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AMMA'S DAUGHTERS: A TRANSMODERN  
STUDY OF PERSONAL, GENDER,  
CULTURAL, AND RELIGIOUS IDENTITIES  
AMONGST WOMEN IN THE AMMA  
COMMUNITY IN UNITED STATES

Bhavana Upadhyaya

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Bhavana Upadhyaya  
*Candidate*

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Communication and Journalism  
*Department*

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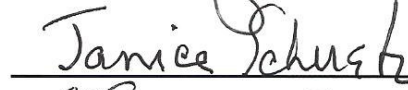
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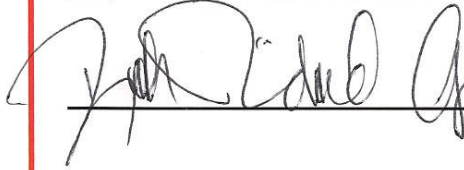
Dr. Jan Schuetz

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Dr. Glenda Balas

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Dr. Ruth Trinidad Gálvan

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PERSONAL, GENDER, CULTURAL, AND RELIGIOUS  
IDENTITIES AMONGST WOMEN IN THE AMMA  
COMMUNITY IN UNITED STATES**

**BY**

**BHAVANA UPADHYAYA**

B.Sc., Zoology, University of Calcutta, 1994  
B.C.J., Communication, University of Pune, 2001  
M.C.J., Communication, University of Pune, 2003

DISSERTATION

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the  
Requirements for the Degree of

**Doctor of Philosophy  
Communication**

The University of New Mexico  
Albuquerque, New Mexico

**December, 2009**

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**DEDICATION**

*To Amma and to the “Amma” in all of us*

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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Of those whom I know, I wish to first and foremost acknowledge my advisor, my guru in academics, Dr. Ilia Rodriguez for her many acts of kindness, deep support, strict and unwavering guidance, and understanding. Without her, this dissertation would have been lost many years ago. I wish to acknowledge committee member Dr. Jan Schuetz for helping me to articulate a different worldview. If not for her, I would have never dived into communication theory or its philosophical underpinnings. I thank Dr. Ruth Trinidad Gálvan for introducing me to Gloria Anzaldúa and other scholars who embraced spirituality in their writings. I thank Dr. Glenda Balas for her no-nonsense honesty, which enabled me to learn the ropes of academic presentations. I also thank my work supervisor Dr. Dan Young for the many insightful and helpful conversations on the subject of this study.

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In one sense, this dissertation belongs to Amma's daughters—it stands as a testimony of their lives and their struggles as they negotiated their spiritual paths. I thank and am deeply grateful to the New Mexico Amma community for welcoming and allowing me to be a part of their spiritual journey. I thank all participants of this research study who were gracious with their answers and my requests for edits and feedback. Without their sincerity and enthusiasm, this study would not have been as rich as it is now. I also thank them for their genuine concern and interest in this study and for their many offers to help me in this process.

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Finally, I humbly submit this work at the feet of Mata Amritanandamayi (Amma). Amma, I know, in my heart, that you brought me to the safety of New Mexico, into the Ph.D. program, to the topic of this study, and to its completion. I know it is by your grace that I have been able to delve deep into complex modern texts and translate between the ancient traditions and modern philosophies. I offer my deepest gratitude for your compassion and your unconditional love, and for helping me discover the purpose of my life.

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**ABSTRACT**

Using a transmodern philosophical approach, this study illustrates the different ways in which women devotees and participants in the Amma Community in United States experience processes of personal and social identification and disidentification as they strive to follow a spiritual path. The study uses the framework of spirituality, which is defined as the journey of disidentification from personal and social identities to the state of connectedness, to highlight how spirituality works in particular and contextual ways amongst Amma’s daughters in the community to enable alternative transmodern articulations of self and difference. The study focuses on four areas—personal, gender, cultural, and religious identities—to make the argument that the particular ways in which identities are negotiated in these areas can provide insights for theoretical reflection and praxis on social change and global peace.

In each area of study, modern understandings in that area is used as the foundation on which ancient knowledges and conceptualizations create new dimensions and articulate new readings to result in a transmodern understanding of that subject area.

Each dimension of identity studied showed its characteristic movements. In the area of personal identities, devotees and participants struggled with each other for Amma’s attention and for each other’s recognition and acceptance to validate and secure

their personal identities. At the same time, many also disidentified and stepped inwards to a state of deep self-awareness and regulation to find the root of conflict not in external differences but in the very state of difference created by ego (forces of individuation).

In the area of gender identity, Amma's teachings have motivated some devotees and participants to articulate gender by disidentifying the concept from the notion of "who am I" into mutable, voluntary roles that they could play in different social situations. At the same time, they understood their gender identity as a composite of masculine, feminine, and any other aspect in the universe which they bracketed in a very feminine term of "motherhood." This grounding allowed some of them to transform their interaction with male partners from confrontation to education and mutual respect.

In the area of cultural identity, devotees and participants found unique ways to consolidate their Western cultural identities and at times found it difficult to develop a full cultural awareness of the East Indian practices and norms. This, I have argued, could be improved through an intracultural awareness, a process by which we can understand the cultural roots of our assumptions and disengage from it. At other times, devotees and participants did succeed in disidentifying from their cultural structures through either a theoretical postulation or an experiential reality of an underlying unity.

Finally, in the area of religious identity, the dialectics of identification and disidentification allowed for a deeper inquiry into religious differences in the form of intrareligious dialogue.

The findings pointed to the importance of including disidentification and self-awareness in the scholarship in communication and presented a revision of the transactional communication model which may enable Asiacentric scholars to study communication in new ways.

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## GLOSSARY

1. *Arati*—It is a Hindu ritual of waving camphor flame around the image of a deity. It indicates the destruction of ego (represented by camphor) through grace and spiritual practices (represented by burning) into divinity (represented by the image of deity).
2. *Ashram*—A Hindu equivalent to monastery. Residents of an *ashram* may or may not be monks and nuns. There are no separate *ashrams* for men and women.
3. *Bramhachari/Bramhacharini*—They are junior monks and nuns who may have specific work responsibility in the Amma organization.
4. *Darshan*—A ritualistic hug of a devotee or visitor by Amma that is meant to be spiritually uplifting for the devotee.
5. *Devi Bhava*— A mystical process of revealing the Divine feminine in Amma's body. After a series of rituals, Amma appears in colorful clothes and ornaments, and is supposed to shed a few layers to be closer to the state of the Divine Feminine.
6. Ego—This is understood as psychic forces that alienate individuals from realizing their essential unity and interconnectedness and is understood, in short, as forces of individuation.
7. *Karma*— The results of having the sense of doership in action.
8. *Karma phala*—Same as *Karma*.
9. *Puja*—A ritualistic worship which includes chanting of sacred hymns, and observances. The worship may be done physically or mentally and can be directed to any Deity or natural forces.
10. *Satsang*—Literally, it means the company of Truth. In the Amma community, it is understood as the gathering of devotees for worship. It also means giving a spiritual discourse.
11. *Seva*—It is the Indian term for selfless service.
12. *Sevite*—A person who performs selfless service.
13. *Swami/Swamini*—They are senior monks and nuns who have significant responsibility in coordinating the various aspects of the Amma organization.
14. *Vasanas*—Inherent tendencies that are transmitted through many lifetimes and result in a particular personality in this lifetime. They include both positive and negative tendencies. It is believed that enlightenment is attained when we exhaust our *vasanas*.

## CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

Only when you learn to love everyone equally  
Will true freedom emerge.  
Until then you are bound.  
You are the slave of your ego and mind.  
--Amma

This quotation was pasted on the inside cover page of a handmade book that I bought at one of the Amma programs in Albuquerque in the year 2005. “Amma,” which literally means “mother,” is the way Mata Amritanandamayi—a mystic and spiritual leader from India—is addressed by her many devotees around the world. I had just begun my ethnographic explorations of the local Amma community and the quotation struck a chord in my heart. The notion of true freedom reminded me of the teachings from the *Upanishads*<sup>1</sup> that speak of a multidimensional form of the world that extends from the visible, tangible, material reality of differences to the inner mystical experience of reality as a unity. At the same time, the quotation evoked questions that are core of contemporary dialogues on the relation Self-Other. First, it digressed from the *Upanishads*—a hyper-individualistic discourse on self-transformation and enlightenment—to include the ethic of caring and the reality of the Other. Second, the quotation connected the ethic of caring to the importance of self-transformation: it is when *I learn* to love everyone equally that everyone is loved equally. And third, it predicated the evidence of that self-transformation on the ethic of caring: it is when I learn to love everyone *equally* that I cease to be a slave of my mind and ego. In other words, if we could learn how to love everyone *equally*, or what poet Narsi called as having *samadrishiti*<sup>2</sup> (seeing with equality), then material inequalities and conflict would not exist.

The quotation in the book, as well as my experiences doing fieldwork among devotees of Amma in the United States, led me to reflect upon the ways in which the ancient speaks with the modern in a form of transmodern communication that aims to advance spiritual understanding of some of the current problems in our world—

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<sup>1</sup> Ancient Indian scriptures

<sup>2</sup> From the song *Vaishnava Janatho*, composed by Narsi, that used to be sung frequently in evening prayer sessions by Mahatma Gandhi.

interpersonal conflict, gender inequalities, intercultural tensions, and interreligious chasms and rivalry. By transmodern communication, I mean a form of thinking that promotes a dialogue between the modern and the ancient, breaking away from East-West dichotomies, with the goal of benefiting the lives and living conditions of people in the contemporary world. More specifically, during the course of my field observations, I found that Amma's devotees in the United States listened and followed Amma's teachings and practices, which are derived mostly from ancient Indian philosophies and traditions, while simultaneously negotiating the social landscape of modern Western society with an occasional interaction with the modern East. As they attempted to *live* the teachings in this landscape, they struggled with their identities in various ways—sometimes emphasizing them and, other times, disengaging from those identity positions and charting a particular path in their spiritual journey through difference in the world.

Thus, I became interested in investigating how spirituality influenced the negotiation of notions of personal, gender, cultural, and religious identities among Amma's devotees and how these negotiations may illuminate existing theoretical and practical problems in the fields of communication, gender studies, and spirituality. One of my central arguments in this study is that spirituality helps us understand the problem of communicating across cultural differences in new ways by introducing the notion of interconnectedness. This notion recognizes that individuals can transcend conventional positions of identification—which result from approaching difference as an opposition between Self-Other—and, instead, approach difference as varying expressions of the same unity. Such a notion, I believe, could lead to a philosophically coherent theorizing of communication for peace amongst peoples and groups across the world.

Amma, who is considered by her devotees as an enlightened master, has a large following in United States. Her annual tour of United States brings her to New Mexico, where I conducted most of my transmodern ethnographic studies. Amma's "daughters" in this study were women in United States from various educational, professional, and religious backgrounds who were devoted to Amma and participated in the community in different ways—whether through consistent involvement in the local *satsang*,<sup>3</sup> helping

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<sup>3</sup> Gathering for worship.



with the organization of the Amma tour in New Mexico, or offering *seva*<sup>4</sup> during the tour programs in United States. The strategies used to generate data included traditional ethnographic methods: multi-site participant observations that lasted close to four years, in-depth interviews, and extensive document analysis. However, the philosophical paradigm that oriented the collection, analysis, and interpretation of data is rooted in a transmodern framework that incorporated Western as well as Eastern forms of thinking and thus produced research that departs from the conventional ethnography and opens new methodological avenues for understanding.

In this respect, this study advances a transmodern perspective that transcends the way in which identity, spirituality, and communication have been conceptualized in academic scholarship. Hence, ancient philosophies inform and insert themselves into modern understandings to forge an alternative path for transformative possibilities. Transmodern is a term borrowed from Lucykx (1999), who summarized the proceedings of a seminar held in Brussels by the Forward Studies Unit of the European Economic Community with the proposal of a transmodern hypothesis. He said:

A transmodern way of thinking is now emerging. It features a creative mix of rational and intuitive brainwork; an enthusiastic embrace of new information technologies; a tolerance, even celebration, of diversity; a conviction that protection of the physical environment has to be a central concern for every human being; a dawning realization that scientific discovery and technological innovation have made human beings the dominant actors in their own future evolution; *a new openness to spiritual guidance as a basis for “private” behavior and “public” policy*; and a move away from vertical authority systems toward “flatter,” more “horizontal” organizations, away from “recommendations-up-orders down” management and toward more consensual decision-making. (Lucykx, 1999, p.973, emphasis mine).

The transmodern, thus, attempts to preserve the best humanistic achievements of modernity while including what it calls the “pre-modern” (Kale, 2005). It also allows us to break away from the East-West dichotomy and to develop an articulation of alternative thought without being anti-West (Lucykx, 1999).

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<sup>4</sup> A job performed with a selfless attitude.

From this general framework, I have, first, problematized the Western, modern concept of identity that is based on a notion of self as an entity that is separate, discrete, and exclusively secular. Identity has been defined traditionally as an answer to the question, “who am I?” In Western thought, particularly in the Freudian perspective, the answer to this question has focused on ego for it enables the individual to discern between the real and the unreal and thus allows for a safe expression of a sense of self as individual, separate, and distinct. In contrast, Asian philosophical systems consider that the self expressed by ego is illusory and that there is no *real* difference between the self and the Other. This system argues that we have a common factor, known variously as the Spirit, divinity, or consciousness, that binds us together psychically. Ego in this system is an obstacle to the path of realizing our interconnectedness and ego-stripping, not ego development, is the desired process. Hence, while the Freudian approach says identity is an important ingredient for ego development, an Asian perspective speaks to the contrary. This alternative conceptualization of self as interconnectedness is also found in various indigenous traditions, the works of Western feminist scholars like Anzaldúa, Keating, and Fernandes, and in the writings of some Christian mystics and contemporary contemplatives like Richard Rohr. The latter works offer relevant models and a rationale for subscribing to the transmodern paradigm to address both social and spiritual concerns of our times.

In this study I draw on an Asiatic approach to self as an entity interconnected to and interdependent on the rest of the beings in the world. The Asiatic perspective—that derives its contents from, amongst other things, ancient philosophy and texts from Asia—radically overhauls the approach to the concept of identity by positing the notion of trans-temporal and trans-spatial unity of all beings. Such a unity also has been proclaimed as an experiential reality by mystics from different cultures through centuries (Wolne, 1997). This unity provides the modern world a new dimension from which to negotiate the existing social friction amongst different peoples. Consequently, identity is understood in this research as the always shifting, unstable emotional significance that is placed by an individual on a certain set of values and beliefs, affiliation to a particular cultural or religious group, social ascription, and discourses. Another central concept in this study is spirituality, defined here as the journey from

identification with certain identity positions to disidentification from such personal and social identities into a state of connectedness.

As mentioned above, this transmodern approach to the study of identity and spirituality had methodological consequences and led to an unconventional form of ethnographic research. For instance, I collected data using traditional methods but also incorporated the practice of “witnessing” and self-reflection as analytical and interpretive strategies. Active witnessing required disidentification or stepping away from my identity positions to be able to see the world as the participants and devotees in the community saw it. And in the process of data analysis, I allowed intuitive process—through dreams, intuition, and spiritual guidance—to influence the ways in which I organized different categories for analysis. Notwithstanding, once the categories emerged, I ensured that the narratives from the interviews and participant-observation supported those categories. Ultimately, I argue that research is also a spiritual process that can be deeply transformational for the researcher if she is able to approach research as mindful inquiry.

The research report is also transmodern in that it maintains the notion of interconnectedness of knowledge. From this perspective, no knowledge is discrete and complete; it is always interconnected and evolving with various other forms of knowledge. Hence, when specific constructs not forecast in my literature review appeared in my findings, I searched across disciplinary and paradigmatic boundaries for appropriate literature to explain them in the analysis section of each chapter. I also incorporated mythological stories, traditional narratives, personal accounts and self-reflection as interpretive devices and to give readers a vivid sense of the researcher’s presence and responses in the field. These various unconventional features blend and emerge in data presentation and analysis to give this report a unique character.

#### Significance of the Study

This study contributes to scholarship in five main ways. First, it is the first time an Eastern new religious movement, the Amma movement, has been investigated from the perspective of spirituality, communication, and identity. Second, it breaks with the epistemological bias towards modern thinking in scholarship by employing spirituality as a framework and envisioning the self as interconnected and interrelated. Hence, it provides an example of research that uses the notion of spirituality to radically reinterpret

relevant theory in communication and gender studies. In this respect, it also advances research founded on Asiatic philosophical assumptions and satisfies some of the Asiatic research objectives—such as the importance of stepping beyond Self-Other dichotomy, and the relationship of communication and spiritual enlightenment. Third, although a study of Indian followers of Amma had been published (Warrier, 2005), no extensive research had been conducted among Western devotees of a third-world leader. Fourth, this study highlights the community dynamics of the Western followers of Mata Amritanandamayi, arguably the most important spiritual leader from India at this time. Her humanitarian works and spiritual guidance have been neglected in mainstream media and literature in United States in spite of her strong local influence. The study seeks to resist the colonial discourse of white women saving brown women by documenting the effects of one brown woman on the lives of white women. Finally, this research opens space for an Asian communication researcher to study a transnational movement in United States that has its origins in Asia. It allows the much-marginalized Asian eyes to approach issues such as intercultural communication and feminism, thus providing alternative readings that may contribute to the diversity of theoretical approaches to these areas.

#### Philosophical Framework

Throughout my academic career, I have enjoyed reading insightful and fascinating research produced by scholars informed by the Western paradigms that emerged from the European Enlightenment. I respect the knowledge and benefits generated by these approaches, irrespective of their epistemology or methodology. In this respect, I value the contributions of positivist, quantitative studies for they allow policy makers and community organizers to formulate plans for community development. Interpretive works, on the other hand, provide rich insights into cultures and the way they function and sustain themselves; while critical theories provide important critiques of society and its structures and unravel the problems that humans in different communities face.

Yet, these paradigms are rooted in a philosophical view that encourages the split of humans from their universe, based on a belief that it is only humans who are behind global transformation. From this view, life is constituted primarily as “the realization of

the human desire to become the measure and master of all things” (Weiming, 1998, p.252). For example, an intercultural communication theory influenced by positivism may study culture as a variable, examine the ways in which culture “interferes” in communication processes, and suggest ways to overcome these cultural barriers to satisfy human desire for security and relationship satisfaction. But one would find it hard to encounter a research study that ponders on the impact of cultural differences on human growth.<sup>5</sup> How does the encounter of the other culture transform the individual? What kind of crisis does it create in the individual? What does that crisis teach the individual? What life changes result from those encounters? If life changes did not occur, then, why did they not occur?

Similarly, a critical study may analyze the inequity in power in a community and explain how some community members become marginalized and muted and describe the process of marginalization. Critical researchers may also address how justice is achieved by exposing the underbelly of a community. The assumption behind such approach is that only humans can undo the injustice that has been heaped on them by other humans. However, if we also focused on a longitudinal study on how justice was achieved for a particular community, we may discover that even though activists and intellectuals did help with the search for justice, the universe also supported such endeavors through seemingly coincidental events and situations. In other words, we humans are not pitted against Nature nor are we alone in our pursuit for justice. For example, several events occurred simultaneously around the world when India achieved its independence, like World War II, British citizens’ support for Indian independence movement, extremist uprisings in north-eastern part of India, and so forth. It would be naïve to think that Gandhi alone succeeded in making the mighty British bow down to his ingenious nonviolent Independence Movement. It is the anthropocentric approach to humanities that puts justice as solely a human endeavor. An anthropocosmic endeavor, like the one proposed by Miike (2004a), would expand such understanding to include the support and cooperation of rest of nature in our journey for social justice.

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<sup>5</sup> Autobiographical essays written around the issues of identity by sojourners, immigrants and multiracial individuals have spoken to this issue like Gonzalez et al.’s (2004) book *Our Voices* or Lustig & Koetser’s (2006) book *Among Us*.

I understand why Enlightenment thinking emerged and why it captured the minds of so many people. The extreme superstition, cruelty in the name of religion, and the hopelessness of impoverished and oppressed in the Middle Ages helped foster the rise of Enlightenment thinking. In its time, such a philosophy created the much-needed balance and brought back respect to the human body and faculty. Interestingly, in recent decades, a vigorous critique of the dehumanizing effects of the Enlightenment has led Western movements in philosophy, science, art, and religion to redress binary oppositions in thinking and advance alternative views through concepts such as interdependence.

In addition to scholarly concerns, I also bring to the forefront Asian worldviews that are well-documented and formally organized but not yet incorporated fully in research in humanities. For example, mysticism and search for the *true* reality is a fully-manifested and accepted part of Indian everyday life. In my own experience, at the age of 11, while meditating with my dance teacher, I found her tearing off her clothes and later realized her body temperature had increased so much that the skin could not bear the touch of the clothes. Indian philosophies speak of this as the opening of the *agni chakra*, of that energy center within the body that rules fire and heat. This brought early awareness into me of supranormal states, of things that evade science and can only be understood in experience. Similarly, when my teacher's son took up a vow of silence at the age of 18 and maintained it for 5 years, often going away to meditate in caves, I knew he was searching for that reality beyond the illusion of our self. And later, in high school, I had an English teacher who taught Shakespeare in the classroom and the mystical poems of Aurobindo in his office. As young adults, my friends and I discussed the contradictions of the various Indian systems of philosophy and reflected on the nature of the world. We inhabited a society in which many mystics lived around us, some of whom we met and others that we heard about. Mysticism was considered a natural phase in our journey for self-realization. One of my own mystical experiences occurred in a fish-market when I saw an intense bright light entering into the market through the tarpaulin-covered roof. I found myself merging in that light and experienced the world as that blissful light. Such were dimensions of being that evaded cognitive processes and were still an accepted part of life. To me, incorporating interconnectedness of self into philosophy is not a mere theoretical venture; it is an unshakeable experiential reality. To

be established in that connectedness, in the reality of the true self, has been a lifelong quest for me and for many millions others in my country. I know this to be true for people in other Asian countries as well as thousand others I have met in United States and South America. For example, the famous Persian Sufi mystic and poet Rumi wrote:

The lamps are different,  
But the Light is the same.  
So many garish lamps in the dying brain's lamp-show,  
Forget about them.  
Concentrate on the essence, concentrate on the Light.  
In lucid bliss, calmly smoking off its own holy fire,  
The Light streams towards you from all things,  
All people, all possible permutations of good, evil, thought, passion.  
(Mevlana Rumi (1207 - 1273))

But these ideas are often marginalized in mainstream research in humanities. The self is considered separate and distinct in mainstream modern thinking. Buber(1958), in spite of his forays into the teachings of Buddha and how it related to his concept of I-Thou and I-It, said: "I bear within me the sense of Self that cannot be included in the world. The world bears within itself the sense of being, that cannot be included in the image" (p.94). Levinas dealt the issue of ego in the presence of the Other more seriously in this philosophical reflection on the face of the Other. He said:

In Desire, the I is borne towards the Other (*Autrui*) in such a way to compromise self-identification of the I, for which need is only nostalgia, and which the consciousness of need anticipates. The movement towards the Other (*Autrui*), instead of completing me or contenting me, implicates me ... the relationship with the Other (*Autrui*) puts me into question, empties me of myself, and empties me without end, showing me ever new resources. I did not know I was so rich, but I no longer have the right to keep anything for myself. (Levinas, 1964, p.52)

However, Asian philosophers and indigenous mystics inform us that emptying "me of myself" is an extremely difficult process and this is borne out by the extensive documentation of their mystical journeys. In keeping with this difference in worldview, this study is informed by only those scholars (Euro-American and Asian) who understand

the self as basically interconnected. In this respect, the Asiacentric philosophical assumptions developed by Miike (2004a) speak to the above scholarly concerns and provide the necessary framework to base this study.

*Asiacentric Philosophical Assumptions*

Miike (2004a) formulated the ontological, epistemological, and axiological assumptions of for an Asiacentric approach to communication. Asiacentric assumptions have both a gross and subtle layer of influence. But they are sometimes misunderstood as only subtle, esoteric assumptions with no worldly consequences. Therefore, I deliberately provide examples from the material world to illuminate them. Miike has stated that the ontological assumptions of the Asiacentric paradigm acknowledge everyone and everything are interrelated across space and time. This assumption recognizes the essential interdependence of all beings in the Universe. This is not merely a worldview of Asian religions; it is evidenced by the global economy today. Draffan, in an interview with famous eco-activist Derrick Jensen (2001), described the mind-boggling interconnections of the world to a Vietnamese dinner they shared in Spokane, Washington:

The chicken was raised on Arkansas factory farm owned by Tyson Foods, which supplies one-quarter of America's chickens and ships its products as far away as in Japan. The chicken was fed corn from Nebraska and grain from Kansas, and was one of about 17 million chickens processed by Tyson that week. Once frozen, the bird was put unto a truck made from plastics manufactured in Texas, steel milled in Japan from ore mined in Australia, chromium mined in South Africa, and aluminum processed in the United States from bauxite mined in Jamaica. The truck's parts were assembled in Mexico. As the truck brought the frozen chickens to Spokane, it burned fuel refined in Texas, Oklahoma, California, and Washington from oil originating beneath Saudi Arabia, Venezuela, Mexico, Texas, and Alaska.

. . . . Another company associated with every facet of that meal was Azko Nobel, a chemical company with 350 facilities in fifty countries. It makes the chicken vaccines that allow Tyson to keep its operation relatively disease-free, as



well as automobile coatings and chemicals used at many stages in the agricultural and manufacturing processes. (p.7)

If not the sacred understanding of the Universe, then at the very least the real interconnections of our world should impress researchers to adopt the above ontological assumption. As Draffan (quoted. in Jensen, 2001) said, that the root of today's problems is:

the belief that I'm separate unit, independent of the web. But, despite my denial, I'm smack in the middle of the web, and I'm going to get cancer from the toxic waste, and the laborers who put my consumer goods together are going to get cancer, and to believe otherwise is delusion. (p.7)

Miike explains that the epistemological assumption of this paradigm is that everyone and everything become meaningful in relation to others. This assumption allows for multiple interpretations (Chen, 1987) and circularity in the approach to knowledge (Kincaid, 1987). For example, it was only when some Asian cultures were compared to European and North American cultures that researchers found there were differences in the ways these cultures functioned. One of the binaries that emerged from those studies—notably Hofstede's (1980, 2001) study of cultures—was the individualism-collectivism binary. But Miike (2004a), quoting Kim (2003) stated that ultimate purpose of knowledge is to transcend the different dimensions and differences and realize the interconnectedness of all things (p.33). Where is the interconnection that transcends the binary of individualism-collectivism? One approach could be informed by the Asian concept of ego (as in Upadhyaya, 2006) to interpret the individualism-collectivism binary as different expressions of ego. In individualism, ego is limited to being possessive only of the individual—individual identity, and individual property. In collectivism, ego is invested in being possessive of the group—group identity and group property. Neither allows a space for the *other*. Thus the dimensions are not at the other extremes of a linear continuum; rather they are varying expressions of human ego.

In a different context, today's peoples can be and have been best understood only in relation to one another. For example, the issue of illegal immigration into United States can be approached in many ways—historical events between United States and Mexico, the Central American political struggles of the last century, natural disasters, the rise of

industrialization in Europe in 17<sup>th</sup> century, increasing split between the poor and the rich in the world, rise of multinational companies, media's exaggerated portrayal of United States as the desirable place to live in, the structures by which Earth is split into political isolates. Yet a central issue is the human greed that tries to chalk off areas and mark it as belonging to one versus the other. Draffan has explained that human greed was founding reason why deforestation has happened in such a large scale:

The system is driven by our endless desire, and suffering is the result of our habitual ways of seeing and thinking and doing. I once read about a Canadian lumberman who said, 'When I look at the trees, I see dollar bills.' Before we could deforest a mountain, we had to change the way we perceived it. Before the trees could be cut, they had to be redefined as property and then as private property.

Once that projection and objectification has taken place—from living being to property, from trees to dollar bills—and once you identify possession of that object as your source of happiness, then everything falls into place. The forest has been privatized, and the landslides and species extinctions are all externalized. (Jensen, 2001, p.11).

Analyzed in a similar way, the endless desire and greed becomes the link that drives the apparently different dimensions of migration of Mexicans to United States or the deforestation in the rain forests of Amazon.

The axiological assumption of Asiatic paradigm harmony is vital to the survival of everyone and everything. If ontology describes reality and epistemology speaks about how knowledge is produced in Asiatic paradigm, axiology guides the knowledge to bring maximum benefits to this universe. In Asiatic paradigm, axiology is more than a political, polite corollary to research—it is the driving motivation for research. Bringing harmony begins with the understanding of the importance of an individual change to the entire system. Such a change is neither superficial nor simple. Draffan, again, spoke of the complex ways in which the illusion of separateness from the universe is maintained and the way we could perhaps restore harmony in the universe:

Personally, I don't use a chainsaw. When my neighbor gets his out, I shake my head and feel irritated that someone is cutting down the few trees left around here.

But, as always, it's more complicated than it seems. I use paper, so I've been letting somebody else wield the chain saw. . . . As a society we buy into these things. We need to shut down the nuclear power plants and take down the dams, too, but we'll never do that until we really feel the suffering they cause and understand the illusions on which they are based . . . . Attention to and care for the world. No matter where you are, or what you're trying to do—whether it is in your personal life or in the political realm—slow down, pay attention, and take responsibility for everything you do.(Jensen, 2001, p.12-13)

In a sense this study does this—pays attention to how people translate spirituality in their everyday lives; how that, in turn, influences their views about the world and themselves; it pays attention to how I, the researcher, conducted myself through the research; and how and if we did manage to create harmony amongst us and with rest of the Universe.

While I subscribe to the assumptions under Asiatic paradigm, I do not subscribe to the idea of Asiaticity because the term “Asiaticity” buys into the Cartesian idea of the binary. Centricity is defined as the “metatheoretical notion that insists on placing a cultural group of people are viewed as subjects at the center of inquiry” (Miike, 2004a, p.19). Asian thought and works have been marginalized in world scholarship and that Asian systems of thought have much to contribute to the development of knowledge and its application in human society. However multiple centers competing with one another for presence in scholarship is not the way to address this problem. It once again sets the stage for another competition and continues to divide the already much divided world. But we also need to remember that the alternative to multiple centers cannot be a simplistic paradigm that glosses over difference and relapses into Eurocentricity. It is with this in mind, I subscribe to the contents without subscribing to the political position implied in this view.

Further, I argue that the philosophical paradigm put forth in Asiaticity, as in Afrocentricity, is not so much about the West and the marginalization of the rest of the world, as it is a discomfort with the intellectual traditions emerging from Modern Enlightenment thinking and a struggle to reinstate the *ancient*<sup>6</sup> in

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<sup>6</sup> I use the word “ancient” instead of pre-modern or traditional for three reasons. One, I want to give both the ancient and the modern equal weight in scholarship. Second, pre-modern or traditional has

contemporary scholarship. To overcome this binary, scholars have recommended a transmodern hypothesis. Kale (2005) described transmodern as the synthesis of the best of what modernization has to offer along with the best that indigenous traditions and cultures provide.

My attempt in this study is to advance the transmodern hypothesis by trying to translate the ancient in modern terms and to improve mobility of thinking between the two intellectual worlds, so that future scholars could more freely access both the worlds. This is not an easy process for both the worlds entwine and capture my thinking in deep but different ways. So I invite the cooperation of the reader in this struggle to translate between paradigms, to work together to make, in Anzaldúa's terms, this unsafe, risky bridge our home.

#### *Definition of Spirituality*

An important concept that grounds this study is spirituality. Spirituality is the process of discovering the reality of “who am I” beyond the personal and social identities in the world. In much of ancient Eastern philosophy, the concept of identity as a social identity is rare. Ancient philosophies have paid great attention to the question, “who am I?” and explored that in great depth. For example, the Upanishads<sup>7</sup> describe Bramhan<sup>8</sup> as “neti, neti” (neither this nor that). On a similar note, Adi Sankara, the great Hindu philosopher, teacher and mystic from the eighth century A.D. said:

*Na mruthyur na sankha na me jathi bhedha,  
Pitha naiva me naiva matha na janma,  
Na bhandhur na mithram gurur naiva sishya,  
Chidananada Roopa Shivoham, Shivoham.*

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acquired a connotation of backwardness and conservativeness in academia. Thirdly, I hold that ancient is not a historically dated, culturally-rooted thinking occurring before modern times; rather it is a continuity of wisdom that emerged in ahistoric times and resurfaced several times in different ways across different cultures spread over all the five continents. Thus ancient thinking has cultural variations in indigenous traditions, pagan religions, mysticism as well as teachings in Abrahamic religions, some versions of particular Asian philosophies and in contemporary thinkers like Eckhart Tolle, Ken Wilbur, or Amma. I have been asked several times, how Asian is Asiaticity? The question is valid and my answer is, there are two dominant forms of Asian thinking—one, that is influenced by modern Enlightenment thinking but has its own cultural flavor as in the works of Uma Narayan, Gayatri Spivak, Lata Mani, Chandra Mohanty and others; second, that is influenced by ancient wisdom and has its own cultural flavor as in the works of Wimal Dissanayake, Anantha Babbili, Yoshitaka Miike, Tu Weiming and others.

<sup>7</sup> *Upanishads* are one set of scriptures guiding Hindu philosophy.

<sup>8</sup> Pure consciousness is termed as *Bramhan* in *Upanishads*.

(I do not have death or doubts or distinction of caste,  
I do not have either father or mother or even birth,  
And I do not have relations or friends or teacher or students,  
As I am Shiva<sup>9</sup> the all pervading happiness,  
Yes, I am definitely Shiva.) (Shanakaracharya, nd, para 5)

Similarly, the butterfly dream in *Zuangtzi* written by Chuang Tzu, a great Taoist philosopher, says that social identities are temporal and changeable:

Once I, Chuang Tzu, dreamed I was a butterfly and was happy as a butterfly. I was conscious that I was quite pleased with myself, but I did not know that I was Tzu. Suddenly I awoke, and there was I, visibly Tzu. I do not know whether it was Tzu dreaming that he was a butterfly or the butterfly dreaming that he was Tzu. Between Tzu and the butterfly there must be some distinction. [But one may be the other.] This is called the transformation of things (Majka, nd, para 15)

A *Shawnee* proverb says, “We are all one child spinning through Mother Sky,” and a *Sioux* proverb says, “With all things and in all things, we are relatives.”

Criticizing the neglect in Western modern philosophy of an essential self that transcended the conditioning of culture and language, Wolne (1997) argues that mystical traditions across cultures challenge the contemporary notions of identity based on a self created and conditioned by society. He compares Rorty’s accounts of the self with accounts from different mystical traditions and noted:

The traditional mystical accounts provide a much more detailed picture of the self that is grounded on careful religious and meditative investigation, not simply philosophical speculation. Thus, while Western metaphysicians have constructed their ontologies using discursive intellectual faculties, mystics put forth their ontologies based upon experiences confirmed by countless adepts. (Wolne, 1997, p. 92)

I attempt to reconcile the ancient understanding of the essential self and the notion of interconnectedness with the modern conceptualizations of the social self and identity

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<sup>9</sup> Shiva here does not refer to one of deities in the Hindu trinity, rather it means Pure Consciousness.

through a framework in which both exist as mutually enriching concepts that may perhaps advance our knowledge about identity and its role in human lives.

Thus, my understanding of spirituality adheres in the assumption of oneness of all beings in this world and the assumption that although many of us do not perceive this oneness at all times, eventually all of us will enter into this state of Pure Consciousness. Hence spirituality is the movement from the state of individuation to the state of connectedness.

I find a belief similar among many world religions, wherein divinity is the substratum to all life. All beings are varying expressions of this unity having different functions to play in this universe. However, the ego (in Eastern beliefs) or the fall from the Garden of Eden (in Abrahamic beliefs), detaches the “expression” from its fundamental unity with all beings and creates the physical reality of an individual.

This psychic detachment creates the Subject and the Other in the universe, which through various means, begins to build on fortressing the *assumed* reality. The Subject and Other contrast themselves by attracting identities of who they are to map their location in the universe. These identities may be personal identities or social identities such as gender, culture and religion. These identities locate the individual within a specific state, in opposition to the state of Other who is never allowed to be the same.

The Subject lives with the insecurity of losing the roots whereupon the assumed reality of individual may be destroyed. Thus the Subject seeks to constantly develop autonomy by defining various individuals, groups, objects, and ideologies as a personal possession. Any threat to these possessions jeopardizes the survival of the Subject. People and institutions handle these threats through conflict, war, and power struggle in various forms. As Smiljanic (2008) argues, “Going ‘beyond the ego’ is quite possibly one of the most difficult challenges to set up for oneself, particularly as we are brought up to situate our identity largely within the ego mirroring an ego-based society, which mainly seeks to keep individuals in fear and disempowerment” (p. 144).

At the same time, the Subject is also intensely attracted to the Other because of a vague memory of the Wholeness and intermittent psychic reminders of imperfection. Thus the Subject also seeks to connect with the Other and become Whole. However, the *state of connectedness* is achieved only by transcending or collapsing of the Subject-

Other position and the *experiencing* the sense of Unity or Pure Consciousness. However, the physical reality of human existence is not considered as an illusion; rather it is the notion of separateness that is delusional.

Spirituality is defined in this study as *the journey from disidentification from social and personal identities into a state of connectedness*.<sup>10</sup> In this sense, spirituality is *not* necessarily linked to religion, although I am studying a new religious movement. Based on my preliminary investigations, studying spirituality is a marked and significant independent feature in Amma's movement.

Associated with the definition of spirituality are concepts like mind, heart, and body. Unlike the socio-cognitive theoretical understanding of self in mind, mind in this study is considered as the seat of ego in an individual and a space in which both reason and emotion exists but the movement is an outward manifestation to the external world. One's mind tends to exclusively engage with the world, avoid looking inwards, and construct itself as whole and separate from the Other. The heart is the seat for connection with the rest of the world. It also consists of reasons and emotions but the movement is inwards, into the depths of the internal universe, a wise mind. The body is what sheaths the mind and heart into an illusory sense of whole and single unit. The grossness of the body is dependent on the strength of the mind versus the heart. If the heart is strong, the body becomes subtle and the universe is able to diffuse in and out more easily. In such a case, the person may experience psychic visions and intuitive understandings. Even the enlightened person does not become fully liberated until the sheath of the body falls off. My ontological, epistemological, and axiological assumptions influence and, at the same time, are affected by my research process. In other words, as the discussion in the following chapters will illustrate, my experiences doing fieldwork helped me to expand my understanding and, simultaneously, to read and interpret findings through these paradigmatic assumptions.

Background: Amma and Mata Amritanandamayi Math

She does not favor any particular religion. When asked to which religion she belongs, she says, "My religion is love and service." (Cheever, 1999, para 9)

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<sup>10</sup> One of the participants found this definition beautiful and wrote, "I didn't realize the meaning of spirituality on this level. I hope that I can someday achieve this state."

“When did you meet Amma for the first time?” This is a frequent question that is asked by way of introduction amongst devotees of a short, dark woman from rural India, popularly known in media and literature as “Amma,” “Ammachi,” or “Hugging Mother.” The answer to this question forms the first bonds of sisterhood or brotherhood amongst members of the Amma community, since the answer often includes a reflection on grace or, at other times, testimonies of a miracle. In the four years that I have been associated with this community, I have heard every now and then an answer that sounds like this: “I was sitting there, waiting for this lady, when she entered the hall. I saw her and immediately I knew, this was God.” To thousands of devotees of Amma, she is embodied divinity. Dr. Padma Subramaniam, a renowned dancer in India, has said: “Humanity does not always get this opportunity to see divinity in flesh and blood” (*Amma in Chennai*, 2007, para1). To thousands others, she is a great spiritual teacher and a living mystic. To few others, she is a great humanitarian. In the years I have been with this group, I have seen homeless, and lay people, famous actors, and politicians (including some prominent figures in New Mexico) weave their way to her embrace.

The term “God” is itself a contested concept. To some, the term may be symbolic, indicating a transcendent divinity, the true self. To others, it represents the Creator of all things that exist and a personal God with whom one could have a relationship. But as I read through some thousands of testimonies of different devotees around the world (available on [www.amma.org](http://www.amma.org), [www.amritapuri.org](http://www.amritapuri.org), and in *Amrutavani*, a magazine of the organization), one thing is clear: Amma has been considered God in both senses mentioned above. Her devotees and many of the participants in this study have said that she is the female Christ (Raj, 2004), Mary, different Indian goddesses, and *Bramhan*.<sup>11</sup> What I wish to emphasize here is that there is an extraordinary devotion among the several devotees of this woman. Raj in both his 2004 and 2005 articles testified to this. Warriar (2005) had similarly described the devotion to Amma amongst Indian devotees but also pointed out that the “long droughts” of having no miraculous experiences evidencing Amma’s presence in their lives also created disenchantment with the organization and Amma (p.102-118). I have similarly observed in my journey through

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<sup>11</sup> Hindu Advaitic term for pure consciousness or divine consciousness



several public programs, retreats, and *ashrams*<sup>12</sup> a devotion that throbs with such life that you are pulled against your will to find out more about this woman. It is pertinent to note here that I have been associated with several new religious movements as well as traditional religions in India and have met several living mystics. Yet the atmosphere around her had a certain intensity that was unlike previous encounters with gurus and their followers. I was charmed by Amma. I also learned that, as in Warriar's (2005) study in India, Western devotees, too, were at times disenchanted with other devotees in the community and sometimes with Amma.

My own journey with this organization started with a strange encounter with a nurse while I was in a hospital bed. I had, previous to the hospital visit, begun to ponder the suitability of researching Indian women gurus for my dissertation. My hospital visit occurred while I was in a deep personal crisis and in despair about life in general. One morning, my nurse came in, shut the door, and said that she wanted to give me something that may give me hope and strength. She, then, gave me a newspaper cut-out photograph of Amma. I must confess that the photograph seemed as the beacon of hope to me. Later that year, I went to meet Amma during her public program in Albuquerque. I had previously visited many other women gurus to scope out my research. This time, I was stunned by, first, the number of American devotees, and second, the vibrancy of devotion that I could feel in the atmosphere. I later found out, both through my trips to her *ashram* as well as media reports, that she has an even larger following in India. Eventually, I realized that my birth mother had accepted her as a guru for close to 12 years.<sup>13</sup>

#### *On Amma*

Amma was born on September 27, 1953, in a small fishing village called Parayakadavu in Kerala, a state in the southwestern corner of India. There are no secular biographies of Amma. The organization has authorized two biographies and a documentary—by an Indian and two Westerners. *Ammachi: a Biography* (1994) is written by one of her senior-most devotees, Swami Amritaswarupananda. The text is

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<sup>12</sup> *Ashram* is a Hindu counterpart of a monastery.

<sup>13</sup> I had been indifferent towards my mother's religious beliefs for a long time until I discovered in 2006 how Amma's photo had been in my house since my early twenties and had accompanied us in our (my and my brother's) weddings. I even found a pendant carrying Amma's photo in my wedding jewelry. My mother told me that she had also asked Amma's blessings for my Ph.D. studies when she met her in Chennai, India.

replete with adorations that are often expressed in a guru-student relationship in India or elsewhere. This would be called a hagiography in the West, a term that has a negative connotation in India since the biography that shows *undue* reverence to the saint. But the biography of Amma written by Western author, Judith Cornell and titled *Amma: Healing the Heart of the World* (2001) also conveys devotion. And the documentary *Darshan* (2005) produced by French filmmaker Jan Kounen expressed a similar but restrained admiration and adoration for Amma.

From her biographies, we learn that since childhood she had enormous devotion to the Indian god Krishna, and that she suffered every now and then from mystic madness or ecstasy. She was beaten up by her parents for her transgressions. She did not study beyond fourth grade. She refused marriage and was repeatedly harassed by her family and relatives on this issue. When she was about 22 years old, she experienced a deeper mystic transformation, during which she experienced self-identification with her chosen deity, Krishna—a state known as *Krishna Bhava*. This attracted the attention of several villagers who began to recognize her mystic states. Later she developed *Devi Bhava* states, which are a spiritual mood of self-identification with Mother-Goddess. I have seen old film recordings of these events and can testify that there seems to be a difference in the appearance of this woman when she is in those states. A song written by Amma, supposedly after her enlightenment, speaks to her mystical experience and her purpose in life after realization:

Smiling, She became a Divine Effulgence  
And merged in Me. My mind blossomed,  
Bathed in the many-hued light of divinity.  
The events of millions of years gone by  
Rose up within me. Thenceforth,  
Seeing nothing as apart from my own Self,  
A single unity, and merging in the Divine Mother,  
I renounced all sense of enjoyment.  
Mother told me to ask the people  
To fulfill their human birth. Therefore,  
I proclaim to the whole world

The sublime truth that She uttered,

"Oh Man, merge in your Self!"(Amritanandamayi, nd, para 3)

Soon she began to attract disciples from all over the country and outside. In Amma's Indian *ashram* at Amritapuri, I spoke with Western disciples that had been with her for more than 20 years. According to a devotee, Amma was known as a great mystic amongst the different gurus and mystics of that time. It was under the instruction of her guru, who had just died, that this devotee came in search of Amma. In India as well as outside, mystics and spiritual teachers have their own modes of communicating about who is exalted and who is not. It is similar to academia, where long-time scholars know which new scholar shows promise and whose scholarship must be followed closely. The same applies to the world of mystics. One of the close devotees of Amma in Albuquerque, New Mexico, also met her through an instruction from a mystic in New Mexico.

Amma first traveled to United States in 1987. One of the first places she visited was the state of New Mexico. According to her New Mexican devotees, Amma considers New Mexico to be a holy land that has been the refuge of several spiritual seekers. The Mata Amritanandamayi Math has three *ashrams*<sup>14</sup> in the United States and one of them is located in Santa Fe, New Mexico. Thus New Mexico boasts devotees who have been with Amma for decades.

The most intriguing and unique practice associated with Amma is *darshan*.<sup>15</sup> Thousands of devotees wait for long hours to be able to go up to her and be enveloped in her embrace for a few seconds. She holds them lovingly in her arms and strokes their head, back, spine, or chest. She applies sandalwood paste on their forehead. She usually whispers a few loving words into their ears, gives them *prasad*<sup>16</sup> comprised of a Hershey's kiss and some flower petals. A lucky devotee may get a fruit. Sometimes she may chat with the follower for a minute and then turn to receive the next visitor. Sometimes when a person is getting ready to leave, she may look at them straight in the eye and pull them back and lavish them with another round of kisses and blessings. Sometimes, she attends to other duties while she is holding someone in her lap, as

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<sup>14</sup> A Hindu counterpart of a monastery.

<sup>15</sup> Spiritual hug.

<sup>16</sup> Sacred offerings.

responding to a phone call, discussing an issue with her *swamis* and *bramhacharis* (monks who have been assigned different levels of responsibility in the running of the Math), practicing a new song, looking at some artwork. These moments are glorious for the devotee, who stays buried in her soft lap, feeling her stroking you all the while. The devotees, who have experienced her singing whilst in her lap, tell me that it is an extraordinary experience—deeply calming and spiritually enhancing. There are often conversations amongst devotees about whether staying in her lap for long is actually an indication of some major trouble brewing their way, and this interpretation does worry some devotees. There are competitions amongst the devotees on who gets the last *darshan* of the day from Amma. Devotees try to manipulate their position in the *darshan* line to be able to get the last *darshan*. Then some disciples want to be on Amma's left side or right side while going up to her for *darshan* (there are usually two lines moving simultaneously for *darshan*).

Devotees react to *darshan* in many ways. Some come away with a broad smile and go around hugging other people, others weeping and yet others become meditative and usually begin meditating somewhere in the vicinity of Amma. Some take a seat near Amma and stare at her for hours. For several others, *darshan* is a time to chat with Amma. Some of the conversations during *darshan* are unpredictable. I have watched people tell Amma a joke and others who ask her what soap she uses. Sometimes, devotees use this opportunity to ask Amma a question or share a problem. This is where Western devotees often confess to be jealous of Indian devotees, for Indians who can speak her language (Malayalam or Tamil) are at an advantage in these conversations. When Westerners speak to Amma, they are aided by a translator, which allows for conversation but it is not as fluent as native speaker interaction. However, I have also found several Westerners joking and laughing with Amma. *Darshan* is usually so addictive that people visit her every day just for *darshan* when she is in a city.

Amma has won several awards including the Gandhi-King award for non-violence at the Global Peace Initiative of Women Religious and Spiritual Leaders, at the United Nations in Geneva, Switzerland, in October 2002. Her keynote lecture entitled *Awaken Universal Motherhood* has been hailed by her devotees as her firmest support for women's struggles. In one sense, Amma is a feminist although she never uses that term to

describe herself. She has consecrated temples and given some of her women devotees, priestly duties, at these temples. This is a taboo in traditional Hindu religion, which considers women to be polluting and hence unfit for such duties. Much of her organizational leaders are women. Further, she hugs all her devotees, irrespective of gender, even when full bodily contact with members of male gender is also taboo in both Hindu religion as well as Indian society. As Raj (2004) pointed out, her discourse, during *darshan*, is an area “where tradition is at once defied, redefined, and transcended” (p.205).

### *Teachings*

It is hard to summarize her teachings. Her messages from the past twenty years have been extensively documented in several volumes of *Awaken Children*.<sup>17</sup> She explains the philosophy guiding the community elaborately at the end of this chapter. In this section, I present categories of her basic teaching: (1) Love is all that is needed, (2) Practice selfless service to others, and (3) Develop egolessness.

During her public programs or retreats, Amma gives a very short spiritual lecture. She imparts the bulk of her teachings one-on-one at the time of *darshan*. A devotee during this *darshan* may ask Amma a question (personal, intellectual, devotional), and Amma answers. The devotees document these answers. But sometimes, the teaching is not verbal. Some of her devotees, both here in New Mexico or in India, tell me that sometimes a gesture or a look that Amma gives them awakens within them an answer or knowledge as they call it. They find Amma as a personal teacher teaching every moment.

*Love is All that is Needed*

Amma places a great emphasis on unconditional love. To love without expectations, to love without a desire, to love fully, and to love all are central themes in her messages and actions. She considers devotion to be more powerful than critical intellectual thinking. According to some of her long-time devotees, for many years, in her Indian *ashram*, she did not teach disciples any yogic or other spiritual technique; rather she asked them to love their chosen God or Deity or Energy devotedly. Devotion and

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<sup>17</sup> Several volumes of transcripts of conversations with Amma from the 1980s. The transcriptions were made by one of her senior disciples. The transcripts provide an everyday record of Amma’s teachings, her life as well as various mystical incidents involving the devotees.

faith, according to her, are sufficient to bring a devotee close to God or pure consciousness. At the same time, she does not believe that God only exists as the transcendent one, but she holds that God is present in everything and everyone. She has asked many of her devotees to not only love her (i.e. Amma) but to love and recognize everyone as Amma. This quotation from Amma in Linda Johnsen's book *Daughters of the Goddess: Women Saints of India* frames this section:

First, develop one-pointed love towards God. When that love becomes the center of your life, and as the devotional practices become more and more intense, your vision changes. You come to understand that God dwells as pure consciousness in all beings, including you. As this experience becomes stronger and stronger, the love in you also grows until at last you become that. The love within you expands and embraces the entire universe with all its beings. You become the personification of love. This love removes all dryness from you. It is the best cure for all emotional blocks and negative feelings.

Reasoning is necessary, but we should not let it swallow the faith in us. We should not allow the intellect to eat up our heart. Too much knowledge means nothing but a big ego. The ego is a burden, and a big ego is a big burden. (Johnsen, 1994, p.99)

#### *Practice Selfless Service*

Selfless social service or *seva*, as it is called in the Math, is one aspect of her teachings and practices that a person new to the Math will immediately notice. In a public program, there is a table for registering people to do different *sevas*. The Math and Amma emphasize social and community service more than they do meditation and other activities. In fact, social service is considered a *sadhana* or a spiritual practice. As Amma says: "I realize my purpose is to console—to personally wipe away tears through selfless love, compassion, and service . . . . Compassion to the poor and the needy is our duty to God" ([www.amma.org](http://www.amma.org), accessed on October 2, 2004). Elsewhere she emphasizes:

We can never close our eyes to the world in the name of spirituality. Self-realization is the ability to see ourselves in all beings. This is the third eye through which you see, even while your two eyes are wide open. We should be able to

love and serve others, seeing ourselves in them. This is the fulfillment of spiritual practice. ([www.amma.org](http://www.amma.org), accessed on March 5, 2007).

In this context, her Indian *ashram* is unlike other Indian ashrams I have visited. Residents do not live in a peaceful, isolated place; rather, they are very much engaged with the villagers around them. Often on a Sunday, local villagers come to the *ashram* to be entertained by different performers. When I lived in the *ashram*, about 2,500 kids from tsunami-affected villages descended on the *ashram* for a week-long camp. During that time the words of peace and tranquility, which are often associated with *ashrams* and spiritual retreats, seemed a misnomer. These kids were supervised by the *ashram* monks, who found this as one of the hardest spiritual practices. Yet, while most of us were tired of the kids and their mischief (I witnessed several monks and spiritual aspirants lose their temper during this period), Amma added to this confusion by visiting the kids on whim and arranging sudden delightful *darshans* for them. I would hear at some corner of the *ashram* that Amma wanted to meet the kids and give them *darshan*. *Ashram* residents, old and young, ran towards the main hall to make use of the opportunity to meet her. In the *darshan* lines, they would jostle with kids for a place in the line, fight their way up to her embrace, and emerge from that embrace with the smile of a happy child.

#### *Developing Egolessness*

In this aspect Amma definitely identifies with Eastern philosophies in her teachings. Attaining an egoless state is akin to the goal in Advaita Vedanta philosophy in Hinduism and has parallels in Buddhism and Taoism and other schools of philosophy in Hinduism. To an extent this is similar to some Christian theology that emphasizes becoming humble or small. But as Bess (2000) pointed out, the question of non-self is not an issue in Christianity; duality of the self and God is always present. In the *dwaita* tradition in Hindu philosophy, a similar duality between the devotee and the deity is maintained, and the devotee never aspires to merge in the deity. This tradition emphasizes the heart as does Christianity. But other Eastern traditions consider the attainment of the state of non-self or merging into the divine as enlightenment. In Amma's teachings and spiritual instructions to her devotees, variations of this principle emerge. She says the following in her dialogues with devotees:

If the seed has to sprout, it should go beneath the soil with the attitude, “I am nothing.” It cannot grow into its real nature as a plant if it haughtily thinks, “Why should I bow down to this dirty earth?” When the button on the handle is pressed down, the umbrella opens. Similarly, if we cultivate and develop humility, when our ego is made to bow low in front of the Supreme and His Creation, visualizing everything as Him, only then will our Real Nature unfold.

People who think, ‘I am great and something special,’ are in reality smaller than anyone else. They will always try to project their ego while engaged in any action whatsoever. Just like an over-inflated balloon, they will have to burst one day. The really great people are those who take themselves to be servants of God and who serve all with humility and simplicity.

The Supreme Reality is within us, but we are not aware of It. We remain in the worldly plane of existence due to ego and this is why we do not know this truth. (Amritanandamayi, 1991, p.39-40).

#### *Other Comments on her Teachings*

In a sense, Amma does not teach anything that is radically different from other gurus and teachers from the East. Yet, it is not the message, but the messenger that determines the influence of the message in this case. Many of her devotees do not read her books, and many do not even understand what she says (either in her native language, Malayalam, or the English translation). Yet, they find her to be a personal teacher. During my stay in the Indian *ashram*, I met several Spanish-speaking (both from Spain as well as Latin America), German-speaking, and Japanese-speaking residents who hardly spoke a word in English, and spoke none of any native language in India. Yet, an observer could watch their eyes shine whenever Amma was around. Other times observers could see, after the *darshan*, and among the meditating with closed eyes, tears flowing down devotees cheeks. I struggled to speak with a Spanish-speaking woman to find out how she came to live in the *ashram*. She said that she could not speak to Amma or understand what Amma said, but when she met her and was hugged by her, she knew Amma was special. Within a few months of meeting Amma in Spain, she wound up her business in that country and moved to the *ashram* in India. This story repeated in the narratives of



many monks and *ashram* residents in India shows that Amma carries intriguing and powerful charisma.

### *The Organization*

Mata Amritanandamayi Math (or MAM), was established in 1981 and recently recognized by United Nations as a non-governmental organization (NGO). I refer to MAM as the Amma organization and describe its three major areas of focus: education, humanitarian activities, and spiritual upliftment. All activities in MAM are managed by monks and volunteers of the organization.

### *Structure*

The organization is managed by the senior disciples of Amma. Most of the disciples in senior leadership positions are renunciates but some are householders who have dedicated their lives as couples to the organization. The director and president of the Amma organization is Amma. The vice-president is Swami Amritaswarupananda. He is assisted in his duties by a large number of disciples who are mostly selected by Amma personally to head a particular institution or area. Thus a renunciate disciple of Amma heads the *satsang* in United States.

According to the public tax profile available with Internal Revenue Service in United States, the organization has no employees in United States. Some sites and indeed, some Indian scholars<sup>18</sup> have accused Amma of employing famous public relations consultant Rob Sidon to lead a campaign for her. However, devotees informed me that Rob Sidon is a volunteer devotee with the organization who has dedicated many hours of his time and his expertise to the organization without pay.

Much of the organization, in India and abroad, is run on donations, retreat fees, and sales of products made by volunteer Amma devotees. In 2006, according to the Human Resources of India report on foreign contributions made to non-governmental organizations, the organization received about Rs.86 crores or \$17 million in foreign contributions and ranked as the fourth largest organization receiving foreign contributions. The top two organizations were Christian-based humanitarian organizations. Despite the resources, Amma and all members of the tour staff travel on

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<sup>18</sup> For example, this accusation was made in response by several members of the audience to my rhetorical analysis of one of Amma's speeches in a paper presented at National Communication Association Conference in 2005.

economy airfare between countries. In between cities in a country, Amma and her senior disciples mostly travel on road.

While traveling in India as well as when talking to Indian scholars in the U.S., I often heard this allegation: “Amma is surrounded by high-profile disciples and everything is run by them. They have complete power over the institution.” As a researcher who has been in the field for close to four years, worked with the Math in various capacities, and also observed Amma for close to 20 hours a day for many days, these accusations are without merit. Amma is in complete charge of all aspects of the functioning of the Math—whether day-to-day, short-term or long-term plans. Three examples provide evidence to my statement.

First, when I lived in the *ashram* in India, I accepted the job of a breakfast supervisor. One day, a hawk entered the dining halls (the halls are not fully enclosed) and began attacking people who were holding plates of food. People were terrified. My impulse was to capture the hawk and send it to the zoo. However, the head of the *ashram seva* forbade me from doing so without specific instructions from Amma. That night, the Math administration talked to Amma and she gave instructions not to touch the bird, and instead, to raise the existing netted makeshift doors. Her logic was if the bird did not have a straight line of attack, it could not swoop on the food. At that time Amma was in San Ramon, California, giving one of her marathon *darshans*.

Second, I sat at close quarters with Amma listening to all the calls she took and her conversations with her *Swamis*. Not only do *Swamis* consult her about numerous issues, but she gives them instructions all the way from the U.S. to a construction manager in India in charge of rebuilding houses for tsunami-affected people—what should be the distance between the houses, how deep to dig the foundation etc.

Third, during the public programs or retreats I have watched Amma decide how many tokens to be distributed that day to people (not that anybody is turned away, but discerned how Amma decided to redistribute new tokens that new arrivals get their chance to see Amma). I once made the mistake of announcing the token number during a public program, and Amma sent a monk to correct me. Amma is not only in charge of all issues in the Math, she seems to be the sole person in charge of everything in the Math.

*Education*

The Math supports a full-fledged university in India called Amrita University, which has four campuses in Amritapuri, Bangalore, Coimbatore, and Cochin. The disciplines taught in these campuses are engineering, medicine, journalism, information technology, and management. All the four campuses are linked via an Indian Space Research Organization (ISRO) satellite. Faculties in these campuses are monks or highly educated non-resident Indians, who are either returning to India or teaching as visiting faculty. Several of the administrative staff are also devotees of Amma.

Research in physical sciences is also encouraged and according to the *ashram* website. Currently 50 research projects running in different fields of medicine and several state-of-the-art technological research projects are underway in several areas of engineering. The university also encourages the studies of Ayurveda (a traditional Indian science of medicine) and has both educational and research facilities for the same. The university also has a school devoted to teaching deaf and hearing impaired students.

In addition, an industrial training center provides training in different trades. The training was provided free of charge to youths after the Asian tsunami disaster of December 2004. The university also has an Institute on People's Education that trains the poor on various jobs, from nursing to candle-making. An adult literacy program is associated with the Institute. Environmental protection is another endeavor of the organization, and three medicinal plant reserves are managed by the MAM. A host of educational activities to promote interest in home gardening is also part of the organization's educational efforts.

At the level of primary and secondary education, 53 K-12 schools around India are run by the organization that also provides scholarships for children of poor families. A special project for tribal people has also been initiated and 10 schools have been opened. The tribal project focuses on "preserving traditional tribal afforestation practices, promoting environmental protection in tribal areas, and provide training tribal agricultural practices" (*Embracing the world for peace and harmony*, p.60).

#### *Humanitarian Activities*

The organization also built a world-class 800-bed hospital at Cochin, India, called Amrita Institute of Medical Sciences or AIMS. This hospital is very popular to rich and poor alike. Expensive treatment is given free to those who need it. Additionally, another

hospital that is fully charitable and provides treatment free of cost was also built near the ashram in India. In addition, the organization built a hospice, which is quite extraordinary facility since only two other hospices exist in India. The ashram also sets up several medical camps around the country, where some of the doctors from the West volunteer as part of their seva.

The Math has been very active in the rebuilding efforts after the 2004 tsunami. It not only housed several affected villagers for several weeks, but has been active in rebuilding communities. According to the website of the *ashram*, this is a rs.100 crores or 23 million dollar project. The organization rebuilt 6,200 houses, providing free education, healthcare, and employment to several thousands, made new fishing boats for the fishermen in the affected areas, and offered free clothing, food, household items, etc. The Math was also active during the 2005 United States Katrina disaster and securing funds for the affected people.

Similarly, the Math reconstructed several villages fully after the Gujarat earthquake of 2001 and the tsunami of 2004. Besides these projects, they built houses for homeless and slum-dwellers in several places in south and west India. Today, the project has completed building homes in more than 12 cities and towns in India. In Pune, according to the promotional literature, the organization has built homes to accommodate 1,800 families living in slums (*Embracing the world for peace and harmony*, p.34).

In addition, about 700 orphans live in the orphanage in Madurai, India, and the Math also built two old age homes in India. An home for seniors is being built in Oklahoma, U.S.A, also. Further, about 50,000 widowed women or married to sick or disabled husbands have been given lifetime pensions by the Math. The Math has also built a domestic violence shelter for women in Tamil Nadu, India. And it regularly provides technical training to women so that they can find employment through a program called *AmritaSree*. Many thousands of women have also been given free sewing machines so that they can start tailoring. In addition, prostitute rehabilitation is high on the priority list of the *ashram*. The endeavor of the *ashram* is to be able to rehabilitate all the prostitutes in Kolkata (previously known as Calcutta)'s infamous red-light district in Sonargachi. The organization also conducts free wedding ceremonies for the poor. Free legal aid is also provided to the needy by volunteer lawyers in India.

The most popular service of the organization in the U.S. is *Amma's Kitchen* project, a location where devotees prepare food for the homeless. Devotees also organize to pray for troubled members of the organization or during climatic turbulence.

The Math established the Green Friends project, which is active in both India and United States. The project volunteers have participated in large scale afforestation (planting tree saplings in large areas where trees have been indiscriminately cut down) measures in India. A meditation method called eco-meditation is encouraged, which allows the spiritual aspirant to reflect on the interconnection of nature and humanity and the necessity to ensure harmony.

The prisoners' welfare project is underway in 15 states in United States. Volunteers visit prisoners and write letters to them regularly. In Santa Fe, New Mexico, the Integrated Amrita Meditation technique is taught to juveniles in the Santa Fe Juvenile Detention Home.

### *Spiritual Upliftment*

The Math centers in 33 countries all over the world and include United States (more than 80 groups), Canada (8 groups), Argentina (1), Costa Rica (1), Brazil (1), Colombia (1), Austria (1), Belgium (2), Denmark (1), Finland (1), France (2), Germany (5), Italy (1), Luxemburg (1), Ireland (1), Netherlands (1), Spain (1), Switzerland (5), Sweden (2), United Kingdom (1), United Arab Emirates (4), Malaysia (1), Japan (1), Singapore (1), Mauritius (1), Reunion (1), Kenya (1), and Australia (8).

These centers function as local agencies of the Math. They hold *satsangs* (gathering of people for prayer), local community service activities like Mother's Kitchen, fundraising activities for charitable activities in India, and activities surrounding the preparation for Amma's tour to the West.

*A Glimpse into Satsang in New Mexico.* *Satsang* literally means to "associate with the Truth or to be in communion with the Truth" (Ramakrishnanda, 2004, p.115). In social terms, *satsang* means the company of those who are spiritually enlightened or on the spiritual path. The *satsang* helps people find a social network that respects and supports the ideals of a spiritual life. It also provides emotional and intellectual support to sustain the spiritual path. In cultural terms, *satsangs* in any religious community in India have their own norms of worship—the order, content, and the guiding Master for the *satsang*—and

thus have their own cultural identity. *Satsang* also means giving spiritual talks or giving a talk on spiritual topics.

In United States, *satsangs* are the ways by which devotees of the Amma community congregate to worship Amma, other deities or the Divinity, reinforce their spiritual practices, tell Amma stories,<sup>19</sup> and support each other through personal, professional, and spiritual crises. Almost each state in United States has its own *satsang*. New Mexico has four *satsang* groups—Albuquerque, Santa Fe, Taos/Dixon, and Las Cruces.

Of these, Santa Fe is the largest and oldest *satsang* group. Members of this group have been devoted to Amma since the first time Amma visited United States in 1987. The group meets regularly every Saturday evening at the *ashram* and temple dedicated to Amma in the desert foothills of Sangre De Cristo mountains. The group also meets at an Indian devotee's house once a month for *satsang*. The *ashram* and temple were donated to the Amma organization by two senior devotees who now manage much of Amma's tours in United States.

The *satsang* in Albuquerque is much smaller than the Santa Fe *satsang* and meets alternate Saturdays at various houses for worship. Taos' *satsang* is run out a dedicated space to Amma in the property of two longtime devotees. Recently, the *satsangs* were conducted in various houses in Taos. Las Cruces also conducts *satsang* in the houses of devotees.

The *satsang* structure at the point of writing consists of various area coordinators who head various areas like *satsang*, Amma's kitchen, *bhajans*<sup>20</sup> etc. The coordinators share responsibility of the smooth running of the *satsang*. All decisions are made in the organizational meeting held almost once a month that is open to all *satsang* members. In special circumstances and special needs, a *satsang* council consisting of three or four people mediate in making decisions and ease the functioning of the *satsang*. A regional coordinator ensures the smooth functioning of all the regional *satsangs*. The regional coordinator in turn reports to National *satsang* coordinators and the head of Amma's organization in United States. Instructions from

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<sup>19</sup> Amma stories are narratives in which the devotee explains how an incident helped her feel Amma's presence or grace or conveyed an important message. These stories may be at times miracle stories but more often than not, they are everyday mundane stories that highlight a moral or a teaching.

<sup>20</sup> Devotional singing.

Amma and/or senior disciples of Amma come via the U.S. head to local coordinators through a special listserv.

A typical *satsang* is preceded by the chanting of 1,000 names of the Goddess in Sanskrit or the *Lalitha Sahasranama*. This takes an hour and many devotees do not attend it as it is long, tiring, and to some, boring and/or intimidating. But some devotees enjoy this chanting and find it very important to attend this session. Many of participants who had learned to chant the 1,000 names told me that it was beautiful to know that God (Goddess) had 1,000 different names to call and adore. Others felt it was powerful in its ability to purify the minds of the devotees and took it up as a serious spiritual practice. Amma suggested regular chanting of the 1000 names as a spiritual practice. The chanting is easier for Indian devotees than for Western devotees. For example, I have been chided on more than one occasion for chanting the 1,000 names “too fast” for others to keep pace.

The main *satsang* starts after the chanting is over. In Albuquerque, it begins with the chanting of the 108 names of Amma in Sanskrit, composed by the famous Kerala poet Unnikrishnan Namboodripaad who was devoted to Amma and spent his last years in the Amritapuri *ashram*. According to the *Awaken Children* series, the poet breathed his last in Amma’s lap. Many devotees learned to chant this hymn and take turns in leading the chant. Devotees who have recently learned to chant are usually tense about leading it and receive plenty of encouragement from their friends in the community in their attempts. New devotees or devotees who do not know how to chant this hymn often volunteer to offer flowers to the image of Amma’s feet during the chant.

The chanting is followed by *satsang*-related announcements. When the announcements are too long, descriptive, and secular, devotees complain about this intrusion in the devotional environment. Some *satsang* coordinators attempt to keep the announcements brief and to the point. This is followed by a talk on a spiritual topic. The *satsang* has ritual guidelines for talks; they usually refer to and elaborate some aspect of Amma’s teachings; few speakers are available, and last minute decisions are sometimes made about who speaks at the *satsang*.

The main feature of the *satsang* is usually the *bhajans* or devotional singing. Two *bhajan* coordinators live in Albuquerque. The *bhajan* group of Albuquerque has grown in

strength, practice, and performance in the last two years. Its members received a standing ovation and were asked to sing again on a subsequent day during the Amma programs in 2008. *Bhajans* are loved by most devotees, although some prefer to listen rather than sing. *Bhajans* are sung in specific ways. There is a lead person who sings a verse or two and the rest of the group follows by repeating the verse. This allows the entire group to participate in the worship. The *bhajans* are selected from a series of books known as *Bhajanamritam*. There are thousands of songs compiled into five volumes and several yearly additions to the volumes. These songs have been composed by Amma, several senior disciples of Amma, offerings by famous poets and singers, as well as devotees all around the world. The songs are in different Indian and world languages like Spanish, English, and French. The Santa Fe *bhajan* group took the lead in creating *bhajans* in English. It produced several audio records of their compositions. Devotees listen to audio CDs and practice the lyrics and the music. They also attend *bhajan* classes where they learn how to sing *bhajans* (especially songs in Indian languages). Although many prefer to sing simple Indian chants, some of the Western devotees have shown admirable initiative in singing complex songs in Indian languages. Devotees bring their drums, guitar, harmonium, flute, casio, and other musical instruments and accompany the singing. Many songs have a fast tempo and the popular singers are those who can lead the chant to an ecstatic pitch and tempo and then bring it back down to soft reflective tones. *Bhajans* in Amma communities are a musical treat.

After an hour of singing, the *satsang* winds down with *arati* (a ritualistic waving of camphor flame around the image of Amma). Different devotees volunteer to perform this aspect of the worship. The waving of the flame is sometimes difficult, if one is not used to it, and there are amusing stories told by devotees on the mistakes they made while waving the flames. Couples usually wave the flame together. The *arati* is accompanied by a special *arati* hymn dedicated to Amma. After the *arati*, devotees chant their final prayers. These prayers are Vedic hymns whose translations<sup>21</sup> are as following:

Prayer 1:

Lead us from untruth to truth,  
from darkness to light,

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<sup>21</sup> Translations are based on what is circulated in the *satsang* sheets.



from death to immortality.

Om peace, peace, peace.

Prayer 2:

May all beings in all the worlds be happy and peaceful.

Prayer 3:

That is the whole, this is the whole;

from the whole, the whole becomes manifest;

taking away the whole from the whole, the whole remains.

Om peace, peace, peace.

After the prayers, devotees receive the flame and Hershey's kisses as sacred offerings. Some devotees leave at this point, others wait for the *satsang* dinner to open. The dinner opens with a food prayer extracted from the *Bhagvad Gita* whose translation is as follows:

*Bramhan*<sup>22</sup> is the giving, *Bramhan* the food offering;

by *Bramhan* it is offered into the *Bramhan* fire,

*Bramhan* is that which is to be attained

by complete absorption in *Bramhan* action.

The dinner is usually a vegetarian potluck. Different devotees bring food items. Some devotees try out Indian cooking for *satsangs*. Other devotees applaud their efforts. Indian devotees are often asked about their evaluation of the cooking. As an Indian, I have been surprised and touched by the efforts some devotees (both men and women) put into cooking.

Besides *satsang* worship, local Integrated Amrita Meditation teachers conduct a full-day class almost once a month for beginners and a refresher once a month for those who have learned the meditation technique. Amma's Kitchen is another important activity of the *satsang*. Devotees volunteer to prepare warm burritos, prepare food bags containing other food items like nuts, candy, fruits, and hot and cold coffee or tea every Saturday for the homeless and hungry at a local church. In Santa Fe, members prepare the food and food bags in Amma's *ashram* and distribute in a park frequented by the homeless. Finally, a Sanskrit pronunciation class is also offered once a month.

The Santa Fe *satsang* offers various classes in chanting and music practice and holds

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<sup>22</sup> Bramhan is the Vedic term for Pure Consciousness or Divinity

question and answer sessions regularly with a senior devotee. The Santa Fe *ashram* also houses some full-time monastic residents who have committed their time and energy completely to the spiritual path. They help in the upkeep of the temple and the *ashram* and participate in leading several *satsang* activities. Visitors also go up and stay in the *ashram* for a couple of days for spiritual practices or volunteering with different activities. The Santa Fe *satsang* also holds fundraisers for various humanitarian activities and disaster relief.

*Integrated Amrita Meditation Technique (IAM)*. This is a special meditation practice that is said to have emerged in Amma's mind during her meditations many years before. But it was only in 2003 that this meditation was made public. The technique is available to anyone free of charge. It takes a whole day to learn the technique. It is copyrighted and can be learnt only by an instructor appointed by Amma. It takes about 35 minutes to complete all the meditation steps.

By 2008, an Organizational IAM course offered a shorter and secular version of the main IAM for professionals using a technique that brings focus to the present moment and was offered as a course through the Continuing Education program of University of New Mexico in 2008. In 2008, a meditation program for children between the ages of 10 and 16 was also offered. It is a simple meditation program that helps children get an early start into focusing their mind. All the programs are taught by volunteer teachers who have received special permission from Amma to teach the meditation.

*Ashrams*. The Math has ashrams in different places around the world. These ashrams serve as places where monks or spiritual aspirants can focus on spiritual practices fully. They have a meditation room, library, kitchen, and individual rooms. There is a daily schedule at the ashram that usually begins at 5:00 a.m. with chanting of the 1,000 names of the Goddess and 108 names of Amma. In the Amritapuri ashram in India, most of the daytime is spent in one seva or the other. In the evening, people gather to sing and pray at the ashram temple. Tuesdays are days dedicated to meditation, so, much of the everyday work in the ashram is suspended on this day. Amma herself meditates along with the ashram residents on this day when she is in the ashram. It must be noted that Amma travels eight to nine months a year. So the months she is in the ashram are very special to the residents. Locally, there is an ashram in the mountains in

Santa Fe, New Mexico. Anyone can go and live in the ashram for a few days for very little cost.

### *Amma Programs*

Amma travels around the world once a year. She travels to Europe in the months of October and November and Japan, Malaysia, and the Far East in May, and United States and Canada from June to July. She visits the United States briefly again in November, usually around Thanksgiving. When she visits a place, she offers a free public program. In a few places in U.S., she also holds retreats. Albuquerque is one of those places where she holds retreats. The retreat is a time when a spiritual aspirant gets to spend more time with Amma. She not only gives *darshan* to them everyday, but also answers questions, gives them a new name, or feeds them dinner with her own hands. There is usually a lot of laughter as Amma teases someone or another. Sometimes she practices new songs even while she holds a devotee in her embrace. To devotees, these are delightful moments, that provide others with an opportunity to be in her embrace for long.

### *Sevas*

*Seva* is the Indian term for selfless service. Amma's teachings and the Amma organization are built around the concept of *seva* (Warrier, 2005). Much of the smooth functioning of the Amma programs is dependent on people offering *seva*. From an organizational point of view, it is a way of ensuring high productivity and high standards of accountability to work responsibility. Devotees take pride in offering *seva*. Many work for months prior to Amma's tour in United States, arranging for hotels, food, and staff accommodation, seeking permission from various offices of the city, publicizing Amma's visit, fundraising, and coordinating different volunteers to head or serve in different areas, often at huge personal costs. In the days prior to the beginning of the tour program in a city, key volunteers work for 8 to 10 hours communicating with one another and assigning all available volunteers to schedules and work responsibilities. During the Amma programs, most of the *satsang* members work for a minimum of 10 hours a day. They take off from work and stay awake all night and get up early in the morning with very little time for meals—handling crisis after crisis, change after change. Mothers with

little children, fathers with large families, friends, seniors, all participate together in a massive effort to meticulously create an event.

For example, volunteers doing the laundry of staff members who accompany Amma through the entire tour, and the coordinators first take a trip around the neighborhood where the program venue is located to check the quality and proximity of the laundromats in the area. They find out the number of machines each laundromat offers, its quality, and the distance from the venue. They then create a map and decide on a structure to send volunteers to different laundromats according to the amount of loads on a particular day. After this, they buy laundry supplies (usually all of them are environmentally friendly) and collect quarters. Simultaneously, they send out a call for volunteers for this *seva*. After numerous e-mail messages, they decide on a schedule for each volunteer. At the appointed time, the volunteer shows up at a given location. The coordinator collects individually identifiable bags with individual laundry instructions from the staff. The volunteer goes through an orientation for this work on the first day. After the orientation, the volunteer counts the number of bags she is taking charge of, collects quarters from the coordinators, laundry supplies, map for the assigned laundromat, and instructions on how to do the laundry in a systematic manner. According to the instruction sheet and orientation, the volunteer must place each bag of clothes before individual washers. Then, systematically, the volunteer opens the bag, reads the unique laundry instruction from that load of clothes, and puts the clothes to wash as per the instruction. The bag with the name is kept on top of the washer. The volunteer then moves to the next washer, and it continues until all bags have been emptied. A volunteer may receive anywhere between 7 to 15 loads of laundry at a time. After this, the volunteer transfers the washed clothes to the dryer (unless the clothes have been instructed to be not dried) and hangs the bag on the handle of the dryer. The dried clothes must be piled in one folding table only with the accompanying bag. They are folded and placed back in the bag carefully. Any misstep in this process leads to clothes being put in wrong bags causing much frustration and anger from the individuals who lose their clothes. In addition to this rigorous instruction, the volunteer chants her mantra, remembers to do the laundry with love for the hardworking staff members, and maintains an attitude of

humility and surrender. Thus the laundry *seva* becomes more than a volunteer service, it is an intense spiritual practice more akin to Zen practice of constant mindfulness.

It is for the spiritual practice that many *satsang* members offer *seva*. After an Amma program, devotees often gather to tell stories of spiritual understanding or experiences they had during their *seva*. Many do the *seva* to imitate Amma in her conduct and try their hardest to be humble, smiling, flexible, adaptable, persistent, strong, and hardworking. Many devotees push their limits by trying to work harder than they believe they can. Sometimes devotees have confided in me their resolve to push further in work and efforts to stay awake during a particular year. In spite of the obvious coordination and meticulous organization, the internal observation of one's spiritual attitude provides the greatest accountability to each work area. As this study shows, this powerful self-monitoring work causes the greatest internal change in the devotees.

Besides the usual *seva*, devotees who volunteer for various activities during the year or lead important *seva* areas in Amma programs are given a special *seva*. This is a kind of reward to recognize the work that different devotees do. Special *sevas* always mean that it has to do with Amma—like sitting close to her during the program, doing her laundry, cleaning her room, and the like. Senior devotees or lead tour coordinators decide who gets what special *seva*. Sometimes devotees fight over a special *seva*, so that *sevas* have to be allocated secretly. I have been honored to receive several special *sevas* during the period of study. Yet some devotees do not like the special *seva* system. They question the nature and sincerity of a *seva* if it is done with the expectation of receiving rewards. I do not know the logic behind the system, but it exists and many devotees love it.

#### *Tour Structure*

Besides, involving the local volunteers, a typical Amma program has a tour staff of volunteers who take off from work, pay for their own room, board, and transportation to gain access to Amma for two months or more. In 2008, the total number of tour staff was 200, including volunteers from India, Europe, and United States who had dedicated themselves to world tours. The staff provides consistency in the organization of the tour in each city where a program is held. The tour staff works for close to 18 hours a day, with very little food, and bare accommodations for two months in United States. There are no breaks; and they cannot receive *darshan* unless Amma specially asks them to

come. They cook meals and snacks for thousands of people in each city, set the tables and clean the dishes, arrange the stage, the lights, and the sound system, man booths selling Amma publications and products, coordinate *darshan*, sing the evening devotionals, and make flower bouquets. They work amidst large, noisy crowds. They often travel from city to city in buses. When a program ended at 9:00 a.m. in Albuquerque, the staff packs up and leaves by 1:00 p.m. and travel for seven to 12 hours to the next stop, reaching the next venue late at night. That same night, many of them begin to arrange the stage, booths, and boxes and the rest will wake up in a few hours to start chopping, cooking, and cleaning. This process continues non-stop for two months.

At times, one can see a staff member tired and exhausted, sleeping hard or sitting with a long face. Sometimes they snap at others in irritation. Yet, even this arduous journey for the staff volunteers is a spiritually benefiting journey. Some sleep on floors with thin blankets and light pillows. I was told by a staff member who shared my room that she preferred to sleep on the floor because that is how Amma slept, and she wanted to feel closer to Amma. Another staff member told me how he felt Amma's blessing on him during the tour because Amma's grace gave him strength to continue work through the period. Sometimes, the staff members receive special opportunities like walking in a natural reserve with Amma, singing and meditating with her in natural surroundings, joking and goofing with Amma, and sometimes receiving special attention from Amma.

Spiritual practice is understood in diverse ways by the volunteers. I met some of Amma's photographers and videographers both in the *ashram* in India and United States. In both places, they told me that shooting Amma's video was a deep spiritual practice. In the *ashram* in India, the videographer said that when the tsunami struck the *ashram* in the December of 2004, all she could think was that she needed to record what was happening and went right into the surging waves, trying to document what was happening to the *ashram* and the villages nearby. Another videographer who was not adept in swimming, said she held on to a pole and chanted her mantra as she recorded the damage that was happening. The tsunami documentary that was produced as result of these efforts helped raised funds for the disaster relief efforts. In an informal conversation, one of the photographers noted that the video shoot was a form of meditation—keeping focus on Amma, staying present, and watching unendingly for a photo opportunity. These

photographers and videographers buzz around Amma for at least 15 hours a day. Even the volunteer manning the sound system was a renunciate disciple of Amma and worked for 15 to 18 hours a day mindfully watching for changes in sound frequencies, different microphones, video presentations, and audio CDs. Thus, Amma's program simultaneously is a well-managed event and an intense spiritual zone with an intensity that makes the Amma community and organization a very important site of study.

#### *A Glimpse into a Devi Bhava Day*

This is the day when Amma appears to her devotees in the form of goddess. This day is usually held in a secular place like a large hall in a deluxe hotel. In Albuquerque, *Devi Bhava* is held in a four-star or five-star hotel's ballrooms and is usually on the last day of retreat. About 5,000 people come to see Amma on a day in Albuquerque, while the numbers exceed 10,000 in Los Angeles. In India, an average crowd is about 50,000 (according to both eye witnesses as well as website figures).

The day starts as usual at 9:30 a.m. Swami Amrutaswarupananda, senior disciple of Amma, leads her devotees into meditation. After this, Amma, dressed in a simple white sari begins hugging individual devotees. This goes on till about 2:00 p.m., after which Amma leaves the hall. The hall coordination group for the evening then rushes in to remove the chairs and all items from the hall. They then proceed to mark the hall so that distinct *darshan* lines or lines to see Amma can be made. Another group starts working on the stage. A makeshift room is created on the stage that serves as a worship room for Amma as well as a room where she changes into the colorful clothes of the Goddess.

The line coordination group thereafter meets in the hall and is given instructions on line management. Each person has a two-hour shift with specific responsibilities. When the crowd starts pouring into the hall, people are assigned to take care of seating people and meeting needs of those who have physical problems with sitting down and the elderly. There is another group who are known as greeters who welcome people and identify those who are meeting Amma for the first time. They explain different practices of the Math and concepts like *darshan* to the visitors. Childcare is provided by another group of volunteers. During this period, there is a huge group of volunteers who are busy cutting vegetables and cooking in the kitchen.

At about 5:00 p.m., people start forming lines. At about 6:00 p.m., the tokens are given out and people are seated on the floors in a particular arrangement. At about 7:00 p.m., Amma enters the hall wearing a white sari, and she instructs the crowd to perform a ritual which Raj (2005) said is quite similar to Christian communion ritual. After this ritual, there is a short spiritual discourse followed by devotional singing. At the end of this process, Amma retires into the makeshift room on the stage. The hall is rearranged, and chairs are once again placed in the hall. Based on their token number, people make their way to the *darshan* line. The curtains of the makeshift room open once, showing Amma still clad in a white sari, praying to the goddess. Few minutes later she reappears as the goddess, dressed in a resplendent and colorful silk sari (usually gifted by one of her devotees). Her senior female disciple, Swamini Krishnamritaprana, performs a traditional *arati* (ritualistic waving of a lighted oil lamp).

After this, Amma gets ready to receive people. The *darshan* goes on all night until next day morning. During this time, Amma gives *mantra* (a sacred rosary chant) to those who desire it. There are different groups functioning at this time. There is a group that organizes the flowers and fruits Amma receives and recycles them, another administers different food counters placed at different places in the hotel, a group monitors the lines, and another group takes care of those in special need. Different groups sing and perform all night long. At the end of the *darshan*, Amma ministers marriages, names children, gives first food to infants, helps young children to write their first alphabet, etc.

The end of the *darshan* is usually a unique spectacle, for Amma noticeably becomes more energetic as she meets more and more people. People circambulate the hall once, and Amma, smiling radiantly, showers everybody with tons of flower petals. People sing and cry during this time and many go into ecstasy (uncontrolled but regular body movements, continuous dancing, swooning). Then Amma retires into the makeshift room and reappears a few minutes later dressed in a white sari. One would find at this point, that many of her devotees are crying and running behind her, because *Devi Bhava* marks the end of Amma's visit to a city. After she leaves, a group gets together and cleans the hall, organizes leftovers, lost items, etc. People are usually extremely exhausted at this point. In Albuquerque, along with attending public programs and retreat, volunteers spend a week sleeping three to four hours a day. I am usually so



exhausted after events that I stay in bed for the next two to three days. I cannot help but wonder how Amma is able to keep up with this schedule month after month, year after year, for the past 20 years.

*Philosophical and Religious Underpinnings of the Amma Community*

This section elaborates on the philosophical underpinnings of the Amma community. The description of the central philosophical worldview of the Amma community is based on Amma's teachings as published in the ten-volume series of *Awaken Children* and two volumes of *Eternal Wisdom*. The assumption is that since all my research participants and many other devotees read through her books and listen to her spiritual discourses in New Mexico, at some level and to a certain extent the participants likely subscribe to her view. Description of this worldview may help the readers to understand why the participants responded in certain ways and used certain terms in response to different interview questions.

The worldviews through which Amma developed and conveyed her teachings are quite similar to dominant Hindu and Buddhist philosophical thoughts. They also have resemblances to certain interpretations of the Bible, as posited by Rohr (2008)'s book *Things Hidden: Scripture as Spirituality* as well as to Eckhart Tolle's expositions in his books *Power of Now* and *A New Earth*. Similarly, this section cites the *Bible* and various Christian thinkers and mystics to showcase the resemblances because many participants and devotees in the Amma community attempt to find these similarities with Christianity, and hence, these comparisons help understand the assumptions within this community. Furthermore, these views point to the deep interconnectedness of all world's religions and philosophies.

The main underlying theme is the belief that everyone and everything is interconnected and imbued with divine consciousness. Divinity is the substratum on which different forms and expressions appear. This is akin to the metaphor of the ocean and its waves. The waves seem to have their shapes and other characteristics, yet the essence of waves and the ocean is water. This divine consciousness is also known as Pure Consciousness (I will refer to divinity henceforth as Pure Consciousness).

From this perspective, most of us in our normal states of consciousness do not experience interconnectedness but instead experience ourselves and others as separate

and autonomous beings. The ultimate goal of all beings is to return to the state of Pure Consciousness, known in the community variously as seeking enlightenment, self-realization or nirvana. Amma said,

The Self is not only confined within you but pervades everything in the Universe. We can attain the level of Self-Realization only when we perceive that everything is one and the same. We won't be admitted to God's world without the signature of even the smallest ant on our entry papers. The first requirement, along with remembrance of God, is to love everyone and everything, both the sentient and the insentient. If we have that greatness of heart, liberation won't be far behind. (Amritanandamayi, 1997, p.184)

Amma says that all beings, all beings, irrespective of their spiritual status in a current lifetime, return to the Pure state in this lifetime or another. Amma explains,

A sinner—but, in fact there are no sinners; for the state of enlightenment lies hidden in all human beings, even in the worst 'sinner,' just waiting for the right moment to emerge. So, no one is really a sinner. There is only *Atman*.<sup>23</sup> (Amritanandamayi, 1998, p.40)

If people do not experience this Pure state it is due to a layer of ignorance or ego that limits the consciousness to what is experienced by the gross sensory faculties. In other words, a link is broken so that only the external sensory experience of the world remains real. This break becomes stronger and thicker every time we execute an action with the belief that it is "I" the individual who is performing it. On a similar note, 17<sup>th</sup> century Catholic mystic Angelus Silesius said,

God, whose love and joy  
are present everywhere,  
can't come to visit you  
unless you aren't there. (Silesius, nd, para 1)

This sense of doership during an action by an individual engaged in performing it is supposed to result in *Karma* or fruits of action. Karma or fruits of action can be positive or negative. Positive *karma* leads to good sensory and worldly experiences like a good marriage, good career, good friends, good health and the like. Negative *karma* leads

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<sup>23</sup> Pure Consciousness.

to painful sensory or worldly experiences like a bad marriage, workplace problems, enemies, poor health. Almost every individual has her or his share of both positive and negative *karma*. Irrespective of whether the *karma* is positive or negative, enlightenment cannot be achieved until the sense of doership is renounced. Accrued *karmas* may express themselves in this lifetime or over many lifetimes.

*Karma* includes not only past actions (*prarabdha*) but also the action in the present moment known as *purushartha*. It requires reflection of the present moment as a sense of doership in action in the present moment creates future fruits of action. This aspect of *Karma* is often neglected in popular understanding of the term, but Amma places great emphasis on this aspect of *Karma*. In various passages in *Awaken Children*, she encourages her devotees to hold the past as a cancelled check and not spend too much time brooding over it. All we have is the present moment to create a new future.

Further, every action leaves behind a subtle impression on the egoic consciousness known as *vasanas* or tendencies. These tendencies are also transmitted through many lifetimes and result in the development of a particular personality in a particular lifetime. For example, somebody may be born with artistic talents or interests, another may be very organized, punctual and controlling, and yet another might be engaged in intellectual pursuits. The composite of *vasanas* (tendencies) and *karmic phallas* (fruits of action) as well as the continuation of the inevitable journey back to the Pure state determine the personality and life experiences of the individual in a particular lifetime. A boy born with musical talents may do very well in his musical career in his early years of his life, then is struck with schizophrenia, drops out of school, and is reduced to homelessness; still, an art enthusiast can re-discover his talents and help him return to the limelight.<sup>24</sup> This worldview would explain the series of events as follows—the boy came into this life with innate tendencies that made him like and excel in music. However, at a certain point in time, his negative *karma phala* (fruits of action) came to fruition and he suffered from mental illness and homelessness. However, later, a set of positive *karma phala* expressed itself, and so an art enthusiast ran into him and began to help him out of homelessness.

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<sup>24</sup> This example is borrowed from the real life story of Nathaniel Ayers as shown in the movie *Soloist* (2009).

The first *vasana* in a *jiva* (individual soul) is God-given. From that arises *karma* (action). From those actions arise new *vasanas*. All these *vasanas* accumulate as latent tendencies inherited from the previous birth. Eventually they spring forth as a new birth. This cycle will go on spinning like this. Liberation from *samsara* is possible only through elimination of these *vasanas*. All spiritual practices, like *satsang*, chanting, the Divine Name and meditation are performed for weakening the *vasanas*. (Amritanandamayi, 1989, p.124).

The above example must not be read as fatalistic or a reason to ignore people who suffer. It is not fatalistic because the theory of *karma* clearly points to the importance of this lifetime and this moment in preventing accrual of new *karmas*. The theory of *karma* simply asks a person to not resist the ripening of past fruits of action and instead accept it with grace while continuously working towards moving beyond new *karmic* accrual through renunciation of doership of all action. Further, Amma stated that through spiritual practices which include service to others, it is possible to cancel the effects of fruits of action. She gave an example of a person who was fated to be stabbed to death but due to spiritual practices, this person only suffered a minor injury (Amritanandamayi, 1991, p.14). Many Western scholars and popular media have misinterpreted this aspect of *karma* and reduced much of Asian thought as fatalistic and negative. Amma spoke to this issue:

Try to forget about the cycle of *karma*. There is no meaning in thinking about the past. It is a closed chapter. Whatever is done is done. Prepare yourself to confront the present. Don't brood over the past or over the past actions. What is important is the present, because your future depends on how you confront the present. Only when the constant presence of Divinity fills your entire life are you in the present. Until then you live either in the past or in the future. (Amritanandamayi, 1994, p.64)

According to the philosophy within the community, living in ego is known as suffering because it is living in less than the full potential of the Pure state. Persons living in ego may be rich, beautiful, or geniuses, yet such lives are considered to be in suffering as the full potential of experience has not been reached, as Amma said:

Sorrow is due to desire. We would have attained the bliss of Liberation long ago if desire was the means to attain real happiness. It is said that worldly life depends entirely on the sense organs. Because of this, all our energy is being dissipated through sensual indulgence. Living in the senses will not give us real bliss. Bliss is the same as the one-pointed thought of God. (Amritanandamayi, 1991, p.124)

An awareness of temporality and fragility of all worldly experiences results in the awareness of this suffering and provides an opportunity to the individual to consciously yearn a return to the Pure state. If the individual is lost in worldly pleasures, then the Pure Consciousness arranges for *vasanas* and *karmas* to work out a state where the person is jolted out of that state through accidents, losses, sudden visions or dreams and the like. On a similar note, Rohr (2008) said that the wounds can be an “epistemological advantage” to see and experience Gospel. In some specific way or the other every individual receives a reminder to return to the Pure state.

The power of *karma* veils our true nature, while the same time it creates the urge to realize the Truth. It helps us go back to our real existence. The cycle of *karma* is a great transformer. . . . And to the true spiritual seeker, the great message says, “It is better if you can stop the circle completely. Close the account and be free forever.” (Amritanandamayi, 1994, p.65)

A person who attains the Pure state is known as the saint or enlightened one. Such a person has complete control over what she or he expresses at a particular moment and chooses such an expression for the benefit of all beings. Such a person is also known as the Wise One and is accepted by some seekers of the Pure state as *guru* or Supreme Teacher. A guru provides the ultimate teaching on the way to return to the Pure state. A guru discerns the structures of egoic consciousness and helps the disciple demolish the barriers that prevent the experience of Pure Consciousness. The assistance from a guru comes in many forms: (1) By creating situations that allow the disciple to identify a *vasana* and detach from it, (2) through teachings, (3) through demand of spiritual discipline, (4) by mystically absorbing some of the *karmas* and thereby reducing the load on the disciple, (5) by removing few layers of ego, to allow the disciple to glimpse into the Pure Consciousness, (6) by creating an environment of sacred devotion, and (7) by using other means unique for a particular disciple and her growth. Amma said:

The *guru* is the embodiment of selflessness. We are able to learn what truth, dharma (righteousness), renunciation, and love mean because the guru lives in those qualities. The *guru* is the very life of those qualities. By obeying and emulating him, those qualities take root in us. Obedience to *guru* is not slavery. The *guru*'s aim is only the safety of the disciple. He truly shows us the path. A true guru will never see his disciple as his slave. He is filled with love for the disciple. He wants to see the disciple succeed, even if it means hardship for himself. The true guru is indeed like a mother. (Amritanandamayi, 1997, p.36)

The return to the Pure State is facilitated in many ways. Simple devotion or *bhakti* to God or Divinity or a particular form of God is one method to achieve self-realization. In this method, the disciple begins to yearn for God, prays and thinks of her constantly, and experiences deep pain at the separation from her God. Amma emphasized this path in her teachings and spiritual discourses and stated that devotion was an easier route to self-realization:

We should understand that God-realization is the aim of life, and worship Him with this goal firmly fixed in our mind. "Devotion in principle" means recognizing that it is the one and the same God who manifest in all living beings and in all deities—in all names and forms. It means surrendering selflessly to Him. That is the kind of devotion we should have.

. . . . There may many types of food, but those who suffer from indigestion or other illnesses cannot eat everything. But *kanji* (rice gruel), made with broken rice, is agreeable to everyone's health. The path of devotion is like that. It suits everyone. (Amritanandamayi, 1997, p.80)

To create atmosphere of devotion, Amma regularly leads devotional singing in the evening in all of her programs and retreats during the tours as well as while in the *ashram* in India. Her devotional singing sessions are very inspiring and uplifting. Amma herself created many of the songs she sings in these sessions. In the *Awaken Children* volumes as well as books written by Swami Ramakrishnanda, there are examples of Amma entering into *samadhi*<sup>25</sup> or state of Union with Pure Consciousness while singing a devotional

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<sup>25</sup> *Samadhi* is considered to be that state when the individual consciousness is perfectly merged into Pure Consciousness. In that state, the body becomes completely still, all bodily functions including

song. In a 1988-89 documentary film video of Amma's North India tour, the documentary shows Amma standing in river Ganges in Haridwar and singing to the goddess of the river and entering into complete Samadhi. Showing her body turn rigid and her breathing ceasing, disciples bring her back to the world by continuously chanting sacred *mantras* and rubbing the soles of her feet and palms. The narrator states that Amma was in that state for several hours before returning to normal consciousness.

The path of devotion is quite similar to Christian conceptualizations of mystical states of several saints. A notable mention must be made of St. Therese of Lisieux, The Little Flower, in whose words devotion gains a new meaning.

How shall I show my love is proved by deeds? Well - the little child will strew flowers...she will embalm the Divine Throne with their fragrance, will sing with silvery voice the canticle of love.

Yes, my Beloved, it is thus that my life's brief day shall be spent before Thee. No other means have I of proving my love than to strew flowers; that is, to let no little sacrifice escape me, not a look, not a word, to avail of the very least actions and do them for Love. I wish to suffer for Love's sake and for Love's sake even to rejoice; thus shall I strew flowers. Not one shall I find without shedding its petals for Thee...and then I will sing, I will always sing, even if I must gather my roses in the very midst of thorns—and the longer and sharper the thorns the sweeter shall be my song. (*Her thoughts and words about love of God*, nd, para 3-4)

A second method is the active renouncement of doership in action or what is known as *Nishkama Karma Yoga* (practice of desireless action). In this way, the seeker is engaged in service to others while actively pursuing the practice of desireless action. This is also known as selfless service. Although at the onset, this idea seems peculiar to the Eastern mind, one can find similar words in some of the Christian mystics:

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breathing cease. The identification to the particular body completely ceases as the universe becomes the substratum of experience. Saints are said to use different methods to keep themselves in the worldly plane. For instance, the famed 19<sup>th</sup> century Indian mystic Ramakrishna was said to have regularly consumed small amounts of meat to ensure he did not return to the state of Samadhi often. According to her disciples, Amma reminds herself that she needs to sing the full song before she begins to lead the *bhajans*. This determination allows Amma to remain in the worldly plane of consciousness and prevent hours of deep silence in between a stanza of music.

On the day of my conversion Charity entered into my heart and with it a yearning to forget self always; thenceforward I was happy.-St. Therese of Lisieux (*St. Theresa and her little way*, nd, para 2)

Such a person will act hoping to benefit the universe but will not be attached to the results of the action. It is a form of active, all day meditation while engaged in activities that decrease poverty, hunger, fear and insecurity, disease and the like. Amma said:

Service is also a form of *sadhana*.<sup>26</sup> If you claim that you have attained perfection after doing *sadhana* sitting in a certain place, Amma will not accept that. Getting out into the world and doing service is very much part of *sadhana*. If we want to eliminate the enemies that lurk in the innermost depths of the heart, we have to serve the world. Only then will we be able to tell how effective our meditation has been. Only when somebody gets angry with us, will we know whether we still have anger in us. (Amritanandamayi, 1997, p.185)

The successful practice prevents activist burnout and keeps the service engagement at a constant level and pace. For example, Amma practices *Nishkama Karma Yoga* or desireless action when she hugs thousands of people without a break through the entire year for more than 30 years now. Many of the people who receive her hug do not become her disciples. Many disciples leave her at a certain point in time and other remain committed to her but insincere in their spiritual practices. Amma does not “fret” over the loss of her disciples or their lack of spiritual discipline. Swami Paramatmananda (1987), one of the earliest Western devotees of Amma illustrated this point in an example. He describes his frustration when some of the new disciples who came to settle near Amma were not serious about their spiritual practices and instead, came to enjoy the peace and happiness in Amma’s company. He reaches a point when he wanted to leave the *ashram*. One of the nights, he has a dream in which Amma appeared:

I saw Ammachi looking at me with the full moon shining in the sky to her left and the sun shining to her right. She pointed at the sun and said, “Do you see the bright ray of the sun? Like that ray, try to see the ray of Divine Light in each one’s eyes.” (Paramatmananda, 1987, p.269)

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<sup>26</sup> *Sadhana* is the Sanskrit word for spiritual practice.



Swamiji<sup>27</sup> writes that after the dream he slowly came to a peace about how others intended to grow on the spiritual path. In the course of time, Amma developed a schedule for spiritual practices and began to enforce them on the *ashram* residents. Selfless service or *seva* as it is called in the community received the greatest emphasis in the Amma community. In one of the Amma's quotations on the Amritapuri website that changes everytime a person logs in, Amma said "It doesn't matter if someone believes in God or not as long as they serve others" (www.amritapuri.org).

A third way to achieve self-realization is through contemplation or *Gyana Yoga*. In this process, the seeker contemplates on the meaning of life and deconstructs various significances, peeling layer after layer of significances to reach a point when s/he finally glimpses the Pure state. This process, which is highly developed in Buddhism, especially under Nagarjuna has led some Asiatic scholars to claim that Nagarjuna the father of deconstruction. Much of the Indian scriptures, the *Upanishads*, are written by seekers who used this method to ponder about life and after-life. Amma assists this process in her disciples through the many teachings as well as experiences which allowed the disciples to glimpse the Pure state. The Hindu Advaitic tradition represents contemplation at its best, an approach that is not central to the community practices. In fact, Amma speaks about the dangers of Advaita since it can lead to abstract nonsense,

What sense is there in calling ourselves *Brahman*<sup>28</sup>, we who run after food and clothing while considering the body to be eternal? Look at great souls. They have no hatred toward anyone. Smilingly they mingle with everyone. They lead the world looking upon everything with an equal eye. (Amritanandamayi, 1991, p.208)

Meditation is part and parcel of all the methods but is not central to the process. For many decades, Amma did not teach any form of meditation and instead simply emphasized devotion and *seva*. In 2003, however, Amma introduced a unique meditation technique known as Integrated Amrita Meditation which is practiced by many devotees and participants for 20 to 45 minutes daily. All of Amma programs have a few minutes of meditation in the morning and evening. But her stress has been on *seva* and devotion and

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<sup>27</sup> The suffix "ji" is added to the honorific "Swami" when not followed by the name in Indian cultural practice to show respect.

<sup>28</sup> *Bramhan* is the term for Pure Consciousness in the Hindu *Advaitic* scriptures or *Upanishads*.

devotees and participants reported their greatest spiritual insights while working around or for Amma.

Constant thought directed to God is meditation, like the flow of a river. You reach the state of meditation only by achieving true one-pointedness. In the beginning, you should purify the mind, make it one-pointed and dissolve it through *japa* and devotional singing; then practice meditation. (Amritanandamayi, 1997, p.37)

It is to be noted that the methods are not exclusive of each other and are mixed and matched by devotees and participants according to personality needs, demands of the situation or moods.

Besides the reliance on the above spiritual practices, grace is an important component in the philosophy of the community. Unlike the post-renaissance excessive focus on individual agency, the community believes in both individual agency as well as the agency of Pure Consciousness in the form of grace. Grace helps seekers in their journey to the Pure state in many ways: by providing temporary relief from physical, financial, and emotional problems till the individual is strong enough to face them with spiritual courage; by taking care of simple daily needs like food, shelter, clothing and safety through a series of events known to the world as coincidences; by decreasing certain *karmic* burdens of individuals allowing them to proceed on the spiritual path more easily. A *guru* or Teacher serves as conduit for grace by absorbing some of the *karmic* burdens of the disciples, and removing some layers of ego to allow the disciple to glimpse the Pure state momentarily.

Such an approach seems consistent with the Christian understanding of grace and is perhaps in greatest consistency with the verse in the People's New Testament, "Who gave himself for us. The Lord who will appear gave the greatest of all things, himself, for us. That he might redeem us. To deliver us from sin, not only from its power, but its penalty" (Titus 2:14). In one example in the *Awaken Children* series, Amma clearly stated that the burdens can be shared by an enlightened one. In the example, Amma shared an intuitive feeling she had, to a devotee (Amritanandamayi, 1991, p.278). The devotee's son had taken leave from Amma during a previous visit and Amma felt that he was going to face serious problems in his job. She tried to warn him and looked for him in the dark. But he had already left. In the dark, she stumbled on something and fell into a

ditch. Amma felt that God, by making her fall down, had mitigated the devotee's difficulties. The devotee said that Amma's feelings were right; his son had, indeed, faced the problems in his job but they subsided soon. The son had felt that it was Amma's grace that helped him through this difficult period.

Grace and the faith that ultimately everyone will return to the state of Pure Consciousness creates a model of the universe and God that is limitlessly benevolent and unendingly patient for this community. No *karmic* burden is so great that it cannot be repaid. No state that is completely hopeless. Instead, it is the combined processes of the efforts of both the individual and Pure Consciousness to help the traveler reach her home. No one is alone in this Universe. However, all have to work hard and show courage to journey through life. The model can be compared to the first steps of a child in an ideal family. The mother watches over the child, hovers around protectively, encourages it to take the step itself, applauds when the child takes those first steps, and then rushes to pick up the child when it falls down after the first few steps. The mother is there, but the child has to make the efforts and learn to walk. This face of love is what Saint Therese of Lisieux urged Christians to remember—God was not a cruel, judgmental being but rather unending and merciful love (*Her thoughts and words about love of God*, nd). This face of love is symbolized in the suffering of Christ on the Cross, whose teaching of love created much fear amongst the priests in Jerusalem and who in his last breath prayed to God “Father, forgive them, they know not what they do” (Luke 23:34). Christ's extraordinary love, acceptance, and patience for all, is often forgotten in the fight between the believers and non believers. Rohr (2008) echoed the same idea in the following words:

We all are saved in spite of ourselves—and for one another. It never was a worthiness contest. If God is love and if grace is true, then what exactly is the cutoff point? “When is God's arm too short to save?” (Isaiah 50:2). (p.218)

#### Preview of Chapters

Chapters one through three feature a description of the Amma community in United States, my philosophical framework, a review of the scholarship that informs this study, and a description of the methods. Chapters four through eight present and discuss the findings of this study and their implications for scholarship. In the following paragraphs, I outline each of the chapters.

In this chapter, I introduced the focus and philosophical assumptions that ground this study, presented the definition of spirituality that frames the particular approach to identity in this study, and identified my ontological, epistemological, and axiological assumptions from the Asiacentric paradigm. I also presented my critique of Asiacentricity and posit a transmodern approach to research. I closed the chapter with in-depth background information about Amma and the organization she leads. I presented a biographical sketch of Amma, along with elaboration of her main teachings; described the structure of the organization, better known as Mata Amritanandamayi Math or MAM, as well as the various humanitarian projects in which MAM is involved in; and presented my ethnographic work to describe the way local *satsangs*<sup>29</sup> congregate and the dynamics of Amma's programs in New Mexico. I concluded with an elucidation of the philosophy that drives the practices and beliefs in the community.

Chapter Two reviews scholarly literature on identity, elaborates the connection between the concept of identity and the study of difference in scholarship, unravels the concept of identity in literature in the four areas of focus in this study—personal identity, gender identity, cultural identity and religious identity—and highlights the theoretical and practical problems that have emerged because of an exclusively rational approach to the issue of identity. I argue that a spiritual framework and inclusion of the notion of disidentification can provide another dimension to the theoretical and practical understanding of identity dynamics in scholarship. On this basis, at the end of the chapter I present the research questions that drive this particular research study.

Chapter Three presents the methods used to collect and analyze data and describes how I used participant-observation and conducted the interviews and collected and analyzed the various primary documents and secondary sources about the community. I also present the methods used for interpreting the data and writing this report, with a detailed description of my role in the study. Here, I argue and demonstrate how research is also a spiritual process that can be deeply transformational for the researcher if she is able to approach research as mindful inquiry.

Chapter Four examines the particular ways in which devotees and participants negotiated their personal identities in the Amma community—during Amma programs

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<sup>29</sup> Local congregations

and in the ways the devotees related with Amma and each other. It elucidates how devotees tried to disengage from these identities by focusing on trans-temporal psychic processes to make sense of interpersonal conflict and tensions in the community. I explore the implication of these findings to literature on interpersonal conflict and suggest the significance of intrapersonal awareness in conflict resolution.

Chapter Five examines the particular ways in which devotees and participants negotiated their gender identity in the Amma community—through their experience of abuse, intergender relationships, and their relationship with Amma. Women engaged and disengaged with their gender identity in particular ways as they struggled with hegemonic feminist discourses on what constituted an emancipated woman, as they healed from past abuses, and as they charted their spiritual path. In the discussion section, I address the implication of these findings for feminist scholarship.

Chapter Six examines the particular ways in which devotees and participants negotiated their cultural identities in the Amma community: how did they construct and secure their cultural identities in particular ways even as they struggled to understand East Indian cultural norms and practices. At times, the participants were able to disengage from cultural identifications, particularly in their relationship with Amma and in their philosophical struggle, to find a unity that transcended cultural differences. I explore the implication of these findings to scholarship in intercultural communication, particularly the relevance of intracultural awareness to improve intercultural communicative competence.

Chapter Seven examines the particular ways in which devotees and participants negotiated their religious identities in the Amma community. The chapter explores how they negotiated interreligious differences through switching cultural codes between different religions to reach a disidentified understanding of religious affiliations. Intertwined with the concept of religion is a notion of spirituality that in this study transcends differences across religions. I discuss the implications of these findings for the study of interreligious dialogue, drawing on Pannikar (1978)'s notion of intrareligious dialogue.

Chapter Eight provides a summary of findings and answers to the research questions, a discussion of limitations of this study, and a set of recommendations for

future research. Additionally, I provide details of some important insights gained from this study and how it can advance scholarship in communication. Toward this goal, I introduce a theoretical understanding of disidentification, elaborate on the significance of self-awareness for competent communication, and draw on the worldviews of devotees and participants in the community studied to offer an alternative reading of the transactional model of communication.

## CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

In this study, I examine the relationship between spirituality and identity in the unique context of a third-world originating, transnational spiritual organization that fosters a community—known in this study as Amma community—in the United States. My research observations provide data for understanding four dimensions of identity—personal, gender, culture, and religion. Therefore, this literature review focuses on the above mentioned areas of scholarship on identity to offer an overview of the alternative ways in which identity has been theorized. My central argument is that a spiritual framework can help us understand the various dimensions of identity in new ways as well as perhaps provide a foundation for communication strategies that foster peace, understanding, and acceptance of the Other.

In recent years, some scholars have voiced their objections to “secular hegemony” in communication theory (Buzannell & Harter, 2006). They critiqued the exclusion of spirituality in communication inquiry as a form of marginalization and disenfranchisement of voices (Rodriguez, 2001). Some argued that secular hegemony is a “pernicious form of colonialism” where one worldview is privileged (Buzannell & Harter, 2006) and communication inquiry is “overwhelmingly of one epistemology” (Rodriguez, 2001, p. x). To include spirituality, they argued, is to “enlarge the realm of possibilities” (Rodriguez, 2001, p. x) for understanding communication experiences.

Research devoted to communication and spirituality has approached the issue from a Christian view. Flaherty (2005) voiced this criticism and stated: “My only criticism is that the book is strongly based on Christian spirituality and it left me wondering how Eastern spiritualities, particularly evident in global communications, might impact some of the theory represented” (p. 348).

Asiacentric scholars conceived of the neglect of spirituality in communication inquiry as evidence of a Eurocentric bias that construes the individual as a unique and autonomous identity, and privileges individualism, reason and rationality, and individual rights and freedom over interconnectedness, emotion and sensitivity, responsibility and duty to others (Miike, 2007). More importantly, they claim, the Eurocentric approach alienates humans from nature. Miike’s Asiatic approach reconnects humans to nature:

How can an anthropocosmic theory of communication teach humans the importance of fulfilling their roles egolessly, returning their debts to others and nature, and appreciating every meeting beyond the self-other dichotomy? What can human beings learn about the nature and ideal of communication from all sentient beings and their ‘live-and-let-live’ encounters?” (Miike, 2007, p.277)

On a similar note, Goodall (1993) asked the question, “What would a theory of communication include if we took seriously the idea that humans are, first and foremost, spiritual beings?” (p.40). Miike (2004a) asserted that one of the research objectives in Asiatic scholarship is spiritual liberation through communication. My study attempts to create a tangible framework in which future studies on spirituality and communication may prosper.

My study focuses on the women members of the Amma community in New Mexico, U.S.A., to explore how spirituality influences the way they communicate their sense of identity. Some scholars outside of communication have studied Amma (Mata Amritanandamayi) and her movement. Religious studies scholar Johnsen (1994) profiled Amma in her anthology on women saints in India and some biographies (Bess, 2000; Cornell, 2001) examined Amma’s life story. Religious studies scholar Raj (2004, 2005) wrote two articles on her movement. One profiled Amma and her practices as a female guru in India and United States and analyzed her *darshan* (spiritual hug) discourse (Raj, 2004). Another study analyzed the organization of her tour programs in United States and the process of acculturation of Hindu rituals and practices to suit an American audience (Raj, 2005). Raj’s (2005) interviews more than a dozen devotees and showed how certain practices of the Math have Christian themes borrowed from Christian sources. He also noted the devotees did not necessarily give up their previous religious affiliations but rather followed both simultaneously.

Warrier (2003, 2005) wrote extensively about the Amma movement in India using an ethnographic approach. She explained the construction of selfhood in a postcolonial, rapidly modernizing, global India and examined how urban, middle-class Indians in the movement created their own complex version of modernity that was at once modern and traditional. Her study showed “how the spiritual enterprise of Mata Amritanandamayi proves to be an instance of ‘Hindu’ faith and practice adapting to change in contemporary



India” (Warrier, 2005, p. 141). According to her, the movement was not entirely indicative that India was becoming more religious-minded (that is, affected by right wing religious movements in India like the Hindutva movement).<sup>30</sup> Rather, she insisted, this movement showed the deep roots of the secularization, autonomy, and independence that is emerging in the urban middle-class India. People she interviewed in the study did not necessarily identify themselves as religious and instead preferred to call themselves spiritual. The *seva* ethic or the principle of selfless service to the community created a civil structure and a civil face to the spiritual practices (Warrier, 2003, 2005).

My study differs from the scholarship on the Amma community in two ways. Unlike the previous scholarship, which has been grounded in anthropological and religious studies, my study focuses on the perception of identity from a communication perspective and uses spirituality as a framework. Secondly, I approach the community from an insider perspective, trying to understand the world as Amma and her followers experience and negotiate it.

The following sections present an overview of scholarship on identity, followed by a review of literature on each of the areas in focus in this study—personal, gender, cultural, and religious identity. Each section shows how a spiritual framework adds new insights to the understanding of identity in the communication discipline.

#### Overview

Identity is a significant area of study in the humanities, whether around the politics of identity, negotiation of identities in interactions, or psychosocial search for identity in marginalized and invisible groups and individuals. My contention is that existing research relies on a modern premise about the nature of self as a discrete, rational, and autonomous entity. This premise places the notion of difference at the core of the concepts of self and identity. This section discusses relevant ideas from Martin Heidegger, Giles Deleuze, Luce Irigaray, and Jacques Derrida, theorists who have influenced the theory of difference and our understanding of identity (Donkel, 2001). I will focus here on how the concept of identity has been articulated in two main ways:(1)

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<sup>30</sup> This is not homogenous across the organization. She mentioned examples of some senior disciples of Amma who believed in the superiority of Hinduism over other religions (Warrier, 2005).

a notion of identity that assumes that difference leads to dissociation from one another, and, (2) a notion of identity as a subjectivity that has a reality beyond differences.

The works of Heidegger, Deluze, and Irigaray highlight the dissociative approach to difference in the study of identity. Heidegger noted that difference has to exist before we can begin defining identity and that difference is at the heart of identity (Heidegger, 2001). Deluze, even though he accepted Heidegger's argument that identity and difference were linked, argued that identity is subordinate to difference; it is in difference that identity emerges and has no existence prior to difference (Deluze, 2001). His work, echoing the scientific theory of evolution, characterizes the relationship between different entities as based on dissociation rather than association (Deluze, 2001). Let us take the example of apes and humans to understand this argument. When difference is understood as an association, apes and humans are existing beings on this planet who are different to each other. One is identified as ape having certain "ape" characteristics, and the other is identified as human having certain "human" characteristics. This is how many creationists understand species. When difference is understood in terms of dissociation, humans are differentiated from apes. Thus, it is when a being differentiates from a pre-existing being that the identity of the being emerges. Extrapolating on this conceptualization of difference, the identity of a being is based on its differentiation or separation from other beings.

Echoing the evolutionary notions of struggle and visibility from the perspective of gender identity, Irigaray's argument about sexual difference is an argument against Man representing everything into his "sameness" (Irigaray, 2001). She says:

How can I say it? That we are women from the start. That we don't have to be turned into women by them, labeled by them, made holy and profaned by them. That that has always already happened, without their efforts. (Irigaray, 2001, p. 311)

In a sense, she made a furious attempt to present a positive feminine identity rather than a notion of woman who is *not* a man or of a woman who should be treated in the way *same* way as a man. Similarly, Butler (1993) argued the lines of dissociation when she stated there was no space for women in language, for language itself was of phallogocentric origins. She wrote, "For if the feminine is said to be anywhere or anything, it is that

which is produced through displacement and which returns as the possibility of a reverse displacement” (Butler, 1993, p.45). These authors reiterate the tendency to understand gender identity as a struggle to dissociate from a world that is possessed by phallogocentrism.

The content and constructions of sexual difference has been hotly debated in feminist scholarship. Women of color scholars and activists dissociated from Western notions of feminism and problematized the construction of racialized sexual difference as a monolith. In 1851, Sojourner Truth interrupted the homogenizing notion of global sisterhood with her famous speech, *Ain't I a woman?* Mohanty (1991) critiqued Western feminist scholarship by arguing that along with sexual difference, third world women were subjected to “third-world difference” which overdetermined women as “powerless’ group prior to the analysis in question” (p.340). Mohanty argued that “Strategic coalitions which construct oppositional political identities for themselves are based on generalization, but the analysis of these group identities cannot be based on universalistic, ahistorical categories” (p.349). I agree with Mohanty that there was a tendency to reduce and objectify the Cultural Other in feminist scholarship, but would add to this argument that the tendency to reduce and objectify others is not restricted to dominant groups only. Rather, each sub-group tends to continue reducing some other group in turn.

The dissociative approach to identity in political struggles—although important in problematizing the subversive nature of “sameness” and exposing the erasure of differences during the construction of sameness—does not facilitate a future where we could coexist with one another while being in the differences. What we need is a holistic approach to difference that neither glosses over it nor allows those differences to become divisive. Keating (2002) arguing against the dissociative approach to differences, wrote:

We’ve been trained to define differences oppositionally—as deviations from what Audre Lorde terms the “mythical norm, which . . . [i]n America . . . is usually defined as white, thin, male, young, heterosexual, Christian, and financially secure” (Sister, 116, her emphasis)—and to regard these differences shameful marks of inferiority. Driven by our regard to these difference-as-deviation, we ignore, deny, and misname the differences among us. (p.519).

On a similar note, Anzaldúa (2002) described the clash between the White feminists and feminists of color as an approach that bred hostility rather than understanding. She argued that while White feminists rhetorically endorse diversity issues, they “evade questions of complicity with those in power.” On the other hand,

Many [Feminists of color] are driven to use the truth of their ill treatment as a stick to beat whites into waking up; they are experts on oppression and thus don't have to listen/learn from whites. Some women of color—las meras meras—strut around with macha in-your-face aggressiveness. Hiding their vulnerabilities behind clenched fists and a “que se chingen” attitude, they overlook the wounds bonding them to the other and instead focus on las heridas (wounds) that divide. (p.565)

My argument is that by positing a state of connectedness through disidentification from identity positions, we may be able to approach differences as founded and built upon commonality, as varying expressions of the same transcendent reality, like the different flowers in a bouquet and be able to include differences as enriching and vital to each of our individual lives.

Another approach to identity has been through deconstruction. Derrida (2001) approached the notion of identity and difference in a novel way and broke from conventional understandings of identity and difference as clearly delineated positions, when he argued that the world was nothing but constituted by difference and is only difference. This he called as “différance.” His contention was that an object can never fully summon up a stable meaning on its own but rather develops it through difference, or what it is not, and infinitely defers its meaning. Trying to explain what *différance* is, he said, “difference *is not*, does not exist, is not a present-being (*on*) in any form; and consequently we will be led to delineate also everything *that it is not*, that is *everything*; and consequently that it has neither existence nor essence” (p.282, emphasis in original). Constituted and activated by difference, identity depends on difference. So the question “who am I?” is never really answered by identity for it simply says, “Who am I not?”

Dissanayake (2007) pointed out the uncanny similarity between Derrida's notion of *différance* and the 2<sup>nd</sup> century Buddhist philosopher and mystic Nagarjuna's approach

to *sunyata*.<sup>31</sup> Nagarjuna employed a similar process to deconstruct the principle of identity. According to Dissanayake (2007), Nagarjuna's philosophy asserts:

Identities are not fixed and immutable but are volatile, multi-faceted, and admit of pluralities of subject-positions . . . . Identities are relational; they encourage lateral constructions and re-constructions. They are also a product of language. They come into being through the power of language. Identity admits the interplay of ever expanding and ever enlarging possibilities and recognizes its location in ceaselessly changing terrains. (p. 38)

Identity, therefore, is neither fixed nor can be fixed, for it continually slips away from our theoretical grasp. In effect, Derrida's approach to identity adds to the emergence of antiessentialism scholarship by assuming identities are fundamentally fictitious. But, as others have argued, such an approach negates the social material realities of inequalities amongst identity groups (Fraser, 1997).

In spite of a theoretical problematization of the notion of identity, at the political level the "logic of identification" endures even though some activists call for an alternative approach to identity in the struggle for social justice and equality (Fernandes, 2003). Keating (2002) emphatically stated:

Identity politics have been extremely useful: we've invented and found specific names and labels that affirm us, give us self-confidence, agency, a sense of belonging, a place to call 'home.' But at some point—no matter how effective these labels seem to be—they will fail us. They will be walls rather than doorways (p.529).

In sum, the modern roots of the concept of identity surfaced under the rationalist influence of Descartes's maxim "*cogito, ergo sum*;"<sup>32</sup> but if the I exists only as a thinking individual, then its experience of the world is confined to the observable and the tangible. In addition, the foundations of modern concepts of identity are deeply intertwined with a notion of a struggle against and from what I am *not*. These assumptions have led other philosophers to pose the paradox of communication: *if selves are discrete, distinct, and fundamentally isolated, why then do we need to communicate and transcend that*

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<sup>31</sup> Closest translation will be devoidness.

<sup>32</sup> I think, therefore I am.

*isolation?* (Ricoeur, 1976). And although deconstruction methods have problematized the notion of identity as fixed and unitary, they have not provided a means by which we can negotiate the social and material reality of difference. In this respect, I align my research with the work of other scholars who have been arguing that a notion of self as discrete and separate does not engender a philosophy for articulating peace, understanding, and acceptance in this world (e.g. Anzaldúa, 2002; Bradley, 2007; Cervenak, Cespedes, Souza, & Straub, 2002; Dissanayake, 1993; Elam, 2000; Fernandes, 2003; Ishii, 2004; Keating, 2002; Lawson, 2007; Miike, 2004a; Smiljanic, 2008, Weiming, 1998). Furthermore, I argue that a spiritual framework based on interconnectedness of selves can resolve this theoretical and practical dilemma. As Weiming (1998) wrote, the desire to theorize interconnectedness has been felt by many scholars:

The need to express a universal intent for the formation of a ‘global village’ and to articulate a possible link between the fragmented world we experience in our ordinary daily existence and the imagined community for the human species as a whole is deeply felt by an increasing number of concerned intellectuals (p.253).

This notion of interconnectedness provides a new dimension from which differences can be understood as varying expressions of the same unity without negating the material and social reality of differences. Disidentification allows an individual to have an eagle’s view to the reality of difference without being invested in it. At the same time, in response to the scholarship on antiessentialism, I recognize the importance of transcendence. Unlike Derrida, who claims that language was rooted in reality and could be realized through continuous deconstruction, Nagarjuna argues that language itself is empty of reality and needs to be transcended to understand reality (Dissanayake, 2007). If identity “comes to being through the power of language,” then identity is also empty of reality and needs to be transcended. My analysis uses this particular notion of transcendence to articulate a view of how disidentification from personal and social identities can lead to a state of connectedness. This study thus gives voice to marginalized epistemologies in modern scholarship and explains how people can articulate peace and understanding in the world.

## Personal Identity and Spirituality

Literature dealing exclusively with personal identities is relatively sparse in the communication discipline. Scholars tend to conceptualize personal identities in relation to cultural, gender identity, relational or enacted identity. However, my review shows that spirituality contributes to an understanding of personal identity.

Central to the question of personal identity is the concept of personhood. According to sociologists Foddy and Kashima (2002), the concept of person that emerged from the Enlightenment tradition depended upon “universal natural law, which governs everything in nature including human nature. Reason, which was then regarded as a human embodiment of this universal natural law, was therefore a human disposition that is abstracted from and untouched by sociocultural specificities” (p.22). They argued that this vision gave rise to the concept of human rights that later became the theoretical backbone of democracy. The concept of the person in this tradition was an abstract individual<sup>33</sup> equipped with fixed set of abilities and needs (Foddy & Kashima, 2002). Dissanayake (2007), on the other hand, preferred to call the “individual” an “undivided source of consciousness, meaning, and action” and “an illusory whole that gives the appearance of a free and self-determining being” and “person” as the one who has agency (p.40).

However, when the topic switches to the construct of personal identity, scholars disagreed about whether the fundamental criterion that defines personal identity is memory or body (Perry, 2002). Personal identity is a complex subject in humanities: “when it is asked wherein personal identity consist, the answer should be...that all attempts to define would but perplex it” (Butler qtd. in Perry, 2002, p. 84). Yet, different scholars grapple with it. Political philosopher Parekh (2008) argued that in terms of the future, personal identity was an individual achievement that some people don’t reach due to “poor upbringing, inadequate or confused self-understanding, lack of critical self-reflection, or aversion to or fear of settled preferences and a stable identity encouraged by consumerist society” (p.10). Sociologist Perry (2002), on the other hand, thought personal identity was an important way to provide psychological continuity to a person

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<sup>33</sup> I note the contradiction on the question of embodiment of the notion of person. The authors call reason as a human embodiment in one paragraph, yet in subsequent paragraphs they refer to the concept of person as an abstraction.

for “we know what to expect from ourselves in the normal case and can expect continued commitment to the values we have” (p. 144).

Communication scholars Hecht, Warren, Jung, & Krieger (2005) envisioned identity as a composite of four layers, of which one is the personal layer that refers to the individual as a locus of identity. Identity is stored in a personal layer as self-concept, self-image, self-cognitions, feelings about self, and or spiritual sense of self-being. The personal layer provides “understanding [about] how individuals define themselves in general as well as in particular situations” (Hecht et al., 2005, p.263). They theorize that personal layer of identity is “hierarchically ordered meanings attributed to self as an object in a social situation” (p. 264). Personal identity contains unique attributes that allow an individual to differentiate from other members of an in-group (Oetzel, 2009; Ting-Toomey, 2005).

In social interactions, others ascribe an identity to an individual that differs from the way the individual sees herself, and this creates tension and vulnerability. Furthermore, due to social circumstances a person may enact an identity that differs from her personal identity, as when women suppress their self-conceptions and instead enact what seems socially acceptable (Hecht et al., 2005). Martin and Nakayama (2007) write, “We are who we think we are; at the same time, however, contextual and external forces constrain and influence our self-perceptions” (pp.188-189). Other scholars point out that personal identities depend on the different methods of self-construal (Kim, 2002). In individualist cultures, people “work to exemplify their differences from others, but members of collectivistic cultures tend to emphasize their membership and connection to others” (Samovar et al., 2007, p.118).

The significant point to note in the above discussion is that personal identity is a “unique” attribute and that what we are and want to be is constrained by social forces. But as Derrida (2001) already pointed out, beings are not able to summon up a fixed meaning in an absolute sense and always derive it as a difference from the other. Thus, the unique attribute is more in relation to the in-group qualities, as in “I am an East-Indian but unlike other members of my culture, I like to maintain large personal space and privacy.” Such a process always invokes a category that is developed in difference and is difference itself. I argue that the framework of spirituality helps conceptualize that



the very nature of living in the Subject-Other dichotomy called personal identity, which is developed in difference, and always collides and emerges in presence of the Other.

Further, personal identity should be studied in context of how it impacts the Other. Buber (1958) proposed that empathy and respect for the Other emerges when we are able to shift from a “I-It” consciousness to an “I-Thou” consciousness. I question if the hyphen between I and the It can ever allow the “It” to transform into “Thou.” My argument is that unless *I* am able to experience that I am Thou, “It” does not transform into “Thou.” Although Buber reflects on the possibility of “I” transforming into “Thou,” he is hesitant to accept it fully. He argues that there is something in “I” that is unique and different from the world (Buber, 1958). However Vedic maxims: *Aham Bramhasmi* (I am That) and concurrent *Tat twamasi* (You are also That)<sup>34</sup> believe that selves are interconnected and “I” can fully transform into “Thou.” Therefore my first research question is:

RQ1. How does spirituality influence the perceptions of personal identity in Amma’s daughters in United States?

#### Gender Identity and Spirituality

The purpose of reviewing literature on gender is two-fold. In the following sections, I explore the contentious relationship of mainstream feminism with religion and argue that in that political tension spirituality has become a marginalized area of study. Then, I review the historical debate on sex and gender that has posed a theoretical dilemma in defining gender identity. I then show how spirituality may contribute to resolving the confounding questions involved in the debate. For the purposes of this review and this study, I consider “woman” as a strategic political category from which a response to oppression and marginalization can be articulated and strategies for emancipation formulated.

#### *Feminism, Religion and Spirituality*

Scholarship on women and religion is fraught with tension. On the one hand, scholars explored how patriarchal influences in religion oppress women and on the other hand, others claim that religion can enable and facilitate feminist goals of emancipation.

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<sup>34</sup> Incidentally, Halbfass (1991) found that the notion of *Tat twamasi* (You also are That) came into South Asian thinking because of the influence of Christian missionaries.

Marginalized in this relationship is the importance of spirituality in women's lives and to feminist objectives.

Feminist scholarship has had a contentious relationship with religion. Many feminists explain how patriarchal structures in religion have contributed to an overall degradation of women's status in society. For example, Mary Daly in her famous book, *Church and the Second Sex*, argued that the church has systematically subordinating women as second-class citizens in significant ways. She said that women were ideologically oppressed as inferior beings responsible for the fall from the Garden of Eden and, at the same time, the Church fixed the concept of the biologically impossible Virgin Mary as an ideal to be achieved by women (Daly, 1968). Further, she showed how women have been systematically excluded from the hierarchy of religious institutions through a patriarchal interpretation of scriptures; an argument that is confirmed in recent studies (like in Gross & Ruether, 2001).

Several feminists claim that the confluence of patriarchy and mainstream world religions is deep and irredeemable and instead explore goddess-centered religions as an alternative (Daly, 1975; Christ, 1979). For example, Christ (1979) argued:

Religions centered on the worship of a male God create "moods" and "motivations" that keep women in a state of psychological dependence on men and male authority, while at the same time legitimating the *political* and *social* authority of fathers and sons in the institutions of society. (p. 275, emphasis in original)

However, other scholars oppose feminist's rejection of religion by calling for the need to interpret scriptures in ways that would empower women (like Fiorenza, 1979; Tribble, 1979).

The feminist criticism of religion extended beyond Christianity to include Hinduism, Islam, and Buddhism (Gupta, 1997; Humes, 2000; Hutchings, 2000; Kissling & Sippel, 2002; Rajan, 2000; Sanasarian, 1989). For example, Ackermann and Joyner (1996) criticized the Quran for containing patriarchal ideology<sup>35</sup> that not only validates women's subservience to men and patriarchal institutions, but also legalizes domestic

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<sup>35</sup> They quoted Surah 4:34 as an evidence of this argument: "...and as for those women whose ill-will you have reason to fear, admonish them (first); the leave them alone in bed; then beat them; and if thereupon they pay you heed, do not seek to harm them" (Ackermann & Joyner, 1996, p. 130)

violence. Responding to the feminist criticisms of Islam, Majid (1998) described the historical underpinnings of the current state of women in Islam and argued that feminist enterprises must begin from within Islam and cannot be a borrowed concept from the West. In the context of Eastern religions, scholars argued that in spite of the worship of the divine feminine in the form of the goddess, the structures of these religions continue to support patriarchy. For example, *Mahadevi* (Great Goddess) is worshipped by the male priest and women have a subordinate role in the worship (Hume, 2000). Similarly Rajan (2000) argued that the ideological construction of the independent goddesses like *Durga* and *Kali* as undesirable and a concurrent establishment of the married goddesses like *Laxmi* and *Saraswati* as an ideal for domesticity re-inscribed patriarchal structures in women's lives. In Buddhist traditions, scholars critiqued the symbolism of the female and the female body as undesirable and an evidence of suffering in the world (Paul, 1985; Wilson, 1996). For example, Wilson (1996) pointed out the discrepancy in the practice of meditation on cadavers amongst certain Buddhist sects where the male monks meditate on female corpses which symbolize ugliness and decay of the worldly pleasures while the female monks are required to meditate on corpses of their own gender. The absence of women in religious hierarchy surfaced in Eastern religions, too (Gross & Ruether, 2001). Although there is nothing more central to Buddhism than the teacher-student relationship, yet "the practice of favoring men over women as teachers so fundamentally contradicts the Buddhist view that all beings contain the spark of indwelling Buddhahood" (Gross & Ruether, 2001, p. 66).

Postcolonial feminists pointed out the collusion of religion and the project of colonization (Cramer, 2003; Dube, 2002; French, 1988; Pui-Lan, 2002). For example, Pui-Lan (2002) analyzed the discourse around the Chinese footbinding by the Christian missionaries and argued that the colonial discourse of "saving brown women from brown men," along with the religious discourse of footbinding as "a sin against God, and a sin against man," effectively erased any possibility of agency of Chinese women and portrayed them as simply victims waiting to be set free.

In this contentious mix of feminism, religion and colonization, studies about spirituality are comparatively rare. Nonetheless, some scholars examine the inextricable and empowering ways in which spirituality is entwined with the lives of women (Castillo,

1995; Gálvan, 2001; Hill-Collins, 2000; hooks, 1993; Wekker, 1997). For example, hooks (1993) argued that spirituality is one of the ways in which black women can transcend the material and psychological devastation of oppression, while Castillo (1995) has stated that spirituality allowed Chicana women to achieve joy and sense of well-being. Scholars, such as Christ (1997), Spretnak (1992), Reis (1991) and Teish (1988), have documented the different rituals and practices of goddess-centered religions that help women heal. For example, Reis (1991) wrote that rituals centering contemplation on Aphrodite could help women to recover from physical abuse. Gálvan (2001) described how Mexican *campesinas*, amidst the harsh realities of migration and economic hardships, employed spirituality to deal with their everyday problems. For these *campesinas*, “women’s spirituality serves as a catalyst with which to struggle the daily turmoil of their home, work, or community” (Gálvan, 2001, p. 611). Similarly, Wekker (1997) described how women’s organizing efforts in Surinam was deeply intertwined with their spirituality.

Furthermore, some scholars incorporated spirituality to reframe feminism in radically different ways (like, Anzaldúa, 1987, 2002; Fernandes, 2003; Keating, 2002). For example, Anzaldúa’s incorporation of spirituality in her feminist writings explicated the “metaphysics of interconnectedness that posits a cosmic, constantly changing spirit or force that embodies itself in material and nonmaterial forms (Keating, 2000, p.9). Fernandes (2003) more directly addressed this issue and suggested that spirituality should be the foundational driving force in the search for social justice. There are four tenets to her argument: first, the reclamation of the materio-spiritual unity of self and the world in scholarship; second, long-lasting social transformation will occur when each and every individual is able to disengage from structures of power and privilege; third, this transformation will occur when such a disengagement becomes an everyday practice; and fourth, that this practice has to be necessarily spiritual.

For Fernandes, spirituality is not an esoteric abstraction of reality; it is a complete unambiguous confrontation of reality. It is not antithesis of materiality; rather it enjoins the material with the sacred. She pointed out, “Spiritual practice that is based on a belief of the separation between the spiritual and the material is at best a form of escapism and

at worst a means for perpetuation of deep-seated forms of injustice” (Fernandes, 2003, p.109). Anzaldúa echoed this point in her interview with Keating:

To me being spiritual is awakening to the fact that you’re a spirit, that you have this presence. Any spirituality that does not see that presence on a daily basis and work to awaken it, to give it more life and make it a part of your everyday life, is not spirituality. (Keating, 2000, p.98)

Further, Fernandes posited that for lasting social transformation, each and every individual has to disengage or disidentify from individual collusions with the structures of power and privilege as a daily practice. She stressed this need for disengagement as a vital component of social movements. She further recommended that in the process of disengagement, we link spiritual qualities like compassion, love, and humility to ethical practices of the social quest. To this end, she argued that the practice has to be necessarily spiritual. She maintained that it was in recognizing the interconnection between us and others, and knowing that we stem from a common source and that divinity exists in all and everything that we can begin to accept these practices as a responsibility, as a recognition of personal accountability (Fernandes, 2003).

When spirituality is incorporated into feminist scholarship, it makes a radical difference in the way gender struggles about social inequalities are theorized. My study advances on this belief that spirituality can provide alternatives for resolving contemporary theoretical and practical problems in the scholarship on gender identity.

#### *Sex and Gender Debate*

In its literal meaning, gender is a grammatical a term for male, female, or neutral (Bradley, 2007). Oakely (1972) made the first clear distinction between sex and gender when she wrote, “gender refers to the socio-cultural aspects of being a man or woman...while sex refers to the base of biological sex differences on which they were erected” (p.15). Later, others linked gender to theories of inequality and oppression and framed under the theory of patriarchy (Bradley, 2007). The argument centered on how gender differences are unnatural and do not arise from genital and genetic differences. Gender became defined as a “social category imposed on a sexed body” (Scott, 1988, p.18). From here, the debate became more heated and significant in feminist scholarship—ranging from the conceptualization of gender without sex, of gender as a

form prior to sex, of both sex and gender being understood as socially constructed, and of the possibility of moving beyond sex and gender (Colebrook, 2004).

Some scholars, however, believe that it is important to understand and include sex in understanding gender and the feminist struggle for justice. Along the lines of the works by Northrup (2006) and Brizendine (2006), Baron-Cohen (2007) argued that there are sex-based differences between “average” men and women, based on scientific evidence that the male brain tends to be more capable of systemizing tasks while female brain is more capable of empathizing. In a similar vein, Hurley (2007) asserted that feminism was not at odds with evolutionary psychology. Rather, the latter could help supported a feminist understanding of issues like nature’s alternatives to monogamy in the form of serial monogamy, and the natural instability of the human reproductive pattern and its dependence on social and cultural reinforcement and support. Her belief is that “understanding the nature of sex” can help us “understand the social construction of gender” (p. 114). Carver (2007) engaged the issue of sex deeply and argued that the physical singularity of the body and its normative and naturalized understanding has not problematized gender trouble sufficiently as in cases of transsexual and intersex. Colebrook (2004) observed that the debate was founded on the tendency of Western scientific tradition to ground opposition on “some fundamental principle which is itself not gendered” (p. 11). This tendency was criticized, following Irigaray (1985), as a male prerogative to understand the other as “sexed” versus himself as the “neutral and unsexed norm” (Colebrook, 2004, p. 11).

Other scholars questioned if sex and gender were helpful categories to understand the feminist struggle and its goals. Elam (2000) wrote: “if woman are a sex, they are oppressed by gender; if women are understood as a gender, they are oppressed by sex. . . . Whichever way feminists argue—whether women are understood as naturally sexed or as culturally gendered—the result is a kind of vicious circle” (p. 168). Likewise, Lawson (2007) questioned whether gender was a “meaningful” and “useful” category of analysis (p. 136). Her argument was that a political or theoretical argument based on the ontology of difference does not include the social reality, which is intensely complex. She said:

In our everyday practices, we, all of us, as complex structures, socially and cultural situated, purposeful and needy individuals, knowledgeably and capably

negotiate complex, shifting, only partially grasped and contested structures of power, rules, relations, and other possibly relatively enduring but nevertheless transient and action-dependent social resources at our disposal” (Lawson, 2007, p. 159).

In such a case, her question is, how can gender be the foundation of emancipatory process?

Scholars have struggled to provide alternative ways to either articulate this debate or liberate the feminist cause from its grips. Harraway (1991), using deconstructionist methodologies, argued that to call somebody a “woman” or a “man,” or to call them “black” or “white” is to compel them to act and be in certain ways (p. 19). Mitchell (2007), on the other hand, argued that sexual and gender difference could be studied in the form of two equally significant dimensions of feminism—sexual difference as significant to “the psychosocial construction of heterosexual procreative sexuality” and gender to “non-procreative sexuality” (p. 164). From a different angle, Browne (2007) examined the concept of gender centered on the principle of equal treatment and questioned what is “equal?” How is equality expressed? What are the normative assumptions around the “shoulds” of equal treatment? Bradley (2007) explored the category of third sex by some cultures to challenge the view of sexes and said that “While we may associate these styles as typically masculine and feminine, it is clear that men and women can choose to employ either of these approaches or indeed a mix of both” (p. 20).

Yet, other scholars have tried to liberate feminist struggle from the clutches of this debate. Colebrook (2004) zeroed in on the concept of immanent body and the question of its transcendence in debate. Her argument was that gender is “form set upon matter, gives way to sexuality as force productive of differences.” On the other hand, Butler (1990, 1993) argued that the sex and gender distinction does not hold and it is best to understand them in terms of performativity—“in our daily lives we repeatedly ‘do gender,’ act out being a man or woman in ways that gives the illusion of stability and fixity” (p. 19). Similarly, Foucault (1980)’s argument was that sexuality is also socially constructed and that homosexuality was not a fixed identity till 19<sup>th</sup> century. Butler (1993) recommended ways to challenge the rules of performance to create ‘transgressive’ gender activities and

identities. But feminists have not been able to enact such activities in public spaces due to a combination of political, cultural, and personal resistance (Bradley, 2007).

Elam (2000) proposed an alternative to this debate through “a possibility of a non-binary, non-oppositional, ‘sexual otherwise’” that would consist of “‘the multiplicity of sexually marked voices,’ of non-identified sexual marks whose choreography can carry, divide, multiply the body of each ‘individual.’” This study builds on this theoretical alternative through the conceptualization of a unity in the principle of interconnectedness as way to step beyond the embeddedness and differences of our expressions in this world without glossing over it. Feminist scholars have developed their intellectual explorations for a long time through the idea of the collective to theorize gender struggles and solutions. I suggest that, like Fernandes (2003), we need to stress on self-transformation—a disidentification from our personal collusions with power and privilege to pave the path for a long-lasting social transformation. Elam argued that this form of utopian thinking is useful because it “demands the continual exploration and re-exploration of the possible and yet also the unrepresentable” (Cornell qtd. in Elam, 2000, p.181). If spirituality, as defined in this study, is the journey from disidentification from social and personal identities into a state of connectedness, what are the implications of this journey on the notion of gendered identities? This study seeks an answer to my second research question:

RQ2. How does spirituality influence the perceptions of gender identity in Amma’s daughters in United States?

#### Cultural Identity and Spirituality

This section discusses the debates about the definition of culture, the approach to the issue of cultural identity, its significance in intercultural communication and the problems therein. As in previous sections, I conclude with a discussion of how spirituality might allow us to conceptualize cultural identity in new ways.

#### *Contested Definitions of Culture*

Culture is traditionally defined as a learned system that consists of patterns of traditions, beliefs, values, norms, meanings, and symbols that are passed on from one generation to the next and are shared to varying degrees by interacting members of a community (Cooper, Calloway-Thomas & Simonds, 2007; Lustig & Koester, 2006;



Oetzel, 2009; Ting-Toomey & Chung, 2005). However, interpretive and critical scholars dispute the normative understanding of culture as something common which is passed on systematically and in a linear, equitable fashion (Martin & Nakayama, 2007).

Some interpretive scholars agree with Geertz's definition of culture as "an historically transmitted pattern of meaning embodied in symbols, a system of inherited conceptions expressed in symbolic forms by means of which men (sic) communicate, perpetuate, and develop their knowledge about and attitudes toward life" (Geertz qtd. in Martin & Nakayama, 2007, p. 85). Shaules (2007) defined culture in terms of deep culture and the deep structures that seem to influence our thinking. The deep structures include the deep assumptions about human existence (Shaules, 2007) that are portrayed in Hofstede's (2001) value orientation schemata (power distance, collectivism and individualism, masculinity and femininity, uncertainty avoidance, and Confucian dynamism). Yet, critical scholars remained unsatisfied with this definition as it did not include the issue of marginality and diverse voices within a culture. Who gets to define a culture, what is included as a cultural norm, and what remains silenced are concerns of the critical theorists. From this view, every culture is replete with cultural struggles for dominance and voice (Martin & Nakayama, 2007). Benhabib (2002) argued against any attempt at homogenizing a culture and establish distinct boundaries, or "badges of group identity" (Turner qtd. in Benhabib, 2002, p. 4). Such views of culture are, Benhabib argued, always from the outside. From within, the participants of a culture experience it through "contested and contestable narrative accounts" (Benhabib, 2002, p. 4). As she said, "from within, a culture need not appear as a whole; rather it forms a horizon that recedes each time one approaches it" (Benhabib, 2002, p. 5).

#### *Identity in Intercultural Communication*

Influenced by these competing conceptualizations of culture, much of intercultural communication research directly or indirectly revolved around the assumption that the communication of identities plays an important role in the constitution and maintenance of cultures. In this field, cultural identity is defined in many ways: "one's sense of belonging to a particular culture or ethnic group. It involves learning about and accepting traditions, heritage, language, religion, ancestry, aesthetics, thinking patterns, and social structures of a culture" (Lustig & Koester, 2006, p. 137); as

having “emotional significance that we attach to our sense of belonging or affiliation with the larger culture” (Ting-Toomey, 2005, p. 214); “identification with and perceived acceptance into a group that has shared systems of symbols and meanings as well as norms/rules of conduct” (Collier & Thomas, 1988, p. 113).

Scholars argued that “one of the most important responsibilities of any culture is to assist its members in forming their identities” (Samovar, Porter & Mcdaniel, 2007, p.38). They claimed that cultural identity, like other identities, is significant in our lives. “Who am I? Who are you? The answer to these questions is central to our identity” (Oetzel, 2009, p. 57). Collier and Thomas (1988) argued that intercultural communication competence involved validating cultural identities and that the closer a person’s ascribed identity for the Other matched that person’s avowed identity, the more the person was competent in intercultural communication. Identities become even more important in a critical context, where the struggle between ascribed and avowed identities take the center stage, with marginalized communities resisting ascriptions and gaining voice through articulation of their own identities.

There are several theories regarding cultural identity from a communication point of view like identity negotiation theory (Ting-Toomey, 2005), identity management theory (Imahori and Cupach, 2005), cultural contracts theory (Jackson, 2002), critical understandings of cultural identifications (Collier, 2005), integrative theory of communication (Kim, 2005). I discuss the conceptualizations of identity in these theories and argue that they are based on a modern conception of self as discrete and distinct that creates a skewed approach to practical problems in intercultural communication.

Identity negotiation theory proposed by Ting-Toomey (2005) assumes that all humans in all cultures desire “positive group-based and positive person-based identities in all communication situations” (p.217). Therefore, in an intercultural encounter, when a person has to interact with an unfamiliar environment, s/he desires security, desires to belong, and needs to “experience a certain amount of predictability and to trust the responses of others” (Ting-Toomey, 2005, p.218). To experience these outcomes, Ting-Toomey argued, people need to develop cultural-sensitive knowledge and competent identity-based communication skills.

Security is a key element in this theory. The assumption is that the need for safety and security must be affirmed and defended, or in other words, the status quo must be maintained. But such an assumption reminds me of a saying posted on a friend's desk: "happiness comes through good judgment. Good judgment comes through experience and experience comes through making bad judgments." The saying reflects what many of us experience in our lives—significant learning happens through failure and defeat. Failure and defeat pulls us into unsafe psychological spaces from where we gain a deeper understanding of our lives and the world. Risking boundaries and treading into unknown spaces allows many of us to grow into fuller human beings. The best works of human kind, whether it be a scientific invention or philosophical treatise are a product of walking into unsafe, unknown spaces. On a similar note, Anzaldúa (2002, p. 3) wrote:

Staying "home" and not venturing out from our own group comes from woundedness, and stagnates our growth . . . . to step across the threshold is to be stripped of the illusion of safety because it moves us into unfamiliar territory and does not grant safe passage.

Similarly, within interpretive and critical traditions, the focus has been on identity as a location from which one can speak, write, and struggle politically. Scholars like Hall (1994) disputed the notion of cultural identities as an eternal result of an "essentialized past" and stated that "identities are the names we give to the different ways we are positioned by, and position ourselves within, the narratives of the past" (p. 325). The focus on cultural identity is significant, especially in the lives of the marginalized in the society. The politics of identity is a deeply emotional, intellectual, and political issue to activists of color. Yet we find activists themselves replicate structures of power and privilege by marginalizing voices and issues within their own groups and forcing further breakouts. Anzaldúa (1990) noted: "We have been indoctrinated into adopting the old imperialist ways of conquering and dominating, adopting a way of confrontation based on differences while standing on the ground of ethnic superiority" (p. 142). Furthermore, some critical approaches to cultural identity stress that our culture, our home, was never a safe space to begin with. It was always a site of struggle and of contestation. As Anzaldúa (2002, p. 3) stated, "there are no safe spaces."

More recently, in context of contemporary theories of globalization, traditional notions of cultural identity are even more problematic. As Appadurai (1996) noted, we need to “begin to think of the configuration of cultural forms in today’s world as fundamentally fractal, that is possessing no Euclidean boundaries, structures, or regularities” (p. 46). At the same time, globalization has led to the emergence of a global consciousness, a sense of humanity and of “our planet” (Robertson, 2001). This consciousness of global identity refers to the emotional significance that we attach to belonging to humankind. This consciousness in turn relativizes local identities through deterritorialization or the “disembeddedness of cultural phenomena from their ‘natural’ territories” (Casanova, 2001, p. 426). Appadurai (1996) states that deterritorialization “affects the loyalties of groups” so that “the loosening of the holds between people, wealth, and territories fundamentally alters the basis of cultural reproduction” (p. 49).

This discussion about traditional conceptualizations of culture and cultural identity serves to highlight that when the definition of what is culture is itself highly debated, the location and significance of cultural identity also becomes contested. Spirituality provides a dynamic framework to explore the above described theoretical dilemma by introducing the notion of disidentification. This approach steps beyond the dilemma around the theorizing of culture by not focusing on the attempt to fix its definition and being comfortable with its inherent heterogeneity and ambiguity. This approach embraces (un)safety and insecurity through a disengagement from cultural positions to return to cultural differences as varying expressions of a common unity.

Some theories, such as integrative communication theory, embrace heterogeneity and ambiguity in interesting ways through the conceptualization of intercultural personhood and identity (Kim, 2001). Intercultural identity, in this theory, involves identification to more than one culture, which is evolving continually, becoming increasingly richer in content and complex in structure by breaking ingrained narrow notions of norms and cultural patterns, and expanding into the uncertain skies of becoming a citizen of our planet (Kim, 2001). He explains:

The development of intercultural identity is grounded in the situation of ‘marginality’—the state in which a stranger is ‘poised in uncertainty between two

or more social worlds' and characteristically experiences an acute sense of self-doubt, loneliness, isolation, hypersensitivity, and restlessness (p. 191).

According to Kim (2001), there are two key issues in the development of intercultural identity—the first is individualization, and the second is universalization. Individualization is a process by which the Self-Other orientation is liberated from the restrictive categories of social groupings, and instead facilitates an ability to reflect on the connection of the person to humanity. There is a clearer sense of selfhood, of a place in the world, of feeling authentic, and well being “in the form of self-acceptance and self-esteem and the relative absence of malice and other debilitating emotional states such as anxiety and depression” (Kim, 2001, p. 192). There is also a parallel development of a universalistic mental outlook—an approach that allows a person to become a global citizen. As Kim (2001) describes:

As people advance in their intercultural transformation process, they are better able to see the oneness and unity of humanity, feel greater compassion and sensitivity towards others who are different, and locate the points of consent and complementarity beyond the points of difference and contention. (p. 193)

The outcome of this process of intercultural transformation is the realization of intercultural personhood, defined as personal characteristics that transcend any given cultural group (Kim, 2001). This person develops greater cultural reflexivity, a greater ability to have an authentic sense of selfhood, other, and the world. It is a state when a person is in harmony within herself and the world.

This theory closely relates to my argument that disidentification allows for a universalistic mental outlook. And yet, it falls short on the account that it uses a social-scientific approach to reduce data to certain categories and thereby converting the richness and complexity of intercultural transformation to certain statistical measures of functional fitness, psychological health, and intercultural identity components. Further, the theory does not explain how transcendence from the characteristics of a cultural group happens. I argue that intercultural personhood cannot be achieved as long as one continues to be in a Subject-Other dichotomy and that transcendence requires a certain disidentification from that dichotomy. The notion of intercultural personhood in Kim's work does not contradict the philosophical conceptualization of self as discrete and

distinct and, hence, begs the question—what is philosophical premise to support the notion that the self can expand and transform to include the other in intercultural personhood? The concept of interconnectedness can provide this theory a philosophical basis for transcendence and transformation. The genuine intercultural identity can be formed only when the individual transcends the Subject-Other dichotomy and moves into the state of connectedness where varying expressions are experienced as the expressions of the same unity and hence cannot participate in hegemonic interactions for dominance and power in exclusion of the Other. Hence my third research question is:

RQ3. How does spirituality influence the perceptions of cultural identity in Amma's daughters in United States?

#### Religious Identity and Spirituality

In this section, I present the various studies and perspectives on religious identity and spirituality. The Amma community is a new religious movement led by a woman leader, Amma, who was born into Hinduism and influenced by Hindu beliefs. Amma is followed by Western women, none of whom grew up in a Hindu household. Thus my study focuses on religious identity in an interreligious context. I first elaborate on the complexities in the understanding of the terms “religion” and “spirituality,” illustrate the special case of new religious movements, and then present the terms in context of religious identity and its association with religious violence and intolerance. Then, I present a brief sketch of existing scholarship on solutions presented to end this violence and intolerance, for I have argued that spirituality, as defined in this study, can provide an alternative to unravel the cohabitation of religious identity and violence or intolerance.

#### *Contested Definitions of Religion and Spirituality*

The modern study of religion in contemporary social sciences owes its origins to Durkheim's foundational study *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life* (1914). He argued that religion was socially constructed and not divinely-inspired. He said that although all forms may be divine, what is considered sacred and hence had religious meaning and what is profane and has no religious meaning is socially-constructed through laws of prohibition (Durkheim, 1995). Thus, certain social aspects are constructed as superior and hence sacred while the rest are deemed inferior and prohibited. However, the sacred and profane interacted and were interdependent with

each other. But in essence, religion was a way by which society worshipped itself. Religion, for Durkheim, was not a detriment for it allowed people to live in an organized manner and facilitated social control and cohesion (Durkheim, 1995).

However, in contemporary times, religion is a more ambiguous concept. What constitutes religion or does not is something about which scholars disagree (Beyer, 1994). Zinnbauer, Pargament, and Scott (1999) found thirty-one definitions of religion in social science publications. For me as a Hindu, the concept of religion is also a Western concept imposed upon a certain set of practices, beliefs, and philosophy by the Western world to make sense of something that is unlike Christianity. According to Seigler (2007), Hinduism is a concept that was coined by the British in the 1820s to name the religious activity of the people in India.

The difference between religion and spirituality are the subject of scholarship (King, 2008, p.120). Some assert that spirituality transcends religious organizations, while others conceptualize religion as a vehicle for spirituality, and still others argue that the great overlap of human experience in both religion and spirituality do not allow distinct definitions (Benjamin & Looby 1998; Hinterkopf, 1994; Ingersoll, 1994; Kale, 2004; Shafranske & Gorsuch, 1984; Zinnbauer et al., 1999). King (2008) argued that historically and structurally, religion has a spiritual core. To divorce the concepts entirely from each other does not serve purpose since they are interrelated, dynamic and “respond to each other in their mutual transformations” (van Ness qtd. in King, 2008, p.121). Hence, King (2008) called for understanding spirituality as rooted in a thoroughly historicized and contextualized framework and advocated the use of spirituality in its plural form as spiritualities (p.121-122). Smiljanic (2008), however, approached the issue of spirituality from a non-religious perspective. She stated: “Essentially, and very simply, spirituality is working with the self. The project of working with the self involves examining ourselves and redefining our relationship to what we do” (Smiljanic, 2008, p.141). Due to the ambiguity of incorporating spirituality into scholarship, the theoretical intertwining of religion, spirituality independently do not produce to the scholarship but lead to interreligious violence and intolerance. I argue that spirituality as defined this study can provide an alternative exploration of interreligious conflict and tensions.

### *New Religious Movement*

Amma community is a new religious movement, or NRM, that differs from old traditional religions but also deviates from the way religions are practiced. According to Wilson (qtd. in Clarke, 2006, p.10-12), one of the important identifying features of NRMs is that the responsibility for spiritual advancement mostly remained with its devotees and less on the clergy. In some cases, spiritual masters or gurus are indispensable to the spiritual process; but Wilson finds this as an attribute that followers give to the master, not something that the master himself/herself claims. Further, the member is not required to have faith in the Revelations in the scriptures, but as Gurdjieff (qtd. in Clarke, 2006, p. 11) said, membership requires some trust and the rest can be verified through experience in this very life. NRMs also emphasize that the spiritual quest is to undergo the deepest possible realization of this real self. Many NRMs are engaged in social service and believe that when members participate in social service backed by religious and spiritual beliefs, it causes transformation of the self as well as the world (Clarke, 2006, p. 4). However, some NRMs have acquired notoriety as cults. For example, in Japan in 1995, members of a NRM, called Aum Shinrikyo, used sarin gas to kill and injure passengers in a Tokyo underground (Clarke, 2006). Many cults in United States and thus NRMs are looked at with suspicion.

NRMs are also considered an instrument in the process of globalization. Roberston (1992) suggested that there is a religious aspect to globalization, in the sense that there is a quest for self-identity and the meaning of being a human, not in particular religious terms, but more in terms of humanity itself. Clarke (2006) noted that NRMs are intricately intertwined in this process for finding self-identity and participate in the project of constructing of global self for a global world.

Burgess (2008) argued that existing definitions of religion in terms of its institutional framework exclude NRMs. Since NRMs have a tendency to focus more on individuals than society, and with their fragmentary system of beliefs, they are less likely to create new religious “institutions” (Burgess, 2008; Hervieu Léger, 2000). Hence Hervieu Léger proposed a new definition of religion as a chain of memory that serves as the unit allowing a member of faith community to invoke history of a particular tradition and define its goals in terms of that memory (Hervieu Léger, 2000; Burgess, 2008).



Burgess (2008) argued against the tendency of researchers to confuse sacredness and religiousness as “mirror-images” of each other rather than as distinct and potentially related phenomena. From this view, the return of the sacred does not mean the return of religion to the center of modern society but “it indicates the ridding the world of the presence of religion” (Hervieu Léger qtd. in Burgess, 2008, p. 63). Burgess (2008) provided an alternative definition of the sacred that would include the special case of NRMs:

*The sacred itself would actually be a state of consciousness in which all aspects and expressions of existence are valued, and their interdependence is perceived and experienced on a personal level. Naturally, awareness of this value and connection can grow slowly, or emerge suddenly in moments of spiritual or religious intensity”* (p. 60, emphasis in original).

This particular articulation of the sacred has informed this study by illuminating the understanding of how participants derived spiritual lessons from the most mundane encounters.

#### *Religious Identity, Violence, and Transformation*

Scholars contend that religion is not merely associated with violence but is perhaps the source of violence. Ellens (2004) pointed out that the violent metaphor of a cosmic battle between good and evil is internalized in Western religions (p.4) and therefore, a religious practitioner may construe affiliation to her religion as being on god’s side (Ellens, 2004; De Vries, 2004). Kille (2004) noted that when a group identifying with a religion makes absolute truth claims, it will often make them with reference to sacred writings (p.71). Such a group is termed as the scriptural literalists, for whom the “religious identity more or less transcends reason and is not amenable to rational investigation or criticism” (Parekh, 2008, p. 131).

Scholars argued that religious metaphors can kill (Ellens, 2004; Girard 2004). Girard (1986) saw three crucial elements in the mimetic process of employing violence to reduce dissonance in a society and to maintain order and peace in the face of a natural tendency to dissonance, chaos, and disorder. The first is the codification of control structures or prohibitions; second is the creation of rituals for enacting both the event of

redemptive violence and the patterns of required conformity within society, and third is the killing of a scapegoat. (p.266; also see Stirling (2004), p.11).

Hanford (2004) claimed that religions cause psychological shame that leads to violence as revenge (p. 240) and the defensiveness and self justification that prevents dialogue and becomes a reason for violence (Aden, 2004). Further, when religion is reduced to its fundamentals, it leads to distortion of teachings and subverts religion under politics (Anderson, 2004; Parekh, 2008). This allows the mobilization of “physical groups” for violence and hatred of the religious Other (Kakar, 1996). For example, the Iranian leader of ‘70s and ‘80s Ayatollah Khomeini’s emphasis was that a cleric who simply studies scriptures and prays cannot understand Islam, until he is part of the Islamic revolutionary struggle (Parekh, 2008, p.146-147).

Kakar analyzed how religious identity is produced and how it leads to violence from a psychological perspective. He argued that from the religious selfhood and the “I”ness of religious identity, a new track of collective “We”ness emerge when this identity colludes with a community of believers. Thus a religious identity is not merely a self-identity but expands to become a community identity. When community transforms into communalism (an ethnocentric view to community), the community aspect of religious identity becomes heightened and this in turn creates an “intolerance of all those outside the boundaries of the group” (Kakar, 1996, p.192). Communalism is triggered by an environment of fear and anxiety (Kakar, 1996; Parekh, 2008).

Scholars claim that although religions are sometimes the source of violence, they can also be the source of transformation. Hanford (2004) suggested that a constructive approach to religion would ensure members are provided with good education, quality theologians to interpret theology in different critical ways as well as an emphasis on healthy shame where intolerance is grounds for shame (p. 241-245). Anderson (2004) advocated finding a third alternative to religious interpretations, engaging in a critical examination of scriptures that exposes the yoking of religion to political motivations, challenging the use of religious power for destruction, and emphasizing the importance of not dehumanizing other religions (p. 281).

Scholars also emphasize the similarity of beliefs and practices amongst world religions (Beuken & Kuschel, 1997; McKiel, 2007). McKiel (2007) produced an

impressive book documenting the ways in which religions had commonalities. He illustrated the ways in language, the concept of unknowableness and oneness of God, spiritual concepts (like concept of soul, resurrection and reincarnation, rebirth, next-life) and religious practices (like worship, equality and justice, and kindness) are common among religions.

On the level of praxis, Neibuhr (2008) provided examples of instances when people automatically reached beyond their religious boundaries to recognize the pain of the other. His contention was that many people naturally lived in interfaith but that somehow this aspect of people's religiousness did not gain as much attention. He illustrated how different church groups were concerned about attacks on mosques and the Muslim community and took steps to protect them—like the establishment of a program called *Watchful Eyes* by the Church Council of Greater Seattle to head off the violence on Muslims living in the Seattle area shortly after 9/11 attacks.

However, the greatest emphasis is placed on the importance and centrality of dialogue amongst religions as a way to promote interreligious understanding. Dialogue is important to undermine the dogmatic views of scriptural literalists (Parekh, 2008). However, Parekh (2008) argued, in a vein, similar to Kakar (1996), that there is a limit to dialogue when scriptural literalists are obsessed with certain scriptural utterances. In such a case, the scholars proposed, what is needed is an examination the contexts in which scriptural literalists make their readings. For example if there is fear and anxiety in the environment, then that needs to be relieved to facilitate scriptural literalists to explore dialogue.

I agree with Kakar that a religious identity performed in an environment of fear and anxiety leads to defensiveness and reaction against the religious-Other. It is not merely creating multicultural societies or recognizing pluralism that can prevent the defensive reaction, but it is the endeavor to move beyond social identity that allows a person to recognize and accept the Other not as a threat but a differing expression of the same interconnected unity. For dialogue to succeed, it requires, as Parekh (2008) stated, the understanding that “each needs to listen to the other, reflect seriously on its criticisms, and take a fresh look at itself” (p.177). For a person to be able to listen and reflect, one's ego has to diminish (Upadhyaya, 2006). Kakar (1996) himself points out, “Riots *do* start

in the minds of men, minds conditioned by our earliest inner experience of self-affirmation and assertion” (p. 192, emphasis in original). If riots start in the mind, shouldn't the *mind* be the place to disrupt the growth of violence and hatred? Yet, answers to simple questions are not the emphasis in a majority of scholarly works. Davis III (2004) pointed out the importance of shifting the locus from the outer social world to the inner world of the psyche or soul in the teachings of Jesus (p.40). Aden (2004) also wrote about the importance of humility as a way to open up possibilities for peace and harmony (p.257- 259). This movement of turning inwards produces spirituality and humility that cannot genuinely emerge unless an individual withdraws from his or her identity positions. Therefore studying how people negotiate religious identities in context of spirituality provides clues on how the violence and intolerance that emerges from religious identity may be controlled, eradicated or transformed into deep dialogue. Hence my fourth and final research question is:

RQ4. How does spirituality influence perceptions of religious identity in Amma's daughters in United States?

#### Chapter Summary

In summary, this chapter provides a brief historical overview of identity scholarship and argued that a philosophy that is rooted in notions of difference is not an adequate framework to articulate peace and understanding in the world. Through a review of scholarship in the areas of personal, gender, cultural, and religious identities, the conceptualization of identity in this area is problematic. A spiritual framework as defined in this study provides an alternative way to understand, articulate, and accept difference without being trapped in that difference.

## CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGY

The focus of this study was a group of U.S. women, living in New Mexico, U.S.A., and devotees of a religious guru from India known as Mata Amritanandamayi (Amma). The philosophical frameworks that informed this study were the transmodern and Asiatic paradigms. One of my central arguments in this study is that spirituality helps us understand the problem of approaching differences in the world in new ways by introducing the notion of interconnectedness. This notion recognizes that individuals can transcend conventional positions of identification—which are based on approaching difference as oppositional to the Subject—to an approach to difference as varying expressions of the same unity. Such a notion, I believe, could lead to a philosophically coherent theorizing of communication for peace amongst peoples and groups in this world.

The central research problems explored in this study are: 1) the influence of spirituality on the conception of culture, gender, religion and the individual, and on the various identity positions associated with these conceptions amongst the U.S. women devotees of the transnational *Amma* movement, and 2) how the understanding of this dynamics of identification in turn influence our knowledge about communication. The research explores how women construe concepts like gender, culture, and religion through a spiritual lens through communicative behaviors.

### Research Questions

The specific research questions guiding this project therefore are:

RQ1. How does spirituality influence the perceptions of personal identity in Amma's daughters in United States?

RQ2. How does spirituality influence the perceptions of gender identity in Amma's daughters in United States?

RQ3. How does spirituality influence the perceptions of cultural identity in Amma's daughters in United States?

RQ4: How does spirituality influence the perceptions religious identity in Amma's daughters in United States?

### Definition of Key Concepts

15. Identity refers to the always shifting, unstable emotional significance that is placed by an individual on a certain set of values and beliefs, affiliation to a particular cultural or religious group, social ascription, and discourses. It encompasses the sense of coherence or unity that, even if temporary, extends through space and time and allows a person to define himself or herself and interact with others socially.
16. Personal identity refers to the emotional significance we attach to the unique attributes, needs and desires to differentiate us from other members of an in-group.
17. Gender identity refers to the meanings and interpretations we hold concerning our self-images and expected other-images of “femaleness,” and “maleness”
18. Cultural identity refers to the emotional significance we attach to our sense of belonging or affiliation with the larger culture or cultural heritage. In this study, it is in relation to the East-West cultural dichotomy.
19. Religious identity refers to the emotional significance we attach to our sense of belonging or affiliation with a particular religion.
20. Disidentification is a process of moving beyond our emotional attachments to different cultural, religious, and social groups as well as our unique attributes.
21. State of connectedness occurs when we recognize our fundamental interconnectedness with rest of the universe.

### Philosophical Assumptions and Research Objectives

This study fulfills three of the five Asiacentric research objectives (Miike, 2004a) in particular ways. It (1) explores spiritual liberation through communication (p.45), (2) depicts multiple visions of harmony among complex relationships (p.47), and (3) examines (inter)cultural communication needs and problems through Asian eyes (p.48). Miike (2004a) has proposed that from an Asiacentric perspective, the “role of communication, then, is to facilitate egolessness and connection toward Asiacentric spiritual enlightenment, the oneness of the Universe” (p.46). This study explores how participants and devotees navigate the journey to enlightenment and struggle with ego-identifications and the implications of those processes on our knowledge of

communication. Further, the study pertains to the question of harmony in context of contemporary, much-debated understanding of concepts like gender, religion, and culture and seeks to explain them in a way that would contribute to harmony in the universe. Finally, Miike (2004a) emphasized that there was a need to balance out the Eurocentric bias in scholarship to study intercultural situations and bring in an Asian perspective to communication and culture theories (p. 48-49). I approached this study with a primarily Asian worldview and discovered common ground with some ancient Western views. In light of this understanding, I have approached this subject through a transmodern perspective that bridges the gap between ancient and modern wisdom.

To achieve the above research objectives, I used traditional ethnographic methods. However, applied them under the transmodern paradigm, the research report departs from the conventional ethnographic account. Methods for data collection consisted of formal and informal interviews, participant-observation, auto-ethnographic reflection, and document analysis—of organizational websites, publications, video and audio recordings, and non-organizational blog posts created by devotees.

#### Data Collection Procedures

The procedures I used to collect data for this research are participant observation, interviews, document analysis, and auto-ethnographic reflection. The description of procedures for data collection is presented below.

#### *Sampling Methods*

The main population for this study is women devotees of Mata Amritanandamayi—the guru and leader of the Mata Amritanandamayi Math movement and known as Amma—who are above the age of 18, and were born and reside in United States. They are also described in this study as devotees and as Amma’s daughters. I excluded American women devotees who are of Asian origin. The reason was that this group had a greater affinity to the cultural practices of the Math movement and therefore their experiences would not offer a sharp contrast for the kind of data I wished to collect. For the interviews, I selected women residing in New Mexico as most of my field study was conducted in New Mexico. These women are described in this study as participants. To complement these data, I incorporated some observations from my stay in the Amritapuri *ashram* in India. An *ashram* is a Hindu version of a monastery but is not

restricted to monks and nuns only. It is an area specifically designated for spiritual practices and discipline, and is occupied by permanent residents who are nuns, monks, or renunciates and temporary residents who come for a period of spiritual discipline and practice.

The criteria for deciding if a woman participant is a devotee of Amma were if she fulfilled all of the following:

- She claimed to be a devotee of Amma.
- She knew Amma for at least one year.
- She had attended at least one public program/retreat with Amma.
- She was either active with the Math activities like attending *satsangs*, *sevas* during Amma tour programs, *satsang* activities like Amma's Kitchen, *bhajan* practice, fundraising, or was actively applying the teachings of Amma in her daily professional/personal life.

I used purposive sampling for the interviews. The rationale for using this method was that there were certain people who could provide me with optimum and trustworthy response in the field (Fetterman, 1998). I was in the field for close to four years. I knew many of the women devotees who had been with Amma for a long time or were very active with the Math activities. I had also developed a good relationship with some of them. I received good referrals from some of the participants who led me to interview other women who they thought would provide me interesting information for the research. Through this process called snowball technique, purposive sampling allowed for a richer and a more trustworthy data collection.

#### *Gaining Access*

I participated in the Amma community's activities for close to four years. I attended five spiritual retreats and several public programs with Amma. Public programs are usually for a day or two when anybody is free to go upto her for a *darshan*. There are programs both in the morning and evening. The evening program ends between 3:00 and 5:00 of the next morning. Retreats are a three-day and night affair open to only those who have paid<sup>36</sup> and registered, and include a special question-and-answer time with Amma, a dinner that is personally served by Amma, special spiritual talks by *swamis*, yoga classes,

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<sup>36</sup> The three-day retreat costs were \$195 without accommodations for adults in 2009.



*bhajan* (devotional singing) classes and time with Amma in less crowded circumstances. The retreat culminates in a special public program known as *Devi Bhava*. On *Devi Bhava* night, Amma is said to express (*bhava*) the divine feminine or goddess (*Devi*) more tangibly. After an extensive worship, she appears dressed in colorful saris (as against her traditional white) with jewelry, including a crown. It usually starts in the evening at 7:00 and continues till 8:00 or 9:00 the next morning. I also attended several monthly *satsangs*. *Satsangs* are local worship sessions where the devotees gather to pray and chant together. They are usually two-hours long and preceded by an hour-long chanting of the 1,000 names of the goddess and proceeded by a vegetarian dinner. The total session requires a minimum of five hours. *Satsangs* are held twice a month. I also participated in several *sevas* during the public programs and retreats. *Sevas* technically mean voluntary selfless service. The different organizational responsibilities that a devotee volunteers for is also known as *seva*. I served food, cut vegetables, helped in publicity, did staff laundry, and worked in different positions in the *darshan* line. For the 2008 North American Amma tour, I was asked to be one of the coordinators in managing the *darshan* line and as I wrote this, I received a request to help in *darshan* line coordination for the 2009 summer retreat. This was an important responsibility because in Albuquerque close to 2,000 people visit her everyday and on the *Devi Bhava* night, about 5,000 people are known to attend.

I also received an invitation for several special *sevas*, which allowed me to observe several activities near Amma. These included doing evening *arati* (flame ceremony for Amma which allows one to sit at the front of the hall for the entire evening *bhajan* and *meditation* program), *padapuja* (worship of Amma's feet), *Prasad* timer (timing the *sevites* offering *Prasad* or gifts given to devotees who come for Amma's *darshan*—which includes Hershey's kisses and flower petals—into Amma's hand who then gives it to the devotee), *Prasad seva*, flower person (the person who collects flowers from Amma and puts them in a bucket of water), *Prasad* starter (this *seva* is different because it allows the person 10 or more minutes instead of two to four minutes to sit next to Amma and places him or her amongst first persons of the day to offer the *Prasad*. This also allows one to sit near Amma for the entire morning and evening meditation), and lap assistant *seva* (a nice and easy *seva* that was available in 2005 only, and which allowed

me to sit on the right-hand side of Amma, close to her chair, and watch for people who may need cushions for their knees as they bend down to receive *darshan*).

Although I entered the community for the purposes of research, I was charmed both by Amma's messages as well as her presence. Eventually, my personal devotion to her did endear me to many of the participants who felt safe and comfortable talking to me. In addition, in 2005, I spent about six weeks in the Amritapuri *ashram* in India, participating and praying with several women renunciates from all over the world. These six weeks gave me useful insights relevant to this study. This stay was also important since many women devotees in United States consider a trip to Amritapuri sacred and significant in their lives.

#### *Participant Observation*

The first important method I used to gather data was participant observation. Participation observation is a process by which a researcher is able to watch social actors in their natural settings while simultaneously participating as "responsible and contributing members" (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002, p. 135). It is not a random process; rather it is a highly systematic process (Weick qtd. in Lindlof & Taylor, 2002, p. 133-134). The rationale for using this process is best described by the following quotation from Liberman (Liberman qtd. in Lindlof & Taylor, 2002):

The craft [of fieldwork] consists . . . . of hermeneutic practices that permit the researcher to understand the indigenous world close to the way that it appears to the people themselves . . . . to ascertain the interpretive schema that informants employ in knowing their world, to be able to communicate with them in ways they find immediately recognizable, to discern in detail the way one's subjects fit meanings together, and to appreciate the horizon of meaning they bring to bear on what they are still in the process of understanding (p. 134-135).

For the purpose of this research, I use the term "participant" when I refer to those in the community that I interviewed formally, and I use the term "devotee" to refer to the members of the community that I observed and informally conversed with.

I first met Amma in June 2004, on the *Devi bhava* night. I was mesmerized by the number of Western devotees that attended the program. As an Indian, I was amazed at that time to find so many "Indophiles" existing in New Mexico. The following

December, I received the Research Project Travel grant from University of New Mexico to travel to Amma's *ashram* in India. However, my trip was cancelled as I reached south India on the afternoon of the day when the Asian Tsunami struck. I later found out that Amma's *ashram* had been flooded and all visitors and local village inhabitants were being accommodated in the Amma University campuses nearby.

I traveled back to the *ashram* in May of 2005 and lived there for several weeks. While I lived in the ashram, I participated in most of the ashram activities. My *seva* in the *ashram* started as a breakfast server in the canteen that catered specifically to Westerners and I moved up to become the breakfast supervisor. There was no specific criterion for promotion; I seemed to be well-organized and was staying for an extended period of time. I also helped clean the *ashram* grounds and set up dinnerware. I participated in morning meditations and evening *bhajans* regularly. Amma was in the *ashram* for a couple of weeks before she left for her East Asia and North America tours. I also participated in any impromptu events set up by Amma and spent many hours either with her or under her room, observing and conversing with *ashram* residents who had meeting appointments with her. Besides this, I conversed with many *ashram* residents and visitors at dinner tables and in their apartments.

My desire to focus the research on the Indian *ashram* residents was thwarted on two accounts. Most of the Indians did not like the idea of having to sign consent forms. They were more willing to talk to me informally. Second, several of them were uncomfortable with my attention on their lives. They kept telling me that their life was not important and they had nothing worthwhile to say. Some also told me that Amma could respond to the interview questions in lieu of them and that it would be best for my research project if I asked the questions directly to Amma. I realized that as a researcher I was using a secular paradigm to assure potential participants about the importance of their personal words and lives, and this contradicted their spiritual goals working towards being more humble, less ego-centric and more harmonious to the world in their spiritual path.

I re-considered plan and focused my research on lay women in United States. There were several reasons and assumptions behind this switch—(1) women in United States are more comfortable with formal research interview process and the IRB

protocols, and (2) I thought that since I was a researcher from a developing, erstwhile colonized country from Asia, my approach to research, and the ways I analyzed and interpreted data may yield different insights from those produced by local Western researchers, and (3) a study of Indian followers of Amma had been conducted and report was published (Warrier, 2005), but no extensive research had been conducted among Western devotees of a third-world leader.

In the Amritapuri *ashram* in India, I announced my research endeavors to the *ashram* residents with whom I conversed. Many did not seem to be bothered by it. One of the residents told me that it was futile to work on this project, since so many others had researched and written about Amma. Another resident felt that since I knew Bengali fluently, I would soon become Amma's translator in Bengali since it seemed that the organization lacked good Bengali translator at the point in time. Yet another East Indian resident decided to collaborate with me, help me refine my questions and deepen my understanding of the ways of resident life and Amma. However, circumstances did not allow us to go further into our collaboration.

I asked for Amma's permission to conduct the research in her community in June 2005. She replied, "Whatever my daughter wishes." I let many *satsang* members know of my research endeavors in Albuquerque early in 2005. Most of them were not bothered by it nor did they ask any questions about the scope or focus of my research. One devotee, who later became a participant, was amazed that my research focused on Amma and her devotees. When she learnt about the focus on gender in my study, she felt that I would perhaps go on to work with Amma in the sex-worker rehabilitation project in the notorious red-light district of Sonargachi in Kolkata (erstwhile Calcutta), India. I kept disclosing my research intentions at a couple of other occasions publicly but I did not receive any response or further questions about it from devotees. What was more important for them was that I had ended up finding Amma through my educational endeavors. Through the different tours, *satsangs*, and *satsang* activities, whenever I came across devotees with interesting background and who felt comfortable talking to me, I asked for contact information for a future in-depth interview. Some also expressed a desire to maintain a friendship with me. Some offered to drive me to the Amma's *ashram* in Santa Fe, NM. I accepted the offer on several occasions.

Once I decided that women in United States would be my main focus, I began to participate in the local *satsangs* (prayer groups) and volunteered for *seva* in the Amma tour programs. In the Amma tour programs, I started with helping in cutting vegetables, serving food, and assisting in managing the entry of people on the *Devi bhava* night. My enthusiasm at work impressed a *sevite* who gave me special *sevas* that allowed me to work close to Amma. In subsequent Amma tour programs, I moved to managing the *darshan* line and was able to immediately interact with devotees and visitors and understand how the tour and the *darshan* was organized. Further, this assignment gave me an opportunity to be in the hall and observe *darshan* and the various activities going around Amma. In the year 2008, I was promoted as a *darshan line* coordinator, which gave me further insights into the working of the community. Many of my *seva* shifts were in the night, and sometimes I worked all night during an Amma program. I also participated, whenever necessary, in *sevas* like doing laundry for staff members (about 13-15 loads a day), food serving, and cutting vegetables.

I wore white whenever possible and followed community protocols around address and behavior. White is often worn by devotees, voluntarily, to indicate their devotion to Amma and also as an informal sign of membership in the community. It was expected to be modest in your dress and behavior, speak in polite tones, and salute each other with *Namah Sivaya* (salutations to One who is pure consciousness). I also read instruction sheets for each *seva* carefully and followed them to the hilt to the best of my abilities. I never questioned them nor did I create my own ideas on how a *seva* was to be performed. In fact, much of my discomfort came when I realized that many devotees came with their own ideas about how to execute a *seva*, leading to much confusion and discomfort. I also chanted *mantras* (in the beginning, I used any *mantra* that I could remember and, later, chanted the *mantra* that Amma had given me) as instructed during the *sevas* as much as possible. On one of the occasions, while I was doing a special *seva* near Amma, I was struggling to remember to chant even as I timed the activity of another *sevite*. I must have looked funny with my mouth silently repeating the words, forehead in a serious frown even as I kept focus on my watch. Amused by my clownish efforts, Amma turned around and grinned at me.

For me, a typical day at an Amma program started at around 7:30 a.m. I would jump out of bed, take a quick shower and rush to my *seva* location. I would talk with fellow *sevites* while working, asking them various background questions, personal experiences with Amma, the strength of their affiliation, etc. I met some of my interview participants in this process. At around 10:00 a.m., I usually went into the hall for the morning program to begin. I usually did not have regular *seva* duties in the morning and spent the morning doing odd *sevas*, sitting around Amma, and observing people and their interactions with each other as well as with Amma for long periods of time. Sometimes I would take notes in the hall and other times, I would go to the lobby or to my hotel room and write down my observations, my immediate analysis, and my feelings around them. I also would spend time reflecting on what I saw, how I was reacting and responding, and observing my own self in the process.

The reflections were an important daily component which allowed me to store information in an oral mode. I come from an oral culture where a lot of emphasis is given to memory and recall abilities. In Western cultures, people sometimes look down on the ability to memorize in schools and colleges. In urban India, a similar phenomenon is also taking place. I personally consider the practice of trying to memorize and recall as a useful way to cultivate different brain faculties and create less reliance on technology and other tools. As a 16-year-old girl, Swami Tejomayananda, a senior disciple of Swami Chinmayananda, an important spiritual leader in India at that time, discovered that I had a didactic memory when I remembered and wrote down every word that was spoken in a spiritual discourse given in Hindi over a 15-day period. My writings were copied and distributed to many people around India. Although my abilities were not nurtured over time, I still retain strategies by which I am able to recall huge amounts of information. During this research, reflections were methods by which I would condense the day's experience into visual images and sensations under which different conversations and encountered were embedded. After a period of time, I would write down notes on the computer and sometimes in notebooks.

The morning program would typically end at around 3:30-4:00 p.m. After the program, I would return to my room or the lobby and rest a while. In the evening my duties would start sometimes from 6:30 p.m. The evening program by itself would start at

around 7:30 p.m. with *bhajans*, meditation, followed by *darshan*. The *darshan* would often end at 3:00 or 4:00 a.m. the next day, and I was usually around till Amma left.

After 1:00 a.m. on regular program days, the crowds would start thinning out and those who continued to be in the hall would start to be more open with their feelings. I invariably came across interesting interactions amongst devotees as well as with Amma during this time. Amma becomes more jovial as the night grows, and the crowds at 3:00 a.m. often huddled around Amma and laugh loud over her jokes.

I also signed up for retreats each year and spent much time interacting with devotees, and observing Amma and the activities of various monks in the organization. I attended Amma programs in Albuquerque, New Mexico, San Ramon, California, and Detroit, Michigan.

I was with the community members for at least 18 hours each day during the Amma programs and retreats. During the last day of the 5-day program in New Mexico, or the *Devi bhava* night, the crowds surge to many thousands and *darshan* lasts well into 8:00 or 9:00 a.m. of the next day. In three of the seven *Devi bhava* programs I have attended, I worked the first and the last shift of managing the *darshan* line. This is an especially hard duty, since the beginning of *darshan* usually starts with chaos and ends with tremendous exhaustion of all the *sevites* and the devotees waiting for their turn in the *darshan* line. The 18-22-hour shifts for four days culminate in a 24-hour intense work shift on the fifth day, with large crowds milling in small spaces and breaking all surface appearances of sweetness and graciousness. Anger, frustration, crying, yelling, pushing, arguing, manipulating, and bossing appear very easily during this night. I had my own share of tiredness and the surfacing of several negative emotions. I did my best not to yell at anybody, but often anger would cause me to leave the hall momentarily. I also cried many times in the hall, as personal pain, hidden usually by politeness rituals, would emerge to the surface without resistance. I kept a note of these processes and used them to identify with the narratives of my participants.

I observed the following dynamics in the four programs—1. gender divisions around *seva*, 2. the activity and conversations around Amma, with a special focus on women, languages they used, cultural and religious background based on their appearance or through personal knowledge, 3. organization of different activities within

the hall where the *darshan* took place and how gender and culture seemed to interact in these spaces, 4. any interaction between an East Indian and a Westerner, 6. rituals and customs in the hall and other *seva* locations, 7. the content of my interactions with visitors and devotees, 8. my reactions and responses to people and the environment, and 9. anything out of the ordinary that caught my eye—like trance, self-talking, appearance of divine possession, crying, meditation for long periods of time, repetition of a certain person in the same location over a period of time, mental instability etc.

Besides the Amma tour programs, I participated in Amma *satsangs* and *satsang* activities in various houses and public spaces in Albuquerque. I attended *satsang* for six months in 2005, six months in 2006, 3 months in 2007, and one year in 2008. I participated in the Amma's kitchen or homeless burrito project for a year in 2007 and 2008. My son also helped in the burrito project for about six months in 2008. I attended *bhajan* practices off and on in 2007 and 2008.

In April 2008, I opened my house for *satsang* once a month. At the point, *satsang* was being offered only once a month and members wanted another day in the month. A couple of my participants asked me if I was willing to conduct the *satsang* in my house. Besides my personal desire to have devotional chanting in my home, believing that such chanting charges the house with good energy, I was also driven by the motivation to give back to the community that I researched. The question of how the participants and devotees of the community benefited from my research remained on top of my mind.

In August 2008, the children's group known as Amrita Bala Kendra opened in Albuquerque. Some of the sessions of this group were held in my house with my son participating in these activities.

In *satsangs* and *satsang* related activity I observed for the following—(1) rituals and customs around worship, (2) who did what during the *satsang*, (3) who were left out, (4) what strategies did newcomers use to become part of the group and what strategies did existing members use to welcome them into the group, (5) conversations over food after the *satsang*—who spoke and who did not, what did they speak about, gender, cultural, and religious background of the members speaking, (6) the content of my interactions with other members, (7) my response to these interactions and to the environment.



The way this procedure for data collection deviated from the conventional method was in my practice of witnessing. Scholars are concerned about how research represents subordinated groups and if knowledge benefits only “others” but not the researcher. Fernandes (2003) has argued that knowledge needs to be considered as an ethical practice where one is aware of the “power-laden relationships that permeate it without being ultimately trapped by these relationships of power” (p. 83). She suggested the practice of researcher as a witness, noting that a witness is different from observer in that “the witness consciously accepts both the power-laden relationship and the ethical responsibility of the act of witnessing” (p. 83). A witness acknowledges that she is implicated in a situation, her presence changes the dynamics of the situation; she learns through this process and is transformed. I was deeply embedded in the community practices and way of life. I worked on developing a non-judgmental attitude and suspending theoretical preconceptions as I received data, but I did not fully succeed in this process although such an attitude remained my ideal. But the act of witnessing, first and foremost, transformed me as the researcher. I write more on this subject in the section *Can research be a spiritual process?*

The transformation developed a deeper ethical responsibility to represent the world in the report from the eyes of the participants, to speak for them with accuracy, honesty, and empathy. Buber’s call to see the Other as “Thou” and not “It” affected this procedure. I unflinchingly recorded and reported problems in the community, and felt the anguish in some participants as they articulated their narratives. But I also struggled to see the humanness of the struggles of the participants, fought to keep hope alive in my analysis of these struggles, and sustained compassion for the participants in this community and for all those who may read this work. I adhere to the values of intellectual compassion rather than critique, and hence aim to serve as nurturing researcher. I work to see how people make sense of things in unique ways and how life continues in spite of the many problems. I also gently point out some problems that had been ignored and solutions to the same.

However, at no point was I seamless with the community. I always knew I was observing and had a responsibility to record what I saw and heard. I was alert and cognizant of my duties. Although on occasions, Amma’s presence and intensity of the

spiritual atmosphere made me focus on my own spiritual path and practices, there was no point when I forgot that I was a researcher. For me observing, recording, reflecting, and being transformed intellectually by the reflections were simultaneously research as well as a spiritual journey. Research was my spiritual practice, my path to self-realization. In that sense, I was very different and extremely alone in the community.

### *Interviews*

I used semi-structured, in-depth interviewing techniques. I used respondent interviews (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002). Interviews are effective techniques because they allow the researcher “to understand the social actor’s experience and perspective” (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002, p. 173). Interviews provide the researcher a rhetorical construction of the participants’ experience.

This construction is not entirely accurate—as the participants may inflate certain aspects in their narrative, construe things that never happened, undervalue their role in an experience, or speak about an experience from the perspective of others who may be present or involved in that experience (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002). Yet, I believed that in the process of interviewing, the participant has an opportunity to reflect on a set of experiences and present his or her story to the researcher. I also believed that this process allowed for critical transformation for both the participant as well as the investigator.

In my study, I wanted to find out how women in the spiritual community negotiated their cultural, gender, and religious identities in their lives. I wanted to know how their understandings of the world influenced their communication strategies. What can be a better method than to ask the women themselves about their experiences and to document their narratives? Interview was thus the best-fit for my study.

I used in-depth interviews for two reasons. Firstly, I did not think these interviews could be done in a single sitting. Secondly, I wanted the participants to go into the depth of their experiences—I did not just want information, I also wanted to know their feelings, their thoughts from recollecting certain experiences; I wanted to provide them a space for them to articulate those experiences. I also needed an opportunity to interview them further after I had a chance to reflect on the first and second interview. This allowed me to go deep into the research problem.

I interviewed 20 women. At this point, I noticed clear indication of repetitions in the data across certain categories—marital status, religious background, involvement in the *satsang* and degree of familiarity with India. I made appointments with each of the women, provided them with consent forms, and audio-recorded their responses to the interview questions. The interview protocol and its rationale are included below. They were pre-tested for efficiency. After the first interview, I realized the women wanted to speak about their first encounter with Amma and hence I included the question in the interview protocol.<sup>37</sup> This question became an ideal warm-up for further reflections. The interviews were semi-structured and open-ended.

The interview protocol comprised some demographic questions in the form of a written survey and some general background questions. The questions in the interview protocol and their rationale are described below.

Demographic questions allowed me to gather basic demographic information of the participants, such as age, ethnicity, sexual orientation, occupation, and highest educational degree obtained. Background questions were originally created to allow me to gather information—like the length of association, the manner of association, and impact of association. But I found that sometimes they yielded rich data for the research questions. Main questions in the interview were designed to provide me data that would answer research questions RQ1a-d. The questions eliciting narratives on their journeys as women as well as about their discomfort in the Amma community yielded the richest data for this study.

#### *Demographic Profile of Participants*

The women interviewed were between 29 and 63 years of age. Nine of the women were single and the rest were married. None of the single women was in a relationship at the time of the interview. One woman reported that she was a lesbian, another asexual, and the rest described themselves as heterosexual. Six of the women had high school diplomas and some college experience, seven women had a bachelor's degree, and seven had a graduate degree. The professions of these women ranged from secretary and gardener, to teacher, healer, and researcher. Three of the women were retired. One woman was a homemaker. Most of them were Caucasian, with exception of

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<sup>37</sup> Complete interview protocol is included in the appendix of this report.

one Hispanic. I tried to recruit Hispanic and women from other minority groups but the interviews fell through. I did not ask the women about their average annual income, but from personal information by being in the community, the class status varied with a few women of low-income status, a few on the upper end of income-strata, and a majority in the middle-class. All of them had lived in United States for most of their lives.

The women's affiliation to Amma and the Amma community ranged from two years to 20 years. One woman was a devotee for 20 years, seven for around 10 years, and the rest between two to six years. One woman had been affiliated with Amma since her pre-teens. Three of the women did not attend *satsang* during the time of the interviews but were active in Amma tours and other activities of the *satsang*. Nine of the women played important leadership roles in organizing the Amma tour in New Mexico.

At the time of the interviews of the 11 married women, the husbands of six women were active in the Amma community. The husbands of the other five were either neutral or negative to Amma. Four of the husbands who were neutral came for *darshan* with their wives at least once during Amma programs. Two of them also volunteered for *seva* during the programs. One husband began attending the *satsang* regularly towards the close of 2008. All the women reported having stable marriages at the time of the interviews. For most of the women, their current marriage was the second or third one. I attempted unsuccessfully to interview a woman who was currently separated and said that she had separated on Amma's advice, but the differing time schedules and my inability to reach her location did not allow us to settle on an appointment date.

Eight of the women reported sexual and physical abuse trauma. Three of them reported suffering from various mental health problems currently. Many had dealt with depression, post-traumatic stress disorder, alcoholism, and drug abuse.

#### *Interview Process*

Most of the interviews were conducted between March and June 2008. Each interview lasted anywhere from 40 minutes to 1.5 hours. I conducted the interviews both in Albuquerque and Santa Fe. I interviewed six people from Santa Fe and the rest were from Albuquerque. I interviewed them in my house, in restaurants, and in hotel lobbies depending on their request or convenience. Those who came to my house were usually treated to lunch or dinner after the interview. In such cases, the interview encounter lasted

for two to three hours on an average. It also gave them an opportunity to reflect back on certain questions and remember new things during the course of the informal small talk after the interview. On many occasions, I had to switch my recorder on again several times as the participant would start saying something significant.

Those who came to my house were most relaxed and talked to me easily and comfortably. In general, participants of the Albuquerque *satsang* that I frequented were more comfortable in talking to me compared to participants in Santa Fe, although one participant in Santa Fe was surprisingly candid in her interview and self-disclosed easily. Several participants started the interview with a prayer to Amma for guidance in their responses and felt that the research was part of Amma's work. They approached the interview with great seriousness and sincerity, and thought deep and hard to answer my questions. In that sense, the interview itself became a sacred process.

Many participants spoke to me about the different pains and sufferings in their life, whether through personal loss, illness, trauma or their frustrations in dealing with other *satsang* members. The interviews were sometimes very deep, painful, and private. Eight of the women confided their trauma around sexual and physical abuse in their lives. These self-disclosures bound me with my participants at a deep emotional level. I found myself becoming increasingly loyal to my participants and involved in their journey through their pain. Most of the participants became good friends after the interview.

Many of the participants found the interview to be a place to reflect and rearticulate their feelings and opinions around different issues. For some participants, it became a safe space to express their frustrations in the *satsang*. In that sense, it became therapeutic to vent and release their feelings. Some participants said they had changed their positions and began to view the same situation differently after a period of time.

A couple of participants interviewed for a second time and others answered questions that had been missed in the first interview. All interviews were audio-recorded. The participants chose their own pseudonyms for the purposes of the interview. I transcribed the interviews and sent the copies to the participants. About 80 percent of the participants responded with edits to the transcript. Others did not respond, although I sent a couple of reminders in some cases, and phoned in others. Many of the participants who had edited the transcripts, edited them at length. They told me how things had changed

since the time I had interviewed to the moment when they re-reading it. Some wanted to be politically correct and careful and edited any information that may be judgmental about the community. Few others added information and provided greater depth to the contents of the interview.

Since several interviews were deep, painful, and distressing, I was often tired and spent after an interview. I also found myself becoming quite emotional after the interviews. I found myself becoming angry about certain aspects of the *satsang* functioning. I have described my journey through these emotions at length in the section on self-reflexivity. In any case, I had to learn techniques of keeping an emotional distance from my participants. For this purpose, I learnt certain Native American practices like washing my hands and face and brushing myself with rosemary leaves after an interview.

As far as it was possible, I edited out information about trauma if it threatened the identity of the participants, although none of them asked for the information to be kept off the record. I avoided providing details on the conflicts within the *satsang* to help sustain the integrity of the community. Instead, I focused on how the participants said that they dealt with conflict and interpersonal tensions.

In addition, I ensured that the interview itself did not cause pain by asking respondents to recollect on how they had dealt with trauma. This helped them regain agency and courage. I showed empathy and held hands at times. I also self-disclosed my own experience with trauma whenever it was appropriate to create a mutual bond of secrecy and trust. I was usually with them for sometime after the interview to check for after-effects.

#### *Document Collection*

I collected a number of documents pertaining to the Amma organization. I bought or borrowed from other devotees most of the publications released by the organization. Some of the publications were referred to me by the participants, like the talks and autobiography of Swami Paramatmananda. Some of the participants found his talks and writings to be closer to their cultural understanding, humorous, self-critical, human and easy to read. Participants also referred to other books written by different Amma devotees like *The path of the Mother* by Savitri I. Bess (2000) and *Mystic Christ* by Ethan Walker (2003). In addition, I began to read Eckhart Tolle's works after few participants spoke

about its similarity with Amma's teachings. I read and fully analyzed all of Amma's speeches to primarily Western audiences.

In addition, I visited the main *ashram*'s website [www.Amritapuri.org](http://www.Amritapuri.org), produced in India, at least once a week for close to two years. I read all the blogs in the section *Ashram diary*, the news updates, twitter messages after they were introduced in late 2008, and scanned many photographs of different Amma programs around the world. I visited the North American website [www.amma.org](http://www.amma.org) and the New Mexico website [www.ammacenter.org](http://www.ammacenter.org) less frequently, about once in three months, since these websites were not updated as frequently as the main *ashram* website.

I visited unofficial blogs like *ammachi.tribe.net* for two years once a fortnight and kept track of the issues raised in those blogs. I also regularly scanned the Internet for news items on Amma or the organization as well as anti-Amma messages and articles. I visited other regional websites every once in a while and kept note of the differences in content of the websites in comparison to the New Mexico website as well as the main *ashram* website. I recorded all the typed instructions I received as *sevite* as well as information on Amma tour structures and email communications around the Amma tour organization. I noted the spiritual content that accompanied instructions and emails, the issues that seemed to be important to the devotees, interesting stories of intercultural and interreligious nature, and communication problems and resolutions of the same. I also noted the gender spread across the organization and any issues that evoked a gender division in the community.

This procedure deviated from conventional ethnography in that I approached the world of published literature almost as a participant-observer. When I found devotees referring to certain literature, I sought out the same and read them. I followed blogs like a participant-observer, albeit in a mediated virtual environment. I compared and contrasted data from this procedure with data collected from participant-observation and interviews and noted common and repeated themes. The data collected from this procedure was used only as a supporting material to what I already found in other procedures.

### *Autoethnographic Reflection*

Goodall (2004), arguing for narrative ethnography (another term for autoethnography), addressed the issue of being absent in research studies in the following words:

In my writing I avoided how I felt, personally, about my subject matter—fellow human beings—and ignored, or at least suppressed, my emotions. The *me* that appeared on the page had no past, nothing personal to say about himself, and revealed no desire. That person who appeared on the pages I wrote, that successful communication professional, represented himself in his prose as an unclassed, non-racial, ungendered, and soulless purveyor of bodiless cognitions. I was clinically aloof, dry all the way down to my calcium skeleton, but nevertheless omniscient, objective, argumentative, and supposedly rational. I had attained the rarified status of the third person singular and found myself writing as if I was proud to be so damned distanced from others. My words, my point of view, could have been authored by an academic anyone. I now understood my problem. Saw it clearly. I had written *myself* out of my life (p.187, emphasis in original).

While I agree with Goodall (2004) and others like Tillman (2009) that we need to bring an emotional closeness into our research, I think the imperative of autoethnography goes beyond that. It allows the researcher to stand in the shoes of the researched and experience, as much as possible, what the researched experiences. I felt it was important to document my journey because I believe research on spiritual communities about spirituality cannot be understood at an intellectual distance. How does one understand and explain emergence of *vasana* (inherent tendencies) at a particular moment without trying to embody the values, beliefs, and practices of the participants? It is very easy to belittle and subvert participant's experiences as interesting stories to be read and shared amongst academia and its students. As a devotee remarked to Judith Cornell (2001) after a bout of bronchial infection forced her to leave the Amma community briefly, "'Judith, if you don't suffer you won't write a good book.' She was right. You cannot authentically portray someone else's life without having a genuine experience of it" (p.230). The traditional scientific approach to religion entails digging deeper to expose and reveal



hidden layers known popularly as depth realism (Humphrey, 2008, p.109). My approach to research has been to dive deep into the ocean to experience the ocean as the fish do even while revealing the beauty of their world which I call as experiential realism.

Secondly, I approached this study from a transmodern perspective. I chose this unconventional approach because I had found much of Asian philosophical traditions absent in scholarship in communication. I noticed a bias that emphasized and recognized only Euro-American philosophies and solidifies a belief that the study of communication started in Europe. As a postcolonial thinker, the absence and bias against non-Eurocentric scholarship triggers me to approach research that would include and acknowledge other epistemologies. Since scholarship produced from such epistemologies is not codified, categorized, or “published” in the same way as Euro-American scholarship does, I am forced to recount mythological stories, narratives, and poems as a personal experience of these traditions. Miike (2004) suggested that we need to reconsider the “hierarchical view of data and evidence because Asia has rich “subjective” data and evidence that are “public” to Asians. What Eurocentric scholars would call as autoethnography is for me a desperate recourse to bring to the forefront knowledges that have not been accepted as such in the academy.

#### Procedures

This is known as the phase of construal. Here theory and experience come together. I needed to make a big picture inference regarding a philosophical issue from the themes developed in the earlier stage. The politics of interpretation—clash of world views, issues of power were carefully reflected on and corrective measures taken (Mason, 1996).

My approach to analysis and interpretation of data is unconventional. Initially, I coded the transcripts and tabulated the codes into themes using conventional methods of line-by-line coding. However, I soon realized that such a structured and controlled process triggered me to think in conventional ways using traditional theories. I asked myself—how can this be a postcolonial transmodern research if I am falling back on conventional methods of interpretation and analysis? It is at this point, I decided to switch to other ways of knowing. As Starosta and Chen (2003) said, “Some research truths will

always remain intuitable more than observable, and felt more than directly observable” (p. 20).

Transcriptions were an excellent way to spend time with the content of the interviews. I listened to the tapes and re-read the transcripts many times. Many nights I went to bed reflecting on the contents of the interview, allowing the interviews to speak to me. I connected the dots and then broke it all down and re-connected them several times over the months that followed. Often I read a book that I found interesting and allowed the book to become my tarpaulin to bounce my ideas about the connections. Sometimes I meditated and sometimes I sat quietly, looking emptily around me. The process was deep, enthralling, and intense. Sometimes when I felt very good about a connection, I would use the I-Ching<sup>38</sup> to probe if this was “the grand theme” or if I had to go deeper into the idea. Often the I-Ching told me to seek further, think more deeply, or pointed me in a direction that I had not noted before. Sometimes I did not talk to anybody nor socialized or responded to emails for many days as I stayed engrossed in the mind, decoding what the data meant. I analyzed and interpreted dreams to provide me a direction to understand the data. I kept questioning the authority and power of existing paradigms and reminded myself several times to approach the issue as a decolonized researcher. I kept refusing the need to rely on European scholars to defend my ideas and often went back to subversive scriptural texts in the Western world and the founding scriptures of the East Indian tradition.

The data from participant observation, interviews, document analysis, and autoethnographic reflection merged spontaneously. As a theme emerged from the transcripts, I would switch to ponder and reflect on my notes and reflections from participant observation and document analysis. I would compare and contrast them—did the data from the various sources support this theme? I mostly led with the themes that emerged from the interviews and used other sources only as supporting evidence. In some cases, the themes from the participant observation were clear and strong but not reflected in the interviews. In such cases, I evaluated if my position as an observer gave me a vantage point to see certain issues that the participants were unable to perceive in the

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<sup>38</sup> I-Ching is an ancient Chinese classical text which is used for divination. The text contains symbols, images, rules, and judgments. The particular image or symbol in response to a question or doubt emerges by creating a hexagram through a certain algorithm.

environment. If the theme was strong and data from the participant observation was clear, I reported the same. Similarly, on rare occasions, themes that emerged from document analysis were strong and I evaluated their implications to the prevailing atmosphere in the community. If such themes provided a new dimension to the data then I included them in the report.

Bringing all the themes together into a coherent theme was complex and required several revisions. It required patience, willingness to let go, prayers, editorial guidance, and time. I strived to sustain intellectual compassion and hope as the themes were organized and threaded together. I strived to sustain and highlight the humanness of the devotees and participants in this study without sacrificing respect to their spiritual aspirations and journeys. I let the themes teach me about communication and about identity. I responded to them as a sincere student, asking appropriate questions, reflecting and incorporating new knowledge.

I learnt, I transformed, and proceeded to share this knowledge in the research report. Still, sometimes, I found myself paralyzed with fear when I felt the ideas I was closing in on were too radical for the Western academy. The experience, when I was an activist, of being criticized and publicly ridiculed for standing apart traumatized me. I wondered if I dared to express what I saw in the data. I compared my work with others and felt hopelessly alone and foolish. Sometimes, I called a couple of the participants and expressed my fear about the direction of the analysis. They reassured me and helped me stay course. Several of them brought me food, took me out to dinner and movies, and entertained my son while I wrote this dissertation. Several wrote me good wishes and said that they had me in their prayers. Through 2008 and 2009, devotees checked with me on the progress of the research and listened to me empathetically. In that deep sense, the participants and the devotees of the community participated in the making of this dissertation.

During the writing of the report, I ensured the following—(1) in my narrative, the different voices are heard and felt. I quoted participants extensively (Lincoln and Denzin, 2003); (2) I ensured that I presented a thick description of different situations and environments to provide credibility. Taking extensive field notes was essential to this process (Geertz, 1973); and (3) triangulated my data using multiple methods (using two

different methods to collect data from the same sample) strategy (Mason, 1996). I used participant observation to corroborate details some of the details laid out in the interview with a participant. I also titled several sections of data presentation in different chapters using in-vivo codes, or phrases and words that the participants or devotees used during interviews or in the community.

In addition, I used member validation to allow the participants to respond to the findings. I distilled the findings into a summary report and emailed the same to all of my participants. At the time of this writing, it has been seven days since I sent the summary report and I have received responses from six participants. Three of them provided me overall feedback and commented variously, like “excellent paper and obviously well-thought out,” “Your summary is so lovely Bhavana! Beautifully written and insightful,” and “I have briefly read through your paper and find it to be excellent.” Three of the others provided me feedback to specific sections of the summary. I have included their comments in relevant sections in this report. In addition, they also commented on the report overall. One participant wrote that she was “flooded with tears of joy” upon reading the summary and noted that: “I am relating so much to your overall findings and they're giving me a greater sense of commonality and community.” Another participant said that this report was important as a witness to women’s struggles in their spiritual journey since women’s stories tend to be invisible in society. A final participant said that I “rocked” and gave me an A+ grade. Two others called and told me that they were unable to provide me immediate feedback as they had family and professional issues to take care of but promised to respond as soon as possible.

Finally, I would like to point the inherent contradictions of writing a research report that tries to create a dialogue between the modern and ancient using an academic discourse that has emerged from modern Enlightenment thinking. What I have found is that modern academic discourse demands fixed definitions of concepts and a clear roadmap of thought that sometimes does not do justice to the profoundness and complexity of some of the ancient ideas and visions and appears to be rooted in Western culture’s need for high uncertainty avoidance (Gudykunst, 2005) and low-context communication (Hofstede, 2001). I remember being told in an Indian philosophy class by

my American professor that most of the recommended readings for the class were written by Germans or Americans because their Indian counterparts did not have “good English” and could not explain Indian philosophical concepts very well. In contrast, writings of scholars like Anzaldúa evade this “fixing” and “structuring” of ideas creatively to accommodate the different epistemological needs and cultural roots by: code-switching between Spanish and English, moving fluidly from prose to poetry and mythology to description of contemporary social struggles, and providing varying definitions of the same concepts to suit the context of a paragraph. For example, in the same book, *conocimiento* at times means “deep awareness” and as “*un aja*,” sometimes simply as “understanding,” and yet at other times as “a way of knowing and acting on *ese saber*” (Anzaldúa, 2002). The varying definitions prevent the readers from falling into easy categories of knowing and constantly challenge them to walk the path of the *mestiza*. The ancient *Vedic* scriptures and the *Upanishads* in India were written in a highly metaphorical and poetic language, always indirectly pointing to a truth that could emerge only after deep reflection in the reader’s minds. For me, the influence of this indirect metaphorical language and of wanting to disrupt easy categories of understanding has become an unconscious part of writing. To be forced to write in unambiguous, one-dimensional, structured way defies my understanding of communicative language as being fundamentally ambiguous and incapable of transmitting truth in its wholeness and has created difficulties in my ability to express my ideas and arguments. Therefore, I humbly submit that what constitutes as “good academic writing” is a composite of cultural moorings and epistemological biases in both the writer and the reader.

Yet, I have attempted to disengage and adapt to the demands of modern Western readers to the best of my abilities. I invite the readers to join me in this difficult journey of making knowledges accessible, through *conocimiento*, when my writing fails your cultural standards and epistemological understandings.

#### Ethics

An IRB proposal was submitted and approval taken in February 2008. I was transparent in all my dealings and extreme precautions were taken with regards to privacy of women’s confidences. Yet, a serious case of ethical tensions occurred when information that some participants had confided regarding criticisms of the community

was shared with other devotees in a public talk I offered to a group of devotees on the issue of culture and communication. My goal was to alleviate existing tensions in the community. I had done this with the good, albeit misplaced intention, of giving back to the community that I was researching. There were a couple of devotees who were extremely curious about the identity of the participants who had offered criticisms and pressured me to reveal their identities. In spite of the pressure, I did not reveal anybody's identities. Afterwards, I invited a couple of devotees who felt attacked during my talk to interview with me. Although appointments were made, the devotees had to back out due to their time schedules and work commitments. After this experience I refrained from any further attempts to alleviate tension in the community through public presentations.

As I write this report, I am keenly aware of the tensions and anger within the community members and have had to reflect on different strategies to ensure that the identities of my participants are protected. I have also been concerned that my report may be misused to create further tensions in the community. I have avoided referring to detailed examples that point to certain controversial incidents in the community and could expose the identity of participants. I have avoided quoting extracts of the interview that point to a certain devotee/s of the community. Most importantly, I have engaged in deep self reflection to understand my bias in this project. I will describe this in detail in section on self report.

### Self Report

I have reported about my influence and involvement in the study under three headings—(1) the Etic-Emic questions, (2) Researcher Bias, and (3) Can Research be a Spiritual Process?

#### *Etic-Emic Question*

Researchers are often concerned with their insider-outsider position and how it influences research. I have been more an insider than an outsider in this research. I have been concerned about this issue and have highlighted the benefits as well as problems of this type of researcher position.

#### *Benefits of the Emic Position*

A previous ethnographic study of the Amma community in India was conducted by Maya Warriar (2005). She stated at the beginning of her research that she was an

atheist, had an irreligious upbringing, and did not have any faith in Amma. Her interest in this community was to see how modernity was articulated by the members of this community. This is a brilliant study and incisively analyzes, criticizes and presents various dimensions of the community. For a study on globalization and or modernity, such an etic position is valuable.

However, if one wants to understand how spirituality influences the way people construe the world, an emic position is valuable. It allows the researcher to empathize deeply with the worldview of the participants and to become a co-journer to understand and appreciate how such an influence may benefit others in the society. It also gives the participant voice and agency in the report. It validates their worldview and their lifestyles instead of explaining them as psychological and biological phenomena. For example, Warriar (2004) was curious why devotees cried so much in Amma's embrace. To explain that, she said:

Though devotees stress the spontaneity of their emotions, it is *easy to see* how several factors come together in the course of the evening's events come together to culminate in an overflow of emotional feeling. I have already noted how the mood of anticipation and expectation created by *bhajans* and the sight of others in the queue breaking down in the Mata's embrace, all build up to an emotional high-point which is neither entirely spontaneous nor separable from the particular environment in which these individuals find themselves. In addition to these factors is the *expectation* on a devotee's part that contact with a truly 'divine' or spiritually enlightened 'other' must entail extraordinary experiences. (p.30, emphasis mine).

We can see how the author positions herself as the intelligent omniscient outside observer who knows better than devotees who psychologically fulfill their beliefs in extraordinary experiences through emotional catharsis. The approach relegates the devotee's voices and their narratives about the experience. This is the approach that creates the "other" in research.

On the other hand, I approached the same issue from an emic perspective and reported how the devotees experienced interreligious visions, how gender was implicated in the process, and how the experience itself was part of a long, hard spiritual journey. I

stood by my participants and believed with them that enlightened people exist and experiences can sometimes be lived at multiple levels. At the same time, I reported devotees' doubts about those experiences and how they explained or resolved those doubts.

Further, I question the validity of etic-emic divisions. If all of us interconnected and interrelated, and we are the same divine substratum, then the etic and emic division is merely a superficial division that we seem to subscribe to. Your ability to discern is not so much dependent on your location but rather on your ability to *empty* your mind. Have we not learnt that community development does not happen because of an outside agency discovering what the community wants, but by listening to what the community is *able to say* it wants? The important task for the researcher is to speak less and listen more and listen to all the parties concerned—not just the power players of the group.

Another important benefit of being primarily an insider is that most spiritual communities have outsiders documenting their rituals, customs, and narratives. The secular hegemony in academia has been highlighted by scholars (Buzzanel & Harter, 2006). Being spiritual myself and holding beliefs similar to those held in the community offers readers a space to hear the point of view of people who have been subalterned for a long time in the academia. Grupetta (2008) argued that little knowledge of faith communities could inadvertently cause offence to the communities on a micro level that emerges only on a personal and local level. She provided various examples in which she had to show her participants that she followed their religious requirements prior and during the interview like changing into dog hair free clothing, washing her hands seven times and finally putting her hands in dust to show adherence and respect for the customs of the faith community she was studying (Grupetta, 2008). In that sense, my insider status assured my participants that I would listen, understand and portray the community with sensitivity and deep knowledge.

#### *Drawbacks of an Emic Position*

The most important issue raised by being primarily emic is the problem of losing critical distance or “going native.” The core of the problem is the haunting specter of the need for objectivity in research amidst the question of how knowledge can be objective “if it is shaped by historical, social, and cultural contexts” (Bentz & Shapiro, 1998), an



issue Harding (1996) called the “epistemological crisis of the West.” I argue that the resolution to this crisis in the form of self-reflexivity is not enough, for it is often used at a rhetorical level, as a section in the methods section of a study, and does not do enough to highlight a significant ways in which a researcher should uncover hidden biases and work on bracketing them. Scholars have pointed out that being an insider can skew your understanding and response to the “others” of the community and that what is needed is the ability to journey between differing worldviews (Humphrey, 2008, p.113).

Following Bentz and Shapiro (1998)’s advocacy for “mindful inquiry,” I practiced mindfulness<sup>39</sup> and checked and stepped back several times to evaluate my emotions and ego-investments as well as how my personal biases were influencing the way I collected the data. Mindfulness brings the mind to the present moment and creates a certain distance where you can actually observe your mind and body. It is moment of deep emptiness, of becoming still, as you allow information to percolate through you. Knowledge then arises from that emptiness. It is intellectually hard to convey this experience but it is available to all to practice.

The practice of mindfulness is a secular practice that involves counting of the breath, easing the mind from being swept away by the flow of thoughts, and being conscious of the body and how it feels. It requires disciplined and regular practice for few minutes a day and over the years, it transforms into this ability to step back and watch yourself at any point in time. Having said this, it is still very easy to be caught in the emotional confluence of issues; mindfulness requires persistent and continuous ability to step back. I have practiced mindfulness for about 3.5 years, and today the practice has become easier and requires lesser time to remember than before. I consider mindfulness to be a researcher’s response to positivist objectivity.

#### *Researcher Bias*

My bias was most evident in the following areas—(1) approach to spirituality, (2) loyalty to guru, and (3) emotional attachment to participants.

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<sup>39</sup> A practice in which you observe the mental terrain with its train of thoughts without being carried away by the thoughts while being aware of breathing simultaneously.

### *Approach to Spirituality*

I grew up in an environment where believers worshipped goddesses. Many of the goddesses that were worshiped in my neighborhood and birth-city were associated with various forms of mysticism. I had encountered two out-of-body mystical experiences myself as a teenager. I read and loved philosophers and gurus like Sri Aurobindo and Swami Yogananda, who had a heavy dose of the mystic in them. Thus, my approach to spirituality encompassed the encounter of the supersensory and supernatural. As I prepared for this research, psychic sensations, intuition and visions were part of the practices that I expected to observe and experience in the community.

However, I had no mystical experiences in Amma's embrace or elsewhere in the community. I did record some of the participant's mystical experiences as expressed in their interviews. In spite of my intentions to locate the mystic in the dialogue on communication, I discovered that spirituality was more of an everyday, mundane process of being completely present and awake every moment. I discovered spirituality in interpersonal relationships, in body trauma, and in negotiating gender in the society. I discovered that spirituality was not exclusive to a group of people who meditated but to everyone—irrespective of whether they had faith or not. It was the ability to control the mind and open the heart to all differences. I realized that to strive to bring peace to the world and to oneself was a spiritual process.

### *Loyalty to Guru*

In my proposal for this study, I had pointed out that since I was a disciple of Amma, I did not wish to study conflict in the community. I said, "Given my bias (as a follower of Amma), I will endeavor to describe any such power negotiations from the women's point of view but I will not stand in judgment on the practices and policies of the organization" (Upadhyaya, 2007, p.110). I was extremely reluctant to study problems in the community and was afraid I would encounter financial misappropriations, sexual misconduct, fraud and the like. I purposely tried to keep my eyes closed to these issues.

It did not matter what I intended because conflict came knocking right on my door. I was first shocked when participants reported problems and tensions in the community. I had done my best to believe all was well and that it was a sweet, affectionate environment where I was going to see how people transformed themselves.

Instead, I was confronted with politics, onemanship, poor communication, misunderstanding, and interpersonal confrontations. I was also troubled by previous publications on the various problems of devotees, like belief in the superiority of Hindu religion by a senior swami (Warrier, 2005). While these issues troubled me greatly, they later became one of the richest sources of understanding how the path to perfection proceeded. Discovering the spiritual core in conflict was perhaps the best knowledge I gained in this study.

I asked some participants what they thought about the problems in the community. They accepted that problems existed and that we had to realize that as long as one is not enlightened, one is imperfect. Mere association with an enlightened guru or a spiritual organization does not automatically guarantee goodness in an individual. This ability to see multiple layers of all people—to see their imperfections, their struggles to be perfect, and the constant reminder that in spite of it all, all of us were of the same divine presence not only opened my heart to accepting all as they were, but removed judgment and destructive criticism from my thinking.

#### *Loyalty to Participants*

Over the course of my field study and interviews, I became particularly close to participants and became emotionally involved in their issues. When participants started confiding their problems and frustrations in the community, I began with disbelief and then felt it must be a misunderstanding. Quite foolishly, I launched an attempt to teach the members how differences in culture created varying conceptions of what it means to be in a *satsang*. I failed in my attempt and instead created greater friction in the community when some members felt I was becoming the voice of the dissenters. This, in turn, activated my activist rage for justice as I slowly but aggressively worked towards creating my own version of just and fair environment. The tension in the community came to a head with in-fighting and the same. I was much troubled by my role mediating these conflicts and questioned the appropriateness of the notion of researcher as an activist. Further, I questioned the validity of my research if I was personally biased against certain individuals.

I prayed deeply and fought hard to find within my heart that space which was open, and accepting of all as they were. I also engaged in *satsang* sponsored mediation.

Sometime in the early days of 2009, my heart finally shifted, the block opened up and I was free of the emotional attachment of how the environment in the *satsang* should be. Instead, I listened deep and watched how the spiritual process unfolded itself. I wrote to Amma and told her of my complicity in *satsang* tensions and asked her permission to drop the research if she deemed my conduct ethically unfit. She told me to be not involved in *satsang* politics anymore but did not ask me to cease research activity within the community.

As an epilogue, I report that the activism, although misplaced, did lead to a change in the organizational structure from single leadership to multiple leaders and to greater importance placed on organization meetings in the decision-making process. Some of the participants felt that although I thought it inappropriate to participate in *satsang* politics, it did finally ease some tensions and created a safer space for the devotees. Others felt that tensions came to a head because of an intense spiritual process going on within the *satsang* wherein everyone, regardless of her or his positions, was able to release attachments and evolve spiritually.

#### *Can Research be a Spiritual Process?*

In the modern Enlightenment paradigm where religion is understood most often in terms of its social origins and impact, the sacred and profane are considered binary opposites (Durkheim, 1973). All those objects and behaviors that are deemed sacred belong to the religious realm while everything else that does not have a religious function is profane. "Since religious force is nothing other than the collective and anonymous force of the clan, and since this can be represented in the mind only in the form of the totem, the totemic emblem is like the visible body the god" (Durkheim, 1973, p.184). Such an approach to religion emerges from the Enlightenment mentality which recommends the split between human and nature, and holds the human as the controlling and sole agency in the Universe.

Oriented by an Asiatic approach, I hold that research can be a spiritual process. Indeed, my use of listening, mindfulness, and prayers during the research helped me to convert the research process from a mere career move to gain an academic degree to life-giving, life-enhancing process. I explain below how research can be seen as part of a spiritual journey. I will focus my remarks on these aspects of this dynamic: (1)

research, researched and researcher are interconnected and interrelated across space and time, (2) good research is the practice of witnessing, (3) good research can decrease ego.

Following the Asiatic ontology, I hold that research, researched and researcher are interconnected and interrelated across space and time. The researcher chooses her study based on her own *karma* and *vasanas*. According to the worldview that I have grown up in, the reason why the researcher chooses a certain research topic is because of her inherent tendencies that draw her towards the research; and it also becomes a site of *karma*, where the researcher has to complete *karmic* debt to the community in question. Listening to participants, reporting it faithfully, and analyzing the issues in order to benefit the community and the world helps in decreasing the *karmic* burden on the researcher.

Good research would use knowledge as an ethical practice (Fernandes, 2003). It requires a form of active witnessing, in which the researcher “consciously accepts both the power-laden relationship and the ethical responsibility of the act of witnessing” (Fernandes, 2003, p.83). I failed in this act when I intervened in the *satsang* organizational issues. As I wrote to Amma, I then realized that my duty was to listen deeply and report faithfully what I had heard and observed. It was an ethical responsibility, in this case, to be the blank whiteboard on which participants wrote their stories, synthesize them, and observe the changes in the stories over a period of time. My personal values as well as the power of having knowledge of certain issues, interfered in that process. This was a hard lesson on how not to conduct research, and it helped clear my mind and heart of conflicting emotions enough to be able to report as faithfully as I could. Being aware of my influence, my personal traits, my preferences and opinions and the power-ladenness of the researcher-researched relationships helped me to ease down and seek unconventional ways to know. Often, I asked the interviews to speak to me and other times, I prayed that the understanding may emerge by itself. I quieted the mind as much as I could. I sometimes woke up in the middle of the night with a sudden glimpse of how everything was connected. As Bentz and Shapiro (1998) said, “the development of awareness is not a purely intellectual or cognitive pursuit but part of a person’s total way of living her life”(p.7). Yet, since I am not enlightened, I remain imperfect in my strivings. The report is not perfect. It is up to readers to use their own strategies to discern

knowledge that is beneficial versus that which is neither constructive nor practical. To me as a researcher, the best form of validation for this report has come from the participants, when one of them wrote that this report was significant as a witness to women's spiritual struggles. I am humbled by the knowledge that somehow, in spite of my inadequacies, some of the participants did feel empowered by the findings.

Finally, good research requires becoming more and more humble. It requires treating your subjects as your teachers and educators, listening to them as they help build knowledge in your mind. It requires detachment from your own opinions and preferences. It requires great flexibility of the heart to stretch out and accept all without castigating some as incarnate evil and others as eternal angels. It requires compassion to feel and understand how the subject is where she is. Sometimes research becomes a deconstructive endeavor to highlight problems and issues in a community. Yet such expositions on power structures and their infallibility may create a sense of hopelessness in the minds of readers and do not provide concrete solutions on how to overcome them (Fernandes, 2003). My endeavor in research has been to keep hope alive and make peace a possible project of humankind.

Bentz and Shapiro (1998) wrote a brilliant book on mindful inquiry as a way to respond to the epistemological crisis in academia. Synthesizing four intellectual traditions—phenomenology, hermeneutics, critical social science, and Buddhism, they proposed the philosophy for mindful inquiry which emphasized self-awareness and reflection, integration of multiple perspectives, and accepting bias and attempting to transcend bias, among other aspects for good research. In addition, they said:

10. Inquiry should contribute to the development of awareness and self-reflection in the inquirer and may contribute to the development of spirituality.

11. Inquiry usually requires giving up ego or transcending self, even though grounded in self and requires intense self-awareness. (p.7)

In a sense, if the concept of spirituality as I have defined in this study—as a journey of disidentification from social and personal identities into a state of connectedness—also applies to me as a researcher. Researchers enter into research communities with a need to protect their identities on who they are and what they believe in. There is a need to disengage from those identities and instead move towards a state of

connectedness from where personal opinions and beliefs seem less significant. This happens automatically during research as opinions, beliefs, customs, and norms clash against the researcher's worldviews. The point is, if we are able to consciously and voluntarily accept this process and allow the discomfoting experience of the Other move us into the state of connectedness, we could—one, produce knowledge of greater validity and legitimacy, and two, we as researchers can improve our abilities to accept and respect all.

When our models of who we are fall away, we are free simply to meet and be together (Dass & Gorman, 1985, p.38)

## CHAPTER FOUR: PERSONAL IDENTITIES AND SPIRITUALITY

This chapter examines the communication of personal identities in the Amma community in relation to spirituality. Personal identity is defined here as the emotional significance we attach to the unique attributes, needs, and desires that differentiate our individual “self” from other members of an in-group. This chapter explores the complex and particular struggles of devotees and participants to express their personal identities within the structures and practices of this spiritual community and the unique ways in which they attempt to resolve such struggles as well as the interpersonal conflicts they face as active members of a group. More specifically, it focuses on how participants enact processes of personal identification and disidentification in unique ways to reconcile the individual, social, and spiritual dimensions of their identities.

The findings presented in this chapter draw on participant observation of settings and social interactions as well as interviewees’ accounts of individual experiences and beliefs. The findings suggest that the participants’ struggle for individuality and visibility in their communication and social exchanges with fellow devotees often entail interpersonal conflicts around dynamics such as alienation from fellow devotees, rivalry, and power struggles. Furthermore, the data presented below also suggest that in trying to resolve such conflicts, participants embark on a journey of disidentification from personal identities into a state of connectedness, holding a vision of ideal communication as symbolized by Amma’s attributes. I will argue that this journey toward connectedness is neither linear nor complete, but an ongoing struggle to transcend interpersonal tensions through self-monitoring and intrapersonal reflection and awareness. Following the presentation of findings, I will discuss three topics that emerge from the data and are relevant for the understanding of interpersonal communication and conflict in new ways: 1) the significance of intrapersonal reflection during interpersonal tensions, 2) the idea of conflict as a sacred site, and the association of disidentification with communicative competence.

### Findings

#### *The Darshan Hall as an Illustrative Setting*

I will open the presentation of findings with an ethnographic description and personal reflection on the dynamics of *darshan* hall events during Amma tours, a setting



in which I observed and experienced how devotees perform their personal identities in the space around Amma. The Darshan hall event is a main public event during Amma programs and the setting where she gives spiritual hugs (*darshan*) to devotees and visitors. I choose to describe this site in detail for several reasons: 1) to convey to readers unfamiliar with the Amma community some of the unique and complex organizational practices of this spiritual group, 2) to focus on a key setting where participants communicate their personal identities as they attempt to develop their relationship with Amma and, at the same time, navigate interpersonal tensions related to organizational structures and space management around their leader.

At the *darshan* hall events, the setting is noisy, with large crowds milling from everywhere. During my first retreat, in the year 2005, there were at least 1,000 people attending the retreat. The 100-square feet space around Amma was cramped throughout the day and night with least 80-100 people squeezed into this space at any point in time. There were five queues of people moving towards Amma. Two frontal lines moved toward her for *darshan* (spiritual hug). The lateral lines were the “*Prasad*” line, “Question and Name” line, and “Sit close to Amma” line. Each line had its own dynamics of movement and communication. The following paragraphs provide a close description of line dynamics.<sup>40</sup>

The *darshan* line is rigorously organized.<sup>41</sup> The structure varies every year. Each year, coordinators of the *darshan* line await instructions from Bhavani<sup>42</sup> and other devotees in the North American Tour coordination team. Generally, there are two *darshan* lines. People entering the hall for *darshan* receive a token from the token person and then check-in the token counter for their turn to enter the line. They show their token to the *darshan* “line-back” person who validates the number and allows them to enter the line. Specially marked chairs are arranged for about half of the total length of the *darshan*

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<sup>40</sup> There are other activities going on in the hall and outside during the Amma programs and retreats. I have chosen to focus only on the lines because I participated most fully in these lines and therefore have greater insight in their dynamics.

<sup>41</sup> Note to readers: *Darshan* Line organization differs year to year and retreat to retreat. The description provided here is based on my observations from 2005-2008 in New Mexico programs and retreats.

<sup>42</sup> Bhavani is a tour staff member who coordinates several aspects of the tour, including *darshan*.

line. This length varies from year to year, retreat to retreat.<sup>43</sup> It depends both on hall dimensions as well as the instructions for the year. People sitting on the chairs play musical chairs and move forward from chair to chair. A “floater” keeps the line moving and ensures that there are no gaps in the line. According to the instruction sheet provided to line coordinators, Amma does not like gaps in the *darshan* queue.

At the end of the line of chairs, a “*darshan-front*” person positions himself or herself and guides devotees to the floor. Who sits where is a source of confusion each year. Some years, the “line-back” and “floater” would arrange families and singles in separate lines. Othertimes the “*darshan-front*” person then becomes the person who arranges families and singles. Families have a particular form of arrangement. Kids sit in the front, the father sits behind them, followed by the mother. This is sometimes a source of irritation for many American families. I will describe this aspect of arrangement in detail in the chapter on gender identity.

Before 2008, “floaters” were also the number changers in the token counter. After 2008, two new positions dealt with number changing, an important duty. Usually, when the line of chairs is one-third empty, the number is changed to a higher token. Often the coordinator decides whether it is time for the “number-changer” to change the numbers. Sometimes the signal may be given by any person in the “*darshan* line-back” team. This situation may become complicated during retreat days, when several people attend meditation classes that are held parallel to the *darshan* and they miss their turn. After the classes are over, they rush into the hall to get *darshan* and such people are allowed to enter the line out of turn. It is the responsibility of the shift coordinator to know when the classes are let out and to make arrangements so that people can enter the line easily. In those times, the lines are allowed to become quite empty in expectation of the coming surge.

Sometimes, people request to enter the line out of turn for varied reasons: “I have a *seva* (selfless service duty) soon and will be missing my turn,” “I have to attend to somebody who is sick, invalid, or a child and need to see Amma soon,” “I have to leave the city and this is my last *darshan*,” “I have not been able to get *darshan* for last two

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<sup>43</sup> In 2009, the chairs went all the way almost upto Amma’s seat. Devotees and visitors had to go down on their knees only for the brief moment of *darshan*.

days,” or “I need to see Amma now.” The process of entertaining such requests changes from year to year and person to person. Usually, after a period of wondering and negotiating, such requests are met.<sup>44</sup>

At other times, Geeta or Amritapriya<sup>45</sup> ask the coordinator to change numbers even though the seats are not empty. These orders are usually followed without question. So people who come to see Amma, need to watch out for the token counter carefully as the pace of change would vary across the day or night. This practice irritates some people who complain about the sudden speed in changing the token counter and about missing their turn as a result. Exceptions are made at the discretion of the shift coordinator and sometimes “*darshan* line” *sevites* (devotees who do selfless service job for the Amma tour).

The “*darshan*-front” person has many responsibilities to ensure that people are seated very closely and keep moving. This allows Amma to keep a momentum and pace her hugs. Devotees receive a tissue to wipe their faces so that they may not soil Amma’s sari. People also leave their belongings, jewelry that may poke Amma, and their eyeglasses at this site. The movement in this area increases as people are quickly guided to Amma’s lap. Only experienced *sevites* work in this section. Sometimes Geeta finds a *sevite* in this section to be inadequate for the service and calls for a replacement. As soon as the *darshan* is over, an “exit” *sevite* immediately rushes forward and helps the devotee to stand up and moves him or her away from Amma. Only *sevites* who are physically able are given this duty. I have heard some devotees complain of being roughly handled in this area.

Some men and women prefer to reach Amma from her right side, known as the “Geeta side,” indicating the side on which Geeta stands to help devotees. There are different reasons why people do this. Some consider this side to be auspicious for their gender. Some want to ask Amma question or give her things. Geeta usually facilitates this process by translating questions or conversations, or taking offerings from devotees and following up on their various requests. Such people request to sit on the right side of the

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<sup>44</sup> Although accommodating such requests sometimes gets the “*darshan* line” team into trouble with overall line coordinators like Bhavani and Geeta for letting people in out-of- turn.

<sup>45</sup> Geeta is Amma’s assistant who stands on her right hand side through the entire *darshan* period. Amritapriya is one of Amma’s oldest New Mexican devotees and now coordinates different aspects of North American Amma Tours.

*darshan* line. Depending on the number of families and singles coming up for the *darshan* that particular time, it may or may not be convenient for “*darshan* line” *sevites* to accommodate those requests. This sometimes leads to discomfort and irritation for both the *sevites* as well as devotees awaiting *darshan*. Some devotees remain adamant and refuse to move and others tend to be flexible.

*Darshan* line organization and movement form an elaborate, well-planned structure that undulates from enforcement of strict rules to dealing with unexpected disruptions. Communication among the different *sevites* managing this line is usually very important. Common problems that arise are due to differing interpretations of the same set of instructions, poor training of a *sevite* at a particular position, the personalities of *sevites*, changing instructions from Bhavani or Geeta depending on new Amma requests, and changing *darshan* situations near Amma and how exceptions are dealt with. “*Darshan* line” *sevites* are immediately visible to Amma and hence tend to be strong monitors of their duties. This may lead to the opposite at times, when *sevites* are lost looking at Amma hugging people and have to be reminded over and again to be conscious of their duties.

The sudden disruptions, along with working with huge crowds at odd hours of the night, cause high stress amongst *sevites* and deeply impact the quality and content of communication. While the need to be alert and flexible is important, of greater importance is the spiritual practice during the service. The instruction sheet handed to the “*darshan* line” *sevites* has a subtitle: “Smile and be in your heart, which is where Amma dwells!” The requirement is to maintain a loving attitude towards people who come for *darshan* and other *sevites*. The instruction sheet describes the importance of this service in the following words:

Remember, this wonderful *seva* helps move Amma’s children toward her for each person’s unique experience. Please monitor the line with both your head and your heart. If you find occasional stressful situations: Remember, this wonderful *seva* helps to move Amma’s children toward her for each person’s own unique experience (repeat as necessary) (Notes for Shift Coordinators, 2008).

Simultaneously, the “Question and Name” line moves laterally towards Amma from her right side. In United States, the days Amma entertains questions and give names

differ from year to year and retreat to retreat. Often, the morning of the second day of the retreat is the day when Amma answers questions and gives names to devotees. A *sevite*, known as the “Question Line” person, is in charge of the line. After chairs are placed at the right side of the stage in the morning, devotees assemble in these chairs by 9:00 a.m. The “question line” person then decides who gets to enter the line first based on the following criteria: the question concerns life and death, the question has serious life implications, the questioner has never asked Amma a question before. Usually 10 to 12 people manage to enter the “question line.”

Those who enter the line write their question clearly, briefly, and legibly on a postcard. They sit in the question line in a sequence decided by the “question line” person. They sit on the floor for four or five hours at times. There are special facilities provided for people with disabilities, the elderly, and parents of very young kids. After the morning meditation at around 10:00 or 10:30 a.m., Amma begins *darshan*. At a certain point she turns around and signals that she is ready to take questions. One or two translators stand behind Amma and take the postcards and translate the question into Malayalam for her. Amma listens and may ask further questions to the questioner. Sometimes she may look at the questioner for sometime. Other times, she launches into an elaborate answer. At other times, she does not answer and instead continues giving *darshan*. The translator usually knows when Amma wants to answer a question and when she does not. If Amma gives an answer, then the translator pulls the questioner to the side and translates Amma’s answer back in English.

The “question line” is meaningful to many devotees because of their immediacy to Amma and attention they receive to personal issues. The “question line” also allows devotees to talk to Amma directly. People hold these moments as very sacred. Different stories of grace and realization often revolve around the question line. The line allows people to sit close to Amma and watch the happenings for a long period of time without being interrupted. Sometimes, I got out of the question line without asking my question because I had observed the scene for long enough.

The “name line” follows the “question line.” “Name line” allows the devotee to ask Amma for a new name, usually in Sanskrit, that is meant to improve the spiritual quality of the devotee’s life. The “question line” coordinator receives a notification from

someone close to Amma on how many names will be given that morning. Eligibility to enter the name line depends on, first, how many times a person tried to enter the line, and second, whether Amma asked the person to enter the line. I auditioned for this line only once and learned that other devotees had tried to get a name for six or seven occasions previously. There were no first-comers allowed to enter the line on the day I auditioned. Entering the name line does not guarantee a new name. Amma decides whether a person should be given a new name on that particular day.

People who do not manage to ask their questions sometimes become irritated and take their ire upon the “question line” coordinators and complain to fellow devotees in the hall or after the tour. Since it is never publicly announced when and where question lines or name lines are scheduled, this practice causes distress amongst devotees. A person can find the location and times of these lines by asking experienced *sevites* and the “question line” coordinator. Newcomers find this to be inconvenient as they do not understand the organizational structure nor can they discern who the right people are to ask for information and who cannot give them directions. Betty, one of the participants in this study, described her difficult experience in trying to get a name from Amma in the following words:

It must be by Amma’s design that is so hard because I don’t know why, but is really, you know, I haven’t been able to ask a question or get a name in the four years that I have been to coming to retreat. It is just weird. It is just weird. (Interviewer: Yeah, there must be some reason why.) It can’t be poor planning (Interviewer: because they are pretty organized). It is gotta be something from Amma, I have just figured this out after 4 years that you have to go the first morning if you have to get the name. Get a name from her. Second morning, they always say no names today. So after everybody queues up for two hours then the gal comes up. Poor gal, she has got to take the brunt of everybody saying. They whittle you away, who really wants (a name). I know it has gotta be by her design.

Receiving new names also cause distress to some devotees because they do not like the names they have been given or wonder if it is a “good name.” Yet others are excited with their new names and announce their new names to others. On occasions I

have had people come up to me as one of the few East Indians in sight, to ask me the meaning of their names. Sometimes, I knew the meanings of their names and other times I did not. Names are not only given in “name lines,” but sometimes are given during *darshan*. A devotee sometimes asks Amma for a name during *darshan*. Amma may choose to ignore the request or signal the person to join the “name line.” Sometimes, even without being asked Amma gives a name. In 2007 *Devi Bhava*, a woman came up to me and said that Amma had repeatedly said a particularly word. According to this devotee, Amma said, “My daughter Moksha, My daughter Moksha.” I explained to her the meaning of the word and said that it was probable that Amma gave her a name.

While the “question and name line” moves laterally from Amma’s right, the “*prasad* line” comes from Amma’s left. This line is composed of devotees who had been either active in their *satsang* or had done at least four hours of *seva* (selfless service job). They are seated on the floor and they scoot forward on their bottoms. These devotees are granted the privilege of giving *prasad* (offerings given by Amma to a person after *darshan*) to Amma. Each devotee gives anywhere from 2 to 10 minutes of time to be close to Amma and give *prasad* to her hand. Amma opens her left hand as she hugs a person or a family in the *darshan* line. She opens her hand at any point of time. She might open her hand while her arms are wrapped around the person or family, or opens her hand after the hug. It is the devotee’s job to keep a watch on Amma’s hand and reach out to keep the *prasad* gently in her hand. Each devotee undergoes training on how to give *prasad*. Indian devotees receive a packet of ash along with a petal and a Hershey’s kiss. American families get a petal and a Hershey’s kiss for each member of the family, families are usually showered with flowers, and others receive an apple or a rose. Good devotion is expressed by mindfulness and deep focus on Amma’s hand so that the moment it opens, even slightly, the *sevite* reaches out to place the *prasad* in her hand. It is considered poor devotion to have Amma reach out for the *prasad*. *Prasad* giving is a major source of joy for devotees and many devotees make it a point to join the line at least once a day. Devotees are usually allowed to give *Prasad* only once a day.

A *Prasad* supervisor or assist arranges the *prasad* and hands it over to the *prasad* giver.<sup>46</sup> *Prasad* supervisors are experienced devotees hand-picked for this job. They have longer shifts compared to a *prasad* giver. The *prasad* timer is seated behind the *prasad* assistant keeps time and lovingly signals the *prasad* giver that her or his time is over. The next person then scoots forward and takes position. The *Prasad* timer provides a special *seva* that it allows the devotee to sit close to Amma for an extended period of time.

Besides the *Prasad* timer, only a few other *sevites* sit on the floor on the left side of Amma, including the flower person (this *seva* involves gathering flowers and other gifts given to Amma during *darshan* in a basket), the flower runner (a person who runs the basket when it is full to the flower and fruit recycling station outside the hall), and a *prasad* line re-trainer (this person checks that every person who enters the “*prasad* line” knows how to give *prasad*). All these people have shifts and work from one to two hours. Standing behind Amma would be one or two members from the national tour coordination team, any one of the swamis, and a *sevite* who would have the very special *seva* of massaging Amma’s back while she continued with the *darshan*. Occasionally a *sevite* (usually a woman) receives an opportunity to massage her feet. These *sevites* usually are staff members in Amma’s tour. At the end of the “*prasad* line,” the *prasad* line coordinator and flower coordinator keep a watch to ensure that each person is doing his or her tasks efficiently, keep time for each shift, and find replacement for each shift. Some devotees usually stroll around this area hoping somebody will miss their shift so they can volunteer for this special *seva*.

In 2008, a new special *seva* started called the gazing *seva*. For about ten minutes a devotee is allotted a seat very close to the front of Amma when she or he can “gaze” at Amma to her or his heart’s content. There is a steady stream of devotees who sign up for the various time slots during the day or the night to sit at this spot with Amma.

The last queue moving towards Amma is from the right and runs parallel to the “question line.” This line does not have an official name, but in every retreat devotees arbitrarily create and regulate this line. I named it the “Sit-Close-To-Amma” line based on the purpose it serves. Devotees rush to this line early in the morning. This is one of the

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<sup>46</sup> This *seva* position was removed in 2009 when the *Prasad* giver was first the *prasad* supervisor or assist for a certain time period and then gave *prasad* for few more minutes.



queues that can get the most cramped up. Each year, the same set of devotees makes it a point to sit in this area all day and sometimes all night. The line does not move forward unless the person sitting in front decides to give up his or her seat. Several people sit in this line meditating, chanting mantras, chanting 1,000 names or 108 names. On occasions people are sobbing in this line. Sometimes they consoled each other and sometimes people are left free to express their emotions. Others simply stare or gaze at Amma for hours, observing her every move and listening in to every conversation she may have. It is important to note that most conversations happen in Malayalam<sup>47</sup> but that does not prevent devotees from trying to listen in. Some devotees make a special effort to learn Malayalam, which is known in the community as “Mother’s language.”

These five lines pour into the center of the universe for the retreat: Amma. Seated in a low, weakly cushioned sofa-of-sorts, draped in a simple white sari, Amma moves rhythmically, without missing a beat. She welcomes the next person in the *darshan* line with a smile, a question, a concerned look. Sometimes she listens to their concerns or shares in their delight. She takes over babies and spends time gazing at them, kissing them on their cheeks before handing them back to their delighted mothers. Then she hugs the devotee or his or her family. Sometimes she receives flowers or fruits from devotees. She raises the flowers and gently touches them to her forehead in salutation and gives it to the person behind her. This then gets passed to the flower-person who adds it to the flower and fruit basket. Soon the basket will be full and the flower runner will rush it to the recycling station. If it is a fruit, often Amma bites into the fruit without eating any of it and passes it back as a sign of acceptance of offering.

As her arms wrap around her devotees, her left hand opens ever so slightly, and the serene *prasad* giver reaches forward to place *prasad* gently into her hands. Sometimes she keeps her hand open even after receiving the *prasad*. And the *prasad* giver eagerly rushes forward to place more *prasad* in her hands. With a slight movement, she releases her devotees from the embrace. Sometimes, she reaches out again and embraces the devotee again, a deep affirmation of her love for the devotee. Sometimes she kisses the devotee on his or her cheeks and makes a funny face to elicit a laugh or

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<sup>47</sup> Amma’s mother tongue and the language in which she delivers all her talks and answers all questions.

smile from the person, to calm the person, to tease, or to point out that life is full of joy rather than sorrow. The exit *sevite* rushes forward to help this dazed devotee to her or his feet. Amma's right hand then presses softly into a small *darshan* counter that she holds during *darshan* to raise the count of people who have had her *darshan*. Exact and rigorously tabulated numbers seem to be a passion in the Amma community. For example, the food coordinator always has an accurate count of how many people are served for a particular day's breakfast or lunch. This count is used to estimate the amount of food to be prepared for a meal on any given day during an Amma program at a particular city. Similarly, Amma rigorously keeps count of the number of people who come to get her *darshan*. It is assumed this allows her to gain insight of how many people typically come to program in a particular city, or to pace herself during *darshan* to accommodate all those who are waiting in the hall, or perhaps for deeper spiritual reasons like to stay in the physical body and not be lost in *samadhi*.<sup>48</sup>

Amma then turns around and signals for the question line to begin. In the meantime, the next devotee in the *darshan* line scoots forward and moves into her embrace. She stays in that embrace for a longer time, and Amma caresses her back as she listens to the translation of the question. Amma turns her head to look at the questioner, seriously and intently. Sometimes, one of her hands reaches out to caress the cheeks of the questioner, and Amma starts talking in Malayalam. The translator bends over close to her face, his or her mouth covered with a hand to avoid spitting on her face. The translator straightens up and signals the questioner to rise up so that Amma's answer can be explained. Amma, in the meanwhile turns back to the devotee in her lap, raises her face, gives a kiss, takes her into her embrace, gently whispers into her ear "My darling child, my darling child," and then releases her. Amma's hand already has the *prasad* that she gives to the devotee with a smile.

She continues to manage the line around her. She adjusts her sari, turns around to people behind her, such as staff members or a "question line" translator, and then signals

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<sup>48</sup> It has been mentioned both in community conversations as well as web blogs that Amma has to use different methods to ensure she stays present in the social sphere and is not lost in the bliss of *samadhi*. *Samadhi* is a state in Hindu theology where an individual is presumed to be completely one with the Universal consciousness and completely loses identification with body. Such a person cannot interact with others or even breathe. In one of the Amma videos, in a description of her North India tour in 1987, Amma is filmed entering into the state of *Samadhi* while she was singing to the Goddess of the river Ganges in Haridwar, a pilgrimage city at the foothills of the Himalayas.

them to ask their question. They bend over to ask their questions about administration of the tour, *ashram* questions from India, questions from various project sites and other miscellaneous questions. They cover their mouths with their hand to prevent spitting. In the meanwhile Amma greets the next person in the *darshan* line, as she did with a scantily-clad young woman. This woman is now in Amma's lap with Amma caressing her back even while launching into a long conversation with the people behind her—explaining and clarifying issues. She pauses in her answer, lifts the woman's face, kisses her gently on her cheeks, embraces her and whispers again "My darling child, my darling child!" and releases her to the awaiting "exit" *sevite*. The right hand clicks softly on the *darshan* counter and Amma turns around to the people in the "Sit-Close-To-Amma" queue and lovingly glances at a couple of them. All eyes in that queue seek hers eagerly as if imploring: "Amma, look at me. Amma, look at me."

Gracefully, she turns and welcomes the next man in the queue with long purple spiky hair. She pulls him towards her and lovingly looks into his eyes and takes him to her lap. As he lays still, a tour staff leans forward from her right side, hands covering her mouth and asks an urgent question. Amma answers, seeming yes or no. The staff member shakes her head vigorously to every word Amma says. A pause and Amma again picks up the man in her lap and takes him into her embrace and whispers, "My darling son, my darling son" and again, with a slight movement, she releases him. *Prasad* is already in Amma's hands, and she hands it over to him. As he gets ready to leave, she pulls him back again, anoints sandalwood paste on his forehead and takes him back into her embrace and then lets him go. The grinning man rises with the help of the "exit" *sevite* and usually takes position in the "Sit-Close-To-Amma" queue.

Meanwhile, Amma signals for the next question in the question line. The gazing *sevite* of that moment continues to look at this surreal yet down-to-earth scene. Ten minutes are up. The next gazing *sevite* strokes her back gently to signal her time is up. She bows down and gets up, while tears are streaming on her face. Amma already has the husband and wife from the *darshan* line close to her, talking to them animatedly. They hand over photos of family and friends to be blessed by Amma. Amma inquires about someone in the photo and they explain her situation. Next, they give her rosary *mala* (stringed rosary beads in the form of a chain to be worn around the neck)) and rosary

bracelets to be blessed by her. She kisses the objects and lovingly puts the *malas* around their neck or bracelets on their wrists as the couple smile widely like children getting red balloons.

This play continues without a break for five or six hours in the morning and for about five or six hours at night in Albuquerque during retreat days. And it continues without a break through the entire year. Amma never gets up to use the restroom nor does she eat during *darshan*. In my presence, I have always observed Amma still seated, still giving *darshan* and the token counter is always higher than what it was when I left. Occasionally, Geeta or some *bramhacharini* (lady renunciate) offer her some tea. Amma takes a sip and then continues with *darshan*. She occasionally shifts her leg positions, almost invisibly. Sometimes her feet show though her sari, a devotee catches sight of it and rants about her beautiful feet for many moments afterwards. Amma never refuses to embrace anybody or to give *Prasad* to anyone. She may appear angry for few moments and then her face turns a bright smile as if there was never any anger. She sometimes cries when she hears stories of sorrow from her devotees and then wipes their tears with her *sari* or hands causing that very face metamorphose within moments into a loving glance at some devotee nearby. She looks seriously or intently or piercingly at people close to her and sometimes at people at a great distance at the back of the hall.

Every two hours, a new set of *sevites* joins the various *sevas* in the different queues and all over the hall. Every shift has its drama, small or large. Almost in every shift, some *sevite* has a realization of his or her state of mind or an experience of grace. Shifts churn out Amma stories that are told amongst fellow devotees and shared in *satsangs* (local spiritual gathering). These stories publicly affirm each devotee's devotion and connection to Amma and publicly thrill other devotees of their guru's state of enlightenment, thereby bring about deeper state of bonding.

The inward movement from the edges of the different queues to Amma is almost a metaphorical movement from chaos to serenity, from *masala*<sup>49</sup> to purity, from affliction to radical acceptance. It is often, in this community, also a literal movement of

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<sup>49</sup> Although masala literally means spices, in a colloquial East Indian sense it means mixing things arbitrarily to create an impure flavor.

consciousness from the outside to inside, from changing others to changing oneself. Betty describes this change of consciousness while on the *darshan* line beautifully:

I was thinking that I have a question for her-love or money, love or money, love or money, which one I should ask her because I thought she granted wishes. The closer I crawled to her, the more I couldn't think at all. I couldn't think love or money. And the closer and closer I got to the actual hug, my mind was clunk! I couldn't form a thought. It was then an experience. I wasn't ego at all. So I got up from my hug from her and you know, helped up and walking away from the stage, and I was just like ahhhh! It was so funny because I was trying to think of what I could get and then that was not the thing anymore. It was like what happened here?

During the public programs, there is almost complete lack of privacy for Amma because she is very visible to her devotees for 15 to 20 hours a day in New Mexico and close to 22 hours in India. A web service called [www.twitter.com](http://www.twitter.com) provides updates or tweets about what Amma is doing in a particular hour continuously. Some examples of tweets: "Amma has started giving *darshan*," "Amma is singing Mata Rani," "Amma's Western devotees are singing *bhajans* now. *Darshan* continues." This description also illustrated the high levels of stress that this woman endures and yet found the evidence of stress-related disruptions in her mood, attitude, looks, or availability. In 2008, the grapevine carried a story that Amma's spine was adversely from continuous sitting and that she was in terrible pain. On blog posts as well as in informal conversations, devotees discussed whether Amma suffered from physical pain and whether the devotees should feel sorry for her. In any case, Amma did not cancel any *darshan* or scheduled programs.

The *darshan* hall events is a site from which I observed how devotees perform their personal identities in the space around Amma, and how they express their unique likes and dislikes, problems and concerns, needs and wants. More importantly, this setting allows for the expressions of the unique ways in which they collide with organizational structures and space management around Amma to create and resolve particular problems in interpersonal communication. As these processes unfolds, Amma wades into the same space by continually accommodating the various needs and wants,

even while she maintains a charming control of the rhythm and pattern of interactions to develop and sustain relationship with her devotees.

### *The Struggle for Individuality*

Devotees in the Amma community struggled for individuality in their communication and social exchanges with their fellow devotees. The struggle is discussed through the following themes—(1) focusing on the prize, (2) sibling rivalry, and (3) power struggle.

#### *Focusing on Prize*

In the Amma community, sitting close to Amma, being able to talk to her, and most importantly, doing *seva* to be deep in her presence is highly desired. Thus, certain *sevas* like *prasad seva*, flower *seva*, being *prasad* supervisor or assist, *seva* of the *darshan* front person, exit *seva*, cleaning Amma's room, doing her laundry, doing *padapuja* (ritualistic worship of Amma's feet), or *arati* (waving camphor flame around Amma after the evening *bhajans*), amongst other duties, are highly treasured and wanted positions. These are known as special *sevas*. Devotees are selected to these special *sevas* based on participation in *satsang*, the amount of *seva* they performed for the *satsang* during the year or during the tour, and tenure in the organization. *Satsang* coordinators, area coordinators, and supervisors for certain *sevas* recommend devotees for these special *sevas*. People get into special *seva* lists and sometimes a conflict breaks out about who got into the list and got what *seva* and who did not.

In a sense, special *sevas* are ways of rewarding and appreciating commitment to the community. However, the selection of individuals also imposes hierarchy in interpersonal relations. Elena spoke against the subtle support to hierarchy in special *sevas*. She said:

There is sometimes a kind of hierarchical feeling that you get that is even akin to what we were talking before. For example I was at a meeting, I was over there signing deleted for the *sevas* and someone came along and said to me, don't get overbooked, because you are doing so much that we are going to get you sometime near Amma. So you don't want be so overbooked that you cannot do that. Or last year, you have been at such and such work, I have to give you some *prasad* or you know, whatever timer, then you go up there, do it for 3 minutes or

10 minutes or something. That's one thing I don't feel comfortable. Because I feel everyone is deserving. I don't think anybody should be, you have been doing this stuff and we have been putting these marks for you. The farther you are working, the forward the accounting goes. Skip me over. It is okay.

The concept of *seva* is rooted in selfless service meant to bring about spiritual growth. In my first *seva* for the community as a breakfast server at the Amritapuri *ashram* in India, I received a laminated sheet of instructions that instructed me how to serve equal portions of food, how to avoid wasting food by spilling or dropping or giving excess amounts to devotees, and how to chant my mantras continuously and stay in a state of devotion and humility. Since then, each *seva* offered specific instructions, but include chanting my mantras, recognizing people I am working for or with as Amma or Amma's children, and staying inward in a state of devotion and humility. However, as famous singer Krishnadas cited from his guru in a video documentary, "No one but an enlightened person can do selfless service." In the worldview of this community—which is in many ways similar to the views within Krishnadas's community, in other communities following Eastern religions and in some non-denominational congregations in United States—until you attain a state of perfection, when your self has become completely interconnected with rest of the universe, the powers of individuation or ego will always insert some amount of individual self into all actions.

Special *sevas* bring to fore an important aspect of the community: the prize of all devotion and all service is Amma. This extraordinary focus on Amma, at times, creates a sense of alienation amongst community members because the focus tends to be on Amma and not Amma's children. The struggle between wanting to be loved *only* by Amma and wanting to be loved by others *too* is intense and confusing. Participant Betty eloquently spoke about this conflicting desire to be loved by Amma and at the same time be loved in the community:

Last year, I was crying to one of the vendors at the retreats, I am like, you know what, it is so hard here in Albuquerque, almost like a stranger here, because everybody is focused on the prize and nobody wants to communicate and relate to each other and you know I feel so lonely. This is not a place to meet and greet, it

has been a real struggle to hook up with anybody and have a conversation.

Because they are all Amma, Amma, but I think we are here altogether.

Almost as a response, several sections in the instruction sheets for *seva* and stories on the Amritapuri website allude to and encourage devotees to consider all people as Amma. Several participants in this study spoke about their efforts to recognize Amma in others. Some saw Amma as a passerby, some as their co-workers, some as their clients, and others as their fellow devotees. A photo on the Amritapuri website shows Amma reaching out her hands to touch members of a crowd with the caption, “Divinity touching Divinity.” Ella spoke about trying to remember the essential divinity in the people she encountered and how those encounters also helped her remember Amma:

I want to honor all her children, I ask her to show me her face and then her eyes in each person. When I want to be critical, I remember that she says that that person is one of my brothers and sisters. That is one of Amma’s children. I feel like from Amma I can honor them because before I used to dismiss them. Not give them a thought. Now I know that they are not just people, they are Amma’s children and they are related to me. Everybody is related to me, we are all in Amma’s big family. When I was walking down the hall, in Santa Fe, at a vision clinic for work, I spoke to Amma in my heart and told her that I wanted to see Her in everybody today. A woman walked down the hall towards me and she raised her eyebrows like Amma does. She smiled at me. I was thankful to Amma. It just looked just like Her.

Shanti also reported that she practiced the principle of seeing Amma in her patients and said that it was a difficult practice:

Trying to see, trying to realize the importance to see Amma in all the patients.

That I struggle with. But if I have a hard patient and I can catch myself in time, I will tell myself how will I treat Amma and how will I touch Amma. Still working on all that.

In contrast, devotees also talked about realizing that “others are not Amma” and that we are not “Amma.” The expectations of genuine love and unconditional non-judgmental acceptance from fellow devotees are often misplaced and cause pain and trauma amongst devotees. As I scanned library catalogues for academic writings on



Amma or Amma community, I came across a couple of master's theses that criticized the community on various fronts. These materials, like the interviews, pained me, for I wanted to believe that spirituality was a powerful way to reach peace and harmony in the world, and I wanted evidence that proved my basic assumption. I spoke about these theses to a couple of participants, and they responded with descriptions of their own fears and doubts. One of the participants then urged me to remember that Amma alone is the enlightened person in the group and that she alone is above selfishness and pettiness. Others, including the *Swamis* (senior renunciate disciples), were not enlightened. They may be spiritually well developed, but they were not "enlightened."<sup>50</sup> To expect behavior and conduct that comes to an enlightened person naturally, from an unenlightened person is like "searching for diamond in a coal mine." Nistula affirmed this idea that there would be flaws in unenlightened people even if they were spiritually quite evolved like the monks who worked near Amma. She said:

They are not Amma. They make me angry, some of the *swamis* make me angry. But I have to realize that just because they are near her it does not mean they are better than me. Which is a very good lesson for me. I was taught that everybody else was better than me. I used to put everybody on a pedestal and this is another thing that Amma had to poof. Nobody belongs in a pedestal except Amma but she wouldn't say that, but I say that. Everybody else is human.

The notion that others are not Amma also translates as "We are not Amma." The devotees consider themselves to be on the path, but not yet there. A constant reminder of devotees' human frailties and vulnerabilities is the contrast made between Amma and *sevites* during the tour programs. The pressure of working with large crowds, having little sleep, sharp emotional needs around Amma, and the desire to be perfectly devoted evolve into angry situations. I have been snapped at and spoken rudely to in tour programs. I have also snapped and spoken rudely to others in the programs during the height of exhaustion. In every retreat I have witnessed several of the participants in this study crying as I have also cried. Sometimes I would cry at the end of the hall, sometimes very close to where Amma is seated. But I would cry and so would others.

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<sup>50</sup> Enlightened, in this community, means a state when one has completely transcended any identification to the world including the body. Such a state is most mystical and most difficult to reach, and only few in the world can reach this state at a given period of time.

To some observers, the heavy workload and unseemly schedules would appear to be volunteer labor exploitation and may indicate poor planning and organization. In fact, many of the ex-Amma devotees' websites and blog posts make these claims. Ex-devotees complained about working long hours with very little rewards and those who lived in the Amma *ashrams*, both in India as well as United States, complained of heavy work, poor nutrition, poor living arrangements, and very few spiritual rewards. They accused people in higher administration of holding too much power. The following story comes from one of Amma's close female attendants, Gayatri.

Gayatri, an Australian woman, joined the *ashram* in early 80s and was one of Amma's first Western disciples. Most video clips, photographs, and recordings of conversations with Amma from the 1980s include Gayatri standing close to Amma, performing some tasks, or having a conversation with Amma. She was the closest female disciple to Amma in the early periods of Amma's guruship. According to gossip, Gayatri became increasingly disenchanted by the workload and Amma's constant criticism of her *seva*. One night or early morning, Gayatri left the *ashram* without saying a word to anybody, including Amma. Then she moved to Hawaii where Amma provided for her living expenses.

Gayatri's story causes bewilderment amongst devotees who say "Amma's ways are strange." Devotees interpret the workload to be a spiritual purification process. It is said to be good to work the consciousness to an extent when the veil of external politeness drops. At this point, the devotee becomes sharply aware of her flaws or ego (forces of individuation). Once they observe this aspect of their mind, the devotees detach from that state and gain inner peace and wisdom. The exhaustion from heavy workload and emotional distress around Amma may be Amma's way to work on the devotee's ego, to allow the *vasanas* (inherent tendencies) to arise to the surface, and then to skim them off or eliminate them. I discuss the issue of *vasanas* in greater detail later in this chapter.

### *Sibling Rivalry*

Amma in Malayalam means "mother." For many devotees, this is not merely an epithet to address a saintly woman, but a literal statement. She is the Mother who compensates for the kind of mothers that some devotees lacked in their lives. For some of the devotees, Amma's embrace or *darshan* expresses "unconditional love" and

acceptance. According to these devotees, Amma accepts their presence without judgment, criticism, or evaluation evoking a state of peace and of intense belonging.

Marie reported sensing this unconditional love from Amma:

When I first met Amma, I went up with my daughter and then I couldn't move after the hug. I couldn't move, I wanted her to look at me, and I just stood there waiting for her to look at me. Eventually she looked at me. That is when everything changed for me because I could see she was absolute unconditional love. She had absolutely no judgment. I cannot explain this; it was the purest thing I had ever experienced.

For others, the tactility of the hug is quite powerful since it is a touch that some said their mothers had never given. Betty said:

She takes you into her heart and she embraces you and that is a big deal for me.

Because of my childhood and how I wasn't touched. So it really means a lot to me that she holds you like a mother that you never had. It's pretty big and that meant so much to me.

For many others, Amma became the Mother they lost. For example, Big *Swami* lost his birth mother at a young age and Amma helped him heal and feel his mother's love in his heart. Participant Teresa spoke about the visceral experience of finding her mother's presence in Amma and how it cemented her relationship with Amma:

It was a profound experience because when I had my first hug from Her, I think part of it as the visceral experience that she was physically identical to my mother in the sense, her girth and her height, things like, maybe a little bit shorter. When I received the hug from her, it had been 17 years after my mom's passing, it was as if [My mother had returned]. I have had many surrogate mothers since then but this was first time I truly felt that my mother was holding me again. I had a complete breakdown and breakthrough where it was like I truly felt my mother's spirit through Amma and felt my mother's love. I felt it in waves here and there. I have come to know through the years that the reason Amma is known as Amma is for her unconditional love. It is like a mother's love and it is that characteristic that I so identified with, that I was longing for. That is where my relationship with Amma started.

This “mommy” syndrome brings about its own play of sibling rivalry. The interpersonal relationship struggles amongst many devotees resemble the issues that siblings face when competing for a mother’s attention and love. This sibling rivalry is described in the words of Sophia:

We are all here because of Amma and we come at it from different angles. You know. This happens within the *satsang*. Amma is a mom, she is mommy, and what that can represent to people fighting for Mom’s attention, being jealous of what this sibling gets, and she represents the mom that none of us ever had. No, she is *my* mom and no, she is *my* mom. You have had *that* experience with her—when I saw her she did da da da. I am sorry I ever said a word. It is like growing up all over again. Having to be a wimp (emphasis in original).

Sibling rivalry expresses itself in the following forms:

1. Whom does Amma favor?
2. Who can gain Amma’s favor?

*Whom does Amma favor?* According to the literature produced in the community, Amma does not favor any person. Yet, some devotees construe some of her actions, real and imagined, showing more love to one person compared to the other. For example, Amma sometimes talks animatedly to a few devotees. The devotees who have this extensive conversation are viewed with envy by some other devotees. This was specially the case with one *satsang* devotee who has long animated conversations with Amma. Informally, I have heard devotees ask—especially newcomers—ask me and others why Amma seems to ignore them but talk so much to this particular devotee. The explanation that I first received, and which I have since faithfully passed on to others, is that Amma conducts herself according to the needs of the devotee. Thus, some devotees need to converse with Amma so that they can grow spiritually. For others, Amma behaves in a fashion that is most suitable for their growth. Some of the senior devotees pointed out that Amma hardly talks to them, but they still feel strongly connected to her. The discrepancy becomes a subtle point of contention among devotees. I have heard choked voices saying, “Does Amma love me? Does she know I am around?”

Acknowledgement also comes through what Amma may give during *darshan* or during *seva*. Did Amma give X devotee an apple today? Did she give her a rose? Did

Amma give her a special glance? Did Amma give her a standing *darshan*? Did Amma ask the devotee to sit close to her? Have I ever been asked by Amma to sit close to her? Is she ignoring me today? Was I unable to touch her palm as she left the hall? These questions and more create an emotional conundrum for the devotees and result in many a tear. This game of hide-seek, giving and restraint, enraptures many devotees. Each devotee creates her own narrative as to why something happened. And these narratives embody notions of spiritual growth and realization.

Devotees attributed different meanings to Amma's actions in the *ashram* in India. It was about 8:00 a.m., and I had reached the kitchen area at the *ashram* as usual. One of food supervisors told his friend about an incident in the morning. Unknown to me, Amma left the *ashram* early that morning for her North American and Japan tour. Devotees gathered around her car to say goodbye and this supervisor was also present in the group. As always, Amma outstretched her arms to allow people to touch her palms. The supervisor attempted to touch her palms but at that very moment, Amma moved her hands away. The supervisor concluded that his weak spiritual practices for last couple of days led to this reaction and that Amma let him know that "she knew." The other *ashramites* (devotees living in the *ashram*) who had gathered around listening to this story explained to a confused me that there were subtle actions that Amma did which helped the disciples to learn, that Amma actions were ways for the guru to teach the student.

Since meaning attribution to Amma's actions is very common in this community, it causes a lot of pain, distress, and heartache. In one of the retreats, during the question and answer session, a devotee jumped up and asked Amma why she was so variable in her affections. Why would she sometimes give so much love and attention to a devotee and other times, ignore the disciple and hurt him deeply. This question brought a huge cheer from the audience as all eyes turned to Amma, awaiting her explanation. Amma grinned and looked at everybody with a part guilty, part amused face. She explained that she was sorry that she could not give attention to everyone all the time. But if the disciple wanted that attention, all she had to do was insist on her giving that attention. She said that she did not stop anyone from asking her anything. The audience did not seem to buy her answer. The mood was that somehow she should agree that she was playing with their

heart and mind. The devotee later reported that he got a wonderful *darshan* from Amma that evening.

Devotees often share stories that reveal connections with Amma. Acknowledgment of these stories by other devotees in the form of active listening, smiling or other nonverbal complimentary gestures is sometimes important to the storyteller. The point behind the narrative is often: “I love Amma, Amma loves me too, and we had a special moment together.” When a devotee is unable to tell a story or her stories are unacknowledged, there is heartache and defensiveness as if claiming, “Amma loves me, too!”

*Who can gain Amma’s favor?* A devotee asked this question in a question-and-answer session at a retreat: “Amma, what can we do to win your grace?” Amma replied that it was selfless action what filled Amma’s heart with love and blessings. Amongst Amma community members, *seva* is one of the ways that hopefuls aspire to win Amma’s attentions. The person who works the hardest is presumed to be the one who earns more blessings from Amma.

Devotees in the tour sometimes talk about how much *seva* they are doing in a tour program by providing descriptions of the kind of *seva* they are doing, the time schedules, and the levels of exhaustion. Sometimes, members speak about Amma’s grace helping them through difficult *sevas*, exhaustion, and night-time schedules. The amount of *seva* is also an indication of the extent of a devotee’s relationship to Amma.

Some devotees visit a program or a retreat away from New Mexico with the specific purpose of doing less *seva* and spending more quality time with Amma. Some devotees travel outside the country to Australia or Europe to be with Amma in a different locale. The buzz word in the community is that in Australian retreats and programs, Amma gives extended *darshan* and talks to people for longer periods of time than in United States. Katherine travels to various cities to see Amma and she said:

I like to see her as much as I can. This time I was hoping to go to Australia but the tickets were so expensive. It was like 1,800 dollars round trip. So, mostly I try to go both the retreats in fall. In the summer, of course, it is the week in Albuquerque. I also try to go and do two or three other cities, like public

programs or retreats. This year I hope to do Seattle, San Ramon, and Toronto. So that is important for me to see her as much as possible.

Yet another participant who wished to remain unnamed said that she was able to see Amma in various cities and countries:

By the nature of my job, I am able to see her in a lot of cities in United States. I have been able to take off from work and go to India a couple of times. And fortunately a couple of years, my work took me to Australia. Going to Australia was tremendous, truly Her grace.

The idea of being with Amma in another city is very popular, and devotees make arrangements to share rooms and transportation, carpool, and follow Amma from city to city all across North America. There is a special section on the Western Amma website allows devotees to coordinate room sharing and carpooling at Amma programs and retreats both in North America and Europe. However, those who cannot travel to see Amma in other places for financial, professional or family reasons, sometimes suffer from heartaches and jealousy. A couple of devotees explained to me that the reason why they did not visit Amma in other places was to save money and give it for a donation. Yet devotees reported being jealous of others who speak about their travel plans.

Another way some devotees try to gain access to Amma is through display. Some devotees bring interesting toys or decorations or objects that might get Amma's attention during *darshan*. Sometimes they may dress up in costumes, hoping to catch Amma's eye. In one very interesting incident, one of the participants dyed her hair bright blue and sat near Amma and reported that Amma noticed her hairdo and made a surprised face.

### *Power Struggle*

Power is the ability to influence or control other people and events (Donahue & Kolt, 1992). A power struggle often alerts people as the struggle to make things happen or bring about desired outcomes. A distinct form of power struggle within the community may arise from the intention of doing good or improving the quality of *satsang* or Amma tours.

Within the community, different members develop power currencies that come from leadership roles, tenure, and networking. Some devotees occupy leadership positions within the community either during the Amma tours or in *satsang*. During

Amma tours, tour coordinators and area coordinators occupy official positions of power, because they recruit and manage *sevites* for various *sevas*. They have the right to recommend *sevites* for special *sevas*, know about the tour coordination and arrangement, and have access to important information channels for other *sevites* bewildered with changing instructions. The same group of people remained as the tour coordinators for Amma tours from 2006-2008. Area coordinators also remain the same from year to year unless they request a change in *seva* positions, have different physical or mental abilities for that particular year, or have fallout with some of the significant tour administrators. Some areas experience higher turnover of coordinators than others depending on the amount of stress on that particular area or on the quality of the experience of a coordinator in that area in the previous years. For example, laundry and staff accommodation is a pretty intense *seva* area and has seen transitions with different people trying better ways to decrease the stress in this *seva* area. At the same time, the children's program—which attracts lesser number of *sevites* than other areas, has been coordinated by the same person for some years.

The ease of changing *sevas* or choosing a *seva* sometimes creates discomfort. Tour coordinators, some area coordinators, and important tour administrators are viewed with suspicion and fear. “I want to do this *seva*, but I know so and so will not like it” is a statement I have sometimes heard in the months leading to the main summer program. Some *sevites* who question and challenge certain *seva* processes also feel marginalized in the group.

The system of tour coordination results in a confused confluence of democratic ideology and hierarchical decision making. Instructions come from the North American tour coordination team, who in turn receive and develop instructions from *swamis* and other significant members in the *ashram* in India. These instructions are then passed and localized by the local tour coordination team. However, devotees participating in tour *seva*, especially in *sevas* that need to be completed before the tour begins, may enter the team with ideas of their own. A devotee may claim local cultural expertise or professional experience in a certain *seva* areas. Such devotees may experience discomfort with subservience to “instructions.” Some devotees question whether the instructions are coming from Amma, who gets to make decisions, and ask why certain people make



decisions rather than others. For example, Peace spoke to the conflict between a democratic ideology and hierarchical structures within the organization:

Even now, I get resentful at meetings; that's why I won't go. Why are you telling us to do that, and who's telling you, and why can't we make up our own decisions here? I don't understand if there are directives coming from Amma or what.

There are so many unwritten rules, which is nice, but there's so many ways to transgress those rules.

People making decisions, known and unknown, are viewed with suspicion and are sometimes considered power brokers within the community. Compounded to this discomfort, the invocation of Amma through "Amma has said this" statements creates confusion, irritation, and a sense of helplessness amongst the members. This aspect of communication was specifically addressed in the 2008 tour meeting where members were dissuaded from using "Amma has said" statements to support a directive or a change in instruction.

The second power currency that some members hold is tenure. The more senior a devotee in the *satsang*, the greater chances the devotee has to voice her opinions, influence decision-making process, have access to special *sevas*, and *seva* coordination positions. Thus devotees who have been with Amma for seven to 10 years or so are often visible in the inner circle of the coordination. Newcomers often approach them for guidance into the *satsang* and expect them for help to ease into the *satsang* group. There is no official mentorship process by which newcomers may gain access to greater and qualitatively more complex *sevas*. Individual tenured members may take a newcomer under their wing and help them to learn and gain experience in a *seva*. I learnt *darshan* line *seva* because one of the devotees took me under his care and guided me into the intricacies of the process. Some years later, he recruited me to be *darshan* line coordinator.

On the other hand, devotees who have been with Amma since the first few times she visited North America in late 1980s face a different situation. The large crowds that gather to meet Amma have increased, and the needs for tour management have become infinitely more complex. Often, newer devotees with their fresh energy and enthusiasm maneuver their way into the newly created positions, making some of the "senior"

devotees isolated and unrecognized within the community. In 2008, at Amma's request, a special meeting was held for senior devotees to air their grievances and discuss ways to redress those grievances.

The third power currency is networking. Some devotees are good networkers within the Amma community. This power may be enabled by their personality, their experience and talent in networking, confidence, and ability to travel to different places to offer complicated *sevas*. Men, in general, often can easily join the network since there are fewer men compared to women in the New Mexico *satsang* and there is always a need for strong men to do heavy duty *sevas*. Devotees with this social network within the Amma community are noted by others who may rely on them during times of crisis—whether personal or community related. Devotees who network efficiently have greater chances of being recruited into complicated and high-reliability *sevas*. However, since networking also exposes a devotee's personality characteristics and flaws, such a member may find herself cut off from key *sevas*. I have come across members in conversations as well as in blog posts and different unofficial Amma listservs who express their dismay at being excluded from joining certain *sevas*.

In summary, this section emphasizes how devotees struggle for individuality and visibility in particular ways in the *satsang* as well as in Amma programs and the ways in which interpersonal tensions emerged in the community around the enactment of self.<sup>51</sup>

#### *Intrapersonal Communication as the Site of Disidentification*

Although the devotees and participants struggled to maintain their personal identity in interpersonal relationships and opposed perceived and real inequalities, several spoke about their deep reflection and intrapersonal communication efforts to disidentify from their personal likes and dislikes, motivations, and desires. They did this by holding the root of all conflict in trans-temporal, mystical concepts like ego (forces of individuation), *karma* (fruits of action), and *vasanas* (inherent tendencies).<sup>52</sup>

The participants in this study seek an understanding of the individual self and the way it creates and distorts the world. Therefore, instead of blaming causes of conflict or

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<sup>51</sup> One of the participants wrote in response to this section that the relatability about the feelings of individual alienation “gives me a deep sense of unity, optimism and spiritual purpose, since your findings are derived from numerous interviews with Amma's daughters.”

<sup>52</sup> A participant stated that the trans-temporal mystical concepts were culturally coded so that it was a slow learning process to understand and apply the concepts in their lives.

communication problems on materiality of communication (inappropriate and ineffective language use and lack of clarity in message), personality, or power differentials, several devotees and almost all of my participants view the root of conflicts in the intrapersonal dynamics of ego, *karma*, and *vasanas*. Katherine spoke about the inner dimension of conflicts:

Whether I was in the world and having an experience or going to someone's house, something is making me uncomfortable, something is going on *inside* of me. Even though it is going on external, the external is a pressure; but I would think it is something inside of me and then I would look for a spiritual reason. It is not about outward things doing to me rather *I* am having a certain reaction (emphasis in original).

The emphasis in this quotation is that while conflict seems to emerge due to incompatibility of goals or styles, the real reason is that we react to these incompatibilities is due to internal reasons buried within ourselves, that the external acts as a trigger for these reasons to express themselves.

These internal dynamics or “inside” are described and understood differently by different participants. Some participants and several members speak about the *vasanas* (inherent tendencies) that are at the root of the conflict. Yet others speak of *karma* (fruits of action). And several participants and members mention ego (forces of individuation) as an important source for all problems, sufferings, and miscommunication.

In a deep sense, these terms are interconnected as the chapter on philosophical framework shows. *Vasanas* (inherent tendencies) emerge because ego (forces of individuation) confines us to some tendencies while excluding other tendencies. *Karma* (fruits of action) is caused because of both existing *vasanas* and lack of detachment from the ego which creates a sense of doership in action.

#### *Vasanas*

*Vasanas* are “residual impressions of objects and actions experienced, habits” (Amritanandamayi, 1996). Participants in this study understand *vasanas* as “negative tendencies that rear their ugly head up and cause all sorts of trouble,” like “anger, jealousy” or simply as, “negative tendencies.” They believe that *vasanas* are the reasons

why we feel different from the other and are responsible for our desire to judge and categorize others, as Ella said:

If I am judgmental or if somebody is judgmental, I know that *I* am judging somebody or somebody is judging me and I think I am judging them for judging me then I have that stuff, that kind of thing.

Conflict happens during an interaction when the dormant *vasanas* (inherent tendencies) are awakened and rise up to the surface to the personality. These inner negative tendencies create judgment in the mind and attachment to opinions, beliefs, and expectations. Thus the person's inability to tolerate difference, to accept another wholly, and to love another unconditionally alters the effect of *vasanas* among individuals. One participant reported that getting rid of *vasanas* is a difficult process in spite of her attempts to become a better person:

But the qualities that I have mentioned before, trying to be more humble, a better listener, trying to be more loving. Those are the things that I keep trying to improve. And then there are my tendencies that unfortunately keep coming up!  
(laughter)

On a similar note, Katherine answered the question about any issue that made her uncomfortable in the Amma movement in the following way:

Generally no, except my *vasanas* coming up and having those moments when Amma's around which is hard of course, but which is normal. No, I just love it . . . . Sometimes, I will notice that you ask me things that are uncomfortable. This is not the answer to your question, but in the bigger picture we are having our *vasanas* worked out.

In this quotation, like the preceding one, the participants point out the subtle process of becoming a better person. Stripping down internally is a complex and very subtle process that has been recognized by mystics and sages all over the world.

Conflicts are expected to surface amongst devotees who have accepted Amma as their guru or when other devotees are around Amma. This is explained in the following way: when a devotee has given responsibility for spiritual growth to Amma as a guru, Amma works tirelessly to cleanse the person of her *vasanas* (inherent tendencies) and hence such a person finds herself in situations where her *vasanas* are activated and come

to surface. Even if the devotee has not accepted Amma as her guru, just being in the presence of an enlightened being activates hidden and deep-seated *vasanas* and forces them to come to surface. On becoming visible, it is easier for a devotee to eliminate those tendencies through mindfulness and distance from the tendencies. In brief, this creates the micro-level process of spiritual growth and that puts people in the path to enlightenment. Bhuvana stated,

Well, I think the closer you are to Mother, whether you are at the tour or at the *ashram* you know there is a period everything feels wonderful and beautiful. Then you get into different roles and jobs and the ego is also—the heat is turned up. If you want to get the poison out, then it has to turn up.

Katherine similarly stated:

There are these people I am having a hard time with and Amma is touching them, feeding them chocolate, I never knew I had such stuff but that stuff can . . . then I get jealous and I get sad and then I go sulk somewhere and go and sit outside the hall for a while.

The above quotations from Bhuvana and Katherine point out that Amma's presence trigger these *vasanas* and one finds themselves, as in the case of Katherine “jealous” and “sad.” At the same time, the participants recognize this as a spiritual process.

Relief from the turbulence created by *vasanas* (inherent tendencies) comes through observing the mind, detaching from the situation, becoming humble, and asking for Amma's grace to relieve the devotee from suffering. Once the devotee is released from the suffering, the *vasana* in question is assumed to be extinguished and the devotee will not suffer from that tendency again. In other words, conflict, communication problems, and interpersonal discomfort are considered to be part of a spiritual purification process in this community. However, as one unnamed participant stated, the process is neither simple nor easy:

One year there was a woman who worked, she had met Amma in the first year and she was a perfectionist. She drew a beautiful flower arrangement, very sattvic. But she would not let others participate because she wanted it done so specifically. Certain people would talk off. I was like, Mother wants people to petal, to participate. And one year, she (the woman) asked me to be her personal

assistant. I kept saying yes, yes, yes. Whatever she asked I said, I would do, I would do. Then suddenly I thought she is being nasty, mean, and rude. Then after that, it (the thought) made things worst. Then I realized both, of going against the grain and totally go with the grain. It is tricky. Learning about somebody, who pulls in you one way and then they pull you another way. At what point do you find your center?

In this quotation, the participant reports her struggles on how to work egolessly; how to be humble and loving and yet not be subservient.

Referring to ego (forces of individuation) as the hidden cause behind all suffering, Amma has said:

The best cure is to closely observe the mind. This will bring the hidden cause of your suffering into light. The ego is the cause, the invisible root. The invisible but powerful ego needs to be exposed. Just by exposing the ego, it disappears, saying, “I have nothing to do here, so goodbye—I will never see you again.” It won’t say, “See you later.” Exposing the ego is the same as destroying it; it is like exposing a thief in his hideout.” (Amritanandamayi, 1996, p. 79)

From March 2008 until December 2008, I suffered from interpersonal tensions of varying intensity with some *satsang* members. As I navigated this path, different emotions were aroused within me. When I sought advice from fellow *satsang* members, I was constantly reminded that this was good. It meant Amma was working deep inside me and helping me to progress spiritually. I received this reminder from no less than five different members on different occasions. Similarly, other *satsang* members would go through different communication problems, fear of different kinds, and struggles in their environment. They would describe their difficulties as a spiritual journey and deep grace: “Amma is working hard on me.” The notion in the community is that Amma always brings up “stuff” (negative emotions like anger, jealousy, hatred, greed) and “stuff” is an indication of her mystical powers as a guru. In other words, conflict is understood not only as purification for spiritual growth, but also as an *essential* ingredient for facilitating that growth.

One of the devotees described that the awareness of the mental state that made her realize that Amma was bringing up her *vasanas* (inherent tendencies). Arati explained:

I have had the experience of Amma churning up my *vasanas* and have made my own mistakes as well. The tendency is to think that everybody else is crazy and I am not. But the truth is that we are all crazy. Still, Amma clearly asks us to do our very best at being righteous in our every thought and action.

Devotees described Amma as a tough mother in the community, a guru who demands a lot from her disciples. The contrast between the loving embrace of a loving mother and the emotional turbulence outside the embrace, supposedly activated by the same mother, is palpable. The question that has often crossed my mind is, if Amma is a tough mother, why are her disciples not running away? Some definitely do. But some people that I met at the *ashram* in India, at retreats in San Ramon, Michigan, and in New Mexico continued their connection to Amma for more than 10 years, slipping, sliding, and trying to crawl back into her grace. In a strange way, their difficulties seemed to increase affection and closeness to Amma. Nistula said that in spite of the intensity of the spiritual process with Amma, it somehow made sense:

I guess I could hear her words, I mean I read her books and the *bhajans* began to make more sense. Everything Amma says started to make more sense. Everything became an allusion to her. I sort of realized—the real problem was indeed attachment. Although I had those Buddhist practices for seven years, all kind of stuff, it didn't click, and then Amma made it click. I kind of realized all the same things I had invested in to prove I was a good person, to prove that I was spiritual. Amma threw me into that, she made me realize what spirituality was. I certainly had gone through several cycles, where I get angry at Amma. At the beginning I was praying for, usually around love. A relationship stopped. Amma helped me understand that. I let many things go. She also helped me with my anger. She has taken a lot away. Things that would just go around and around my head and she would just take it.

Nistula identifies the core problem being “attachment” in this quotation. Attachment is what I would call as identification to a particular way of being, of being rooted in that way. Disidentification or stepping away or what Nistula calls as “letting go” is spirituality in Nistula's understanding. Other participants also spoke to the importance of “letting go” in their interviews.

### *Karma*

*Karma* refers to the fruits of actions in this life or other lifetimes. Very few devotees used this term to describe the causes of conflict or interpersonal stress despite the fact that Amma talks and writes about *karma* more than she does *vasanas* (inherent tendencies). For instance, she mentions the word *vasanas* seldom in the *Awaken Children* series while she writes several sections on the word *karma*. Some participants conceived this concept in both emotional and physical ways. For example in the quotation below, the participant said the different mood cycles in our life was due to *karma*:

We have our *karma* and our times when there is strong periods of anger and strong periods of being down and confused and sometimes when you are elated and open.

Another participant referring to her sick friend said:

Nobody knows why she is suffering so much, but I guess she is burning through her *karma* quickly.

In this case, *karma* acquires a bodily expression.

The interviewees ascribed different difficulties that emerge in interactions with others to results of past action, a view that is especially useful in complicated and intractable conflict situations. There is no remedy to such situations except through acceptance that *karma* like a virus, needs to run its course. Guru's grace may alleviate or decrease the ill-effects to a certain extent. In some cases, Amma is said to take a *sankalpa* or resolve to remove suffering through grace. One of the stories after the 2008 tour revolves around a woman who was very sick but devoted to Amma. After receiving her hug, the woman got up to leave when Amma beckoned her and told her that Amma had made a *sankalpa* to remove her diseases. Thereafter, the woman found that her physical suffering was progressively decreasing. In some cases, it is said that Amma may not make a *sankalpa* because this may cause a devotee to take birth again to suffer that disease again.

### *Ego*

The largest number of devotees and participants used the term ego to describe the inner causes of communication conflict or interpersonal stress. In the organizational literature, there is no clear, unambiguous, and consistent definition of ego. It has been



variously described as the mind (Amritanandamayi, 1995), individuality (1995, 1996), and outer shell of self (1996). Pulling from various sources from the Amma community, I define ego as the limiting force that constrains consciousness to an illusory individuated state of difference and thus veils the experience of the unity of universal consciousness. Amma has said in the *Awaken Children* series:

The mind is the ego, which makes you very self-centered. But instead of being self-centered, you should become centered in the Self (*Atman*), the real Center of your existence . . . . The ego has no real existence of its own, for the mind and the ego are false. At present we are under the impression that the mind and ego are our friends, but they are only misleading us, taking us away from our true nature . . . . Know this and try to come out of the limited shell of your mind and ego. The seedling cannot emerge and grown into a large tree unless the outer shell breaks and dies. Likewise, the inner Truth cannot be realized, unless the ego dies (Amritanandamayi, 1995, p. 7-8).

Devotees express the idea that devotion to Amma, proximity to Amma, and spiritual practices increase awareness of the inner dynamics of the mind. They shift the focus of attention from outside the individual and the environment to the inner self of the individual, as observed by Warriar (2005) in her study of East Indian devotees in India. Thus, devotees find that the ability to self-monitor responses to others and to the environment increases sharply around Amma or in increased devotion to Amma. Mita described this inner movement:

It has made me acutely aware of my ego, especially around Amma. It can be very hard. Around Amma I sometimes experience an intense fear of my own ego. As tour approaches I enjoy the anticipation of seeing Her, but there is also a quiet dread that comes from the fear of seeing myself. *Because you are going to see yourself around her at some point.* No matter what you do, you are going to. And so you try to prepare for it. You are attentive. You try to stay loose and open but when you least expect it, something happens and your ego is screaming (emphasis mine).

Sophia spoke on a similar note:

It is so difficult for me to be around her and *make all of my anger come out, all those vasanas and to get real furious and then to think why am I doing this.*

Where does this come from? Why is this happening in my life? Well, you know this is what we get to see and in that, holding that, that's inside of me, there's a cause in it. What I am holding on to, what is forging up the anger and asking myself that question— this is so old for anger to come up like this. Why would I want to put it on another human being? (emphasis mine)

In this quotation, Sophia alludes to ego as an “old” thing. This is congruent with the philosophy in the community that ego is developed and solidified through many lifetimes. Thus, what seems as anger at the current moment triggered by current circumstances, is understood in the community as anger that is buried in our psyche for many lifetimes. It is pain that is carried over from other lifetimes.

In a sense, being around Amma or through spiritual practices, devotees find that the environment becomes a mirror to see themselves and their ways of engagement with the environment. The mind turns inwards and begins to focus on *changing itself instead of changing the other*. The focus is not superficial; rather, it looks at the subtleties and complexities of mind functions. Peace also described her struggle with ego:

Amma has influenced me when I have conflicts with other people. I'll sit down in prayer, and I'll go to her. I had a huge conflict with someone a year ago, and as soon as it happened, I went in and I sat down at my altar, and Amma sat there, I swear she was there physically, and she sat the other person down there physically, and we all three sat there at the altar. It was like “Ok, work through it, you kids. You're both my beloved children, work through it.” So how do I do this? How do I heal? How do I not point the finger at somebody else, and not go through that process? A lot of what I get from her, that I really try to practice, is that she doesn't find fault with anybody, and I'm really trying to do that.

Similarly, Mita spoke about an incident during *Devi Bhava* (the night when Amma is assumed to be in the form of Goddess) when she was irritated with a *prasad* timer who was not doing his job properly and was allowing some devotees to have inordinate amount of time to give *prasad* (offerings given by Amma after *darshan*) whilst giving her

only a couple of minutes. This is how she turned what was a more a small interpersonal conflict into a deep self-reflection:

I was so upset. My heart was pounding, I was totally distracted and I missed the whole experience. And then I had to go out of the hotel and go for a walk to calm myself down. It took about 2 hours to get back, to finish working it through my mind. Okay, what is going on with you? That experience came out of the blue because that wasn't me. I recognized it clearly, that person that was stewing in this wasn't me. I had been taken over by my ego. I had had the experience before of *feeling totally separate from my ego* and that is what happened that night. After some time, I finally got to a place where I could see what had happened. I felt overwhelmed with gratitude at being brought to see that as painful as it was. But it was so beautiful in the end (emphasis mine).

The state that Mita describes in the above quote is described in the community as *sakshi bhava* or the attitude of witnessing. To explain *sakshi bhava*, Amma has said:

Being in the state of *sakshi bhava* does not mean that you will remain idle without taking care of your duties. You may be concerned about your children's studies, the health of your parents and your wife and so on, yet in the midst of all these external problems you remain a *sakshi*, a witness, to all that happens and to all that you do. Within, you are perfectly still and unperturbed.

While enacting the role of a villain in a movie, the actor may be seen to be shooting his enemy, getting angry, being cruel and treacherous. But within himself, does the actor really become angry or cruel? Is he really committing those acts? No, he is not. He is just a witness to all that he does. He stands aside and watches without becoming involved or touched by it. He is not identified with external expressions of his body. Likewise, one who is established in *sakshi bhava* remains untouched and unperturbed within, under all circumstances (Amritanandamayi, 1995, p.31).

The exercise of becoming aware of one's ego (forces of individuation) and reducing it is simultaneously a process of experiencing the interconnections with other beings. The experience manifests itself in love, compassion, acceptance, and non-judgmental attitude towards others. In our daily lives the inconstancy and conditionality

of love and compassion surfaces. In a way, devotees in this community are realistic about this aspect of love and instead, work deep to clear the tendencies within us to provide unconditional constancy in our abilities to give love and compassion.

The approach to realizing this interconnection starts first with the intellect. Moving from notions like “others are not Amma” and “we are not Amma,” in response to conflicts with others, the idiom changes to “We all are Amma’s children,” “You are Amma, Amma is Amma, and I am Amma” in the struggle to feel love and compassion for others. There is an intellectual understanding that all of us—all sentient and non-sentient beings—are composed of the same consciousness or divine presence. The struggle is often to convert this intellectual understanding into the experience of the heart. Peace noted that while previously she had problems with some of her workplace colleagues, the attitude of trying to reduce ego and realizing all are Amma’s children made restructure her response to her environment:

I work with a lot of people who are blue collar workers, who don’t care about anyone *or* anything; they don’t care about their jobs, and they’re really lazy and sloppy, and I have lot of struggles in accepting them, and not judging them, and just plain working with them. Things like going out and seeing the trash they leave around and the work they leave undone, and hearing my mind say, “well, I’m not going to touch that, they can pick it up ” and instead making a decision I’m going to go do it because it’s good to humble my ego. So I will go and I will pick up their trash, and I will do those things that my ego says “No, I don’t wanna, that’s theirs,” but, you know what? It’s not their stuff, its Mother’s stuff, and *so I’m going to do it because I want this ego to dissolve into nothingness* (emphasis mine).

It is to be noted that sometimes devotees also experience this interconnection in a sudden vision or mystical experience either around Amma or during spiritual practices. The conflict and interpersonal stress within the *satsang* that has been described in the previous section, is also examined from the lens of ego (forces of individuation). The reason why a person may be acting in a particular manner is ascribed to the churning of the ego within that person. It is, therefore, considered a transient state and efforts are made to look beyond the state in which the individual exists. The point of bringing this

aspect into the discussion is to dissuade the reader from concluding that the devotees follow a self-denigrating and defeatist philosophy whilst allowing others to function negatively as before. The attempt is to maintain compassion in spite of the rift and in spite of the material realities of the rift. This attempt seeks to prevent people from engaging in revenge and other destructive modes in communication. Sophia spoke in this context:

I think that our communication, our spontaneous communication is really about in *here* (pointing to the heart) and not been recovered, comes out of *here*, it comes out in the room and as you know from teaching communication, and *it sparks somebody else's unrecovered stuff* and then the next person and the next person and on and on and soon you have this pot of great big yucky cookie dough. And from my point of view what everybody should do is, oh that is my part and that is my part, agreed to pick it up and throw it away and then begin talking. But most people do not have the abilities or skills to do it (emphasis mine).

In this quotation, Sophia spoke about how expression of ego in one person triggers ego responses in others and creates interpersonal tensions. These interpersonal tensions, according to Sophia, can be resolved only by each one of us working internally to decrease our egos. The thrust of the quotation is not on dialogue, but rather self-reflection, awareness, and responsibility. Similarly, Nistula said that interpersonal tensions are because we are triggered by other personalities and we also trigger others through our personality:

Some people are very nasty. I ignore it. Often I talk to one of my friends and see what is behind this person. *I try to look behind the issue, am I the trigger here or is this person triggering me or maybe this person is having a bad day.* So I do a lot of talking to myself. Or else I bring it in meditation with Amma. Amma, what's going on? What am I supposed to do here? Or if I am very upset and I don't get an answer from Amma, and I flip through her books and I see what page I come to and what story does she tell and how does it apply to me.

In this quotation too, Nistula focuses on internal self-reflection and awareness. In addition, she calls for spiritual guidance to help her ease out of a situation.

In the Hindu mythology, one of the famous stories is that of the churning of the ocean. The story goes something like this:

Once upon a time, the lesser gods or *devas* and the demons or *asuras* decided to churn the great ocean to retrieve elixir of immortality from its womb. They borrowed a sacred mountain Meru as the churner and tied the holy snake Visukhi around it as a rope. The gods and demons held each end of the snake and churned the ocean. As the churning intensified, the deadly poison contained in the ocean frothed to the surface. The fumes of this poison suffocated the gods and demons alike. They stopped the churning and prayed to the great gods for mercy and rescue. Shiva, one of the gods of the trinity appeared and drank the poison. The poison stayed stuck in his throat which then turned blue.

As a teenager, I was reminded by my enlightened teacher, Swami Chinmayananda, to understand these stories as metaphors of our life. Thus it went that the ocean was our life, the elixir of immortality is the enlightenment that we desire, the churning is caused by the tug of war between our tendency to stay in the world and our urge to enter the state of connectedness, the churning itself is a spiritual activity, the poison that appeared is our dormant *vasanas* (inherent tendencies), and Shiva drinking poison is the need for divine grace in our lives to help us in situations beyond our control.

Readers may doubt if such a process yields any change in the long run. Many of the participants have asserted that they have changed and that they have seen others changing. Bhuvana spoke about the change they saw in themselves and others:

I sometimes do get jealous because I think other people are better than me and in better positions. It is very small and I watch it as a game. *But less and less.*

Mother gives extra boost as we are around here. We are caught up with all those things and over the years I feel less and less jealousy and judgment and I hope it continues that way (emphasis mine).

Sophia spoke about finding softness in her life because she was previously more intellectual than devotional:

Through Amma I have learnt the sacredness of devotion, that devotion is the path for me. I am just discovering that in doing that how much softness has come in my life.

Katherine reported that she saw devotees around her changing in their attitudes and interactions:

After living here for eight years there are always people I butt heads with, have a different view with, and then we would work it out. Then that person changes or I change. It is very humbling to see how people are changing. I hope I am changing too. I just think it is amazing, some people may be softened; some people may come out of their shell, or whatever the case may be (emphasis mine).

Marie reported that she had become more assertive:

There is a lot less pressure. I am okay just how I am. I keep going, keep learning and I hope to have close relationships with people but they are not my judge and jury for me anymore. I do still have those feelings come up. I hope that people like me. I do not think it will ever go away. But my whole life is not dependent on that. I will recognize it, I like that person and I want them to like me but let us relax a little. I am a lot more self-forgiving.

#### *Amma Communication*

A description of identification and disidentification practices around personal identity in the Amma community is not complete without describing how devotees experience Amma and what she seems to symbolize for the community. Sitting at the center of many desires, needs, and longings, the small, brown woman from rural India, who speaks mostly in Malayalam somehow manages to engulf hearts with love and acceptance. Gracefully, without missing a beat, Amma receives one person after next for *darshan*, opening her left hand for *prasad* and clicking her right thumb on the *darshan* counter at the end of a *darshan*—even while she listens and answers questions hurled at her from all sides.

Many devotees said they believe that Amma communicates with them perfectly. They claim to hear and understand her clearly. Amma's messages touch their heart and seem to have great depth and bring in profound realization and knowledge. Similarly, Amma seems to understand the devotee clearly, irrespective of the effectiveness of message construction, and she is also supposed to listen into the silence of the heart. Stories in Amma's literature and websites detail this aspect of communication, and some

participants in this study gave examples of how Amma communicates vividly to them.

Peace reported:

Amma communicates with me crystal clear during programs but it'll be inside. Like she'll tell me to go get a shawl. Oh yeah, she told me one night, it was like 4 a.m. on *Devi Bhava* night; and I was just sitting there, and she kept saying "Go get a shawl." And I'd be like I don't want to get a shawl. I had this fight with her inside, I don't need a shawl, and I don't want to get a shawl. I didn't have money to spend on a shawl "Go get a shawl" So finally I just said, "well, okay. I'll go get a shawl." I go back to the shawl table, and I was standing there looking at shawls and two very dear friends come over to me and they wrap me in a shawl. So there's that level of communication too, from Amma where her words just ring in my head. (Do they seem to be speaking in English?) Yes, very clearly. Very clearly.

And Nistula said:

I try not to listen to too much about Amma says this and Amma says that. I am going to communicate directly with Amma because when I do *everything is clear*. In India I was sitting behind her, you know how it is, on the stage there at Amritapuri. I was behind Amma and I was thinking about R (friend) how she was, if she has gotten her results, and all of a sudden I heard Amma say go to the computer. So I went to the computer, and I saw this email from her which was saying that everything had turned for the worst. Then I heard Amma saying, go get on the plane and go home. So I ran. It was 3:30 p.m. I ran to the phone; the next flight was at 11:30 or something that night. The airport is three hours or so from Amritapuri, so I had to pack up my stuff, give rest of the money to the little table, and I went up and gave Amma a hug and told her I was leaving and she gave me a hug and I got into the plane and came back so that I could be there for R to help take care of her. So it is amazing how Amma always tells me about things and lets me know. You know I always ask her in my head, shall I do this, am I doing the right thing. So it is like a constant conversation. Hear her other times. So I ask her for her input on everything all the time.



A story from the main *ashram* website also highlighted this aspect of communicating with Amma:

It was a Wednesday and Amma was giving *darshan* in the Kali temple. The time was 8:00 p.m. and Amma was having a serious discussion with us on our project. I was standing very near Amma. Prema from our organization was sitting by the side at the edge of Amma's *peetam* (seat). Suddenly out of the blue, Amma turned towards me and asked me if I had eaten anything that day. I told Her that I had my lunch. She immediately took an apple and gave it to me.

Prema came and exclaimed how lucky I was to get apple from Amma. I smiled, and told her that right at the very moment when Amma turned around and asked if I had eaten anything, my thought was that it was getting late and I will miss the "masala dosa"<sup>53</sup> in Aryas (restaurant) on the way back to AIMS (hospital). That apple satisfied my craving for that day. (*Masala dosa*, nd)

Some of the participants find Amma's nonverbal communication clear and unambiguous. Her ability to mould to the devotees' personal characteristics and needs seems uncanny. Ella spoke to this aspect of communication.

She cares for me so much and I can't think of anybody would care for me like that. This is the necklace that she blessed for my friend, and when I told Amma through a translator about my friend X, and that she had found a lump in her breast and so she blessed it and she put it on me. Her face, her face when the translator told Amma about my friend, her face had the same look on it, I didn't notice it till later, the same look that was in the book that the *swamini* (senior female renunciate disciple of Amma) wrote when she was talking about tsunami and she had the same concern. It touched me deeply that that wasn't a tsunami but she was as concerned about my friend as she was about tsunami people that had lost everything and then when she just looked at me, that's what did it and I cried for days just thinking about that. I felt dizzy when I stood up and I can't wait to see her again.

Sara similarly said:

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<sup>53</sup> Spicy Indian version of crepe considered a delicacy in South India.

There is communication with Amma. We all feel that one-on-one communication. When she walks by you, *you know that she knows you*. How does she do that? It is amazing! But she does, with all of us. That is why we keep going back, that is why we all adore her (emphasis mine)

Premamaya also emphasized:

A lot of things can be communicated with just one word. Or just a look. I mean especially with Amma, I mean she can give you a look and you know exactly what it means.

Two of the participants referred to how Amma communicates in silence. One said:

Amma communicates things to us too. You know, when you are silent you can get communicated.

Another explained:

The second time, I could not get on the floor because of my arthritis and so I was in special needs. So they walk with you down. It felt like I am not honoring her if I don't get on the floor, and it was painful, and the guy said "don't worry about it. She is listening to you." And I looked over and she was hugging somebody, of course. While one eye of hers was covered by the head, the other eye was drilling into me. It was powerful and at that point she was learning about me and in retrospect, she was probably trying to call me to her or something. There was a meaning to that look. It was not a smiling look; it was drilling through me.

Some devotees reported that they conversed with her all day in spite of her physical absence, and they received messages from her in their heart or in signs in nature Shanti said:

Recently, I wanted to quit my job. On my way to work, I usually pray. I said Amma, if you would like me to leave this job and if it is your will, and if it is the right thing to do, I need a sign because I can't think anymore. It was one of those moments. It just came out, I needed help. I forgot about it. I prayed and drove in to work. 20 minutes from my house to my job. I put the key to the lock and I noticed I had the whole key ring, my car key, my mailbox key, but there was no key for the facility and I still haven't found it. That was a sign. It wasn't in the garage, anyplace. My key ring wasn't broken ever. I had an extra key in the glove

compartment. So I grabbed my extra key and got into the facility. It's like leaving the job this time doesn't make any sense intellectually at all but it is what it is like. It makes no sense, I am meant to leave just now. Again that's God's will, tuning into what Amma wants versus what's right. Amma is teaching me to trust, to trust at a different level, I am not used to listening to.

The point of describing and providing elaborate examples of communication with Amma is to highlight what devotees describe as perfect communication or a communication where miscommunication cannot happen. Devotees held Amma as a perfect mirror to reflect a devotee's mind, and that she did not have any limited number of attributes. Rather she expressed those attributes which was most beneficial for the devotee. Yes, she is a unique individual and yet devotees said it was hard to describe the boundaries of her identity. Interestingly, Amma refers to herself in the third-person and never uses the word "I" to describe or refer to any of her teachings, personal advice, or actions. For example, sometimes she would say, referring herself, "This is a crazy girl!" or in response to a question, "Amma thinks that perhaps you should." In a sense, the description of identification and disidentification process around personal identity within the Amma community travels finally to the other end of the spectrum, to the absolute state of connectedness or what the community calls as the state of enlightenment.

And this is the case even though Amma speaks in Malayalam almost exclusively. Occasionally, she speaks in Tamil and sometimes she is known to drop in a phrase or two in other languages. The different questions of devotees are translated by a *sevite* to Amma. Amma's answer is then again re-translated to the questioner. All her spiritual discourses are in Malayalam, which is then translated into English in North America by Swami Amritaswarupananda. The open question-and-answer session with Amma during retreats also proceed through translation. Yet, some of the devotees do not find it inconvenient.

Even when Amma gives *satsang*, and she gives *satsang*, and she sings in Malayalam and I can't understand a word, and it just soaks all the way through me. And I almost get more out of listening to it as Malayalam than I do from when *swami* says it: he interprets it into English. When he says it in English, my mind wanders, and I'm off to another place and half paying attention. But when

Amma is talking, it's like all of me is focused on what she is saying. It's like its vibrating inside of me.

There are problems in translation. I understand Malayalam well but cannot speak it with any confidence. When I ask her a question, I speak in English but I listen in to how that question has been translated. I also listen into what Amma says and watch the same being translated to me. I do the same in the evenings when she is giving *satsang* (spiritual discourse). I listen to what she says and then note how the *swami* has translated. And year after year, I have noted gaps and flaws in translation. Sometimes I would speak aloud in my mind: "Hey, you did not cover that portion of what Amma said!"

Other devotees feel this inability to communicate directly to her distressing. Some venture out to learn Malayalam. An instructional CD is available in the stores to learn Malayalam. Some try to practice it with Amma, evoking laughter in the *darshan* area. Sometimes, Amma ignores the efforts and sometimes she encourages the efforts. The unpredictability of her response to devotees' efforts to learn Malayalam creates its own emotional dynamics.

In another story published in the main *ashram* website in India, a Bulgarian woman wrote that she had a desire to listen to Amma speak in Bulgarian. In a *darshan*, Amma whispered into her ears clearly in Bulgarian. Excited but yet suspicious, she wondered if Amma could speak only one phrase in Bulgarian. In the next *darshan*, Amma spoke a couple of different Bulgarian phrases. This story was related in the local *satsangs* also as a sign that Amma knew all languages but that she preferred to have her devotees listen to the language of love.

The language differences do not decrease the surge to meet Amma. The question line is as long as before. The crowd sitting in to listen to Amma's *satsang* in the evening is as crowded as before. Although I have heard some devotees envy that I can understand what Amma says, I have not learnt of major fallout with the *satsang* or with the Amma community because of language.

As a communications researcher, it is bewildering that this absence of direct communication with Amma does not seem to hamper devotees' relationship with her. People seem convinced that Amma knows all that is happening in their life or in their mind. An article published in the on the Amritapuri website deals with this issue of

language. A devotee came to Amma and confided her distress on not being able to speak in Malayalam. Amma replied:

“Daughter, don’t you know what is the most precious and deep love relation that we experience in human life? It is the relation between the mother and her baby. In that love, words are not used to express feelings, yet the innocence and purity of that love is felt so deeply”

The devotee (and all those present) sat speechless imbibing Mother’s mood as she was saying those profound words. “Daughter,” Amma added, “it is that kind of love that Amma wants you to have with Her. In this love, words or language are not used or needed” (*The deepest love?*, nd, paras 7-8).

To conclude this section on personal identities, I will note that devotees and participants expressed and enacted their personal identities in unique ways, which sometimes led to interpersonal tension and conflict. But many devotees and participants also showed strong self-monitoring and intrapersonal reflection to transcend the discomfort of interpersonal differences. These processes were neither linear nor homogenous but seemed to be catalyzed by what Amma as an enlightened woman symbolized in the community. The participants emphasized the difference between the communication amongst devotees and communicating with Amma and described communication with her as perfect.<sup>54</sup>

#### Discussion of Findings

The findings suggest devotees use particular ways to navigate the journey of disidentification from personal identities into a state of connectedness. This journey is neither complete nor linear, but is more a unique struggle to find answers to interpersonal tensions through intrapersonal reflection and awareness, and through a vision of an ideal communication in the form of Amma. Three topics of interest emerge from the findings and will be addressed in the discussion section: 1) significance of intrapersonal reflection during interpersonal tensions, 2) significance of conflict as a sacred site, and 3) the association of disidentification with communicative competence. These topics may help us understand interpersonal communication and conflict in new ways.

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<sup>54</sup> One of the participants wrote that the finding in the section *Amma Communication* was “so correct” and she hoped to find that “state of connectedness, that could lead to such clear, truthful, wisdom.”

### *Intrapersonal Awareness*

Interpersonal conflict is an important area of study in scholarship. So before I discuss the findings, let us look at what the literature in both sociology and communication has to tell us about this topic and explore the ways in which the findings support, advance, or contradict existing knowledge.

Conflict is defined in sociology as “a situation in which interdependent people express (manifest or latent) differences in satisfying their individual needs and interests, and they experience interference from each other in accomplishing these goals” (Donahue & Kolt, 1992, p.4) and in communication scholarship as a “transactional process between people who perceive incompatible goals, scarce resources, or interference in achieving their objectives (McCornack, 2007, p.296). Simmel considered conflict as a natural process in social interactions due to the significance of “behavior or the social characteristics of each party” to the other (Simmel, 1955, p.13) and believed that conflict had both positive and negative effects. At the level of social theory, other thinkers have considered conflict as a way to enact change in terms of Hegelian dialectics—for example, only out of the clash or conflict between a thesis and an antithesis, a synthesis or resolution is achievable. Marx identified conflict as a progressive force in economic and material terms and defined it in terms of the role of class struggle to advance social equality and justice. Weber, on the other hand, framed the notion of power as a means to create order in society and understood conflict more in terms of competition (as in the processes of biological selection) (Duke, 1976).

In interpersonal communication studies, scholars have focused attention on the different strategies that people use to manage conflict, for example, avoiding, accommodation, competition, collaboration, and so on (e.g., DeVito, 2001; McCornack, 2007). The majority of scholarly works in the area of conflict have emphasized the importance of cognitive processes to both manage conflict and predict conflict outcomes.<sup>55</sup> For example, Donahue and Kolt (1992) considered destructive conflicts as those in which freedom, dignity, face, and power of a party are threatened, which focus on personalities and not behaviors, aim at compromising interdependence of the parties,

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<sup>55</sup> One of the participants reacted to the notion of “managing other’s response” and noted that this seemed like a “patriarchal system.”

and have many escalation cycles followed by avoidance. On the other hand, in constructive conflicts, people respected each other, saved face, talked openly about differences, and worked on improving interdependence of the parties involved in conflict. Thus they recommend that during conflict management, parties should be careful not to threaten face of the other, aim to communicate openly, come to the resolution table with a problem-solving frame of mind, and define, process and resolve issues in a collaborative spirit. Krauss and Morsella (2006) pulled from various communication paradigms and provided a set of principles to understand the interplay of communication and conflict. For example, deriving from a perspective-taking paradigm, they said, it was significant for positive conflict resolution outcomes, that when we are speaking, we take our listener's perspective into account.

Other scholars have pointed out the deeper intrapersonal processes that influence conflict and its outcomes. For example, Thompson, Nadler, and Lount Jr.(2006) described the different judgmental cognitive biases that impact conflict and its outcomes. They identified four core biases in conflict: 1) the need to simplify conflict situations, 2) perception of opposing forces, 3) false dichotomy between cooperation and competition, and 4) egocentric judgment. These biases created different problems like exaggeration of conflict, biased judgments of fairness, inability to develop trust or rapport, or happiness on the grounds that the other is sad. Lindner (2006) argued that the ability to regulate emotions in conflict is very important. She said that negative emotions like fear, hatred, anger, and humiliation can negatively impact conflict outcomes and hence it was important to foster positive emotions like hope, and confidence during the conflict resolution process. She went on to say that, "It is wise to recognize that everybody has 'hot buttons' that, if triggered, will stir up strong emotions such as anxiety, anger, rage, fear, depression, or withdrawal" (Lindner, 2006, p. 285). She recommended that we should know the other's hot buttons to avoid pressing them, and it is equally important to know one's own hot buttons and how we react when they are pressed, so that we can control our reactions in that event. Mischel, DeSmet, and Kross (2006) recommended self-regulation as an important factor in conflict resolution. They argued also that self-regulatory failure happened due to early childhood socialization processes, the way a situation is construed by an individual, "(b) expectancies and beliefs activated, (c)

feelings and emotions triggered and experienced, and (d) the goals and values engaged” (p.297). They noted that when conflict spirals and escalates, it is important to implement cooling strategies and techniques like “time-out,” and “reflection” to develop greater self-control, and emotional regulation. Note the emphasis on rationality and cognition in the above summary of studies on intrapersonal processes influencing conflict. Also note the emphasis that conflict is considered resolved only when it is resolved *interpersonally*.

However, there are other scholars and conflict resolution practitioners who have written about the centrality of intrapersonal processes in conflict resolution. For example, Kottler (1994) in his book *Beyond Blame* emphasized the need to look inward rather than outward in conflict situations. He recommended that we—1) identify what sets us off, 2) understand why others act differently, and 3) see ourselves in others. He further recommended that we explore the origins and causes of conflict—personal historical patterns of conflict, emotional reactions to these conflicts, and expectations that may lead to escalation of conflict. He emphasized the importance becoming comfortable with discomfort of conflict, know that pain motivates action, and to learn taking responsibility without blaming others—through introspection and a commitment to oneself to act differently. Kottler (1994) elaborated the various positive functions of conflict like—developing a focus on issues that have been neglected, recognizing conflict triggers, underlying issues behind present conflict, the release of tension, promotion of growth, regulation of interpersonal distance when things become enmeshed, and as a path to intimacy. In a similar vein, Muldoon (1993) addressed the importance of personal accountability in conflict. He wrote: “Accountability is not just a matter of words. Sometimes the psyche demands a tangible demonstration of sincerity” (Muldoon, 1993, p.78). He recommended conflicting parties learn to face facts with courage, develop compassion and respect for the other, and practice deep listening. The Arbinger Institute—that works worldwide on peace-building efforts on a local level—published a book titled *The Anatomy of Peace* that borrows from various religious and cultural traditions to present conflict resolution more in intrapersonal terms. It argued that the most important place for conflict resolution was the *heart at peace*. Drawing from the historical and folk accounts of the Crusades, they compared the heart at peace like



Saladin's<sup>56</sup> conduct during the wars. They reported that although Saladin fought his enemies, he also treated them with respect and dignity. Using Buber's notion of I-Thou vs. I-It, they argued that in constructive conflicts people learn to treat the other as people versus others are objects. They said that it is only when that notion is firmly grounded in the heart, can we hope for positive, deep, and long-lasting conflict resolution outcomes.

The findings in this study also point to the importance of intrapersonal processes for positive, deep, and long-lasting conflict. The participants reported engaging in self-monitoring, reflection and self-regulatory activities. It was a very important theme in almost all the interviews. Warrier (2005) also pointed the distinct emphasis placed on self-awareness in her study on the East Indian devotees of Amma in India. Not all participants reported having resolved the interpersonal issues through reflection, but it was evident that they believed that the heart of resolution existed in self-awareness and monitoring and they seemed to struggle through that process in their everyday life.

Where the findings contribute significantly to existing scholarship is in illustrating how the participants attempted to disidentify from their personal identities to locate and identify with a psychic unity. The importance of personal identities in causing interpersonal conflicts has not been researched adequately. But the findings in this study show that personal identities—as in personal preferences, styles of working and interacting, likes and dislikes and other attributes—create an awareness of a sense of difference from the Other which the participants tried to resolve, firstly through the belief in common divine substratum and, secondly, through an attempt to experience that unity through certain practices like meditation, prayer, or mindfulness. One of the events that happened in course of the interviews can illustrate this point clearly. During the interview, Marie expressed her mild discomfort with some of the ways in which the *satsang* was conducted. The next day, I received an email from her asking to retract from her earlier statement. Her words speak more eloquently on this issue than what I can muster and hence I quote her at length<sup>57</sup>:

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<sup>56</sup> Saladin was a 12<sup>th</sup> century Sultan of Egypt and Syria who led the Islamic opposition against the European crusaders during the third crusade. He was noted for his chivalrous conduct and was respected for the same by the Christian chroniclers.

<sup>57</sup> I received permission from her to explain the incident and quote her email in the study.

The truth of who we are, is so much greater than who we think we are. I finally had the opportunity to SEE this in AMMA. There are really no differences between me and anyone else. I am more than the illusion of the ugly old fat white woman. But, I have allowed my words to betray this truth. Any differences I portrayed between myself and anyone else is simply proof of my own ignorance and need for even more discipline, practice and surrender. *I regret saying that the satsang did not seem to have enough focus and devotion during ritual. It is only myself that needs to practice more focus and devotion, every moment!* (From the email, caps in original, emphasis mine).

In other words, to realize Buber's notion of I-Thou in our lives, I wonder whether cognitive and rational processes are sufficient. Can we—confined in the Subject-Other framework—rationally change the “It” to “Thou?” Shuon (1984) said that “I” and “Thou” split was an exoteric version of modern thing and instead emphasized on the ancient esoteric version “I am Thou” to create a space for greater understanding and to move beyond differences. An anchor, a notion of unity or interconnectedness, evolves in the devotees' attempts to discover the humanity of the Other. We can, perhaps, borrow from the ancient notion of an essential self and the interconnectedness of all beings as the place from where the “I” can facilitate the transformation of “It” into “Thou.” That anchor in this community happens to be a common divine substratum. That anchor can be framed in different ways—as humans living in a common planet for environmentalists, as parents of the same child in issues like divorce, as children of the same God, for religious conflicts. But that anchor, I argue, somehow facilitates the intrapersonal process of reflection, monitoring and regulation; of being accountable and avoids blaming others; of developing compassion and empathy for the other during conflict resolution process.

In summary, the findings support the importance of intrapersonal awareness and reflection in conflict resolutions processes. The findings point to: 1) the possible importance of personal identities as originators of conflict and, 2) the significance of the journey of disidentification from personal identities into the state of connectedness as a way to develop a heart at peace.

*Conflict as a Sacred Process*

As has been noted in preceding section, conflict is considered by scholars to have positive and negative effects. Parties in a conflict may also view it as a destructive (as in creates emotional suffering, financial loss, loss of face, loss of relationships) or constructively (as in greater intimacy, greater knowledge of the other, development of respect and trust, release of tension).

But what most modern thinkers do not include is the deep transformative effects that conflict can have on a person's life, a notion that conflict could perhaps be sacred. Muldoon (1993)—a seasoned mediator who set up one of the earliest private mediation firms in United States—through his extensive recount and reflection of various mediation cases pointed to the significance of conflict as a sacred process. He described a story he had heard as an attendee of a conference of the Parliament of World Religions. A Japanese professor had a conflict with his teacher about which Buddhist tradition was better—the Pure Land way or the Zen. Each day he argued with his teacher about the superiority of his family beliefs in the Pure Land way and his teacher, in turn, attacked those beliefs and argued for the Zen path. He was deeply distressed by this conflict and it escalated to great agony, till one day his mind “awakened.” Muldoon (1993) stated that “the natural human tendency to resolve conflict” was by choosing “between two opposing positions” which may relieve internal turmoil, “but it doesn't reveal the deeper truth” (p. 240). He said that it was important to stay in that contradiction and paradox and awaken to reality that is—neither this, nor that. He further argued that “paradox” meant moving beyond opinion. Conflict, he said, could help us mature:

The more I am faced with what is not only “not me,” but that which is even “against me,” the more completely does my unique “I” emerge. The more profound the conflict, the more fully I am pushed into myself, into my interiority, into the “within.” As I am forced to face the reflection of my uncharted character by this inward-driving pressure, I see more truly who I am. Once seen, I can hardly pretend to be otherwise. Opposition then, both presses me inward and pushes me outward. It is because I have gone into myself deeply that I am capable of truly relating to another. (Muldoon, 1993, p.242)

The findings from this study show that participants held interpersonal conflict as a sacred process, as a way to gain enlightenment. It was a way by which they became

conscious of their *vasanas* (inherent tendencies) and could work on detaching themselves from it. It was a way by which they could exhaust their *karma* (fruits of action). And most importantly, it was a way by which they could monitor their ego (forces of individuation) and remind themselves the importance of moving beyond local identities to a unity, to an awakening or enlightenment.

Miike (2004a) argued that since communication scholarship has been deeply infused by modern Enlightenment thinking, the significance of gaining spiritual enlightenment through communication has been neglected. He also argued that communication was a sacred site where we receive and pay our debts to rest of the Universe. This study shows how participants found the conflict in communication was a way to resolve debts as also a way to gain enlightenment. The findings of this study thus support and advance the Asiatic research objectives by connecting certain Asian religio-philosophical ideas with everyday human interactions.

In summary, my findings suggest that conflict can serve a purpose beyond the immediate social needs and desires to include the desire for spiritual enlightenment and for fulfillment of trans-temporal psychic processes. In other words, conflict can be deeply transformative and sacred in nature.<sup>58</sup>

#### *Communicative Competence and Disidentification*

Modern communication scholarship emphasizes the importance of effectiveness, appropriateness, and ethics for developing what is known as interpersonal communicative competence (McCornack, 2007). It is a set of rational strategies that an individual can develop to become a competent communicator in interpersonal situations. Effectiveness in communication is measured by the extent to which the communicative goals are met; appropriateness deals with sensitivity and flexibility towards the context of communication; and ethics deals with respect for laws of the land as well as honesty, respect and empathy for the other in the interpersonal communication situation (McCornack, 2007).

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<sup>58</sup> One of the participants wrote that this was a significant insight and she had not thought about it as such. She also marked some of the sentences in this section with a “wow!” Another participant wrote: “I feel a deep sense of validation which is very motivating on my spiritual journey. Knowing that this spiritual path is transforming and sometimes painful, this feels invaluable to me.”

While these categories have been researched for their validity and legitimacy, I have found that they are very hard to implement in our everyday lives. I have taught the techniques to my students and in their course work, insisted on journaling about their application of these techniques in their everyday lives. I have seen, that even with the most sincere of my students, as Lindner (2006) said, “everybody has ‘hot buttons’,” which when triggered lead to a complete collapse of these techniques. In other words, it seems important for communicators to first work on themselves to monitor and regulate those hot buttons before attempting to become a competent communicator.

My argument is that one cannot become a fully competent communicator in every instance, unless we expand our resources to include not only the rational but also the intuitive and the psychic. Even then, a person can become a fully always competent communicator only when she is firmly established in the state of connectedness. My argument is based on two premises—1) the findings in this study point to the perception of perfect communication with Amma, and 2) the stories of the lives of great masters across cultures testify to the possibility of perfect communication.

Amma is considered as an enlightened master and therefore, a person who is beyond personal and social identities. Experiences recounted by the participants as well as the many narratives on web blogs point to a perception that Amma is not confined by language or culture or gender, that she is able to psychically read thoughts in a person’s mind, is able to respond in a way that awakens a certain form of knowledge in the devotee’s mind, and is able to communicate perfectly with as little a gesture as a glance.<sup>59</sup> None of my participants ever said that Amma did not understand them. She was, to them, an All-Knowing Mother.

It is possible that modern thinkers may be uncomfortable with the notion of omniscience and claim that such a perception is irrational. Indeed it is irrational but several accounts of the lives of enlightened masters exist and testify to their extraordinary abilities to gauge the context of the communicator and respond with a single goal in mind—to benefit the communicator in deep transformative ways. Muldoon (1993)

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<sup>59</sup> One of the participants wrote: “So Amma communicates with us on many different levels, non-verbal, visual, eye contact, and on the psychic plane. I am sure this has not been sufficiently researched on a scholarly level.”

described the “awakened” professor in the story I have recounted above, in the following words:

Years before, on the Navajo reservation, I had seen a medicine man—“a shapeshifter”—with the same penetrating stare. There was no point trying to hide or pretend with such people. They saw too deeply. There was a tangible difference in the quality of their presence. (p. 240)

The point is this: while for modern scholars the conceptualization of self is an intellectual speculative discourse, for the ancients across cultures the realization of the essential self is an experiential reality. I want to emphasize that there is a section in this world which believes in the possibility of perfect communication and a perfect communicator. I believe this study give space to the voices of that section of the world.

Rooted in the notion of perfect communication and communicator is the belief that we need to move beyond our local personal identities into a state of connectedness, it is at the end of spirituality—the end of the journey of disidentification from personal and social identities into a permanent state of connectedness—that we become omniscient. In other words, disidentification is central to the process of becoming omniscient. This knowledge could help scholars to become sensitive to local ways in which some people may seek to improve communication.

Therefore, to be able to speak to the transmodern, can we perhaps include the significance of disidentification from personal identities as an important step in achieving appropriateness, effectiveness, and ethics in communication. Or in other words, achievement of communicative competence is related to the extent a person can disidentify from her identity position in communication.

In summary, the findings suggest a need to include the notion of disidentification to the scholarship on interpersonal communicative competence.

#### Chapter Summary

The chapter presented findings on how personal identities were enacted and expressed in particular, contextual ways in the Amma community. It also showed that intrapersonal awareness through a struggle to disidentify from personal identities and a concurrent perception of what constituted as perfect communication was significant to the devotees and participants in the community. The findings suggest the significance of

intrapersonal awareness in conflict resolution, advance the notion that conflict can be conceptualized as a sacred process, and introduce the significance of disidentification for improved communicative competence.

## CHAPTER FIVE: GENDER IDENTITY AND SPIRITUALITY

This chapter examines the dynamics of gender identity in the Amma community in context of spirituality. Gender identity is understood in this study as the meanings and interpretations we hold concerning our self-images and expected other-images of “femaleness” and “maleness.” Drawing on observation, documentary, and interview data presented in this chapter, I will argue that the enactment of gendered identities and disidentification among women devotees of Amma follows a complex, heterogenous pattern that challenges some of the dominant feminist discourses about gendered identities and behavior.

The first section of the chapter discusses the particular ways in which gender identity is expressed and disidentified from by participants as they talk about self and their social interactions. The data are presented around the following salient themes: (1) dynamics of identification and disidentification and women’s bodies, (2) questioning equality and difference, and (3) awakening of the universal motherhood. Here, I discuss how among participants, the belief that physical and psychic processes in the female body are part of a journey towards enlightenment—the transcendence of all personal and social identities to become firmly established in a state of interconnectedness—allows the body a significance that is greater and different from gendered discourses about it.

The findings presented here also underscore some of the ways in which participants reject dominant feminist discourses on equality and difference and instead look into Amma’s teachings and search within themselves for answers on what constitute emancipation. Along these lines, they conceive gender as a temporal and ephemeral expression of divine unity at a particular social moment, and thus articulate a discourse that denies gender its power to cause divisiveness. The women identify with Amma’s notion of “universal motherhood” to define womanhood as a balance between masculine and feminine qualities. They also stress the idea of achieving *equality in the mind* through the elimination of internal sources of domination like fear, anger, distrust, greed, and ego, and seek to cultivate non-reactionary approaches to inequality in order to forge a path for productive, mutually respectful, collaborative inter-gender communication. The data also suggest that as the women strive for equality in the mind, the journey to attaining these ideals is neither homogenous nor smooth, as many struggle with tensions



and contradictions; among them, tensions related to perceptions of gender bias, competition, and hetero-normativity.

In the second section of this chapter, I offer a discussion of findings to explore their implications for feminist theorizing and practice. I argue that the women's enactment and disidentification from gender identities provide a provocative reading of the equality versus difference debate, a debate that, along with questions regarding essentialism and multiculturalism, constitutes one of the current impasses in feminist scholarship.

### Findings

#### *Dynamics of Identification and Disidentification and Women's Bodies*

In the Amma community, gender identities were expressed as an embodied sense of self in the context of spirituality. Although there were no specific questions in the interview protocol that gathered information on the physical dimension of their identities, the women's bodies came into focus in the discussion of spirituality in three ways, as participants talked about: (1) healing from abuse, (2) body and journey to enlightenment, and (3) immanent divinity.

#### *Healing from Abuse*

Eight of the 20 participants spoke of some form of abuse in their lives. They had been either sexually abused as children or suffered physical abuse, cultic violence or sexual abuse as teenagers and adults. Another participant said she witnessed sexual trauma. Violence in these women's lives led, in some cases, to mental health problems and, abuse of alcohol and drugs. Some of the women said they suffered from post-traumatic stress disorder, bipolar disorder, and attention-deficit hyperactivity disorder. The data also showed that a number of women had been in Alcoholic Anonymous (AA) 12-step programs and psychotherapy. It is interesting to note also that although the women's narratives presented below reveal their struggle with an imbalance in their gender identity due to abuse, they also portray a conception of the feminine and the masculine as qualities rather than states of being.

*Effects of abuse.* For a couple of women, trauma resulted in shame in being a woman and being in a woman's body. The interviewees spoke about denial of the socially ascribed "femaleness" of the body. They interpreted the feminine erotic aspect of

their bodies as something weak that could also draw violence into their lives. Participants related how they would restrain from showing their bodies and instead mask them with manly ways of dressing and behavior. The narratives show that the female body evoked within them a sense of vulnerability and weakness. In the following quotation, Teresa spoke about denying feminine expressions of her body:

X was very beautiful. I had many questions before what was it to be a woman. I saw the way men treated X and after that, later on she got into an abusive relationship. I became very combative very early, where I didn't want to be pretty, I didn't want to be attractive, I didn't want to be confident. *I didn't want to be anything feminine.* I was being afraid that would lure the attacker, the abuser, the man that would hurt me. Anytime I would show any sexuality and femininity, that is what it would bring (emphasis mine).

For another participant, Marie, denying the feminine is part of her issues dealing with gender identity. She said:

I have felt very unsafe in the world and I have attributed that to being female. I have felt extremely vulnerable and extremely afraid. And I have gone through a lot of identity issues. Even with gender identity. Which for me, not for everyone else, but *for me had a lot to do with trying to appear to be less feminine.* Trying to feel safer. For many years people thought I was a man . . . . I was afraid of femininity, really more of how society and men treat me and I did not want to be vulnerable and soft. That was a weakness. Things that are taught to us by this society and definitely my family were very hard. Even as a child, we would be called names like weak and so we had tried to be strong. Anything that was feminine was mocked. So that really did affect me very deeply (emphasis mine).

Although some of the women said they turned to therapy to address their issues, they also reported that healing finally happened through Amma.

*Recovery.* The women spoke about how spirituality offered relief from the pain they had suffered for many years. The relief did not come through a change in social structure or justice being meted to an individual or group. Rather, it emerged through the recognition that they had allowed themselves to be traumatized by the pain, and therefore, had suffered the abuse for a long period of time. They spoke about how reading

about Amma, knowing her teachings, being with her, and observing her helped them become aware of their complicity with the power of their abuse.

For some, it was Amma's touch or glance that helped heal the wounds. For others, healing was a mystical process. For Nistula healing was a mystical process:

I had a lot of emotional wounds, and I can see her going in with some kind of a balm and putting on me, internally. I would see her doing this. And then I would realize the things that would bother would not bother me anymore. It was gone.

For Ella, healing came through a glance:

I had severe abuse when I was a child. I feel like Amma has healed it more than anybody. I had been in therapy for 15 years and I feel like that one hug last summer when she looked at me, I think that healed everything. And then sometimes I feel like I have other things that come up and look like may be there is a need. Before, there used to be a need to be healed and now that is gone.

For some women, entering Amma community was part of a healing process that required a spiritual anchor. Teresa stated:

I have been in recovery from alcohol and drug abuse for five years, and I have a friend I had known for a longer time than that. He said you must meet this person. Being in that program of AA there is demand in the program that if you are going to stay sober, you are going to find some spiritual path—a replacement for your use with alcohol and drug and find an alternative path to keep you sober.

Speaking about the recovery process, Betty used a powerful metaphor of a pilgrimage to a church dedicated to the Virgin of Guadalupe in Mexico to explain her life and her triumph as a woman:

Outside this church are all these pilgrims, and they are walking, crawling on their knees; they lay down on their bloody rags and kneel on that and pick that up behind and lay another one down in the front and kneel on that and make their way to the altar to worship. And that for me is my visual of my journey through life to Amma. I have been *unnecessarily* prostrating myself on bloody rags, crawling when it is not necessary . . . the journey to Amma is like, get up and walk, you know—stand up and walk and be with me. Don't be less than me, be with me (emphasis mine).

Teresa similarly spoke about this torment in the mind and how the spiritual practices helped her to let go of pain:

I feel like Amma and spiritual practices has been a floodgate that has helped me to open up and be able to let go of a lot of things I fought about inside for a long time, *allowed* to traumatize me, hurt me for a long time (emphasis mine).

Women's conversations show the importance of letting go and being free from emotional pain. The pain, memory of the pain, the consequences of that pain, according to these women, distort our lives, make us lesser than what we can be, and bring further suffering. Spiritual practices helped these women regain their freedom from pain. The narratives indicate that it also helped them to accept and respect themselves, and find self-confidence and their significance in the world.

Lisa captured this aspect of healing powerfully in the following words:

Before I met Amma, I was involved in this very dysfunctional relationship. I was not honoring myself as a woman. I was not honoring my beauty and my purity and my sacredness and *now I am*, like you know, I would never accept anybody into my life that would not treat me well and that wasn't the case before (emphasis mine).

Some of the women reported that the freedom from pain also awakened a sense of commitment to help other survivors of abuse. Nistula spoke about her pain around seeing other women and children being abused and beaten up. Ella hoped to take up the issue of shaken-baby syndrome in certain parts of New Mexico and work towards ending it. She said:

Being with Amma has made me passionate about wanting to prevent this. So I bought a curriculum, and I am offering to teach this to unwed mothers, and I feel very strong and passionate about this. I feel this is Amma's work too.

To summarize, one may note how some of the women rejected the erotic and the feminine with their bodies and selves because of abuse and perceptions of social discourses. For them, healing involved using spirituality to reintegrate these dimensions into their bodies and discover the power within to detach from social ascriptions and gendered discourses. The healing also facilitated an awareness and desire for some of the women to help other survivors of abuse.

### *Body and Journey to Enlightenment*

Disease, poor health, and other physiological problems was another area where body and spirituality became intertwined. Physical health problems were regarded in some cases as *vasanas* (inherent tendencies) coming to surface or as *karma* (fruits of past action), exhausting itself through bodily disease. In other cases, the resolution of bodily health problems became the most powerful way to witness Amma's grace and her mystical powers.

*Bodily health.* Amma followers also referred to health problems as emergence of *vasanas* (inherent tendencies) or burning of *karma* (fruits of action). In a sense, the body and its struggles with disease became a sacred site for spiritual growth. Some devotees mentioned that after attending Amma tours and spending many hours in her presence helped dormant *vasanas* to emerge in their bodies through diseases. In observed conversations, they mentioned falling "badly" sick after being with Amma and offered consolation to one another that this was a good thing: it was grace in action. Accidents and even the sudden deaths of Amma devotees are understood as *karma* in action and considered spiritual growth through Amma's grace.

Annihilation of the body in death is also considered a form of spiritual growth because reincarnation or multiple lives is a pre-dominant belief in this community and Amma's teachings. Many devotees believe that enlightenment may require rebirth to finish pending *karma* (fruits of action) and to provide a new opportunity for an individual to recommit to the spiritual path. Amma said in one of the volumes of *Awaken Children*:

A new birth is therefore not the beginning of existence. You could call it a fresh start, or yet another chance to continue the onward journey towards the real Source of existence. Being born is like return of the same contents in a different package. . . . Death is not complete annihilation. It is a pause. It is like pressing the pause button on a tape recorder in the middle of a song. Sooner or later, when pressed again, the pause button is released and the song continues.

(Amritanandamayi, 1996, p.195)

The lore goes that Swami Paramatmananda, one of the senior-most disciples of Amma, was suffering from a debilitating spinal problem and had gone to Amma for her

*sankalpa*<sup>60</sup> to release him from this pain. Amma said, according to the lore, that if she removed the pain, he would have to take another birth to finish his *karma* (fruits of action). The Swami then voluntarily decided to suffer the pain. He is currently said to be disabled, and I have not seen him in any of the Amma tours in United States during the period and location of my study.

On a similar note, during our interview Nistula described her friend's struggle and suffering with a debilitating viral disease and her perplexity about the continuation of the disease in spite of approaching Amma for resolution and relief several times. She concluded:

It makes me question why do we have to suffer so much, and I don't really know.

Nobody knows why she is suffering so much, but I guess she is burning through her *karma* quickly.

Visiting and living in Amma's *ashram* in India is also said to help burn *vasanas* (inherent tendencies) through bodily suffering. When I visited the *ashram* in 2005, I became quite sick with allergies and the flu. I had never suffered from allergies prior to visiting the *ashram*. I was so sick that I had to be in Amma's hospital for a couple of days. Devotees in the *ashram* told me that I was being cleansed and purified. And referring to her own experience at the ashram, participant Shanti said:

I just remember I slept a lot, I had no energy. People said that happens to some people. That's how she can work on you by having you sleep.

Members of the Amma community have found within their spiritual practice a way to treat health problems in one of the Ayurvedic treatments offered by the Amritapuri *ashram*: the *Panchakarma*<sup>61</sup> treatment. This treatment is meant to release bodily toxins and allow for relief from diseases as well as to provide a launching ground for deeper spiritual practices. The treatment is, however, a very rigorous regime and is known to awaken severe bodily and mental suffering. In the *ashram*, devotees considered the *panchakarma* to be a spiritual practice for burning *vasanas* (inherent tendencies). Svoboda (1992) explained that the treatment requires moving *the past* in the form of

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<sup>60</sup> Divine will or resolution.

<sup>61</sup> According to veteran Ayurvedic practitioner and writer Robert Svoboda (1992), *panchakarma* is a technique of purging bodily toxins in two ways: depleting the system like "emesis, purgation, evacuative enema, evacuative nasal medication, blood-letting" or nourishing the system through "oily enema, nourishing nasal drops and the like" (p. 156)

*doshas*<sup>62</sup> trapped in the body back to the present (p. 157). He wrote: “Your present is what flows in your channels; as soon as it is deposited somewhere it becomes your past. Once the *doshas* are flowing again in your ‘present’, they are expelled by *panchakarma*” (p. 157).

During my observation at the *ashram* in India, I met several devotees who used *panchakarma* treatments. One of the devotees mentioned how pure she felt after the treatment, as if she were a baby. She said that she became as sensitive as a baby after the treatment such that it was hard for her to travel or interact. And among the participants in interviews, three said they had received *panchakarma* treatments in the *ashram* in India. Elena mentioned that her visit to the Ashram was “physically rough” and spoke about the travails of doing the *panchakarma* and trying to get a token for *darshan* with Amma. Shanti underwent an Ayurvedic detox program in United States and described her experience in the following way:

I feel I am taking off all these layers that have been built up . . . it is like if I have too much of something, I have to find who it belongs to. I want it simple, I want everything simple . . . And maybe that’s what is happening to me, the spiritual journey is leading me to who I was when I was five. That person was a person who is now a little more wiser and little more refined. But that’s what we came with and then something happens and something makes us, (accumulate) all these layers, these persona and baggage . . . Last summer I did an ayurvedic detox, here, and even that, I lost like five to six pounds with that, not a lot. But it has not come back. It was like a physical—that something else was in my body that I didn’t need.

*Grace and health problems.* For these women, the body in its experience of *vasanas* and *karmas* became the sacred site for witnessing Amma’s grace and love in their lives. In one of the *satsangs*, a devotee mentioned how he had asked Amma for relief from a particular heart condition and that after he spoke to her, the symptoms stopped bothering him. In the San Ramon *ashram*, at the end of every Amma program, a

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<sup>62</sup> With respect to the physical body, *dosha* is described as “fault, mistake, error or stain, a transgression against cosmic rhythm, an inaccuracy that prevents success and leads to chaos” (Svoboda, 1992, p. 35). There are three active *doshas* in the human body which are basically waste products of the five elements—air, water, earth, fire, and ether.

severely disabled devotee arrived in a stretcher for *darshan*. I heard that this devotee had been visiting Amma for many years and this was a ritual at every Amma program in San Ramon. Amma got up and caressed the man's chest and then anointed the man's face and hands with sacred ashes (field notes, June 2008). According to the local lore, over the years that same devotee had shown good signs of recovery. As I stood near to the *darshan* area, I felt that the devotee seemed happy and content with Amma's touch. In Albuquerque, too, I have seen disabled men and women in wheelchairs or stretchers coming in for *darshan* regularly over the years. I have known devotees going to Amma with questions about physical problems and receiving answers or in some cases, ashes or sandalwood to be used for curing the disease. Some of the women are known to ask Amma for children. According to Karin Nirmala, a devotee in Zurich, after trying for many years, Amma's grace helped her to conceive (*My first darshan*, 2003, p.17-21).

Participant Nistula shared one of her experiences with me during the interview. In India, Nistula found herself bleeding excessively from her uterus and went to Amma for advice. Amma asked her to go to AIMS hospital.<sup>63</sup> Nistula was advised by the doctors in the hospital to undergo a round of chemotherapy to stop bleeding. Nistula was not willing and kept requesting doctors to do a hysterectomy instead. Finally, she said:

I remembered what Amma said, duh. Do what the doctors said. So I did and then I brought the medicine back, and Amma blessed it and then I stopped bleeding and I haven't bled since, and I went into menopause. I had this problem for ten years and finally bam! And it was done. That was the end, and it was done.

Nistula and Nirmala's stories talk about grace and health problems in different ways. In Nirmala's case, grace helped her conceive while for Nistula, the same grace helped cease menstruation and therefore all possibilities of reproduction.

As an East Indian, I have been socialized into believing that menstruation is a time when a woman is impure and must withdraw from religious rituals. Naturally, I made special efforts to find out Amma's views on this subject. According to the *ashram* website in India, Amma believed that during menstruation women should engage in more intense spiritual practices. This thinking is quite similar to what Tolle expounded in his

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<sup>63</sup> A super-specialty hospital set up by Amma in Cochin. Many devotees around the world volunteer their talents to this hospital. Many also visit this hospital for treatment.



book, stating that women find that their pain-body is awakened during menstruation and the practice of being in the present becomes more important during these times (Tolle, 1999, p.139). Further, unlike the traditional Hindu practices, I noted that there were no restrictions about meeting Amma when menstruating.

In sum, in this community disease and physical health problems and the purificatory processes and some allow devotees to become closer to enlightenment. The suffering caused due to bodily pain is understood as a sacred process that aids the individual self to merge with the Universal consciousness. The devotees struggle to accept the pain and disease and wait sometimes impatiently and sometimes patiently for relief. The body as sacred site provides the body a meaning that transcends gendered discourses of a body's function and its significance. The underlying belief in the trans-temporal psychic processes in the body as part of a journey towards enlightenment—a state where a person transcends all personal and social identities and becomes firmly established in the state of interconnectedness—allows the body a significance that is greater and different from gendered discourses about it. So while the body remains sexed in performance, it ceases to be confined by it.

#### *Immanent Divinity and a Woman's Body*

*Woman spiritual master.* For several participants who had experienced abuse, Amma's material presence in a woman's body was significant in their decision to enter the community, since the experience of being violated by men brought forth an inherent distrust of men as spiritual masters. The fact that Amma is a woman helped Nistula in her spiritual journey:

I think the fact that Amma is a woman makes it very easy for me. Because of my childhood I have an inherent distrust of men. Because of all the sexism. And I was sexually abused as a child and hearing about all the gurus and people who were sexually abusing their devotees I am like not going close to any man. The closest I went to a man was Thich-Nhat-Hanh and I watched him for a long time to realize, he is good. He is not Amma, but he is a good man.

Similarly, Peace reported that her spiritual journey was deepened because of Amma's presence as a woman:

It's been intensely important to me that Amma was a woman. Like when I got my first *darshan*, and I was in the *darshan* line, and I was about to go up on the stage, and I looked at her, and I realized "this is really big...holy cow" this is like, and I could see the ceremony, and what was going on up there, and I thought "I just need a safe place, she's a woman, and she looks harmless enough," If she'd been a man, I wouldn't have opened myself, I could never (deep sigh) splay my soul open to a man the way I have with Amma. I think her being a woman has allowed me to go so much deeper into the furnace of my spirituality, trusting in ways I couldn't with a man.

The narratives point to the importance of women spiritual masters for women's spiritual lives. In effect, Amma's presence amongst the top religious and spiritual leaders in the world in the 2007 CBS Christmas eve feature, "In God's name," drew an enthusiastic response from several members who noted that she was the only female religious leader in the documentary.

*Manifestation of Christ.* For some women, Amma manifest Jesus Christ in a female body. This idea seemed to have a great impact on the women's psychology for the participants usually mentioned it with great energy and pride. Mare reported:

Christ is a very real person to me and many Christians, but you can't see him in the physical fore; and I feel that Amma is the physical embodiment to God. When you're in her presence, it's such a centered focal point for the energy of the divine. People who aren't exposed to that don't understand it. So, in a way, they thought I was very strange. And we'd have these arguments sometimes...the kingdom of God is within you, it's not a little Indian woman. And I'd say, oh yes, the kingdom is God is in a little Indian woman and you can experience it for yourself.

Jane also claimed that Amma manifested Christ:

When I counter people saying world is coming to an end and Jesus is coming again and Armageddon is happening, I say that Jesus is already here, and she is a female and brown.

An element that makes these narratives interesting is the fact the Christ is a man while Amma is a woman, and yet the participants did not find it problematic to transpose

the male Christ in the female Amma. This illustrated a belief in the community that divinity exists and can be realized in both men and women. But the belief that divinity is present in a woman's body liberated women from patriarchal discourses in religions (both Eastern and Western) regarding the status of women in church or temple, worship, nature, and other issues that I have pointed to in my literature review. There is something in the nature of women wanting to be a saint or to unite with God or seek enlightenment that allows women to transcend gendered discourses about their roles and status in society. In this community, the possibility and facilitation of the journey to state of connectedness in a woman's body empowered women.

*Superhuman nature of enlightened women's bodies.* The immanent divinity in a woman's body relates to the superhuman qualities of the body of an enlightened master. Amma is considered enlightened, and she is a woman. She is also believed to express superhuman qualities of physical endurance. This allows women to redefine the vulnerabilities of their bodies in terms of the possibility of superhuman strength.

Indeed, Amma expresses extraordinary physical endurance. She sits in the same chair for 11-12 hours in New Mexico, hugging each and every person individually without a break for eating, drinking or using the restroom. In addition, she leads meditation morning and evening, gives spiritual discourses, and sings every evening for two hours. This is not only her schedule in New Mexico but all through the different cities in North America, South America, Europe, Australia, and parts of Asia and India. In India, some portions of Europe, some portions of Asia and in South America the crowds are much bigger than in United States. According the Amritapuri *ashram* website, in Chile 2008, 20,000 people waited for long hours for their individual hugs from Amma. In India the crowd easily surges to 50,000, and Amma sometimes gives hugs for 24 hours without a break. In the four years I have been with the Amma community, I have not recorded a single day when Amma had cancelled a program or *darshan* or had gone on a vacation. An excerpt from the recent addition of twitter (provides hour-to-hour updates about Amma's whereabouts) to the Amritapuri *ashram* website will give the readers an idea:

Amrita Chimes

- 22.00, *darshan* is over 6 hours ago

- Swami Pranavamritananda is singing, Amma continues *darshan* 10 hours ago
- Amma started *darshan* in the main hall... 16 hours ago
- Amma's Kozhikode, Mangalore program dates are announced  
<http://www.amritapuri.org/2689/febyatra/> 2009/02/04
- 21.15, *darshan* is over...there was one *pada puja* at the end 2009/02/04
- Amma is giving certificates to the graduated medical students of AIMS medical college 2009/02/04
- Amma started *darshan* in the Kali Temple 2009/02/04
- Amma's last song was 'JaiMaAmbe' 2009/02/03
- Amma is singing *bhajans* 2009/02/03
- Amma came to the Kali Temple for Meditation & Q&A 2009/02/03  
(<http://twitter.com/amritapuri>)

A participant spoke to the seemingly superhuman abilities of Amma with great emphasis and sincerity:

It humbles me, when she comes through a city. I mean she is like a hurricane. She comes and blows us all away. She works harder and longer and more than everybody. We give all that we can and it takes me about two weeks to recover. And yet She never has to recover, after working harder and longer than any of us, She is off to the next city with vibrancy and enthusiasm! So when I start thinking I am really tired, I really need a break, I understand that I am not Amma. She is not human in that sense. So I cannot push myself to those standards. But it pushes me; I can do a little more. I cannot do as much as she does, but I can do a little more.

In spite of the belief in the superhuman qualities of enlightened persons, devotees also speculate whether divine bodies can suffer. Amma's bodily health was a point of discussion in informal conversations and in blog posts. Amma is supposed to suffer from diabetes. Devotees are usually not allowed to take up sugary foods up to Amma. A *sevite* close to Amma keeps a close watch on what food is brought to Amma and quickly snatches desserts away from devotee's hands before Amma can see them. Amma usually does not refuse anything that is offered to her.

According to Swamini Krishnamrita Prana (2005, p.180-181), during Amma's 50<sup>th</sup> birthday celebration, a one-inch nail pierced Amma's feet as she walked to one of the events. But Amma would not allow her to treat the wound and instead continued visiting and greeting people. The next day the wound had become infected, and she took antibiotics on an empty stomach. This made her ill, but still she continued giving *darshan* to nearly 50,000 people. According to Prana (2005), Amma had said later that at one point during *darshan*, she "could not even see. She said that Her vision had totally diminished and the crowd simply 'swam' in front of her eyes. No one knew this as She still went on embracing people for hours" (p.181-182).

In summer 2008, a story circulated amongst devotees about Amma having injured her back and being in a lot of pain. Speculation fired up on whether Amma was very sick. Devotees reported witnessing extra heat packs applied on Amma's back. In blog posts, devotees discussed Amma's health and expressed feelings of sympathy for her. They wondered if the speed of *darshan* had increased that summer because of Amma's ill health. As a *darshan* line coordinator for a couple of night shifts that summer, one night I was asked by a senior tour staff to request people to postpone their *darshan*, if possible, to the following day. Requesting devotees to give up their time with Amma was very hard. Some conceded and others fought or asked several questions. The line *sevites* and myself were quite stressed at the end of the night with the human drama that built around the request.

The discussion about Amma's health included the question of whether she *could suffer* ill health. What should a devotee do? Should s/he try to restrict the number of times they went for *darshan* or perhaps avoid *darshan* altogether? Should s/he pray for Amma's health? Devotees' views varied. Few claimed the pain that "Amma's body" was suffering and decided to go for *darshan* only if they thought it was absolutely necessary. A few said that the chanting the 1,000 names of the Goddess would help heal Amma's health. Yet, others said Amma was beyond the ill health. They believed that Amma was not like ordinary humans and did not suffer pain like the rest of humanity. Amma, according to these devotees, allowed her body to experience disease to decrease *vasanas* and *karmas* of her devotees.

Swamini Krishnamrita Prana (2005) explained in her book that the incident when a nail pierced Amma's foot occurred because "Amma was absorbing any kind of negativity that was due to happen at the time of the birthday, as the four-day event involving so many people miraculously took place without a single incident or injury" (p.182).<sup>64</sup> This view is quite similar to the Gospel verse: "To Him who loved us, and washed us from our sins in His own blood" (*Revelations* 1:5). Amma herself said in a volume of the *Awaken Children* series:

Do not think about Mother's sickness. It has been taken from different people. Mother suffers for thirty or forty minutes, or maybe a day, what they had to suffer for thirty or forty years. Mother is only happy to do this . . . but she wants to see you growing spiritually. Children, you will only become weak-minded if you think, "Mother is tired," or "Mother is sick" or things like that (Amritanandamayi, 1991, p. 37).

In the view of the community, enlightenment is not only merely enlightenment of the individual self; rather, it includes the human body, the different faculties of experiencing and interpreting the world, and consciousness, so that everything attains the state of connectedness or intimate knowledge that all is divine and the One. Such a state, it is believed, allows the enlightened masters to employ all components of their human bodies and faculties to benefit humanity and rest of nature. The body of such a being not only provides the material medium for transmitting wisdom and knowledge but also actively participates by mystically transferring the *karmas* (fruits of action) and *vasanas* (inherent tendencies) of unenlightened individuals, facilitating their spiritual journey to the state of connectedness. A similar attribution had been made regarding the throat cancer that Swami Ramakrishna, the famous 19<sup>th</sup> century mystic, suffered. It was believed that he had absorbed some of his devotees' *karmas* and suffered this in the form of cancer.

*Transcending gendered body.* Although many devotees appreciated the fact Amma was a woman, they said she transcended her gendered body. They argued that Amma had

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<sup>64</sup> An estimated 300,000 people from around the world and India attended the celebrations in Kerala, India.

*chosen* to take a woman's body for the spiritual needs of the time. The divinity that she embodied was confined to gender. A participant who wished to remain unnamed said:

She chose to come as a woman. That is very powerful, as a role model, and to have a teacher as a woman. And to have so many people bowing down and respecting the feminine. That said, Amma transcends gender, Amma embodies the qualities of both the masculine and feminine. I think that, on a superficial level, She is a woman and people see it as that . . . . But on a very personal level, I feel God and that transcends my gender and Her gender.

The theme of spiritual consciousness transcending the sex of the body was significant in a few other devotees' interviews as well as conversations. Nistula spoke on this issue:

But when it comes to talking about Amma, then there is not much of a difference. Then gender ceases to become an issue. It just feels like you are talking to the soul. When I see men I see woman in the man and when I see women, I see man in the woman. So we are just souls here.

Interestingly, in the 1980s, Amma used to dress up as the male Hindu deity, Krishna, in what used to be known as *Krishna Bhava*.<sup>65</sup> Videos from this time period show Amma dressed in male clothes, replete with crown and peacock feathers, giving *darshan* to devotees. However, Amma stopped *Krishna Bhava* suddenly in late '80s, stating that she felt that the mood of the *Devi* (goddess) expressed deeper care and nurturance for the devotees.

Although some followers adapted the belief that immanent divinity in a woman's body is liberating and also facilitates the spiritual journey of women, neither divinity nor the divine body are ideas confined to the gender discourse. While gender is visibly valid when solely considered in the realms of social life, it loses its potency of divisiveness in the notion of divine unity. Gender, then, becomes a temporal and ephemeral expression of the divine at a particular social moment.

A secular view is that the body did occupy a significant place in women's lives in their spiritual paths. For instance, healing from abuse consisted of disidentifying from gendered discourses about the feminine. And the body gains a meaning through trans-

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<sup>65</sup> *Krishna bhava* means a divine mood in which the attributes of the male God Krishna is expressed.

temporal psychic processes that allowed women to move beyond gendered discourses on body's functions.<sup>66</sup> Finally, immanent divinity in a woman's body liberated women from patriarchal discourses about women's status in religious affairs, and facilitated their spiritual journey. But at the same time, the divine state remains transcendent and beyond the confines of the social discourses on gender.

#### *Re-thinking Dominant Feminist Notions of Equality and Liberation*

This section explores other ways in which women in the Amma community negotiate gendered norms about identity in context of spirituality. Many women reject dominant public and cultural discourses about gendered behavior and instead interpreted Amma's teachings and searched within themselves in various ways for answers on what constituted emancipation.

#### *Non-Combative Approach to Equality*

The women in this study stressed the idea of achieving *equality in the mind* and fighting internal sources of domination like fear, anger, distrust, greed, and most importantly, ego (forces of individuation). "Equality in the mind" is a phrase used by Amma in her speech *Awakening Universal Motherhood*. She urges women and feminist activists to delve into their minds to rediscover an already existing equality and power. This phrase is echoed by the participants' interviews and describes a particular intra-personal way of approaching feminist struggle. The data show that the women tried to approach social inequalities with consciousness-raising endeavors that focused first and foremost in the mind.

Women in this study understood feminism mostly as a struggle for social equality with men. I did not come across comments or observations that noted more recent developments in feminist philosophy—like the idea of women being equal as women, race and class conscious feminism, or postmodern ideas—among devotees of the Amma community in New Mexico. For several women, the feminist discourse for social equality was a life practice in their relationships. It was something that they had believed and acted upon in their lives. But as they introspected on this practice, the women spoke

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<sup>66</sup> One of the participants stated that this notion of transcendence in the body was not her experience since "white and thin bodies are normative" and they are not in question. She said it was the bodies of women of color that feel the deeper need to seek a signification beyond gendered and raced discourses.



about the oppressive effects of this discourse in their life choices and mental states. For these women, the discourse of equality of sexes was oppressive because, it forced them to take up roles they did not feel comfortable with and, it made them feel that if they did not fight against gender roles in their private sphere, they were not liberated women. In this sense, they perceived the feminist ideology as a hegemonic discourse that dictated what constituted emancipation and what an emancipated woman should do. This perception was clearer and stronger amongst the married women who dwelt at length on the nature of their current and past marriages than amongst single women who did not dwell much on romantic relationships.

For example, Peace, one of the married participants, expressed this position forcefully:

But before, I mean I was raised in the '60s, in the women's lib, so it was like "Do not put me in that role because I'll knock your head off!" There was so much emphasis on "There's no difference between us; we're just as good as men. We're just the same as men." And that's baloney, because we're not. There's women's medicine, and there's men's medicine.

From this perspective, the women expressed dissatisfaction with the feminist practice, since it did not lead to peace of mind, happiness or healthy relationships. They termed the feminist struggle in the private sphere<sup>67</sup> more as an ego struggle and claimed that equality had to be found foremost in the heart.<sup>68</sup> They envisioned the relationship with a spouse as a contribution from two partners who understand and respect each other. Many said that instead of judging or speaking in hostile tones, they needed to provide love, understanding, and support to their spouses or partners. From interview recollections of how they spoke or acted around their partners, it seemed that women were using supportive, affirming, and adaptive communication to encourage and educate their partners on building and sustaining healthy relationships. Women linked these abilities to the capacity to quiet and control of the mind, open the heart, and fight ego.

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<sup>67</sup> Questions were directed towards their personal journey as women. As a consequence, very little was elicited about their views and activities in the public sphere.

<sup>68</sup> Heart is understood in this context as the seat of wisdom where one can connect with an inherent divinity and interconnectedness. Mind, on the other hand is understood mostly as the seat of intelligence and emotions moving outwards under the influence of ego or forces of individuation. However, in the literature available in the community the term "mind" does not have a consistent meaning and the meaning is understood only in the context in which it is used.

Furthermore, they associated their experiences to the influence of Amma and her teachings. Peace stated:

Even though we had a good marriage before, it's like she (Amma) sucked all the ego out of the conflicts between us. And, that's one way, and me being able to communicate those things to X in ways that aren't threatening, or judgmental, or 'you gotta do it this way.' Simply like one time, I tithed a good chunk of money to Amma and some other charities and X was able to do something else, and I said to him, 'it's only because you take care of our household that I am able to donate to Amma, and without you I couldn't do what I do, and that without me, you couldn't do what you do.'

Theresa said that coming to Amma had enhanced respect for her husband and, at the same time, she claimed that she no longer had the urge to change her husband's behavior:

X and I are like mirrors. We are mirrors, and so I have had to realize, he is himself. We both have come to that. We honor each other a lot. It took a long time to get there. We don't have to be 24 hours with each other each day, we honor each other. We respect each other. It is very important. We are still husband and wife, same old junk, but it is like he is my brother . . . . Sometimes he will say something, (and I say) I don't need your comments. He will say something some other time (and he comes to an understanding), you are right, we have a guru now, we don't need to fix each other.

### *Domesticity*

These women spoke about taking up some of the traditional gender roles voluntarily because they said they were more comfortable with them. They, however, reiterated that they did not think that taking up these roles was in any sense subservient. They found that this attitude helped them develop greater empathy and love towards their spouse. In a sense, the data showed that the women found the urge to take up certain roles from within, rather than comply with what the feminist or traditional gender discourse demanded. For example, Peace said she was comfortable taking up some of the traditional gender roles:

I think she's helped me in my marriage with X, accept the fact that I do things, some things better, and he does some things better, and we're both more

comfortable in our gender roles in our marriage. He's okay if he takes out the trash all the time, because he likes working outside, and I'm okay if I always make the bed.

Some of the women spoke about the importance of housework and their struggles against a norm that labeled housework as "no work" and a sign of female servility. These women opted to do the housework voluntarily and as an act of love. Mare, for instance, argued that housework had an important place in a relationship:

I think being a housewife, and providing groceries and providing meals and keeping house, doing laundry, doing all those things that help maintain your living environment, being able to get up in the morning and have breakfast, and prepare a lunch, and go off to work and come home at night and be able to have dinner. And keep the dishes clean and keep clothes so that everyone has clothes to wear, keeping food in the house. It's providing an environment you can thrive in, a well-organized environment. And it shows that you care for your spouse because you are willing to do those things for them. You're willing to that for your husband, and so it shows that you love him and care about him and support him. You know what I mean?

The women acknowledged that such an attitude did not lead to an imbalance in responsibilities, that they did not carry the major and unpaid burden of domesticity. They spoke about how their husbands also did their jobs with love and respect. Mare's husband did laundry and occasionally prepared dinner when she was late home from work. Peace's husband also did chores that were suitable for his personality and complemented the sum total of work in the house. Their point was that their attitude of understanding and love, instead of judgment, castigation and gendering of tasks, led to an overall state of peace in their domestic life.<sup>69</sup>

But the women perceived the twang of stepping out of the discursive demands in conversations with others and in their insecurities regarding how their current beliefs were perceived in the community. In this respect, the alienation from the mainstream

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<sup>69</sup> One of the participants wrote in response to this section: "Sounds like many of the women interviewed have been working hard on healing on a deep level, and how wonderful the example that Amma gives all of us of the inner strength to conquer anything."

culture that women said they feel due to their affiliation with the Amma community (discussed in detail in the chapter on cultural identity), was exacerbated by their changing attitudes towards domesticity. Mare, for example, said:

Some people would find it strange. They're, like, you get up at 5 in the morning with your husband. And it's like, yeah, that's how we start our day together. Why can't you sleep in? I wouldn't feel right, I wouldn't feel right, I don't know, it just wouldn't feel right.

Mare's narrative indicates that domesticity is not imposed by Amma's teachings or community practices; rather it is an affirmation of her worldview.

Interestingly, Amma's speech on *The Infinite Potential of Women*, available in United States in June 2008—long after the interviews were recorded—have a similar note about equality. In this speech, Amma spoke in great details about how patriarchy has demeaned the value and respect for women in the society and urged men to realize that women's contribution in every field brings greater prosperity and health to the world. She appreciated the different women's movements around the world that worked towards bringing social equality for women. At the same time, Amma cautioned women from against reacting with a combative attitude towards the history of women's oppression. She said:

In the past, the condescending notion, "Man is superior to woman. She does not need freedom or equal place," became entrenched in the minds of most men. The mentality of women, however, is altogether different. They feel: "For centuries, men have lorded over and exploited us. We've had enough! From now on, we need to teach them a lesson; there's no other way."

Both these stances are fraught with resentment and enmity. Today, such destructive thoughts control both women and men, inflating egos and further confounding the problem. For our minds to be free, we must abandon this competitive mentality of "Who's better?" (Amritanandamayi, 2008, p. 17-18)

In her public communications, Amma exhorts women to look within themselves and consider their roles for peace in domestic life. In one of the stories in the book *First Darshan*, a woman from Spain, in throes of her second marriage, recounts that after meeting Amma a couple of times, she realized that difficulties in her marriage were due

to her inability to recognize the good qualities in her husband and to give love because of childhood suffering (*My first darshan*, 2003, p.121-124). One of the popular stories Amma relates in evening discourses during her tours in North America is the story of the beggar. She called husband and wife to be beggars begging each other for love. She urged householders to turn inwards to seek the reservoir of love.

The narratives of the participants respond to this call for turning inwards and having non-combative encounters with the partner in a relationship. However, the above data should not mislead readers into believing that Amma or the women in the community believed in playing traditional gender roles in society. Close to half of the women participants reported being abused at some point in their lives. Their lives, as is mentioned in the previous section, were dedicated to coming to terms with abuse and what it revealed about patriarchy in society, and with healing. These women had suffered from various forms of sexist oppression, and I perceived that they deeply understood the feminist ideals of empowerment and justice. Further, a few women participants reported that within their marriage, they were the leaders or the more assertive voice. Mita reported that in her marriage, she was the more assertive and active partner:

Even with my husband, I feel like we are linked but that somehow he follows me. He has his own connection with Amma which is very different from mine. But he lets me take the lead.

At the same time, Mita's narrative suggests the idea that leadership in her relationship is more a matter of personality and tendencies rather than a power-struggle.

### *Take Back the Night*

Amma's talks on the power and potential of women and their issues are cited frequently by the women in the community. In 2008, I stopped at an Amma bookstore during the San Ramon public program to buy a copy of her latest speech on women. As the women *sevites* at the store scrambled to find more copies (there was only one left at the point), a male *sevite* asked what this book was about and the women were quick to retort, "It is a speech you need to read!" Nistula spoke about the influence of Amma's teachings:

I think Amma speeches of women and the role of women have influenced me. It is just that she keeps the issue of sexism on the burner, the more I think about it,

the more I see it everywhere. It doesn't matter it goes across every culture and it makes me angry, and I am glad that Amma keeps talking about it. Because I hate seeing women abused, I hate seeing women beat up, and I hate seeing children starving and all these different things. Oh! And all this is because of the patriarchal system.

In several stories in *Awaken Children* series, Amma speaks strongly against domestic violence and the effects of intoxicants on the health, wealth, and peace of the family. In some of the stories, she consoled women who have been beaten up and assured them of her support and grace:

One just imagines that one gets pleasure from intoxicants. Does happiness reside in cigarettes or alcohol or drugs? There are people who smoke away several hundred rupees per month. That money would be enough for a child's education. Intoxicants may help one to forget everything for only a short while, but in reality, the body loses its vitality, the person faces ruin, and failing health leads to untimely death. Those who should be of benefit to the family and country end up destroying themselves and harming others instead. (Amritanandamayi, 1997, p.4)

Amma has set up a domestic violence shelter in India, created a pension program for widows, and instituted several educational programs for both young girls and adult women. Besides, Amma has worked to bring equality in religious sphere by consecrating temples herself,<sup>70</sup> appointing female priests to her *Bramasthanam* temples,<sup>71</sup> and instructing women on Vedic rituals and ceremonies. Most importantly, *darshan* is the locus at which Amma broke with traditional taboos around hugging men. It has been noted in her biography that people in the nearby villages objected to Amma hugging men and having male disciples. In the early years, a local newspaper in southern India accused Amma of having sexual relations with her male disciples, an accusation the disciples had vigorously denied and ridiculed. According to the biography, Amma's father was upset with her taking in male disciples and was afraid it would bring dishonor to the family.

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<sup>70</sup> Upper-caste Indian men have dominated religious duties like consecration of temples, priestly duties, officiating Vedic sacrificial ceremonies and the like for several centuries now.

<sup>71</sup> A special type of temple consecrated by Amma which is dedicated to Pure Universal Consciousness (or Bramhan as it is known in Hindu tradition).

However, over the years Amma's approach to men and women alike as a Mother has become accepted both in India as well as abroad (Amritaswarupananda, 1994).

During my stay in Amma's *ashram* in Amritapuri in 2005, women renunciates were required to move to a different building when Amma left the *ashram*, and were not allowed to enter into the area where male monks lived. I was told that this was because Amma wanted to protect the women in her absence. Women also had a special path to go towards the meditation hall, which went under Amma's room. This was known as the women's way, and men were not allowed to go through this path. Women meditated and prayed separately in the Kali temple during Amma's absence; men were not allowed into the temple. Men prayed and meditated in the meditation hall outside the temple. It was as if women had the special protection of Amma, and being in the temple dedicated to a fiercely independent goddess with only women had a special sweet quality to it during the evening prayers. When Amma was present, men and women prayed and meditated together and lived without many restrictions.

Amma does not confine herself or women to reclaiming women's spiritual heritage, but according to some of the stories, news items, and teachings she actually works on taking back the night for women in a political sense. Giles (1982) wrote in an essay that:

Among feminists, "Take back the night" is a call to political action for women to assert the right to go out at night without fear of injury or violation. For the feminist mystic "take back the night" is a summons to reclaim our spiritual heritage and enjoy a freedom from fear that at once includes and exceeds the physical and psychological dimensions implicit in the political slogan. (p.39)

In the *ashram*, women renunciates are encouraged and sometimes required to provide security to buildings in and around the *ashram* at night in order to remove their fear of male aggression after dark. Amma has asked them to be courageous and take up the responsibility, assuring the women that she would look after them. During Amma tours in India in 2008, the *ashram* website reported that on one occasion, Amma asked the women staff members, instead the male staff, to take care of loading and unloading trucks. The news story was accompanied with a photograph of the women working to load the large trucks.

In another amusing story related during my stay in the *ashram* in India, Amma once left the *ashram* to stroll by the seashore late at night. As she sat on the rocks by the sea, a man approached her and made sexual overtures and taunts to her. According to the story, Amma got up, revealed who she was and confronted the man on his remarks. This episode was quickly known among the village folks surrounding the Ashram, and men became afraid of approaching any woman by the seashore at night, in case the woman turned out to be Amma. In her speech on the *Infinite Potential of Women*, one of Amma's recommendations was: "At any time of night, women should be able to walk alone without fear. Men should put forth sincere effort to see that this becomes a reality" (Amritanandamayi, 2008, p.45).

#### *Gender Communication*

Women interviewed talked about how they put into practice social equality between genders, avoided reactionary politics, and instead approached the issue of inequality from a place of unity and peace. This set of beliefs emphasizes self-transformation as a catalyst for social transformation. In the participants' interviews, there is a shift in feminist consciousness from reflection on social structures, institutions, and ideology towards an inward-looking, spiritualized practice that "actively breaks from any desire for retributive justice" (Fernandes, 2003, p.59) and instead seeks to make, as Fernandes (2003) puts it, "a first small step at the individual level" to re-link "our ideas of social activism and our quests for social justice with qualities such as compassion, humility and love" (p. 59).

Such a process allows the once-rejected feminine qualities to be used again strategically and wisely in a spirit of mutual understanding and education. Theresa reported using those qualities in the following way:

If there is an office or something and there is an agitation he and I, mostly me, then I realize that all he wants is this. He is not trying to take over but he doesn't know, so I bent and sort of became the female and it became so pleasant and so easy, so flowing. Oh this is fun. It was no longer a struggle.

Theresa's narrative speaks about easier and strategic ways for dealing with gender communication which avoids reactionary politics and instead focuses on communicative goals. Instead of feeding competitive fire, a woman can choose to focus on the



communicative goals of an interaction and work on developing mutual understanding and respect. To this end, the feminine (or the qualities of nurturing, understanding, gentleness) can be employed productively to create a mutually satisfying inter-gender communicative encounter.

In summary, some women in the community rejected dominant feminist discourses about gendered behavior and conduct and instead used Amma's teachings on developing equality in mind and non-reactionary approaches to the issue of gender inequalities to forge a path for productive, mutually respectful, collaborative inter-gender communication.

### *Awakening of a Universal Motherhood*

#### *Amma's Message on Universal Motherhood*

Amma's 2002 message on *Awakening Universal Motherhood* influenced many women in the community. In this message, Amma spoke about the influence of patriarchy on women's minds and said this thwarted their success in social and spiritual lives. She says that the awakening must happen within, the limitations were limitations only when accepted by the mind, and that the power to overcome limitations exists within women. In a manner that evoked Irigaray (1985) when she spoke about the subordination of the feminine and importance of the concept of mother, Amma said that power existed in her innate motherhood. She linked qualities like love, empathy, and patience to motherhood and stated that these were "inborn," "nature" given qualities in her that she must embrace as she surges to overcome her limitations. She said:

A woman's mind has the capacity to reflect and react at the same time, whereas a man tends to reflect less and react more. A woman can listen to the sorrows of other people and respond with compassion; but still, when faced with a challenge, she can rise to the situation and react as strongly as any man.

It is the power of motherhood that enables women to reflect and react. The more a woman identifies with her innate motherhood, the more she awakens to that *shakti*, or pure power. The awakening of women begins when they develop this power within themselves; then the world will begin to listen to their voices once more. (Amritanandamayi, 2003, p.48)

Amma then posited that real humanity emerged only when the masculine and feminine principles were balanced; that because of the exile of the feminine principle, the Earth was being destroyed and there was an increase in suffering in family and society. She urged women to understand the importance of not “turning their back” to the feminine qualities and instead embrace them for the sake of healing of the world.

She proceeded to provide suggestions for improving of women’s lives, which ranged from combating gender-based violence, protesting media’s portrayal of women as sex objects, eradicating poverty, and improving literacy levels amongst women. She also requested people to integrate the concept of selfless service in their lives and dedicate themselves to improving the situation in society today. Finally, she said that motherhood was not “restricted to women who have given birth; it is a principle inherent in both women and men. It is love—and that love is the very breath of life” (Amritanandamayi, 2003, p. 61). She urged men to awaken their maternal qualities and thereby contribute to the healing of the Earth. She said, “Motherhood, in its ultimate sense, has nothing to do with bearing a child, but with love, compassion and selflessness. It lies in totally giving to others” (*Amma: Sri Mata Amritanandamayi Devi*, para 1).

#### *Community Understanding of Universal Motherhood*

Women in the community referred to this message when they spoke to the need to develop maternal qualities in themselves. Arati spoke about how she had always respected and honored the maternal side of her personality and how meeting Amma provided greater impetus to her decision to actively awaken her maternal aspect. The women also spoke about how the problems of modern society are rooted in competition and the survival of fittest. Along the lines of Amma’s message on awakening motherhood, they provided suggestions to improve leadership and workplace structures based on a motherhood model. Arati spoke about the masculine and non-maternal bias in the workplace:

I think in today’s society, that workplace values have declined so drastically, that the environment tends to be in opposition to one’s expression of feminine and maternal qualities. This may be more applicable to workplace life in bigger cities where life can be highly competitive. At least, that was my experience. I wanted to be nurturing and to be a good person in the world. But in order to succeed in

the workforce, I had to compete, I had to strategize, and I had to take on male qualities which were not really comfortable for me. I guess I am not a very competitive person, but that does not mean that I am not motivated. I am motivated in the proper, righteous atmosphere. I am not competitive I guess in the normal American sense, which essentially means you have to win over others, and lord over others and not support others. In this society, I believe that, all too often, we are encouraged to get what we want and take the most—irrespective of the harm one may do to others in the process. To me, this is simply unrighteous and I feel that such misguiding messages are common in American society

Premamaya offered a definition of feminism which emphasized the mother:

True feminism is really knowing who you are as a woman in the society and contributing as a woman and being proud to be a woman. We have gifts to contribute, we are mothers, we have all that ultimate compassion that allows us to be mothers, to help be that other side of the relationship. It takes two halves to be in a relationship.

In a sense, the participants spoke to a paradigm which suggested that there was something essential in a woman.

But, interestingly, Amma's messages in India are quite different from those in the Western platforms. In India, Amma spoke thus in *Awaken Children*,

Woman is *shakti* (Power). She is much more powerful than man . . . . But by nature, women are yielding and giving and this often results in being unsteady . . . . A woman's self-confidence is often weak, but she can make it unshakably firm. A woman can do it, for she has the patience . . . . A woman can rule as well as a man if she brings out the dormant masculine qualities within her.

(Amritanandamayi, 1992, p. 13-14)

It is possible, since the status of women in India is abysmal—with most women still fulfilling roles ascribed by patriarchy, suffering a great sense of insecurity—that Amma's messages to women awaken a more masculine aspect of their beings. What is important to note is that Amma's message is not about women being “only” feminine, but rather towards developing a balance between masculine and feminine qualities. And the balancing of these qualities does not create an androgyny, but, rather, a *mother*.

Some of the women noted that this indeed was the thrust of Amma's message: to develop a balance of masculine and feminine qualities under the nurturing umbrella of motherhood. Bhuvana said she was more of a tomboy, deemphasizing her feminine side:

I probably feel more a male than a female. I am more a tomboy. That is what I love about Mother. She can be so feminine and beautiful and she can be so tough. She's got the masculine. As a woman, spirituality or Mother has taught me to be a strong, balanced person with a little bit of male and a little bit of female.

Elena claimed that Amma's talk about motherhood included men:

Even in Amma's discourses saying this is what is needed whether you are a man or a woman, you need to be more motherly.

Both the narratives show that participants believed that feminine and masculine are qualities within humans, rather than identity-positions. They also explain that mother in the community is not linked to bodily functions, but to a balance of these qualities.

Amma is known in the community as a tough mother, a mother who disciplines, a mother who is very alert, and a mother who is present, compassionate, and unconditionally loving. In 2005, when I reached the *ashram* in India, I was told by many people that Amma was a tough mother. I did not understand what they meant. For me, "mother" meant sweet, gentle, loving, and compassionate woman. Over a period of time, I finally understood the import of their statements.

#### *Amma as the Symbol of Universal Motherhood*

Women in Amma's community do not experience a sudden burst of peace in their lives after meeting Amma. Most commonly, women in the community undergo a series of suffering—mental physical, financial—during their tenure with Amma. Crying, complaining about the new problem Amma has brought up (or "vasinating" as a devotee termed the emergence of *vasana* that created problems in their lives), wishing the journey to enlightenment would not be so tough, are common features in the community. During Amma tours and the different *sevas* around the year, devotees work so hard and often suffer from deep exhaustion. And yet, somewhere deep within them, unable to resist Amma's charisma, they undergo a deep personal transformation. Every woman participant, without exception, said that her life was incredibly transformed after meeting

Amma and that the transformation was internal, although sometimes in their worldly gains. Arati said:

In like every single way possible. It is hard to think of specifics. Since Amma came in my life, my whole life has been transformed, everything has changed.

Similarly Lisa said:

She has just changed everything in my life.

Another participant who wished to remain unnamed spoke about the influence in a different way:

... to say she changed my life would be an understatement, you know, it is, more like she is my life and understand that in a much larger sense than of her physical. That might scare some people who might say “Huh.” But to understand who she is to the degree you can and that makes lot of sense that somehow she *is* my life.

In this narrative, the participant emphasized that influence transcended the self-Other dichotomy into a realization that Amma was not an Other who influenced; rather it was an awakening that she was divinity already present within the participant.

The environment around Amma is anything but sweet or gentle. Unlike other spiritual retreats, where there maybe silence, regular prayers, gentle and soft voices, Amma’s spiritual retreats are more like a three-ring circus straight out of India. There is a shopping area to buy spiritually compatible items. There are tables with staff that offer advice on astrology, health, and healing. There are tables with information about different activities. And then, of course, there are people everywhere moving, talking, pushing, asking, answering, crying, complaining, meditating, kids crying and bawling, mothers irritated and upset, fights amongst friends, *sevites*, couples, devotees struggling to sit closer to Amma, to touch her, ask her, talk to her, gaze at her—it is a bollywood movie at its finest. And yet, amidst the loud noises and flurry of activities, participants say a change happens deep inside them—a realization, an awakening for some healing.

And the soft, seemingly weak woman clad-in-white is anything but fragile. She sits on her chair, smiling beautifully at some woman, playing with a child, holding a baby in her arms. She seems so accessible, so present, so loving, and so tactile. Yet, when she rises up from her seat, it feels like the world falls back. I have at times in the night sat very close to her and watched her rise from her seat, and I have stepped back at the gush

of power that this woman exudes. When she is ready to walk, it feels as if no crowd can stop her; it is almost like a strong wind passing through the corridor. You look and give way helplessly. Bhuvana spoke about Amma's dual nature:

I was really impressed by the fact that she had a fierce quality. That is the other thing about Amma. Here she is sweet and little, round and then I have seen over the years taken different forms like a mother does. She expects certain things, she expects discipline, when to give discipline, when not to get disciplined She can be so strong. We need to be strong along with sweet and kind and loving.

In one of the blog posts in the Amritapuri *ashram* website, a devotee described a scene in Gujarat, a state in India. Amma was in the second floor of a house. Devotees had gathered in the first floor and packed up through the stairs. Many of them were men, and they were extremely aggressive about wanting to touch Amma and take her blessings. There was much jostling going on. The organizers were worried that Amma would be hurt or manhandled by the crowd. They plotted to find another way for Amma to leave. But instead Amma stepped out of room, and plunged directly into the crowd, pulling each visitor into her embrace. The crowd gave way, as she moved through, quickly hugging each person on her path. The relieved organizers followed her out of the house.

The reason why I have described in detail the interaction of devotees with Amma and how they perceive her is to allow the readers to understand that what Amma seems to symbolize to the community is a perfect balance of the male and the female, the masculine and feminine qualities. Therefore, the comments of the participants evoking and embracing the feminine should not be interpreted as essentializing women in a patriarchal sense of the term. Amma as a role model in the community allows us to explore men and women, not in terms of essence or gender, but in terms of where the dominant tendencies lie. In a way, men and women in this worldview become humans whose uniqueness, amongst other things, is primed by a certain slant in the balance of qualities available in nature.

This ability to see humans as transcending gender was mentioned by Nistula:

When I see men I see woman in the man and when I see women, I see man in the woman. So we are just souls here.

Likewise, another participant said:

On one level this is all real, I am a woman, you are a woman, and I am in your house. But on another level, on a level that I don't understand very well, but Amma understands both the levels very well. When I am deep in meditation, *I am not me*. I feel, it is rare, but I feel I am not "this" (pointing to herself). (emphasis mine)

### *Contradictions and Tensions*

Although the data showed that the women strived for equality in mind, and formed their identities around a particular notion of motherhood that balances masculine and feminine qualities, the journey to attaining these ideals is neither homogenous nor smooth. The path is fraught with tensions and confusion, among the more salient are tensions related to perception of gender bias, competition, and hetero-normativity.

Participants and devotees reported sensing the contradictions between the rules fostered in the community versus what Western feminism had taught. For example, through participant-observation, I have learned that arrangement of devotees and visitors in the darshan line during Amma tours has a specific rule and procedure. When the line back *sevites* are allowed to arrange families, the sequence is, the children sit first, behind them their father sits, and behind the father, the mother sits. In the case of couples, the husband sits in the front and the wife sits behind him. This arrangement annoyed several Western women who would insist on sitting next to their husband, or sometimes sitting in front of him. I have been asked for reasons why such an arrangement is made, and I would usually say: "That is what I have been told. I don't know the exact reason." The arrangement would sometimes be messed up by the family members and couples deciding to bypass the rule at some point in the *darshan* line. It used to be uncomfortable and embarrassing to go up to the couple or family and ask them to be rearranged. Sometimes, I used to give up and let the *sevites* in the *darshan* front area manage the arrangement.

When Amma gave *darshan* to couples, husbands were hugged first, followed by the wife, and then Amma hugged the couple together. There was no chance for anybody to mess up this arrangement, as *sevites* nearly quickly moved the husband first into Amma's embrace, followed by the wife. When Amma gave special items like an apple, a rose, a sandalwood piece, or ash packets after darshan, she would thrust those items in the

hands of the man. This would cause heartache amongst many Western women who were taken aback by the apparent gender discrimination at the heart of *darshan*.

For example, a participant related this story to me. The woman and her husband went up to Amma to ask a question about their lives. Amma motioned the woman to stay where she was and asked her husband to come closer. She gave her answer to the husband and then gave him an apple. The participant was furious because it was a question that was from both of them and yet only her husband was asked to be near Amma and, to top it off, *he, not she*, was given an apple. It took her sometime to calm down and regret her outburst at the unfairness of the process. The following words are from that participant's interview, where she describes the contradictory feelings she has within the community and her struggle with the notion of giving vs. taking:

I am a strong woman. I have struggled for freedom and independence. And I believed this was the right thing to do—it is to be free and to be independent, to go and come as I please, to do what I want, and that that would make me happier. But then here comes Amma and this whole Hindu tradition where women are second, and I stayed away from her. I mean I went to see her every year but I would not get involved in the organizational level and so just a few years ago (I got involved) because I just couldn't find balance in living all these years.

I had worked to say what I wanted, and go after the things I wanted, and to feel some sort of freedom. And what I am discovering with Amma even though I don't understand too well, I still have resistance, but I am discovering that in the giving that there is freedom. And it is not easy. It is not easy. It is not easy for me.

This participant was not the only one who saw the contradictions between what rules fostered in the community versus what Western feminism had taught. I have seen and heard women telling me that Amma seemed more affectionate to their husbands than to them and at times was ignoring the wives. There is heartache amongst the women over this issue, jealousy against their husbands. But it is not a heartache that seems serious enough to break with the community or with their spouses. Instead, the women wonder about Amma's design behind creating this heartache. What is she trying to teach them?



What are they not listening to? Thus the heartache for most women seems, at one end, a spiritual exercise and at the other, a deepening of their emotional attachment to Amma.

Besides the perception of gender bias in the *darshan* line, I noticed gender-bias in language used in some of the books as well as in the discourses given by some of the *swamis*.<sup>72</sup> The entire *Awaken Children* series refers to only “he” and not “she.” God is also referred to as *he*. During some of the spiritual discourses given by the *swamis*, some of the examples made fun or ridiculed women. This was especially visible in 2005 and 2006. I heard rumors that some of the women complained about the bias to the *swamis* and noticed that in 2008, Swami Amritaswarupananda was very careful to include both genders in examples as well as in reference. I put the question about the bias to a *swamini*<sup>73</sup> in 2007, and she said that the *swamis* had lived in a culture where it was customary to speak in a certain way, it had become a habit and that habits were hard to break. She assured me that the bias was in the language, not in their hearts.

Another tension comes from the importance given to families and to heterosexual unions in public discourse. Amma often referred to families and heterosexual couples and suggested ways to strengthen families and marriages in her spiritual discourses. Motherhood and children are highly extolled in the community discourse, and this alienated women who are not mothers or are unmarried. One of the devotees mentioned during the 2008 *Devi Bhava* about how she felt alone and unwanted because Amma seemed to only talk about married couples and families and she had none. Single women also spoke about the difficulties of developing friendship with spouses of women devotees for fear of being misinterpreted as flirtatious. On the other hand, women whose husbands were not devotees of Amma also worked on keeping a distance from other men to prevent jealousies that might threaten their marriage or another marriage. Even lesbians whose sexual identity was not known in the community said that they were careful about talking to the menfolk within the community. Betty spoke to this issue:

I have my stigma, it is either in my mind or is real; because I am a single, I do not have a man attached to me—is she is going to be busting up our marriage? That is

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<sup>72</sup> *Swami* is the term used to describe some senior male disciples of Amma who usually wear saffron colored robes.

<sup>73</sup> *Swamini* is the term used to describe senior *female* disciples of Amma who usually wear saffron colored robes.

the problem with A and B because I think A was so jealous of me being friends with B. I don't know what her fear was, but I felt something very strong. Because I could just talk to A while B was the hard nose with me, and I couldn't stand it any more. I had to back out.

At the same time some of the single women told me that Amma's sons were highly desirable because unlike men outside the community, they were motherly men with soft, emotional, and gentle qualities. Some of the marriages that are solemnized by Amma are often of couples who met and fell in love in the Amma community. Single women also actively involved Amma in their dating processes. Women reported showing Amma the photographs of their dating partners to receive her blessing and permission to continue dating. One of the woman devotees said in a *satsang* that Amma warned her not to continue dating a particular guy, but she could not bring herself to break away from him. Later she realized that he had been cheating on her for a while when she ran into his "fiancee" at a party. Some women even showed Amma photographs from internet dating sites and sought her advice on whether they should date the particular person.

The only non-celibate lesbian woman participant did not address the issue of heterosexual bias in the community. There are several lesbian couples and single lesbian women in the Amma community. The couples go for hugs together and they decide who should sit in the front and who in the back in the *darshan* line. Amma hugs them as she hugs heterosexual couples. Lesbian couples do many important *sevas* in Amma tours, and the *satsang* coordinators for Albuquerque till 2006 were a lesbian couple. I have also seen the same set of couples attend programs for many years.

I put the question of heterosexual bias to a lesbian couple informally at an Amma tour program. I wanted to know if they were hurt and alienated by their invisibility in spiritual discourses and books. The couple replied with two main points: one, they argued that Amma was probably trying to strengthen the foundation of marriage and family since it was falling apart so easily in the West; secondly, they said that Amma always said that there needs to be a balance of masculine and feminine qualities in a person, rather than suggesting that a good relationship was a man and a woman together. This approach, they said, opened up possibilities for same sex couples to try and achieve the same in

themselves and in their relationships. Further, they said, Amma tries to not get involved political struggles and prefers to work with devotees on a case by case basis.

In summary, this section presented data on how a particular notion of motherhood was employed to create an identity that embraced both the masculine and feminine in the community. This section also elaborated the different tensions within the community and showed how the women made sense of these tensions and how that influenced their worldview. In the next section, I explore the implications of the findings to feminist theory and practice.

### Discussion of Findings

This section discusses the findings and their implications for feminist theorizing and practice. Women in the community enacted and disidentified from gender identities in particular ways that provide a provocative reading of the antiessentialism and multiculturalism debate that arose from the equality versus difference questions and that Fraser (1997) has described as one of the current impasses in feminist scholarship. The findings also call for a return and positive evaluation of the feminine in feminist scholarship.

Fraser (1997) has posited that one of the problems in contemporary feminist theory is the oppositional stance of antiessentialist and multiculturalist thinking in scholarship. She noted that, historically, this stance emerged from the debate between notions of equality and difference. I will briefly describe the phases through which the current impasse in feminist scholarship has evolved.

On the notion of equality, Simone De Beauvoir wrote an important book on the status of women in the society in 1952, titled *The Second Sex: The Classic Manifesto of the Liberated Woman*. This book influenced many generations of women and feminists, society, and social thought in general. The book, although more than half a century old, still continues to influence modern feminist thinking in spite of the many criticisms it has faced. The central purpose of its author was to analyze and illustrate how gender is not innate but rather created by patriarchy to further the interests of men in the society. Beauvoir analyzed the subtle and not-so-subtle ways in which women are socialized into believing that they are the “weaker” sex. Her critique starts with the situation of women from childhood into adulthood, passing through marriage and motherhood, to brilliantly

tease out the social practices and messages that create women as a second sex. She argued that “this secondary standing is not imposed of necessity by natural ‘feminine’ characteristics but rather by strong environmental forces of educational and social tradition under the purposeful control of men” (Beauvoir, 1952, p.viii).

Fellow French feminist Irigaray critiqued De Beauvoir’s notion of equality as it seemed to universalize the masculine as the normal and feminine as the socially created version. She said that this approach will only turn women into few more men. She wrote: “Demanding to be equal presupposes a term of comparison. Equal to what? What do women want to be equal to? Men? Wage? A public position? Equal to what? Why not to themselves?” (Irigaray, 1991, p.32). She argued that women must be equal as women, not like men; that life conditions and female body had differing needs from men and must be treated as such. She emphasized the need for a female identity that was exclusive of patriarchal influence and control. And so began a scholarship on difference where feminism became related to the reintegration and evaluation of the feminine as a superior and more desired aspect of being.

But by the mid-1980s, the equality-difference debate was subsumed by new scholarship from women of color and lesbians who questioned if the category of woman was sufficient enough to explain the differences contained within it. hooks (2000) spoke emphatically about the need to understand feminism in terms of race and class. Mohanty (1991) questioned the notion of global sisterhood and argued that first-world Anglo feminism could not represent and understand local third-world contexts of women’s lives and their societies. In this way, a scholarship based on the notion of multiple, intersecting differences flourished in academia. This is variously called cultural feminism (Alcoff, 1988) or multiculturalism (Fraser, 1997). This position favored providing political recognition to all group identities. It also meant that, at some level, there was a notion of an essential cultural woman in each group, on the basis of which a social struggle for recognition could be enacted.

Around this time, post-structuralists began to question if a category called woman existed at all (Alcoff, 1988) and took an antiessentialism stance where any and all identities were considered as basically fictitious and constructs that continued the politics

of exclusion (Fraser, 1997). They relied on deconstructive methods to destabilize the notion of gender identities and gender difference.

Alcoff (1988) called this as the identity crisis in feminist scholarship—how do we develop a scholarship when the basic subject of the scholarship, “the woman” itself is in question? She attempted to resolve this crisis by invoking woman as a “position” from where feminist politics can emerge rather than “a set of attributes that are ‘objectively identifiable’” (Alcoff, 1988, p.34). Spivak (1994) answered the question of essence with the notion of “strategic essentialism”—an essence that is invoked for the purposes of political struggle. Fraser (1997) attempted to resolve the identity crisis by bringing our attention back to the notion of social equality and politico-economic redistribution. She said that both multiculturalism and antiessentialism had abstracted themselves from the basic drive of feminism: the struggle for social justice. She argued that a feminist scholarship that accommodated multiple, intersecting differences from the perspective of social equality and redistribution could help resolve the impasse in feminist scholarship.

I agree with the above mentioned modern feminist scholars about the need of invoking identity as a strategic move as well as the importance of bringing our awareness back to social justice and social equality. However, as Fernandes (2003) pointed out, in spite of the efforts of feminist scholars, “the central approaches in feminism continue to rest on the logic of identification” (p.30). Such identity-based politics has been criticized by Anzaldúa (2002), Bradley (2007), Fernandes (2003), and Keating (2002) as providing an illusory anchor for political struggles that does not allow for “the kinds of transformation of self and world that are necessary for a lasting manifestation of justice and equality” (Fernandes, 2003, p.31).

Along with the practical realities of feminist activism, a question about the definition of feminism as a collective experience of us as “women” and as a collective political struggle persists. To understand how the notion of collective entered feminist scholarship, we need to return to Marx, who interpreted Hegel’s dialectics in terms of material realities of class struggle. He argued that the workers were alienated from the means of production and from each other through a system that exploited them economically and politically. He therefore emphasized the need for workers to develop class consciousness and organize themselves around this notion of a collective that was

being oppressed and marginalized. He also emphasized the significance of intellectuals in developing collective consciousness and organizing class struggle (Duke, 1976).

Although Marx put forth an understanding of how social inequalities were perpetrated in the society, his dichotomy between the bourgeoisie and proletariat as the basis for class struggle was criticized as simplistic and limited in its power to accommodate the historical revisions. For example, women spoke about the inequalities that existed within the worker class as their domestic and reproductive labor went unpaid and unnoticed. Women of color broke away from the women's struggles for socio-political equality to speak to the class struggles that existed with White women. This pattern of differentiation has continued to include variations of caste and sexual orientation. As described above, any notion of collective identities that invokes the subject of woman is challenged on the grounds of its authenticity, both theoretically and experientially. As Lawson (2007) argued, "Fundamental here once more is the fact that human subjectivities, human experiences and social structure cannot be reduced one to another; they are each ontologically distinct, albeit highly interdependent, modes of being" (p.155). This notion of uniqueness in each individual was poignantly pointed out to me in an interview with a well-read participant in the community who responded to my request to describe her journey as a "woman" in the following way:

I do subscribe to women's rights, equality and job fairness. But as far as that question, my journey as a woman, because I have never been any other, I don't know how to come at that. (laughter) I am not getting the key to that. (question rephrased a number of times) When you say as a woman, as a woman as opposed to what? As a woman opposed to man? How would I know? How would I know how this journey is different from this journey as a man?

History teaches us that although social inequalities become apparent at the level of gender, class, race, and sexual orientation, in fact, individuals in each of these groups have also replicated or have the potential to replicate the structures of unequal politico-economic distribution and alienation. The smallest denominator of greed and power exists, perhaps, not at the level of a group, but at the level of an individual. Perhaps it is not systems and institutions but human minds that propagate domination and injustice.

Each one of us, I argue, is implicated in a potential or actual enactment of that power, greed, and selfishness.

Along these lines, some scholars are radically reframing the approach to feminism to a call for a feminist education whose praxis lies on self-transformation and the practice of disidentification from local structures of privilege to make the political a personal and spiritual commitment to justice.<sup>74</sup> Such an approach requires a deep form of *intragender awareness*—what Anzaldúa called the *conocimiento* (deep awareness)—through which every person is invited to reflect and disengage from the privileges that multiple, intersecting differences allowed within us, even as we counter the abuses those differences may heap upon our social lives. Fernandes (2003) argued that, “students must disidentify from their own privilege in order to clearly analyze and, indeed, take responsibility for how that privilege shapes the most intimate aspects of their lives” (p. 33).

It is in the concept of intragender awareness or *conocimiento* where modern thinking dialogues with ancient wisdom to answer questions that plague feminist scholarship and activism. Scholars, drawing upon indigenous traditions and their spiritual practices, have emphasized the importance of positing a shared factor of identity (Keating, 2002), or a notion of interconnectedness (Anzaldúa, 1991) in the sense of the sacred, divine, or universe (Fernandes, 2003) from where we could learn to embrace and include differences. The findings in this study intersect with this notion of interconnectedness and *conocimiento* and show how this notion allows women in the Amma community to approach bodies, gendered discourses, gender communication, and their identities in transmodern ways.

The participants in this study spoke about how they avoided and rejected the politics of retributive justice in gender communication and hegemonic feminist beliefs on what constituted an emancipated woman. They reflected and worked on including the man, a process that Anzaldúa (2002) argued, challenged conventional identities—“to include men (in this case, feminist-oriented ones) is to collapse the gender line” (p. 4). The communication encounters recounted in the interviews showed collaboration, mutual

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<sup>74</sup> Note: The call for self-transformation is correlated with the struggle to achieve social justice for all and is not a mere individual desire for enlightenment. One of the participants commented that this analysis was “perfect.”

respect, and compassion—values that should ideally found any social justice ventures. To this end, they reintegrated the feminine in their body and conduct—which they perceived had been rejected as weak and undesirable by social discourses and experience of abuse—in unique and empowering ways, without subserving to the other sex. This reintegration of the feminine is not a theoretical exposition; instead, it remains an experiential healing reality that is unique to each woman.

At the same time, “woman” was not understood as essentially “feminine.” Instead, she was understood as having a common essence with man that was divine in nature and superseded the social discourse of gender. The essence existed as a potential that could be awakened by, amongst other things, the balance of feminine and masculine qualities in each person. This approach collapses the conventional gender lines without denying the reality that, in an unenlightened state, we remain gendered. Note that the discourse of the reintegration of feminine has moved from the confines of the woman to include men. Thus, not only should women create a balance between the masculine and feminine qualities, men are also invited to reintegrate the feminine in their lives. This approach challenges conventional understandings of the male gender and their resistance to feminine attributes.

The masculine and feminine becomes almost a skill set for use in different social interactions in this community. Whether in the ways Amma was perceived in the community or in their own accounts of communication encounters, women express these qualities differently at different times. In a way, we could perhaps ponder on the term “gender” as a set of qualities whose expression can be controlled by the person behind them. Butler (1993) defined gender in terms of performativity and called for transgressive public performances to challenged gendered norms. Perhaps, transgression can happen more naturally and privately by people exhibiting more masculine qualities in certain social contexts, exhibiting more feminine qualities in other contexts, and exhibiting a balance or a mix in some other contexts. This study supports the assertion of Bradley (2007) when she said: “While we may associate these styles as typically masculine and feminine, it is clear that men and women can choose to employ either of these approaches or indeed a mix of both” (p.20).



More importantly, although gender may be construed as a performance, it does have a purpose and function to play in a social situation. There are times when our masculine qualities like valor and leadership are needed and times when feminine qualities like nurture and compassion are needed. Gender allows us to navigate the social realities in ways that can bring harmony to the universe and facilitate our journey to the state of connectedness.

The body was also provided a signification in the community that transcended gendered discourses by positing that it was a site where spiritual purification could occur. The body, like the consciousness also attained enlightenment and was divine. The body also transgressed gendered discourses as in the example of Amma, when she donned male clothes and giving *darshan* in the *Krishna Bhava* (the mood of the male god Krishna). Likewise, 19<sup>th</sup> century mystic Ramakrishna was known to don the clothes of women on many occasions to worship Kali, and 14<sup>th</sup> century female mystic Lal Ded from Kashmir traveled in naked abandon, claiming that there was no shame in exposing her body for she was yet to meet a man. She said:

*tseth navuy tsandram novuy*  
*zalmay dyahum navam novuy*  
*yanu petha lali me tanuman novuy*  
*tanu lal bo navam navuy chhas.*

(My mind cleansed and new, the moon is new too,  
Everything in this ocean of the world I saw as new,  
Since I, Lal, washed my body and self,  
Forever renewed am I !) (Matoo, 2000, para 18)

Thus, some of the mystical traditions as well as the findings in this study inform us that along with the work on problematizing social discourses about gender and sex, spirituality can empower women and men to work on disengaging from those discourses in their minds and hearts. While modern feminist philosophy predominately focuses on the social aspect of women's emancipation, the ancient wisdom focuses predominately on the intrapersonal aspect of women's emancipation. Perhaps we need to learn from both the worlds to create a transmodern conception of women's emancipation.

Interestingly, the awakening of the divine essence has been termed as the awakening of the universal motherhood in the Amma community. Motherhood as a term can bring old memories of fixed social-sexual difference. Riley (1983) in her book on childcare and mothering, addressed the troubling concept of motherhood by stating, recognizing the need for adequate childcare as a way to meet the needs of mothers, “in no way commits you to supposing that the care of children is fixed eternally as female” (p. 194). Further, she advocated that we need to restrain from deploying any version of “motherhood” to avoid falling back to the trap of essentialized motherhood.

I agree with Riley that motherhood is a problematic concept. Not all women in the community subscribed to the notion of mothering. Some women, especially those with no children were intimidated and alienated by that concept. Women struggled to come to terms with the notion as an abstraction rather than an embodied demand. At the same time, I argue, first, that mother remains and will always remain our sacred connection to humanity and, as Irigaray (1991) had argued, it is pertinent to reintegrate that concept into our understanding somehow without falling back to fixed notions about women as essentially mothers. Secondly, the theoretical problem with the phallogocentric origins of the term “mother” is rooted in a Derridean argument that language is rooted in reality and it is through language, “perpetually deconstructed, that reality can be understood” (Dissanayake, 2007, p.37). On the other hand, the ancient philosophers like Nagarjuna argued that language is empty of reality and needs to be transcended to understand reality (Dissanayake, 2007). Hence, I think we need to approach the term mother not as signifying a material reality in the society, but merely as a metaphorical guide to a transcendent reality.

I believe that a notion of mother as a divine essence can be a possible feminist image in the quest for social justice. This leads me to attempt to a definition of feminism in transmodern terms. Feminism is an emancipatory and service-oriented project for women, designed to bring *conocimiento* on our collusion with power and privilege, to bring about a balance between masculine and feminine principles within ourselves and the world, and to support community service to bring social equality and justice to the category of woman at this historical moment in the society. In this definition social transformation is predicated on widespread and deep self-transformation, almost on a

Gandhian notion of change: “I change myself, I change the world.” One of the songs sung frequently in Gandhi’s evening prayer sessions says thus:

*Vaishnav jan to tene kahiye je*

*Peed paraayi jaane re*

*Par-dukkhe upkaar kare toye*

*Man abhimaan na aane re.*

(She is a devotee of Vishnu

Who knows the pain of others

Does good to others, especially those in misery

And does not let pride enter her mind)

I now provide a description of how I visualize the image of the mother in this feminist project. *Mother* is a person who is wise, strong, skilled, and assertive when needed, as well as nurturing, disciplined, compassionate, and loving. She is tough when her project needs discipline. Even when she is nurturing, it is not a passive emotion; it is an act that might at times be seen as violent, as aggressive, as unloving and yet her vision is large and broad and encompasses the knowledge of what the moment needs for a wise tomorrow. This is the Amazonian *mother-woman* whose strength is anchored in love and whose actions result in peace for today and tomorrow. This *mother-woman* may be an answer to Irigaray’s call to reclaim the “mother” from the patriarchy:

It is also necessary for us to discover and assert that we are always mothers once we are women. We bring something other than children into the world, we engender something other than children: love, desire, language, art, the social, the political, the religious, for example. But this creation has been forbidden us for centuries, and we must *reappropriate* this maternal dimension that belongs to us as women.

... we must not once more kill the mother who was sacrificed to the origins of our culture. We must give her new life, new life to that mother, to our mother *within* us and *between* us” (Irigaray, 1991, p.42, emphasis mine)

The notion of the Amazonian *mother-woman* is not grounded in gender or sex, it does not need to be a mother or mother-to-be in the body; it is a quality within all those who identify themselves as women. This includes transgendered women, lesbians,

women who cannot give birth, and women who dislike giving birth. It is not a quality that is expressed by all women, but rather something that can be uncovered and expressed by all women in their journey to emancipation.

Womanity is then a journey towards attaining that perfect state when the body becomes one with divinity. Along with social reforms and activism, each woman will also have to mother herself—critically nurture herself through self-monitoring, awareness, great discipline, consistency and determination—to become one of the many sites of compassion and liberty. This process overthrows the system of domination without being co-opted by it. This process breaks from patriarchy completely without violence or hostility or struggle. This process transcends theoretical barriers imposed by language and the rest, instead focuses as Bordo (1993) argued, the *real* body. This process can bring peace and love back to the world and to feminists in their own everyday lives.

#### Chapter Summary

This chapter explored the particular ways in which women in the Amma community identified and disidentified in terms of gender identities. Women healed from bodily abuse through disengagement from violence and a reintegration of the feminine by rejecting the notion that feminine means weak or undesirable. Women held that the body was a sacred site of purification and an active participant in the spiritual journey. Amma as a woman and as an enlightened being, served a liberating example from patriarchal discourses in religion. Women challenged hegemonic feminist discourse on what constituted an emancipated woman and searched within themselves in quest of an essence that they claimed was common to both men and women. Ideally, a woman was considered to be a balance between masculine and feminine qualities of nature. Gender seemed more like a dominant quality of either masculine or feminine nature that was expressed in social situations. The awakening of divinity within men and women was cast in terms of awakening of motherhood. These findings allowed an alternate reading of the antiessentialism and multiculturalism debate, and I argued that social transformation is perhaps predicated on self-transformation which can facilitate justice in deep, long lasting ways.

## CHAPTER SIX: CULTURAL IDENTITIES AND SPIRITUALITY

In this chapter, I explore how the participants and devotees negotiated the question of culture and their cultural identity in the community. Cultural identity is defined here as the emotional significance we attach to our sense of belonging or affiliation with the larger culture or cultural heritage, particularly in relation to the East-West cultural dichotomy. The findings presented below show that the ways cultural difference was negotiated were complex and multi-layered. Drawing on interview, field observation, and documentary data, I will highlight how participants and devotees engaged in a cultural dynamic that kept them rooted in their culture and trying to transcend the East-West dichotomy.

The data suggest that participants construe their cultural identity in unique ways by integrating their Western identity with elements of the Eastern-Other and, more specifically, by identifying Amma—as opposed to Hinduism or Indian culture and history—as the primary referent. In this process, they articulate diverse responses to the encounter with cultural difference: from discovering, befriending, and confronting the cultural Other to seeking to move beyond difference through communicative strategies that emphasize essential sameness, commonalities amongst cultures, and the dissolution of cultural differences in *darshan*. However, I will argue that compared to other dimensions of identity explored in this study (personal, gender, and religious identity), devotees in the community were more rooted in their cultural identity and seemed to find it more difficult to reach a state of connectedness with respect to cultural affiliation.

These dynamics of disidentification and identification around culture will be examined in the first section of this chapter through the discussion of four salient themes that emerged from the data: (1) Cultural dialectics: Discovering, befriending, and confronting East Indian culture, (2) Reconfiguring India as Amma, (3) Cultural alienation from own culture, (4) Searching for the unifying ground. In the second section of the chapter, I will discuss the implications of research findings in terms of their relevance for the understanding of the dynamic relation between intercultural communicative competence and intracultural awareness.

Indeed, the Amma community presents a rich site to study intercultural communication for it comprises an extraordinary range of countries and people in its

various programs and in the *ashram* in India. As one of the participants pointed out, “to be around Amma is to be in a United Nations of sorts.” To close this chapter introduction, I will present to the reader an overview of the multicultural dynamics that characterize this spiritual community. The community is spread over 33 countries and 6 continents. Amma programs draw thousands of people in Europe and United States, and I was surprised to note the crowds of visitors in countries like Chile, Brazil, Singapore, Japan, and Malaysia. In 2008, Amma visited Chile and Brazil for the first time. According to the Amritapuri website, the event drew close to 20,000 people in Santiago, Chile and an equally large crowd in Brazil. In Singapore, in the year 2009, 12,000 people were estimated to have been hugged by Amma. The crowds in Malaysia have been traditionally large, with crowds above 10,000. In Japan, crowds are known to fill stadiums.

In the Amritapuri *ashram* in India, I found devotees from various countries in South America like Venezuela and Brazil, Asian countries like Japan and China, various countries in Europe like Finland, Spain, Germany, Italy, and from the United States, the Caribbean Islands, and Australia. These devotees lived side by side with one another and the local Indians. Most of them wore Indian clothes and lived in very frugal and humble conditions. Personally, I was most excited to meet devotees from Finland and Venezuela because of their relative remoteness from India as well as their scarce representation amongst the tourists in India. The Venezuelan devotee became a good friend during the stay, and I found that her dad had been a devotee of Anandamayi Maa, a woman mystic in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. The devotee had come to India to visit another famous Indian guru and but instead was entranced by Amma and decided to commit herself to life as an ashramite with Amma. I had wonderful conversations about Goddess Kali with her as she was a Kali devotee.

The staff that accompanies Amma during the different tours in United States has a significant section of devotees from various parts of Europe and Australia as well as some from South America, besides a considerable group from different parts of India. During the initial period of my field work, I often found myself asking the tour staff which country they came from and making record of the same. I kept my ears open for different accents and different ways of expression in English.

The Amritapuri website, which is updated regularly, provided insights, news stories, and photographs of Amma programs and Amma devotees in various countries. The website at times resembled a travel website with great photographs and snapshots of people's lives in different countries. Further, almost every country has its own Amma website presented in local language. Thus, there are hundreds of Amma websites in different languages in the cyberspace.

Although I did not visit any country for Amma tours besides India and United States, the information on the Amritapuri website gave insights on how the programs are conducted in countries where English was not a primary language. Some of Amma's *swamis* and *bramhacharis*<sup>75</sup> spoke local languages and translate Amma's speeches during Amma tours. For example, Br. Shantamrita helps in translation activities during Amma tours in Japan. Besides this, local devotees helped in communicating information in local languages. Amma herself often sang a devotional song in the local language. While in New Mexico, Amma sang in various Indian languages, English, and Spanish. In Europe, Amma is known to sing in French, German, and Spanish. These songs invited an enthusiastic response from devotees who wildly cheered her when she sang in Spanish in New Mexico.

The readers are reminded here that India herself hosts several languages, and conducting Amma programs in various cities in India is itself a linguistic challenge. In early 2009, the Amritapuri website reported that Amma had conducted meditation sessions in two local south Indian languages, Tamil and Kannada. The website stated that this was the first time Amma had conducted these sessions in a language other than Malayalam and that instead of settling into meditation, the devotees cheered loudly on hearing Amma speak the local language.

The *satsangs* in New Mexico were dominated by Caucasian Americans with a handful of Hispanics, Germans, and East Indians thrown into the mix. *Satsangs* in California, Texas, New York, Michigan and few other places have a greater variety of cultures represented. My study mostly drew from field observations in the *satsangs* of New Mexico and the various Amma programs in New Mexico, California, and Michigan.

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<sup>75</sup> Renunciate disciples of varying seniority, administrative responsibilities, and spiritual stages.

## Findings

### *Cultural Dialectics: Integrating and Differentiating from East Indian Culture*

When asked about their reactions to the intercultural interaction and communication they encountered as members of the community, participants' responses varied from admiration of the East Indian culture, to efforts to understand and appreciate the Indian culture, to difficulties dealing with differences in cultural attitude and norms of East Indians.

#### *Integrating with the East*

Most of the participants in this study reported little or no knowledge of Indian culture or Hindu traditions. A few reported having practiced Buddhism and having visited India prior to meeting Amma. But the overwhelming tendency was for devotees to stumble into the Amma community. For instance, Marie reported:

I went to school for philosophy and I had always been into spirituality. One of my classes in college was Tibetan Buddhism, and I met many people from different religions. But I didn't know nearly as much about Hinduism as I do now.

Similarly, Sophia said:

I didn't know the names, I didn't know about *archana*. I did not know anything about *archana*, *devi puja* and Amma's practices.

One of the participants reported an anti-Hindu bias prior to meeting Amma, and a couple of the participants reported fear of cults around Indian gurus. One participant said:

I had an aversion to Hinduism, all the music, and the Gods; they were confusing to me. I much preferred something more quiet and contemplative.

The participants reported culture shock and confusion upon entering the Amma community or meeting Amma for the first time. The chanting and singing in Indian languages, the various smells of Indian incense sticks, and sandalwood, along with the aroma of various Indian culinary delights, the vibrant and sometimes gaudy Indian colors, people sitting sprawled over the carpet, Indian clothing, and the constant human traffic are some of the scenes that greet newcomers when they attend Amma's programs. The scene is that of a state fair—too many bodies around, too many different sounds, and too many different smells—intense, vibrant, irritating, and enchanting all at the same time. The environment is unlike that of the spiritual retreats that the readers may have seen; it



is more like a spiritual festival or celebration of kinds. Some participants reported their attempts to decode this strange environment when they first came to Amma for *darshan* even while they encountered a profound and even more strange experience of the sacred and holy around Amma. Peace described her culture shock:

And for the next couple of days, I was in real culture shock, because I didn't understand. I mean I come from a family of extreme Catholicism, I mean very Catholic, and here I am, when I met Amma, there's all this music I never heard before, and all these emotions coming up, and I wanted to sit down and kiss her feet and I'm like "What is this?"

In spite of the culture shock, as the above narrative indicates participants experienced an unexplained draw to the community. Theresa also described the dual nature of her first experience in the community:

I am looking sideways and I am seeing all these Indian people and all these commotion, I didn't understand anything. I kept saying, Master, I can't understand anything. I looked up and I saw Amma and I said, I am here Master, I am here and I fell to my knees, and I bowed down and I got into the *darshan* line.

In the narratives of their effort to integrate with the Eastern-Other, many participants spoke about the different ways in which they tried to learn the nuances of Indian philosophy and tradition in order to conform to Amma spiritual practices. Even though the majority of participants did not report having close relations with East Indians, a couple of women spoke fondly about the significance of having friends and mentors in the Indian community. Mita was welcomed into the Amma community by the East Indians in California and found their devotion to be inspirational. Arati found her relationship with an Indian couple to be helpful and anchoring in her journey through the nuances of the Amma community's practices. Bhuvana had close friends in the East Indian Amma community of the Southwest. Sophia learnt more about Indian culture and its norms from her friends, whom she called "mentors" in the Amma community. Mita reflected on the level of devotion of her East Indian friends in the community:

Their (East Indians) level to devotion to Amma was something which I had never experienced before. I had never seen any devotion like that. It was such a sweet

devotion. . . . They just worked tirelessly with a smile and they were inspirational to me.

Arati spoke fondly about her East Indian friends, their devotion and their support to her efforts to learn East Indian practices:

One of my most cherished communications has been with an Indian couple who have been with Amma for quite some time. Because this couple grew up in India, they've been able to help familiarize us with Indian culture in general and Amma's path in particular. They've explained and clarified things for me in a way that has been extremely beneficial. I greatly admire this couples' devotion to Amma, their overall manner and discipline, as well as the way that they serve Amma and others.

Other participants related to me the range of cultural resources they utilized to learn about Hinduism and Indian culture. Sara bought *An Idiot's Guide to Hinduism* written by a Westerner to understand how Hindu practices were different and what comprised those practices. Mita spent days and hours learning to chant the 108 names of Amma, writing the different pronunciations meticulously onto notecards. Many participants attended Sanskrit and chanting classes taught in Santa Fe and Albuquerque. Other participants and other community devotees made great efforts to sing *bhajans* in Indian languages and to Indian *ragas*.<sup>76</sup> Some learnt to play the harmonium<sup>77</sup> and a couple of others learnt to play the tabla.<sup>78</sup> They also learnt to cook basic Indian recipes like *kichari*,<sup>79</sup> *dal*,<sup>80</sup> and some even succeeded in preparing more complex Indian recipes like *sambhar*,<sup>81</sup> *gajar ka halwa*,<sup>82</sup> and *vada*.<sup>83</sup> They wore Indian clothes like *salwar kameez*<sup>84</sup> and *saris*<sup>85</sup> when possible at *satsangs* and during Amma programs. They learnt

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<sup>76</sup> *Ragas* are specific order of music keys meant to create a mood for the song.

<sup>77</sup> Indian musical instrument similar to a piano, but much smaller in size and with a lesser range of scales and is played with one hand.

<sup>78</sup> Indian drums, common in North India and played with the palms of the hands.

<sup>79</sup> A lentil and rice combination cooked with specific Indian spices.

<sup>80</sup> Lentil cooked with certain Indian spices

<sup>81</sup> A south-Indian recipe which includes lentils, tamarind, vegetables and variety of Indian spices

<sup>82</sup> A time-consuming north-Indian dessert prepared by cooking shredded carrot in milk, ghee, and sugar and garnished with almonds and cardamom.

<sup>83</sup> An Indian savory.

<sup>84</sup> A dress style adapted from central and west Asian Muslims which consists of a loose pant with a long flowing upper garment which has slits on the side.

Hindu religious rituals like *arati*<sup>86</sup> and *puja*<sup>87</sup> and performed them at *satsang* or in the privacy of their homes.

There was an effort amongst Western devotees to integrate with the East in their appearance. I was taken aback during my first field experience in an Amma program in June 2004 by the sight of hundreds of Western women wearing Indian clothes with the ease and grace of an Indian woman in her home space. Many did not wear any make up nor did they have elaborate hairdos. As an East Indian, I have always noted the intensity with which American women view their looks—the elaborate makeup, fashionable haircuts, and extensive rituals involving the use of various hair products to create a clean, good looking hairstyle. I have come from a community where wearing *kajal*<sup>88</sup> in the eyes, flowers in the hair, and a silk garment was the extent of the makeup. I never used shampoo till the age of 13 or so and was introduced to conditioner in my late twenties. We used soapnuts to wash our hair and oil to condition it. Thickness, luster and length of the hair braids designated beauty. It would be common for women to just pull and fold their hair into a bun and have frizz all over the head during a workday. As a newcomer to United States, I often stared at undergraduates in the locker room working with many different hair products as they slowly styled their hair into exquisite shapes. Therefore, for me to see many Western women with casual hairdos was surprising and made me feel as if their approach to Indian culture was authentic and genuine.

Integration between East and West happened in space also. Many Americans sat close to each other on the floor during Amma programs. Given the American need to have greater physical space as compared to Indians,<sup>89</sup> Amma programs disturbed the conventional proxemic dynamics in many ways. Firstly, Americans had to sit very close to one another. Secondly, during *darshan* they would often be nudged or pulled up by *sevites* in their efforts to keep the *darshan* line moving. Besides this, American devotees have to work in very crowded conditions for close to 20 hours each day for 4-5 days during the tour program in New Mexico. While some Americans complained of feeling

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<sup>85</sup> It is a continuous 6 yards piece of unstitched cloth of a specific material and design which is draped in particular ways to make for a full dress. Wearing a sari and learning to work with it requires steady practice.

<sup>86</sup> Hindu flame ceremony at the end of a worship in which camphor flame is offered to the deities.

<sup>87</sup> Hindu style of worship.

<sup>88</sup> Indian eyeliner made from burnt camphor and other products.

<sup>89</sup> Many research studies point in this direction like Hall (2005).

as if they were sitting on someone's lap, the discomfort did not cause devotees to reduce the hours they spent with Amma during the programs. I saw a couple of American women squished right next to Amma all morning and evening during all the tour program days for two years in a row and often wondered how they managed to get that position and stay in it without a break for 6 to 7 hours at a time.

The participants also struggled to integrate with the East through rituals. Some participants expressed concern about their lack of knowledge about the "proper ways" to do Hindu rituals and chants. They were afraid their ways would be rude or disrespectful to Indians and struggled to learn the "correct ways" to conduct oneself in a Hindu ritual and chant. Ella stated:

The only thing I worry is criticism for doing it wrong or maybe, you know. When I put it (CD of 1000 names) on and go to sleep, I think am I being disrespectful. If an Indian person saw me, would they think I was disrespectful, the way I am putting it in my life.

Marie had similar concerns:

I realize that Hinduism was really ancient and that there are a lot of proper ways to do things and that possibly people will be upset if they were done wrong or like carelessly. I try to respect that, but not knowing, I am going to mess things in some people's minds. But it is a way to maintain my relationship with Amma, and I know it is okay with Her. And I try to learn to write, the correct way of doing things.

Some of the participants and many devotees traveled to India and did their best to adapt to Indian social and tropical conditions. Eight of the participants had traveled and lived in the *ashram* in India as well as visited various other places in south and north India. The tropical weather and the language difference was very hard for some of the participants. Elena described her experience:

It was very hard. It was hot all the time. X and Y said it is like only 80 degree temperature like he always knew the temperature. But I was burning outside. He is saying it is not really hot here. But I felt like a snail when I was in India.

Mita similarly reported her discomfort with the weather in India:

It was hot and so humid. I felt physically sick. I was getting migraines and I felt dirty all the time and it is dusty. I reached a crisis one day after being there for a week and a half. I was just feeling totally alien.

But at the same time, several participants demonstrated endurance in their efforts to integrate with the Eastern other. Some said that they felt at home in India. Nistula and Theresa insisted that India felt like home to them. In spite of the heat, the dust, noise, crowds, strange languages, customs and social norms, illness and accidents, several of the participants traveled back to India. Nistula went back to India in spite of an earlier serious illness in India. Mita went back to India in 2009. Shanti was considering going back to India. Others like Teresa said that they were “aching” to go to India. Readers should also note that since this researcher is an Indian, it is possible that the participants were being polite and had toned down their negative experiences in India.

Interestingly, many sojourner participants reported reverse culture shock when they returned to United States. They began to see United States in a different light. Shanti spoke about her experience of wanting to return to United States while in India and then missing India when she returned:

When I came back to the U.S. I had the hardest time. I was really sick in India so naturally I wanted to go home, because I was so sick. But when I got home I did not want to be here. I missed Amma. U.S., I hated it, it seemed ridiculous.

Materialistic, the people seemed so odd. There was a sweetness; there was something in India that I loved. It was really hard for me to transition. I wasn't doing well for sometime. I was pretty sick after I came back here.

Overall, the participants did not think integration with the elements of the East was an imposition in the community, but rather it was an ideal they strived for. They worked hard to learn the new practices but also forgave themselves for their failings.

#### *Identifying Cultural Differences*

During the interviews, some participants noted the difference between Indian cultural customs and norms and their own. Katherine noted the different ideas of personal space Indians had in India and habits like “line-cutting,” which often happens in queues in India, and spoke about her attempt to develop patience and acceptance of the local

habits. Another participant who wished to remain unnamed spoke about the aggressiveness amongst Indians in India:

Yeah, they push a bit in India (laughter), you need to push back.

Katherine elaborated on the differing understanding of personal space:

I have never been so affected in my life. People definitely have a different sense of personal space in India at least where I was in India as compared to the West. In the West, you keep 10 feet of distance. There people were always mushed up. They would sit on your lap. I am sitting here, but I am also kind of sitting on you too.

Some participants said that they were in situations where the cultural difference created interpersonal tensions. Katherine spoke about a situation in Toronto where on the day of *Devi Bhava* the *darshan* line management was overwhelming, with crowds of East Indians in a hurry to reach Amma as soon as possible. They tried to sidestep protocols and climb over to the stage in some fashion or the other. The utter chaos and lack of civic respect surprised Katherine. A similar incident was reported by Sophia, who was surprised by the aggressiveness of an Indian while she was arranging chairs for an Amma program and also spoke about hearing stories of the aggressiveness and lack of civic respect of Indians living in India when they are around Amma. The following quotation is representative of what some Americans said they feel about some Indians<sup>90</sup>:

I certainly had Indian people talk down to me as if there is really nothing that I know. You know they were born in the right side of god, yes it is really interesting and I have to ignore it. But it is very difficult around Amma and when we are tired. That American woman wants to come out and snarl at them.

The fact that Indians are more at ease with some of the practices in the Amma community gives them an edge and often puts them in the unofficial role of “teacher” or “advisor” to the Americans in the community. Such roles are confusing because an American may not be in need of a “teaching” at a particular moment, while an Indian unable to discern the climate may thrust himself or herself into such a role, creating intercultural tension.

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<sup>90</sup> I have not mentioned the name of the participant because some participants requested that their names be not printed in quotations that may be politically difficult.

East Indians and Westerners played different roles, took different tasks, and worked mostly within their own cultural group in the Amma community in San Ramon and Michigan. In New Mexico, the active East Indian devotees within the Amma community are very few and scattered. Perhaps this allows them to mingle and work with Western community more closely. In San Ramon, more East Indians worked in managing the Amma tour in the evening, while the morning sessions saw a greater number of Westerners. This could be because of different work schedules and residence of the devotees. It is also to be noted that there were a handful of local Californian Indians who seemed to work with the Westerners closely through the entire day. I did not interview organizers nor did I have access to tour structures in San Ramon and Michigan and hence this is an area that requires further investigation.

In New Mexico, devotees of the Amma community made efforts to connect with the local East Indian community through some of the East Indian devotees like myself. For example, there were some meetings, and Amma devotees attended some of the East Indian community events. Several East Indian community members came to Amma's public programs and *Devi Bhava* and received *darshan*. In addition, several East Indian students came for *darshan* every year. Some of East Indian professors at the University of New Mexico also came for *darshan* at Amma programs each year.

Yet, in spite of the East Indian presence at Amma's programs and obvious efforts to recruit members of the East Indian community, the East Indians maintained a distance from the local Western members of the Amma community. Although I do not have specific data that point to reasons why such a divide remained in New Mexico, from informal conversations with fellow East Indians, I can speculate that the reasons could be one or more of the following perceptions: (1) It is safer to depend on traditional Hindu practices than to follow a guru who may at some point be suspect of foul practices; (2) Gurus who attract Western following are viewed with suspicion and doubted for their authenticity at times; (3) Western modification of Hindu practices and customs to suit Western lifestyles are disliked and considered an adulteration of the authentic Hindu way; (4) Indians do not like to be associated with people perceived as "hippies;" (5) The lack of rigorous spiritual discipline and ignorance of Hindu religious rules amongst

Westerners are viewed with contempt; and (6) Hinduism can be practiced only by those who are born Hindus for only they get it.

### *Valuing the East*

At the same time, there were some participants and several devotees who held that Amma's Indian nationality was more than a coincidence. They claimed, as one of the devotees put it, that "India has the highest number of saints per square foot" and that Amma was the descendent of an ancient tradition. To them, India was a sacred land.

Nistula said the following about India:

I think I loved India in that you can feel the presence of the Divine Mother the second you hit the ground. Spirituality is all over the place and it is not hidden. Coming back here was a complete shock. Where do you see God? Do you see God? Many people talk about God but not in the same way. In India it is genuine; the seed of the spirituality is India. So although I do not like the conditions in India, India is home. As an American I do not really consider this as my home.

Nistula also reported that the spiritual presence in India kept her out of harm's way:

The feeling of Divine Mother being present is very strong in India. I felt like I was protected in a strange way. Because of the femininity or the presence of Divine Mother is so strong. You know with the men and many horrible situations, nothing happened to me. I have traveled quite a bit in India and nothing has ever happened.

Some participants and many devotees visited India and toured not only Amma's *ashram* but also visited other sacred sites in south and north India. Devotees remarked to me that Americans did not understand the importance of saints and their ways as did Indians who grow up around them. Some American devotees bought apartments in Amma's *ashram* in India and travel regularly to stay there. To participants like Theresa, the *ashram* in India was like home. Some devotees and participants found the pace of life in India slower and found the return to United States to be a culture shock. Theresa reported that the *ashram* in India was home:

It was like coming home. There was a lot of chatter and excitement in the airport. As soon as we turned into the driveway to the *ashram*, it was silent. Inside me it was like, oh I am home. Mother, I am home.



Bhuvana reported that pace of life in India was slower:

I liked the tropics, because the climate is so warm and people are really warm. Everything here is so fast and so analytical. So going there slowed me down. I felt like more at home and I don't know. The first time I went I did not like it as much, but when I worked at AIMS<sup>91</sup> I loved it.

*Indian or Amma*

As an East Indian, I must acknowledge that I have felt pride that a famous spiritual leader like Amma was born and lived in India. Having grown up in Calcutta, I have experienced some resentment that a Western woman like Mother Teresa is idolized by the media and world leaders and politicians because she helps the poor and needy, whereas the efforts of brown women like Amma, who provide both humanitarian aid as well as spiritual guidance, rarely find media space and if they do, only in the inside columns of newspapers. So I had a lurking desire to invert this process by studying the effects of a brown woman on the lives of the white women. To this end, I kept my focus on the possible syncretic practices of the American women in the Amma community.

*Divesting Practices of their Origins*

If practices observed indicate that syncretism indeed takes place in the movement, it is significant to note how some of such practices involve the cooptation and naming Indian practices in the Amma community as exclusively “Amma,” and divesting it from its historical origins. I observed this clearly when I witnessed an encounter of an East Indian woman with an American devotee in San Ramon in 2008. A *satsang* group had just finished singing *bhajans* for Amma during the morning program. One of the songs that earned the greatest applause was the sacred *Gayatri*<sup>92</sup> chant sung in a modified Westernized version by an American man. The East Indian woman remarked that the song was sung beautifully and that since it was a sacred mantra it had its own charm. The American woman replied that the song was beautiful because of Amma's presence and since it was being sung to Amma. In the stroke of a phrase, the chant ceased to have a history and instead became alive only in the present moment in Amma's San Ramon

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<sup>91</sup> AIMS stands for Amrita Institute of Medical Sciences. It is a super-specialty hospital built by Amma's charities in Cochin in South India.

<sup>92</sup> *Gayatri mantra* is considered very sacred by Hindus and is whispered by a priest/male guardian in the ears of a Brahmin boy during the sacred thread ceremony which commemorates the commencement of spiritual study by the boy.

*ashram* in California. In another instance during interviews, participant Lisa told me about one experiences that also illustrates how followers can remove Amma from her Indian culture or nationality:

I have sat and listened to like an Anglo girl talk about how bad Indian people are, while Amma's is right there in the room (laughter).

On a similar note but in response to the question of whether learning Indian practices was hard, some participants reported that it was not hard since irrespective of what nationality Amma belonged to, they would have learned the practices of that nationality. Marie, for instance, said:

To me what the package is wrapped in is not so important. But I do this, I have my *mala*<sup>93</sup> because for me it just helps me feel closer to Amma. If Amma were Christian or Buddhist, I would be that. Because for me it is just Her, Her essence, this is what has finally clearly spoken to my heart. And, so I know this is not the only way. But I also never met anyone like Her.

In a sense, the underlying theme was that “Amma” subsumed the “Indian” or “Hindu” category. The cultural root of Amma practices is defined by how her followers perceive it. This may be due to one of the following reasons: (1) Most of the participants had very little prior knowledge about India, and the encounter with Amma was not a cultural encounter but rather a spiritual encounter; (2) Participants were deeply affected by Amma's presence and found her to be a unique phenomenon in the world, evidenced by the numerous references both by participants and devotees in the community that Amma was a female Jesus or Jesus reborn in a brown woman's body; and (3) There is a fear of becoming Easternized and being categorized as people who gave up their birth religion and cultural customs. In any case, participants seemed to handle the tensions around cultural identity by making Amma spiritual practices a unique culture in itself.

In another sense, because it is me, an East Indian, reading this encounter, there is a perhaps a hidden agenda and desire to want the American devotees to acknowledge the Indian cultural origins of some of the practices in the Amma community. In other words, perhaps I have sought a validation of my cultural identity and therefore I have made a skewed reading of the data. It is then, perhaps me, who cannot see beyond the rootedness

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<sup>93</sup> Hindu Rosary

of my own cultural identity to believe that practices that originate within a culture do not necessarily *belong* to the same culture but may end up being shared by people transnationally.

But reconfigurations of practices as uniquely “Amma” would sometimes express themselves comically for the Indian members. In one case, a famous Indian hymn dedicated to Goddess Durga had to be chanted. One of the American devotees usually leads this chant. On this occasion, she was absent and the organizer was harried about who could possibly lead this hymn. To my amusement, it did not occur to the organizer to check with the Indian devotees who were present if they possibly knew the hymn. The Indian devotees had to assure the organizer that we were well acquainted with the verse and could lead it comfortably.

#### *Dissemination of Ideas and Cultural Tensions*

Another effect of reconfiguring India as “Amma” occurs when organizational messages that emerge in India are distorted or create confusion and tension while being translated to local American audiences, an effect that I term as “Lost in Translation?” *Satsangs* and Amma tours in United States are headed, first and foremost, by Amma. From different conversations, I am aware that Amma converses with different leaders of the community in United States on a regular basis. Affirming the Asian assumption that enlightened ones transcend specificities of culture and time and can make recommendations which are helpful across cultures, I am not approaching Amma’s messages as culturally-specific. However, the many *swamis*, *brahmacharis* and *brahmacharinis*<sup>94</sup> who are Indians are under the influence of cultural habits and customs. This, in turn, may create confusions at a very subtle and invisible level. Yet, since which aspect is Indian and which is American is never clear, devotees interpret the confusion as a drama of the Amma organization, or in other words, an “Amma” thing.<sup>95</sup>

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<sup>94</sup> The different levels of renunciates/monks in the Amma community who help administer different Amma institutions and Amma programs.

<sup>95</sup> One of the participants noted that she felt “sad” to learn about the findings in this section. She wrote: “historical origins are the fertile ground on which culture begins” and was sad that they were erased in the community in particular ways. She also wrote that it seemed that cultural tension was at such a subtle level that it did not seem evident. But it helped her understand some of the things she had encountered in the *satsang*. She said that she had found the Eastern concept of surrender to the guru very difficult to reconcile with the Western notions of agency and individuality. She pointed out to me that it was important to study immigration, not only as a movement of people from other cultures, but also as movement of ideas and values. Another participant said that she did not realize the findings of this section.

*Ritual space and cultural tensions.* For example, *satsangs* or spiritual group gatherings happen in open spaces in rural areas and in houses in India. Given the Indian proclivity to very small personal space, and interpersonal informality, it is not stressful for Indians to host large gatherings in their house. I have personally attended several *satsangs* in different Indian homes through my childhood. The only requirement is often a clean room and a clean altar with all the worship items. The rest of the house does not undergo any lengthy preparation. It used to be a common experience for me as a child to see the male head of the household return from work, be seated near the dining table and fed evening snacks and coffee separately, while worship might be going on in another room. The house of neither the host nor the host herself was never up for public presentation. It was never discomfoting to enter new houses for attending *satsangs*. We always entered each other's houses at any point in day and sometimes night. Our sense of privacy was quite fuzzy. Given this attitude of Indians, it is easy to understand how *satsangs* easily flourished in India without any need of holding them large public spaces.

In United States, where researchers have noted that Americans have a greater need for privacy and larger personal spaces, so it is not surprising that some participants in Albuquerque spoke about the discomfort of entering private homes for spiritual gatherings. Shanti said:

Sometimes I find *Satsang* uncomfortable. The Albuquerque *satsang* is smaller, but when I go to Santa Fe, it is a bigger group, then I feel I can come and go as I please. I am not locked in. Of course, when you are at the temple, there are things that are going on. You can be at the temple, or you can watch Amma (on TV) in the *ashram*. There is just more of a flow. To go to somebody's house, there is something about that makes me feel uncomfortable.

They reported that the *satsang* was about their private connection with God or Amma and that in private homes they had to make polite conversations with the host and be an appropriate guest. At times, when some devotees had trouble relating or had conflict with a fellow devotee, going to a private home for *satsang* was difficult.

Many participants and devotees spoke about the need for an Amma temple in Albuquerque or, at the very least, a public space for *satsang*. The devotees also discussed the possibility in the local organizational meeting. They also reported preferring the

relative anonymity of the temple and *ashram* in Santa Fe for their prayers and worship. Peace voiced the desire for a public space for the *satsang*:

As far as *satsang*, I would love to see a public space *satsang* . . . because I know, I think three individuals that don't come to *satsang* any more, because it's not a public space, because they have allergies or they don't want to meet in a personal space. Some of that is personalized too, but it's also because when I was a newcomer, I hesitated going into a personal home for *satsang*. I was not comfortable going into someone's home that I didn't know, into a practice that I didn't know. If it'd been in a public space, I think I might have had less hesitation.

Amma was, however, reported to have urged local members to not waste money in renting spaces and to have the *satsang* in a public space only if it was donated.

*Power-distance, organizational structure, and cultural tensions.* Besides the issue of *satsang* location, there was also a debate on the order of worship and what constitutes a *satsang*. Researchers have written extensively on the large power-distance that exists in cultures like India (the most famous research is Hofstede (2001)'s work on value dimensions of 56 countries). Power distance is the extent to which the less powerful members of institutions and organizations expect and accept that power is distributed unequally (Hofstede, 2001). Thus in the United States, "people like to think of everyone as being equal" (Hall, 2005, p.37). But on the other hand, some countries in east and south Asia like Malaysia, Philippines, and India believe power and authority are facts of life (Samovar et al., 2007, p.146-148). Thus when a *guru* gives instructions in India, it is followed with great respect and precision and questions are usually suppressed. However, in United States the power-distance is smaller and emphasis is placed on democratic decision making. Hence, U.S. Americans in the Amma community tended to be strong, assertive men and women and who respected the voice, individual opinions and questions of themselves as well as others.

Added to this cultural difference, different members had differing abilities to adapt or accept new cultural environments. While some *satsang* members could move across to the Indian culture (or at least a version of the culture) with ease, others had resistance and questions. After all, accepting Amma as a *guru* is one thing, quite different

from accepting Indian cultural norms and traditions. This complex mix was further flavored with suspicion as to which of the *satsang* instructions were coming directly from Amma and which had been decided by *satsang* leaders in United States or New Mexico. The mix of intercultural difference and interpersonal distrust brewed tension amongst devotees, with some wanting greater flexibility and variety in the worship and others insisting on sticking to organizational directives. The meeting for organizational decision making (OM as it is called in the Amma community) followed a policy in Albuquerque that allowed devotees to propose agenda items and discuss the same in the meeting. The OM in Santa Fe did not allow for individual members to propose agenda items. However, the organizational decisions were taken collaboratively in these meetings.

Yet, since some of the *satsang* organizational contents were outside the boundaries of discussion, and since some decisions could be made only after running it through the organizational heads of New Mexico and United States, there was dissent around how much of the decision-making ability must lie with the different heads of the organization and how much needed to be managed and decided at the local level. Further, such meetings are lengthy, tiresome, frustrating, and often undemocratic since only those who are assertive and extroverted speak and speak over other conversations. In the end, one is not really sure if the decisions taken were truly democratic or the voice of few people. Peace spoke about her frustrations with meetings:

How do you form a *satsang*? Is there something formal to do to form a *satsang*? Even now, I get resentful at (OM) meetings; that's why I won't go. Why are you telling us to do that, and who's telling you, and why can't we make up our own decisions here? I don't understand if there are directives coming from Amma or what. There are so many unwritten rules, which is nice, but there's so many ways to transgress those rules. It could just be one person's avarice: she doesn't like the way we're doing this so she comes down hard.

Sophia also elaborated on this issue:

In the Amma community there are so many rules that are unspoken that are interpreted like the Bible. Whenever they say that is what Amma says, *swami* says, I always laugh to myself and say well this is another biblical interpretation. But I find that frustrating and that I do not get to move as I would like to. It is

challenging for a lot of people because it is very stuck and tart. And I want to move forward.

To deal with such tensions, the devotees decided to have a sharing time during OM where each devotee would be allotted a small period of time to share his or her opinion about issues. But this option was also fraught with tensions and discomfort around the length of time to share, the number of people sharing, and the emotions that it could generate. Thus, OM was considered an intense space for several members who picked and chose which meetings to attend and when to stay away from them.

In 2009, the organization changed its policy in Albuquerque from having a single *satsang* coordinator to a *satsang* council consisting of three members appointed by Swami Dayamrita, the head of the organization in United States. It was found that such a change in leadership structure had made *satsang* coordination easier in other parts of the country.

#### *Alienation from One's Own Culture*

Alienation is a sense of feeling out of place, different or foreign in a particular space. Many participants reported that they became alienated from close friends and family because of their affiliation to Amma and the Amma community. Katherine told her story this way:

Then when I met Amma that was a little bit different. It was sort of because I was so excited, I had just met Amma and I would talk about her and they were like, oh well, what's that about? They were quite skeptical. I would go to some of the programs and they were like, I don't want to see the event. But they don't understand it. They didn't understand me being excited and things, it definitely put some distance between me and some of my friends.

A common theme in participants' narratives was that the friends and family believed that the participant was joining a cult and was getting brainwashed. Some had been hesitant to reveal their affiliation to Amma and the Amma community to family members and close friends for the fear of being categorized as a cult member. Peace spoke about her story:

A lot of my family, I didn't even let know. My brothers and sisters, I didn't talk about Amma at all, and it's only this year that I have been willing to tell them that I have a guru. One of my brothers is concerned that I'm in a cult.

Others had kept their affiliation to Amma personal and private. Betty explained her decision as follows:

I am very private person. And I don't, my family doesn't know that I am devotee. Peace also reported in keeping her relationship with Amma private:

I also haven't been forthcoming with Amma, frankly because I was tender in knowing how profoundly she'd affected me and not wanting to expose that to ridicule or judgment.

For some participants, the criticism of their affiliation was painful initially.<sup>96</sup> For others, the process was cleansing and that they lost friends who were not positive influences in their lives. Arati reported:

I would say that since I have met Amma I have lost a lot of friends. But I actually am okay with that. After coming to Amma, I felt like a big cleansing happened in terms of friends disappearing who maybe weren't so helpful spiritually.

Few other participants spoke about how their friendships and social activities changed after coming to Amma. Many reduced or gave up their drinking and smoking, and their visits to bars. As their interest in the spiritual meaning of things and personal spiritual practices increased, they found lesser interest in conversing with erstwhile friends about mundane worldly topics or gossip. Sara, Katherine, Elena, Arati, Peace, and Shanti reported profound change in their circle of friends. It also created distance in romantic relationships with men outside the Amma community. Premamaya waited long before she finally disclosed her affiliation to Amma to her dating partner. At the time of interview, Theresa had still not disclosed her spiritual affiliation to her workplace colleagues. Sara spoke about the changes in her social life since her main focus had become spiritual development:

It has been hard pulling away from social groups because they are just social. They like to go out and drink, go gambling, and I don't have anything against them, it is just that I want to focus on things other than chitchat. And that was all party was about, chitchat. So that has been kind of difficult. You can't explain

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<sup>96</sup> One of the participants noted that this cultural alienation slowed her process of integration into the community. Another participant noted that knowing that this section had been culled out of many interviews gave her a sense of relatability, and "this relatability gives me a deep sense of unity, optimism and spiritual purpose."



that to people. If they are not interested in spiritual things they cannot understand it right?

Katherine said that her spiritual practices did not allow her late night activities as she has to get up early morning for her meditation:

We used to previously go to listen to music, go to the bar with my girlfriends and a lot of that tapered off after I met Amma. I still do social things but not with the frequency that I used to. I can't stay out late because I have to get up and do my meditation. I cannot go home and wake up fuzzy. So in that way, it changed quite a lot of my relationships.

Elena, who is retired, said that she did not enjoy common practices among U.S. seniors and preferred to do volunteer activities:

Because I feel so aligned to Amma, just in case somebody said, they want to go on a cruise, I might say, No. And truly I would not be comfortable with it...food, food, food, and it is all about you. Maybe in that way hopefully I have become more involved in compassionate activities.

Shanti reported a behavioral change:

I used to drink alcohol a lot, and I don't anymore.

The changed attitude towards common social activities and pastimes changed the content and quality of existing friends' circles. Participants reported not being able to connect with old friends and acquaintances.

This change in social landscape in turn resulted in greater dependence and reliance on the Amma community for social activities, friendship, and support. In a way, the alienation from the mainstream culture allowed for culture-building and strengthening of the Amma community. Shanti turns to *satsang* members for support and guidance.

Sara prefers being in *satsang* where it is easy to be herself. Arati reported:

I feel that I need relationships that nurture my spiritual life and I want to try and nurture that for other people, as well. It is helpful that I have relationships within the *satsang* because those in the *satsang* are devoted to Amma, as well.

Sara explained why the *satsang* was important for her:

That's why the *satsang* with people who understand Amma is so important for me because then you have connections with people who believe like you do.

When relationships within the *satsang* did not work out or if they were not warm or frequent enough, it caused pain and social isolation. Some participants spoke to this issue in the interviews describing the tensions and dilemmas within the community. For instance, Arati said:

Sometimes I feel like running away from the community and other times I feel totally strengthened and feel so much of Amma's love in the community—it is just a mix of those things.

Likewise, Betty spoke about her inability to find social support in the community:

I have been on several retreats, and I can hardly stand it, you know. Every year, I get a little further into it, but last year, I was crying to one of the vendors at the retreats, it is so hard here in Albuquerque, almost like a stranger here, because everybody is focused on the prize and nobody wants to communicate and relate to each other and I feel so lonely. This is not a place to meet and greet, it is been a real struggle to hook up with anybody and have a conversation.

Several participants also deliberately tried to distance themselves from their own culture through self-criticism. Several participants answered the question about their problems communicating across cultures with the retort that they had problems mostly with their own culture. They were critical of the manners and conduct of the members of their own culture as well as spoke about interpersonal tensions with their cultural members. It is possible that since this researcher is an East Indian, the participants evaded the question to be polite and instead turned it onto their own culture which was easier to criticize before a foreigner. Shanti, for instance, said:

(Responding to a query about intercultural communication problems)

Communication problem in the same culture, I had a problem. No, not another culture.

Other participants spoke about different criticisms they had toward their own culture.

One participant who did not wish to be named said:

The intercultural conflict or perhaps more accurately stated intercultural challenge I have in Amma community is with the Westerners who I often times think are trying to figure out who they are in the Amma community. . . . I don't want to be

judgmental but sometimes I don't connect very well with Westerners. With some Westerners I do, but I connect far better than with the Indians.

It is possible that intercultural tensions are overrated and the people naturally have greater empathy, willingness to understand and accept other cultures than we give them credit for. Sophia addressed the issue of self-criticism and greater accommodation for the other culture in a follow-up interview:

I realized that when I am around people of another culture. It is always on American soil for I have never been to India; I have always believed that I am the one to learn. I have never had the idea that you are in my country and so I have powers over you, I have always had a tendency to refer to myself as a boring American without culture . . . . (Referring to speaking to people of another culture like Indians) it is almost like a subservient attitude that I have so much to learn.

Mita also made a similar statement:

The other thing is that when you look at another culture, you excuse it. It is not your culture and who are you to say anything about it. It is what it is. Whereas when you look at your own culture you tend to be partial.

#### *Searching for the Unifying Ground*

In this section, I focus on the ways the participants and devotees sought to move beyond the cultural differences and identified three communicative strategies used in this process. They spoke of cultures in metaphors that emphasized their essential sameness, emphasized on the commonalities amongst cultures, and tried to dissolve their cultural differences in *darshan*.

#### *Oneness*

Many participants focused on the unifying features, commonalities and similarities amongst cultures. The underlying theme in their narratives was "We are one." Theresa focused on commonalities and stressed that the divisions were more mental than factual.

They speak a language that is different from mine but there is always something, it is exactly the same, whether it be motherhood or a grandparent or singing or education. There is no difference. There is no difference between Indian people

and Hispanic people, between Korean people and Japanese. None. It is only philosophical barriers that everybody puts up. There is no difference.

Arati explained how they saw this oneness amongst different cultures through spirituality.

Since meeting Amma, I have been blessed to see more the oneness of everything—that is, when viewed from a very macro perspective and a sublimely spiritual eye.

However, certainly cultural differences exist. Some of these differences have been a source of pain and frustration for me. I deal with it, by clinging to Amma’s feet.

Yet others like Peace, Nistula, Bhuvana, and Teresa stressed the point that intercultural is not necessarily “confrontational” but rather a source of joy. Peace said:

I love experiencing all the different cultures around Amma. I think that’s why I like her so much.

On the other hand, a few participants dismissed the concept of culture and focused on differences as arising from personality. For instance, Sara stated:

I don’t think it is a cultural thing as much as it is a personality thing. Don’t you think? We are relating to each other.

Although this approach may seem like glossing over differences, it is aligned, philosophically, with the community view that all living beings are divine, that there is only One divine consciousness that pervades in all of us, and that it is the illusion created by the mind that produces divisions. Hence, participants were negotiating my questions on intercultural encounters and experiences in a way that seemed to justify the above described philosophy. In answer to my question on intercultural problems Ella, referred to the belief in the community that all of us have the same divinity and thus lessened the importance of cultural differences:

She (Amma) is saying that the Divine Mother is in us as she is in us and we are all One. That’s what she is saying. Not separate and that oneness, it is all one love, it is just one love. There aren’t many different kinds of love, it is the same thing.

#### *Oneness through Amma*

The day-to-day work during Amma programs sometimes required working under supervision of a staff member from a different country. For example, important staff coordinators dealing with areas like kitchen, Amma shop, and *darshan* are not U.S. Americans. They come from India, Israel, European and South American countries. And

yet, no major intercultural encounters were reported except some problems with different accents and languages. Mare referred to this problem as follows:

Communication issues, maybe, let me see. Maybe on how to chop vegetables a certain way (laughs)! But the way you resolve it—this person just showed me what to do. They tried to explain it in their language, and I wasn't quite sure what she meant, so she went "Oh, dink, dink, dink." And she showed me what to do. She showed me what the standard was. That was how I resolved it.

It was almost as if devotees created Amma as a category that subsumed the cultures that the devotees belonged to, so much that almost every participant paused and reflected for sometime before answering specific questions on intercultural communication encounters. Many participants pointed out that the purpose and focus of gathering at Amma programs was Amma, period. As one participant said: "We are all here because of Amma and we come at it from different angles."

In New Mexico, where the overwhelming majority in the community is Caucasian, intensive intercultural experience or development of intercultural relationships is unlikely. On this issue, Lisa commented:

It is interesting because especially now here in Albuquerque, most of the attendance are White—White or Hispanic. You see very few representations from other cultures. When you go other cities you see a little bit more, so I don't really see it playing a big part for me.

I was, for most part of the field experience, a researcher walking around with a magnifying glass, hoping to see some hidden germs and gems of intercultural encounters. I listened in, I walked around observing whatever I could, I stared at people intently sometimes, hoping the data would at some point unravel itself and tell me what was going on, but they did not yield the expected insights. And as I was writing this chapter, I stayed awake many a night, reflecting on the data I had gathered, wondering what piece was missing. I finally realized that I was looking at everything too closely, believing it was all hidden and subtle. Sometimes, a researcher needs to zoom out and see the whole picture, the entire landscape.

I zoom out. I quiet my mind—the theories and previous research studies fade out. I see. I see a hall with many people looking like white Westerners in white attires—some

Indian-styled—busy at work: communicating, organizing, executing. I hear some accents that are not New Mexican. I see some brown-skinned Indians around Amma—asking her something or the other and the rushing off somewhere else. I see saffron and yellow clad bearded *swamis* and *brahmacharis* either next to Amma, translating questions of the devotees to Amma in Malayalam and then translating Amma’s answers in English to the devotees. I watch Amma look at the devotee with the question sometimes kindly, sometimes sternly, sometimes affectionately. In her arms lies a Caucasian woman with blond hair. As Amma lifts the woman’s head up and whispers something in her ears, tears stream from this woman’s eyes. One farewell kiss and Amma lets the woman go. The next in line scoots into her arms—a young woman who had been adopted from India as a child and a woman who looks East Asian drop into her lap. A hug, few Hershey’s kisses and a smile later, they get up to proceed towards their *seva* duty. Meanwhile, the Israeli woman at the Amma shop is saying something loud to some of the staff members. The East Indian *darshan* line coordinator for the entire tour crosses the hall fast and furious, which is amazing since she has a tiny frame. Many people look warily at her because when she walks this fast and towards Amma, some change is in the cards for the hall organization and *darshan* at that stage. The local state coordinators are on the walkie-talkie. A fellow *sevite* whispers to me, pointing towards a coordinator, “She has not slept in two days.” A devotee walks before me carrying a small white board announcing, “*Sevites* needed NOW for serving lunch.”

As I leave the hall towards the dining area, I notice an African American standing by one of the doors, holding Amma’s slippers to her heart. Soon *darshan* will be over and this woman will be able to give the slippers to the *sevite* chosen to help Amma wear the slippers. This is her *seva*. As I reach the food serving area, I notice the young woman with long curly hair from Colorado, smiling widely and alertly as I have seen many years in the past. I volunteer for the serving *seva* and quickly wear the cap, gloves, and apron and step into the plastic-covered floor of the food serving area. I know some of the servers and others are strangers. One of the servers, a Caucasian woman shifts out of her position and invites me to serve the salad. As I take position, she gives me quick instruction about the current protocol about serving the salad, based on the available quantity and other kitchen problems. She leaves, and I take over. The lunch line

continues smoothly. The plates moves down through the various food items and reaches me. I ask, with a smile, “salad?” Upon receiving an affirmative nod, I proceed to scoop a small helping of salad and ask again, “cheese?” “No.” The plate moves away from me. Another plate comes in. The same ritual of questioning and handing the plate further down the food line continues for 2 hours. Salad supply falls. The kitchen staff announce—no more salad available, give smaller quantities of salad. I begin to dish out smaller quantity of salad for each plate. Soon there is no more salad. I apologize to the next person in line. She says, “It is okay. I should not have been late for lunch.” Soon lunch is over. *Sevites* disband. We walk towards our lodgings for a wink before we get up again and start our different *sevas* all over again.

It is not that different cultures do not exist. It is not that they do not have differences and work through negotiating those differences. It is that sometimes we need to shift the focus from being only “inter” cultures to *also* “with” cultures. In a deeper sense, the Amma community represents a miniature of our Earth—of the many cultures working together to improve the condition of Earth and our lives. Sometimes we work within our own community, and sometimes alongside many other communities. Sometimes there are issues of power and greed that cause members of some cultures pain, suffering and extinction. Many times cultures have conflict amongst themselves. As an academic, I write this paragraph on the eve of Earth Day 2009, amidst a growing understanding, of what Majid (2004) explains is not a “clash of civilizations,” but one civilization and one humanity, I want to emphasize this dimension of the data—that cultures worked together in intricate, connected, and disconnected ways to produce an Amma program in New Mexico.

The implications of these findings to intercultural research and notion of culture will be discussed in a following section.

#### Discussion of Findings

In this section, I discuss the findings and elaborate on the complex ways in which cultural identities are enacted and the efforts people make to disidentify from them. The community devotees and participants are found deeply rooted within their cultural structures and struggle in various ways to move beyond it in an environment that is essentially intercultural. I note that for improved intercultural communicative

competence, along with the ability to learn and adapt to the other culture, it is also important to develop an intracultural awareness to disengage from one's own cultural norms.

### *Intracultural Awareness*

McCornack (2007) argued that besides the ability to be appropriate, effective, and ethical in communication, intercultural communicative competence specifically required world-mindedness<sup>97</sup> and attributional complexity.<sup>98</sup> Samovar, Porter, and McDaniel (2007) defined intercultural communicative competence to include—1) the motivation to interact with someone from another culture, 2) knowledge about the person and their culture, 3) ability to adapt skills to suit the other culture, and 4) be of good character (p.315-316). What the scholars seem to indicate is that communication between cultures requires a strong ability to learn and adapt to the other culture. This has been termed as cultural awareness. Gaston defined cultural awareness as the “recognition that culture affects perception and that culture influences values, attitudes, and behavior” (Gaston qtd. in Shaules, 2007, p. 86).

Devotees in the community made special efforts to learn about India and Indian culture through books and asking fellow Indian devotees. Some adored India and claimed she was the place of great spiritual presence and power. They also showed deep self-restraint in accepting certain local norms when they visited India. For example, Katherine spoke about how her mother reminded her that if Indians cut through line, it may be appropriate for their culture and that they needed to respect it.

There was also a self-criticism about the lack of culture-appropriate etiquette amongst some Westerners before Amma. Wearing scanty clothes and indulging in public display of affection caused distress to some participants who were anxious to look modest and reserved before Amma. And their anxiety at some level mimicked the anxiety of Indians when they meet a Mahatma (great soul)—appropriate clothing, humility and reserve, mindfully present in the moment, waiting to carry out the next set of instructions. Self-criticism was also around the perceived materialistic pre-occupation and fast pace of

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<sup>97</sup> Demonstration of acceptance and respect towards other cultures' beliefs, values, and customs (McCornack, 2007, p. 173).

<sup>98</sup> The ability to acknowledge that other people's behaviors have multiple and complicated causes (McCornack, 2007, p. 175)



life in the United States. In a sense, they were able to disengage from their own cultural positions to an extent and struggled to express devotion and care for Amma in her cultural terms.

But basic, hidden, and unquestioned assumptions about others' cultural practices create resistance to cultural learning even when situations demand change (Shaules, 2007, p. 56-64). Thus I saw that although some participants struggled to learn and accept India, there were others for whom deep structures of culture—its values, worldviews, assumptions of good and evil—collided, as we can see in the section on *Confronting India*. The same was true for the East Indian community for their conspicuous absence in the organization of the Amma tour in New Mexico (with some exceptions) that can be construed as an unsaid reluctance to work with the Western devotees. The data also showed how cultural value-dimensions embedded in organizational messages originating from India upon dissemination in United States became intermingled with Western value-dimensions, creating local tensions that devotees were not able to discern as a result of intercultural differences. This exposed the ways in which cultural differences could create problems when ideas generated in one culture are implemented in another culture without a full accommodation of the new culture's norms and customs. What the findings suggest is that cultural awareness of the other, that is central to competent intercultural communication, is not sufficient.

The problem I believe is the fact that intercultural communication scholarship has almost exclusively focused on learning and adapting to the norms of the other culture, it has been other-oriented. It has assumed that belonging to a culture means possessing complete knowledge about that culture. Yet studies in deep culture show that we are often unaware of the deep cultural roots of our assumptions which can lead to prejudice against the other culture (Shaules, 2007).

I am pointing out here the need in intercultural communication scholarship to stress on *intracultural* awareness as a way to understand in depth the values of one's own culture and to provide a tool to disengage from it. It allows an individual to prepare for an intercultural communication encounter much before the actual event. Thus I define intracultural awareness as a social level of mindfulness, where mindfulness is understood as an awareness of one's own thoughts and perception (Oetzel, 2009). Intracultural

awareness creates awareness of the cultural influences on thought and perceptions and allows the space to disengage from it. As Anzaldúa (2002b) said:

Tu camino de conocimiento requires that you encounter your shadow side and confront what you've programmed yourself (have been programmed by your cultures) to avoid (desconocer), to confront traits and habits distorting how you see reality and inhibiting the full use of your facultades (p.540-541).

This process of disidentification, Fernandes (2003) argued, can be very difficult when it comes to certain social identities which are experienced in a more personal sense. "Yet, it is precisely such difficulty that represents the heart of disidentification—it is a process which operates from a place of risk rather than from a place of safety" (Fernandes, 2003, p. 34). The disengagement allows us to "value and appreciate our own cultural roots' as well as to 'value and appreciate all other cultures as well.' After achieving this final stage, the cultural learner is able to 'transcend culture and see ourselves as a product of culture, but no longer a prisoner of culture'" (Gaston qtd. in Shaules, 2007, p. 86). Including this aspect in the research on intercultural communicative competence may perhaps facilitate improved intercultural understanding. This intracultural awareness is definitely evident in some cases in the Amma community. But a greater emphasis on this aspect could have facilitated a deeper acceptance of the East Indian practices and beliefs in the community.

#### *Complexities in Negotiating Cultural Identities*

As has been pointed in the literature review, there is a centrality of identity in intercultural communication scholarship. Literature on intercultural encounters inform us that in face of the threat of change, identity struggles maybe motivated by the need for security, inclusion, predictability, connection, and consistency (Ting-Toomey, 2005). Further, it has been argued that intercultural communicative competence was directly correlated to the validation of the cultural identity of the other person and that the closer a communicator's ascribed identity matched the other person's avowed identity, greater the intercultural communicative competence (Collier & Thomas, 1988). The findings from this study, however, elaborate that complexities around securing one's own cultural identity and validating the other person's cultural identity at the same time is difficult.

For example, the drive to reconfigure India as Amma and divesting certain practices such as some Indian chants from their historical origins was a particular way in which the devotees and participants dealt with the existence of Indian practices and customs in the community. This drive, if as existing scholarship suggests, was motivated by a desire to preserve one's own cultural identity within the community, then it also shows that devotees were reluctant to validate the cultural identities of the Other.

At the same time, to possibly counter the threat of exclusion from the mainstream culture, devotees constructed an alternate identity where they rejected only those mainstream practices (like the consumption of alcohol in social interactions) that were incompatible with the spiritual path. The new identity is thus created through selective abstention from certain practices and acquiring few new practices unique to the Amma community. This new identity kept them within the mainstream discourse of diversity without being construed as the cultural Other by the members of their own culture. But overall, participants kept their bonds with the mainstream culture. In their everyday performance, there was no external change in clothing, hairdo, greetings, or other behaviors to distinguish them as Amma devotees. The only difference was during Amma programs and sometimes during *satsangs*, they tended to wear white and some of them wore Indian clothing.

The construction of a new identity and reconfiguration of India as uniquely Amma possibly allows Western devotees in the community deal with that threat of losing their cultural identities to the dominant presence of the cultural East in the community. In other words, securing their own cultural identities seemed related to the partial invalidation of the Other in particular ways, thereby decreasing intercultural communicative competence between the cultural groups in the community. Although East Indians were not interviewed in this study, from participant-observation the same argument can also be made for them in their observed absence in the *satsang* or in the organization of tour programs. In other words, in spite of the environment being essentially intercultural, the East Indian and U.S. American cultural groups remained distinct and away from each other. Note that I am not calling for a performance of homogeneity or cultural assimilation here as evidence of cultural validation and

acceptance of the Other. Rather, I am pointing at the subtle structures of discomfort and tension between the two groups in the Amma community.<sup>99</sup>

At the same time, some participants and devotees disidentified and struggled to integrate the East at an experiential level. Some of them thought of India as a home, some as superior to their own culture, and others as interesting and enjoyable practices. However, acceptance of the Other cannot mean degradation of Self. Those who adored India did tend to look down on their own culture. On different occasions, devotees did attempt to disidentify from the inferiority-superiority dichotomy and seemed to move into a state of connectedness—1) through dedication to Amma and following recommended practices, and (2) through the rhetorical reflection of Oneness.

Irrespective of what they said or did, the fact remained that they had accepted an East Indian Hindu woman in the persona of “Amma” as a spiritual Master or a great being and dedicated the most intimate aspects of their spiritual journey to her guidance. Their devotion to Amma was intense and at least in some cases, superseded all other relationships. They prayed to her, meditated on her, confided their problems in her, and believed that she watched over them, protected them, and gave them guidance as necessary. It simply did not matter if she was brown, spoke Malayalam, and liked *chai*. To sink into her embrace, to receive a glance from her, a rose or an apple brought exquisite joy to many of the participants and devotees. Before her they became children vying for her attention and special favors. Her presence and the common relationship to her provided the unity that moved beyond cultural differences.

In their dedication to Amma, devotees and participants took extraordinary efforts to maintain a discipline around Amma’s recommended practices. Many reported that they performed the IAM meditation or the chanting of the 108 names daily without a break. I noticed when I shared rooms with some participants during the Amma programs or visited their homes that they were very particular about their spiritual discipline. I observed many of them struggle to learn the 1000 names of the Goddess and work hard to pronounce difficult Sanskrit words and bring them to correct rhyme. They practiced singing in various Indian languages. Some even sang difficult Indian songs because they

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<sup>99</sup> One of the participants wrote that she could see these tensions now but wasn’t aware of it before she read the summary and that she realized that she had been trying to hide or compensate for these tensions by trying to smooth out personal differences.

found the meaning profound or beautiful. They learnt to play Indian instruments. When I asked them whether they were uncomfortable with any of it, they denied discomfort.

Many of the participants reflected in their narratives on a notion of unity and oneness to downplay the significance of cultural differences. Even though it was but a rhetorical gesture, it is a sign that they were intellectually struggling to speak and think in a manner that was coherent with the core philosophy of the community—that all of us are divine and that we need to give up our attachment to labels to attain enlightenment.

Finally, it was in Amma's lap or the heart of *darshan* that cultures melted into one untiring, unflinching embrace. Amma represented symbolically and through action the ideal state of including all, loving and accepting all—the very state of connectedness.

The rhetorical expressions of unity and the persona of Amma represents for the community an underlying commonality, an interconnection from where they were able to step beyond cultural preferences and value-dimensions, at least momentarily. This substantiates my argument that as long as cultural identities remain rooted in the Subject-Other framework, the cultural Other cannot be easily accepted. Hence a transcendent notion of unity is significant because it allows us to navigate differences in ways that may lead to greater intercultural understanding and the development of Kim's vision of intercultural identity and personhood. As Benoit said: "At the end of this gradual evolution my inner universe reaches homogeneity in which not forms but the opposition of forms is abolished. Everything is equalized" (Benoit qtd. in Kim, 2001, p. 183).

#### Chapter Summary

This chapter showed how participants and devotees identified and disidentified from their cultural identities in unique ways. The participants and devotees befriended, confronted and adored India as the Eastern Other in particular ways. They reconfigured Indian practices in the community as uniquely Amma and misinterpreted the confusion resulting from intermingling of value-dimensions of the East and the West as something unique to the community and called it an "Amma thing." They, however, also attempted to disidentify from the notion of cultural differences by stressing on an underlying unity and spontaneously at the heart of the *darshan*. The findings suggest the need to include

intracultural awareness in the definition of intercultural communicative competence<sup>100</sup> and support my argument that disengaging from the Subject-Other framework and moving into a state of connectedness could allow to negotiate differences in new ways.

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<sup>100</sup> One of the participants wrote that “It would be nice to learn this at an early age, with more integration of cultures, etc., from the grass roots level of experience. How this could be achieved, I am not sure.”

## CHAPTER SEVEN: RELIGIOUS IDENTITIES AND SPIRITUALITY

This chapter examines the influence of spirituality on the religious identities of Amma's devotees and participants. Religious identity refers here to the emotional significance we attach to our sense of belonging or affiliation with a particular religion. I explore the particular ways in which devotees and participants in the Amma community identified with and disidentified from religious affiliations established before meeting Amma to practice a form of cultural code-switching and interfaith understanding. The research found that participants practiced various religions and switched codes between religions, even as they were members of the Amma community. Members showed a high acceptance of other faiths and, more importantly, viewed spirituality and religion as two separate phenomena influencing their sense of identity. Even though certain tensions emerged around the question of religious differences, participants in the study built a sense of religious identity that incorporated a strong component of interfaith<sup>101</sup> understanding.

In the first part of the chapter, I present the findings organized around four salient themes that emerged from the data collected: (1) dynamics of a new religious movement in the Amma Community (2) Hindu-Christian interreligious code-switching (3) contradictions and tensions, and (4) living interfaith. As the discussion below will illustrate, the religious experience of participants involved breaking with previous religious affiliations that required them to follow prescribed beliefs and practices. Yet, such break was neither complete nor did it create a completely new religious identity position. Even though devotees did not accept the practices and beliefs in the Amma community unequivocally—for they resisted, questioned, and expressed discomfort with some practices—their experience in the Amma community led to a *state* of shifting identities in which their identifications move fluidly, back and forth, in a continuum of

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<sup>101</sup> In this study, interfaith indicates an endeavor to understand and accept different religions. I have noted that in United States, the term interfaith has been used, in many cases, to bring together different denominations of Christian faith in an effort to recognize the common fundamentals of Christian faith. For example, Interfaith Funders, a leading network of grant makers to improve congregation-based community organizing, has one Jewish organization, 10 Christian organizations and no representative from any other religion in its list of members. Such an effort, although laudable and important, should not be mistaken as an endeavor to go beyond the boundaries of Christianity to understand other religions.

spiritual practices that blends their past and existing religious beliefs with the practices of the Amma community.

In the second section of this chapter, I discuss the findings to elucidate their implications for scholarship in interreligious dialogue and understanding. Using Cornille (2008) and Panikkar<sup>102</sup> (1978) understanding of dialogue, I will underscore that the narratives of the participants show an engagement in intrareligious dialogue that holds the promise for the understanding and theorization of fruitful interreligious dialogue. Furthermore, I will argue that the participants' emphasis on a spiritual continuity amongst religious traditions and a transcendent and mystical unity as a common factor in all religions is consonant with Kale's (2004) conceptualization of religion as a vehicle that "serves to nurture spirituality for many individuals by providing a roadmap to comprehend and express their spirituality" (p.94).

### Findings

#### *Dynamics of a New Religious Movement in the Amma Community*

I start the presentation of findings with a discussion of religious practices in the Amma Community in light of recent scholarship on new religious movements (referred from hereon as NRMs). The discussion highlights the features ascribed by scholars to NRMs to show how the Amma community not only breaks from old established orders as is true to a NRM, but also constitutes itself as a site of interfaith<sup>103</sup> understanding and encounter. In other words, affiliation to this NRM is not an exclusive affiliation; rather, it becomes both a confluence and a filtering of different religious practices that nurture a particular dynamic of identification and desidentification among Amma's devotees and followers.

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<sup>102</sup> One of the most renowned writers in the area of interreligious dialogue is undoubtedly, Raimon Panikkar. Born to a Hindu father and a Catholic mother in Spain, Panikkar became a Catholic priest before launching on a personal odyssey to experience the different religious truth claims and find a way to lay a solid foundation for interreligious understanding. As he stated, "I 'left' as a Christian, I 'found' myself a Hindu and I 'return' a Buddhist, without having ceased to be a Christian" (Panikkar, 1978, p.2).

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Existing scholarship describes a as a movement that breaks with old established religions in their affiliations as well as in religious practice and norms (Clarke, 2006; Wilson, 1999). Within NRMs, less emphasis is placed on the need to rely on clergy and scriptures and more on direct spiritual experiences, revelations, and efforts. In addition, NRMs engage in community service as well as emphasize dailiness of spiritual practices while performing community service (Clarke, 2006).

In terms of public perceptions of NRMs, the relative newness of most of the religious movements characterized as NRMs and some violent incidents involving groups that may fall under this category have generated an image of NRMs as a phenomenon to be feared. Unlike old religious traditions that have been modified and sometimes mellowed by the onslaught of history, the NRM is comparatively new and has at times resulted in the growth of destructive cults like the *Aum Shinrikyo* in Japan, the Manson family and Peoples temples in United States, and the Order of Solar Temple in Canada and Switzerland (Ontario Consultants on Religious Tolerance, 2007). This has generated fear of joining NRMs, which have been frequently mistaken for destructive cults (Melton and Bromley, 2002).

Among participants interviewed for this study, many spoke about the fear they felt when they first encounter the Amma community and the relief after learning that in spite of Amma's history of visiting United States for over 20 years, there had not been a single investigation revealing any impropriety or fraudulent dealings involving Amma or Amma's organization. A few of the participants said that they took time to observe and then join the community as they had heard about gurus sexually abusing their disciples or having inappropriate financial dealings with the community. It is important to remind readers that 40 percent of the participants of this study had suffered sexual and physical abuse and two participants suffered from spiritual or cult abuse.

When friends invited Nistula to receive a hug from Amma in 1995, she reacted with initial hesitation. She described her experience in the following terms:

I did not know what *Devi Bhava* was. I saw all these strange people in white, and I thought it was a cult. It completely scared me. Amma was sitting under this little umbrella. There were no *swamis* around. It was in the middle of the day, and I remember she had the band playing. But it was all these Americans, so I had this

vision of Osho<sup>104</sup> running through my head. Osho! Oh god, I don't know about this . . . . But Amma was like amazing. And so she hugged me, and I had never felt such unconditional love, and I saw the whole universe, yeah. Wow . . . . I had one friend who had the cold feet and ran back to her car. Another friend who refused to go up. The third friend went up and also felt unconditional love.

Nistula did not go back to see Amma for another seven years, till circumstances brought her back to the community. Shanti, similarly, met Amma in 1991 and had a profound experience, but was scared by it and did not go back to see her till 1998 in New Mexico.

Other devotees talked about the relief they felt upon confirming that their guru was above the type of controversies that dogged other NRMs and guru movements in United States. Elena was thrilled and expressed the strength of her faith<sup>105</sup> in the following words:

Some cultural religions and gurus, sooner than later, here is some tainted story and you are so thrilled and pleased to know that it could *never* happen because of Amma, because she would not let it happen. Because she has such a close contact and knowledge (about the organization and the way it is run), which proves that it just couldn't possibly (happen).

In a sense, the devotees did keep a watch on the political developments around the Amma community and remained aware of the danger of having deep trust and faith they had in their guru.

My son, then a nine-year-old boy, once asked me: "Mom, what will you do if you discover Amma was a fraud?" This question terrified me when I had started participating in the community. I watched Amma for hours and many days, sat as close to her as possible, eavesdropping on conversations, and squinting my eyes on what gifts were being offered to Amma. Finally, after two months of observation in India and United States, I was overwhelmed with her simplicity, her inexhaustible energy, and the

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<sup>104</sup> Osho, previously known as Bhagwan Rajneesh, had an extensive community in United States in 1980s. He was later investigated for financial fraud and stories emerged from ex-devotees and security guards about his inappropriate sexual behavior with female disciples.

<sup>105</sup> Faith refers here to a conviction in a particular worldview or in the teachings of a master. It does not refer to religion.

visibility of almost all her actions. If she is a fraud, I decided, she must be extremely talented to pull it off.

A central feature ascribed to NRMs is that they *discard* practices and ideologies of old established religions and forge new exclusive ways of practice. In a sense, the common perception is that they are *new* religions. In United States, this is accompanied by the belief that Americans who have disowned their Christian faiths convert to Eastern NRMs and become New Agers (e.g., Brian Flynn's 2005 book *Running against the Wind*). NRMs, like the *Hare Krishna Movement* that attracted and continues attract thousands of Americans, have caused deep anxiety amongst the Christian faithful because of the possibility of erosion of their religion in United States. This is evidenced in more than 10 Christian websites devoted to addressing the problems of Eastern religions and Eastern NRMs (e.g., *Christian response to Hinduism*, nd; Kreeft, 1987; Pratte, 2003). Some scholars consider the influence to be the Easternization of the Western Mind (Campbell, 1999). Thus, unlike Western NRMs, Eastern NRMs are considered to be the repackaging of Eastern faiths under a new guru.

In many ways, practices within the Amma community are a repackaging of Hindu practices and beliefs. Hindu deities like Krishna, Ganesh, Durga, Kali, Venkateshwara, Ram, Siva and others are worshipped in devotional songs. Ancient Vedic rituals like the different fire ceremonies to appease Gods and planetary deities are conducted both in United States and in India by senior monks of the Amma organization. Several devotees learn and offer Vedic astrology and Ayurvedic sessions. The *satsangs* end their prayer gathering with *arati*,<sup>106</sup> closing Vedic prayers, and distribution of *Prasad*.<sup>107</sup> The common greeting in the organization is a Hindu mantra *Aum namah sivaya*.<sup>108</sup> The prescribed chanting of the 1000 names of the Goddess or *Lalitha Sahsrnama* is a popular Hindu chant in many parts of India. Whenever Amma entered the hall for giving *darshan*, she was worshipped with the traditional Hindu ceremony for the guru called *Padapuja*. Warriar (2005) insisted that the practices within the Amma community in India are Hindu.

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<sup>106</sup> Traditional Hindu ceremony that involves the waving camphor flame around the altar.

<sup>107</sup> Food that has been sanctified by offering to the gods.

<sup>108</sup> It is translated as "I greet you, who are the embodiment of Shiva (Pure Consciousness)."

Yet, the Amma spiritual community does break from Hinduism in significant ways.<sup>109</sup> First, Amma herself has claimed to be not a Hindu. In an interview to a Seattle-based news website, *seattlepi.com*, she said: “My religion is love, compassion, selfless service” (Iwasaki, 2006, para 8). Many devotees say that she is as much a Hindu as Christ was a Jew. Secondly, the extraordinary emphasis on community service as the locus for spiritual transformation is unlike most Hindu practices which hold meditation, contemplation, and chanting as the path to enlightenment. There have been exceptions in the last century,<sup>110</sup> with the founding of the *Ramakrishna Mission* by Swami Vivekananda who declared: “So long as the millions live in hunger and ignorance, I hold every man a traitor who, having been educated at their expense, pays not the least heed to them” (Vivekananda, nd, para 4). *Rashtriya Swayam Sevak Sangh*, a Hindu nationalist organization, has also built its Hindu nationalist identity through engagement in community service. Yet, the results of the community focus of the Amma organization have been found to be significant in India in terms of the building of institutions like hospitals, orphanages, universities, disaster relief efforts, and rural development programs. Thirdly, certain practices have either defied established Hindu norms or been introduced to Hindu lives. For example, Amma’s building and consecration of *Bramhasthanam* temples<sup>111</sup> are unique in India as well as the appointment of female priests to these temples, both of which defy the belief that women cannot perform such duties. The regular chanting of peace prayers, although extracted from the ancient Hindu scriptures, is also a new practice for the Hindu mind. Further, breaking male and religious fiefdoms, women and non-Hindus have also been trained to perform ancient *vedic* rituals. For example, Br. Remadevi is a U.S. American woman who has been trained to do various difficult *vedic* ceremonies, and she conducted a series of *yagnas and homas* (complex *vedic* fire rituals) around United States in 2008 for world peace and for praying

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<sup>109</sup> In a lecture given in June 2009 in New Mexico, Br. Shantamrita addressed the issue of prevalence of Indian religious and cultural practices in the Amma community. He redefined these practices as ancient traditions which were not limited to India and had common threads in many cultures around the world. He said these ancient traditions, which were more ancient than what archaeology has been able to decipher, valued spiritual wisdom more than philosophy and rituals. This wisdom became a living wisdom (or *Shishtachara*) through the lives of great masters who taught by living the wisdom as an example.

<sup>110</sup> Mahatma Gandhi also emphasized the importance of *seva* in the nonviolent movement for Indian Independence.

<sup>111</sup> Temples dedicated to Pure Consciousness or *Bramhan*.

to Nature. I attended the ceremony in Santa Fe, New Mexico, in 2008 and was thrilled with my first experience of a woman conducting these rituals.

My field observations of the Amma community showed that this break with conservative understanding of traditions was neither complete nor did it evoke exclusivity in the community practices. Many devotees actively practiced and participated in old established religious practices and events. Jane and Mare are parishioners of local Christian churches and participate in several church activities—both social and charitable. Some devotees sing in their church choir. Theresa and Bhuvana practice Buddhist chants and meditation methods and participate in Buddhist gatherings. Betty is a minister in a non-denomination religious group. Books like [\*Medicine of Light: A Shaman's Journey through Mystic Space-Time\*](#) by Bhairavan (2006) are written by shamans who are Amma devotees. Thus the belief that members of NRMs necessarily give up their existing religion seems to be erroneous in the case under study. Instead, they negotiate their established faiths with the new experiences, teachings, and practices of the Amma community.

Further, Amma's and the *swamis'* discourses empathetically reflect on various religious beliefs of the community members. For example, volume four and six of the *Talks by Swami Paramatmananda* extensively study and reflect on the message of Jesus Christ and St. Francis of Assisi in the context of Amma's messages and the community. In several spiritual discourses, in United States as well as in the Ashram in India, Amma has spoken about the importance of Christ's message of love in modern society and the need to incorporate it in our daily lives (for example, *May the Christ take birth in your heart*, 2008). Amma's curriculum for cultivating spiritual values in children includes a story of St. Francis of Assisi and a gospel.<sup>112</sup>

In effect, some of the practices within the Amma community were syncretic and actively borrowed from established religions, including Christianity. The *Atma puja*<sup>113</sup> ritual before the beginning of *Devi Bhava* is unlike any existing Hindu rituals and has been likened to Christian communion ritual (Raj, 2005). Food prayers, albeit extracted

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<sup>112</sup> From the Amrita Bala Kendra curriculum (2008 version).

<sup>113</sup> Worship of the self as spirit.

from the *Bhagavad Gita*, are new to the Hindu mind,<sup>114</sup> and I have often forgotten to say it before eating in Amma community events or with an Amma devotee. However, such a prayer is familiar to the Christian devotees of the community who take great care to say it before their meals.

Established religious festivals are also celebrated within the community along with new festivals exclusive to Amma community. For instance, Christmas Eve is celebrated in the *ashram* in India with special Christmas *bhajans*,<sup>115</sup> cultural performances by Westerners of Christian faith in the *ashram*, and a Christmas message from Amma at midnight. Christmas and Thanksgiving are also celebrated by the devotees in United States, and I have been invited on different occasions to participate in those celebrations. Often times, Amma is in San Ramon, California, or in Michigan during Thanksgiving, and the program usually includes a special Thanksgiving dinner (albeit a vegetarian version) served or blessed by Amma. Hindu festivals like *Diwali*, which are celebrated all over India, are also observed in the *ashram* in India as are local state festivals like *Onam* and *Karthick Purnima*. However, these Indian festivals are not celebrated by devotees in United States. On the other hand, festivals that are exclusive to the community and are equally celebrated in United States and in India are the *Guru Purnima*<sup>116</sup> and Amma's birthday on September 27. Sometimes, there is a live video transmission of the celebrations and in other cases, photos and video recordings of these events are loaded on the Amritapuri *ashram* website.

Certain practices, typical for the Amma community, are flexible to include the extra-religious needs of the devotees. For example, the practice of initiating discipleship through receiving a *mantra*<sup>117</sup> from Amma, includes Christian mantras with reference to Christ and Mary, along with Islamic, Buddhist, and Jewish mantras. A couple of the

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<sup>114</sup> Brahmin men, who have received the sacred thread, are instructed in certain prayers for invoking and sanctifying food before meals, but they differ from the content of the food prayers in the community, the way they are executed, as well as the individualist rather than communal tone of its performance.

<sup>115</sup> Devotional songs.

<sup>116</sup> *Guru Purnima* is usually celebrated by devotees of a particular guru in a community gathering. In that sense, it is not an exclusive festival, yet the way it is celebrated in Amma community makes it exclusive for the community.

<sup>117</sup> Mantra is a sacred set of words, usually in Sanskrit, that is often given to the disciple by a guru and is supposed to have enormous spiritual energy to help facilitate the spiritual journey of the disciple. The disciples usually chant them for a minimum number of times daily and are encouraged to chant all through the day, when possible. In a sense, they are similar to saying of the rosary of the Catholics.

participants received Christ mantras as part of their initiation. Further, devotees and participants reported asking Amma for spiritual counsel in the practice of their existing faiths.

Underlying the syncretism of their practices, a common goal seems to motivate Amma's devotees. Several noted that their search for God had been continuous through various religious traditions. Seventeen out of 20 participants said that they had been searching for God all their lives, and three said that after entering the Amma community, they had become committed to searching for God. These women are people whom we encounter in our everyday lives in urban areas—the secretary at a school, a gardener that you may have employed to work on your yard, your massage therapist, a researcher studying and reporting on secular issues, an artist commissioned to prepare some paintings for your office walls, a real-estate agent, an employee in your organization. These are urban women in urban jobs who sought God in earnest and practiced different methods to reach Him or Her. Most of the women said that they either found God in Amma or a Master who could catalyze their journey towards God or Enlightenment.

For some women, Amma was definitely God or an Embodiment of Godhood, and this was a powerful anchor in their lives. Marie reported:

I have always looked for God even as a child, I have looked for God. When I finally reached a point I said there is no God and I was angry. Then, when I experienced life like that, absolutely, essentially, completely alone forever, it was very very hard. And now I know that even though I haven't figured out how to do things right, the house and the car and family, even if I do end up homeless again and hungry again and I do know what that's like. That even though I don't like that, having Amma was such a life changing event for me that I am not even afraid of death anymore. Even if I have to go through death or whatever it is, I am not afraid. That is the simplest answer. I am not afraid. To me I met God. And there is nothing bigger than that.

Other women related their first encounter with Amma or first *darshan* as powerful and transformational. Some devotees said that they were able to recognize her divinity the moment she entered the hall and had gone into spontaneous rapture. Yet others like Peace reported she experienced her divinity during *darshan*,

It was really in the *darshan* that I felt a strong energy as I moving toward Her, it was like a wind blowing toward me, my whole body was rocking back and forth . Another participant who wished to remain anonymous reported similarly:

. . . And then after I had the *darshan* and I sat against a wall, just couldn't really think or do anything, I just sat. I was touched so deeply. And then I remember distinctly walking in the back of the hall and sitting on a chair, I couldn't stay in the chair because I felt like I was sitting at the same level as Amma so I slid down out of the chair and sat on the floor. If I could have dug a hole in the floor, I would have and put my face in it as I felt so humbled and so grateful (and unworthy) to be in Her presence. I just watched her, and I just felt so humbled. I had never felt that much respect and that much humility, I felt like I wanted to do something, anything to help, to serve, so I went to the people who were working and I said, "Can I do something?" They told me I could help clean. I went and cleaned the bathrooms. Usually I would think cleaning bathrooms is not the kind of work I would volunteer to do at a public event, but at that moment the depth of humility that came from within me was not even mine. My mind had no concept of what was happening. But it was just something deep within was touched immensely. Recognition of sorts. It was a powerful experience.

For this participant, recognition of Amma's state as an enlightened being was spontaneous and powerful. In another section of the interview, the same participant said that she did not like Hindu religious practices or the multiplicity of Gods in this religion. She said she had been uncomfortable with loud noise and garishness of decorations during the Amma program, yet Amma's presence and a recognition that she was a great master superseded the discomfort. Many other participants spoke about this spontaneous recognition and effects of the recognition. Some began to sob uncontrollably while others found their bodies moving in particular ways. The recognition often brought about a sense of humility that was the first step in developing the teacher-student relationship between Amma and a devotee. A couple of others like Sara, observed a connection to Amma during devotional singing in the evening, but a few said it took time to recognize her divinity and such a transformation did not happen immediately.



Some women reported having dreams and visions foretelling their meeting with Amma. Arati reported that she had spontaneous powerful meditation experiences of Godhood in the months before meeting Amma. Sophia had a dream of Amma and woke up saying her name prior to meeting her. Bhuvana spoke about an unusual “draw” to meet Amma. Betty also reported that she had a deep urge to go and meet her. Theresa had a dream in which she saw the feet of the Master and was both initiated as well as cured of her eye disease. She described her first *darshan* experience in the following words:

So it was here in Santa Fe that I finally came and I knew the day before or the night before that the light was coming and it had to be very special. I had to be a perfect child, not a grown up but this child. Then I remember thinking back when I was preparing for, what we call as first communion, I remember being so happy. Oh I have to be perfect, I have to be perfect! I am going to my Master! When I came down, we were in Santa Fe in the hotel, and walked into the tent here (*ashram*), there was my entire dream. Exact dream, and I am looking sideways and I am seeing all these Indian people and all these commotion, I didn't understand anything. I kept saying, Master, I can't understand anything. I looked up and I saw Amma and I said: “I am here Master, I am here” and I fell to my knees and I bowed down.

For Theresa, the knowledge of Amma was her Master was intuitive and without any doubt and preceded her first encounter with Amma. Theresa was a practicing Catholic, deeply embedded in her traditions. She had no prior knowledge about Eastern religious practices nor had she been to any such events. Yet, the narrative shows that the call of whom she thought was her master superseded social conditionings. The point about being a child in this narrative can be read as a suspension of ideas and beliefs and a willingness to learn things from scratch. This willingness to learn was found in a few other participants who also stressed the importance of being humble and allowing Amma to guide them in their path.

The purpose of presenting data in this section is not to highlight how the women in the community perceived Amma, but rather to point out how in accepting or recognizing Amma as God, as an embodiment of God or as a Master, there was a destabilization of the notion of what God meant or how one could reach God. For

example, amongst other practices and beliefs, God is understood as our Heavenly Father in mainstream Christianity, and can be known through accepting Jesus as the savior and the Son of God. Sophia's words best describe this destabilization:

The spirituality I feel about something that I know is there, before that something was called God, I now out of convenience's sake call it Amma. But Amma has said that she is not God. She is not Christ, she is not Buddha, but I pray to her and this gives me an anchor in the outer world.

This destabilization seemed to have happened in a manner that does not appear to be easily comprehensible by the rational mind and can be understood best as spirituality: an untangling of consciousness from the forces of individuation into the state of interconnectedness, where religious divisions do not exist. In sum, although the Amma spiritual community does in some ways break from old established orders true to a NRM, but it is also a site of interfaith understanding and encounters. Affiliation to NRM is not an exclusive affiliation; rather it becomes both a confluence and filtering of differing and different religious practices.

#### *Interreligious Code-Switching*

The practices described above illustrate the participants' tendency to engage in a form of syncretism that will be further analyzed in this section as an interreligious code-switching used by participants to understand and accept Amma and her actions and messages. Code-switching refers here to using a religious cultural code from one religion to explain or make sense of a different religion's perspectives or worldviews. The participants used messages and symbols from world religions to explain Amma's actions or messages. Among participants, interreligious code-switching involved primarily Christianity and Hinduism, with Buddhism and Native American practices also represented.

#### *Interreligious Code-switching with Christianity as the Code*

Several participants and members of the Amma community accepted Amma or understood Amma's messages using symbols from their Christian traditions. They did this in two ways: by rationally correlating Christian cultural symbols to explain Amma's actions and messages, and through mystical experiences. In doing this, they destabilized their established religious identities.

*Cultural symbols.* Participants followed Amma from within their Christian faith using cultural symbols specific to Christianity in three significant ways: 1) recognizing Amma as Christ or a Christ-like figure, (2) finding similarity between gospel messages and Amma's actions and messages, and (3) finding similarity of Christian and Amma rituals and practices.

Participants and many members spoke of Amma as a female embodiment of Christ. This was a common reference in the community—in informal conversations, *ashram* blog posts, and participant interviews. Some participants believed Amma was the return of Christ in a female form, and others believed her to be of the same divinity as Christ. They were thrilled over this reflection and grateful that they were able to be in company and discipleship of Christ or Christ-like figure. Bhuvana who grew up as a Catholic, for instance, reported:

To me she was the epitome of everything that Christ stood for. And she is a woman.

Mare, who is a practicing Christian, said:

Christ is a very real person to me and to many Christians; but you can't see him in the physical form, and I feel that Amma is the physical embodiment of God.

Similarly, Jane, who is very active in her congregation, said:

When I counter people saying the world is coming to an end and Jesus is coming again and Armageddon is happening, I say that Jesus is already here, and she is a female and brown.

Some participants cited Gospels or referred to Christ's central message of serving humanity and having faith in the grace of God to present their interpretation of Amma's actions. Jane was, perhaps, the most eloquent of them all. I met her in April of 2006 in an auditorium after a famous Rabbi's lecture on spirituality. We sensed that we had seen each other before, and she asked if I was with Amma. I said yes, and she replied that Amma had made the pages of the Bible alive for her. This remark was quite interesting, and I immediately took her phone number and stayed in touch with her. During our interview, we had to pull down the New Testament for her to make exact cites as she explained why she found Amma amazing. The following quotation from her interview conveys the position of Church-going participants:

(Referring to Luke 10:38-42) Martha is a traditional Jewish women and Mary wants to be with Jesus all the time. Men and women are not supposed to be sitting together with a teaching rabbi. And here Jesus is saying that Mary sitting in with men is perfectly okay. And here is Amma and her story where she is hugging and having physical connection with males she is not related, and they are just horrified by it. I can see that. It's the same thing taking place with Martha and Mary. It is such a parallel. This woman is so much like Jesus and the stories are so alike for me.

Jane made sense of Amma and her practices by finding similarity with Biblical stories that she was familiar with. In this way, she tried to step beyond the visible differences between practices in Amma community and that of her Christian faith and instead seek commonalities in the two.

Participants found similarity in rituals and practices in Amma community with Christian rituals and practices. Katherine found the *atma puja* to be similar to special blessings ceremony in the Catholic Church. She also found the use of rosary and the devotion to Virgin Mary similar to the *japa mala* and devotional practices to the Goddess and Amma. Ella found the 1,000 names to the Goddess and the 108 names to Amma similar to the Catholic practice of litany to the Blessed Mother. Theresa said that although she did not know any Hindu practices before meeting Amma, it was not a culture shock:

I grew as Catholic, Old Catholic, very traditional, where we washed the feet. We washed the feet of the Master, we washed the feet of others, to honor them. And so I grew with that old stuff, so because of my searching I would study one spiritual person, that was Christ, for hours and think what is he doing, what is he telling us. And I would study with my mind and then I would get it. So when it came to East Indian, I was just ready, it was not unusual. Not even the *mantra*, we said our rosary, it was very similar. We did a lot of fasting for particular reasons. We did a lot of things that young people don't know because they don't do that. Easter to me was very important to me because we sacrificed many things. We sacrificed for forty days. Did tone down the worldliness. We were told, tone it down. Stay inward towards Christ. Oh, I understand.

Throughout her interview, Theresa downplayed cultural and religious differences and instead emphasized commonalities. In this section, she explained why, in spite of her having no knowledge of Eastern traditions and philosophies, some of the Eastern practices within the Amma community did not baffle her. The theme of interconnections and commonalities was prominent in several participants' interviews.

*Mysticism.* Participants and other devotees reported that their interreligious dilemma was resolved through mystical experiences. Scholars have pointed out that although mystical experiences are supersensory experiences, they are still mediated by cultural symbols of the mystic (Carman, 1983; Cousins, 1983; Gimellos, 1983; Katz, 1983; Schimmel, 1983). I noticed, in effect, that the participants' mystical experiences also used symbols from their religious traditions. Peace noted that she saw a vision of Christ being crucified and resurrected during her first *darshan* and that the vision showed how that process was as simple as a change of clothes. Another woman reported seeing a dead relative along with Amma and the Virgin of Guadalupe. Theresa reported having a vision of the Lady of Guadalupe standing over Amma with her hands out, like in the images of the Lady in churches, while waiting in *darshan* line for her first *darshan*. Mare resolved her dilemma through a vision during one of Amma's programs, and she described the experience in the following ways:

I guess the most significant thing which would bridge a cultural difference is that when I went to see Amma, not the first time, maybe like the fourth time I went to see her, I wanted to be sure I was on the divine. I mean I knew how I felt about her, but I needed some sort of reassurance that my Christian views could also intertwine. It's like I was having a little bit of conflict, so I actually had this vision as Amma was entering the room one day. It was actually one of her, who are the guys dressed in orange? (the *swamis*), yes, one of the *swamis* was standing behind her, and he looks exactly like Christ, and so I had this vision. I mean it was just clear as day, this vision of Christ over her shoulder. His head was right behind her, and I thought that was a symbol to me that Christ is Amma and Amma is Christ. It's the *same* thing. It's not about one religion or the another, it's about loving humanity.

Mare resolved her religious dilemma through the vision of Christ, a religious symbol of Christians. The narratives of these participants confirm that, as scholars have argued, mystical visions are not acultural transcendent symbols but often mediated by the culture of the mystic (Foreman, 1990). In Mare's mystical vision, the symbol of Christ resolved her dilemma. More importantly, this movement allowed her to express devotion to Amma in a way that did not betray or deviate from her religious practices and beliefs. In this sense, Mare and other participants' code-switching enables them to expand their sense of religious identity to incorporate the Other in their lives.

I conclude this section with the citation of a blog posted on the main *ashram* website. The citation conveys this experience for a woman living thousand of miles away from New Mexico. Silvia Nardi grew up in Rome, Italy, as a Catholic. After meeting Amma, she experienced a deep connection to her. Her family believed that she may have been brainwashed and, in the blog post, she emphasized that her faith in God and Jesus had not been "even minimally affected" due to her discipleship to Amma. However, in her heart she was afraid that she may have abandoned her Church. She had a dream that resolved this dilemma:

In the dream, I was standing in the garden of my parents' house, with a *darshan* ticket in my hands and waiting for my turn for *darshan*. Around the corner, I could see Amma giving *darshan* on the street to a group of people crowded around her. At one point, she left the people and moved towards me. The closer she came, the brighter her white sari shined, and the happier I felt. I was so happy that I exploded into an uncontrollable laughter, and then Amma turned to look at me. She stopped, looked at me, and said in Italian, "You are always in my thoughts, there is not a moment when I am not thinking about you." She continued, "Try to rest as you are tired." And then she continued again, "What you are doing now in your spiritual life is not in conflict with the Catholic Church."

At that moment I woke, with joy in my heart that accompanied me throughout the day. I have thought and rethought and doubted whether or not this was but a joke of the mind or an important message of the Mother. Someone with whom I discussed this dream asked me, "But what did you feel in the dream?"

And I said: “Immense joy that I have never experienced in real life.” Then I realized that Amma wanted to help me, by giving answers to those questions that affected my mind, including the irrational fear of being abandoned, and the sense of guilt against the Church and my family (*Dream Darshan*, 2008, paras 5-6).

*Interreligious Code-switching with Hinduism as the Code*

Participants attempted to understand and accept Amma through Hinduism as a code in two ways: by understanding Christianity through the lens of Hinduism, and, by trying to understand the principles of Hinduism. Among those who used Hinduism to understand Christianity, several participants and devotees called Christ as an *avatar* or a guru against the convention of calling him the Savior or Son of God. It is possible that they switched to this code to make it easier for this pre-dominatingly Hindu researcher. For example, Jane reported:

All of a sudden being around Amma, I got an impression: a kinesthetic feeling of that Jesus was a guru. He was not an itinerant preacher going around having tent meetings. That the people that came to him had their hearts cracked open just like Amma does.

Here, Jane understands her Christian practices and symbols through a Hindu code and through her observations of Amma. She integrates the information back to her knowledge of the Bible and reads the stories in a different way. Through this re-reading of her scriptures, Jane finds the commonalities in religious practices.

It is worth noting that outside the local community, a devotee has researched and published books that relate Christian teachings to Amma’s messages. Walker III (2003)’s books are read by devotees in the community in their efforts to understand the parallels between their current or past faiths and Amma’s messages. These books use Hindu or Asian concepts like ego and illusion to interpret the Bible. He prefaced his book *Mystic Christ* (2003) with the following words:

This book is a discussion of various scriptures in the Old and New testaments with the majority of these being quotations from Jesus. Also included are numerous parallel and appropriate commentaries by Ammachi (Holy Mother) whom the author regards as his teacher and mentor (p. xi).

The author's presentation of the Bible with parallel commentaries from Amma—whose teachings are, at times, closer to Eastern philosophies—is once again an attempt to tease out the commonalities in traditions rather than differences. The commonalities emerge through a re-reading of the Christian scriptures through an Eastern eye.

Many participants indicated that they had begun to appreciate their birth religions and to re-read their scriptures in a new way. Almost all of the participants emphasized that they loved or believed in Jesus. They called him an *avatar*, embodiment of God, guru or a *mahatma* (great soul). They were emphatic that their discipleship to Amma did not mean a rejection of the persona of Jesus, but many, in fact, insisted that Amma allowed them to appreciate their birth religions in new ways.

For instance, Peace was born in a “very” Catholic family where relatives had been or were nuns and monks. She said she had noticed the contradictions between the Hindu traditions experienced through Amma and the social abuse perpetrated by the same religion as portrayed in the Meera Nair film *Water*. This contrast allowed her to revisit her birth religion and understand its own contradictions:

Maybe that's why religion goes in different places. It is because the pure truth of it is extracted and transplanted elsewhere. And I'd never known that. And I kept thinking why Catholicism is and why is Christianity so rotten to the core. And it's not; it's become corrupted by people, but if you extract that pure seed you get the same purity that you get with Hinduism, and with Native American spirituality, or with whatever, it's the same everywhere.

Other participants spoke about re-reading the New Testament with a new eye after joining the Amma community. Katherine spoke about re-reading the New Testament after joining the Amma community:

Sometimes I am traveling and I open a chapter and I am amazed for the New Testament, you know about Jesus. It is amazing how I read it completely differently now that I have met Amma. Because before it just seemed that I had nothing practical.

Arati, who was raised Catholic reported that she read the New Testament for the first time *after* joining the Amma community:



I was raised in the Catholic faith, and after meeting Amma I read the New Testament in the Christian Bible for the very first time. I felt the ultimate oneness of these teachings and felt such an awesome spiritual awakening that mere words cannot begin to describe. I realized that Amma is Jesus Christ, Krishna, Buddha. In the re-reading of the scriptures, the participants emphasized on the commonalities amongst various teachings rather than how the teachings were different.

A couple of participants also pointed out that Amma did not want devotees to convert to her way of life but rather to embrace their existing religions fully. For instance, Teresa said:

One of the things she said, I do not want you to convert to my religion. I am here just to give love. And whatever religion you have, embrace it fully. I read it. It was something that she had told in *Awaken Children*.

Other participants and devotees painstakingly studied Hindu philosophies and correct pronunciation of different chants in their efforts to understand and accept Amma. Participants and devotees read books on Hinduism to understand its philosophical rootings (for example, they read *Hinduism for Dummies*). Elena spoke about the significance of mantra and its vibratory influences while an anonymous participant spoke about the need to maintain the discipline of chanting the 1,000 names, since indiscipline may cause negative vibratory effects. Participants worked hard to learn the correct pronunciations of the chants. Mita used a tape that slowly pronounced the 108 names and transcribed each name by pronunciation into a four-by-six inches index card. Sophia followed a CD, and she also took classes on 1,000 names. Several participants and devotees attended the pronunciation classes in Santa Fe or in Albuquerque. Other participants and devotees attended Vedic ceremonies whenever they were held as well as offered *pujas* for different planets in the *Brahmasthanam* temples in India under the guidance of Vedic astrologers in the Amma community.

Thus religious identities became mutable and less fixed as the participants navigated between traditions. Not only did participants seek commonalities amongst traditions, they also received that the teachings in the community encouraged to continue their existing religious journey and did not ask for a conversion to Amma's teachings or practices.

*Hindu-Christian Code-Switching in Action: A Scene from the Field*

The limitations of a religious movement that is new and small in a given region force organizers to depend on and share existing structures and resources in order to hold meetings or conduct various activities. Unlike in Santa Fe, where devotees have an *ashram* or space dedicated to their activities, the Amma community in Albuquerque collaborated with local churches for space as well as participation in their activities. This created interesting exchanges for interreligious dialogue.

In Albuquerque, different teams of devotees gather every Saturday morning at a local Catholic Church to prepare burritos and snack bags in the church pantry in what is known as Amma's Kitchen or the Burrito project. The bags are then distributed to the hungry that come to the door of the church. Saturday is the day when the church's volunteers do not serve food to the hungry. Amma's Kitchen has come to fill that vacuum by bringing its own devotees for the project. At the same time, devotees receive an opportunity to serve the hungry as requested by Amma. Along with my son, I volunteered in this project for a year, from August 2007 until July 2008. A description of a typical scene observed provides illustration of such interreligious exchanges.

On a typical Saturday, the *Burrito* project starts at 10:00 a.m. Amma's devotees clean the tables and organize vessels and food prior to the preparation of the meal. A prayer is chanted invoking Amma and requesting her blessing for the meal preparation. The volunteers then divide the work and begin the process of preparing the meal. During the preparation, sometimes volunteers sing Amma songs, and, at other times, play Amma *bhajan*<sup>118</sup> CDs. The Sister at the church does not object to any of these practices or to the presence of Amma's photograph in the Church's pantry. After the meal is prepared and the bags packed, devotees gather together for a blessing of the food in Sanskrit and then proceed to distribute the bags to people waiting outside the church. For most of the people waiting for their bag of food, this would seem as a normal Church practice and would offer Christian blessings to the devotees. At the end of the distribution, the devotees form a circle to chant peace prayers. Sometimes, the Sister joins hands with devotees and adds her own prayers for peace and happiness in the world. This spontaneous interfaith mood seems neither out of the ordinary for the devotees nor for the

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<sup>118</sup> Devotional songs.

Sister. Besides joining the prayer, the Church's staff may leave extra bags of fruits, chocolate syrup, and fortified milk powder near a table with a note indicating that it could be used for the Saturday *burrITO* project. The devotees, on the other hand, are careful to not touch items that belonged to the Church pantry and to clean the kitchen and food preparation area thoroughly before leaving.

In addition to the interfaith collaboration in the *BurrITO* project, the community in Albuquerque also experimented with using a local church's space for conducting its prayer sessions or *satsangs*. A couple of rooms were rented out to the community once a month. Some devotees loved the fact that it was a public space rather than a private home. Yet, others objected to the fact that all photographs of Amma and other worship items had to be put away in storage at the end of every *satsang*. The experiment did not last long.

#### *Interreligious Code-switching between Buddhism and Amma Practices*

Four of the participants practiced Buddhism intensely and formally prior to meeting Amma. One other participant practiced Buddhism informally. Two of the participants continued their Buddhist practices after entering the Amma community. These participants easily distinguished between Buddhist practices and Amma practices, noting that in contrast to Amma's programs many Buddhist practices require silence and intense meditation periods. Two of the participants regularly attended *Vipassana*, an intense Buddhist practice for 10 to 15 days where the members commune together, live in complete silence, eat frugally, and practice meditation for 10 to 12 hours a day. For them, this setting is qualitatively different from Amma retreats, which are noisy, crowded, busy with constant work, and often riddled with interpersonal conflict and tension. This, they said, were Amma's way to cause the internal *vasanas* (inherent tendencies) to come to surface so that devotees could exercise self-awareness to recognize and remove them. Some participants spoke about this process. Nistula, for instance, explained:

*Vipassana* is completely silent. And Amma is the opposite. Amma tries to bring up every possible thing and she tries to create conflict. It is explained that this is the rubbing of the stone and we become polished. It is also the cacophony, it is total chaos around Amma. In *Vipassana*, it is all orderly, there is no talking, you

can't even look at each other. And Amma just throws you together and she brings up all your *vasanas* and you have to deal with it.

Similarly, Bhavana differentiated between Buddhist philosophy and rituals with Amma community practices:

I think Buddhists tend to be much very mental and everything is broken down to understanding the mind. . . . But they don't focus a lot on service. So for me the Buddhist practice is much more inner and giving a lot of things you can do to practice. There is this practice and that practice and it gets very complex. In Amma, previously it was only music and hugs, *bhajans* and hugs. And a little bit of teaching. Now, okay, there is IAM meditation, mantra, but she does not ask a lot of us. It is more that we try to remember God in our acts and the importance of the mantra and then the meditation practice . . . . So she is like, kind-of roll up your sleeves, you have practices to help you, but really we have to help each other. And this is not for everybody, it is sometimes she gives permission to go to a more inner world.

Participants also spoke about the problems in Buddhist practices or community. Two of the participants who continued with their Buddhist practices referred to the resentment others experienced in the Buddhist community because of their involvement in the Amma community. Teresa elaborated on the need for religions to avoid dogmatism and the belief that their way was the only way. She recounted an episode where a Buddhist leader from her community attended an interfaith dialogue and afterwards declared himself triumphant because he had made the group to chant Buddhist *mantras* for 10 minutes. Teresa questioned the usefulness of such a dialogue when the fundamental drive was to convert the other, even if it was for 10 minutes. Nistula, on the other hand, addressed the problem of excessive meditation. She said that prior to joining the Amma community, she was meditating for 18-20 hours a day. She said that intense meditation caused her to dissociate from the body frequently and led to hallucination. Nistula offered another perspective on this when she argued that it was important to be grounded or have a grounded personality while practicing intense meditation. She claimed that Amma's insistence on *seva* and bringing up *vasanas* or negative tendencies in interpersonal tensions kept her grounded. An anonymous participant reported that at a

certain point in her Buddhist meditation practices, she sensed a desire for a teacher. So when Amma appeared, she considered her as the teacher and followed her practices.

Nonetheless, Teresa and Bhuvana continue with their Buddhist practices and said they were seamless with Amma practices and Amma. Teresa reported that she felt Amma wanted her to continue her Buddhist practices, and Bhuvana said she loved the Buddhist practices. None of the participants reported any confusion or dilemma about their previous and existing practices or reported it was odd or wrong. According to Teresa:

When I met Amma, I had already been chanting again. One of the things she said, “I do not want you to convert to my religion. I am here just to give love. And whatever religion you have, embrace it fully.” I read that. It was something that she had told in *Awaken Children*.

#### *Interreligious Code-Switching with Native American Spirituality*

Some of the participants and devotees had been practicing Native American spirituality prior to meeting Amma. Few of them were recognized as medicine-women, shamans, and Native American healers. These participants found that there was little difference between the practices in the Amma community and the Native American spirituality. Lisa reported:

You know having done the Tibetan Buddhism and shamanism, it is very out there. . . . I think my exposure to those kinds—I have worked and lived with *curanderas* and I have done some mystical things with the herbs. And so this is not really foreign, it is not really foreign. It seems very familiar.

Several of the devotees continued their Native American spiritual practices in the Amma community. During Amma tour programs, it is easy to run into healers and shamans seeking blessing from Amma, practicing some of their techniques in the hall, or doing bodywork for a devotee. Further, some of the members of the Tewa-speaking pueblos in Northern New Mexico regularly visit Amma and perform Native American dances before her. One of the couples in that group was married by Amma in their full Native American dress and in a ceremony that included some of their local customs. Members of Tewa-speaking pueblos also visited India and Amma’s *ashram*.

In sum, this section on interreligious code-switching exposes some of the religious tensions participants and devotees face as they worked to resolve interfaith differences. In

most cases, the devotees reported a break with previous religious affiliations that required them to follow prescribed beliefs and practices. Yet, the break was neither complete nor did it create a completely new religious identity position. Most often, it led to a *state* of shifting identities: neither here nor there, the participants' journey evolves as a fluid back and forth in a continuum of spiritual practices that blends their past/existing religious experience with the practices of the Amma community.

### *Contradictions and Tensions*

As expected, in this process of religious identification and disidentification participants encounter tensions and contradictions that are significant to discuss. The findings of this research show that devotees did not accept the practices and beliefs in the Amma community unequivocally: they resisted some practices, questioned others, and expressed their discomfort about others. In other words, their destabilized religious identities do not find a fixed anchor in a new religious paradigm but instead remain a shifting subjectivity without the certainty and safety of established religions.

### *Pick and Choose Amma Practices*

Participants did not follow all practices suggested by Amma. Some participants found the chanting of 1,000 names intimidating and selected to learn 108 names only. Some participants loved *bhajans* or devotional singing, while others preferred to stay away from it. Some participants practiced the Integrated Amrita Meditation technique rigorously every morning or evening, while others found it to be time-consuming or did not learn it. Most participants spoke about the importance of chanting their *mantra* all day and spoke about their struggle to comply with this discipline. A couple of participants had suggestions to improve the structure in Amma retreats to make it more interesting and dynamic.

### *I Do Not Want to Convert Others*

Several participants and devotees spoke about the discomfort they experienced when speaking about Amma to non-devotees and inviting them to get her *darshan*. Their discomfort related to a couple of issues: first, they were afraid that people might misinterpret their invitation to an invitation to a cult, and second, they said that this process was like trying to convert people into Amma devotees. The social stigma attached to Eastern NRMs by those who perceived them as brainwashing cults affected

Amma devotees, and some lost or developed distance from both friends and family members over this issue. For instance, Ella realized the problem when people interpreted her behavior as “crazy.”

Other participants talked about their discomfort of joining a group that would believe Amma was the only way to enlightenment or God for that would be recreating religious dogma within the Amma community. For many, Amma was a great Master or God, but others paths were equally valid and appropriate. As one participant who desired to remain anonymous put it:

I have respect for everybody’s path, and I have never tried to force people to come to Amma. I do not have strong desire that people should meet Amma. I have a strong desire for my family to meet Amma, and they have couple of times. That was special. But I want them to do what is right for them and I want them to be at peace in their paths. As long as they are doing that, I am happy.

Several participants spoke similarly about coming to peace with their family members differing paths and controlling the urge that others must meet and accept Amma as they did.

Yet, every year the public relations team would request devotees to speak about Amma to non-devotees and invite them for *darshan*. Participants spoke about the ways they would send in the invitation. Theresa talked about Amma to members of the Indian community or to people she was called to speak. Others would tell only close friends and family members about Amma’s programs. For Sara, on the other hand, inviting people to see Amma was not a contradiction, rather continuity. She could not understand why people were not taking advantage of the presence of a guru as powerful as Jesus who traveled to their city every year:

This culture is mainly Christianity and Christians believe in one enlightened person only, in history one person only, that’s it. So living with someone that is every goodness, powerful as Jesus was, isn’t it crazy, it is amazing. When Jesus walked the earth, people didn’t know him, and his neighbors didn’t value him. And the people in my circle of friends, someday they are gonna regret that they did not take advantage. I have told friends. They respond with: “Well, let me see. I have to do this and I have to do that. I can’t sit for so long.” She comes to this

state once a year; and we are lucky she comes here, and they can't fit her in. It is amazing. Besides, she may never ever come back. We cannot see the future. We might not even take another breath, so the moment is important.

Thus, there is a tension in the community between respecting people's religious preferences and questioning why others do not perceive and recognize Amma's greatness. Interestingly, I have visited and sought blessings from several traveling mystics in Albuquerque in the company of Amma devotees. During these meetings, I have heard devotees explain that it does not matter what practices or beliefs different mystics have, their closeness to divinity allow them to spiritually awaken and strengthen the devotee's journey to enlightenment. In a way, although Amma was their spiritual master, it was not an act of betrayal to bow down before another teacher. This follows from the philosophical belief that divinity in all and it is the same divinity that is expressed differently through different masters. Rumi's poem comes to mind,

The lamps are different,  
But the Light is the same.

#### *Dogma in the Amma Community?*

Participants who had been critical of the church in their lives prior to meeting Amma were quite wary about the return to dogmatic practices in the Amma community. Some devotees argued that the lack of transparency in the organizational structure and unspoken rules indicated rigidity in thought and practice. The practice of using the phrase "Amma has said" in meetings irritated some devotees who said that such interpretations were comparable to a literal interpretation of the Bible.

At another level, devotees sometimes reported being judged if they did not follow certain customs and manners in the community. The practice of wearing white in the Amma community gatherings and programs was uncomfortable for some devotees who questioned the practice. According to a brochure created for newcomers, the organization states that no one is required to wear white but some devotees choose to do so out of their devotion to Amma. Still, a majority of Amma devotees wears white clothes during Amma programs and retreats. Some of the devotees said that such a practice created an ingroup-outgroup division that made them uncomfortable.



A couple of participants questioned the mystical experiences shared in the community and wondered if they were a construction of the mind. They spoke about the discomfort when others attributed all events to the grace of Amma, and with the craze in the community to collect her fallen hair, half-drunk cup of tea, fruits in her room, and other items as sacred objects. This tendency to openly question Amma practices was not common among participants and devotees but was found in small pockets in the community.

Other participants directed their criticism to the presence of “New Agers” in the community. They found the clothes and behavior to be disrespectful to Amma and the Eastern tradition of mahatma or enlightened beings, and said the clothes and behavior of New Agers diminished public understanding of seriousness about spirituality in the community and projected it more as a fad or lifestyle. The participants were emphatic that spirituality for them was more a life practice rather than a lifestyle. At the same time, the participants assured me that such a discomfort was more a judgment on their part because Amma accepted everybody regardless of their religious or spiritual affiliations. As the above paragraphs reveal contradictions and tensions in the community, they also suggest that the destabilized religious identities do not ground themselves in a new paradigm but instead remain constantly shifting and moving in uncharted terrains.

#### *Living Interfaith*

I don't really consider myself to be Catholic, Buddhist, or Amma devotee. I just want to be a good human. And I am devoted to Mother.

—participant Bhuvana

Amma's messages on interfaith are salient in the teachings disseminated in the community; not surprisingly, the theme of interfaith living emerged in the participants' narratives on religious identity to provide another

#### *Amma and Interfaith Interactions*

In this section, I present examples of the core messages about interfaith that circulate in the Amma community and the kinds of organizational events sponsored by it with the goal of illustrating the sources of information and models that influence the participant's understanding of interfaith interaction. One example is Amma's speech titled *Understanding and Collaboration between Religions*. Amma was awarded the 4<sup>th</sup>

Annual James Parks Morton Interfaith Award in 2006. During the presentation of the award, Amma gave a speech that was published and read by several devotees in United States. In it, Amma said that spirituality was the inner essence of all religions.

Philosophical teachings, scriptures, symbols, and rituals were the external aspects of a religion while compassion, love, unity of spirit, and the desire to know the True Self was the inner core of religion. She said that people had become more attached to the external aspects of religion instead of focusing on its inner essence. This has caused religions to become destructive forces by starting wars and conflicts around whose religion is better or the right way. Giving an example to illustrate her point, she said:

For example, pointing to a tree, a person says, ‘Look at that tree. Do you see the fruit hanging on that branch? If you eat it, you will attain immortality!’ Then, what we should do is climb the tree, pick the fruit and eat it. If, instead, we hold on to the person’s finger, we will never be able to enjoy the fruit. This is akin to clinging to the words of the scriptures, rather than grasping the spiritual principles to which they point (Amritanandamayi Devi, 2006, p.17-18).

She urged religious leaders to encourage their devotees to learn to discriminate between the outer shell and the inner essence of religion and seek true awakening of their spirit. She said, “Today, we are searching for a God who dwells only in pictures and scriptures. In that search, we have lost our way” (Amritanandamayi Devi, 2006, p.24). Further, she pointed out that sometimes interfaith dialogues are mostly words but are not followed up in actions in the world. She stated that unlike the past, when religious divisions were out in the open for all to see and recognize, in current times, such divisions had become deep seated in the heart and very subtle. This had made such divisions harder to recognize and tackle and hence more powerful in their effects. She requested believers to open their hearts and express compassion and love for one another. At the end of the speech, she gave suggestions for improving interfaith understanding, which included environmental protection campaign, eradication of hunger and poverty, fostering studies of world religions in each religious center, and service to others.

Moreover, Amma’s organization has been active in inviting different religious leaders for various events. In addition, several religious leaders, monks, and nuns from different world religions have visited Amma or received *darshan* on their own accord.

For instance, Amma's 50<sup>th</sup> birthday celebrations in September 2003 hosted religious leaders from different faiths. Representatives from Judaism, Christianity, Buddhism, Islam, and Jainism spoke at the Interfaith summit held to commemorate the event. Reverend Dr. Ipe Joseph, the general secretary of National Council of Churches of India, spoke on this occasion about the importance of recognizing other faiths in the following words:

Long ago, Christians considered people of other faiths as "pagans." Then the Church was willing to call them "non-Christians," trying to give people of other faiths an identity which is measured in terms of our own identity. Again the Church made an effort through interreligious dialogue to understand the people of other faiths and neighbors of other faiths, but that is not enough. My submission is that the Church has to still open herself to recognize people of other faiths as "fellow pilgrims" (*Religions embracing for peace and harmony: The Amritavarsham50 interfaith summit*, 2003, para 3)

According to the *ashram* blog, priests and ministers of Christian faith in India visit Amma in the *ashram* in Amritapuri, India. For example, Most Reverend Dr. Philipose Mar Chrysostom Mar Thoma Metropolitan a.k.a. Bishop Thirumeni, considered the longest reigning Bishop in India, visited Amma in Amritapuri in August 2008. According to the blog, the Bishop participated in the *bhajans* and received Amma's *darshan*. In his own words, the Bishop said that he had been visiting different *ashrams* and participating in their prayers and "Through this I am trying to understand different ways of worship and ways of service. Through that I am trying to come closer to God" (*Bishop Thirumeni: "Amma is a blessing given by the Lord,"* 2008, para 6).

Amma, on the other hand, has been insisting on Indians becoming more open to different faiths. In Kerala, there are several temples which have strict code of allowing only Hindus inside the sanctum sanctorum of the temple. In 2005, Amma requested that people of all religions be allowed into the temples, stating that a true believer, irrespective of his or her religion, could never "defile the temple" (*Mata favors temple entry for all*, 2007, para 2). Further, she welcomed celebration of non-Hindu festivals in the *ashram*. CNN's Delia Gallagher reported that a picture of Jesus hung in Amma's private quarters (*Guru fights poverty of love*, 2007, para 16). In September 2008, a

Muslim family from Iran performed *Padapuja* or the worship of the guru's feet at the Indian *ashram* (*Heaven at her feet*, 2008, paras1-2).

Finally, this interfaith principle is at the heart of *Darshan*, where religions are transcended in the arms of love. Uma Pamaraju from *Fox* news noted, "It is indeed fascinating to watch the hundreds of people — Christians, Jews, Muslims, Buddhists and Hindus — kneel as they get closer to Ammachi and her magnetic hugs. She embraces all faiths and describes herself as a servant of god" (*Hugging saint visits the US*, 2007, para 3). I have personally watched people of all faiths sink into her embrace—Buddhist monks, Catholic nuns, Native Americans in their traditional clothing, Muslims, and Jews. While presenting Amma with the Interfaith award in 2006, Donald Rubin commented similarly: "By reaching out and accepting all human beings through the physical act of hugging, she transcends all religions and political divisions" (Amritanandamayi, 2006, p.7).

One could assume that only devotees with liberal religious views come to receive Amma's *darshan*. The participants of this study are definitely liberal in their thinking and practice. However, the *ashram* blog cite examples of people who practice their religion rigorously and still visit Amma. In an interesting interview, the blog reported on a conversation with a Hasidic couple who had come to Amma for *darshan*. The reporter questioned whether the couple suffered from any conflict with their religious practice by coming to Amma. The couple referred to Amma as an embodied divinity and said that they avoided idolatry and instead approached Amma in the following way: "When I go up for *darshan*, I'm praying to the Hebrew God as I'm receiving the blessings from her" (*Torah: The Shabbas queen, the Shekina*, 2003, para 3, emphasis mine). The husband said he received a Hebrew mantra that he had been using for a long time through his Hasidic lineage.

I met a Jewess devotee while doing *seva* in the kitchen during the Albuquerque Amma retreat of 2007. It was my only close interaction with a person of Jewish faith, although I had known other important staff members in the Amma tour who were of the same religion. This devotee spoke about having spent a long time in Israel, studying the scriptures and contemplating, when in one meditation she received a call from the Hindu

yogi Babaji.<sup>119</sup> She considered Babaji as her guru. Somehow her path also led her to Amma, and she began attending Amma retreats in earnest. These examples highlight how interfaith understanding happens within the organization and in different, personal ways for different people. And most importantly, they indicate that interfaith understanding is the result of a recognition of the spiritual essence within one's own religion.

*Coffee Poured in Many Cups*

Consonant with Amma's interfaith philosophy, the participants in the study expressed a heterogeneous religious identity, one in which they simultaneously located themselves as belonging to a particular religion and still followed practices that broke with the religious tradition. Yet, they insisted that no break had occurred, and accepted all religious practices as part of the *same*. A participant reported thus:

I was always serious about my religion and spirituality, and I do not put any labels on it, but it is just more than growing up in a Christian household. I grew up in Methodist church, and I liked it and all. I mean I still very strongly believe in Jesus. But I also believe there are other Avatars. There are other incarnations of God. But I absolutely believe that Jesus was one. I have no problems with that. I am not conflicted about carrying a Methodist title and practicing a number of things. I am not attached to a Methodist title either. I don't need to use it. But in terms of practice, from a young age I often spoke to God, in my prayers.

In this quotation, the participant speaks about the complex ways in which she forms her identity. Disidentification, as suggested by his narrative, does not mean rejecting an identity and securing another; rather it is an expansion of identification to include more than one religion in a form of interfaith understanding. Participants also spoke about their spiritual continuity as one that allowed for the transcendence of any differences between the practices in the Amma community and what they practiced before joining the community. Three of the participants had practiced Native American religious traditions prior to meeting Amma and argued that practices in the Amma community were not a break but a "process" of becoming more familiar with a common spiritual essence. This idea of interfaith understanding as a spiritual continuity was

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<sup>119</sup> According to the different stories, Babaji is reputed to be several centuries old. It is said that he appears every now and then to initiate or advice disciples and then retreats into the Himalayas for deep meditation. According to some, he recently left his earthly body.

present in some other participants, too. Let us examine the following quotation from Arati:

I had wanted spirituality and had yearned for a more tangible experience of God, and Amma has blessed me with the experience of God and has given me the knowledge that spirituality and self realization are the purpose and goal of life . . . Amma has really driven home the point that the most important thing is to be a good person, to treat others with love and respect in every way possible, to serve others in the world, I really struggle with that, trying to serve in meaningful ways.

Arati was and is a Catholic. Her yearning for God prior to meeting Amma is not at odds with her experience of God with Amma. The quotation does not reveal any tensions or breaks in what was desired and what was gained. Further, like many other participants and stories of devotees on the Amritapuri website, experiencing God is living like an imitation of God—as a good human, loving and respecting others without bias or reservation, and living life as service to others. Teresa said:

Do people perform miracles or do people believe if miraculous things occur? I do not know. I do think love is genuine. Those who carry wisdom are genuinely wise and they come and go through humanity in order to try to bring some form of sanity to our lives. She is definitely one of them. She touches thousands and millions of people and she has profound wisdom without being taught and she is definitely one of them. I admire her and love her and appreciate, and I also love the fact she inspires so many to do so much. That is a true teacher. Therefore, none of the other stuff matters. It is the end result. It is about action and so, if a teacher inspires others to take care of themselves and others, that's what matters: to honor life around them and to take care of others and to take care of those who are hungry and sick and alien in some way, shape or form; that is a profound teacher and saint in my eyes.

At the core of the participants' interfaith understanding is the belief in an essential, common goal in all religious practices: to enable spiritual growth in order to accept and love themselves and others without reservation. The spiritual journey of the devotees, as the narratives presented here indicate, is often unrelated to a personal achievement of enlightenment; it is about becoming a better human in a very secular

sense. While many of the participants claimed that they sensed Amma's inner illumination, it was her social acts of giving that they modeled their lives after.

Jane also spoke about the secular dimension of the spiritual journey:

I love the idea we are here to live a life of love and service. And the opportunity to feed the poor. I mean, Jesus says feed the poor. He does not say, feed the deserving poor. He doesn't feed the nice poor, the sober poor, he says feed the poor. And Amma says the same. And it is pretty consistent throughout great spiritual teachers that we are supposed to help the poor.

None of the participants claimed that after accepting Amma as their teacher or God, or following Amma recommended practices, they were automatically guaranteed heaven or liberation. For each one of them, spirituality was, instead, a continuous struggle and mindful practice to become a person able to love and accept in all circumstances and at all moments. They spoke about their failures in becoming that perfect person. They spoke about trying to be more humble, less attached to results, opinions, and situations, and more hardworking. Some spoke about overcoming fear, insecurity, and other negative patterns in their lives.

As the participants stated, achieving such spiritual goal is an extremely complex and hard process. I would add that is also non-linear, in that a person does not visibly become progressively better. There are moments of great peace when the person exudes tremendous love and acceptance, and moments of great frustration when the person may be surly and angry. John of the Cross called the periods of darkness "the dark night of the soul." And anybody who uses detox diets would understand that the purification of the body is never a linear or easy process. It is like entering a room to clean it. As you discover more hidden spaces where dirt has accumulated, as you struggle to reach them and pull out the dirt, to an outsider you look dirtier and the room looks messier. But continue at it because you know that the room is actually getting cleaned. In that sense, many of the devotees who have seriously and sincerely committed themselves to process of becoming good appeared quite messed up, or as devotees like to say, "patients in Amma's hospital" to outsiders. The Amma programs, retreats, and *satsangs* are chaotic, frustrating, and hard. Many devotees drop out unable to withstand the intensity of the process in themselves and in others. It seems ironic to me, as I look back to when I

started my field research in the community I believed that in a community whose leader was a hugging mother, the research process would be sweet and magical. There has been no magic, no miracle. There have been moments of deep and enthralling sweetness and mostly long periods of intense discipline and hard soul work. I guess that is what spirituality is about. Willa Cather (1873-1947) said in a similar manner, “Miracles rest not so much upon healing power coming suddenly near to us from afar, but upon our perceptions being made finer, so that for a moment our eyes can see and our ears can hear what is there about us always.”

In the next section, I discuss the findings and its implications to scholarship in interreligious dialogue and understanding.

#### Discussion of Findings

In this section, I discuss the findings presented above and make the argument that spirituality allows for the negotiation of religious identities in unique ways to create a space for dialogue that gains depth and genuineness as Panikkar (1978)’s concept of “intrareligious” dialogue. There is a unique shifting of identities, from one more rooted in organized religions to one more fragile and unstable after identification with the Amma NRM. This shift leads to a breakthrough or transcendent, unifying understanding of religions. In this realm, the findings more clearly support the underlying conceptualization that spirituality is a journey from disidentification from social and personal identities to a state of connectedness.

#### *Religious Background of Researcher*

Any interpretation of data on religion requires the transparency of the researcher’s religious background. I was born to a very religious Hindu mother and an atheist father. In spite of her religious convictions, my mother (perhaps due to her education in a Catholic school) included Jesus in her worship in particular ways. For example, she celebrated Christmas by making a dessert and offering it to the gods via Hindu rituals. Thus Christmas was a holy day in our home. I also grew up believing Buddha was an *avatar* of one of the Hindu Trinity, Vishnu.

At around the age of 14, certain mystical experiences left me believing that Divinity or God was beyond forms, structures, and qualities. This took me into a journey of Hindu scriptures like the *Vedas*, the *Upanishads*, and the *Bhagavad Gita*. Due to lack



of theological knowledge of other religions, and finding deep kinship to *Upanishads*, I turned into a religious fanatic from the age 18-24, vigorously speaking in public platforms about the need for a Hindu identity.

However, the basic premise of *Upanishads* of the unifying reality of *Bramhan* or Pure Consciousness began to create discomfort in my mindset about the superiority my religion. I began to question the validity of the notion of superiority of one religion or another as well as its resulting mutual hatred and intolerance. I began the process of trying to understand the religious-Other by first studying the texts of Hindu mystics like Ramakrishna and Swami Yogananda. Ramakrishna had practiced Hinduism, Islam, and Christianity and stated that he gained enlightenment through all the three religions. This, to me, was the greatest testimony of the validity of other religions.

However, although I believed that religions, irrespective of their beliefs and customs, led to the same Divinity, it was difficult for me to authentically appreciate and understand the beliefs and practices of the religious-Other. I felt there were few irreconcilable differences between the truth claims of Christianity and Hinduism. For example, Hinduism firmly believed in *karma* and reincarnation while Christianity believed in Heaven and hell, judgment day and a single life. I read several Biblical interpretations, visited churches of several denominations to observe the practices and listen to sermons, and followed certain Christian rituals like Lent in an attempt to reconcile these differences. Over a period of time, I reconciled these differences to a certain extent through my personal spiritual journey. I realized that although the principle of reincarnation held the eternal hope for salvation, I did not remember most of my past lives and had no clue about my future lives. As far as I was concerned, I had just this life in which I could try my best to be selfless and humble.

However, even more important was my discovery of the fallibility of Hindu religious practices as they exist today. I realized that I had not grown in an atmosphere of social service and charitable activities to other humans. We worshipped the plants, the animals, the birds, and elements of nature like fire and water. But we did not worship humankind fully through charitable acts. But service and charity is central to the Christian belief and practice. Through further studies, I realized Hindu practices have been found by scholars to be essentially non-ethical, in that there is no place for the Other

in its philosophy. I discovered the ethics or that obligation to the Other came to India only through Christian missionaries (Halbfass, 1991). Further, Gandhi's nonviolent movement was greatly inspired by his reading and interpretation of the Sermon of the Mount.<sup>120</sup>

It was at this point that I reconceptualized my understanding of interreligious dialogue as a way to learn from each other and become fuller in our practices. The present study, the data collection process, and its interpretations is influenced by this background.

### *“Inter” to “Intra” Religious Dialogue*

The data collected showed that devotees and participants engaged in a deep internal dialogue with different traditions and tried to explain other religions through their own religious lens. Further, those devotees who had lost affinity with their birth religions discovered a refreshing new appreciation of the value of that religion. Using Cornille (2008) and Panikkar<sup>121</sup> (1978) understanding of dialogue, I argue that the narratives of the participants engage in intrareligious dialogue that holds the promise of an external, fruitful interreligious dialogue.

Panikkar (1978) elaborated three attitudes towards dialogue and three models that provide reference language for a dialogue. The attitudes are: (1) exclusivism—one's religion claims to truth are alone true. This creates intolerance and hybris; (2) inclusivism—one's religion claims to truth includes all levels of truth that exists wherever in the world. There is grandeur and magnanimity in this approach and has an in-built feeling of superiority; (3) parallelism—all paths run parallel, and it is our duty to not

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<sup>120</sup> “My claim to Hinduism has been rejected by some, because I believe and advocate non-violence in its extreme form. They say that I am a Christian in disguise. I have been even seriously told that I am distorting the meaning of the Gita, when I ascribe to that great poem the teaching of unadulterated non-violence. Some of my Hindu friends tell me that killing is a duty enjoined by the Gita under certain circumstances” (Gandhi, 1924, p. 175).

“‘[Jesus] has been acclaimed in the west as the prince of passive resisters,’ Gandhi explained. ‘He was the most active resister known perhaps to history. His was non-violence par excellence.’ So awed was Gandhi with Jesus’ example that he incorporated it as an important conceptual component of his civil disobedience campaign against British rule in India”  
(<http://www.gandhitopia.org/group/mgnd/forum/topics/in-jesusgandhiking-connection>)

<sup>121</sup> One of the most renowned writers in the area of interreligious dialogue is, undoubtedly, Raimon Panikkar. Born to a Hindu father and a Catholic mother in Spain, Panikkar became a Catholic priest before launching on a personal odyssey to experience the different religious truth claims and find a way to lay a solid foundation for interreligious understanding. As he stated, “I ‘left’ as a Christian, I ‘found’ myself a Hindu and I ‘return’ a Buddhist, without having ceased to be a Christian” (Panikkar, 1978, p.2).

interfere with them and instead deepen our faith to reach them at the end. However, this goes against history where religions lived in mutual interferences and has the belief that each religion is complete in itself for a complete journey.

The three models in which dialogue can happen are: (1) the physical model: the rainbow—white light of reality falls into the prism of human experience and diffracts into several colors. Here, traditions are different from each other, but in fringes one does not know if that is true. Further, two traditions may merge and give birth to a new one. However, all traditions are guaranteed salvation; (2) the geometrical model: the topological invariant—a primordial original form takes on “an almost indefinitely number of possible transformations through the twisting of Men, the stretching by history, the bending by natural forces and so on” (Pannikar, 1978, p.xxii). Religions appear irreconcilable until they find a topological invariant which may be different in different conditions. In this model, religions do not stand side by side, but “they are actually intertwined and inside each other” (Panikkar, 1978, p.xxii); (3) the anthropological model: language—each religion is a language and like languages, they are complete in expressing everything that they want to express. But they are also capable of growth and evolution. Religious encounter is then considered akin to translation and problems are similar to problems in translation.

Likewise, Cornille (2008) has also written extensively on the pre-conditions to dialogue or how a participant for a dialogue can prepare herself in a book titled attractively, *The (im)possibility of interreligious dialogue*. She stated the following conditions as important requirements for a interreligious dialogue: doctrinal or epistemic humility, commitment to a particular religious tradition, interconnection or the belief that in some way the “teachings and practices of other religion are in some way related to or relevant for one’s own religious tradition” (Cornille, 2008, p.5), empathy and hospitality for the truths of other religions (also see Neibuhr, 2008 for his understanding of the concept of hospitality).

Panikkar (1978) recommended that the characteristics of a religious dialogue could be the following—(1) it is free from particular and general apologetics,<sup>122</sup> (2) face the challenge of conversion, (3) holds that a historical dimension is necessary but not

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<sup>122</sup> Apriori ideas in defense of self-religion as well as religion in particular.

sufficient, (4) it is not just an intellectual encounter or theological symposium, nor merely an ecclesiastical endeavor, (5) and that it is a religious encounter in faith, hope and love.

He said:

By love, finally, I mean that impulse, that force impelling us to our fellow beings and leading us to discover in them what is lacking in us. To be sure, real love does not aim for victory in the encounter. It longs for common recognition of the truth, without blotting out the differences or muting the various melodies in the single polyphonic symphony. (Panikkar, 1978, p. 35)

In the community studied, the precondition of doctrinal humility is satisfied because many participants pointed to Amma as return of Christ in the form of a brown Indian female. It did not matter to them that Amma was born a Hindu or that she was a female. This extraordinary ability to transmute a core aspect of Christianity to the female person of another religion by itself creates a firm ground for openness.<sup>123</sup> The participants who engaged in extensive interreligious code switching from Christianity to Hinduism were mostly active parishioners in their church activities. They attended Sunday mass, worshipped Christ actively, and participated in their Church related activities. This satisfied the condition of a firm commitment to a chosen religious affiliation.

In the cases of the participants who had little or weak affinity to birth religion, there was a commitment to the Amma NRM that allowed them to rediscover their birth religions in unique ways. The condition of interconnection was present naturally because as Cornille (2008) stated, “The very idea that one may remain faithful to one’s tradition while surrendering to a spiritual master of a different religious tradition requires some belief—on the part of both the masters and disciples—in the spiritual interconnection between religious traditions” (p. 118). Empathy for the religious Other was showcased in the efforts of participants and devotees of studying Hinduism, asking fellow Indian devotees the meanings of certain rituals and making an active effort to educate themselves about the religious-Other. In cases, where participants had weak affinity to birth religion, they became more accepting of their former religion by providing

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<sup>123</sup> One must remember that Amma’s presence has helped non-Hindu members to move across traditions, but it is possible this does not apply to persons of Hindu religion. Warriar (2005) pointed out that a senior disciple of Amma felt that Hindu religion was superior to all other religions. Such a notion is easy to develop if Hindus would like to coopt Amma as a symbol of the superiority of their religion.

explanations like: the religion originally was pure but has been corrupted by mediating humans and Hinduism also inflicts suffering on people in India but brings peace to people outside India. Finally, participants exhibited hospitality for the religious truths of the religious Other by using concepts like “Kingdom of God,” “Avatar,” “Guru” interchangeably across both Christianity and Hinduism.

Following Panikkar’s description of the characteristics of a good dialogue, the important ones to mention here are—(1) that the participants were free from general apologetics<sup>124</sup> and questioned if their perception of Amma’s love and grace was not merely a psychological need. They also included the examples of people who were atheists but were deeply charitable and humble as highly spiritual people. There was a marked ability to question the necessity of religion itself for enlightenment. (2) The presence or faith in an enlightened being in contemporary society broke the conditions of historicity of religious principles. (3) It was not an intellectual or theological encounter. It was a genuine religious encounter of “faith, hope, and love” with ability to confront the challenge of conversion (Panikkar, 1978).

Following other scholars like Parekh (2008) and Anderson (2004), I also advocate expression of self-criticism as a sign of health of a religious community. Some of the participants criticized the practices of the Amma community and worried about certain practices and beliefs becoming dogmatic, literalist, and intolerant. This ability to question oneself and one’s religious practices also shows a certain distance that participants had for their “religious” affiliation and hence their religious identity.

The data also showed that in spite of widespread fear amongst Christian communities about the “Easternization of the Western Mind”(Campbell, 1999), the participants actually showed a renewed interest and understanding of their birth religions. They understood Christian scriptures through a new pair of glasses, but whereas previously they discarded the scriptures and symbols as impractical or cultural without deep meanings, they were now able to appreciate and recognize their own religions. The use of certain terms alien to the Christian tradition cannot be construed as a rejection of Christian terms. Rather, it is the very nature of spirituality to slip beyond such

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<sup>124</sup> General apologetics refers to the idea of not dialoging with anybody who is irreligious or has non-religious beliefs.

dichotomies to discover the divine in one and all. The ancient Eastern connection actually helped the modern Westerner to better fit within her own tradition.

It is important for the readers to note that although the premise of spirituality holds the hope for eternal peace and understanding, the community does not exhibit a clear, linear path to transcendence. Interreligious code switching, whether through symbols or mystical visions are culturally coded and rooted, and require those codes to make the journey. Further, in examples where participants distinguished between Buddhism and Amma NRM, they did not speak of spiritual continuity but rather emphasized the differences in practices of these two religious groups. Of course, this answer could have been prompted because I framed the question in a context of difference. The fact that some participants noted that some of the practices within the community were becoming dogmatic is also a sign of inflexible identification with the Amma NRM.

However, overall the community *seemed* to exhibit qualities for a fruitful dialogue amongst religious traditions—for learning, growth and transformation. The self-restraint on part of several participants to desist from converting others to become Amma’s disciple is founded on the belief of validity of truth claims of other religious and non-religious paths. Amma’s path worked for the participants, and they adored and worshipped her as a female version of Christ. They were also proud to be associated with the community and to be “around the time of Christ.” But they also held all other paths led to self-realization, enlightenment, or salvation. In their narratives, they let their family members and friends who were not with Amma or decried Amma’s practices *be*.

It is here that I find that modern philosophy can interact with ancient ideas to create an interreligious understanding that is based on an internal dialogue and awareness. Modern philosophy has focused predominately on the inter nature of dialogues without giving sufficient focus on the individuals who are engaged in this dialogue. This has been clearly evident in my discussion on interpersonal conflict and intercultural communication. Further, modern thinking tends to approach the whole issue from within the Subject-Other framework since it has stopped recognizing the transcendent reality of the essential self. As Schuon (1984) said, “One wonders if

anything separates the modern world from its predecessors more than its leveling of reality into a single dimension” (p. xvii).

In my opinion, the seeds of this interreligious understanding and acceptance emerges from an internal dialogue—the “intrareligious” dialogue (Panikkar, 1978). Intrareligious dialogue is “an inner dialogue within myself, an encounter in the depth of my personal righteousness, having met another religious experience on that very intimate level” (Panikkar, 1978, p. 40). I propose that joining and navigating an NRM without having to give up existing religious beliefs creates an interreligious dilemma that is processed through an inner interview and dialogue of traditions.

However, the dialogue does not happen without a certain weakening of identity positions as the participants navigate the double identity positions of being rooted in their original religion and developing a fragile identification with the Amma NRM. The identification with the Amma NRM was fragile because it was comparatively new in their lives and participants were still figuring out its impact on their lives. At some level they have had to transform existing truth claims in a way that is neither discontinuous nor homogenizing. Thus Christ is not discarded as a central figure but rather transformed into the persona of Amma. This is only possible when people emphasize the “Cosmic Christ” instead of “historical Christ” (Panikkar, 2004).

Christ is the only mediator, but he is not the monopoly of Christians and, in fact, he is present and effective in any authentic religion, whatever form or the name. Christ is the symbol, which Christians call by this name, of the ever-transcending but equally ever-humanly immanent Mystery (Panikkar qtd. in Cornille, 2008, p. 131).

This transcendence from particularities of history, culture and indeed, gender, reflects some of the rhetoric of the participants as well as their lived religious practices. The participants moved beyond the particularities of religious practices into a spiritual core that was disidentified from the social expressions of a religion but reidentified, as Fernandes (2003) conceptualized the disidentification process, with abstract universal expressions like “love,” “humanity,” “charity,” and “kindness.” The participants disidentify the spiritual journey from practices of a certain religion to identity with a more basic ideal personal conduct in the world. There is slipping beneath differing

religious traditions into a deeper focus of what religion is supposed to achieve in this world. Panikkar (1978) described the function of religion is to, “connect me with the transcendence, with what stands above me, with what I am not (yet). Faith is that connection with the beyond, however you choose to envision it. So one thing faith effects is salvation” (p.18).<sup>125</sup>

How is salvation achieved? To this community, it is in striving to look at the world and conduct oneself as one would if she were fully transcendent. This ideal epitomized in the person of Amma serves to draw devotees from the divisive Subject-Other position into a more loving, accepting, understanding, and forgiving state of connectedness. This emphasis on spiritual continuity amongst traditions and the transcendent and mystical unity as a common factor in all religions in the community moves me to support Kale’s (2004) conceptualization of religion as vehicle that “serves to nurture spirituality for many individuals by providing a roadmap to comprehend and express their spirituality” ( p.94).

However, one must remember Panikkar’s warning to not ignore the importance of belief (religion) by considering it to be merely a garb. He said that beliefs were part and parcel of religion. He stated, “Our human task is to establish a religious dialogue that, although it transcends the *logos*—and the belief—does not neglect or ignore them” (Panikkar, 1978, p. 21). I agree with him but also respectfully state that in today’s world, where religious divisions are resulting in intolerance in various subtle and not-so subtle ways, perhaps a rhetoric in the form of Dykstra (1991)’s article “Reconceiving practice” would be beneficial. We could provide a way to extend a belief or religion’s history and philosophy into emphasizing the importance of practice of its central values. For example, the Christian teaching “Love thy neighbor as yourself” could be one of the central practices of a church community which has a historical and cultural context and yet in its heart steps strive beyond the context of history and culture. As Panikkar (1978) brilliantly elaborated this practice in a theme similar to what I have suggested in this study:

Understanding my neighbor means understanding him as he understands himself, which can be done only if I rise above the subject-object dichotomy, cease to

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<sup>125</sup> Pannikar uses the word “faith” interchangeably with religion.



know him as an object and come to know him as myself. Only if there exists a Self in which we communicate does it become possible to know and love another as Oneself (p. 11).

Schuon (1984) similarly argued that we can transcend religious differences by exploring the esoteric nature of an inward-turning spiritual path. He said:

The root of the polarization of the real into subject and object is situated in Being, not in the pure Absolute, Beyond-Being, but in its first self-determination. The divine *Māyā* is the ‘confrontation’ . . . of God as Subject of Consciousness and God as Object or Being; it is the knowledge that God has of Himself, of His Perfection and of His Possibilities. (Schuon, 1984, p.154).

Panikkar (1978) also suggested development of philosophy of Religion rather than philosophies of particular religions. He argued for it on the basis there existed something like “fundamental religiousness” which transcends historical and cultural boundaries. Schuon (1984) also spoke about this deep transcendental unity amongst religions. He said:

There is a unity at the heart of religions. More than moral it is theological, but more than theological it is metaphysical in the precise sense of the word . . . The fact that it is thus transcendent, however, means that it can be univocally described by none and concretely apprehended but few (p. xxiii).

Panikkar (1978) argued that we needed a philosophy of religion which will not reduce “all religions to one homogenous pudding” (p.51). A notion like this exists in the Amma community with the oft-repeated reference to *Sanatana Dharma* (Eternal Duties).<sup>126</sup>

Today we seem hopelessly stuck in religious differences and dialogue sometimes is more a politically correct overture rather than a genuine religious encounter. Our understanding of the religious-Other is sometimes more a form of social *tolerance* than a deep seated *acceptance* of the Other, what Amma called the danger of intolerance being on the subtle

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<sup>126</sup> Several Hindu mystics as well as Hindu fundamentalists believe that “Hinduism” is a creation of the British and that Indians had a conglomeration of religious practices known as *Sanatana Dharma*, which emphasized values, ways of living, and philosophical reflections rather a religious system. Amma also refers to ancient practices as Sanatana Dharma. However, is this ancient practice confined to a geographical and historical unit? Does it apply to all regions and histories? Do *rishis* (ancient seers/mystics) exist only in India or do they include the vast terrain of our Earth?

level (Amritanandamayi, 2006, p.19).<sup>127</sup> The conceptualization of single Religion having various religious expressions similar to the concept of one human civilization having many provincial cultures can, perhaps, rhetorically devalue the significance of religious differences and build a superseding patriotic affiliation to an Earth Religion without glossing over historical and cultural differences in religious expressions. Such a Religion will emphasize the human motivation and psychic need to transcend fully into enlightenment and hold the promise of eternal peace and love amongst all beings in our planet.

### Chapter Summary

In this study, participants navigate religious differences code-switching and an interfaith emphasis in their thinking. At other times, they struggle with the construction of a new religion. But most importantly, they attempt to seek a spiritual essence that seems to have more to do with becoming better humans than seeking enlightenment.

Spirituality, in this community, is not a linear path to the state of connectedness, rather in the area of religious identity and in context of the Amma NRM, it takes the form of intrareligious dialogue that neither completely transcends religious identities nor is it fixed as to prevent the Other to enter and force the Subject to confront the challenge of conversion.

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<sup>127</sup> Amma has pointed out that when intolerance moves to a subtle invisible layer, since it cannot be easily identified and eradicated, it becomes more powerful and pervasive. She said that this was the current situation of religious intolerance in the world.

## CHAPTER EIGHT: CONCLUSION

The present study examined the different communicative acts through which devotees and participants in the Amma Community in New Mexico enacted processes of personal and social identification and disidentification as they strive to follow a spiritual path. It highlighted how the disidentification process works in particular and contextual ways among members of the community to enable alternative transmodern articulations of self and difference. Such articulations also provide insights for theoretical reflection and, at the practical level, may offer a foundation for lasting peace and deep understanding among peoples.

In terms of the dynamic tension between identification and disidentification as a core issue in spiritual growth, each dimension of identity studied showed its characteristic movements. In the area of personal identities, devotees and participants struggled with one another for Amma's attention and for each other's recognition and acceptance to validate and secure their personal identities. At the same time, many also disidentified and stepped inwards to a state of deep self-awareness and regulation to find the root of conflict not in external differences but in the very state of difference created by ego. In this way, the shift from identification to personal identities to a disidentified state of connectedness mapped a non-linear, complex spiritual path.

In respect to gender identity, Amma's teachings have motivated some devotees and participants to articulate gender by disidentifying the concept from the notion of "who am I," as in opposition to a male identity, into mutable, voluntary roles that they could play in different social situations. At the same time, they understood their gender identity as a composite of masculine, feminine, and any other aspects of being in the universe and bracketed these qualities within the very feminine term of "motherhood." This grounding allowed some of them to transform their interaction with male partners from confrontation to education and mutual respect.

Concerning cultural identity, devotees and participants found unique ways to maintain identification with their Western cultural identities and at times found it difficult to develop a full cultural awareness of the East Indian practices and norms. This struggle to identify with the Other, I have argued, could be addressed through intracultural awareness, a process by which we can understand the cultural roots of our assumptions

and disengage from them to advance intercultural competence. At other times, devotees and participants did succeed in disidentifying from their cultural structures through either a theoretical postulation or an experiential reality of an underlying unity across peoples and cultures.

Finally, in the area of religious identity, the dialectics of identification and disidentification allowed for a deeper inquiry into religious differences in the form of intrareligious dialogue. Devotees and participants practiced various religions and switched codes between religions, even as they were members of the Amma community. They showed a high acceptance of other religions and, more importantly, viewed spirituality and religion as two separate phenomena influencing a sense of identity that incorporates interfaith understanding.

As I reached the end of this study, I came to realize the deeper meaning of a cultural practice and ritual in the Amma community: that of asking Amma for a spiritual name. The names that devotees receive are names like Tripura (the goddess who resides at the center of the sacred *Sri Yantra*),<sup>128</sup> Arpita (one who has surrendered), and Divya (one who is illuminated); each name is meant to direct the devotee towards her essential and transcendental reality. In this sense, the voluntary adoption of a new name symbolizes a process of disidentification from existing personal, gender, cultural, and religious identifications. More importantly, this disidentification through naming and metaphor allows devotees to add a new sense of identity that is not confined to a limited social location but leads, rather, into a path of realizing the interconnectedness of everything.

In the following sections, I answer each of the four research questions set for this study with a summary of findings. After that, I present the contributions of this study, limitations, and recommendations for future research.

#### Summary of Findings

*RQ1. How does spirituality influence the perceptions of personal identity in Amma's daughters in United States?*

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<sup>128</sup> *Sri Yantra* is a particular type of sacred geometry that is supposed to represent the world and the divinity that is contained therein.

Spirituality influences notions of personal identity—like personal preferences and choices, styles of working, organization, and communication, personalized ranking of values and the like—in the Amma community in United States by highlighting how identities create particular and contextual forms of social struggle, interpersonal conflict and a sense of difference; and how the disidentification process, from a transmodern perspective, opens up a path of deeper self awareness, self-regulation, and monitoring of conflict that transcends the notion of difference. While analyzing findings in this area of study, I noted how ancient understandings of self as interconnected and the differences perceived in the world as being not real provided a transmodern dimension of intrapersonal awareness and disidentification to modern understandings of conflict management and interpersonal communicative competence.

Devotees and participants struggled with one another other for Amma’s attention and for others’ recognition and acceptance. They wanted to belong to the community. They wanted to be loved and accepted by fellow devotees in the community. They struggled with each other like siblings vying for exclusive attention from Amma. They had a hard time accepting the other personalities, personal preferences, work styles, goals and the like. They exerted power over each other knowingly and unknowingly.

At the same time, many also stepped inwards to a state of deep self-awareness to find the root of conflict not in external noise in communication but in the trans-temporal psychic processes that occurred within a person. The participants identified ego (force of individuation), *vasanas* (inherent tendencies), and *karma* (fruits of past action) as the real sources of external conflict. They strived to be or were graced by Amma’s presence to eliminate them by becoming aware and experiencing a momentary distance from the situation and struggling to experience the belief in underlying unity of all beings. This self-awareness and regulation allowed them to gain an emotional distance from the causes and outcomes of conflict. Such type of awareness, I argue, may be cultivated in other context for it may help a party in a conflict resolution process come to the table with an open and problem-solving frame of mind.

Further, the findings highlighted a view in the community that conflict was a sacred site for spiritual transformation and possible enlightenment. Conflict was also viewed as an opportunity for growth, and for paying and receiving debts. In a sense, this

data provide support for the Asiacentric idea that “communication is a process in which we receive and return our debts to all sentient beings” (Miike, 2007, p. 275). Finally, the findings suggested the possible inclusion of the notion of disidentification in the definition of interpersonal communicative competence. Interpersonal communicative competence is traditionally defined as being effective, appropriate, and ethical in communication. However, in the community, Amma—perceived as an enlightened being and therefore as one who has completely disidentified from all forms of personal and social identities—was claimed to communicate “perfectly” with them. Her ability to communicate perfectly was connected with her enlightened state or the state of connectedness.

In summary, spirituality in this community did not prevent personal identity markers such as personal likes and dislikes and value systems from creating struggle and conflict amongst devotees and participants in particular and contextual ways. Yet, such struggles and conflict were understood as the potential site for transformation, as participants and devotees disidentified from their personal positions to seek the roots of conflict and struggle in the trans-temporal notions of ego (force of individuation), *vasanas* (inherent tendencies) and *karma* (fruits of action). This allowed devotees and participants to regulate and self-monitor themselves in meaningful, transmodern ways that may, as Lipari (2004) and Upadhyaya (2006) have suggested, potentially set the stage for an open-hearted dialogue.

*RQ2. How does spirituality influence the perceptions of gender identity in Amma’s daughters in United States?*

Spirituality influences gender identity in the Amma community in transmodern and complex ways. While analyzing findings in this area of study, I have noted how the ancient understanding of selves as interconnected and the notion of a transcendent reality provides a transmodern dimension to modern feminist demands for empowerment and social justice and the concept of gender identity. This has allowed an alternate articulation to key debates in feminist scholarship.

Firstly, the findings provided an alternate understanding about the modern concept of gender identity. Participants tended to delink the notion of gender from the question “who am I?” and instead, claimed that their essential self transcended genders.

This understanding of self was coded by women devotees as the awakening of Universal Motherhood. Universal motherhood is a principle that defines gender as a composite of masculine and feminine qualities. The “mother” in this community is not interpreted as an essentialist notion of woman focused on procreative organs and abilities; rather, mother is invoked as an appropriate ideal in a hypermasculined technological age, as a call for balancing of masculine and feminine aspects in nature.

Secondly, the findings provided alternate readings about what constituted emancipated woman. The participants—many of whom belonged to a generation familiar with secular, second-wave feminist thought and validated some of the core values of that movement?—rejected dominant discourses about femininity and hegemonic feminist notions on what constituted an emancipated woman. Instead, they framed their own versions of womanhood through spiritual practices and claimed that these versions of gender identity helped them improve their relationships with the other gender. For instance, women who had suffered abuse from male partners said the abuse and discourse about femininity had caused them to reject the feminine erotic and perform more as males in society. These women said that it was as part of their spiritual healing from abuse that they were able to reintegrate the feminine erotic in their bodies and to build more peaceful relationship with partners by performing feminine and masculine subjectivities flexibly to suit the context and to create an interaction based on mutual understanding and respect. Thirdly, the findings articulated a new transmodern dimension in our understanding of gender and body. Among participants the woman’s “body” acquired meaning beyond the social discourse about sex to become a site for purification and an active participant in the spiritual journey. In this sense, Amma herself provided a point of reference. The women appreciated the fact that Amma is present in a woman’s body but attributed superhuman qualities and divinity to Amma’s body. Thus, the body was conceived as a site that allows disengagement from social identities through the notion of divinity.

Finally, the findings of this research also speak to the debate on identity crisis in feminist scholarship, particularly to the question of whether there could be a category of “woman.” The findings support the observations of scholars that call for a rethinking of feminist struggles more in terms of a personal, spiritual struggle to give up power and

privilege and as a commitment to serve marginalized groups of women. Such an approach would also fit with Fraser (1997)'s argument that feminist scholarship needs to focus on politico-economic redistribution rather on politics of identity.

*RQ3. How does spirituality influence the perceptions of cultural identity in Amma's daughters in United States?*

From a transmodern perspective, spirituality influences cultural identities by highlighting the deep roots of such identities in the narratives and observations of community members. While analyzing findings in this area of study, I have noted how the ancient understanding the selves as interconnected and the notion of disidentification problematizes modern understandings of the significance and role of cultural identity in intercultural communication scholarship and provides a transmodern dimension of intracultural awareness to the modern definition of intercultural communicative competence.

The narratives and observations of community members showed that constructing and securing cultural identities may consciously and unconsciously involve a selective validation and invalidation of the cultural identities of others. This was observed, for example, when some devotees reconfigured some of practices in the community as pertaining uniquely to Amma and thus erased any historical and collective contexts of those practices, or when East Indians were aloof and unwilling to participate in an attempt to bridge the cultural gap in the community. But such a process is also mired with complex interlacing layers, for participants and devotees also showed genuine interest in East Indian practices and customs, making choices that seemed conducive to fulfilling their personal preferences but at the same time struggling with other assumptions and practices of East Indians. Further, the findings showed that when devotees and participants could disidentify from their cultural roots, they were able to show great respect and flexibility towards cultural practices and customs of East Indians.

The lack of cultural awareness among U.S. members of this community created some real problems when messages generated from India were implemented in United States without appropriate cultural adjustment. The well established norms of democratic and grassroots decision making in the Amma community in the United States clashed with the top-down message delivery originating in India. This was complicated further



by the fact that some *satsang* members were able to interculturally adapt to East Indian understanding of power distances while others were not. Moreover, given U.S. notions of personal space and private and public sphere, *satsangs* in the home of devotees caused discomfort amongst some of them.

Devotees' deep adoration for an Indian fisherwoman's daughter was the main area where they sank beneath the cultural differences into a state of connectedness. They worshipped her, allowed her the most sacred and intimate space in their heart, confided in her their problems and took her advice without question. Her cultural background did not matter at all. They also said they followed her recommended practices (some of which were alien to their culture) with dedication, discipline and great effort. Ultimately, participants said they felt that it was in Amma's lap or the heart of *darshan* (spiritual hug) that cultures melted into one untiring, unflinching embrace. Amma represented, symbolically and through action, the ideal state of including all, loving and accepting all—the very state of connectedness.

These findings problematize the connection of cultural identities to intercultural communicative competence by reminding us that the construction and maintenance of a secure, stable cultural identity may result in the invalidation of the Other. In this sense, the findings also suggest the importance of intracultural awareness as a measure to improve understanding of cultural norms and assumptions of others.

*RQ4: How does spirituality influence perceptions of religious identity in Amma's daughters in United States?*

From a transmodern perspective, spirituality in this community promotes a shift toward accepting the coexistence of religious traditions and fosters an environment for intrareligious and interreligious dialogue. While analyzing findings in this area of study, I have noted how the ancient understanding the selves as interconnected and the notion of transcendent divinity supported some of the modern scholarship on interreligious understanding and clarified the modern understandings of the difference between spirituality and religion. The alternate transmodern reading gives the definition of spirituality a transcendent quality even while it remains intertwined in the existing structures of religion.

Spirituality in the context of this unique Eastern NRM allows participants and devotees to express their identifications with a variety of religious traditions. For example, many participants adored Amma as the return of Christ in the person of a brown female, thus effectively breaking with the historical, gender, and cultural particularities of Christ and yet continuing the Christian tradition in the form of Cosmic Christ. Similarly, some participants who had weak affinity to their birth religions rediscovered the beauty and profoundness of the scriptures of their birth religion. This further showed that Eastern NRMs, perhaps, do not necessarily take participants away from their traditions but may facilitate a new appreciation for them.

However, the shift of identities did not mean that identities no longer mattered. Rather, the inter- and intra-religious dialogue was mediated by identification with religious symbols and visions deeply rooted in Western tradition. In addition, some participants and devotees also developed exclusive identification with Amma's NRM to the effect of becoming dogmatic about community practices and its leader. But overall, participants showed deep self-reflection about their beliefs and tended to draw out the spiritual continuity amongst traditions to point out the ultimate, mystical and transcendent unity of all religions. This internal reflection is what Panikkar (1978) called "intrareligious dialogue," the most profound aspect of any dialogue.

#### Implications of Findings for the Study of Spirituality

At the beginning of this report, I defined spirituality from a transmodern perspective as the journey from disidentification from social and personal identities into a state of connectedness and used this framework to understand data in this study. It was my assumption when I entered the research field that spirituality was a linear, progressive path to Unity. What I have discovered is the complexity and non-linearity of the journey. After all, as Ryan observed while studying Jung, it involved the complex process of "divest[ing] oneself of the false strappings of the persona . . . that acquired identity by which we define ourselves in terms of socially accepted categories of reality and identity, and to the begin the process of individuation which has its goal the creation of a psychic center beyond the ego" (Ryan qtd. in Smiljanic, 2008, p.144).

Therefore, now at the end of this study, I would describe spirituality with the analogy of a person learning to jump on a trampoline. Every jump, or movement to

transcend difference, also involves a fall, or confrontation with the force of identity attachments. A beginner may not jump very high and may fall awkwardly and hard on the trampoline several times. As time progresses, the beginner becomes more matured and is able to jump higher and also find strategies to stay in the air longer. The fall is more elegant and becomes a spring board for a higher jump. The ideal is that finally the athlete will overcome gravity and choose to fall only on will. This state, known as enlightenment, becomes the final goal of all people who have committed themselves to spirituality. This state also becomes the ideal for the perfect and complete acceptance of all with no need for conflict or any other form of power struggle.

But fall in itself is not *bad*. It reminds the athlete of the beauty of being in air and creates, at times, the urge to go back to that state. It reminds the athlete that conflict arises out of difference and is about *absence* of connection. Thus conflict, although personally and socially traumatic sometimes, becomes fertile ground for a larger jump. It is in conflict where, perhaps, hope for real peace is most alive. As Anzaldúa (2002) said, “Conflict, with its fiery nature, can trigger transformation depending on how we respond to it. Often, delving deeply into conflict instead of fleeing from it can bring an understanding (*conocimiento*) that will turn things around” (p.4).

Most importantly, the spiritual framework seems to hold possibilities for articulating difference in new ways that may promote global peace and understanding. At the same time, a single ethnographic study cannot generalize the above philosophical reflections. We need to apply this approach to studying different religious, artistic, and peace-building communities and explore whether spirituality holds a similar but particular and contextual trajectory in these groups.

#### Contributions to Communication Scholarship

In this section, I apply some two main theoretical insights from this study to the rethinking of existing constructs in communication scholarship. First, I outline a theoretical understanding of the notion of disidentification used in this study and speak to the importance of self-awareness in our efforts to facilitate competent intercultural communication. Secondly, I draw on my study of the communicative behavior of members of the Amma community to offer an alternative reading of the modern transactional model of communication. I incorporate the ancient understanding of selves

as interconnected to provide the model with a new dimension. Included in this revision is an articulation of the significance of transphysical and transtemporal aspects of noise in communication. I make this revision because the devotees and participants present a particular view of the world that is not accommodated by most models of communication.

It may be argued that findings from a single ethnography study are limited by their cultural locations and therefore cannot be generalized. I agree with the argument but at the same time, several scholars have pointed out overwhelming epistemological biases in research (Miike, 2004). In spite of the great diversity within modern Western scholarship, much of this knowledge—irrespective whether it is postpositivist, interpretive, or critical tradition—is ultimately a version of a particular megavision of the universe—that selves are separate entities and the differences between the self-Other is real. This is an exoteric view of the world as against the esoteric view that the universe is a psychic, organic whole (Schuon, 1984). In spite of multicultural sensitivity and attempts to incorporate local cultural understandings, across the board, such scholarship translates those understandings to fit with the modern vision of the Universe.

Let me clarify this argument with an example. When I started writing this report, I asked myself this question—if I was completely ignorant of Euro-American philosophies and uncontaminated by modern society and had to rely only on ancient Asian philosophical systems, how would I understand human communication? I realized immediately that certain words like “identity,” “culture,” and “religion” would not be part of my vocabulary. They neither have literal equivalents in the literature nor are those terms coherent with the view of the universe as a psychic and organic whole. Ideally, a culturally sensitive scholarship should use only those concepts that resonate with local understandings and frame knowledge that concur with local worldview. But such works are rare and far-in-between. Thus, it is not cultures that localize knowledge, rather it is epistemology that limits knowledge.

This dissertation responds to an epistemological lacuna; of not finding my worldview and the worldview of several millions of Asians in literature. Ironically, ancient Asian philosophies would not allow me to call myself an Asian and claim a location for my understandings. The very notion of Asia emerges from modern

philosophical paradigm. Thus, I honor the ancient call for interconnections and seek them in this study by providing transmodern dimension to existing modern knowledges.

Some of the ideas that inform this transmodern study have been extant in several ancient philosophies and proclaimed as experiential reality by various mystics. For example, disidentification and self-awareness has been stressed in many world religions and indigenous spiritual practices. In that sense, this knowledge has already been vetted and lived by many masters and followed by millions of people in the world.

#### *Communicative Competence and Self-Awareness*

Communicative competence has been defined and understood differently by different scholars but all agree on the need to be sensitive and adaptive to the context from which the other person or group is speaking. However, the findings and literature using traditional social scientific methods show the difficulties in developing the ability to be flexible to other's needs and conditions. Following Naragjuna and Derrida, we can argue that communication is fundamentally ambiguous and lacks any fixed reality of meaning and, therefore, any attempt to find appropriate language for good communication seems theoretically futile. To address this, as the findings from this transmodern study suggest, the process of gaining self-awareness leads to the opening of hearts and minds to the mutable and shifting meanings of communicative language and facilitates a path to competent communication.

Some prominent Western scholars in communication, like Gudykunst (2005) and Wood (2004), have included the notion of mindfulness in their works. And in 2007 and 2008, the National Communication Association had several presenters researching various aspects of mindfulness (e.g., Brown & John, 2007; Novak & Sellnow, 2007). Being mindful, has been defined by Oetzel (2008) as "a state of awareness of thoughts, actions, and messages of self and others" (p. 369). Based on the findings of this study and an emphasis in ancient philosophies and traditions on self-awareness and transformation, I wish to advance the idea of mindfulness to include both personal and social levels of disengagement. I would like to expand the definition: Mindfulness is a state of becoming aware of how one's unique personal history and personality, gender, culture, and religion influence the way we perceive the world; a state that promotes a disengaging from fixed

perceptions to become more flexible and adaptable to the needs and conditions of the others.

Thus I expand mindfulness to include not only intrapersonal awareness, but also intragender awareness (also known as *conocimiento* by Anzaldúa, 2002a, 2002b), intracultural awareness (an expansion on the term used by Gaston, 1984), and intrareligious awareness (an extrapolation of Pannikar's (1978) idea of intrareligious dialogue). Including mindfulness at both the personal and social levels can help a communicator to develop flexibility and adaptability to other's needs and concerns and would improve our understanding of competent communication.

For competent communication, a transmodern perspective suggests the importance of developing intrapersonal, intragender, intracultural, and intrareligious awareness and that such an awareness allows us to receive the Other deeply, to provide, in Lipari's (2004) terms, a space to listen, respect, and empathize with the other:

Listening thus involves a contraction within myself so as to create a space for you—what Levinas would call a 'dwelling place' to separate from the I of the listener. The I contracts so that there is a space to receive you. Listening thus involves opening to you, letting your speech enter and flow through me. (p. 137-138)

### *Disidentification*

An important aspect of the theoretical framework of this study was the concept of disidentification and how that influences the content of our communication. The current study unraveled some of the ways in which disidentification occurred in the lives of participants. Building on the findings and extrapolating from nonconventional sources—such as the *Upanishads*, *Tao Te Ching*, Buddhist *sutras*, Sufi poems of mystics like Rumi, mystical interpretations of the Bible from the work of Richard Rohr and Ethan Walker III, the writings of Christian mystics like Teresa of Avila and St. Therese of Lisieux, and other scholars in the humanities—I advance the outlines of a transmodern theory of disidentification.

I formulate disidentification theory to state that disidentification from social and personal identities into the state of connectedness leads to increased and long-term ability to deep empathy and acceptance of others. I define disidentification as a process of

disengagement from social ascription and avowal process of “who am I” in the social sphere. Simultaneously, it is a positive process of reemerging into a state of connectedness which no longer *needs* to be described in specific terms in the social sphere.

Disidentification is an individual mental process that changes attitude towards oneself and allows an individual to become more flexible about personal worldviews, opinions, and lifestyle choices. It is not a social process nor does it gloss over worldly differences. It is not a return to homogeneity but a practice to respect the “integrity of difference” (Cervenak, Cespedes, Souza, & Straub, 2002) in deep ways by radically departing from the existing paradigm of the Master (Fernandes, 2003)<sup>129</sup>. It is an active refusal to participate and engage in a social discourse of who people are and how they should act. As Fernandes (2003) said,

Disidentification is not a ‘new’ fashionable theoretical concept, the latest in the line of intellectual commodities for the knowledge market. The movement to a state of disidentification is a long and arduous journey, one that involves an unceasing stripping away of all of what may seem like unending layers of attachment to various forms of power, privilege, security, and self-interest. (p.32)

A strong personal and social identity may also contribute to empathy and acceptance of the other, as is often found in close relationships—romantic or otherwise. However, the ability is intermittent and short-term. An exteriorized, “material form of identification” leads to a false sense of security through exclusion and defensiveness (Fernandes, 2003, p. 27-34). In feminism, the logic of identification under the thrust of the theory of difference has only made it more difficult for feminists of different groups to sit together and converse (Anzaldúa, 2002; Cervenak et al., 2002; Fernandes, 2003; Keating, 2002). As Keating (2002) noted:

We don’t need to break the world into rigid categories and hide behind masks of sameness which demand that we define ourselves in opposition to others. We can trust that, despite the many differences among us, we are all interconnected” (p.522).

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<sup>129</sup> I am referring here to Lorde’s often cited quotation—“Master’s tools can never be used to dismantle the Master’s house”.

Disidentification provides a stronger, deeper and long lasting change (Fernandes, 2003) in a person's ability for expressing empathy and acceptance of the Other in a variety of personal and social situations. Ultimately, as Anzaldúa (2002) says, "it is about doing away with demarcations like 'ours' and 'theirs'" (p.4).

### *Revision of Transactional Model of Communication*

The devotees and participants present a particular view of the world that is not accommodated by most models of communication. The most popular model of communication in contemporary scholarship is transactional model of communication. In this section, I present a transmodern revision of this model to adapt to the worldview of the members of this community. This model may, perhaps, also be used by scholars who use ancient Asian philosophies to inform their research studies.

Let us first discuss the transactional model of communication (Fig. 1 below). In this model, communicators are influenced by the worldviews into which they have been socialized, the specificities of their environment, the content of the message, as well as the channels they use to communicate with each other. These influences are conceived as "noise" that prevents a communicator from interpreting a message in the exact same way that the sender intended to convey the message. The communicators are also imagined to be separate and distinct entities.

Several Asiatic scholars have argued that this model is based on a particular worldview that is at times not compatible with some Asian philosophies. Dissanayake (2007) said:

These models and paradigms are based on the notion that communication is orderly, unambiguous, and unproblematic. There are, to be sure, various interferences that impede smooth communication, and they are referred to as noises, as for example in the Shannon and Weaver model. Nagarjuna, on the other hand, argues that ambivalence, disorder, and confusion are endemic to communication; they are at the heart of communication, and not in the periphery as the technical term "noises" employed by modern communication scholars would have us believe. (p. 40-41)

I would add that the model also fails to accommodate the practices I observed in the Amma community.



To respond to these concerns, I have added a trans-temporal and trans-physical dimension to complement the existing structure of the transactional model (Self-self model in Fig. 2 below) and to provide a transmodern dimension to the model by adapting the model to accommodate a communicator who is in the state of connectedness (Fig. 3). The Self-self model (Fig. 2) holds that there is an essential self (represented as title case Self) that is an underlying unity for selves in difference (represented as lower case self). The self finds itself in particular interpersonal, intergender, intercultural, and interreligious encounter based on the *vasanas* (inherent tendencies) that self expresses in this life and *karmas* (fruits of action) or debts that it has to pay and receive in this life. The self remains deeply identified with *vasanas* and a certain set of *karmas* need to be exhausted in this life. The combination of *vasanas* and *karmas* create psychic noise in a communication encounter which then is expressed as social noise (similar to the notion of noise in transactional model) whereby one feels at a certain moment that she understands someone more clearly than the other. This underlying psychic noise also causes conflict and misunderstandings. This model reflects the state for most communicators.

The way to transcend this common state and communicate in a more productive way is represented by the Self-realized or enlightened communication model (Fig. 3). This model represents the ideal to strive for achieving full competency in communication.

The way to decrease noise is to be mindful—become aware how one's unique personal history and personality, gender, culture, and religion influence the way we perceive the world and disengaging from the same. When a person is fully disidentified and disengaged from personal and social influences on thought and behavior, she or he is said to be practicing Self-realized or enlightened communication (Fig. 3).

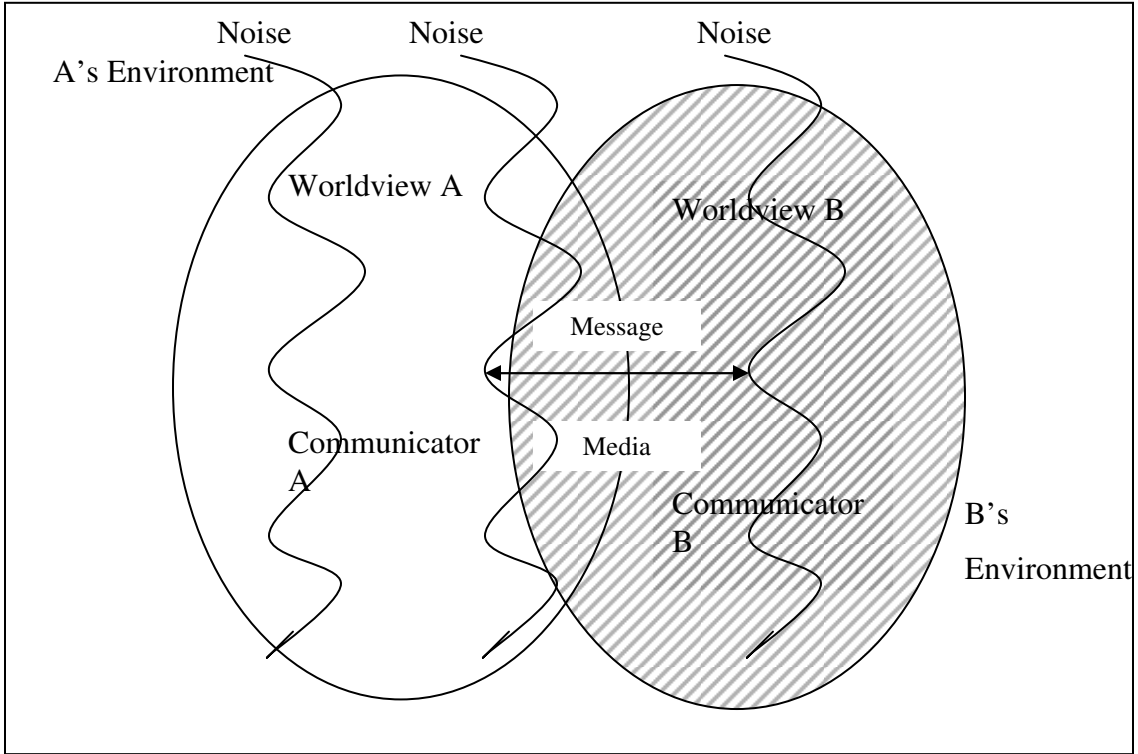


Fig 1: Transactional Model of Communication

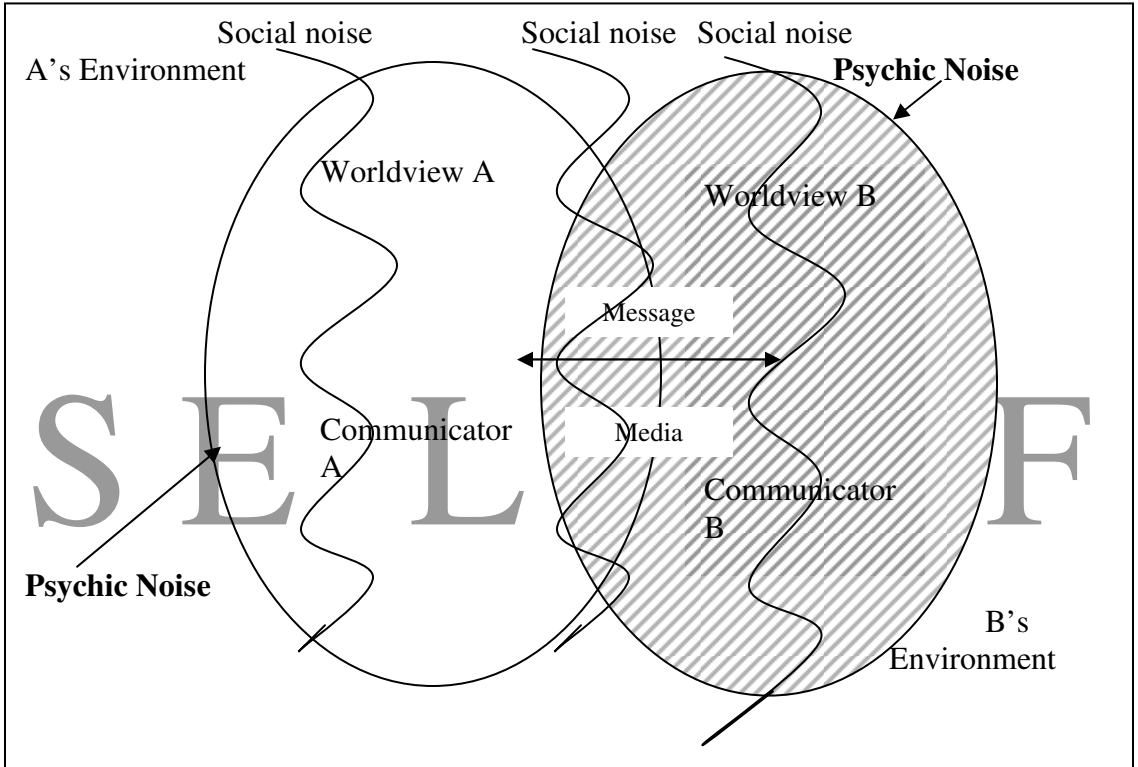


Fig 2: Self-self model of communication

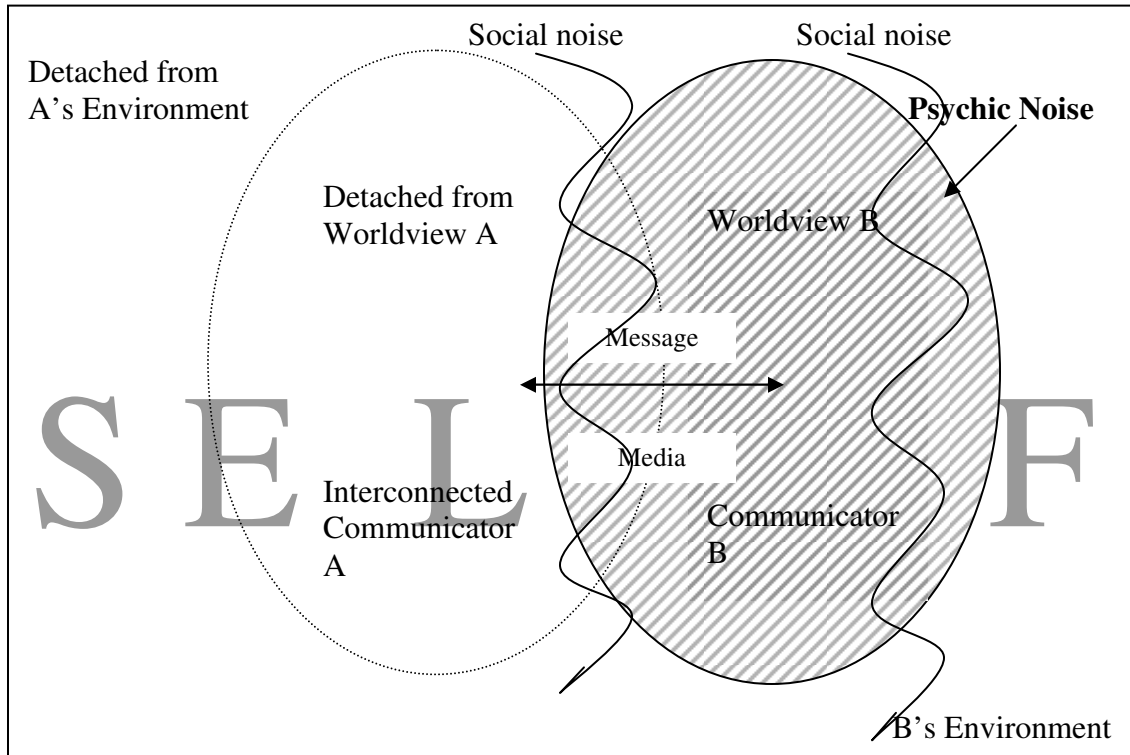


Fig 3: Self-realized or enlightened model of communication

#### Limitations and Recommendations for Future Research

This study was limited to certain demographic and social categorizations. In effect, the study was limited mostly to New Mexico. The Amma community in this region did not have as much cultural or racial diversity as other areas of the country. A study in California or Michigan or Dallas could have provided differing and deeper insights into the various aspects of the community. The demographic variables studied did not include questions about the economic class of participants, and given the small number of interviewees, the study does not highlight class-based differences. Warrior (2005) has suggested that the Amma movement in India is primarily a middle-class movement. Is that true in United States? If so, why? These remained as open questions. In addition, the scope of this study did not include East Indians and did not include men who were an integral part of community life, since my focus of study was the communicative behaviors of U.S. women. Therefore, one cannot claim that the interpretations presented here transcend certain cultural, class, and gender divisions. Finally, since I am not enlightened, I am subject to the same dynamics of spirituality as the members of this community. This research is not perfect in its data collection

methods, analysis or interpretation. But as a researcher I have strived to an extent to do the best I can with my inherent limitations.

In spite of the limitations acknowledged above, the findings suggest avenues for future research. I would recommend that future research in the Amma community would include East Indians and enlarge the setting of research to multiple sites in the world. This will help us study the negotiation of cultural identities in greater depth and diversity. I recommend future research in this community with a focus on the men in the community—how they negotiate their relationship with a woman spiritual leader and their gender identities in community practices. This is an important area of research for gender scholars and feminists, for I understand feminism not just as practice of empowering women but also that of educating men to be aware of their impact on the world of women. How do men learn to respect women and strip away the discourse of masculinity that dominates the society? From my observations and casual conversations, studying the men in the community can lead to deep insights into the nature of gender interactions. Future research in this community from a transmodern perspective would benefit from a focus on the organizational practices and how culture is implicated in those practices. I believe from my observations that organizational communication can benefit greatly from this kind of research.

This study was motivated not just by the desire to give voice to marginalized philosophies and groups in academia, but by a deeper quest for articulating peace and understanding in the world that would be philosophically coherent and socially realistic; an alternative way to understand, articulate, and accept difference without being trapped in the notion of difference. A spiritual framework can be one of the ways to answer this search. It may appear on the surface that spirituality is an exquisite and exclusive individual endeavor, but it is grounded in the notion of collective transformation, a Gandhian idea of one individual change at a time: to create a deep and long-lasting transformational endeavor for global peace and understanding. I conclude this dissertation with a prayer from the Amma community:

Om lokah samastah sukhino bhavantū / om śantih śantih śantih.

(May all beings in all worlds be happy and peaceful. Om peace, peace, peace)

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Appendix  
*Interview Protocol*

Background

1. When did you first meet Amma? How did you meet her?
2. How do you maintain a relationship with Amma?
3. In what ways has Amma influenced you? Please provide examples/stories/anecdotes.
4. Have you been to India? Have you lived in the Amritapuri *ashram*? When? For how long? If yes, tell me about your experience there.
5. Before you knew Amma, were you familiar with any Indian philosophical or religious or cultural practices? In what way and how? Is there any difference from those practices with Amma's spiritual recommendations, messages or practices?
6. Do you stay in touch with other followers of Amma? How do you do so?

Main questions

1. What spiritual practices do you follow?
2. Tell me a story about how these practices influenced your life.
3. Tell me a story about how these practices influenced your beliefs about social relationships.
4. Tell me a story about how these practices influenced your beliefs about yourself as a woman. Can you describe your journey with Amma as a woman?
5. If you were asked to describe this journey in a visual image, a sound, or a word or phrase, how would you portray this journey?
6. There are people from so many different cultures, both men and women, who are involved with Amma movement. Did you ever have a chance to communicate with them?
7. Do you find any differences between communicating with women in the Amma movement as compared with communicating with men? If so, in what ways?
8. Help me understand how you communicate with people from so many different cultures. Have you encountered any communication problems? How you have dealt with them?
9. What do you see as the value in communicating in such intercultural situations?

10. Have you made friends with anybody outside your culture in the Amma movement?  
Tell me more about these friendships—the conversations, the nature of these friendships, the journey...
11. Is there anything that makes you uncomfortable in the Amma movement? If so, give me some examples to help me understand this issue.
12. We have to come to the end of this interview. Is there something you think I have left out or a topic that you wish to speak about?