she wasn't taking her medicine.

P. Verschure That might not help.

S. S. Puri Yeah. And there are some problems like that, but usually...Oh, another problem I'll tell you, sharing a failure, is that in Kuna one year, I didn't pay enough attention to the kitchen conditions and dozens of people got food poisoning. And every day we were taking three or four people to the hospital for an IV [intravenous injection]. But some of those same people came again. They just really like it.

P. Verschure But that's interesting, because it shows that there is a generic process unit that seems to work. But now, do you see any cultural differences there because you have people from dozens of different countries? Does that affect the process?

S. S. Puri It makes it more complex, for sure. And I and the others who are helping make it go forward, either from the foreign side or from the local side, we all understand that we have to make some adjustments of our own and without burdening other people. And we have to sometimes talk individually with people who are having a problem, sometimes having a big group discussion about certain factors that need to be addressed, whether it's a foreign issue or a domestic issue. And so there is sacrifice, I would say, is involved to make things right, because it means you have to spend more energy, more time. And sometimes it's really hard to be one of the leaders because you don't get a lot of sleep, you sometimes don't get food, and you're walking long distances and it's over 30 degrees Celsius.

P. Verschure But now without wanting to tempt you to do, let's say, make racial stereotypes or cultural stereotypes, what are the main dimensions on which you see this variability? You could for instance, I imagine that people from certain cultures have not really been trained in speaking up, while in other cultures, they speak up too much. So, what are the main dimensions you see there in these cultural differences in the context of collaboration?

S. S. Puri It depends on where I am because I've done it in so many countries that I basically go by the culture of that country, because it's the safest way I find. Because look, we're doing it here in Australia, or Fiji, or Papua New Guinea. This is their country, let's all try to adapt to their culture. And then that's easier to get people to collaborate in that, because they realize that, well, no, this is not the US, this is not France, it's not UK or something like that. So it makes more sense and then that also requires that I have to understand that culture, or whoever else is coordinating. Like in Papua New Guinea, I had the country director for the Clinton Health Access Initiative [CHA]. He was very helpful on bridging that gap. So I was a newcomer to that country.

P. Verschure So you gave me the solution, because in some sense you're saying, well, we built in a reference, a cultural reference, and that's where we are. That's the host culture. But the first question is, what is the variability across the different cultures that you have identified? Because apparently, you need to ground it right, you need to put in the reference in order to overcome...

- S. S. Puri Yeah, I find that, it's somewhat due to the nation of origin of that person, but I find it's kind of more personality really. There are very fastidious Indians and there are some careless Japanese people, but not as many as there are, I would say, careless Americans because I'm from America.
- B. Rao I have a question that kind of rides off on that question. I know a lot of the talk has been about goals; common goals and things like that. But I was just wondering, and it's kind of related to what Paul just asked you. You have one common goal, like building a house is a goal. But I find that even something as tangible as building a house, the way that people understand the goal can be very different. And so I was wondering if that has a cultural element to it or not—just like what Paul is asking. What is the variable thing is, and you were saying it's more of an individual thing and not necessarily a cultural thing, but even in terms of understanding the goal, do all people of one culture understand the goal in a certain way from a different culture group? Is there a cultural aspect to understanding the goal?
- S. S. Puri Definitely, but I'm not so sure...I think the personal perspective is what actually determines the final experience of the person. But my experience is also that people come in with some preconceived notions about what's going to happen through this collaboration. And that's definitely a cultural thing. I'll give you an example of a guy from Australia. He was working in the road transportation department in Australia, in Adelaide, and he has built so many roads. So he's got it, and he's an engineer, and he's just looking at it from that perspective. All right, we're going to make a road. But when he got there, he realized that a lot of it is just digging holes with your own two hands and that the rock is in Gujarat after the earthquake, and the ground is so hard that you only get blisters, you can't dig hardly at all. And another guy from France, he broke his pinky[little/smallest] finger on the first day and he had to decide whether he was going to keep lifting these hollow blocks or just take it easy. And he kept doing it. So they kind of continued their participation while leaving their expectations aside. And then one thing I've noticed about people is, that conclusion of that two weeks, or three weeks, however long it is, that is the most important part for them, the closure. And that determines a lot of their experience. They come with certain expectations, and ideas, and the fantasies about how it's going to go. But then at the end, just seeing that family occupy that house for the first time and everybody crying or the children looking so happy with their new rooms, when they were living in a shack until then, then they forget about all those ideas and they just feel so satisfied that they could even come. So that part is not such a cultural thing, it's just your humanity that makes you realize that. That's what I feel.
- P. Verschure How do you deal with dissent in that process? If you break your pinky finger, you might also at some point say, or at the moment this happens, you're in pain like, look, sorry, that's it, I'm going home. Because people will be exhausted and tired. How is dissent managed?
- S. S. Puri We don't push anybody. If they want to leave, we do everything we can to help them. It is challenging. Some of these things, being in a disaster area, you know. In fact, I was sort of recalled from the ground zero in 2011 and the Japanese triple disaster. I went there with the idea that I wanted to stay there a long time and help. But I was the only person that had to go back because I had had a surgery earlier, and the board of directors said there's too much radiation, so you have to come back. I was a little sad about that, but I felt they have my best interests in mind. So a little bit of dissent in my mind but all these things, whether you're the one hand that is forced to go home, or you're the one who wants to go home, we have to be practical and rational.
- P. Verschure So, Shanta, we looked at your experience with also very concrete projects. We have examples. In your own career, you also went to officer training school, you said earlier, where they will train you in a very specific way to manage human collaboration, which might be rather different in how you have been doing it. So could you maybe highlight a little bit, of the differences?

- S. S. Puri Yeah, I think I didn't explain it properly, perhaps. I was accepted, but I ended up taking that job in Japan instead.
- P. Verschure So you didn't really participate in that?
- S. S. Puri I trained myself for it, but I ended up going to bootcamp in an ashram.
- P. Verschure OK. Exactly.
- S. S. Puri So actually, that was a really good lesson too, by the way.
- P. Verschure Why was that a good lesson?
- S. S. Puri Because actually, there was a lot of work. I mean, in those days we didn't hire any workers to do the work. So we were the ones doing the concrete and carrying everything, and the girls would also do it too—so girls here means adult women, not child labor.
- P. Verschure I understand.
- S. S. Puri And the idea is that, we have to be flexible because the work is very strenuous and if somebody needs to take a break, you just let them because that's the way it is and also sometimes the work changes. We take a big pile of wood and move it somewhere. And then you realize that, no, it's not supposed to be there, it's supposed to be somewhere else. And really, it's all about flexibility here because things change in a setting like this.
- P. Verschure So to make now a transition. So you did convert, and you joined an ashram and you follow Amma. In some sense, you could look at this dedication now to also a religious framework as also a way to structure human collaboration. If you want, there are principles also in this religious commitment that structures the way in which people can collaborate. Could you elaborate on that a bit?
- S. S. Puri Very good point, very good point. If it were not for that background, that foundation that we are working upon, a lot of other things could be going on that would not necessarily be condemned in another setting. So, I mean, it is a foregone conclusion that we have to value certain things and if someone just completely ignores some of those values, then it's pretty much clear that he's in the wrong and then we can call him on it. So it would be things like patience, humility, forgiveness; I mean, typical spiritual qualities that all the faiths probably respect. And then also compassion. I think these qualities and many others also, being willing to adjust to other people when needed. This is like the, I guess you would call it, the lubrication for that machine of collaboration in this setting. And I find that really the concrete results are a tangible edifice that is built on the foundation of all these values, the intangibles. And without that foundation of the intangibles, I don't see how I could have done any of these things. I mean, I didn't do it, everybody else did.
- P. Verschure But could we elaborate on this a little bit? The intangibles are values that are also grounded in a religious framework. Is there some structure to that? Because you listed a few, like your generosity, humility and so on. But is there some structure to that? Is there, let's say that an absolute ground zero value that it has to start with and you build the others on top of that, . for instance? Do you see some structure to them?
- S. S. Puri It would have to be selflessness, I would say. And that comes from a deeper quality or state which would be love, unconditional love, which everybody wants, but typically they don't want to give it to people. So, it's a challenge to evoke that emotion or that flow within ourselves so that we can be selfless. It doesn't come...selflessness doesn't just come by chance, right? So that is probably the core principle in my mind.
- P. Verschure And so the core principle is love and from love comes selflessness. But these other values, like you mentioned generosity, humility, how do you see them related to that?
- S. S. Puri Very good question. But to back up a little bit in the Indian philosophy, the core principle is really non-duality. So it means that there's only one in this. It sounds kind of, hokey, but the idea is that if there is a divine power somewhere, that means it's everywhere and we are that

also, that's the concept. So that means that if you, if there's no duality, then that means just like you value your own life, you should value everybody else's life exactly the same way because of that oneness. So from that is where that real love comes, because it's not a dualistic love, it's a monistic one. And from that, the idea is that compassion arises because just like you, if you cut your finger, you're going to treat that, whether it's the left hand or the right hand. So, like that, whether it's your pain or somebody else's pain, you treat it the same way. And that would be the compassion. And so from compassion, you find this selflessness because, like the mother has compassion for the baby, the baby needs a lot of attention or has to stay up all night, the mother will stay up all night. So that's how the selflessness comes from compassion and then from selflessness really comes all the other qualities,. I would say humility, patience, and so on.

P. Verschure That raises an interesting progression for further discussion and collaboration, because now in collaboration, we have to set goals. So now ego comes in, because you could argue that goals are on many occasions articulated through ego, because some ego is going to say this has to happen. So if you dial down ego and we go to love and selflessness, we might pay a price in the goals that collaboration can achieve. So how do you see that potential contradiction?

S. S. Puri Where is the contradiction again please? I was thinking you've really hit the nail on the head, but then I didn't get the...

P. Verschure But that's why I said potential. The point is, the ego might shape goals. It's ego that says, we need a village here and there. But then to actually make that happen, we need collaboration. Now we're going to dial down ego.

S. S. Puri Well, I think one of the ways is to not participate in it, if someone else is having that problem, then Amma has given an example; we can flow like water instead of trying to...if there's an obstacle, you don't have to try to break it and destroy it, you just flow around it. I'll give you an example. And again, I have so many stories from the housing project. We were unloading bricks from a truck, a lorry, and Kerala is the state where we've done a lot of it. And Kerala is a mostly communistic government and the Communist Party., I mean, I don't know a whole lot about it, about communism, but it doesn't seem to be like the original. It's just a lot of striking, and you know they will try to stop traffic and all that. So what they did, the local union came and told us that we have to pay them, even though we're unloading the bricks ourselves. They said, you're taking our money, so you have to pay us for it. And then we just didn't listen to them, we just kept unloading. But we didn't fight with them either, and we just...they had their goals, we had our goals, and we didn't ask them to help us or anything. But we kind of flowed around that issue, so that we didn't have any conflict. It's not within the same collaboration, but if there are people who are having a temper tantrum or something during a project, there's always a way to flow around that and not try to scold them, or control them, or, sort of criticize them, just let them calm down on their own.

P. Verschure Sorry, I interrupted you.

S. S. Puri No, I was saying, we try not to react to that because it's a dead end. The ego level is a dead end for all of us.

P. Verschure So what I'm looking for here is whether there is a cost to the approach you take. Because in some sense, also the examples you give, in some sense, the collaborative process is a reactive one. There's a disaster somewhere, there is someone who have a house. So the world is dictating the goals to you, and now you respond, based on love and compassion. But I could say, as humans, as humankind, we also need to set proactive goals that are purely future oriented where we say, look, we're going to have ecological collapse and if you don't take measures now, even though that's also a reactive one. But the more we project ourselves into future, the more we have to become proactive and then maybe to flow around the problems is limiting.

- B. Rao I think that maybe it's like...I think the goal doesn't necessarily come from ego, but the drive to achieve a goal probably comes, you have to have some ego to actually work towards a goal. A goal can come from compassion. Somebody is homeless, they need a home, so then the goal is to build a home for the person. There's no ego necessarily in the goal. But for example, for you to be involved in that probably does have some levels of ego. I mean, this is what I would think. I don't know.
- P. Verschure The point is, I'm looking for the limitations of the definitions that we have on the table. And one potential limitation I see here is that goals are in some sense given to you by how the world is evolving. So, then the question would be, is there really no role for ego in this whole process? And if there is a role for ego, how is that managed? And so this is why...I'm not excluding the possibility that goals can be set in different ways or that ego actually has no role. But I want to really try to be as precise about that as we can be. If we talk about proactive goal setting, can the collective do that purely driven by selflessness?
- S. S. Puri I can give you a brief failure story and an up-and-coming project. So just before corona or COVID struck, I was trying to rally up a lot of support for us to grow our own vegetables in the Chicago Ashram, the center there, because we have a lot of land and Amma has told us to grow our own food, we have to be self-sufficient. So I was getting everybody out there and I was putting on my boots and work clothes and going out there and trying to set an example. In retrospect, I think there was some ego of the leader role, the white knight who comes in and saves the day. I don't like that attitude, but sometimes it may creep in every once in a while. And at that time, we were all fired up but the problem was, at that time, I could have given a little more consideration, I would say, to the age of all the people and myself, and I actually hurt my knee because I overexerted it in the process of trying to get everybody motivated. And it was a little too much heavy on the leadership side. I could have been not so bold and pushy. We couldn't harvest everything that we had put in the ground, it was very challenging. But the next project that we have coming up now is extremely full of a lot of foresight, which is a project about scientific research about the efficacy of a lot of herbs which we've been growing there, different western, Indian, Chinese, etc., and using those scientific findings to improve those. And we're going to grow them all there and then they're going to be made into medicines and then they will also be applied to wellness on site. And also getting those approved by the FDA in America or something like that. So this is a very far-sighted vision that has come up in recent days, and we're very happy that we are on that path because it is not a reactive one so much. It's an example of a rather novel and a forward-looking collaboration.
- P. Verschure Right. So if you now look at the domain of collaboration and the way you also shape it within the context of the processes where you're active, what do you see as the most critical challenges right now?
- S. S. Puri I was thinking about that earlier because the challenges tend to be, one would be like a myopic approach, looking at things from a short-term standpoint, not really looking like you're saying for the future and just running the collaboration in a way that produces some short-term success, but in the long term, it's going to affect the collaborators and the growth of that whole process. So that was an example of it in that year when we had to take the Japanese students out in the middle of the night, that was definitely a myopic approach. That's one example. Another thing is with youth, an example from youth activities, in one place I was with the coordinators for the youth summit that year, and it was a bunch of I mean, I'm middle-aged now, so I'm not criticizing that, but it was a bunch of middle-aged leaders imposing their wisdom on the youth and there was no empowerment going on there. And so I feel that disempowerment is a big challenge because if your top heavy on the leadership, that can really discourage the motivation of the people. Other things are like I said, the white knight approach can be very destructive sometimes, it doesn't get people working together. The lone wolf approach also, I think, is dangerous too. A holistic approach, I feel, is really critical for all these things and looking at it for multiple layers of benefit, kind

of like biomimicry, approaches, so where we can get multiple results from one action. So, the opposite would be the atomistic approach, the non-holistic approach. We had a failure like that in Japan once a few years ago when I was still living there. We wanted to have everybody grow a very potent Indian sacred herb called Tulsi, and we got everybody excited about it. But we didn't really take into account the climate there, the climatological challenges there. And what happened was people who tried to grow them were sad when they died in the winter. And so it was not a very holistic approach. And one other point that comes to my mind is that, some people are, when they look at the collaboration, they analyze micropoints too much and they lose track of the macro vision. So the macrocosm is what gives meaning to the microcosm, really in a way, because if you're forgetting what the macro vision is, then there's no point in talking about all the details because you're not going to achieve it. Sometimes that happens, I find, and then some people are really nitpicky about little things and they lose track of the macro vision. Finger pointing is another problem that happened at the hospital site. Everybody was pointing, saying it was his fault, her fault, why everything is delayed instead of trying to put together the Microsoft project, the software. So I was trying to fill in 1500 tasks there, and all I got initially was just finger pointing. And there's none of these predecessor relationships coming out. Nobody wants to talk about what the options, the real issues are. And so that took a long time to, hack my way through the jungle of that. So these are a few examples in my experience.

P. Verschure OK, so did you learn anything from the COVID period we're in now in terms of collaboration?

S. S. Puri A lot of mistakes, of course. It seems to be arrogance for us to understand the modus operandi of COVID you know. We thought we knew what we were doing and that was a good lesson about human ego. And the fact that, I mean, what I learned is some of it is metaphysical, I guess you could say. I believe it's the total mass of all the coronavirus on the planet is like one gram or something, supposedly, and it's basically controlling everybody on the planet. That little one gram of something, and it shows how powerful, subtle things are. You can take like, a huge bomb and you still wouldn't stop the whole world, but something very subtle can be very powerful. That's one thing about life.

P. Verschure I think that's a very essential aspect of actually converging. So now look, we will not hold you up much longer. A more open question here is also, do you believe humans, humanity on this planet will ever be able to establish sustainable collaboration?

S. S. Puri I'm a bit of an oddball on that I think if I speak my mind freely. I feel that if we want nature to collaborate with us, we have to collaborate with her. And basically it seems to me that what's happening now in the world is a reaction from nature teaching us how to rectify our course because we're not on a wonderful course at this point. That didn't seem like a world over. We could be doing a lot better and so Mother Nature seems to be leading us in that way. So what if we don't figure it out ourselves, I have confidence that Mother Nature being our mother, will guide us the right way and show us where we really should be focusing, like how people felt early on. Now...everybody's kind of tired, but where they learned a lot early on, like how you can have a good life, and a fulfilled life, and you can have contentment even amidst this if you just change your perception. So I think we're going to be, if we don't create sustainable, or if we don't achieve sustainable collaboration now, we can expect more lessons, life lessons from Mother Nature and as the results of our own doings as well. So when we start learning from those experiences, I think we will be on the way to a sustainable collaboration.

P. Verschure But are you optimistic that we will be able to learn from those lessons?

S. S. Puri Yes. Because I mean, I see nature as my mother. So I think the mother knows what the child needs and the mother will keep giving those lessons until the child really gets it. She's very patient also.

P. Verschure But in your answer, a lot of suffering also is implied.

- S. S. Puri It could be. It's up to us how much suffering has to be experienced.
- P. Verschure So Shanti, if you could change one thing in humans. And to make them better collaborators and also, in some sense, save their own existence on this planet and save the planet, what's the one thing you would change?
- S. S. Puri In one of the scriptures of India, there is a saying that by nature, the mind is facing outwards, I mean, you could probably call it extrovert, is that what we say in English? I don't propose to rewrite the whole story about man and humans, but I think if we want to have sustainable collaboration and if we want to have a better world, then a little more self-reflection built into the human being could go a long way. I think a lot of our failures come from the lack of self-reflection.
- P. Verschure Swami Shantamritananda Puri, thank you very much for this conversation.
- S. S. Puri Thank you so much for being patient with me here with all my wild ideas.
- P. Verschure What's really interesting and puzzles me tremendously is this juxtaposition of the tangibles and intangibles. Because it also means, in some sense, in your model of collaboration, you really critically build on the ability of the mind, this extrovert mind, to impose its own interpretation on reality. Right to give meaning and value to the tangibles that building a house actually stands for something much more profound. So, how do we, where does that come from? Is that learned or is that just given, also the idea of the one right to identify with the one which goes through the history of ideas from the old traditions till now. Where is this coming from?
- S. S. Puri I think it is innate. I mean, that's my field of life, I'm in that already. So it's not fair to say that. But my experience also confirms it in many ways. I mean, it's really, I don't know how to explain it, it's beyond words when you're finished with a project like that and you've got the person who flew thousands of miles just to do something that was very difficult to help somebody and then, when they're saying, farewell it, the tears are so profound. I can just remember one example when I couldn't stop crying myself. There was the recipient of the house and there was a Japanese girl who was the leader of one of the groups, and she was representing her group, saying farewell. They sang a Japanese song to the people, a very sort of sad song, like saying goodbye. It's a traditional Japanese song and then just hearing the tune and the lyrics. Even though they couldn't understand what they meant, the woman started crying. Something touched her and the Japanese woman who is standing in front of her, she took that woman's, they both had like a towel around their neck, like you do in hot places when you're working. And she took that woman's towel and she started wiping her eyes, wiping the tears from her eyes. And when she started doing that, there were other, the woman who was wiping her tears started crying. And then the woman who was crying, took her towel and wiped her tears, you know? And then I started crying, but nobody wiped my tears. But I mean, I'll never forget that. Every time I remember it, I just get that emotion. And there's no reason why I should. It's just part of our humanity and the feeling of...there was another guy on that same year. He was a karate master, a real tough guy, and he was kind of showing off his strength and everything. And I would look at him every day when I would go to his site. And I was like, when is this guy going to just kind of be a real human being, you know? And it was the last day. His house was for a widow named Lakshmi. She is almost 70 and at her house, if you could call it that, if you just went to tap it, it would fall over. I can show you a photo. It's really sad. And then somehow he got so attached to this woman because every time they would come in the morning, she didn't have anything to offer them, but she would run around, as much as a seventy-year-old lady can, she was scurrying around the neighborhood to gather water, a little bit of coffee grounds and sugar so she can serve them what we call well in English, black coffee. She would make that for them and give it to them, and they knew that she didn't have anything, but she was going around and getting it from everybody every day. And so he got so attached to her, when we were saying goodbye, he just completely collapsed. And he was whimpering like a dog, like a little baby. And his

friends had to pick him up. He was so emotional. And so if someone like that can experience those feelings of the heart. I think anybody can.

P. Verschure Yeah, but these are really meaningful examples because it means that this wish of humans to drive the unconscious drive to bond with other humans, this love dimension you meant you mentioned earlier, is rooted in the foundation that we also collaborate and accept each other's idiosyncrasies.

S. S. Puri Yeah. There's no other way. I mean, the best example that we can really get is that of a mother and a child, because the baby is inside of her. It is oneness, really. But then somehow duality takes place. The baby comes out and then it's duality. But still, for the mother, it's still part of her emotionally right. So if we could all feel that way about everybody, think how different the world would be.

P. Verschure But what are you implying that if you want cultural development and economic development is sort of pulling us away from this intrinsic, more open-minded, love-oriented, selfless, collaborative state?

S. S. Puri I don't think it necessarily has to be that way because if we...don't, I don't propose to be an historian, but there are traditions and there are all these historical accounts of better times in the old days. I like to feel that human beings were a little more humane in the old ancient times. Not like 500 years, like thousands of years ago. I think every country has their version of that, sort of the golden years of that country. And I think that in those days, even though the, technology was not the same that we have, they had their own version of that and they were growing, and they were prospering, and they weren't hurting other people. Of course, it changed at one point and it became darker at times, but I still believe that that is possible. It is possible to advance as a country, as a society, and as a people without the negative side effects. And the key to that is going to be, from an administrative standpoint, it would be a holism, which is a holistic perspective. And then philosophically as oneness.

P. Verschure Well, thank you very much. Your insights were extremely valuable.