

December 2021

"Making God's Love Manifest": American Expressions and Productions of Charisma in Sri Mata Amritanandamayi Devi's Global Following

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“MAKING GOD’S LOVE MANIFEST”:
AMERICAN EXPRESSIONS AND PRODUCTIONS OF CHARISMA
IN SRI MATA AMRITANANDAMAYI DEVI’S GLOBAL
FOLLOWING

by

Karen M. Esche-Eiff

A Dissertation Submitted in
Partial Fulfillment of the
Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy
in Anthropology

at

The University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee

December 2021

ABSTRACT

“MAKING GOD’S LOVE MANIFEST”:
AMERICAN EXPRESSIONS AND PRODUCTIONS OF CHARISMA IN SRI MATA
AMRITANANDAMAYI DEVI’S GLOBAL FOLLOWING

by

Karen M. Esche-Eiff

The University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, 2021
Under the Supervision of Dr. Erica Bornstein

While situating it in a changing American religious landscape marked by increasing participation in metaphysical religion, this dissertation examines the appeal of contemporary Indian godperson, Sri Mata Amritanandamayi Devi (Amma), to Americans. Although replete with portraits of individual Indian spiritual leaders’ charisma, the anthropology of religion literature seldom addresses the processes whereby such figures’ charisma gets produced. Drawing on thirteen months of multi-sited ethnographic research conducted between 2015-2016, this dissertation uses Max Weber’s theory of charisma to answer the following questions: what extraordinary capacity do American devotees attribute to Amma; what is the process whereby they and she co-produce this particular expression of her charisma; and what is the role of seva (selfless service) in this process?

Three key findings resulted from this study. First, over the course of their progression through what I identify as the “admirer,” “initiate,” “ashramite,” and “renunciate” stages the American Devotee Life Cycle, American devotees modify their seva practices to perform them on behalf of a wider variety of beneficiaries in a wider variety of contexts as well as in more of an ongoing manner. Second, American devotees attribute to Amma the extraordinary capacity to

transform people. By this, I mean the extraordinary capacity to encourage spiritual seekers not only to understand themselves and the world in which they live but also to act in that world according to what I term a “sevite habitus” informed by the spiritual truth that all are essentially one. According to American devotees, such is “god’s love,” which Amma makes manifest in them - by virtue of her necessarily transformative divine powers, or “grace” - in the form of a desire to perform seva practices on behalf of all always. This is Amma’s charisma and the reason for her appeal to Americans. Third, the process whereby Amma’s charisma gets produced is collaborative. Motivated by proxemic desire, American devotees pursue opportunities to be near Amma. These include opportunities to perform seva practices in her presence. Upon interpreting praising and scolding behaviors that Amma displays as guidance to do so, American devotees diversify their seva practices. They also perform their seva practices more frequently. As a result, they perform the transforming personhoods that they attribute to Amma.

Together, these findings contribute to the anthropology of religion literature on charismatic Indian spiritual leaders by illustrating the role that spiritual seekers play in the construction of the power that such figures wield in the material world.

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To
James and Lexi

In Memory Of
Marie and Don

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

First and foremost, I would like to extend my sincere gratitude to all the individuals whom allowed me the privilege of a window into their lives as devout followers of Amma. For their time and openness, I am grateful to each of them. Special thanks go to one devotee in particular. While the impetus for, the friendship that we share lives well beyond the pages of this dissertation. To her, I say, “Namah Shivaya.”

I am indebted to my advisor, Dr. Erica Bornstein. For the fifteen years that encompassed my graduate studies, she invested in me her time, energy, and genuine interest. Through her tutelage, I learned to think about my passions more critically and, as a result, to grow my understanding and appreciation of them. Hers are foundational lessons that will last a lifetime. To the other faculty members at the University of Wisconsin – Milwaukee whom offered feedback as I experimented with analysis of what was then my eventual dissertation’s subject matter, thank you. These include my committee members: Dr. Paul Brodwin, Dr. Kalman Applbaum, and Dr. Douglas Ihrke. Your advice was instrumental in the years leading up to and during my writing of this dissertation. To Dr. V.K. Bindu, thank you for the kind and patient approach that you took to teaching me Malayalam. വലിയ നന്ദി.

Lastly, I would like to thank my husband, James, and our daughter, Lexi. On many days over the course of conducting research for and writing this dissertation, I was physically absent. On others, I was with you but mentally very far away. Despite this, you remained my biggest cheerleaders. To James, I reiterate the inscription in the promise rings that we gave each other seventeen years ago. I love you “with all my heart and soul.” To Lexi, I say, “jusqu'à la lune,” forever and always.

CH. 1: INTRODUCTION

This dissertation examines the appeal of contemporary Indian godperson, Sri Mata Amritanandamayi Devi (Amma), to Americans (Gold 1988).¹ Drawing on thirteen months of multi-sited ethnographic research that I conducted among American members of Amma's global following in Aurora, Illinois; Castro Valley, California; Elburn, Illinois; and New York, New York, between 2015-2016, it uses Max Weber's (1978) theory of charisma to analyze the process whereby such individuals and Amma co-produce her charisma. While focusing on the lives, spiritual practices, and habitus of American devotees, I answer the following questions (Bourdieu 1990). First, what extraordinary capacity do American devotees attribute to Amma? Second, what is the process whereby they and she co-produce this particular expression of her charisma? And, third, what is the role of *seva* (selfless service) in this process? I summarize my three-part argument below.

AMMA'S CHARISMA AND THE PROCESS WHEREBY AMERICAN DEVOTEES AND AMMA CO-PRODUCE IT

One, over the course of their progression through what I identify as the "admirer," "initiate," "ashramite," and "renunciate" stages the American Devotee Life Cycle (ADLC), American devotees modify their *seva* practices to perform them on behalf of a wider variety of beneficiaries in a wider variety of contexts as well as in more of an ongoing manner. Two, American devotees attribute to Amma the extraordinary capacity to transform people. By this, I mean the extraordinary capacity to encourage spiritual seekers not only to understand themselves and the world in which they live but also to act in that world according to what I term a "sevite habitus" informed by the spiritual truth that all are essentially one. According to American devotees, such is "god's love," which Amma makes manifest in them - by virtue of her

necessarily transformative divine powers, or “grace” - in the form of a desire to perform seva practices on behalf of all always. This is Amma’s charisma and the reason for her appeal to Americans. Because American devotees regard such behaviors as proof that a spiritual seeker is “become[ing] like [Amma],” i.e. as proof that he or she is progressing towards achieving “the goal” of becoming an embodiment of spirituality’s ultimate goal of self-realization, this sevite habitus should be understood as a divine habitus.² In this context, “self-realization” refers to a spiritual seeker’s realization of his or her as well as all other beings’ essential non-duality. For American devotees, “non-duality” refers to the idea that all beings have in them a spark of absolute divinity, or *Brahman*, the eternal essence of the cosmos that is also the true self of all. In effect, for them, “non-duality” refers to essential similitude with the divine. Given the omnipresent nature of divinity, it also refers to essential similitude with all beings on earth. In this way, American devotees’ conceptualization of the notion is not unlike that of the permanent state of bliss, which results from a spiritual seeker’s *atman* (individual soul) and *jiva* (individual life form) merging to become one. I add that “sevite” is an emic term. American devotees use it to refer to seva practitioners.

Three, Amma is not the sole arbiter of her charisma. Indeed, the process whereby American devotees and Amma co-produce her charisma is - as my use of the word “co-produce” suggests - collaborative. Motivated by proxemic desire, American devotees pursue opportunities to be near Amma (Srinivas 2010). These include opportunities to perform seva practices in her presence. When successful at locating and seizing such opportunities (typically with greater regularity the further they are in the ADLC), American devotees find themselves on the receiving end of praising and scolding behaviors that Amma performs in reaction to their seva practices.³ They interpret Amma’s praising behaviors as indication that their seva practices are

“good” (demonstrate progression towards realization of the spiritual truth that all beings are essentially one by serving a wide variety of beneficiaries in a wide variety of contexts as well as in an ongoing manner). They interpret her scolding behaviors as indication that their seva practices are “bad” (fail to demonstrate progression towards realization of this spiritual truth by not doing the above).

Importantly, American devotees perceive Amma as a *purna avatar*, meaning a “full or perfect” incarnation, of Devi in her manifestation as the Hindu pantheon’s Divine Mother goddess (Puri 1988, 197). In the Hindu tradition, Devi is the Great and Divine Mother Goddess. As the Great Goddess, she is the female manifestation of the supreme being, *Purusha*. As the Divine Mother goddess, she is the core form of every Hindu goddess. In effect, she is abstract female divinity. In perceiving Amma as transcendent and absolute divinity, American devotees also perceive her as more fully or perfectly divine than “holy [wo]men” and other godpersons (Gold 1988). Unlike a “holy [wo]man,” or someone whose followers ascribe divine status as a result of wisdom that he or she acquired through *sadhana* (spiritual disciplines and practices), a godperson is a religious figurehead whose followers regard as an incarnation of the divine and therefore god on earth (Gold 1988). In this way, American devotees consider Amma a superior guru whom is uniquely equipped to mediate “divine grace, knowledge, and power” to them, her devoted disciples (Gold 1988, 17). It follows from this that, when American devotees find themselves on the receiving end of Amma’s praising and scolding behaviors, they respond. They do this by continuing their “good” and discontinuing their “bad” seva practices. As a result, they demonstrate to themselves and those around them the transforming personhoods that they attribute to her.

My goals in analyzing the process whereby American devotees and Amma co-produce her charisma are several. First, I aim to provide a rich case study of charisma. Second, I aim to demonstrate that explorations of spiritual seekers' habitus help to illuminate the processes whereby charismatic spiritual leaders' charisma gets (co-)produced. Third, I aim to offer insight into the nature of Amma's appeal to Americans. As their involvement in the co-production of the gravitational center of their devotionism suggests, Amma's appeal is not about such individuals embracing an ingenuine spin-off version of Indian religion. Rather, it is part and parcel of a new spiritual form that is emerging in dialog with expectations about the role of faith in contemporary U.S. life (Albanese 2008; Bender 2010; Huffer 2010; Ibid 2011; Lucia 2014; Pew Research Center 2019; Srinivas 2010). As I argue, at least part of that role is about individual spiritual seeker transformation, not just in the next life but in this life right now. And, fourth, I aim to detail this transformation. This includes what it looks like once it happens as well as the process that individuals participate in for making it and their ultimate conversion to Amma's type of spirituality possible.

CHAPTER ORGANIZATION

I break this chapter into four sections. I begin section one with an ethnographic vignette. I do this to introduce the American devotee perception that Amma is a purna avatar of Devi in her manifestation as the Hindu pantheon's Divine Mother goddess. In perceiving Amma as such and therefore as transcendent and absolute divinity, American devotees also perceive her as a superior guru whose very nature it is to continue to gain new followers. Reports published by Amma's M.A. Mission support this common American devotee assertion. They do this by highlighting increases in the total number of spiritual seekers Amma has hugged while

performing her version of the *darshan* ritual.⁴ In the Hindu tradition, “darshan” refers to the ritual of viewing the sacred, most commonly in the image of a deity while at temple (Babb 1981; Eck 1981). In Amma’s global following, it refers to the ritual of receiving a hug from Amma.⁵

These reports have not, to my knowledge, undergone vetting by external reviewers. Therefore, to illustrate that Amma’s appeal – in being particularly resonant - continues to find receptive audiences, I provide evidence of her M.A. Mission’s expansion. Amma’s M.A. Mission is the transnational faith-based organization (FBO) that she heads in her emotional and official positions as leading god- and chairperson (Gold 1988). It is headquartered at her M.A. Math in Amritapuri, India. This facility is an *ashram* (Hindu center). In being the international headquarters of her FBO, it is also a site for instituting and carrying out seva projects. Specific evidence that I provide includes increases in the total number of M.A. Centers that her M.A. Mission has established. It also includes increases in the total number of countries in which her M.A. Mission has established M.A. Centers. M.A. Centers are satellite facilities. While smaller in scale, they are similar to Amma’s M.A. Math in that they are ashrams as well as sites for instituting and carrying out seva projects.

I include here an important note of clarification. While Amma continues to grow her following in various countries’ religious landscapes, the nature of her appeal in those religious landscapes is not monolithic. This is reflected in the architecture of Amma’s M.A. Mission. To this point, I use the abovementioned increases to illustrate that the United States, while it fell from representing seven to five percent of all countries in which this FBO established at least one M.A. Center between 2009 – 2019, more than doubled its number two (after India) share of total M.A. Centers over the course of that same timeframe (seven vs. fifteen percent). As I argue,

this suggests that the nature of Amma's appeal to spiritual seekers in/from the United States is about something uniquely American and therefore has a social life that is similarly so.

In section two, I contextualize Amma's appeal to Americans. I do this by situating it in a changing American religious landscape that is marked by increasing participation in metaphysical religion (Albanese 2008; Bender 2010; Huffer 2010; Ibid 2011; Lucia 2014; Pew Research Center 2019; Srinivas 2010). As a point of comparison, I offer Maya Warrior's (2000; 2005; 2006) location of Amma's appeal to Indians in an Indian context of economic liberalization.

Section three is my literature review. I begin it with an overview of Weber's (1978) theory of charisma. I address this theory in further detail when analyzing the process whereby American devotees and Amma co-produce her charisma in Chapter Seven. I then turn to reviewing works from the anthropology of religion literature that focus on charisma as a theoretical and ethnographic framework for examining the appeal of Indian gurus. These includes works that catalog attributes, which qualitative social scientists argue are demonstrative of such figures' charisma. They also include works in which such social scientists - in striving to move this part of the anthropology of religion literature beyond portraits of individual Indian gurus' charisma – advance “uncontainability,” or the capacity to cross into and steer a vast array of social arenas seemingly without effort, as the attribute that is demonstrative of all “hyper-gurus” charisma (Copeman and Ikegame 2012a; Ibid 2012b). “Hyper-gurus” refers to publicly visible, globalizing gurus whom tend to enjoy godperson status (Copeman and Ikegame 2012a; Ibid 2012b; Gold 1988). Amma is an example of a “hyper-guru” (Copeman and Ikegame 2012a; Ibid 2012b). I note here that, while “uncontainability” might be helpful for reimagining Weber's (1978) conceptualization of charisma for the “hyper-guru” context, it leaves unexplored the

process whereby the “hyper-guru” and spiritual seekers must, as Weber (1978) insists, collaborate to co-produce his or her charisma (Copeman and Ikegame 2012a; Ibid 2012b; Lucia 2014). This is the goal of my dissertation, to analyze the process whereby American devotees and Amma co-produce her charisma. Lastly, in section four, I summarize the contents of my dissertation’s remaining seven chapters.

AMMA’S APPEAL

On June 25, 2014, I toured Amma’s M.A. Center Chicago in Elburn, Illinois. Karthika facilitated this tour for me.⁶ I met Karthika in Wisconsin when I was four years old. For the past thirty-four years, she has been one of my dearest friends. In 2014, Karthika was a renunciate member of Amma’s global following. A renunciate is an ascetic. In Amma’s global following, an ascetic is a *brahmachari(ni)* (probationary monastic, or “junior monk”), a senior *brahmachari(ni)*, or a *swami(ni)* [meaning a *sannyasi(ni)*, or someone who has undergone initiation into a specific spiritual order]. While strolling past this facility’s dormitory building and kitchen/dining hall to arrive at its bee yard, Karthika and I discussed a development that was then unfolding in India. This development was the Kerala High Court’s issuance of an injunction on the publication, circulation, and sale of *Oru Sanyasiyude Velippeduthalukal* (Malayalam for “Revelations by a Hindu Religious Mendicant,” Times of India 2014).⁷ Kerala is the South Indian state where Amma was born in 1953. It is also where her FBO’s international headquarters, the M.A. Math, is located. The book, originally published in English under the title *Holy Hell: A Memoir of Faith, Devotion, and Pure Madness*, is an account of Amma by former devotee, Gail Tredwell (2013). Therein, Tredwell (2013) accuses Amma of being a disingenuous guru. Among other things, she cites Amma’s supposed secret accumulation of luxuries like fancy

cars and gold jewelry as evidence. “I know Gail ... she isn’t a credible source,” rebuked Karthika.⁸ Karthika continued her admonishment of Gail’s accusations; “The book is slander ... Anyway, Amma has never been more popular ... A river doesn’t stop flowing simply because one person throws her trash in it. The river doesn’t care. It just keeps flowing.”⁹

I include Karthika’s reference to this Indian controversy for two reasons. First, I include it to introduce the notion of the disingenuous guru. I address it in Chapter Three when discussing active vs. passive guru choice among American devotees. I address it in Chapter Four when discussing such individuals’ use of Christian charitable and humanitarian vs. Hindu terms for introducing family members and friends to Amma. Second, I include Karthika’s reference to this Indian controversy to highlight her belief that Amma is more than an authentic guru. As I show in Chapter Three, Karthika and other American devotees, in regarding Amma as a *purna avatar* of Devi in her manifestation as the Hindu pantheon’s Divine Mother goddess, also regard her as transcendent and absolute divinity itself. As a result, they maintain that she is not just an authentic but rather a superior guru. In being a superior guru, it is her very nature to continue to gain new followers.

And, Amma does continue to gain new followers. Earlier in this chapter, I introduced the concept of *darshan*. Importantly, this ritual is not a passive exercise in observance. It should be understood as an (inter)active process of becoming (Lucia 2014). Christopher Fuller (1992) notes that Hindus, in beholding the image of a deity, believe themselves to absorb the powers of that deity. Echoing Fuller (1992), Lawrence Babb (1986, 79) writes that there is a parallel to be found between the motivations behind eating *prasad* (gracious gift), wherein “you become what you eat,” and those behind participating in *darshan*, wherein “you somehow become what you see.” When interpreted through Neo-Vedantic ideals of *advaita* (essential non-duality), spiritual

seekers understand darshan as that highly intimate moment in which its associated act of seeing (and being seen by) a deity suspends the individuated sense of self that normally barricades one from recognizing his or her essential similitude with the divine.

American devotees frequently, for example, in the context of performing daily meditations that I address in Chapters Five and Six, spend long periods of time beholding Amma in mediated forms like photographs and videos that they purchase from physical stores at her M.A. Math in India and M.A. Centers in the United States as well as online through her “Amma Shop.” Despite this, they use the term “darshan” almost exclusively for referring to the coveted ritual of receiving a hug from Amma. To my knowledge, there exist no records indicating how many followers Amma has gained since accepting an Indian man named Balu (now Swami Amritaswarupananda Puri) as her first disciple in 1978. To suggest that Amma does continue to gain new followers (and therefore that her appeal - in being particularly resonant - continues to find receptive audiences), I provide other records that highlight increases in the total number of spiritual seekers she has hugged while performing her version of the darshan ritual. I found these records in the annual M.A. Mission periodical, *Embracing the World for Peace and Harmony: The Humanitarian Activities of Sri Mata Amritanandamayi Devi*. Per its 2007 edition; “Amma has physically hugged more than 26 million people from all parts of the world” (M.A. Mission 2007, 1). The 2019 edition of this publication, retitled *Embracing the World: Humanitarian Initiatives, Sri Mata Amritanandamayi Devi, Mata Amritanandamayi Math*, restates this number significantly higher; “Amma has given this motherly embrace, known as her darshan, to more than 39 million people” (M.A. Mission 2019a, 6). Even if they include individuals whom have participated in Amma’s version of the darshan ritual several times, these numbers suggest that her global following is far from shrinking in size. As I stated earlier, these reports have not, to

my knowledge, undergone vetting by external reviewers. Therefore, to illustrate that Amma's appeal continues to find receptive audiences, I describe her M.A. Mission and provide evidence of its expansion.

Amma's M.A. Mission

Amma formally established her M.A. Math and M.A. Mission on May 6, 1981. She did this under the Travancore-Cochin State Literary and Charitable Act of 1955, at Kollam, Kerala, South India. According to Puri (1988), Amma's establishment of these institutions was not elective strategy. Rather, it was the unavoidable result of Amma's nature as a superior guru to continue to gain new followers colliding with the Indian legal system. I elaborate; in what members of Amma's global following regard as her authoritative biography, Puri (1988) writes that, prior to May 6, 1981, Amma and her original company of disciples inhabited a 162-square foot shelter on land owned by her parents. As Amma's discipleship grew, several of her followers recommended official registration of an ashram and affiliated charitable organization. Amma did not think the proposal wise. "Mother does not need an ashram," she rebuked (Puri 1988, 191). "Is it not a bondage? Haven't you seen the palmist walking with the caged parrot, i.e. being bound for another person's purpose? At last, Mother's situation will also become like that. I cannot do that. Mother has her own freedom. There should be no obstacle for that" (Puri 1988, 191).¹⁰ Despite her concerns, Amma conceded to her disciples' wishes, because of Indian legalities limiting the length of time that foreigners may maintain residence in private homes.

Amma's concerns around "bondage" are not unfounded (Puri 1988, 191). I say this, as the Indian government and other institutions have taken steps to render charitable work in the country increasingly accountable. One way they have done this is through changes to Indian tax

law. And, while religious giving in India is largely unregulated due to preservation of distinctions originally drawn in British trust law between giving for the welfare of an abstract public and giving for the welfare of known others, there have been attempts to bring it into the realm of governmentality. This is seen, for example, in the writing of India's secular constitution during its struggle for independence and afterwards (Bornstein 2012). I return to this idea of regulation and its impact on giving practices that American devotees commonly do in the performance of their seva in Chapter Four.

Also of note with regards to May 6, 1981, is Amma's then decision to abandon her birth name and adopt a spiritual one. In the Hindu tradition, a spiritual aspirant typically receives his or her spiritual name from a guru, as part of initiation into that guru's spiritual order. Without a guru of her own, Amma (then Sudhamani) relied on her "brahmacharin sons" to provide her with an appropriate spiritual name (Puri 1988, 191). They chose Mata Amritanandamayi, which translates from Sanskrit to mean "Mother of Immortal Bliss."¹¹ I highlight this moment, for - despite having previously been alleged to have done such miraculous things as turn milk into *payasum* (sweet milk pudding) and rid a leper of disease - it is here, in the context of charitable institution building, that Amma becomes recognized by others as exceptional enough to be bestowed a marker of difference. I address the idea of conferral that this behavior reflects and the role that Weber (1978) assigns to it in his theory of charisma later in this chapter. I also address my use of this theory as a theoretical and ethnographic framework for analyzing the process whereby American devotees and Amma's co-produce her charisma.

Expansion and Structure of Amma's M.A. Mission

Since May 6, 1981, Amma's M.A. Mission has undergone dramatic expansion. Though once a village-based community with a modest footprint of 162-square feet, it expanded by 2009 to become a vast transnational organization with recognition from the United Nations' Economic and Social Council as a non-governmental organization (NGO) with special consultive status as well as a network of facilities that included Amma's M.A. Math, twenty-six M.A. Centers in India, and sixteen M.A. Centers in thirteen additional countries on six continents (M.A. Mission 2009a, M.A. Mission 2009b).¹² By 2019, Amma's M.A. Mission expanded further to include her M.A. Math, forty-one M.A. Centers in India, and thirty-two M.A. Centers in twenty-one additional countries on six continents (M.A. Mission 2019b).¹³

Satsang groups expand the reach of Amma's M.A. Mission further. These are groups of householder (lay) devotees whom meet, usually at fellow devotees' homes, on a weekly or monthly basis to engage in spiritual activities.¹⁴ Satsang groups exist internationally. In the United States, they appeared to me most common in areas where Amma's M.A. Mission had not (yet) established a permanent presence, for example, in the form of an M.A. Center. As I learned, satsang groups oftentimes disband upon this FBO establishing an M.A. Center nearby. In 2019, there were seventy-seven satsang groups in the United States (M.A. Center 2019).

Related to the transient nature of satsang groups, I include here a finding that I was surprised to make. While it implies the end of family members, friends, and otherwise well-acquainted people coming together to share in the devotionism that unifies them, satsang group dissolution is not always an unhappy occurrence. This is because, in happening in the context of M.A. Mission expansion, it implies increased access to Amma.¹⁵ As I illustrate at several points throughout this dissertation, American devotees receive the prospect of proximity to Amma with

excitement and anticipation. I witnessed such excitement and anticipation unfold when, in 2009, the coordinators of the now defunct Milwaukee Satsang Group in Grafton, Wisconsin, announced plans to sell their home and relocate to Amma's then soon-to-be-established M.A. Center Chicago.¹⁶ With their announcement signaling to the rest of the satsang group's members that they would lose their typical hosts, I expected to hear rumblings of frustration. Instead, I heard best wishes followed by expressions of desire to follow in these devotees' footsteps. "It would be wonderful to be closer to Amma," remarked one devotee. In 2012, I discovered that several former Milwaukee Satsang Group members had relocated to Amma's M.A. Center Chicago, thereby realizing their hopes for more frequent opportunities to be near Amma. I return to addressing the notion of proxemic desire, as discussed by Srinivas (2010), when examining the role that it plays in the process whereby American devotees and Amma co-produce her charisma in Chapter Seven.

Despite their transient nature, satsang groups constitute a distinct layer in the hierarchy of Amma's M.A. Mission (Figure 1.1).

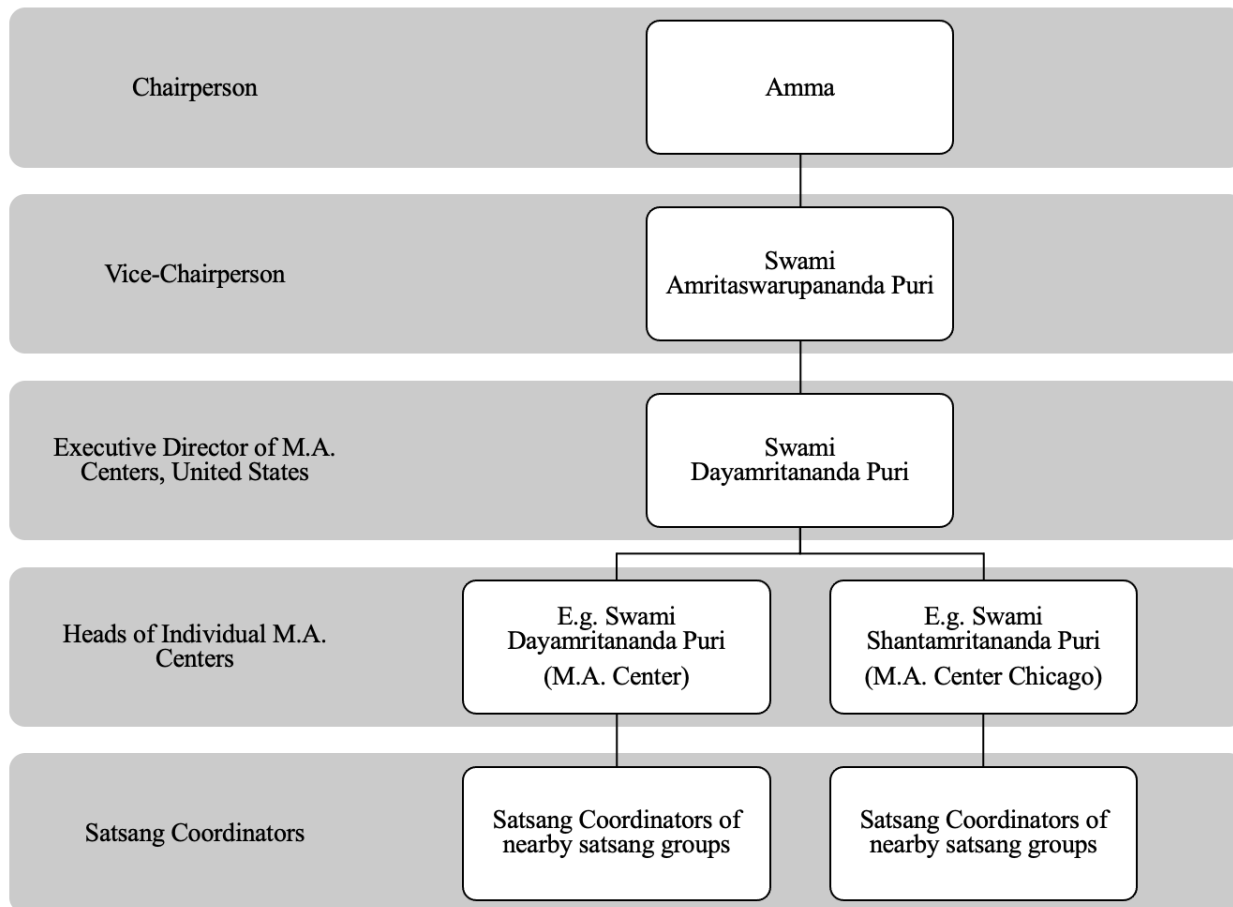


Figure 1.1: Organizational structure of Amma's M.A. Mission in the United States.

At the top of this hierarchy is Amma, in her emotional and official positions as leading god- and chairperson (Gold 1988). Swami Amritaswarupananda Puri sits one rung lower, in his position as vice-chairperson (Cornell 2001). In the United States, Swami Dayamritananda Puri (formerly Brahmachari Dayamrita Chaitanya) inhabits this hierarchy's next layer. His official title is "Executive Director of M.A. Centers, United States." In this position, he oversees all M.A. Centers in the country.¹⁷ Below Swami Dayamritananda Puri sit Amma's disciples whom head her individual M.A. Centers in the United States. These are typically swami(ni)s and senior brahmachari(ni)s. In addition to overseeing all M.A. Centers in the United States, Swami Dayamritananda Puri heads Amma's M.A. Center in Castro Valley, California. Swami

Shantamritananda Puri (formerly Brahmachari Shantamrita Chaitanya) heads her M.A. Center Chicago. Lower still are “satsang coordinators,” or householder devotees whom lead Amma’s satsang groups. As I learned, “satsang coordinator” is a formally recognized role. According to an undated position description that the then coordinator of the Milwaukee Satsang Group circulated at the May 3, 2009, meeting of that group, the duties of a “satsang coordinator” are to: “serve as liaison between the satsang group and the regional and national organization and leadership,” to “guide satsang group operations in a way that reflects Amma’s teachings and follows the guidelines of the national organization,” to “serve as the contact person for the satsang group,” to “maintain satsang group contact information,” to “communicate all regional and national updates to the local satsang group,” to “maintain satsang group finances and send deposits in a timely manner and accurate fashion to the M.A. Center, and to “coordinate satsang group support of Amma’s [public satsang] programs.” Public satsang programs are large-scale, usually two- to three-day long spiritual gatherings that Amma leads in cities where sizable populations of her followers live. In several of these cities, she leads public satsang programs twice a year; in others, once a year. In this way, “satsang coordinators” and the satsang groups that they lead serve as conduits for rendering Amma’s disparate and therefore largely unknowable global following knowable to the financial and human resource management aspects of her M.A. Mission.

Satsang groups also constitute sites of uniquely local expressions of faith. Drawing on Arjun Appadurai’s (1996) theory of “culture flows” as well as ideas of intentionality and intersubjectivity advanced by Alessandro Duranti (1997) and Michael Jackson (1998; 1996), I argue elsewhere that American devotees are simultaneously local and global players, that the M.A. Mission “nodes” in which they participate are a part of Amma’s FBO as well as entities in

their own right (Esche-Eiff 2009). I came to this conclusion after witnessing devotees' oftentimes divergent ideas about seva practices circulate among the M.A. Mission "nodes" that they frequent in the practice of their faith. In circulating, these ideas frequently collide, for example, in the context of regular weekly or monthly meetings of satsang groups to spark the emergence of unique seva translations and practices.

Expansion of Amma's M.A. Mission in the United States

I stated earlier that Amma's M.A. Mission expanded by 2009 to become a network of facilities that included her M.A. Math, twenty-six M.A. Centers in India, and sixteen M.A. Centers in thirteen additional countries on six continents (M.A. Mission 2009b). By 2019, it expanded further to include her M.A. Math, forty-one M.A. Centers in India, and thirty-two M.A. Centers in twenty-one additional countries on six continents (M.A. Mission 2019b). I add that, by 2009, Amma's M.A. Centers in the United States totaled three. They were in: Ann Arbor, Michigan; Castro Valley, California; and Santa Fe, New Mexico. By 2019, they totaled eleven. They were in: Ann Arbor, Michigan; Atlanta, Georgia; Boylston, Massachusetts; Castro Valley, California; Dallas, Texas; Elburn, Illinois; Homestead, Iowa; Los Angeles, California; New Rochelle, New York; Potomac, Maryland; and Santa Fe, New Mexico (Figure 1.2).

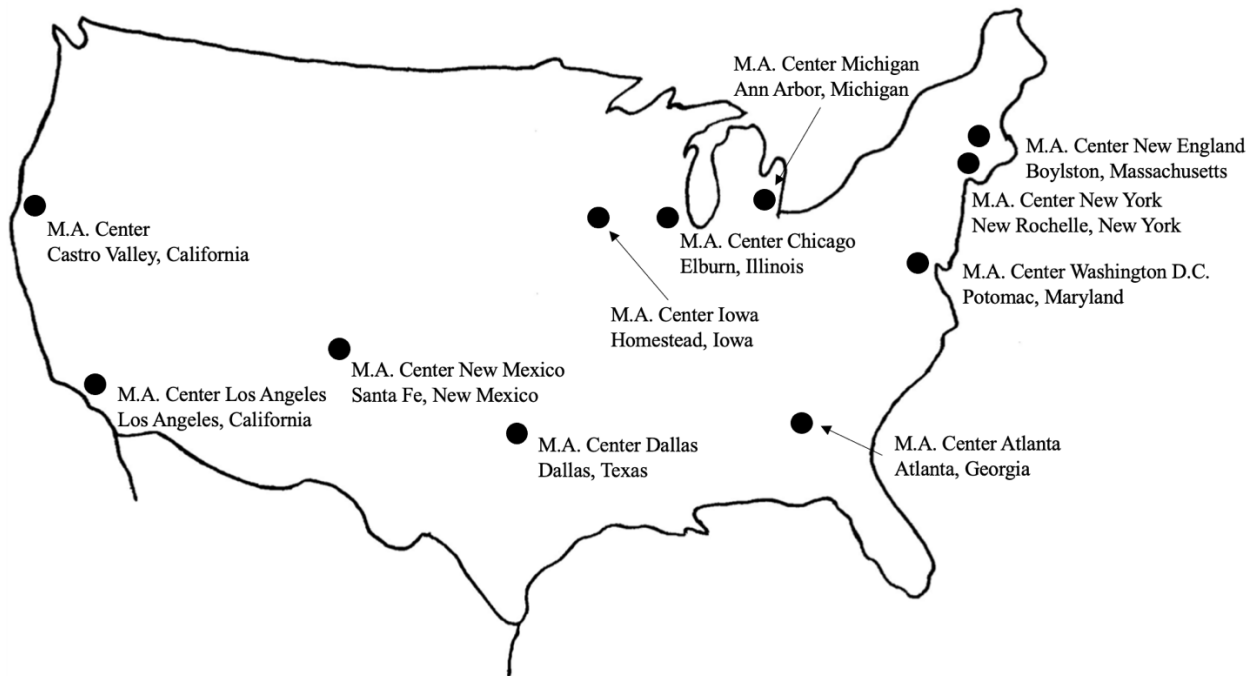


Figure 1.2: As of 2019, the locations of Amma’s M.A. Centers in the United States.

In other words, while the United States fell from representing seven to five percent of all countries in which Amma’s M.A. Mission established at least one M.A. Center between 2009 – 2019, it more than doubled its number two (after India) share of total M.A. Centers over the course of that same timeframe (seven vs. fifteen percent). By 2019, France was the country with the next closest percentage (three percent). Its two M.A. Centers were in Pontgouin and Tourves.

Individual M.A. Centers in the United States expanded during this timeframe, as well. To illustrate, I provide the case of Amma’s M.A. Center Chicago. In 2012, her FBO purchased what was then the Broadview Academy from the Seventh Day Adventist Church, for the express purpose of establishing an M.A. Center in the Chicago metropolitan area. At the time, the property included thirteen single-family homes, two dormitories, and an administrative building on sixty acres. Between 2012 - 2016, American devotees demolished and renovated several of these buildings. They also built others. By 2016, their efforts resulted in the creation of an

ashram that included fifteen single-family homes, a duplex, a dormitory building/library, a kitchen/dining hall, a secondary dining hall, a Montessori school, a *puja* (ritual offering) hall, a *bhajan* (devotional hymn) hall, a bee yard, and a garden on 140 acres. American devotees plan to expand this facility further. According to a 2016 article published in the *Kane County Chronicle*, a group of such individuals requested an amendment to the facility's special use permit, for erecting "a total of 72 single-family homes and a 192 multi-unit residential facility during the next 10 to 15 years" (O'Neill 2016).

I first learned about devotees' plans to continue expansion of Amma's M.A. Center Chicago while attending a "team leaders" meeting on June 20, 2016. I attended this meeting as an ethnographer and in my role as "seating coordinator." "Seating coordinator" is not a formally recognized position. Rather it is a temporary position to which one is appointed, oftentimes by a long-time devotee. One holds this position for the two or three months leading up to and during a public satsang program. In it, he or she manages a team of fellow sevites, for seating the thousands of spiritual seekers whom typically attend such an event. I was appointed to the position of "seating coordinator" on April 12, 2016. I retained it through the end of Amma's Summer 2016 Chicago Public Satsang Program. This event ran from June 26 – 29 of that year. I return to the subject of my appointment to this position (who appointed me, in what context, and why) when discussing the role of proxemic authority in co-productions of Amma's charisma in Chapter Seven (Lucia 2014).

Also in attendance at this "team leaders" meeting were Swami Shantamritananda Puri and approximately twenty Chicago-area householder devotees. They discussed steps to take for readying Amma's M.A. Center Chicago to host her Summer 2016 Chicago Public Satsang Program. These included steps to take for ensuring appropriate lodging for Amma and devotees

accompanying her from her M.A. Math; enough food for Amma, devotees accompanying her from her M.A. Math, and other attendees; appropriate space and supplies for Amma to perform rituals – her version of the darshan ritual, included; appropriate space and supplies for devotees to advertise M.A. Mission sponsorship of seva projects; and appropriate space and supplies for devotees to sell goods like “Amma dolls” (Figure 1.3) as well as services like *Jyotish* (Hindu system of astrology) readings.



Figure 1.3: An “Amma doll.” Members of Amma’s global following produce and sell “Amma dolls,” for example to attendees at Amma’s public satsang programs in the United States, in the performance of their seva. These include American members of Amma’s global following.

Swami Shantamritananda Puri reminded the group that revenue generated as a result of these sales would be routed to Amma’s M.A. Math, for funding her M.A. Mission’s larger seva projects. Examples of these include disaster relief such as what members of Amma’s global following undertook in the wake of the 2004 Indian Ocean Tsunami, Hurricane Katrina, and the

2010 Haiti Earthquake; food, healthcare, and housing for the poor; education for women and special needs children; and community outreach on topics related to public health and sustainability. They also include the FBO's continued institution building (Warrier 2003a). "We are so [*emphasis on "so"*] blessed here," remarked Swami Shantamritananda Puri. He then went on to request that everyone present consider ways to advertise future options for residency at Amma's M.A. Center Chicago. "Let's give [public satsang program attendees] a taste of life here," he stated. "Maybe serve them vegetables from our fields. Most people don't know you can live here ... I mean, not yet, but soon!" The group ultimately decided on erecting and staffing an information booth from which to hand out pamphlets. While at Amma's Summer 2016 Chicago Public Satsang Program, I picked one up. Titled "Come and Live in Amma's Ashram in Chicago!" the undated pamphlet highlights 1,000-square foot single-family homes, 1,500-square foot duplexes, 1,800-square foot duplexes, and 1,200-square foot apartments as future housing opportunities. Priya shared with me in an interview that I conducted with her in 2015 at this facility that all then future housing opportunities quickly accumulated waiting lists. "We're [*referring to herself as well as her husband and daughter*] on the list to rent one of the houses," she stated.¹⁸ In 2015, Priya was a householder devotee. Originally from Grafton, Wisconsin, she relocated to Amma's M.A. Center Chicago shortly after her M.A. Mission's establishment of it in 2012.

I now turn to contextualizing Amma's appeal to Americans. Before situating it in a changing American religious landscape marked by increasing participation in metaphysical religion, I offer Maya Warrier's (2000; 2005; 2006) location of Amma's appeal to Indians in an Indian context of economic liberalization, as a point of comparison (Albanese 2008; Bender 2010; Huffer 2010; Ibid 2011; Lucia 2014; Pew Research Center 2019; Srinivas 2010).

CONTEXTUALIZING AMMA'S APPEAL

Writing about guru faith in contemporary India, Sudhir Kakar (1983), Deborah Swallow (1982), and Pavan Varma (1998) identify feelings of alienation and insecurity as the main catalysts for why gurus are becoming increasingly popular among members of India's urban middle class.¹⁹ Fearful of losing touch with tradition and receiving less support from caste and family networks over time, these individuals attach themselves to gurus, socialize among those whom comprise their folds, and - in the process of doing so - find relief from such trials of "modernity." Hugh Urban (2003) echoes Kakar (1983), Swallow (1982), and Varma (1998). Addressing Sathya Sai Baba's appeal among members of India's urban middle class, he points to the guru's defense of Hindu identity and nationalism as well as his expressions of ambivalence towards encroachment by the "material West;" "Voicing deep fears about the erosion of traditional values, breakdown of social structure and the loss of religious faith," Sathya Sai Baba - simultaneously a conjurer of commodities and a staunch defender of tradition - embodies what Urban (2003, 75) describes as "deep contradictions at the heart of the late capitalist order."

Contextualizing Amma's Appeal in India

Warrier (2000; 2005; 2006) challenges Kakar (1983), Swallow (1982), Urban (2003), and Varma (1998) by arguing that this causal relationship between feelings of uncertainty about "modernity" and heightened participation in guru faith - while it might be true for the urban, middle-class followers of some Indian gurus - is not true for those whom make up the majority of Amma's Indian following. Reflecting on the ethnographic research that she conducted into contemporary manifestations of popular Hinduism among Indian followers of Amma in Amritapuri and Delhi, India, between 1997-1998, she writes:

The majority of devotees I met ... had benefitted vastly from the changing conditions in urban India and had done well for themselves by seizing the educational and career-related opportunities that came their way. Their experience [with] the unprecedented pace and scale of change had resulted not so much in a sense of despair and alienation as in a sense of optimism about multiplying opportunities in most spheres of life. [Warrier 2006, 183-184]

She goes on to argue that, in this context marked by feelings of *hopefulness*, Amma's appeal is less about desire for relief from "modernity" than it is about desire for balanced engagement with it.

Once they entered [Amma's] fold and became acquainted with her spiritual message, devotees developed a new understanding of [Amma] as a healer of the modern world and of themselves as individuals suffering the consequences of a skewed approach to the conditions of modernity. The understanding of modernity shared by devotees of [Amma] was based on the identification of its core "ills" or "imbalances." They came to understand the sorrows and setbacks in their lives as caused by their own skewed engagement with the modern world, which, as they now saw it, was a place depleted of love, faith and compassion. The "problem" with modernity lay not so much in its external conditions as in individual responses to these conditions. What needed to change was not the world out there but one's attitude to that world. One needed to balance materialism, rationality and egotism with spirituality, faith and selfless love. [Warrier 2006, 185]

I add that Amma regards imbalanced engagement with "the conditions of modernity" as more than a psychological "self-help" issue (Warrier 2006, 185).²⁰ For her, it carries cosmic weight. Amma's teachings on *karma yoga* reflect this.

Karma Yoga and Amma

In Sanskrit, *karma* means "acts." In the Hindu tradition, it refers to the results of one's actions. These include results that affected parties understand as positive as well as those that they understand as negative. Karma yoga is a Hindu method of salvation. According to it, just as interested actions done in past lives produce present suffering, interested actions done in a present life will produce future suffering. It follows from this that participation in *nishkam karma* (disinterested action, or action that one does without interest in the fruits of that action) is vital to

overall wellbeing. Only by practicing nishkam karma can a *karma yogi* (practitioner of karma yoga) rid himself or herself of *prarabdha* (burdens of karma), attain *moksha* (liberation from *samsara*, meaning the tiresome cycle of birth, death, and rebirth that Hindus believe all beings to undergo), and - as a result - arrive at spirituality's ultimate goal of self-realization. Should a karma yogi not rid himself or herself of prarabdha, he or she will experience reincarnation and forego self-realization for yet another lifetime.

This understanding of karma yoga is not unique to Amma. It is merely one variant in a vast body of Hindu philosophy on reincarnation. Nevertheless, by teaching that humanity's "modern" insatiable desire for material goods leads to heightened accumulations of karmic burden and hence to suffering, she affords karma yoga's soteriological aspect an original contemporary relevance. The passage below comes from what members of Amma's global following regard as her authoritative biography (Puri 1988). It illustrates this point.

Children, it doesn't matter how much wealth we have. If we don't have the right attitude towards wealth ... or use it properly ... it will only bring sorrow. Even if there is immeasurable wealth, any happiness we might gain from it is only momentary. Wealth cannot give Eternal Bliss. Didn't Kamsa, Hiranyakasipu and others possess vast wealth? Did they ever have mental peace and tranquility? What peace did Ravana have although he possessed fabulous wealth? They all lived egotistically swerving from the path of the Truth. They performed many actions which they should not have, and as a result they lost peace and tranquility.²¹ [Puri 1989, 73-74]

Kakar (1983), Swallow (1982), Urban (2003), Varma (1998), and Warriar (2000; 2005; 2006), while they disagree on the reasons why gurus are becoming increasingly popular among members of India's urban middle class, all locate this phenomenon in a broader context of Indian economic liberalization. For Kakar (1983), Swallow (1982), Urban (2003), and Varma (1998), heightened participation in guru faith is a (negative) response to that which economic liberalization has left these individuals without (tradition and community). For Warriar (2000; 2005; 2006), it is a (positive) response to that which economic liberalization has provided them

with (educational and career-related opportunities). And, while economic liberalization is hardly unique to India, it is not the context in which I locate Amma's appeal to Americans. This context is a changing American religious landscape marked by increasing participation in metaphysical religion (Albanese 2008; Bender 2010; Huffer 2010; Ibid 2011; Lucia 2014; Pew Research Center 2019; Srinivas 2010).

Contextualizing Amma's Appeal in the United States

Central to metaphysical religion is its rejection of organized religion. This includes its rules, hierarchies, and institutions, i.e. its restrictive elements (Albanese 2008). I note here the caveat that, while practitioners of metaphysical religion reject religious institutionalism and therefore avoid congregating in singular religious forums, they operate in overlapping social circles. As a result, they produce what Courtney Bender (2010) calls an "entangled" web of differently organized groups and organizations. She states, "what we think of as the spiritual is actively produced within medical, religious, and arts institutions, among others. It is not unorganized or disorganized, but rather organized in different ways, within and adjacent to a variety of religious and secular institutional fields that inflect and shape various spiritual practices" (Bender 2010, 23). Demonstrating their rejection of organized religion, practitioners of metaphysical religion supplant the term "religion" with "spirituality" and call themselves "spiritual." Lucia (2014, 155) notes that these terms are themselves signifiers of negation; "the spiritual is a category ... that exists only in opposition to its antecedent: religion."

Socio-economically, practitioners of metaphysical religion tend to come from middle-class or otherwise upwardly mobile populations. As a result, they have leisure time as well as discretionary income. They use both for sampling a variety of spiritual options. In this context,

“spirituality” signifies an eclectic combination of beliefs and practices. It also signifies the overarching idea of personal transformation vis à vis understanding of, emulation of, and/or unification with a superhuman power (variously conceived, Lucia 2014).

In the United States, practitioners of metaphysical religion have long had a distinct presence. Catherine Albanese (2008) dates their presence back to the arrival of the country’s first European settlers. While practitioners of metaphysical religion still constitute a minority in the United States, there is evidence to suggest that their numbers are growing and, as a result, impacting the architecture of the American religious landscape. For example, according to the Pew Research Center (2019), the total population shares of adults in the United States whom self-identify as Protestant or Catholic decreased from 51% and 23% in 2009 to 43% and 20% in 2019, respectively. Conversely, the total population share of adults in the United States whom self-identify as “nothing in particular” increased from 12% in 2009 to 17% in 2019 (Pew Research Center 2019). While especially prominent among members of the United States’ younger generations [Millennial Generation +13 percentage points (ppts) in 2019 vs. 2009, Generation X +6 ppts, Baby Boomer Generation +4 ppts, and Silent Generation +1 ppt], the Pew Research Center (2019) identifies this trend as generally consistent across all ages, genders, ethnic groups, education levels, and geographic regions. I argue that this points to a progressively deepening undercurrent of change in the American religious landscape, one that is marked by a shifting away from participation in mainstream organized religion and towards something alternative, something polyvalent, something “spiritual.”

American members of Amma’s global following are hardly an exception to this trend. To this point, when they talk about Amma, most do so in ways that distance her from all established religious traditions. In an interview that I conducted with her in 2008 at her then residence in

Grafton, Wisconsin, I asked Priya to describe Amma's type of faith. She replied, "I'm not saying that Amma is a Hindu ... while a lot of [her] practices stem from that faith, that tradition, ... her religion is only love."²² Similarly, in an interview that I conducted with her in 2014 at Amma's M.A. Center Chicago, Karthika stated that Amma's type of faith is "like all religions." "It's [about] the same point," she said. "It's [about] love and service to others."²³ Karthika's statement echoes that found in the *Rig Veda* (one of Hinduism's oldest collections of sacred works) on the topic of finite human beings' necessarily limited and, when filtered through the lens of their many disparate experiences, multiple understandings of absolute divinity; "Truth is One, but the sages speak of it by many names" (1.164-46). Per Lucia (2014, 156), "This type of generalized universalism only furthers the American predilection for à la carte religiosity."

Because they do not associate Amma with any established religious tradition, it did not surprise me to learn that American devotees - when they talk about who they are, what they believe, and how they practice their faith - rarely invoke the terms "religious" and "religion." Like practitioners of metaphysical religion, they self-identify as "spiritual" and locate their faith-based beliefs and practices in "spirituality." In my 2008 interview with her, Priya summarized what I frequently heard from other American devotees with respect to their reasons for supplanting "religion" with "spirituality." These reasons included their displeasure with the restrictive elements of organized religion as well as their overall predilection for à la carte religiosity.

I would not say that religion has always been important in our family life, and I wouldn't say that religion is important even now. I might say that spirituality is important. Religion to me is more the structure of a faith, and spirituality is the essence of it itself. And [my family was] never particularly religious ..., into doctrine or anything like that, but I was always interested in spirituality, and that was certainly fostered here in the house just growing up in a home where meditation was a daily practice ... and even now, I still can't really identify with any [*emphasis on "any"*] particular religion. Some days I feel

really in-tune with a certain religion. Other days, it's another one, but it's more just like the spiritual essence of that faith and not the particular doctrines.²⁴

Despite their predilection for à la carte religiosity, American members of Amma's global following consistently voice a perceived need to work towards embodying Amma's main spiritual teaching derived from the Hindu notion of Brahman. Upholding the idea of omnipresent divinity on which this notion is predicated, Amma espouses that one ought to reduce his or her karmic burden not through disinterested actions that he or she does in the context of withdrawal from worldly life but rather through disinterested – or, even more specifically, selfless - actions that he or she does in the context of ongoing, active engagement with the world and its human and non-human inhabitants. In other words, Amma espouses that one ought to approach all of his or her interactions as opportunities to perform seva (selfless service).²⁵ Given all beings' essential non-duality, such is - more than any other spiritual practice - appropriate worship of the divine. I describe Amma's main spiritual teaching in greater detail while discussing its relevance to American devotees' seva translations and practices in Chapter Three.

Demonstrating her socialization into this teaching, Priya stated in my 2008 interview with her that “anything in life can be seva, any good action, any selfless action.”²⁶ Given her declaration to this effect, I expected Priya to go on to describe her seva practices in varied terms. However, in my 2008 interview with her, she described her seva practices narrowly. While doing so, she implied that some seva practices are superior to others, due to the types of actions that they involve and/or the types of individuals whom they benefit. “I like to serve food,” Priya stated. “That's one of the most popular sevas! ... When you're helping someone, ... I think that gives the most joy, not like when you're just stuffing envelopes. That's not as satisfying ... as actually giving food to the poor.”²⁷ Interestingly, in an interview that I conducted with Priya in 2016 at Amma's M.A. Center Chicago, she referred to the types of actions that her seva practices

involved as well as the types of individuals whom her seva practices benefited in more varied terms. As a result, her comments reflected greater calibration to Amma's main spiritual teaching that one ought to approach all of his or her interactions as opportunities to perform seva.

I don't really think about seva that much. You know, there's so much talk about seva, and sometimes I see egos getting involved. People say they stay up at night to do this seva, or they worked hard on that seva, and so-and-so is lazy and not doing seva ... I feel like seva, it's not an action. It's more of an attitude. It's about loving and being of service to others, even in little ways, like by offering a smile ... So, my motto is to try and remember god not by doing this and that seva but by being as helpful as I can wherever, whenever, and for [whom]ever I can ... It's not about deeds. That's not what god made me for.²⁸

I now turn to providing an overview of Weber's (1978) theory of charisma. I then review works from the anthropology of religion literature that focus on charisma as a theoretical and ethnographic framework for examining the appeal of Indian gurus.

LITERATURE REVIEW: CHARISMA

Drawing on the epistles of Saint Paul, Rudolph Sohm (1901) introduced to social thought the concept of charisma. As he argues, *charismata*, or "gifts of grace," are spiritual facts (Sohm 1901, 32). They are evidence of an individual's proximity to the divine and, as such, reason enough to substantiate his or her rule (Lindholm 2013; Smith 1998; Sohm 1901). Sharing in bourgeoisie frustrations over German society's then "gathering storm of democratic socialism," Sohm (in Smith 1998, 43) encouraged Reformation-inspired re-establishment of confidence in the Holy Spirit, for the express purpose of marking certain individuals deserving of obedience; "The Church has a God-given organization thanks to the distribution of *charismata*. [In] this Christian community there is no abstract equality. There is no atomizing perception that, contrary to the truth, individuals in this community are all alike and [have] the same rights. Here

we have . . . a God-willed superiority and subordination.”²⁹ It follows from this that, for Sohm (1901), charisma is given and irrefutable.

Due in large part to having borrowed vocabulary from Sohm (1901), Weber (1978) sustained longtime misrepresentation in the social sciences as sympathetic to his predecessor’s characterization of charisma; hence, Downton’s (1973, 210) statement that “the charismatic leader’s legitimacy to act is not derived from the follower’s consent, not from custom or law, but from a transcendental realm” (Smith 1998). Implicit in this and other similar claims advanced by critics and defenders of Weber (1978) alike is the assumption that he too considered charisma a spiritual fact (Cavalli 1986; Lepsius 1986; Lukács 1980; Merquior 1987; Moscovici 1993; Willner 1984). However, this assumption contradicts his theory of charisma as put forth in *Economy and Society: An Outline of Interpretive Sociology* (Weber 1978).³⁰ Therein, Weber (1978) inverts Sohm’s (1901) characterization of the notion to highlight it as neither given nor irrefutable.

Weber (1978, 1112) defines charisma as “gifts of body and mind,” attributes “by virtue of which [an individual] is set apart from ordinary men” (1968, 48). Typically, although not necessarily at times of distress, the masses recognize these traits in society’s “‘natural’ leaders” (Weber 1978, 1111). Conferral of charisma transpires as a result. Per Weber (1978), charisma is therefore neither given nor irrefutable but instead a product of reciprocal relationships that the charismatic leader and his or her followers perform.

It is recognition on the part of those subject to authority which is decisive for the validity of charisma. This recognition is freely given and guaranteed by what is held to be a proof, originally always a miracle, and consists in devotion to the corresponding revelation, hero worship, or absolute trust in the leader. But where charisma is genuine, it is not this which is the basis of the claim to legitimacy. This basis lies rather in the conception that it is the duty of those subject to charismatic authority to recognize its genuineness and to act accordingly. Psychologically this recognition is a matter of

complete personal devotion to the possessor of the quality, arising out of enthusiasm, or of despair and hope. [Weber 1978, 242]

Charismatic Indian Gurus

Pervasive in the anthropology of religion literature are works by qualitative social scientists whom catalog attributes that they argue are demonstrative of specific Indian gurus' charisma. I add here that these social scientists, in exploring charisma primarily as the extraordinary capacity to transcend worldly categories like gender and ethnicity, lay critical groundwork for my claim that American devotees attribute to Amma the extraordinary capacity to transform people. Notable among the social scientists whom argue that Indian gurus' charisma can - and, at times, does - manifest as the capacity to transcend gender is Lisa Hallstrom (1999; 2004). Via her ethnographic portrait of Anandamayi Ma, she details how this Hardiwar-based godperson reflects in her language and behavior the idea of "the genderless of the Absolute" (Gold 1988; Hallstrom 2004, 109).

Interestingly, American devotees recognize Amma as genderless. In regarding her as transcendent and absolute divinity itself, they understand her as not of and therefore beyond the world and the categories that regulate life in it. Hence, they uphold that Amma neither sees gender in herself nor recognizes it in her followers; "For those who have realized God, there is no difference between male and female" (M.A. Mission 2002). Despite this, Amma oftentimes suspends obfuscation of gender differences, for drawing attention to gender inequality. She reconciles her belief in sameness with the attention that she pays to difference by arguing that power imbalances between men and women are social constructs that must be eliminated for actualizing the gender equality that is divinely ordained (Lucia 2014).

According to social scientists writing on the topic, oftentimes manifesting alongside charismatic Indian gurus' extraordinary capacity to transcend gender is their equally extraordinary capacity to transcend ethnicity. Daniel Gold (2005) identifies cases of this among *nirguna* (formless) gurus. Based on ethnographic research that he conducted in North India in the late 1960s-1970s, he argues that by making limited use of Indian cultural markings, these gurus de-ethnicize Hinduism and remake it as a kind of ecumenical universalism that is open and relevant to all (Gold 2005). Tulasi Srinivas (2010) writes that de-ethnicized Hinduism is prominent in Sathya Sai Baba's global following.³¹ According to her, "strategic ambiguity" fuels this internationally popular Indian guru's appeal in India and the United States; predicated on a "matrix of possible meanings," strategic ambiguity enables "[Sathya] Sai [Baba] ... to draw in devotees, of various cultures and nationalities, whose lives and stories all enrich the matrix, iteratively" (Srinivas 2010, 329). Meena Khandelwal (2012) locates similar cases of charisma manifesting as transcendence of ethnicity among gurus in Rishikesh, India. Here, gurus espouse Neo-Vedanta, a type of Hindu cosmology positing "that enlightenment is the realization that the individual soul and the Absolute are one and the same, and that ultimately all distinctions are illusory" (Khandelwal 2012, 209).³² These include social distinctions as well as "sensory distinctions like that between hot and cold" (Khandelwal 2012, 209).³³

Warrier (2000; 2005; 2006) made a related discovery upon conducting ethnographic research among Indian members of Amma's global following. Although Amma espouses Neo-Vedantic ideas of sameness, she does not prohibit Indian members of her global following from engaging in worldly activities that are productive of difference. These include activities related to modern consumerism. As Warrier (2006, 193) clarifies, rather than prohibit Indian members of her global following from participating in such activities, she asks that they forgo imbalanced

preoccupation with their difference-producing aspects; “loss of perspective, and the resulting imbalance, is for [Amma] the cause of much of the sorrow ... In striving to alleviate modern humanity’s ... sorrow, she seeks to restore the realm of the heart in a world of ‘dry minds’, and to reinfuse the world with love.”

But, Amma does not – as Warriar (2003b; 2005; 2006) suggests – merely ask (Indian) devotees to forgo imbalanced preoccupation with such activities’ difference-producing aspects. I say this, as Amma herself is a catalyst for productions of – for example, class-based – differences from which she asks devotees to remain disinterested. This is especially true among American renunciate devotees, due to expectations that Amma places on such individuals with respect to their possession of material goods. I elaborate; while Amma expects Indian renunciate devotees to forsake all possessions save a few basic items, she does not expect American renunciate devotees to do the same.³⁴ This is because she requires members of the latter group to finance a portion of their lives at the M.A. Centers where they reside. These individuals employ a blend of strategies to render this a possibility. Examples of such strategies include relying on family members to contribute funds as well as taking regular, usually annual, one- to three-month-long leaves from the M.A. Centers where they reside, for moving back in with family members and working part-time jobs. When I asked Karthika in an informal conversation that I had with her in 2009 at Amma’s M.A. Math to reconcile this reality with the conventional trappings of asceticism, she told me, “It’s harder for Americans to hand over their money than it is for Indians. Indians aren’t as attached to their money.” Originally from Madison, Wisconsin, Karthika relocated to this facility just prior to renouncing in 2003. As I learned while conducting dissertation research, American devotees who pursue renunciation tend to relocate to Amma’s M.A. Math after requesting and receiving her permission to renounce.³⁵ In Karthika’s mind, the

act of an American renunciate handing over his or her money is an act of asceticism, even though it necessitates prior ownership of that money. I return to addressing this distinction in Chapter Six when discussing the common American devotee perception that, even more than the conventional trappings of asceticism, a spiritual seeker's seva practices are better indication of his or her progression towards "the goal" of embodying the spiritual truth that all are essentially one.³⁶

Reimagining Charisma as "Uncontainability" for the "Hyper-Guru" Context

To move this part of the anthropology of religion literature beyond portraits of individual Indian gurus' charisma, Jacob Copeman and Aya Ikegame (2012a; 2012b) offer "uncontainability" as the attribute that is demonstrative of all "hyper-gurus'" charisma. Per them, "hyper-gurus" are publicly visible, globalizing gurus who tend to enjoy godperson status (Copeman and Ikegame 2012a Ibid 2012b; Gold 1988). Amma is an example of a "hyper-guru" (Copeman and Ikegame 2012a; Ibid 2012b). As beings who are not of the world, they are unrestrained by its regulations. Hence, they seemingly without effort cross into and steer a vast array of social arenas. These include the social arenas of "religion, politics, economy, 'local' culture, [and] 'global' culture" (Copeman and Ikegame 2012a, 324). In this way, "hyper-gurus" are akin to Marcel Mauss' (1990) "total social phenomenon" concept (Copeman and Ikegame 2012a; 2012b).

While "uncontainability" might be helpful for reimagining Weber's (1978) conceptualization of charisma for the "hyper-guru" context, it leaves largely unexplored the process whereby the "hyper-guru" and members of his or her global following must, as Weber (1978) insists, collaborate to co-produce such a figure's extraordinariness (Copeman and

Ikegame 2012a; Ibid 2012b). To this point, Lucia (2014, 245) argues that it would behoove social scientists to address the processes whereby Indian gurus' charisma gets produced; "By drawing the field toward the guru's 'uncontainability' as a 'floating signifier' with 'no distinct meaning,' might we not obfuscate the very human, social, and constructed nature of ... religious authority that gurus produce and wield in the material world?" As I argue, conceptualization of all "hyper-gurus'" charisma as "uncontainability" also leaves little room for exploration of the very attributes that spiritual seekers recognize as exceptional enough to permit such figures entry into the social spaces that they ultimately steer (Copeman and Ikegame 2012a; Ibid 2012b; Gold 1988; Srinivas 2010).

Building on Weber (1978), Charles Lindholm (2002) argues that Western social science has long had a difficult time conceptualizing charisma. This is because it assumes that human beings are necessarily rational creatures who use their rationality to maximize their own interests over those of others. Indeed, charisma - or that which "repudiates the past and overturns all rational organization principles: spiritual calling, not technical training, is what is required of members; salaries and systematic organization are despised; hierarchy is fluid and is determined by the leader's intuition" - seems at odds with such an assumption about the nature of humanity and its motivations (Lindholm 2002, 358). Among American members of her global following, though, Amma's charisma is very much about devotees' own interests. Hence, in an interview that I conducted with Karthika in 2008 at Amma's M.A. Math, she stated, "Amma is a mirror."³⁷ Among American members of Amma's global following, this statement is meant to invoke the commonly held belief that Amma exposes and responds to the needs of others (vs. her own). When I interviewed Karthika in 2014 at Amma's M.A. Center Chicago, she repeated the saying. Perhaps sensing my desire for elaboration, Karthika added, "[Amma] is what people need when

they need it.”³⁸ I argue that, for American members of Amma’s global following, “it” is transformation.

DISSERTATION OUTLINE

I break the main body of this dissertation into seven chapters. In Chapter Two, I address the experiences that led me to examine the extraordinary capacity to transform people that American devotees attribute to Amma and analyze the process whereby they and she co-produce her charisma. I then detail my field sites, timeline, and ethnographic research methods. Following a discussion in which I situate my dissertation research in a broader context of friendship, I highlight “friendship as method” as the concept that guided my interactions in the field (Tillmann-Healy 2003).

In Chapter Three, I answer the following background questions: who is Amma; how do American devotees understand her; how do they understand her type of spirituality; and what is the role of *seva* in her type of spirituality? As I show, American devotees understand Amma as a *purna avatar* of *Devi* in her manifestation as the Hindu pantheon’s Divine Mother goddess. In understanding her as transcendent and absolute divinity itself, they also understand her as more fully or perfectly divine than “holy [wo]men” and other godpersons (Gold 1988). As a result, they consider her a superior guru whom is uniquely equipped to mediate “divine grace, knowledge, and power” to them, her devoted disciples (Gold 1988, 17). I then provide an overview of the *bhakti* (devotionalist) tradition of Hindu faith. I also provide an overview of *seva* as a Hindu concept (e.g. to elderly persons, gurus, and deities). As I demonstrate, American devotees use the *bhakti* tradition of Hindu faith as a framework for making sense of *seva* as

worship not only of omnipresent divinity but of Amma whom they understand as a personification thereof. In this way, they consider seva the ultimate devotional act.

In Chapter Four, I answer two questions. First, what does the American Devotee Life Cycle (ADLC) look like? And, second, how do the seva translations and practices of American devotees change over the course of this life cycle? I then introduce the series of M.A. Mission experiences that I found to represent the stages of the ADLC. I term these the “admirer,” “initiate,” “ashramite,” and “renunciate” stages. In Chapter Four, I answer these questions with respect to the admirer stage; in Chapter Five, with respect to the initiate stage; and in Chapter Six, with respect to the ashramite and renunciate stages. As I show, American devotees in the admirer stage limit their seva translations and practices to acts of service that they perform on behalf of the “poorest of the poor” (Madigan 1998). They perform such practices on an occasional but nonetheless recurring basis and in the context of what they term “volunteer events” that representatives from overseeing organizations schedule weeks if not months in advance. This suggests that, rather than through the Hindu concept of seva that is central to Amma’s type of spirituality, Americans’ initial participation in her M.A. Mission oftentimes makes a back-door entry through the more familiar - and, as I stress, familiarly auditable - concepts of Christian charitable service and humanitarianism. American devotees in the initiate stage differently include in their seva translations and practices acts of service that they perform on behalf of other (affluent) devotees and Amma’s M.A. Mission. They also perform seva practices in a wider variety of contexts and in more of an ongoing manner than their counterparts in the admirer stage. Differently still, American devotees in the ashramite and renunciates stages include in their seva translations and practices acts of service that they perform on behalf of the environment. They perform seva practices in a wider variety of contexts and in more of an

ongoing manner than their counterparts in the initiate stage. As I argue this suggests, over the course of the ADLC, American devotees progressively embody the spiritual truth that all are essentially one.

In Chapter Seven, I detail the process whereby this happens. I do this while answering the following questions: what extraordinary capacity do American devotees attribute to Amma; what is the process whereby they and Amma co-produce this particular expression of her charisma; and what is the role of seva in this process? As I demonstrate, American devotees attribute to Amma the extraordinary capacity to transform people. By this, I mean the extraordinary capacity to encourage spiritual seekers not only to understand themselves and the world in which they live but also to act in that world according to what I term a “sevite habitus” informed by the spiritual truth that all are essentially one. According to American members of Amma’s global following, such is “god’s love,” which Amma makes manifest in them - by virtue of her necessarily transformative divine powers, or “grace” - in the form of a desire to perform seva practices on behalf of a wide variety of beneficiaries in a wide variety of contexts as well as in an ongoing manner.³⁹ This extraordinary capacity is Amma’s charisma and the reason for her appeal to Americans. The process whereby Amma’s charisma gets produced is collaborative. Motivated by proxemic desire, American devotees pursue opportunities to be near Amma (Srinivas 2010). These include opportunities to perform seva practices in her presence. Upon interpreting praising and scolding behaviors that Amma displays in reaction to their seva practices as guidance to do so, American devotees diversify these practices. They also perform these practices more frequently. As a result, American devotees perform the transforming personhoods that they attribute to Amma. In Chapter Eight, I provide a summary of my overall argument and offer suggestions for future research.

CH. 2: METHODS AND APPROACH

In this chapter, I review the fieldwork that I conducted to examine the extraordinary capacity to transform people that American devotees attribute to Amma and to analyze the process whereby they and she co-produce her charisma.

CHAPTER ORGANIZATION

I break this chapter into four sections. In section one, I discuss the experiences that led me to consider Amma's charisma a viable subject of anthropological inquiry. These include experiences that I had while conducting M.S. thesis and preliminary dissertation research. In section two, I detail my field sites and timeline. In section three, I detail my ethnographic research methods. Lastly, in section four, I address the life-long relationship that I share with Karthika. I then situate my dissertation research in a broader context of friendship. I include in this section a discussion of "friendship as method" as the concept that guided my interactions in the field (Tillmann-Healy 2003).

M.S. THESIS AND PRELIMINARY DISSERTATION RESEARCH

As George Marcus (1995) argues, the very nature of "modernity" as a context in which the local and global necessarily interact on a constant basis demands a shifting away single- to multi-sited ethnography. Given that it is "designed around chains, paths, threads, conjunctions, or juxtapositions of locations in which the ethnographer establishes some form of literal, physical presence, with an explicit, posited logic of association or connection among sites that in fact defines the argument of the ethnography," multi-sited ethnography literally puts the ethnographer in what Marcus (1995, 105) argues is a more appropriate position to analyze his or

her ethnographic subjects in the social network(s) where they construct and undergo their social lives.

Given the disparate nature of Amma's global following that I addressed in earlier, when I conducted M.S. thesis research into the seva translations and practices of American devotees between July 2008 – July 2009, I did so while following these individuals to various sites at which they practiced their faith. These sites included the residences of the "satsang coordinators" of Amma's Milwaukee and Glen Ellyn Satsang Groups in Grafton, Wisconsin, and Glen Ellyn, Illinois; the Westin Lombard Yorktown Center in Lombard, Illinois (this was where Amma held her Summer 2008 and 2009 Chicago Public Satsang Programs; July 5-6, and July 4-5, respectively); a drug and alcohol recovery center in Milwaukee, Wisconsin (this was where members of Amma's Milwaukee Satsang Group performed seva practices by sharing home-cooked meals and conversations with individuals undergoing treatment for substance abuse); and Amma's M.A. Math in Amritapuri, India.⁴⁰ Ethnographic research methods that I used included participant observation and semi-structured interviews. I also collected M.A. Mission and third-party publications about Amma as well as her type of spirituality, her M.A. Mission, and her global following.

As a result of conducting M.S. thesis research, I learned that the seva translations and practices of American devotees are far from uniform. While American devotees who do not make at least one pilgrimage to Amma's M.A. Math tend to limit their seva translations and practices to acts of service that they perform on behalf of the "poorest of the poor," those who do tend to include in their seva translations and practices acts of service that they perform on behalf of a wider variety of beneficiaries (Madigan 1998). This suggested to me that, while the seva translations and practices of individuals in the former group reflect rootedness in Christian

charitable intentionalities, those of individuals in the latter group reflect socialization into the Hindu notions of bhakti and karma yoga (Duranti 1997). I introduced these notions earlier. I address their relevance to American devotees' understanding of Amma and her spiritual teachings in Chapter Three. These include her spiritual teachings on seva. Drawing on Arjun Appadurai's (1996) theory of "culture flows," I then went on to argue in my M.S. thesis that, as American devotees circulate among the various "nodes" that comprise Amma's M.A. Mission, so do their ideas about seva (Esche-Eiff 2009). These ideas frequently collide – for example, in the context of regular (usually monthly) meetings of satsang groups in the United States - to spark the emergence of seva translations and practices that reflect uniquely American syncretisms of Christian and Hindu concepts.

The more that I reflected on the data that I collected while conducting M.S. thesis research, the more that I became convinced of a pattern to be found in these collisions, that – perhaps over the course of a uniquely American devotee life cycle – American devotees become socialized not only into understanding themselves and the world in which they live but also into a desire to act in that world according to what I analyze in Chapter Seven as a "sevite habitus" informed by the spiritual truth that all are essentially one. As I mentioned earlier, "the spiritual truth that all are essentially one" refers in this context to the Hindu notion of Brahman. For American devotees, "Brahman" refers to absolute divinity, or - as they frequently defined the term when addressing it in informal conversation and interviews that I conducted with them - the eternal essence of the cosmos that is the "true self" of all. Amma derives her main spiritual teaching from this notion. Upholding the idea of omnipresent divinity on which it is predicated, she espouses that one ought to reduce his or her karmic burden not through disinterested actions that the he or she does in the context of withdrawal from worldly life but rather through

disinterested – or, even more specifically, selfless - actions that he or she does in the context of ongoing, active engagement with the world and its human and non-human inhabitants. In other words, Amma espouses that one ought to approach all of his or her interactions as opportunities to perform seva (selfless service). Given all beings' essential non-duality, such is - more than any other spiritual practice - appropriate worship of the divine.

Motivated to continue exploring the seva translations and practices of American devotees, I undertook intensive study of Malayalam through the American Institute of Indian Studies in Thiruvananthapuram, India, as a Foreign Language and Area Studies (FLAS) fellow; June – August, 2012 and 2013. Malayalam is the official language of Kerala. It is also Amma's first language. I add that, because Malayalam is Amma's first language, members of her global following consider it sacred. American devotees therefore take steps to learn Malayalam. While new American entrants into Amma's fold strive to learn a few words and/or phrases (for making brief remarks to Amma in the context of receiving her darshan), those who have been with her for longer aim to reach conversational proficiency (for conversing with Amma in the context of receiving her darshan and other one-on-one conversations). To illustrate, in 2020, Karthika was hospitalized at Amma's Amrita Institute of Medical Sciences (AIMS) in Kochi, India, as a result of contracting COVID-19. In an informal conversation that I had with her in 2021, she shared with me that Amma called her every day she was at AIMS. "I was so happy to talk with her," exclaimed Karthika! "I felt terrible, but talking with Amma made me feel so much better!" Interestingly, I learned that American devotees tend to code-switch from English into Malayalam from time to time when among each other. They do this most often when discussing topics related to spirituality. These include topics related to seva.

Shortly after arriving in Thiruvananthapuram, India, on June 10, 2013, to begin my study of Malayalam, I emailed several American devotees with whom I had maintained relationships after concluding M.S. thesis research, for confirming that they were still residing at Amma's M.A. Math. Eager to catch up with these informants turned friends in-person while at the same time explore if - perhaps over the course of a uniquely American devotee life cycle – American devotees become socialized not only into understanding themselves and the world in which they live but also into a desire to act in that world according to a “sevite habitus” informed by the spiritual truth that all are essentially one, I traveled the sixty-two miles north to Amritapuri the following weekend.

Once through the gates of Amma's M.A. Math on June 15, 2013, Karthika greeted me. We strolled to the Western Café of this facility, purchased chai lattes from its espresso bar, and sat down at a nearby table to discuss how her life and the lives of our mutual friends at Amma's M.A. Math had changed since I was last there in 2009. As Karthika shared, many of these individuals had continued to live householder lives at Amma's M.A. Math. Others had continued to live householder lives at that facility but, after getting married and/or having children, were discovering what it meant to do so in the context of being spouses and/or parents. Others like herself had remained renunciates. Karthika also discussed her and our mutual friends' seva practices. Interestingly, they included acts of service that she and our mutual friends performed on behalf of a wider variety of beneficiaries in a wider variety of contexts and in more of an ongoing manner (when compared with the seva practices that she and they had performed in 2009). I detail the then new seva practices of these individuals when discussing the ashramite and renunciate stages of the American Devotee Life Cycle (ADLC) in Chapter Six.

Beyond chatting informally with Karthika and other American devotees about their seva practices in India, I participated in daily ashram life at Amma’s M.A. Math. I did this over the course of four of the remaining six weekends of my 2013 FLAS fellowship that extended from June-August of that year. While participating in daily ashram life, I woke up most days at 4:30AM to partake in *archana* (ritual recitation of the devotional work that lists the 1,000 names of Devi in her manifestation as the Hindu pantheon’s Divine Mother goddess, also called the “Sri Lalita Sahasranama”) with primarily monastic but also householder devotees. Also on most days, I performed seva practices in the form of “running” breakfast orders for two hours in the Western Café of Amma’s M.A. Math, attended a late-morning *satsang* (derived from the Sanskrit word “sat,” “satsang” means “company of the good;” American members of Amma's global following use this term to refer to a spiritual lecture that Amma or one of her senior disciples gives; they also use it to refer to groups of householder devotees whom meet, usually at fellow devotees’ homes, on a weekly or monthly basis to engage in spiritual activities), watched Amma perform her version of the darshan ritual, and participated in an evening bhajan-singing session. Sporadically, I attended several “ashram orientation” sessions. I describe these in Chapter Four. Although meant for first-time visitors to Amma’s M.A. Math, I attended several sessions of “ashram orientation” to further my understanding of the narratives via which American entrants into Amma’s fold hear about her.

Out of my conversation with Karthika on June 15, 2013, emerged two hypotheses. First, if I were to conduct it, additional research into the seva translations and practices of American devotees would likely facilitate discovery of the stages of a uniquely American devotee life cycle. Second, such research would likely also facilitate a rare, longitudinal look at several

individual devotees' progressions through this life cycle - their (gradually changing) seva translations and practices, included.

What is the process whereby American devotees' seva translations and practices change over the course of a uniquely American devotee life cycle? What do these seva translations and practices do for American devotees; for Amma? These were the questions that I had circulating in my mind after concluding preliminary dissertation research. Upon conducting dissertation research and, as part of doing so, being afforded additional glimpses into the seva translations and practices of American devotees – the interactions that they had with Amma while performing such practices, included – I reframed these questions to set the following goal for myself: to examine the nature of Amma's appeal to Americans by using Weber's theory of charisma to answer three questions. First, what extraordinary capacity do American devotees attribute to Amma? Second, what is the process whereby they and she co-produce this particular expression of her charisma? And, third, what is the role of seva in this process?

FIELD SITES

I conducted dissertation research among American members of Amma's global following between June 2015 – July 2016.⁴¹ My primary field site was Amma's M.A. Center Chicago in Elburn, Illinois. I selected this facility as my primary field site for two reasons. First, as I learned over the course of conducting M.S. thesis research, American devotees commonly perform seva practices at her M.A. Centers in the United States. Second, among American devotees, her M.A. Center Chicago is particularly popular as a site at which to perform seva practices. According to its website, this facility offers to devotees and admirers a variety of opportunities to perform seva

practices (M.A. Center Chicago ND). By “admirers,” I mean individuals whom admire Amma but are not (yet) devotees.

In addition to Amma’s M.A. Center Chicago, I followed American devotees to the following sites at which they practiced their faith: Amma’s M.A. Center in Castro Valley, California (this was where Amma held her Fall 2015 Northern California Public Satsang Program and Retreat; November 14-15 and November 16-18, respectively); the Jacob K. Javits Convention Center in New York, New York (this was where Amma held her Summer 2015 New York Public Satsang Program; July 12-14); and a homeless shelter in Aurora, Illinois (this was where devotees living at Amma’s M.A. Center Chicago as well as devotees and, from time to time, admirers from the Chicago metropolitan area performed seva practices by sharing home-cooked meals with individuals in need of safe shelter). In Amma’s M.A. Mission, a retreat is similar to a public satsang program but more intimate due to lesser attendance stemming from barriers to access like registration fees and hotel room availability.⁴² According to American devotees, a welcomed benefit of lesser attendance is greater access to Amma, for example, in the form of one-on-one dialogue in “Q&A sessions.” In Amma’s M.A. Mission, a “Q&A session” is an event during which she answers spirituality-related questions from an audience. Amma does this in the context of retreats and on Monday, Tuesdays, and Fridays at her M.A. Math. Since the M.A. Mission’s establishment of it in 2012, Amma’s Chicago Public Satsang Programs have been held at her M.A. Center Chicago. My fieldwork at this site overlapped with and included two such programs; July 1-3, 2015, and June 27-29, 2016 (Figure 1.2).

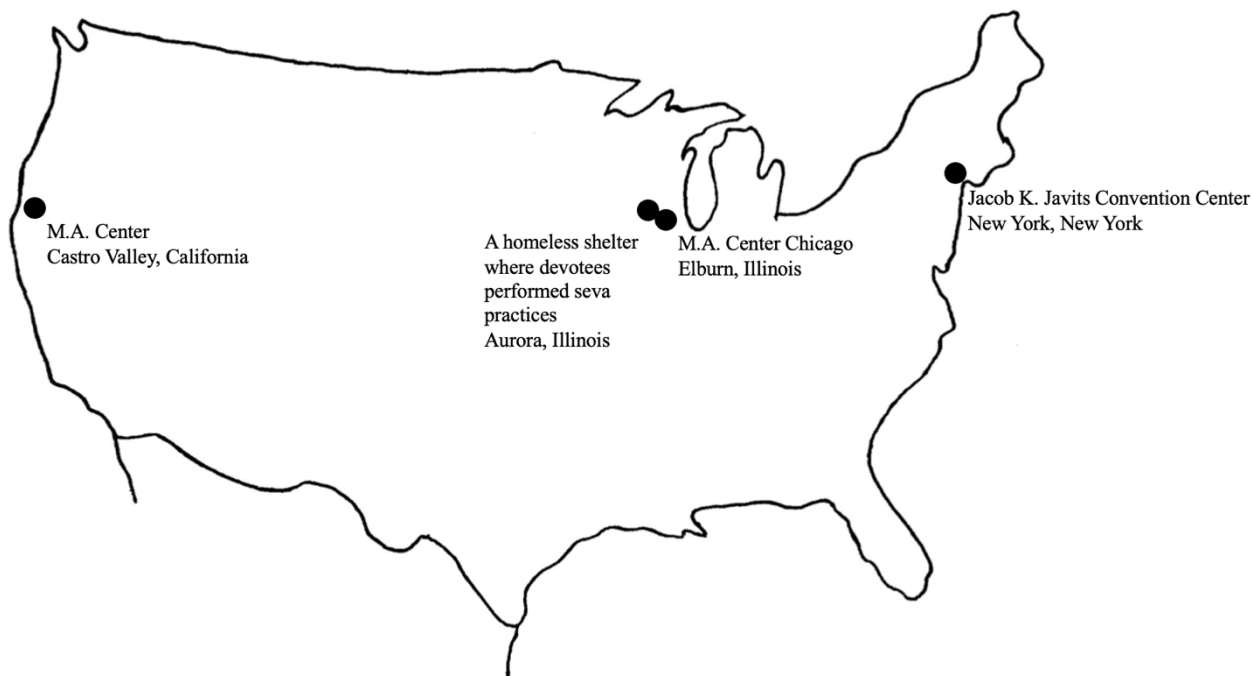


Figure 2.1: Dissertation research field sites in Aurora, Illinois (a homeless shelter where devotees living at Amma's M.A. Center Chicago as well as devotees and, from time to time, admirers from the Chicago metropolitan area perform seva practices); Castro Valley, California (M.A. Center); Elburn, Illinois (M.A. Center Chicago); and New York, New York (Jacob K Javits Convention Center, site of Amma's Summer 2015 Public Satsang Program).

ETHNOGRAPHIC RESEARCH METHODS

For delineating points of convergence and divergence among the ways individuals in different stage of the ADLC translate seva, I used the ethnographic research methods of participant observation and discursive analysis of group discussions on the topic. For the same reason, I also analyzed the contents of the following M.A. Mission publications to which American members of Amma's global following submit stories about their seva practices: *Matruvani*, which is a monthly M.A. Mission periodical that I learned American devotees in the ashramite and renunciate stages of the ADLC commonly read; *Immortal Bliss*, which is a quarterly M.A. Mission periodical that I learned American devotees in the initiate, ashramite, and renunciate stages of the ADLC commonly read; and *Embracing the World*, which is an

annual M.A. Mission periodical that I learned individuals in all stages of the ADLC commonly read.

To extend my dissertation research beyond the realm of translation and into that of practice, I conducted participant observation at the sites to which I followed American devotees. At the Jacob K. Javits Convention Center, participant observation entailed my involvement in various aspects of the M.A. Mission public satsang program experience. I detail my experiences at Amma's Summer 2015 New York Public Satsang program at the Jacob K. Javits Convention Center in Chapter Four. At Amma's M.A. Center and M.A. Center Chicago, it entailed my involvement in various aspects of the M.A. Mission "Seva Saturday," public satsang program, and retreat experiences. In Amma's M.A. Mission, "Seva Saturdays" are days on which individuals (these include devotees as well as admirers) come together to perform seva as a group. In 2014-2016, "Seva Saturdays" took place every weekend at most of Amma's eleven M.A. Centers in the United States. At Amma's M.A. Center Chicago, my typical morning seva on Seva Saturdays was to prepare food for my fellow sevites. My typical afternoon seva on Seva Saturdays was to help lead the ashram's children in their Amrita Bala Kendra (ABK) studies.⁴³ ABK is the M.A. Mission's religious curriculum for devotees' children aged four to twelve. On the first Seva Saturday of every month, I helped to prepare, deliver, and distribute food at a homeless shelter in Aurora, Illinois. I detail my experiences in each of these M.A. Mission contexts in Chapters Four through Seven.

For situating American devotees' seva translations and practices in the ADLC, I conducted career trajectory interviews. All interviewees were American. Five were admirers. The remaining sixteen were householder and renunciate devotees. I recruited each of these individuals in-person at sites where they practiced their admiration of Amma (refers to admirers)

or faith (refers to devotees). I did this via snowball sampling that originated with five members of a family of six whom had long been (and still are) close friends of mine. In 2015, this family included a brahmacharini whom had relocated to Amma's M.A. Math, four householder devotees whom had relocated to Amma's M.A. Center Chicago, and one householder devotee whom was born at the latter of these two facilities. Topics that I addressed in career trajectory interviews included individuals' spiritual beliefs before and after choosing discipleship to Amma. They also included individuals' M.A. Mission experiences, seva translations, seva practices, and interactions with Amma (emphasis on interactions in which Amma praised them for their "good" and/or scolded them for their "bad" seva practices) over the course of discipleship to her. When conducted with individuals whom I had interviewed as part of conducting M.S. thesis research, career trajectory interviews proved especially valuable as a window into the ADLC. It illuminated its stages as well as the seva translations and practices that they imply. I add that I chose to recruit interviewees via snowball sampling for the following reasons: to access the interactional quality of emergent cultural categories (that of seva, included), to provide a snapshot of the social network(s) in which American devotees construct and undergo their M.A. Mission social lives, and to identify in Amma's widely dispersed American following additional relevant interviewees.

All individuals with whom I conducted career trajectory interviews spoke English as their first language. As a result, I conducted career trajectory interviews primarily in English. I say "primarily," as several of the renunciate devotees with whom I conducted career trajectory interviews sometimes code-switched into Malayalam. When interviewees code-switched, I did, as well. I did this not only to help them feel more at ease when speaking with me about personal topics like spirituality and guru choice but also to participate in conversations that – in

resembling those that American devotees have among themselves – I supposed would expose additional layers of meaning to explore.

While not in the context of a formal interview, I had two conversations with Amma. Our conversations were in Malayalam and occurred in the context of her version of the darshan ritual that she performed during her Summer 2014 Chicago Public Satsang Program at her M.A. Center Chicago and her Summer 2015 New York Public Satsang Program at the Jacob K. Javits Convention Center. While visiting a friend turned informant, I attended one day of Amma’s Summer 2014 Chicago Public Satsang Program prior to beginning dissertation research (June 25, 2014). I describe my conversations with Amma in Chapters Four and Five.

In addition to discursive analysis, participant observation, and career trajectory interviews, I conducted analysis of diagnostic events. These included events during which Amma praised American devotees for their “good” and scolded American devotees for their “bad” seva practices. They also included events during which American devotees who did not witness but heard or read about and then debated with other American devotees the spiritual lesson(s) to be found in Amma’s behaviors. I include examples of both types of events in Chapter Seven.

In advance of conducting dissertation research, I contacted Amma’s Legal Counsel in the United States. I found his contact information on a contract that I signed when at Amma’s M.A. Math in 2008. This contract authorized my M.S. thesis research. Per the instructions of Amma’s Legal Counsel, I then emailed a brahmachari at the M.A. Math. As Amma’s Legal Counsel stated in his reply to my initial message, “the decision makers ... reside at [the] M.A. Math in India.” The brahmachari whom he suggested that I reach out to would “know the right channels to pursue.” One month later on January 5, 2015, I received a phone call from Karthika. She

relayed the M.A. Math's approval of my plans to conduct dissertation research among American members of Amma's global following in the United States. Later that same day, I emailed the aforementioned brahmachari, thanking him for the approval. I copied Amma's Legal Counsel in the United States on that email.

APPROACH

With the aim of producing "situated knowledge," ethnography is not only a critical theoretical or a quotidian ethical but also an improvisational practice (Cerwonka and Malkki 2007; Haraway 1991). In defense of this notion, Allaine Cerwonka and Liisa Malkki (2007) argue that the success of ethnography is necessarily contingent on the ethnographer's ability to remain flexible, to allow the research context to inform how, when, and among whom he or she does research, for achieving empirical precision. If this is true, then ethnography is also contingent on the ethnographer's capacity to negotiate relationships. Included in his or her job description are, after all, a number of responsibilities that require amenable interpersonal exchanges. These include but are not limited to the responsibilities of conducting ethnographic methods like participant observation and interviews.

But, not all exchanges in the field are equal, and neither are their resulting relationships. For some, flowing out of relationship negotiation is establishment of ethnographer and informant as "friendly cultural strangers." By this, James Deegan (1995) means adherents to that social type, which aims to produce general social norms like politeness, naiveté, and goodwill for the benefit of everyone involved. For others, more intimate relationships result. This is understandable not only because friendship and fieldwork, in being about doing long periods of life together, are similar endeavors but also because all social ties have in them the inherent

capacity to progress through stages of role-limited interaction to stabilization (Rawlins 1992). In Martin Buber's (1988) terms, relationships might progress "from 'seeming' to 'being,' from I-it (impersonal and instrumental), to I-You (more personal yet role bound), to moments of I-Thou, where we are truly present, meeting one another in our full humanity" (Tillmann-Healy 2003, 732). When doing research, ethnographers and informants therefore might find themselves becoming more than "friendly cultural strangers" to each other.⁴⁴ They might find themselves becoming friends. This is what happened to me while conducting dissertation research to examine the nature of Amma's attractiveness to Americans.

To end my characterization of friendship in the field with a statement of it having been a byproduct of research would nevertheless be disingenuous. This is because, while my dissertation research resulted in new social bonds, it emerged out of a desire to grow my understanding of a life-long friend's devotion to Amma. Especially given the nature of my relationship with this friend turned informant it seemed, if not also crucial for keeping methods calibrated to the research context, at the very least fitting to use what Lisa Tillmann-Healy (2003) calls "friendship as method" as a guide for conducting my dissertation research.

I add that I was careful to maintain transparency with all individuals among whom I conducted dissertation research. Not only as a researcher but also as a friend to some and a potential friend to others, I wanted to be honest. Hence, prior to conducting any career trajectory interview, I made a point to share that – while I did request and receive a mantra from Amma and therefore occupy a social place as a member of her global following - I do not ascribe other-worldly characteristics to her. Rather than to make a show of devotion to Amma, I wanted to examine the nature of her attractiveness to Americans to satisfy a curiosity that I have had about charismatic Indian gurus and their place in the contemporary American religious landscape ever

since a life-long and, indeed, dear friend chose to devote her life to a such a figure on the other side of the world. I discuss my reasons for and experience undergoing Amma's version of *mantra diksha* (ritual whereby a guru bestows a mantra onto a spiritual seeker, thereby solidifying the guru-devotee relationship) in Chapter Five.

Spiritual seekers commonly reacted to my lack of confidence in Amma's divinity by relaying stories of other researchers having pursued Amma as a subject of social science inquiry, only to be overcome by her necessarily transformative divine powers - or "grace," as they commonly referred to them - and trade their roles as researchers for those of disciples. I discuss American devotees' conception of Amma as a *purna avatar*, meaning a "full or perfect" incarnation, of Devi in her manifestation as the Hindu pantheon's Divine Mother goddess, i.e. as not merely an aspect of but rather transcendent and absolute divinity itself, as the basis for their steadfast confidence in all onlookers' inevitable devotion to her in Chapter Three (Puri 1988, 197).

Given their steadfast confidence in all onlookers' inevitable devotion to Amma, it did not surprise me that an American devotee asked me if I felt "any different" after emerging from *mantra diksha* with a rose petal and a small folder slip of paper. In Amma's M.A. Mission, these are cues of a spiritual seeker having been successful in his or her pursuit of a *mantra* (ritual formulation of truth-expressing sounds) from Amma. "I do feel different. I feel happier, a bit more loved! But, I don't think that's what this devotee is hoping to hear," I thought. When I did not answer right away, another devotee added, "We all have a bit of the Mother [*referring to Amma*] in us." They agreed that Amma likely determined I was nearly but not yet ready to receive her "grace."

Friendship as Method

What is friendship as method? What does it imply? Building on distinctions that Mikhail Bakhtin (1986; 1990) draws between dialogue and monologue, friendship as method aims to disrupt the researcher-informant separation that has long characterized traditional (positivist) research. It does this for constructing and maintaining dialogical vs. monological relationships and for nurturing an ethic of care that welcomes emotion, expressiveness, and empathy. As advocates of the approach argue, there is no straightforward connection to be made between friendship and depth of data. Nevertheless, there are some research contexts in which heightened emotional involvement and reflexivity provides richer resources to the researcher than they pose methodological problems to avoid (Owton and Allen-Collinson 2014). To this point, advocates of similar approaches attest that the practice of “getting personal” with informants not only cultivates mutually respectful relationships but also fosters intersubjectivity (Geertz 1974; McLean and Leibing 2011; Van der Geest 2007). Indeed, despite its limitations as a research tool, intersubjectivity makes experience-near anthropology possible and is “the best we have” (Van der Geest et al 2012, 10).

On a tactical level, friendship as method hardly calls for discontinuance of traditional qualitative research methods like the systematic taking of fieldnotes, participant observation, and interviews. Rather, it recommends changes in how the researcher engages these methods. Specifically, it asks the researcher to recalibrate his or her methods to contexts of friendship, all the while keeping in mind that contexts of friendship imply different expectations to be met across cultural boundaries. Tillmann-Healy (2003) offers three guidelines to follow for accomplishing this. First, allow “research [to progress] at the natural pace of friendship” (Tillmann-Healy 2003, 734). By this, she means over the course of a minimum one-year

commitment to the field. Second, situate research “in the natural contexts of friendship” (Tillmann-Healy 2003, 735). Tillmann-Healy (2003) translates this to means in the places and with the people informants carry out their social lives. Lastly, conduct research “with an ethic of friendship, a stance of hope, caring, justice, even love” (Tillmann-Healy 2003, 735). She provides the following behaviors as examples of this: “We set aside a day of writing to help someone move [or] our reading pile when someone drops by or calls ‘just to talk.’ When asked, we keep secrets, even if they would add compelling twists to our research report ... We never ask more of participants than we are willing to give. Friendship as method demands radical reciprocity, a move from studying ‘them’ to studying ‘us’” (Tillmann-Healy 2003, 735). For Tillmann-Healy (2003), this is the most critical of the guidelines to follow. To ignore it would be to devalue friendship as method, an approach that is ultimately about investment in individuals’ lives, to “a program or guise strategically aimed at gaining further access” (Tillmann-Healy 2003, 735).

I add to Tillmann-Healy’s (2003) list two additional guidelines. While neither is a novel idea, I find them appropriate to include in a discussion about friendship as method. First, extend an “ethic of friendship, a stance of hope, caring, justice, even love” (Tillmann-Healy 2003, 735) beyond the doing of research to the drafting of its conclusions and beyond. This means choosing language that describes fieldwork accurately and uplifts informants. Second, despite anthropology’s long history of socializing ethnographers into eschewing focus on their own subjectivities – indeed, in the discipline, the practice of focusing on one’s own subjectivity has earned derogatory names like “‘navel-gazing,’ ‘narcissism,’ ‘self-absorption,’ ‘exhibitionism,’ and ‘self-voyeurism’” (Van der Geest et al 2012, 6) – give oneself permission to be not only

moved but also deeply changed (Davis 2008). After all, friendship changes people – researchers, included.

With all this said, it is despite and because of its rootedness in connections with people that friendship as method has weaknesses in additions to strengths. Its weaknesses fall into three categories: one that concerns the researcher-informant relationship, another that concerns the research project, and yet one more that concerns the researcher. Weaknesses that concern the researcher-informant relationship include its limited capacity to democratize ethnography. Even though friendship as method aims disrupt the researcher-informant separation that has long characterized traditional (positivist) research by acknowledging informants as co-producers of research, it stops short of negating power imbalances like those that concern gender, age, ethnicity, and class (Owton and Allen-Collinson 2014). Ethnographers who use friendship as method to guide their research should therefore be careful not to let their awareness of power imbalances waver and continue to make room for them in their work.

Prominent among the weaknesses that concern the research project are conflicting obligations, for example, when informants tell researchers secrets. McCarthy Brown (2001, 11) adds that it can become difficult for the researcher, when straddling the roles of researcher and friend, to know when he or she is losing sight of “the important distinction between [a subject’s] interaction with the life of [an informant] ... and [a subject’s] interaction with [the researcher’s] own and very different blend of experience, memory, dream, and fantasy.” This weakness implies a need for frequent data quality checks.

Lastly, chief among the weaknesses that concern the researcher is the emotionally taxing nature of straddling the roles of researcher and friend. I highlight two reasons for why this is the case. First, in calling for “radical reciprocity, a move from studying ‘them’ to studying ‘us’”

(Tillmann-Healy 2003, 735), friendship as method implies constant reflexivity. This proves emotionally demanding, even when done sporadically. Second, friendship as method makes the researcher more vulnerable to sadness, disappointment, and frustration, for example, when informants experience tough times or choose not to participate in an aspect of research. For each of these reasons, it implies a need for the researcher to extend an ethic of care to himself or herself. Dare I say that this suggests how disinterestedness might be a helpful strategy for managing close connections in the field?

How Fieldwork Changed Me and I the Field

Admittedly, it wasn't until after I started distancing myself from the field towards the end of my dissertation research that I began to entertain the idea of fieldwork changing me. As the emotionally demanding nature of friendship as method suggests can happen, its weightiest effects were on my mental health. Interestingly, this was not a negative response to what fieldwork left me without. Rather, it was a negative response to what fieldwork provided me with. I elaborate; when in the field, I felt different (happier) than I otherwise did. I acted differently (with a bit more softness towards others and myself). But, I didn't seek a reason as to why. One night, my husband asked a question that persuaded me to stop dismissing my emotional fluctuations and to think about them deeply; "You're always so bubbly when you come back from [Amma's M.A. Center Chicago]. And, then, you aren't. Are you ok?" His question was a valid one. The happiness that I felt in the field tended not to last more than a few days after leaving it. Why was this? Was this community affording me something that my life in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, had ceased to provide? After reading my fieldnotes and diary entries side-by-side, I became convinced that, at a time when I was no longer taking classes or teaching

in-person, it provided me the relationships that I desired. To this point, if the American devotee who asked me if I felt “any different” after the conclusion of my mantra diksha repeated her question today, I would answer, “Yes.” In conducting master’s thesis and then dissertation research, I rekindled (and strengthened) a relationship that I was devastated to think I had lost after my best friend left the United States to be with Amma. I gained new social bonds, new contexts in which to have thoughtful conversations about and reimagine my place in the world. I also gained a new social role. I am a different person with new expectations that I, in caring very much about those with whom I share these social bonds, want to meet. Indeed, Amma is far from without a role in my story of becoming who I am today.

But, it was not only the field that impacted me. I impacted the field, as well. For example, when carrying out the seva position of “Dinner with Amma – Line Monitor” during Amma’s Fall 2015 Northern California Retreat at her M.A. Center, I escorted an American devotee away from Amma. I did this after permitting her a length of time near Amma that, according to this devotee, was “too short.” As I detail in Chapter Seven, American devotees covet opportunities to be near Amma. They do this in part because such opportunities serve as evidence of “their worth ... as ‘good’ devotees” (Srinivas 2010, 166). In escorting this American devotee away from Amma, I left this devotee in need of a replacement opportunity to access Amma and confirm her “good” devotee status. I address my experience carrying out this seva position when discussing the role of proxemic desire in co-productions of Amma’s charisma in Chapter Seven (Srinivas 2010).

Ethnography cannot stop at the point of self-reflection, though. Getting lost in one’s own subjectivity is after all a barrier to gaining ethnographic understanding of another. Nevertheless, by paying attention to his or her own sense of self and self-world relations, an ethnographer can

create space for intersubjectivity, and this is a building block to better ethnography (McLean and Leibing 2011; Van der Geest 2007; Van der Geest et al 2012).

CHAPTER CONCLUSION

In this chapter, I reviewed the fieldwork that I conducted to examine the nature of Amma's attractiveness to Americans. Who is Amma? How do American members of Amma's global following understand her? How do they understand her type of spirituality? What is the role of seva in her type of spirituality? I answer these background questions in Chapter Three.

CH. 3: AMMA AND HER TYPE OF SPIRITUALITY

In this chapter, I answer the following background questions. First, who is Amma? Second, how do American members of her global following understand her? Third, how do they understand her type of spirituality? And, fourth, what is the role of seva in her type of spirituality?

CHAPTER ORGANIZATION

I break this chapter into three sections. I begin section one with an ethnographic vignette. I do this to illustrate American devotees' understanding of Amma as an *avatar*. In the Hindu tradition, an avatar is an incarnation of the divine and therefore a godperson (Gold 1988). A godperson is not a "holy [wo]man," or someone whose followers ascribe divine status as a result of wisdom that he or she acquired through sadhana (spiritual disciplines and practices, Gold 1988). A godperson is a religious figurehead whose followers, in regarding him or her as an incarnation of the divine, also regard as god on earth (Gold 1988). But, just as there are different types of divine persons, so too there are different types of avatars. As I show, American devotees perceive Amma as purna avatar, meaning a "full or perfect" incarnation, of Devi in her manifestation as the Hindu pantheon's Divine Mother goddess (Puri 1988, 197). In the Hindu tradition, Devi is the Great and Divine Mother Goddess. As the Great Goddess, she is the female manifestation of the supreme being, Purusha. As the Divine Mother goddess, she is the core form of every Hindu goddess. In effect, she is abstract female divinity. I then demonstrate that American devotees, in perceiving Amma as transcendent and absolute divinity, also perceive her as a superior guru. I add that I rely on Puri's (1988) description of the purna avatar concept

because American devotees regard his account of Amma's life as her authoritative biography. As a result, they use the concepts that it contains as frameworks to understand her.

In section two, I summarize portions of Puri's (1988) hagiographical work.⁴⁵ Portions that I focus on include those in which he describes events that led Amma to recognize herself as a purna avatar of Devi in her manifestation as the Hindu pantheon's Divine Mother goddess. I do this for two reasons. First, in regarding this work as Amma's authoritative biography, American devotees also regard it as an accurate depiction of her life. Hence, they regard the miraculous events that it contains as evidence of her divinity. Second, I do this to introduce Amma's proclaimed divine mission as a purna avatar to uplift humanity. As I detail, Amma strives to make good on her proclaimed divine mission by encouraging members of her global following to adopt seva as their preferred spiritual practice. These include American members of her global following.

In section three, I discuss the bhakti (devotionalist) tradition of Hindu faith. I also discuss seva as a Hindu concept (e.g. to elderly persons, gurus, and deities). I then illustrate that American devotees use the bhakti tradition of Hindu faith as a framework for making sense of seva as worship of omnipresent divinity and of Amma whom they perceive as a personification thereof. In doing so, they promote seva to the ranks of ultimate devotional act. I conclude this chapter by introducing my finding that the ways in which American devotees translate and practice seva are not uniform. I flesh out this finding when situating spiritual seekers' seva translations and practices in the "admirer," "initiate," "ashramite," and "renunciate" stages of the American Devotee Life Cycle (ADLC) in Chapters Four through Six.

“[AMMA] IS MY GURU ... SHE IS AN AVATAR”

On November 15, 2015, Karthika and I sat cross-legged on yoga mats in a large canvas tent that was approximately 200-square feet in size. This canvas tent was one of approximately twenty that Karthika and other devotees from Amma’s M.A. Math in Amritapuri, India, had erected for readying her M.A. Center in Castro Valley, California, to host her Fall 2015 Northern California Public Satsang Program and Retreat. In Amma’s M.A. Mission, public satsang programs are large-scale, usually two- to three-day long spiritual gatherings that she leads once or twice a year in cities where sizable populations of her followers live. Retreats are similar to public satsang programs but more intimate due to lesser attendance stemming from barriers to access like registration fees and hotel room availability. Amma’s Fall 2015 Northern California Public Satsang Program ran from November 14-15. Her Fall 2015 Northern California Retreat ran from November 16-18.

Karthika and I performed “flower seva.” In doing so, we sorted through nearly a dozen laundry baskets full of rose and chrysanthemum buds. We did this to separate from the buds that we ultimately deemed “healthy” several thousand individual petals. Based on my past participation in Amma’s Summer 2008, 2009, 2014, and 2015 Chicago as well as her Summer 2015 New York Public Satsang Programs, I knew that, prior to concluding her Fall 2015 Northern California Public Satsang Program, she would perform *Devi bhava*. *Bhava* translates from Sanskrit to mean “mood.” “Devi bhava” translates to mean “mood of Devi.” In Amma’s M.A. Mission, the latter term refers to the ritual in which she emerges from behind a curtain to reveal herself not in her typical white but rather in a colorful sari.⁴⁶ In such moments, Amma also wears a golden crown. These behaviors are Amma’s cues to public satsang program attendees to form and, for approximately fifteen minutes, walk in a circle in front of her while singing

bhajans (devotional hymns). With her body trembling to suggest that she is undergoing transition, Amma showers public satsang program attendees with handfuls of flower petals. American devotees maintain that, by displaying these behaviors, Amma reveals to them her true identity as an avatar of Devi in her manifestation as the Hindu pantheon's Divine Mother goddess. In this way, by performing "flower seva" on November 15, 2016, Karthika and I helped to produce a space in which attendees at Amma's 2015 Northern California Public Satsang Program could engage her divinity.

Suddenly, the chime of a bell cut through the din of other sevite cooks' pots and pans that, at the time, were colliding in the canvas tent next to ours. Karthika gathered our piles of white, pink, and red petals. With hurried care, she transitioned those that she had not already into color-coordinated laundry baskets. Then, she stacked these laundry baskets in an industrial-sized refrigerator that she had plugged into a generator earlier that day. Karthika turned to me. While smiling, she remarked that satsang was about to begin. Derived from the Sanskrit word "sat," "satsang" means "company of the good." American members of Amma's global following use this term to refer to a spiritual lecture that Amma or one of her senior disciples gives. They also use it to refer to groups of householder devotees whom meet, usually at fellow devotees' homes, on a weekly or monthly basis to engage in spiritual activities. In the context of this ethnographic vignette, "satsang" refers to a spiritual lecture that Amma was then about to give.

After tying together the flaps that served as the door to the canvas tent where we were performing "flower seva," Karthika made a quick motion with her hands as if to say, "Follow me!" I complied and, while following her closely, made my way through a dense crowd. Most of the individuals in this crowd wore a combination of Western and (colorful) Indian attire. This suggested to me that they were householder devotees. A few like Karthika wore white Indian

attire, indicating that they were brahmachari(ni)s. Based on their Western attire and general looks of confusion, I assumed the remaining others to be admirers. By “admirers,” I mean individuals whom admire Amma but are not (yet) members of her global following. All were headed towards the main structure of Amma’s M.A. Center. American devotees refer to this structure as “Amrita Hall” (Figure 3.1).



Figure 3.1. Spiritual seekers congregate outside Amrita Hall on the 140-acre property of Amma’s M.A. Center in Castro Valley, California.

Upon arriving at the main doors of Amrita Hall, Karthika grabbed my hand. Together, we entered and tiptoed through a sea of individuals whom were sitting on the floor of this building’s main room. I gazed upwards and saw a balcony that was similarly filled to capacity. From a loudspeaker system came instructions for everyone to sit down. Karthika and I located and speedily made our way to a spot on the floor that we thought could accommodate both of us, if

we scrunched together. When we arrived at this spot, Karthika dropped to her knees and bent to touch her head to the floor. Then, while still in a kneeling position, she gazed forward to face Amma.

Amma sat in *padmasana* atop a wide, upholstered chair that was positioned at the center of a stage at the front of the main room of Amrita Hall. Padmasana is a meditative pose. It is popularly known as the lotus position. For approximately an hour, Amma lectured to the crowd. A senior member of Amma's global following translated her message from Malayalam into English. I recognized him as a senior member of Amma's global following based on his ochre-colored robe.⁴⁷ As Amma stated, every human being should strive to formulate a habit of serving others. Given all beings' essential non-duality, such is - more than any other spiritual practice - appropriate worship of the divine. American devotees use the term "non-duality" to refer to the idea that all beings - because they have in them a spark of absolute divinity, or the eternal essence of the cosmos that is the "true self" of all - are essentially one.

As soon as Amma finished giving satsang, everyone in Amrita Hall stood up. While still facing Amma, they pressed the palms of their hands together. Then, they raised their hands over their heads, chanted "*Jai*," and bowed. "Jai" is derived from the Sanskrit word, "jaya." It translates to mean "victory" or "hail." Amma got up from her chair. Taking this as their cue to do so, everyone in attendance sprinted towards the main and side doors of Amrita Hall. Karthika whispered to me that it was time to receive Amma's Prasad. "Prasad" is a Sanskrit word, which means "gracious gift." In the Hindu tradition, it refers to an offering that a spiritual seeker makes to a deity and then consumes. Upon presenting an offering to a deity, the spiritual aspirant considers the offering blessed. Upon consuming it, the spiritual seeker considers himself or herself imbued to some degree with the powers of the god or goddess to whom he or she made

the offering; hence, Babb's (1986, 79) note that, by eating Prasad, "you become what you eat." Karthika again grabbed my hand, this time to lead me to a queue that public satsang program attendees were forming alongside the single-lane road that extended from the gates of Amma's M.A. Center to Amrita Hall.

Spiritual seekers in this queue clapped in unison while singing bhajans. After a few minutes, their clapping and singing hastened. Amma drove past in the back of a white Lexus, prompting these spiritual seekers' once impeccable unison to give way to giddy commotion. Amma tossed handfuls of Hershey's Kisses towards the crowd. In reaction, spiritual seekers ran alongside Amma's car, hopeful to touch it - if not also Amma - and to secure a piece of Prasad. As I learned, unlike in India, where Amma tends to distribute harder candies that are less likely to melt in that country's warmer climate, she commonly receives from and gives Hershey's Kisses as Prasad to attendees at her public satsang programs and retreats in the United States.

Amma as a Guru

As I show with this scene, American devotees perceive Amma as a guru, or a self-realized master whom – in being self-realized – is an appropriate spiritual teacher. American devotees root their understanding of "guru" – or, even more specifically, of "*satguru*" (meaning a self-realized master and spiritual teacher who is innately self-realized due to having been born that way), in that series of conversations, which the *Bhagavad Gita* attributes to princely warrior, Arjuna, and his *ishta-devata*, *Krishna*. "Ishta-devata" is derived from the Sanskrit word "ista," meaning "cherished." In the Hindu tradition, the term refers to a spiritual seeker's personal or preferred way of perceiving god. Krishna is an incarnation of *Vishnu*, the Hindu pantheon's maintainer or preserver god. The *Bhagavad Gita* is a popular Hindu epic. Therein, Krishna states

the following to Arjuna about the role of a satguru in a spiritual seeker's pursuit of self-realization: "Approach those who have realized the purpose of life and question them with reverence and devotion; they will instruct you in this wisdom. One you attain it, you will never again be deluded. You will see all creatures in the Self, and all in me" (Easwaran 185, 120-121). In this context, "self-realized" refers to the state in which one realizes his or her own as well as all other beings' essential non-duality. American devotees use the term "non-duality" to refer to the idea that all beings - because they have in them a spark of absolute divinity, or the eternal essence of the cosmos that is the true self of all - are essentially one. It follows from this that, for American devotees, "self-realized" is about oneness with omnipresent divinity.

Demonstrating their perception of Amma as a guru, the spiritual seekers in this ethnographic vignette attentively listened to lectures that she gave on the topic of spiritual truths. Karthika demonstrated her perception of Amma as such by kneeling and, while facing Amma, bending to touch her head to the floor. In Indian contexts, behaviors like these are typical of a guru's disciple. They symbolize the gap in religious status that exists between unenlightened disciple and enlightened master. They are also signs of respect and deference. Drawing on fieldwork that he conducted in North India between the late 1960s – 1970s among saint-poets, or *sants* as they are commonly referred to in the region, Gold (1988) builds on this definition of "guru." He does this via a typology of three ideal types of "immanent foci" (Gold 1988). Here, the term "immanent foci" refers to "sources through which divine grace, knowledge, and power are mediated to humankind" (Gold 1988, 17). These include the "eternal heritage," the "singular personality," and the "holy [wo]man" (Gold 1988).⁴⁸ I situate Amma in Gold's (1988) taxonomy in the section below.

Amma as a Godperson

While writing about gurus and the types of “immanent foci” that they represent, Gold (1988) describes what he terms the “eternal heritage” as a sanctified tradition. Diffuse in nature, it is “pervasive within all aspects of a culture” (Gold 1988, 18-19). Despite being pervasive, the “eternal heritage” is limited in terms of accessibility (Gold 1988). This is because it is “only [accessible] to members of [the] culture [to which it belongs]” (Gold 1988, 19). Gold (1988, 19) writes that “this ... is as it should be, for the [eternal] heritage belongs primarily to those with rights to it by birth.” Contrastingly, the “holy [wo]man” and “singular personality” are “sources through which divine grace, knowledge, and power are mediated to humankind” via individual persons (Gold 1988, 17). In this way, they have a very different spatial characteristic than the “eternal heritage” (Gold 1988). Due to their concentration in individual persons, the “holy [wo]man” and “singular personality” are more limited in scope while at the same time more accessible than the “eternal heritage” (Gold 1988).

How does a “holy wo[m]an” differ from a “singular personality” (Gold 1988)? A “holy [wo]man” is a person whose followers ascribe divine status as a result of wisdom that he or she acquired through sadhana (spiritual disciplines and practices, Gold 1988). In this context, “wisdom” commonly refers to realization of the spiritual truth that all are essentially one. While they revere such a figure as divine, followers of a “holy [wo]man” perceive him or her as one among many. A “singular personality” is differently a person whose followers ascribe innate cosmic status and, as a result, understand as “one of a kind – not as a prophet like any other; nor [as] a member of a class of nameless angels or gurus ... a singular personality appears as one of a relatively small number of beings whose distinctive divine personal qualities a particular

individual may revere – or adore” (Gold 1988, 20). An avatar, or incarnation of the divine and therefore god on earth, is an example of a “singular personality” (Gold 1988).

Importantly, while American devotees consider Amma a guru, they do not consider her a “holy [wo]man” (Gold 1988). In upholding her as an incarnation of Devi in her manifestation as the Hindu pantheon’s Divine Mother goddess, they consider her an avatar of transcendent and absolute divinity, necessarily aware of all beings’ oneness due to being that which all beings share. For American devotees, Amma is therefore far from one among many. She is a “singular personality” and hence a godperson (Gold 1988). In the context of Amma’s Fall 2015 Northern California Public Satsang Program, American devotees demonstrated their perception of Amma as such by running alongside her car in hopes of receiving her Prasad.

To further my claim that American devotees consider Amma an avatar and therefore a godperson, I provide an ethnographic vignette that describes a moment in which such individuals engaged in ritual recitation of her Astottara Sata Namavali. Amma’s Astottara Sata Namavali is her 108 names. In the Hindu tradition, various gods and goddesses have their own Astottara Sata Namavali. 108 is sacred number in Hinduism. It has roots in Vedic mathematics and astronomy (Kak 2020). As I learned, American devotees engage in ritual recitation of Amma’s Astottara Sata Namavali at least several times a week by themselves at home. They also do this when gathered together to perform spiritual practices as a group. I describe the M.A. Mission contexts in which American devotees gather together to perform spiritual practices as a group when situating such behaviors in the “admirer,” “initiate,” “ashramite” and “renunciate” stages of the ADLC in Chapters Four through Six. Given the frequency with which American devotees engage in ritual recitation of Amma’s Astottara Sata Namavali, I argue that the ideas it contains has relevance to them as frameworks to use for understanding her.

I note here that the *Shri Durga Saptashati* - or that text, which includes 700 *slokas* [poetic verses (usually quarter-verses of eight syllables each or half-verses of sixteen syllables each)] dedicated to *Durga* – confirms for spiritual seekers whom follow her that she is the Hindu pantheon’s warrior goddess. According to Babb (1970), it does this by situating *Durga* in the Hindu cosmology via descriptions of her nature and reason for being. The *Shri Durga Saptashati* also promises those whom study it bestowal of good fortune (Babb 1970). Amma’s *Astottara Sata Namavali* identifies her as “the Great Divine Mother” as well as the “complete manifestation of Absolute Truth.” It also stresses Amma’s divine capacity to transmit brilliance to and provide others with relief. Therefore, not unlike how the *Shri Durga Saptashati* confirms for spiritual seekers whom follow *Durga* that she is the Hindu pantheon’s warrior goddess, Amma’s *Astottara Sata Namavali* confirms for members of her global following that she is an avatar of the Hindu pantheon’s Divine Mother goddess and therefore a godperson. These include American members of her global following.

On September 12, 2015, Swami Shantamritananda Puri (then Brahmachari Shantamrita Chaitanya) stood at the front of the puja (ritual offering) hall of Amma’s M.A. Center Chicago in Elburn, Illinois. He blew into a conch shell, thereby producing a loud, trumpeting noise. In reaction, the approximately forty other American devotees who were in this room ceased chatting among themselves. Several collected their children, whom were still in the process of playing a dizzying game of tag. Approximately five minutes later, everyone was seated in one of approximately sixty folding chairs that were organized into two sections. Each section included approximately six rows of five folding chairs each. All faced an altar that included several pictures of Amma. The largest picture was about four feet tall and had draped over it several brightly colored strands of garland. Offerings of flowers and fresh fruit surrounded the altar. I

took a seat. Noticing that I was using my phone to search the internet for a compilation of Amma’s Astottara Sata Namavali, the devotee to my right offered to lend me the printed copy that she kept in her purse. I was in the midst of thanking her with a soft “*Namah Shivaya*” when the group began chanting Amma’s Astottara Sata Namavali, their intonation rising and falling in unison. “*Namah Shivaya*” is a Sanskrit phrase that comes from the mantra, “*Om namah Shivaya*.”⁴⁹ It translates to mean “I bow to the Auspicious One inside all of us.” American members of Amma’s global following chant it in commemoration of the spark of absolute divinity that they believe to reside in and be the true selves of all beings. They also use the mantra in colloquial speech to mean “hello,” “goodbye,” “thank you,” and “excuse me.” The below comes from a printed copy of Amma’s Astottara Sata Namavali that I purchased at Amma’s M.A. Math in 2008 (M.A. Mission 2008). It includes a Sanskrit-to-English translation of Amma’s 108 names.

Adorations to Amma, ...

- | | |
|-----|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| 1 | Om purna bramhma svarupinyai namaha
... who is the complete manifestation of Absolute Truth (Brahman) ... |
| 92 | Om sisya samkramita sviya projvalet brahma varcase namaha ...
... Who has transmitted Her divine brilliance to Her disciples ... |
| 100 | Om para svaryapana sviya naraka prapti lipsave namaha
... Who is happy in exchanging heaven with hell for the relief of others. |
| 107 | Om devyai namaha
... Whose is the Great Divine Mother ... [M.A. Mission 2008:14-29] |

In his account of Amma’s life, Puri (1988) includes mention of three types of avatars: *avesa avatars*, *amsa avatars*, and *purna avatars*. After overviewing Puri’s (1988, 197) definition of each, I show in the following section that American devotees regard Amma as a *purna avatar* of Devi in her manifestation as the Hindu pantheon’s Divine Mother goddess. In regarding

Amma as such and therefore as transcendent and absolute divinity itself, American devotees also regard her as a superior guru. I flesh out the relevance of this idea as well as the corresponding limitless nature of Amma that it implies to American devotees with respect to what they attest is the inevitability of all onlookers' eventual devotion to Amma in Chapters Four and Five. I flesh out the relevance of this with respect to the extraordinary capacity to transform people that American devotees ascribe to Amma and the process whereby they and she co-produce this particular expression of her charisma in Chapter Seven. I rely on Puri's (1988) definitions of *avesa avatars*, *amsa avatars*, and *purna avatars* because American devotees commonly make mention of them, thereby suggesting that they use his conceptualizations of the notions as frameworks to understand her.

Amma as a Purna Avatar

According to Puri (1988), *avesa avatars* are temporary possessions of individual human beings by individual gods and goddesses, for the purpose of accomplishing worldly tasks. These worldly tasks tend to be specific and context-sensitive in nature. To illustrate, he provides the case of Parasurama (Puri 1988). Per the *Srimad Bhagavatam*, or that *purana* (ancient tale), which details the ten incarnations of Vishnu, Parasurama was a great warrior. Vishnu took possession of Parasurama for a period of time. He did this "to destroy the cruel *kshatriya* [warrior] kings whom had become very arrogant and egotistic" (Puri 1988, 198).⁵⁰ *Amsa avatars* are differently partial manifestations of specific gods and goddesses. As examples, Puri (1988) provides the ten incarnations of Vishnu. While each wields some, none wield the full extent of Vishnu's divine powers. Differently still, *purna avatars* are not just temporary or partial but rather "full or perfect" incarnations of the divine; "purna [avatars are] ... descent of the nameless, formless and

immutable Supreme Energy, assuming ... human form and manifesting infinite power without any limitations” (Puri 1988, 197-198). It follows from this that what differentiates purna from avesa and amsa avatars is their limitlessness. This includes their limitlessness in terms of what they represent, i.e. “the nameless, formless and immutable Supreme Energy,” as well as the scope and reach of their divine powers, understood as “infinite” and “without any limitations” (Puri 1988, 197-198).

American devotees perceive Amma as a purna avatar. To illustrate, in an interview that I conducted with her in 2008 at her then residence in Grafton, Wisconsin, Priya stated that Amma was born an incarnation of Devi. Demonstrating her steadfast confidence in this belief, Priya proclaimed, “Amma is my guru, and, to me, she is an avatar. She is an incarnation of divine love!”⁵¹ In an interview that I conducted with Priya in 2016 at Amma’s M.A. Center Chicago, Priya expanded on this statement, offering limitlessness as the defining characteristic of “divine love.” “Amma’s love is really love with a capital ‘L,’” said Priya. “It’s not a personal quality as you or I would understand it, ... a characteristic that you have or I have. It’s ... an infinite energy. And, Amma’s earthly presence is a physical manifestation of that infinite energy.”⁵² I address American devotees’ conceptualization of the Hindu notion of divine love in Chapter Seven.

Warrier (2000) writes that, when examined alongside typical Hindu ideas about avatarhood, Amma’s is unusual. This is because - whether they concern temporary, partial, or “full or perfect” incarnations of the divine - Hindu ideas about avatarhood tend to refer to the ten incarnations of Vishnu (Puri 1988, 197; Warrier 2000). In other words, while Hindu ideas about avatarhood tend to refer to the ten incarnations of the maintainer or preserver aspect of transcendent and absolute divinity, the idea of avatarhood that members of Amma’s global

following attribute to her refers to transcendent and absolute divinity itself. These include American members of Amma's global following.

Beyond being unique, though, the essential divinity that Amma's status as a "full or perfect" incarnation of transcendent and absolute divinity implies is significant in that, for American devotees, it bolsters their perception of her as a superior guru (Puri 1988, 197). I found that, when compared with examples of "holy [wo]man" and other godpersons, American devotees consider Amma more fully or perfectly divine and therefore better equipped than such individuals to mediate "divine grace, knowledge, and power" to them, her devoted disciples (Gold 1988, 17). I provide an ethnographic vignette to illustrate. It details an informal conversation that I had with Karthika in 2015 at Amma's M.A. Center Chicago on the topic of her 2002 decision to stop following the Indian woman whom was then her guru and start following Amma.

Following the conclusion of Amma's morning all-audience meditation on July 1, 2015, or the first day of her Summer 2015 Chicago Public Satsang Program, Karthika and I took a walk to her parents' house. In 2015, Karthika's parents' house was one of fifteen single family-homes on the 140-acre property of Amma's M.A. Center Chicago. In being offset from the main buildings of this facility, we thought her parents' house a good place to go for enjoying a quiet lunch away from the several thousand devotees whom soon would be descending on its two dining halls and several temporary, pop-up style food kiosks.

As I found is typically the case when trying to leave a building where Amma has just led an all-audience meditation, making our way out of the bhajan hall of her M.A. Center Chicago proved difficult. Not until after passing this facility's puja hall, dormitory building/library, and Montessori school did the crowds thin, allowing our awkward toddling to become a pleasant

stroll. “My parent’s house is just up the road,” remarked Karthika. Ten minutes later, we arrived at a modest single-family ranch-style home, approximately 1,200 square feet in size. Karthika pulled a key from a small pocket in her white half-sari and opened the front door. “Come on in. I think my mom has some vegetarian chili left over from last night.” I entered and noticed a row of shoes, each of which had been neatly arranged to sit perfectly perpendicular to the wall of the foyer. I took this precision as a cue to remove my shoes. Karthika placed her shoes next to mine. Then, she disappeared into the kitchen. “Take a seat! Make yourself at home,” she called!

I took a seat on Karthika’s parents’ couch and scanned their living room. Against one wall, I noticed a small altar. It included several framed pictures of Amma, a framed picture of Devi, and an “Amma doll.” Against another wall, I noticed a bookshelf full of books on spirituality. I recognized the vast majority. Most were compilations of personal encounters with Amma by senior members of her global following. Others were compilations of satsangs given by Amma. “What are these,” I wondered? On the bottom of Karthika’s parents’ bookshelf were a few books that I didn’t recognize. Upon taking a closer look, I saw that they were attributed to an Indian spiritual leader other than Amma.

Karthika emerged from the kitchen. “Lunch is ready!” She set two steaming bowls of homemade vegetarian chili on her parents’ dining room table and called me over. “Sit. Eat!” Curious as to why Karthika’s parents would have books by another Indian spiritual leader, I broached the subject. “[Karthika], I noticed that your parents have a few books by [name of other Indian spiritual leader].”⁵³ “Oh, that’s our old guru,” said Karthika. I must have let my confusion surface because, after a brief moment of silence, Karthika added, “You knew we used to have a different guru, right?” I told her that I didn’t. This prompted her to say more on the subject. “It was a long [*emphasis on ‘long’*] time ago. [Name of other Indian spiritual leader] was a fine

guru. And, she is a wise woman, so we kept her books. But, when my family met Amma, we instantly knew that she's greater. She really is the living embodiment of divine love!" After a few hours, Karthika noted the time. "Oh! Amma will be giving satsang soon. We should get going."

During our walk back to the bhajan hall of Amma's M.A. Center Chicago, Karthika stopped short of the crowds. "You know, there are a lot of gurus out there, but many are like boats with holes." While saying this to me, Karthika wagged her finger, as if to reinforce the gravity of her message. When composing my fieldnotes for July 1, 2015, it struck me that Karthika had once said something similar to me. Indeed, upon looking through my data, I recovered from an interview that I conducted with her in 2008 at Amma's M.A. Math a statement in which Karthika analogized other (disingenuous) gurus to "small rafts with holes": "They [*referring to disingenuous gurus*] might be further along crossing the sea of spirituality [than some]," said Karthika, "but, really, they are just small rafts with holes. They can drown and take their followers with them. We have to be careful about who we follow. That's what Amma says."⁵⁴ This statement by Karthika is not just a reiteration of something "Amma says."⁵⁵ In the context of the active vs. passive guru choice that Karthika referred to in our 2015 conversation, it is also a reflection of personal experience. More than a "wise woman" or a temporary or partial manifestation of the divine, Amma is, for Karthika, "the living embodiment of divine love," transcendent and absolute in nature. As a result, she is a superior guru whom will take her "further along ... the sea of spirituality."⁵⁶

For Karthika and other American devotees, what gives them confidence in such a perception? What do they point to as evidence that Amma is a "full or perfect" incarnation of transcendent and absolute divinity and therefore a superior guru? For many, the contents of

Puri's (1988) account of Amma's life - or that hagiography, which members of her global following consider her authoritative biography - is a key proof-point. Hence, when I asked Karthika in my 2008 interview with her how she knows that Amma is a purna avatar of Devi in her manifestation as the Hindu pantheon's Divine Mother goddess, she responded, "What else could she be?"⁵⁷ Then, she presented me with a copy of Puri's (1988) work and instructed me to read it.

After reflecting on my experiences at Amma's 2008, 2009, 2014, 2015, and 2016 Chicago Public Satsang Programs; her Summer 2015 New York Public Satsang Program; as well as her Fall 2015 Northern California Public Satsang Program and Retreat, it struck me that the American devotees who oversee the M.A. Mission's sale of books about Amma to event attendees tend to display this particular account of her life more prominently than they do others. Like Karthika, they regard it as especially relevant as a source of truth about their guru and godperson.

I summarize portions of this hagiographical work in the section below. Portions that I pay particular attention to are those in which Puri (1988) describes events that led Amma to recognize herself as a purna avatar of Devi in her manifestation as the Hindu pantheon's Divine Mother goddess. These include Amma's first Krishna and Devi bhavas. "Bhava" translates from Sanskrit to mean "mood." "Devi bhava" translates to mean "mood of Devi." In Amma's M.A. Mission, the latter term refers to the ritual in which she emerges from behind a curtain to reveal herself not in her typical white but rather in a colorful sari. In such moments, Amma also wears a golden crown. With her body trembling to suggest that she is undergoing transition, Amma showers devotees in her presence with handfuls of flower petals. American devotees maintain that, by displaying these behaviors, Amma reveals to them her true identity as a purna avatar of

Devi in her manifestation as the Hindu pantheon's Divine Mother goddess. I pay particular attention to Puri's (1988) descriptions of these events for two reasons. First, in regarding his work as Amma's authoritative biography, American devotees also regard it as an accurate depiction of her life. Hence, they regard the miraculous events that it contains as evidence of her divinity. Second, I do this to introduce Amma's proclaimed divine mission as a purna avatar to uplift humanity. As I detail, Amma strives to make good on her proclaimed divine mission to uplift humanity by encouraging members of her global following to adopt seva as their preferred spiritual practice.

AMMA'S APOTHEOSIS

Amma's first Krishna bhava took place in September of 1975. While outside the confines of her family's compound to collect grass for their and other villagers' cattle, Amma overheard a neighbor reciting the *Srimad Bhagavatam*. The *Srimad Bhagavatam* is a purana (ancient tale), which details the ten incarnations of Vishnu. Krishna is one of these incarnations. In reaction, Amma dropped her bundle of grass, entered her neighbor's courtyard, and stood at its center. Succumbing to a bout of spiritual rapture, Amma's mood changed dramatically; "Overwhelmed with divine bliss, her inner identification with the Lord overflowed into her external being, transforming her features and movements into those of Sri Krishna Himself" (Puri 1988, 88)!

Onlookers doubted the legitimacy of Amma's first Krishna bhava. Having long interpreted behaviors that she exhibited during what Puri (1988) calls "god-intoxicated" states as signs of mental illness, they were hesitant to reconsider their perception of Amma as a "crazy girl."⁵⁸ To validate Amma's first Krishna bhava and, thus, her divinity, they presented her with a pitcher of water and demanded a miracle; "If you are really Lord Krishna, then you must show us

proof through a miracle. Otherwise, how can we believe” (Puri 1988, 88)? Amma complied by dipping her fingers inside the pitcher and transforming its contents into a sweet pudding called *panchamritam*. Her actions prompted everyone present to exclaim, “O God! O God’ [and to believe] themselves ... truly in the Divine Presence of Lord Krishna” (Puri 1988, 89).

I first heard of Amma’s former “crazy girl” status from Karthika when I interviewed her in 2008 at Amma’s M.A. Math. I heard it again from Chetas when I interviewed him in 2016 at Amma’s M.A. Center Chicago. In both instances, these devotees chuckled at the notion that Amma had gone unrecognized as a purna avatar of Devi in her manifestation as the Hindu pantheon’s Divine Mother goddess. I inferred from this that they were resolute in their opinions about Amma’s avatarhood. In 2016, Chetas was a renunciate member of Amma’s global following. Originally from Michigan, he relocated to Amma’s M.A. Center Chicago shortly after her M.A. Mission’s establishment of it in 2012.

Amma grew anxious. Would her first Krishna bhava be her last? Hopeful to provoke additional experiences of oneness with Krishna, Amma subscribed herself to a six-month period of extreme asceticism. Her efforts proved fruitless. This prompted Amma to call out to Devi and plead for help; “O Mother ... here is Your child about to die, drowning in unfathomable distress ... this heart is breaking ... these limbs are faltering ... I am convulsing like a fish thrown on the shore ... O Mother ... You have no kindness towards me ... I have nothing left to offer You except my last breath of life” (Puri 1988, 137). Puri (1988, 137) writes that “the Divine Mother [then] appeared before [Amma,] dazzling like a thousand suns[,] smiled, and, becoming ... Pure Effulgence, merged in [her].” This was the first of several moments that led Amma to recognize herself as a purna avatar of Devi in her manifestation as the Hindu pantheon’s Divine Mother goddess. As such, it was also the first of several moments that led Amma to perform Devi bhava

for members of her (then small but growing Indian) following and, as a result, provide them with opportunities to confirm her identity as a purna avatar of Devi in her manifestation as the Hindu pantheon's Divine Mother goddess.

While at Amma's Fall 2015 Northern California Retreat at her M.A. Center, I witnessed an American householder devotee, recognizable as such due to his (colorful) Indian attire, make special reference to this moment in which "the Divine Mother ... merged in [Amma]" (Puri 1988, 137). While speaking into a microphone, so all attendees could hear, he asked Amma to elaborate on her experience; "There was a time in your life when Devi came out of the sky and rose inside you. Swami [Amritaswarupananda Puri] described it as a red-grey light; could you say more about this?" His eagerness to learn more about Amma's first Devi bhava indicated to me that it and the other Devi bhavas that it spurred bore heightened relevance as reasons to confirm her avatarhood.

In the months that followed Amma's first Devi bhava, she found herself assuming the characteristics of other Hindu deities. Amma interpreted these experiences as two lessons from the divine. First, all deities in the Hindu pantheon are essentially one. Each is an aspect of absolute divinity, or Brahman, the eternal essence of the cosmos that is simultaneously the true self of all. Second, as her ability to assume the characteristics of multiple gods and goddesses implies, she was born an incarnation of absolute divinity. Hence, she is a purna avatar of Devi in her manifestation as the Hindu pantheon's Divine Mother goddess. I include Puri's (1988) retelling of a time when Amma assumed the characteristics of other Hindu deities below.

At the end of sadhana one day, I felt that a large canine tooth was coming out of my mouth. Simultaneously, I heard a terrific humming sound. I perceived the form of Devi with large canine teeth, a long protruding tongue, thick black curly hair, reddish bulging eyes and dark blue in colour.⁵⁹ I thought, "Quick! Escape! Devi is coming to kill me!" I was about to run away. Suddenly I realized that I myself am Devi. The humming sound also was produced by me. The next moment I found that I was holding Devi's *veena* [A

stringed instrument that Devi typically holds in depictions of her as *Saraswati*, the Hindu pantheon's goddess of knowledge]. I had Her crown on my head and I was wearing the Mother's nose ring. After a couple of minutes I thought, "What is this? How have I become Devi? Maybe this is a trick played by the Divine Mother to obstruct my sadhana." So I thought, "Let me meditate on Shiva and see what happens," but the moment I began meditating on Lord Shiva's form, I became Him, matted hair, snakes on my neck and coiled on my upper arms. I thought, "Maybe Shiva is also testing me," so I stopped meditating in His form. Now I fixed my heart and soul on Lord *Ganesha* [in the Hindu pantheon, god of wisdom and prosperity and a male aspect of Brahman], the remover of obstacles. Immediately my being changed to that of Ganesha, and elephant's face with a long trunk, a pair of tusks with one half broken, and so on. Whichever form of god or goddess I contemplated, I became. Then I heard a voice from within, "You are not different from them. They have all merged in you long ago. Then why should you call [on] all these gods and goddesses?"

Thenceforth, the Holy Mother's meditation on God with form naturally subsided. The all-pervasive "OM" sprang forth from within the Her, and her whole being was forever merged in That. [Puri 1998, 142-143]

Building on his description of purna avatars as "full or perfect" incarnations of the divine, Puri (1988, 197-198) states that the intent of "such a One" – in being "descent of the nameless, formless and immutable Supreme Energy, [in] assuming ... human form and manifesting infinite power without any limitations" – is not to accomplish specific and context-sensitive worldly tasks like the destruction of arrogant and egotistic kshatriya kings. Rather, it is "restore and preserve righteousness (dharma) and awaken humanity by making people aware of the higher Self" (Puri 1988, 198). I now address Amma's proclaimed divine mission as a purna avatar to uplift humanity.

Amma's Divine Mission as a Purna Avatar to Uplift Humanity

As I showed so far in this chapter via ethnographic vignettes and references that American devotees make to Puri's (1988) account of Amma's life, such individuals agree with her that she is a purna avatar of Devi in her manifestation as the Hindu pantheon's Divine Mother goddess. It follows from this that American devotees also agree with Amma that she is a

“full or perfect” incarnation of transcendent and absolute divinity (Puri 1988, 197). Consistent with Puri’s (1988) conceptualization of the purna avatar concept, Amma claims herself tasked with the divine mission of uplifting humanity. He writes that she “heard a voice from within her say, ‘My child, I dwell in the hearts of all beings and have no fixed abode. Your birth is not for merely enjoying the unalloyed Bliss of the Self but for comforting suffering humanity. Henceforth, worship Me in the hearts of all beings and relieve them of the sufferings of worldly existence’” (Puri 1988, 139). How does Amma aim to uplift humanity? What spiritual practice does she encourage members of her global following to perform for making good on this, her divine mission?

As I learned, Amma aims to uplift humanity by encouraging members of her global following to adopt seva as their preferred spiritual practice. Upholding the idea of omnipresent divinity on which the notion of Brahman is predicated, Amma espouses that one ought to reduce his or her karmic burden not through disinterested actions that he or she does in the context of withdrawal from worldly life but rather through disinterested – or, even more specifically, selfless - actions that he or she does in the context of ongoing, active engagement with the world and its human and non-human inhabitants. In other words, Amma espouses that one ought to approach all of his or her interactions as opportunities to perform seva (selfless service). Given all beings’ essential non-duality, or essential similitude with absolute divinity, such is - more than any other spiritual practice - appropriate worship of the divine. I discuss disinterestedness in relation to Hindu asceticism (broadly) and American members of Amma’s global following in Chapters Four and Six, respectively. I discuss it in relation to the seva practices that they perform in the “admirer,” “initiate,” “ashramite,” and “renunciate” stages of the ADLC in Chapters Four through Six. The quote below nicely captures the spirit of Amma’s promotion of seva to the

ranks of ideal spiritual practice. It comes from an undated edition of M.A. Mission publication, *Embracing the World for Peace and Harmony: The Humanitarian Activities of Sri Mata Amritanandamayi Devi*, that I picked up while at Amma's M.A. Math in 2007.

Everything that exists is a part of God or the Universal Consciousness. To experience Divinity in everyone and everything is the real goal of each of us on our journey through life. A tangible way of achieving this is to practice selfless service, and this is what Amma inspires her children to do. She encourages them to meditate a great deal, but the bulk of their spiritual practice is to selflessly serve all beings in the world – to strive to alleviate sorrow and suffering and to uplift one and all. [M.A. Mission NDa, 14]

How do American members of Amma's global following understand her type of spirituality? To answer this question, I discuss the bhakti tradition of Hindu faith. I also discuss seva as a Hindu concept (e.g. to elderly persons, gurus, and deities). As I illustrate, American devotees position Amma as the object of their devotion and therefore ascribe to the bhakti tradition of Hindu faith. They use this tradition as a framework for making sense of seva as worship not only of omnipresent divinity but of Amma whom they understand as a personification thereof. In this way, they position seva as the ultimate devotional act. I then introduce my finding that the ways in which American members of Amma's global following translate and practice seva are far from uniform. While some include in their seva translations and practices acts of service that they perform on behalf of a narrow variety of beneficiaries in narrow variety of contexts and in an episodic manner, others include in their seva translations and practices acts of service that they perform on behalf of a wider variety of beneficiaries in a wider variety of contexts and in more of an ongoing manner. I flesh out this finding while situating American devotees' seva translations and practices in the "admirer," "initiate," "ashramite," and "renunciate" stages of the ADLC in Chapters Four through Six. I discuss its relevance to American expressions and co-productions of Amma's charisma in Chapter Seven.

BHAKTI

“Bhakti” translates from Sanskrit to mean “devotion.” In the Hindu tradition, it refers to devotionalism, or that “form of Hinduism in which devotion ... to the deity is accorded the greatest value” (Fuller 1992, 156). Characterizing it is intense fervor that a spiritual seeker feels for a particular deity. For American devotees, this deity is Amma. To this point, when I asked Priya in my 2008 interview with her to describe her emotions upon first meeting Amma, she said, “I remember it was just ... like ... in [the Walt Disney movie,] *Bambi*, when all the animals in the springtime get twitterpated [meaning “love-struck” or “infatuated”] ... I was just going around in this cloud of love. I ... kept saying, ‘Oh, don’t you love Amma? Isn’t she wonderful?’ Of course, not romantic love, ... but ... just totally overwhelmed by this incredible sense of love.”⁶⁰ Similarly, when I asked Dilip this question in an interview that I conducted with him in 2016 at Amma’s M.A. Center Chicago, he stated:

I became so ... enthralled ... I was drunk with love from Amma ... Even though I did not speak too much [with other people about the experience] ... I would talk to my friends ... open my heart, and of course [they] ... thought I lost it ... They did not know why I would not stop talking about Amma ... I was thinking about Amma day and night, ... and the only moment I was looking forward to was when I could go back and see her.”⁶¹

In 2016, Dilip was a renunciate member of Amma’s global following. Originally from California, he relocated to Amma’ M.A. Math after requesting and receiving her permission to renounce approximately thirty years earlier.

The bhakti tradition of Hindu faith first emerged on the world’s spirituality scene in India amid a seventh century reform movement that was spurred by two groups of devotional poets. They came from the South Indian state of Tamil Nadu and included twelve *Vaishnavite* (meaning “devoted to Vishnu”) Alvars and sixty-three *Shaivite* (meaning “devoted to Shiva”) Nayanars (Lele 1991). According to Glenn Yocum (1973), these Alvars and Nayanars wandered

from temple to temple composing and singing bhajans about their personal experiences with the divine. Especially for commoners, these bhajans proved appealing. Yocum (1973) notes two reasons for why this was the case. First, these bhajans shirked the then common practice of using Sanskrit - or the language of Hindu society's highest-ranking *Brahmin* caste - in favor of adopting the common Tamil vernacular. Second, their contents unsettled the then widespread opinion that commoners command little to no spiritual merit; hence, the following bhajan by seventh century Shaivite poet, Tirunavukkaracu: "Why fast and starve, why suffer pains austere? Why climb the mountains, doing penance harsh? Why go to bathe in waters far and near? Release is theirs, and theirs alone who call at every time upon the Lord of all" (Yocum 1973, 7). According to Joel Mlecko (1982), this reform movement engendered among spiritual seekers in India greater valuation of emotion over knowledge, the spirit of which Priya's and Dilip's comments, replete with statements of adoration for their beloved Amma, echo. To demonstrate their adoration of their beloved Amma, American devotees perform seva. In addition to worship of omnipresent divinity, it is - for them - worship of Amma whom they understand as a personification thereof. Hence, it is the ultimate devotional act. I discuss this below.

Seva as a Means of Practicing Bhakti

"Seva" translates from Sanskrit to mean "service." In Hindu contexts broadly, it refers to acts of service that one performs on behalf of a variety of types of beneficiaries (Esche-Eiff 2009). Examples include elderly persons, gurus, and deities. As service to elderly persons, seva commonly takes the form of domestic household chores that individuals perform to demonstrate respect for the superior social positions that older persons inhabit in junior-senior relations (Lamb 2000). As service to gurus whom are not associated with the bhakti tradition of Hindu

faith, it commonly takes the form of servile acts that disciples perform to demonstrate obedience and formulate habits of disinterested actions, for progressing towards realization of the spiritual truth that all are essentially one (Juergensmeyer 1991). As service to gurus whom are associated with the bhakti tradition of Hindu faith, it commonly resembles seva to deities. I describe such seva below.

As a spiritual practice, seva has roots in those of the early Vaishnavites. For these individuals, seva commonly included the provision of food and clothing to Vishnu's statues, for showing devotion to and earning blessings from him (Juergensmeyer 1991; Lamb 2000). In the late-nineteenth century, seva as a spiritual practice earned a dramatically different connotation. This occurred in the context of a Hindu reform movement that Swami Vivekananda led.⁶² Swami Vivekananda was the principal disciple of Ramakrishna Paramahansa. Ramakrishna Paramahansa is regarded in this history of Hinduism as one of the tradition's great mystics. To make a show of dedication to him, Swami Vivekananda established his (karma yoga-centric) Ramakrishna Mission. Karma yoga is a Hindu method of salvation. According to it, just as interested actions done in past lives produce present suffering, interested actions done in a present life will produce future suffering. It follows from this that participation in nishkam karma (disinterested action, or action that one does without interest in the fruits of that action) is vital to overall wellbeing. Indeed, only by practicing nishkam karma can a karma yogi (practitioner of karma yoga) rid himself or herself of prarabdha, attain moksha (liberation from samsara, meaning the tiresome cycle of birth, death, and rebirth that Hindus believe all beings to undergo), and - as a result - arrive at spirituality's ultimate goal of self-realization. Should a karma yogi not rid himself or herself of prarabdha, he or she will experience reincarnation and forego self-realization - understood in this context as realization of one's own and all other

beings' essential non-duality, or essential similitude with absolute divinity - for yet another lifetime.

Upon reflecting on the duty of a karma yogi to practice disinterested actions, Swami Vivekananda proposed the then novel idea that monastics, typically separated from worldly life as part of their dedication to asceticism, should participate in social work, for example, in the running of schools and hospitals. His logic in support of this idea was: if absolute divinity is present in all, then seva practices performed on behalf of another is worship of the divine. Swami Vivekananda ultimately incorporated social work in the ritual obligations of his mission's members, thereby institutionalizing seva while also giving it new social expression.

Seva among American Members of Amma's Global Following

As the quote that I provided from an undated edition of her M.A. Mission's publication, *Embracing the World for Peace and Harmony: The Humanitarian Activities of Sri Mata Amritanandamayi Devi*, illustrates, Amma upholds the idea of omnipresent divinity on which Swami Vivekananda's conceptualization of seva is predicated (M.A. Mission NDa).

Demonstrating that American members of her global following do so as well, Karthika stated the following in an interview that I conducted with her in 2014 at Amma's M.A. Center Chicago: "That's why we say, 'Namah Shivaya,' to each other. It means 'I bow to God, who lives inside you.'" Later in that same interview, Karthika added, "Doing something nice for someone else, without expecting anything back, that's acting out what 'Namah Shivaya' means ... Helping, serving others ... that's serving God."⁶³

Beyond appropriate shows of devotion to omnipresent divinity, however, American devotees assert that selfless service performed on behalf of others are simultaneously shows of

devotion to his or her ishta devata. Karthika described the ishta devtata concept in an interview that I conducted with her in 2014 at Amma’s M.A. Center Chicago: “Some people say their [ishta devata] is an actual manifestation, like Krishna or Jesus. Others ... say theirs is light. God is ineffable, so it makes sense that someone’s ishta devata might not be an actual manifestation, or even something tangible ... It could be a sentiment, like love, because god is beyond form.”⁶⁴ She then went on to add, “Just like how some people might say a prayer to Ganesha, others might show the love that they feel [for god] by doing selfless service.”⁶⁵

Like they do with respect to the role of a satguru in a spiritual seeker’s progression towards realization of the spiritual truth that all are essentially one, American devotees locate in the *Bhagavad Gita* a scriptural basis for their belief that, beyond appropriate shows of devotion to omnipresent divinity, seva practices that one performs on behalf of others are also shows of devotion to his or her ishta devata. I came upon this scriptural basis when participating in a session of “Gita Class” at Amma’s M.A. Center Chicago in 2016. In 2016, “Gita Class” was a workshop that Swami Shantamritananda Puri (then Brahmachari Shantamrita Chaitanya) led on the topic of spiritual lessons to take from the *Bhagavad Gita*. At the time, he held “Gita Class” on a weekly basis in the puja hall of Amma’s M.A. Center Chicago. Most American devotees who participated in “Gita Class” at this facility did so once every other week.

The *Bhagavad Gita* is contained in Chapter Six of the *Mahabharata*. Written between 400 B.C.E. and 500 A.D., the *Mahabharata* recounts events attributed to the mythic-epic Kurukshetra War.⁶⁶ In the vastness and complexity of its more than 100,000 couplets, it represents an entire cosmos; the *Bhagavad-Gita*, a key guide to “right” spiritual conduct in that cosmos (Fitzgerald 1983).⁶⁷ Concerning what the *Bhagavad Gita* claims to be “right” spiritual conduct, I note here that, throughout the *Upanishads* (collection of texts that offers commentary

on the *Vedas*, or one of Hinduism's oldest collection of sacred works), there persists an emphasis on the spiritual seeker's need to concentrate on and arrive at a realization of Brahman as the entity that lies at center of all. If the spiritual seeker fails to do this, he or she will forego self-realization for yet another lifetime; hence, the Upanishadic phrase, "Tat tvam asi." It translates from Sanskrit to mean "You are that" (Easwaran 2008, 204). Maintaining that such a mandate renders spiritual growth too arduous a pursuit for the average person, the *Bhagavad Gita* steers Indian scripture away from this definition of "right" spiritual conduct; "hazardous and slow is the path to the Unrevealed, difficult for physical creatures to tread" (Easwaran 2008, 207). It offers bhakti as an acceptable alternative. In its twelfth chapter, titled "The Way of Love," the *Bhagavad Gita* highlights seva that one performs on behalf of others whom necessarily have in them a spark of the divine that his or her ishta devata represents as an acceptable means of practicing bhakti.

In the session of "Gita Class" that I attended, Swami Shantamritananda Puri read aloud from the *Bhagavad Gita*'s twelfth chapter. In it, Arjuna asks Krishna: "Of those steadfast devotees who love you and those who seek you as the eternal formless Reality, who are the more established in [spiritual practice]" (Easwaran 2008, 207)? Krishna responds:

Still your mind in me, still your intellect in me, and without doubt you will be united with me forever. If you cannot still your mind in me, learn to do so through the regular practice of meditation. If lack the will for such self-discipline, engage yourself in my work, for selfless service can lead you at last to complete fulfillment ... Better indeed is knowledge than mechanical practice. Better than knowledge is meditation. But better still is surrender of attachments to results, because there follows immediate peace. [Easwaran 2008:208]

Krishna then goes on to describe his ideal devotee in persistently selfless terms:

The one I love who is incapable of ill will, who is friendly and compassionate. Living beyond the reach of 'I' and 'mine' and of pleasure and pain, patient, contented, self-controlled, firm in faith, with all their heart and all their mind given to me – with such as these I am in love ... They are detached, pure, efficient, impartial, never anxious, selfless

in all their undertakings; these are my devotees, very dear to me. [Easwaran 2008:208-209]

Swami Shantamritananda Puri paused and took a deep breath. Then, he began leading the approximately twenty individuals in attendance in a conversation about its underlying spiritual message. I recognized everyone as residents of Amma's M.A. Center Chicago. In 2016, Swami Shantamritananda Puri was the only renunciate devotee in residence at Amma's M.A. Center Chicago. Hence, all except him were householder members of Amma's global following. As they concluded, if spiritual seekers who act "selfless[ly] in all their undertakings" are those whom the divine holds "very dear," then seva practices that one performs on behalf of another are simultaneously appropriate shows of devotion to the divine (Easwaran 2008, 208-209). This includes spiritual seekers' personal or preferred ways of perceiving the divine. For American members of her global following, this includes Amma. In this way, American devotees position Amma as the ideal object of their devotion. They also reframe seva to others as seva that one does in devotion of her.

Not all seva practices are equal as such, however. To this point, the ways in which American devotees translate and practice seva are far from uniform. While some include in their seva translations and practices acts of service that they perform on behalf of a narrow variety of beneficiaries in a narrow variety of contexts and in an episodic manner, others include in their seva translations and practices acts of service that they perform on behalf of a wider variety of beneficiaries in a wider variety of contexts and in more of an ongoing manner. In other words, while some reflect less, others reflect greater calibration to Amma's main spiritual teaching that one ought to approach all of his or her interactions as opportunities to perform seva. Given all beings' essential similitude with absolute divinity, such is - more than any other spiritual practice - appropriate worship of the divine. This includes appropriate worship of Amma. And, according

to American members of Amma’s global following, that is “the goal,” to “become like her,” to progress towards embodying the spiritual truth that all are essentially one through seva practices that one performs in a diversity of ways and frequently.⁶⁸ I provide two informal conversations that I had with American devotees to illustrate. The first occurred at Amma’s M.A. Center. The second occurred at her M.A. Center Chicago. I add that, while I introduce here my finding that the ways in which American devotees translate and practice seva are far from uniform, I flesh it out while situating spiritual seekers’ seva translations and practices in the “admirer,” “initiate,” “ashramite,” and “renunciate” stages of the ADLC in Chapters Four through Six.

On November 18, 2015, or the third and final day of Amma’s Fall 2015 Northern California Retreat, I decided to take advantage of what was then a thinning crowd of spiritual aspirants to explore the 140-acre property of Amma’s M.A. Center. After approximately an hour of doing so, I came to a large, wooden statue of *Hanuman* (monkey god in the Hindu pantheon and symbol of the mind that becomes disciplined, Figure 3.2) that a spiritual seeker was sanding.



Figure 3.2: On November 18, 2015, an American householder devotee at Amma's M.A. Center in Castro Valley, California, sands a statue of the Hindu god, Hanuman, in the performance of his seva.

It stood at least seven-foot tall and, in my opinion, was a beautiful representation, the kind expression on Hanuman's face conveying to me the sense of loyalty to Rama (an avatar of Vishnu, the Hindu pantheon's maintainer or preserver god) for which he is well known. As if to give credit where he thought credit was due, this spiritual seeker paused his work and disclaimed that the statue was not his creation; "A friend of mine who also lives [at Amma's M.A. Center] designed and built it. I'm just giving Hanuman some needed TLC." He then went on to tell me that he often does "things like this." I asked him if he considers sanding this Hanuman statue seva. He replied, "Yes, [pause] but, it's not my 'official [*emphasis on 'official'*] seva." I situate what American devotees regarded as "assigned" vs. "unassigned" and "official" vs. "unofficial" seva in and address what such types of seva categorizations imply with respect to their practitioners' progressions through the "admirer," "initiate," "ashramite," and "renunciate"

stages of the ADLC in Chapters Five and Six. I probed, “What is your official seva?” “I’m assigned to help in the gardens,” he said. “This, taking care of Hanuman, it’s just something nice that I’m doing for Amma and everyone else, really.”

While some American devotees include in their seva translations and practices acts of service like this, i.e. acts of service that they perform on behalf of a wide variety of beneficiaries in a wide variety of contexts as well as in an ongoing manner, others like an American householder devotee with whom I had an informal conversation in 2015 in the context of a “Seva Saturday” at Amma’s M.A. Center Chicago perform seva practices on behalf of a narrow variety of beneficiaries in a narrow variety of contexts and in an episodic manner. As this spiritual seeker shared with me, he and his wife are from and live in the Chicago metropolitan area. They try to come to Amma’s M.A. Center Chicago once a month to prepare food for residents of a nearby homeless shelter in Aurora, Illinois. I asked him if he performs any other seva practices. He responded, “I know other peoples’ work is more varied ... I’m just not there yet.” Indeed, for him, to “become like [Amma],” to progress towards embodiment of the spiritual truth that all are essentially one through seva practices that one performs in a diversity of ways and frequently, was “the goal” for which to strive.⁶⁹

CHAPTER CONCLUSION

In this chapter, I answered the following background questions: who is Amma; how do American members of her global following understand her; how do they understand her type of spirituality; and what is the role of seva in her type of spirituality? As I showed, American members of Amma’s global following understand Amma as a purna avatar of Devi in her manifestation as the Hindu pantheon’s Divine Mother goddess (Puri 1988, 197). In

understanding Amma as such and therefore as transcendent and absolute divinity itself, they also understand her as a superior guru whom is uniquely equipped to mediate “divine grace, knowledge, and power” to them, her devoted disciples (Gold 1988, 17). After providing an overview of bhakti (devotionalism), I then demonstrated that American members of Amma’s global following use this tradition of Hindu faith as a framework for making sense of seva as worship not only of omnipresent divinity but of Amma whom they understand as a personification thereof. In this way, they position seva the ultimate devotional act.

In Chapters Four through Six I flesh out my finding that the ways in which American devotees translate and practice seva are far from uniform. While some include in their seva translations and practices acts of service that they perform on behalf of a narrow variety of beneficiaries in a narrow variety of contexts and in an episodic manner, others include in their seva translations and practices acts of service that they perform on behalf of a wider variety of beneficiaries in a wider variety of contexts and in more of an ongoing manner. Indeed, while some reflect less, others reflect greater calibration to Amma’s main spiritual teaching that one ought to approach all of his or her interactions as opportunities to perform seva.

CH. 4: THE AMERICAN DEVOTEE LIFE CYCLE - ADMIRER STAGE

In Chapters Four through Six, I answer two questions. First, what does the American Devotee Life Cycle (ADLC) look like? And, second, how do the seva translations and practices of American members of Amma's global following change over the course of this life cycle? In this chapter, I detail the series of experiences that individuals in the first stage of the ADLC undergo while participating in M.A. Mission social life. I also detail their seva translations and practices. I term this stage the "admirer" stage.

CHAPTER ORGANIZATION

I break this chapter into four sections. In section one, I introduce the series of M.A. Mission experiences that I argue represent the stages of the most common variations of the ADLC. I term these stages the "admirer," "initiate," "ashramite," and "renunciate" stages. I term these most common variations of the ADLC the "American Householder" and "American Renunciate Pathways."

In section two, I discuss Amma's religious inclusivism (Warrier 2005). I then evidence it as a reason why, when it comes to the various ways in which devotionism manifests among American members of her global following, those ways are many. Because those ways are many, I refer to the American Householder and the American Renunciate Pathways not as the but rather as the most common variations of the ADLC.

In section three, I provide an overview of the demographics of the typical American devotee. I do this, for - beyond an orientation towards the defining characteristics of metaphysicalism that I discussed earlier - American devotees share a particular set of class-based

demographics (Albanese 2008; Bender 2010; Lucia 2014). These class-based demographics, beyond serving as identifiers of whom in the United States tends to come to Amma, proved significant to my dissertation research as contexts that inform the array of possible experiences from which American devotees choose to participate in her M.A. Mission's social life. These includes the array of possible experiences from which they choose to perform seva practices.

In section four, I detail the M.A. Mission experiences of individuals in the admirer stage of the ADLC's American Householder Pathway (AHP). These include hearing about Amma, engaging in information-seeking behaviors, encountering Amma, and performing seva practices. As I illustrate, individuals in this stage of the AHP limit their seva translations and practices to acts of service that they perform on behalf of the "poorest of the poor" (Madigan 1998). They perform these acts of service on an occasional but nonetheless recurring basis and in the context of what they term "volunteer events" that representatives from overseeing organizations schedule weeks if not months in advance. This suggests that, rather than through the Hindu concept of seva, initial participation in Amma's M.A. Mission by Americans oftentimes makes a back-door entry through the more familiar - and, as I stress, familiarly auditable - concepts of Christian charitable service and humanitarianism.

THE AMERICAN DEVOTEE LIFE CYCLE

Over the course of conducting dissertation research among American members of Amma's global following in Aurora, Illinois; Castro Valley, California; Elburn, Illinois; and New York, New York, between July 2015 – July 2016, I recurring witnessed such individuals undergo one of three series of experiences while participating in M.A. Mission social life. These series of experiences corresponded with their progression through (a) the admirer, initiate, and

ashramite or (b) the admirer, initiate, ashramite, and/or renunciate stages that I visualize below (Figure 4.1).

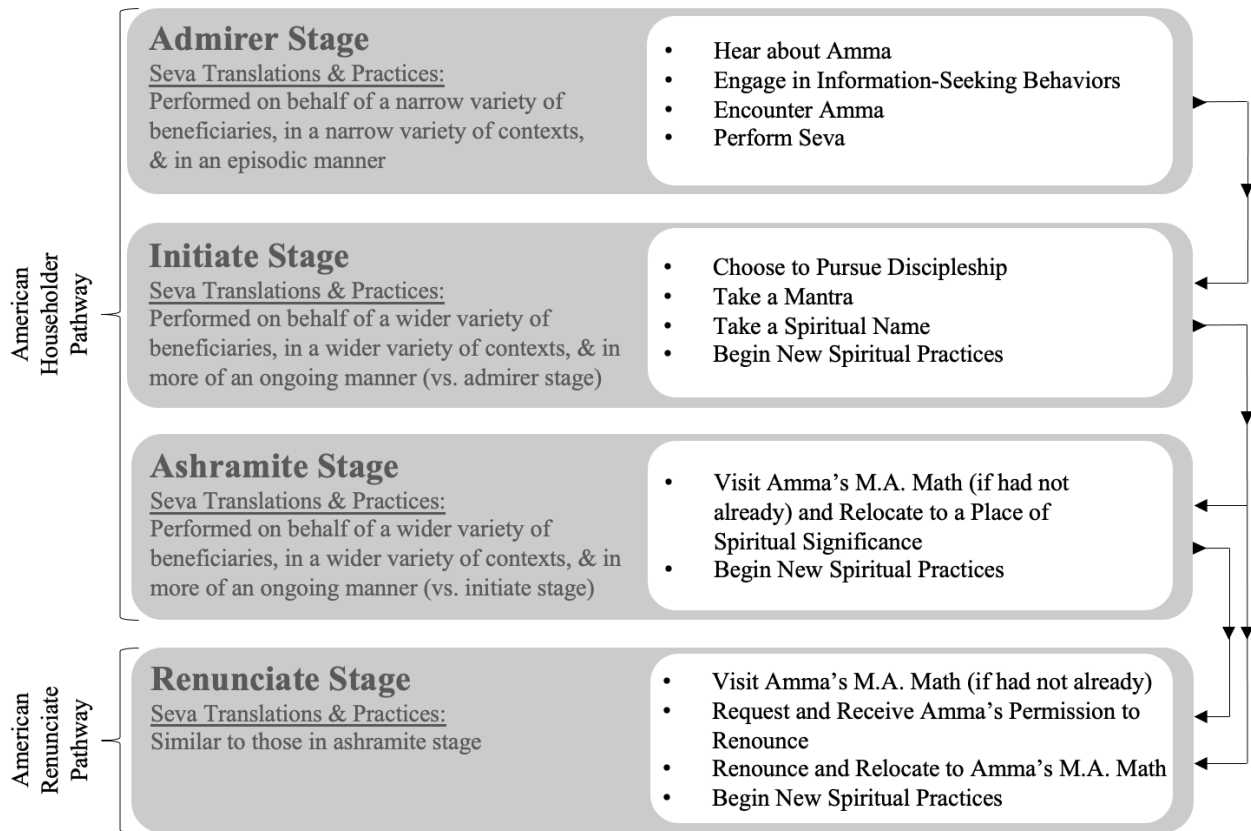


Figure 4.1: The stages of the most common variations of American Devotee Life Cycle.

Given the routine nature of this pattern, I concluded that these series of experiences represent the stages of the most common variations of the ADLC. I term these the “American Householder” and “American Renunciate Pathways.” Because I recurrently witnessed individuals progress through the admirer and initiate stages before entering the renunciate stage (some also progressed through the ashramite stage), I consider the American Renunciate Pathway (ARP) an optional extension of the American Householder Pathway (AHP).

Different Seva Translations and Practices in the American Devotee Life Cycle

I assign these stages the names that I do because of their characterizing attributes. Characteristic of the admirer stage is the state of being an admirer but not a disciple. The initiate stage is characterized by the state of being a householder devotee; the ashramite stage by the state of being a householder devotee who resides at Amma's M.A. Math in Amritapuri, India, or at one of her M.A. Centers in the United States; and the renunciate stage by the state of being a renunciate devotee. But, non-devotee vs. devotee, non-ashramite vs. ashramite, and householder vs. renunciate distinctions are not the only factors that distinguish these stages. Indeed, the ways in which individuals translate and practice seva distinguish them, too. To this point, individuals in the admirer stage translate and practice seva narrowly. They limit their seva translations and practices to acts of service that they perform on behalf of the "poorest of the poor" (Madigan 1998). They perform these acts of service on an occasional but nonetheless recurring basis and in the context of what they term "volunteer events" that representatives from overseeing organizations schedule weeks if not months in advance. Individuals in the initiate stage translate and practice seva more broadly. They do this by including in their seva translations and practices acts of service that they perform on behalf of other (affluent) devotees and Amma's M.A. Mission. They perform these acts of service in a wider variety of contexts and in more of an ongoing manner than their counterparts in the admirer stage. I detail these individuals' seva translations and practices in Chapter Five. Individuals in the ashramite and renunciate stages translate and practice seva more broadly still. They do this by including in their seva translations and practices acts of service that they perform on behalf of the environment. They perform these acts of service in a wider variety of contexts and in more of an ongoing manner than their counterparts in the initiate stage. I detail these individuals' seva translations and practices in

Chapter Six. In Chapter Seven, I discuss the relevance of American devotees' seva translations and practices to American expressions and co-productions of Amma's charisma in Chapter Seven.

AMMA'S RELIGIOUS INCLUSIVISM

Because the AHP and ARP emerged from my research not as the but rather as the most common variations of the ADLC, what I intend to achieve by detailing these pathways is a description of the ADLC that, in being general, is representative for most.⁷⁰ I do not intend to achieve a totalizing description of devotionism and the various ways that it manifests among American members of Amma's global following. Indeed, those ways are many. To explain, I turn to addressing Amma's religious inclusivism in its form as adherence to the ishta devata concept in the context of mantra diksha. Mantra diksha is the ritual whereby a guru bestows a mantra onto a spiritual seeker, thereby solidifying the guru-devotee relationship. According to Warriar (2005), "religious inclusivism" refers to a guru's acknowledgement and approval of spiritual seekers - those within his or her fold, included - following the teachings of religious figureheads other than himself or herself. In Amma's global following, such teachings include those of religious figureheads from Hindu as well as non-Hindu traditions.

Amma's Adherence to the Ishta Devata Concept in Mantra Diksha

Not limiting her understanding of the notion to any one religious tradition's available representations of the divine, Karthika provided the following description of "ishta devata" in an interview that I conducted with her in 2014 at Amma's M.A. Center Chicago in Elburn, Illinois: "Some people say their [ishta devata] is an actual manifestation, [but] God is ineffable, so it

makes sense that someone's ishta devata might ... be a sentiment, like love, because god is beyond form."⁷¹ Amma adheres to the ishta devata concept. She does this by encouraging every spiritual seeker who comes to her to worship not just any but rather that manifestation of the divine to which he or she feels closest. Hence, in the moments just prior to detailing the steps that my mantra diksha would then soon entail, one of the several householder devotees whom were facilitating "mantra orientation" on June 25, 2014, or the third and final day of Amma's Summer 2014 Chicago Public Satsang Program at her M.A. Center Chicago, asked me, "When you think of god, who or what comes to mind?" I assumed this "mantra orientation" facilitator a householder devotee based on his colorful (vs. all-white) Indian attire.⁷²

When American devotees talk about the mantras that Amma bestows, they oftentimes describe those mantras as means by which to summon her necessarily transformative divine energies, or "grace." Illustrating this, Priya stated the following in an interview that I conducted with her in 2016 at Amma's M.A. Center Chicago: "When I chant my mantra, I can feel [*emphasis on 'feel'*] Amma's presence. Even though her body is way over on the other side of the world [at her M.A. Math], it's like her *sankalpa* [divine intention or resolve; in the M.A. Mission, Amma's divine intention or resolve to make good on her divine mission to uplift humanity through selfless service] is right here [*points to her heart*] with me."⁷³

American devotees consider Amma a purna avatar of Devi in her manifestation as the Hindu pantheon's Divine Mother goddess and therefore transcendent and absolute divinity itself. Due to these individuals' conceptualization of Amma as such, I supposed that they regarded her as their ishta devata. This coupled with American devotees' descriptions of their mantras as means by which to summon Amma's "grace" led me to suppose further that, of those whom had received mantras from Amma, most if not all had received mantras with her as their focus.

Nevertheless, because my “mantra orientation” facilitator did not assume that I regarded Amma as my ishta devata, I concluded that, of the American devotees whom had received mantras from Amma, at least some likely received mantras with other manifestations of the divine as their focus.

I say, “likely received,” because Amma claims mantras to be key facilitators of the guru-devotee relationship. In upholding the nature of this relationship as especially intimate, she instructs members of her global following not to disclose the mantras that she bestows. The following statement demonstrates this. I found it typed on the small, folded slip of paper that one of Amma’s senior disciples, identifiable as such by his ochre-colored robe, handed me after the conclusion of my mantra diksha; “Keep [your] mantra as a secret. It is a secret between the master and disciple” (Figure 4.2).

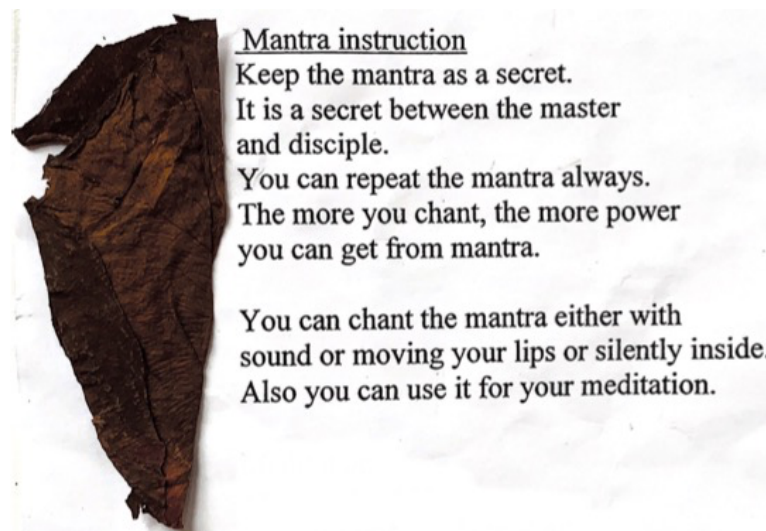


Figure 4.2: The “mantra instruction” and rose petal that a senior member of Amma’s global following gave me after the conclusion of my mantra diksha on June 25th during Amma’s Summer 2014 Public Satsang Program at her M.A. Center Chicago in Elburn, Illinois.

Warrier (2005) addresses the role of variant and secretive mantras in productions of intimate relationships between Amma and (Indian) members of her global following. As she argues, unlike the mantras that gurus from other Hindu sects bestow onto spiritual seekers, those that Amma bestows neither bind devotees together in the esoteric knowledge of a particular phrase exclusive to the group nor distinguish devotees from spiritual outsiders. In being variant and secretive, they establish individual and separate links between Amma and her disciples. In being individual and separate, they fuel perceptions of intimacy. Out of respect for their devotion to Amma, I did not ask any American devotees to disregard her instructions and reveal their mantras. As a result, I do not know how many received mantras with Amma vs. other manifestations of the divine as their focus. The following expression of Amma's religious inclusivism nevertheless suggests that their numbers are far from nil.

In a collection of conversations that he compiled, Puri (2006) writes about a time when Amma bestowed onto an American devotee not the Kali manta that he requested but rather a mantra with Jesus Christ as its focus.⁷⁴ “*Om Chritave namah*” is an example of such a mantra. It translates from Sanskrit to mean “salutations to Jesus Christ.” According to Puri (2006, 108-109), Amma told this devotee, “Amma knows that you were born and brought up ... a Christian, so that *samskara* [predominate tendency inherited from past lives] is deep rooted in you ... you must chant a Christ mantra, as that is your predominant *samskara*. If you chant other mantras, you will have difficulty sticking to them in the long run. Conflicting thoughts are bound to arise.”

I presumed that Amma continued bestowing “Christ mantra[s]” onto at least a minority of her American devotees well into the years of my dissertation research (Puri 2006, 109). I presumed this based on artistic renderings of Jesus Christ that I found available for purchase

online through Amma’s “Amma Shop” as well as my (albeit infrequent) observations of American members of Amma’s global following carrying rosaries while also wearing bracelets bearing the popular Hindu mantra, “Om namah shivaya.” Taken together, these observations reinforced my supposition that, of American devotees whom had received mantras from Amma, at least some likely received mantras with other manifestations of the divine as their focus. They also reinforced my conclusion that, when it comes to devotionism and the various ways that it manifests among American members of Amma’s global following, indeed, those ways are many.

I add that the expressions of householdership and renunciation, which I include in this chapter, while they emerged from my dissertation research as the most common variations of the ADLC, have cultural and historical roots in Indian ideas about the stages of the ideal Hindu life. The *Laws of Manu* (1969) [earliest of the *Dharmasatra*, or that body of Sanskrit texts, which outlines Hindu standards of behavior from the point of view of Brahmanical authors whom, according to Glucklich (2011) and Lariviere (2004), aimed to reconcile local customs (necessarily dynamic) with Vedic religious law (presumedly timeless)] outlines these *ashramas* (life stages).⁷⁵ I summarize them below. I do this to introduce the idea that the expressions of householdership and renunciation, which I include in this chapter - while they have cultural and historical roots in Indian ideas about – are unique in that they challenge a certain notion that underpins the stages of the ideal Hindu life. This notion is renunciation’s presumedly inherent spiritual superiority over householdership. I return to this idea at several points in Chapters Five and Six.

The Stages of the Ideal Hindu Life

According to the *Laws of Manu*, the first stage of the ideal Hindu life is *brahmacharya* (ashrama of the student, Manu 1969). It includes rigorous study of the *Vedas* under the guidance of a guru.⁷⁶ *Grihastha* (ashrama of the householder) follows *brahmacharya*. A householder is a layperson. He or she “leads a family life” (Gottler 1996, 136). Unlike *brahmacharya*, *grihastha* implies fulfillment of multiple duties. These include satisfaction of *kama* (pleasures) and attainment of *artha* (material prosperity). Upon seeing “his (skin) wrinkled, ... (his hair) white, and the sons of his sons,” the individual transitions into *vanaprastha* (ashrama of the forest dweller; Manu 1969, 198). Characterized by limited engagement in worldly life, *vanaprastha* requires the individual to bequeath his or her property to a line of descendants and relocate to the countryside.

In their discussions of age and aging in India, Lawrence Cohen (2000) as well as Diane Mines and Sarah Lamb (2002) liken *vanaprastha* to the present-day life stage of the retiree. According to them, social and behavioral scientists concerned with senility and the interplay among the material and social processes that it involves, while they may understand the retirement home as a contemporary stand-in for Manu’s (1969) countryside, should not go so far as to assume it a peaceful refuge. This is because, with growing demand in India for elder care facilities stemming from what Cohen (2000) calls the phenomenon of the “bad family,” many such institutions are untoward reflections of abandonment. Cohen (2000) elaborates, stating that in India, it is not uncommon for families to abandon their elderly. He roots such instances in financial constraints and shame associated with the widespread perception that lack of love is the cause of older individuals’ mental illness. Cohen (2000) then goes on to argue that acts of

relinquishing older, mentally ill individuals to retirement homes is a kind of strategy that families employ to mitigate their risks of experiencing the social consequences of blame-able suffering.

The fourth and final stage of the ideal Hindu life is *sannyasa* (ashrama of the renunciate). Diane Mines and Sarah Lamb (2002) describe it as a journey into strict asceticism. As they state, one who renounces “strives ... to become free from all attachments to people, places, things, and even his own body, through taking final leave of family, abnegating caste identity, giving up all possessions, performing his own funeral rites, begging, and constantly moving from place to place so that no new connections will develop” (Mines and Lamb 2002, 65). For a karma yogi (practitioner of karma yoga), the purpose of renouncing and practicing asceticism to this extreme degree is to extinguish all the *prarabdha* (burdens of karma) that he or she has accumulated over the course of this and past lifetimes.

To explain the relevance of the stages of the ideal Hindu life to American devotees, I build on my earlier discussions concerning karma and karma yoga. Hindu belief has long upheld Manu’s (1969) claim that *sannyasi(ni)s*, because they are the only spiritual seekers to renounce all trappings of worldly life, are also the only spiritual seekers capable of ridding themselves of *prarabdha* and therefore of arriving at self-realization, or realization of their and all other beings’ essential similitude with the divine. As a result, it has long assigned greater spiritual value to renunciation vs. householdership. American members of Amma’s global following challenge this view. I elaborate; as I showed earlier, American devotees demonstrate their devotion to Amma by performing *seva* practices. According to them, because Amma is an incarnation of omni-present divinity, selfless service to another is selfless service to her and therefore the ultimate devotional act. Importantly, when I say that such individuals perform *seva* practices, I leave little room for non-conforming outliers. This is because all American devotees among

whom I conducted dissertation research, in upholding seva as the ultimate devotional act, incorporated it into their spiritual practices. Moreover, when they performed seva practices, they all considered themselves in the process of extinguishing prarabdha. It follows from this that, for American devotees, what determines a spiritual seeker's ability to rid himself or herself of prarabdha is not the pathway that he or she pursues. Rather, it is the degree to which he or she demonstrates commitment to seva (by performing seva practices on behalf of a wide variety of beneficiaries in a wide variety of contexts and in an ongoing manner) while pursuing that pathway. To illustrate, I offer a statement that Priya provided. She provided it in the context of an interview that I conducted with her in 2016 at Amma's M.A. Center Chicago. At the time, we were discussing her 2009 decision to cease pursuing renunciation and lead a householder's life:

I considered [renouncing] when I was just out of college and ... thinking about what I wanted to do with my life ... but I felt like, while I considered [renunciation] a very admirable path, it wasn't quite right for me. My mindset and interests were more in line with [those] of a householder, a spiritually-oriented householder, granted, but not a renunciate ... Maybe in my next life I'll be a renunciate, not because that's a higher or better path, necessarily. Householders can put their egos aside, serve god by serving others selflessly, and burn away karma, too. Besides, who's to say this householder isn't serving others more fully than that renunciate ... Anyway, maybe [in my next life] I'll be a renunciate, because, when you consider the concept of reincarnation, how many births we've had in this world in all the ages and times, anything is possible.⁷⁷

When it comes to expressing their devotion, renunciate members of Amma's global following do not only perform seva practices. By definition, they renounce. Given the extreme degree of worldly rejection that renunciation implies, why wouldn't American householder devotees consider their renunciate counterparts necessarily further along the process of extinguishing their prarabdha? As I learned, while American renunciate devotees give up many, they do not give up all their possessions. The same is true for their social relationships. American householder devotees are aware of this. As a result, pursuit of renunciation vs. householdership is, for them, not reason enough to assume a spiritual seeker is further along the process of

extinguishing his or her prarabdha. I address displays of asceticism among American renunciate devotees in Chapter Six.

What does the ADLC look like? How do the seva translations and practices of American members of Amma's global following change over the course of this life cycle? Before answering these questions with respect to the admirer stage of the ADLC, I now turn to providing an overview the demographics of the typical American devotee.

AMERICAN MEMBERS OF AMMA'S GLOBAL FOLLOWING

American members of Amma's global following bear a striking resemblance to practitioners of metaphysical religion, for example, in terms of their shared displeasure with organized religion - its rules, hierarchies, and institutions, i.e. its restrictive elements - as well as their predilection for à la carte religiosity (Albanese 2008; Bender 2010; Lucia 2014). Beyond these individuals' shared orientation towards the alternative and polyvalent, though, they resemble practitioners of metaphysical religion demographically as members of the United States' "middle class." As evidence of their "middle class" status, the American devotees among whom I conducted dissertation research oftentimes cited their educational backgrounds and employment histories. Especially when coupled with the discretionary income and leisure time that these two markers of "middle class" status tend to generate, they inform the experiences that such individuals undergo while progressing through the AHP and ARP. In this section, I address the educational backgrounds and employment histories of American members of Amma's global following. I then discuss one way these two markers of "middle class" status inform such individuals' M.A. Mission experiences.

Educational Backgrounds

When I interviewed American devotees, it was not uncommon for them to mention their or, if they renounced prior to living independently, their parents' "middle class" socio-economic status. It was also not uncommon for them to mention their educational backgrounds. Given that these individuals tended to mention their educational backgrounds immediately after mentioning their or their parents' "middle class" socio-economic status, I supposed that they considered the former evidence of the latter. Most had at least one undergraduate degree from a four-year institution. While many also had one graduate degree, several like Paadini had two. In 2016, Paadini was a householder devotee. Originally from Madison, Wisconsin, she and her husband (Ganaka, also a devotee) relocated to Amma's M.A. Center Chicago shortly after her M.A. Mission's establishment of it in 2012. Those who did not have at least one undergraduate degree from a four-year college/university were enrolled in or had started and, due to relocating to Amma's M.A. Math as part of renouncing, dropped out of such a degree program.

Employment Histories

Beyond their educational backgrounds, American devotees whom I interviewed frequently shared their employment histories. These included their professions before and after choosing discipleship to Amma. All had worked or were working in specialized areas of the United States service sector. Most were business executives, lawyers, teachers, and nurses. A few worked in information technology and retail. Several switched or returned to professions from which they had retired after choosing discipleship. Interestingly, they did this at Amma's behest. To illustrate, one devotee whom I met in 2008 during a regular monthly meeting of the now defunct Milwaukee Satsang Group in Grafton, Wisconsin, took a temporary leave of

absence from Amma's M.A. Math where she had lived for almost two years as a renunciate to pursue a degree in nursing from a four-year university in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. In an informal conversation that I had with this devotee after the conclusion of this meeting, she attributed her pursuit of higher education to a request by Amma; "Amma suggested that I go to school to become a nurse, so I did!"

I re-connected with this devotee while chatting in 2012 at Amma's M.A. Math. Immediately after completing her degree requirements, she returned to this facility and started applying her then newly acquired nursing skills to her seva practices by providing healthcare to patients at Amma's Amritakripa Charitable Hospital in India. Amma's Amritakripa Charitable Hospital is a small healthcare facility located just beyond the walls of her M.A. Math. In 2009, it included an intake room, approximately ten beds, and a pharmacy. Consistent with Amma's aim to make good on what I mentioned earlier is her divine mission to uplift humanity by encouraging members of her global following to adopt seva as their preferred spiritual practice, the organizational mission of this hospital includes the provision of a forum in which devotees who reside at Amma's M.A. Math can practice seva by delivering free or low-cost healthcare to other residents of and visitors to that facility as well as to individuals from the surrounding community. I received emergency and follow-up healthcare at Amma's Amritakripa Charitable Hospital between December 29, 2008 – January 5, 2009, after suffering an anaphylactic reaction to a combination of anti-malarial and antibiotic drugs. I discuss my experience being on the receiving end of American devotees' seva practices at this hospital elsewhere (Esche-Eiff 2009).

Another devotee whom I met, this time while performing seva practices in 2015 at Amma's M.A. Center Chicago, temporarily relocated from her residence at this facility to Amma's M.A. Math. She did this to identify legal obstacles to the then future launch of

AMMACHI Labs' Women's Empowerment Project. AMMACHI Labs' Women's Empowerment Project was a seva initiative that Amma's M.A. Mission undertook between 2012-2014 with funding from the United Nations Democracy Fund. Its objective was to provide free vocational training in areas like plumbing, masonry, fabric making, and jewelry making as well as life enrichment courses to women with low levels of literacy in India's remote and impoverished communities, via a fleet of mobile computer labs (M.A. Mission 2014). Over the course of a Seva Saturday at Amma's M.A. Center Chicago in 2015, I chatted with this devotee. She returned to the legal profession from which she had retired for the express purpose of taking on the aforementioned charge. She did this at Amma's behest; "Amma asked me to determine how knowledgeable the women in some of India's most remote and impoverished communities were with respect to their rights as workers. Only once I determined that, helped to problem-solved for that, could other devotees start developing actual curriculum." With furrowed brows that indicated frustration over what she discovered, this devotee added, "In the end, I found that these women, they weren't just extremely unaware of their rights. When someone refused to pay them, they felt like they couldn't say or do anything. 'Men do that, not women,' they would say." In 2015, this devotee was a householder devotee. She had lived at Amma's M.A. Center Chicago for almost one year prior to taking up temporary residence at Amma' M.A. Math.

Discretionary Income and Leisure Time

Due to affluence stemming from their educational backgrounds and employment histories, many American devotees have enough discretionary income and leisure time to follow Amma on her annual *yatras*. And, follow her they do.⁷⁸ In an interview that I conducted with

Karthika in 2016 at her parents' residence on the grounds of Amma's M.A. Center Chicago, she addressed this connection between affluence and (frequent) participation in Amma's yatras:

My parents have been so [*emphasis on 'so'*] generous. After fourteen years, this is the first time they've asked me to pay my way. That's why I took a short leave [from Amma's M.A. Math] and came here [to her M.A. Center Chicago]. It's great to be with my parents. Because I live so far away, I don't get to see them very often. But my main reasons for coming [to Amma's M.A. Center Chicago] are to work and save money.⁷⁹

“Yatra” is a Sanskrit word that means “journey.” In the Hindu tradition, it refers to a pilgrimage that a spiritual seeker makes to a site of spiritual significance. The location of a spiritual seeker's guru is an example of such a site. In Amma's M.A. Mission, “yatra” refers to something different, namely a trip that Amma makes to a city in which a sizable number of her followers reside. While on her annual yatras between 2012-2016, Amma traveled to at least one but usually multiple cities in India (February – March); Australia, Malaysia, Singapore (April); Japan (May); the United States (June – July and November); Canada (July); Denmark, France, Germany, Ireland, Italy, the Netherlands, Spain, Switzerland, and the United Kingdom (October – November).⁸⁰ After arriving in each city, she held a public satsang program. In several cities, she also held a retreat. In sum, “yatra” refers in Amma's M.A. Mission not to a pilgrimage that a disciple makes to the location of his or her guru but rather to a pilgrimage that the guru makes to the location(s) of her disciples. By reversing who travels to whom, the notion of the yatra in Amma's M.A. Mission challenges the norms of hierarchy that symbolize the inequality between enlightened guru and unenlightened disciple (Esche-Eiff 2009; Fuller 1992; Warriar 2005).⁸¹

Additional Demographics

While most of the individuals among whom I conducted dissertation research were 20 – 40 years old, their ages ranged from birth to 70.⁸² Most were of European descent and had previous experience with Roman Catholic, Lutheran, Unitarian, and New Age faiths.⁸³

The total number of individuals whom make up Amma’s American following is difficult to estimate. I offer three reasons for why this is the case. First, as I illustrated in Chapter One, members of Amma’s global following are widely dispersed. This includes American members of her global following. Second, as I show in this chapter as well as in Chapters Five and Six, the M.A. Mission “nodes” that American devotees frequent in the practice of their faith differ, for example, depending on where they are in their progressions through the ADLC (Appadurai 1996, Esche-Eiff 2009). And, third, some M.A. Mission “nodes” are transient. As I mentioned in Chapter One, satsang groups tend to disband upon Amma’s FBO establishing an M.A. Center nearby. Nevertheless, to provide insight into the scope of Amma’s American following at the time of my dissertation research, I offer the below estimate of daily attendance at her summer 2015 public satsang programs in the United States. I based this estimate on an approximation of daily attendance at Amma’s Summer 2015 New York Public Satsang Program. This event took place at the Jacob K. Javits Convention Center in New York, New York. It ran from July 12-14, 2015. I detail later in this chapter how I arrived at this approximation. I add that I provide this estimate of daily attendance at Amma’s summer 2015 public satsang programs in the United States with the understanding that, while many American members of her global following across all stages of the ADLC participate in such events, not all do. Also, of those whom do participate in such events, not all do every year.

Approximate Daily Summer 2015 NY Public Satsang Program Attendance	Number of Cities Where Amma Held a Summer 2015 Public Satsang Program	Approximate Daily Summer 2015 Public Satsang Program Attendance	<i>Minimum Number of Days in a 2015 Public Satsang Program</i>	<i>Maximum Number of Days in a 2015 Public Satsang Program</i>
6,000	10	60,000	2	3

Table 4.1: Estimate of daily attendance at Amma’s Summer 2015 public satsang programs in the United States.

For comparison, Lucia (2014) estimates that, seven years earlier, eight to ten thousand individuals attended Amma’s two-day Summer 2008 Chicago Public Satsang Program. This event was held at the Westin Lombard Yorktown Center in Lombard, Illinois. It ran from July 5-6, 2008.

ADMIRER STAGE OF THE AMERICAN HOUSEHOLDER PATHWAY

In this section, I detail the M.A. Mission experiences of individuals in the admirer stage of the AHP. These experiences include hearing about Amma, engaging in information-seeking behaviors, encountering Amma, and performing seva practices.

Hear about Amma: Word-of-Mouth

Due to affluence stemming from their “middle class” status, American devotees enjoy easy access to a wide variety of “middle class” media sources. Indeed - as I surmised based on signs that I found taped to walls, stanchion posts, etc. at multiple public satsang program locations across the United States forbidding attendees from taking and uploading to online platforms any pictures, audio recordings, or video recordings of Amma - they enjoy easy access to the internet and the various forms of “middle class” media housed there. Despite easy access to them, however, American devotees do not first hear about Amma through “middle class”

media sources. Rather, they first hear about Amma by word-of-mouth.⁸⁴ Even more specifically, they first heard about Amma by word-of-mouth originating with family members and friends. This is despite Amma's M.A. Mission advertising her public satsang programs via extremely visible channels like billboards in high-traffic areas [In 2018, Amma's M.A. Mission advertised her then upcoming New York Public Satsang Program via a billboard in Times Square (M.A. Mission 2018)]. Hence, when I mentioned in an informal conversation that I had in 2016 with Meredith that my mother, interested in the opportunity "to do some volunteer work," accompanied me to Amma's 2016 Chicago Public Satsang Program at her M.A. Center Chicago, she exclaimed, "Your first convert!" Her smile was so wide that it suggested not only approval but also delight. In 2016, Meredith was a householder devotee from Chicago, Illinois. I note here that my mother's conversion did not occur. It was also not my intention.

This exchange is significant for two reasons. First, it illustrates the common American devotee practice of introducing family members and friends to Amma. Second, it reflects the common American devotee belief that Amma, in being a purna avatar of Devi in her manifestation as the Hindu pantheon's Divine Mother goddess and therefore transcendent and absolute divinity itself, is a superior guru whose very nature it is to continue to gain new followers.⁸⁵

Hear about Amma: Christian Charitable Narratives

Despite regarding Amma as a purna avatar of Devi, American members of her global following, when they first hear about her, do so in Christian charitable terms. By "Christian charitable," I mean that descriptor, which commonly gets applied to acts of service that an individual performs on behalf of the "poorest of the poor," for displaying reverence to god in the

image of the suffering Jesus Christ (Madigan 1998). Saint Mother Teresa of Calcutta popularized this translation of the notion in the mid-twentieth century when she established the Missionaries of Charity. The Missionaries of Charity is a Catholic non-profit organization. Its aim remains to comfort "the hungry, the naked, the homeless, the crippled, the blind, the lepers, all those people who feel unwanted, unloved, uncared for throughout society, people that have become a burden to the society and are shunned by everyone" (Goll and Goll 2006, 122).

To illustrate this extension of Christian charitable notions into American introductions to Amma, Priya shared in an interview that I conducted with her in 2008 at her then residence in Grafton, Wisconsin, that - when a family friend first told her about Amma – that family friend referred to her as “a great lady saint from India.” “The conversation happened so long ago,” said Priya. “But, I remember that [this family friend] talked about [Amma’s] motherly love, her incredible compassion, and all the work that she does for the poor.” I asked Priya if she remembered anything else that this family friend mentioned in the context of this conversation. She replied, “No, but that was enough to fascinate me!”⁸⁶

Likewise, Jill’s family friend first told her about Amma. When she did, she referred to Amma as a “saint.”⁸⁷ In 2012, Jill was an admirer from Fort Worth, Texas. I interviewed Jill in 2012 at Amma’s M.A. Math after meeting her in “ashram orientation.” “Ashram orientation” is a short, usually one-hour-long informational session about Amma’s M.A. Math. According to “Welcome to Amritapuri,” all first-time visitors to Amma’s M.A. Math should attend a session of “ashram orientation;” “A guided orientation tour, which begins with a short video about Amma’s life and work, and includes a walking tour of the Ashram premises, starts from the Information Center daily at 5:00 p.m. We strongly encourage all new visitors to take this brief tour, as it really helps you to find your way and make the most of your stay here at Amritapuri”

(M.A. Mission NDb). “Welcome to Amritapuri” is an undated M.A. Mission pamphlet. The householder devotee who registered my arrival at Amma’s M.A. Math in 2012 provided me with a copy. I assumed him a householder devotee based on his colorful (vs. all-white) Indian attire.

Although I was not a first-time visitor to Amma’s M.A. Math at the time, I opted to attend a session of “ashram orientation.” I did this to further my understanding of the AHP. This includes the narratives via which American entrants into Amma’s fold hear about her. Beyond “a short video about Amma’s life and work, and ... a walking tour of the Ashram premises,” the “ashram orientation” session that I attended included a lecture by one of Amma’s senior disciples (M.A. Mission NDb). Focused on what he termed “appropriate ashram behavior,” he stressed the importance of performing seva, dressing modestly as well as refraining from taking and uploading to online platforms any pictures, audio recordings, or video recordings of Amma. Smoking; drinking; and making public displays of affection, for example, hugging, kissing, and hand-holding were likewise discouraged. Drawing on the moral authority that Amma enjoys as a byproduct of her saintly reputation, he concluded his lecture with the following appeal to attendees’ sense of right and wrong: “Amma’s renunciate disciples try very hard to always focus inward. Out of respect for them, Amma asks that you please help us maintain an atmosphere that is conducive to their spiritual practices.”

Hear about Amma: Humanitarian Narratives

Unlike Priya’s family friend, Jill’s went on to describe Amma in humanitarian and, to a lesser extent, philanthropic terms. After Christian charitable, humanitarian terms were the commonest ones via which the American devotees among whom I conducted dissertation research first heard about Amma. The following comes from my 2012 interview Jill:

I remember it was in 2005, shortly after Hurricane Katrina, when my [family] friend first told me about Amma. I was living in Fort Worth, Texas, and the city was taking in lots of evacuees, so Hurricane Katrina was a big topic of conversation ... ‘Amma sent teams of volunteers to Louisiana.’ That’s what my [family] friend told me. She also told me that Amma donated money to help clean-up.⁸⁸

Amma phoned Swami Dayamritananda Puri (then Brahmachari Dayamrita Chaitanya) a few days after Hurricane Katrina reached Louisiana’s coastline on August 29, 2005 (M.A. Mission 2005a). At the time, Swami Dayamritananda Puri was based at Amma’s Amrita Yoga Center in Hot Springs, Arkansas. In Amma’s M.A. Mission, Amrita Yoga Centers are similar to M.A. Centers in that they are satellite facilities. Unlike M.A. Centers, though, they are not ashrams but rather studios where devotees meet weekly or monthly to practice Amma’s trademarked variety of meditation [Integrated Amrita Meditation Technique (IAM)] and yoga as well as to sing bhajans and listen to and discuss recordings of satsangs given by Amma. In reaction to Amma’s call, Swami Dayamritananda Puri mobilized groups of devotees from Arkansas, California, Minnesota, Missouri, and Oklahoma. They collected and distributed donations of food, water, clothes, and school supplies to affected individuals in Louisiana. They also helped evacuees in other states to locate missing loved ones, secure housing, and find work (M.A. Mission 2005b). Along with another of Amma’s senior monastic disciples named Swami Ramakrishnananda, Swami Dayamritananda Puri traveled to New York, New York, later that year. There, he presented former President Bill Clinton with a check for USD 1 million (M.A. Mission 2005c). The check was a donation from Amma’s M.A. Mission to The Bush-Clinton Katrina Fund. The Bush-Clinton Katrina Fund is a 501(c)(3) that former Presidents George H.W. Bush and Bill Clinton established to support the long-term recovery of areas affected by Hurricane Katrina.

Hear about Amma: Hindu Narratives

Given that American devotees first hear about Amma in Christian charitable or humanitarian terms, the percentage of those whom first hear about her in Hindu terms is relatively small. Only a few of those among whom I conducted dissertation research first heard about Amma in Hindu terms. Of those, all had prior exposure to the Hindu tradition. Karthika was one of these individuals. She first heard about Amma from a family friend whom referred to her as an “avatar.” As Karthika stated in an informal conversation that I had with her in 2015 at Amma’s M.A. Center Chicago, “I was a devotee of [name of different Indian spiritual leader] at the time. [Name of different Indian spiritual leader] isn’t an avatar, but I knew what that [term] meant.” If not from previous experience as members of different Indian spiritual leaders’ followings, American devotees who first hear about Amma in Hindu terms tend to have prior exposure to the Hindu tradition due formal education and/or independent study.

Curious why most American devotees first hear about Amma in Christian charitable or humanitarian vs. Hindu terms, I asked several to share their personal motivations for using the terms that they did when describing Amma to people whom they presumed were not aware of her already. Priya responded in an interview that I conducted with her in 2008 at her then residence in Grafton, Wisconsin, by talking about ease of translation and greater likelihood of positive reception due to concept familiarity:

It depends on ... background. If they come from a background where they understand the idea of a guru, of an avatar ... then [I] describe Amma as that, because she is my guru, and ... she is an avatar ... But, to people who don’t have that background, I wouldn’t say that ... I think it would seem strange to them, or they might get freaked out. They wouldn’t understand. To most people, I say that [Amma is] a great saint and humanitarian from India, and that I’m deeply inspired by her incredible compassion, love, and humanitarian works.⁸⁹

Echoing Priya, Karthika stated in an interview that I conducted with her in 2008 at Amma's M.A. Math that "A lot of people don't understand Amma, so I just usually talk about how loving she is and her humanitarianism."⁹⁰ Karthika expanded on this statement in an informal conversation that I had with her in 2014 at Amma's M.A. Center Chicago. At the time, Karthika was addressing what she saw as her responsibility to mitigate skepticism about Amma among non-devotees. To explain, I return for a moment to the notion of disingenuous gurus that I introduced earlier.

Disingenuous Gurus as a Reason for Skepticism

The social science literature on disingenuous gurus is vast. Spanning centuries as well as Eastern and New Age religious contexts, it offers a variety of examples of spiritual leaders whose behaviors spiritual seekers have tended to deem suspect due to challenges that those behaviors pose to trademark qualities of "authentic" gurus like austerity, selflessness, and lack of display (Khandelwal 2004; Lucia 2018; Warriar 2000; Ibid 2005). Examples of such behaviors include those that drive a guru's accumulation of wealth, expansion of political influence, and access to sexual partners (Khandelwal 2004; Lucia 2018). For karma yogis especially, to challenge trademark qualities like these is to challenge the very notion of the guru as self-realized due to mastery of disinterested action.

American devotees are aware of disingenuous gurus. While many are aware due to second-hand accounts that they encounter while perusing online blogs written by individuals whom self-identify as former devotees of such gurus or by watching documentaries on the subject, others are aware due to personal experience. Vijaya is one of these individuals. I interviewed him in 2008 at Amma's M.A. Math. Originally from Madison, Wisconsin, he

relocated to this facility upon pursuing renunciation several years prior. “My parents were quite new age,” he said. Similar to how practitioners of metaphysical religion tend to define “spirituality,” Vijaya defined New Age religion as “unbound to any one tradition” (Albanese 2008; Bender 2010; Lucia 2014).⁹¹ “They took me to all types of events ... from all types of [religious] traditions ... I think I was in a [Native American] sweat lodge when I was five years old.”⁹² Towards the end of my 2008 interview with him, Vijaya provided an example of what he termed the “weird things” he experienced while engaging in new age faith-based practices:

[My parents] had somebody lead channeling sessions at our house ... He would channel some ancient spirit ... [Later,] that person admitted that he was lying, that he was faking it out, and made a public apology. In new age groups, I had seen stuff like this all the time. After seeing these things that were supposed to be real and ended up not being real, I ended up not having a lot of faith in them.⁹³

I interviewed Vijaya on the steps of Amma’s Devi temple. Located at the center of her M.A. Math, this structure stands approximately six stories tall and is bright bubblegum pink in color. After roughly thirty minutes of uninterrupted conversation, a group of what I supposed to be admirers bumped into Vijaya and me. I supposed these individuals admirers based on their Western (vs. Indian) attire. Despite the disturbance, Vijaya continued his storytelling. This suggested to me that Vijaya attached a fair amount of significance to what he was then about to share; “When I was a young boy, my family’s spiritual leader ... asked me to give up my most prized possession ... It was a seashell collection. I loved it.”⁹⁴ Unconvinced of this spiritual leader’s authenticity, Vijaya refused the request. “But ...” Vijaya paused. A slight smile broke across his face. “When I walked in the room and saw Amma [for the first time], I just knew she was for real.”⁹⁵ Feeling compelled to make a show of devotion to Amma towards the end of the U.S.-based public satsang program at which he first encountered her, Vijaya presented Amma with his seashell collection.

Also aware of disingenuous gurus, Karthika stated in an informal conversation that I had with her in 2015 at Amma's M.A. Center Chicago, "You know, there are a lot of gurus out there, but many are like boats with holes." Karthika wagged her finger, as if to reinforce the gravity of her message. I mentioned earlier that, when I composed my fieldnotes for the day on which Karthika said this to me, it struck me that she had once made a similar remark. I recovered from an interview that I conducted with her in 2008 at Amma's M.A. Math the following statement in which she analogized other (disingenuous) gurus to "small rafts with holes:" "They [*referring to disingenuous gurus*] might be further along crossing the sea of spirituality [than some]," said Karthika, "but, really, they are just small rafts with holes. They can drown and take their followers with them."⁹⁶ Based on the seven years that separated these two statements, I surmised that, for Karthika, disingenuous gurus were hardly a fleeting but rather an enduring phenomenon that spiritual seekers ought to take seriously. Hence, when a spiritual seeker approaches a potential guru, he or she should do so with caution. Except, when that potential guru is Amma.

Returning to the topic of her personal motivations for using Christian charitable or humanitarian vs. Hindu terms to introduce family members and friends to Amma, Karthika shared with me in an informal conversation that I had with her in 2014 at Amma's M.A. Center Chicago that - in the context of public knowledge about *Holy Hell: A Memoir of Faith, Devotion, and Pure Madness* growing - she tended to refrain from describing Amma to non-devotees in the same terms that its author, Tredwell (2013), uses (e.g. "guru," "Divine Mother"). In Karthika's mind, to do so could give what she terms Tredwell's (2013) "slanderous" account of Amma undue credibility.⁹⁷ While referencing her confidence in the inevitability that - because Amma is a purna avatar of Devi in her manifestation as the Hindu pantheon's Divine Mother goddess and therefore transcendent and absolute divinity itself - spiritual seekers, when they meet Amma, will

passively recognize her as a superior guru and choose discipleship, Karthika then remarked, “When [spiritual seekers] meet Amma, they know she’s real. I don’t want to give anyone the wrong impression before they the chance to meet Amma.”⁹⁸

Engage in Information-Seeking Behaviors

After they first hear about Amma, most Americans engage in information seeking behaviors about her and her M.A. Mission. Interestingly, I found that, of spiritual seekers whom engage in such behaviors, most do so in ways that are less about mitigating skepticism that Amma might be a disingenuous guru than they are about mitigating skepticism that she and her M.A. Mission might be involved in works that stop short of meeting Christian charitable or humanitarian interpretations of “good.” As I argue, this suggests that, rather than through the Hindu concept of *seva*, initial participation in Amma’s M.A. Mission by Americans oftentimes makes a back-door entry through the more familiar - and, as I stress, familiarly auditable - concepts of Christian charitable service and humanitarianism.⁹⁹

Information-Seeking Behaviors Informed by Christian Charitable Service

Importantly, because the notion of Christian charitable service bases deservedness on identity, “good” Christian charitable service demands audibility.¹⁰⁰ However, as Omri Elisha (2008) illustrates via his ethnographic exploration of “compassion fatigue” among members of the Samaritans of Knoxville, a Christian evangelical community in Tennessee, audibility in this context is not just for demonstrating accountability on the part of service providers, i.e. for demonstrating that they are performing acts of service on behalf of the “right” people. It is also

for demonstrating accountability on the part individuals whom are the beneficiaries of that service. I provide a summary of Elisha's (2008) argument below.

The term "compassion fatigue" commonly refers to desensitization that results from repeated exposure to shallow and formulaic representations of human suffering by Western news media outlets (Elisha 2008, 155). Elisha (2008, 155-156) writes that, while "it still is meant to evoke contemplation of ... the gaps between one's moral ambitions and the conditions of existence that reinforce and simultaneously threaten to undermine [those ambitions]," the term refers quite differently for Christian evangelicals to "a condition of emotional exhaustion." Christian evangelicals attribute this condition, which they call "burnout," "to frustrating experiences of being resisted or manipulated by irresponsible and unrepentant [service] beneficiaries" (Elisha 2008, 155-156). According to Elisha (2008, 163), rather than the experiences themselves, the reason for Christian evangelicals' feelings of frustration is the "deep-lying incommensurability" that exists at the intersection of compassion and accountability, i.e. the twin imperatives that define Christian evangelicals' understanding of "good" Christian charitable service whereby one endeavors to embody the "radical sacrificial compassion of Jesus Christ" while at the same time instill in individuals whom are on the receiving end of that service the godly virtues of "moral, financial, and spiritual accountability" (Simmel 1950, 392).

Christian evangelicals are not unaware of this incommensurability. They "see the relationship [between compassion and accountability] as dialectical rather than contradictory" (Elisha 2008, 156). Given this, how is it that Christian evangelicals consider their efforts to practice compassion and accountability conceptually manageable and practically unmanageable? Elisha (2008) roots his answer to this question in Christian theology. He explains that, when Christian evangelicals perform Christian charitable service, they presume that service

unconditional. However, due to Christian evangelicals' socialization into Christian theology, they also uphold the idea that "even the most 'unconditional gift' of all (eternal salvation) is conditioned on the recipient's obligation to receive that which ultimately can never be repaid" (Elisha 2008, 157). In this context, the service provider-service beneficiary relationship demands that the latter forever remain a willing subject of the divine authority that the former embodies.

Said in social science theoretical terms, Christian evangelicals, when they carry out their "vision of charity," aim to provide "free" or "pure" gifts in the form of unconditional acts like food distribution that they perform on behalf of the "poorest of the poor" (Allahyari 2000; Bourdieu 1977; Madigan 1998). However, so as not to "enable sin," they also mandate reciprocity (Elisha 2008, 162; Mauss 1950). Through use of needs assessment protocols and repeat manipulator databases, Christian evangelicals enforce accountability, mandate that service beneficiaries make auditable the fact that they are becoming responsible persons in moral, financial, and spiritual terms. But, because Christian charitable service beneficiaries can never fully reciprocate the immense gift that is God's grace, Christian evangelicals end up situating themselves in what Jacques Derrida (2001, 45) calls the "madness of the impossible." Just as "unconditional forgiveness, in order to have its own meaning, must have no 'meaning,' no finality, even no intelligibility," unconditional service, in order to be "compassionate," must demand no accountability in its practical application (Derrida 2001, 45).

I stated earlier that most Americans, after they first hear about Amma, engage in information seeking behaviors about her and her M.A. Mission. For those whom first hear about Amma in Christian charitable terms, these information seeking behaviors typically take the form of online research that they conduct via M.A. Mission websites like embracingtheworld.org. Embracingtheworld.org is the main website of Amma's global network of charities. Interested to

learn if Christian charitable interpretations of “good” works indeed inform these individuals’ information seeking behaviors, I asked several to describe the M.A. Mission website contents that they remembered seeing after they first heard about Amma. Echoing the members of the Samaritans of Knoxville among whom Elisha (2008) conducted ethnographic research, Jon and Kim reacted by describing articles that emphasized Amma and her M.A. Mission’s performance of service on behalf of the “poorest of the poor” as well as how the “poorest of the poor” responded to being beneficiaries of that service (Madigan 1998). For them, these articles served as auditable accounts of both parties’ accountability. “Amma has helped so many people,” remarked Jon. “Orphans, sick people, poor people.” Kim nodded in agreement. She went on to add, “Hundreds of thousands of poor women in India have access to vocational training thanks to Amma. Many of them are small business owners now. They’re taking care of their families. They’re giving jobs to other women, too.”

I met and had an informal conversation with Jon and Kim in 2016 during Amma’s Summer 2016 Chicago Public Satsang Program at her M.A. Center Chicago. At the time, Jon and Kim were admirers from Indiana. When writing my field notes for the day on which I chatted with them, I logged onto embracingtheworld.org, hopeful to find the article that Kim had referenced. I believe I found it. An article titled “Empowering Women” states that Amma’s M.A. Mission “provided more than 200,000 economically vulnerable women throughout India with vocational training, start-up capital, and marketing assistance, as well as access to microcredit loans from government-regulated banks and affordable insurance plans, ... [for forming] self-help groups, [sharing] microsavings accounts, and [starting] their own home-based businesses” (M.A. Mission 2020a). The article then invites readers to view a series of videos.

I found this series of videos particularly interesting. I say this, as - beyond representing these “more than 200,000” women as “economically vulnerable,” i.e. as the “poorest of the poor” - it calls viewers’ attention to the morally and financially responsible behaviors that these women exhibited after being on the receiving end of Amma and her M.A. Mission’s service (Madigan 1998; M.A. Mission 2020a).

Watch [this] video to see these women explain their business model, their plans for the future, and the way with hard work, an eye for quality and a little help from Embracing the World, they’ve been able to turn their lives around ... [Watch this video to hear from Ajitha.]. She joined one of our self-help groups, received vocational training and support to start a business ... The other women in the group ... help to support her and her family, both emotionally and financially. [M.A. Mission 2020a]

Towards the end of my informal conversation with them, Kim stated that - like Priya, Jill, and Karthika - she and Jon first heard about Amma from a friend. Despite having first heard about Amma from someone whom they trust, however, it was Jon and Kim’s online research (informed by Christian charitable interpretations of “good” works) that persuaded them to seek out and experience Amma; “After that [*referring to their review of articles that emphasized Amma and her M.A. Mission’s performance of service on behalf of the “poorest of the poor”*], we knew we wanted to meet Amma, so now we’re here” (Madigan 1998)!

Information-Seeking Behaviors Informed by Humanitarianism

The theme of auditability continues in humanitarianism. To explain, I provide a brief overview of Thomas Haskell’s (1985) discussion of the origins of the impulse to mitigate human suffering. Then, I address the emergence of the audit in humanitarian approaches to acting on this impulse. Lastly, I provide examples of American spiritual seekers’ information seeking behaviors. Interestingly, of those spiritual seekers whom first hear about Amma in humanitarian terms, many engage in information seeking behaviors that, for them, confirm Amma and her

M.A. Mission's application of donated funds to reconciliation of programmatic (vs. administrative) expenses. In satisfying their humanitarian interpretation of "good" works, these information seeking behaviors ease such individuals' skepticism of Amma to the point where they feel compelled to encounter her.

I note here the following caveat. What I intend to achieve by addressing auditability in humanitarianism is not a totalizing description of "good" humanitarian works. To reduce "good" humanitarianism to any one defining characteristic would be to ignore the complex array of its ongoing tensions (e.g. between aid workers' philosophical desires for neutrality and their real-life determinations of lives to be saved vs. lives to be risked, Fassin 2007). What I do intend to achieve is an illustration of auditability as a defining characteristic of "good" humanitarianism as well as a reason why Americans whom first heard about Amma in humanitarian terms feel increasingly comfortable with her and her M.A. Mission. By "auditability," I mean the condition of something being made exam-able. The something to which I refer here is sevites' application of donated funds to reconciliation of programmatic (vs. administrative) expenses. Sevites ultimately make this exam-able by producing and providing to donors various pieces of evidence as proof of their efficacy and efficiency.

According to Haskell (1985), the impulse to mitigate human suffering is not inherent to the human condition. Rather, it is a product of Anglo-American contract law. He elaborates, stating that Anglo-American contract law provided humanity with a number of lasting lessons. Two of these lessons facilitated the emergence of a specific cognitive style, which produced in humanity the impulse to mitigate human suffering: "the first [lesson] taught people to keep their promises; the second taught them to attend to the remote consequences of their actions" (Haskell 1985, 551). Upon internalizing these lessons, people felt bonded to an ethical maxim to act in the

interests of others. They also felt causally involved in each other's lives. For Haskell (1985), both of these feelings were prerequisite conditions for people to want to mitigate human suffering.

In humanitarian contexts, aid workers conceptualize the impulse to mitigate human suffering as value-rational (Weber 1978). Despite this, they frequently act on it in instrumentally rational ways (Weber 1978). In Weber's (1978) typology of social actions, value-rational actions are actions that are determined by steadfast confidence in their own inherent value, despite the outcomes they might bring. Instrumentally rational actions are actions that use expectations of results as "conditions" or "means" for attaining "rationally pursued and calculated ends" (Weber 1978, 24). Fiona Terry (2004) traces this disjuncture between aid workers' perceptions and practices to missteps that occurred in the context of major relief projects. Examples include relief projects that aid workers carried out in reaction to the Rwandan Genocide. As she explains, missteps like these motivated aid workers to undergo periods of introspection during which they questioned if their efforts were perhaps unhelpful or, even worse, harmful. Humanitarianism emerged from these periods deeply changed.¹⁰¹ According to Craig Calhoun (2008, 95), "Recruitment to work in humanitarian assistance is significantly based on seeing humanitarian action as 'value-rational,' ... But at the same time, humanitarian action has become the province of large-scale organizations, donors with demands for evidence of efficacy and efficiency, and a profession with its own standards of good performance." In effect, humanitarianism emerged from these periods favorable of the audit.

While she does not diminish the impact of (internal) factors like feelings of failure, Janice Stein (2008) argues that there are other (external) factors to consider when addressing aid workers' motivations to mitigate human suffering in instrumentally rational ways. Not least

among these is the government-NGO relationship that emerged in the wake of “retreat of the state” (Matthews 1997). Jessica Mathews (1997) describes this phenomenon as a power shift that led (mostly Western) governments in the mid-twentieth century to relinquish their social welfare responsibilities to NGOs.¹⁰² Stein (2008) builds on Mathews’ (1997) description, stating that “retreat of the state” is better understood as a two-part process in which governments recoiled from and then reemerged in the social welfare domain as regulators and monitors. This recoil and subsequent reemergence produced the principal-agent relationship between governments and NGOs in which governments now mandate that aid workers express accountability via instrumentally rational language of the audit.¹⁰³

Aid workers and governments are not the only actors in the humanitarian sector to require such expression of accountability, though. Individual private donors require it, as well (Hopegood 2008; Stein 2008). They do this, for example, by requiring aid workers to provide proof that demonstrates the application of donated funds to reconciliation of programmatic (vs. administrative) expenses. Most American members of Amma’s global following whom first hear about Amma in humanitarian terms exemplify this trend. To illustrate, I return to the interview that I conducted with Jill in 2012.

After Jill first heard about Amma, she engaged in information seeking behaviors. Like Jon and Kim’s information seeking behaviors, Jill’s took the form of online research that she conducted via M.A. Mission websites like embracingtheworld.org. Interestingly, unlike Jon and Kim’s information seeking behaviors, Jill’s focused primarily neither on content that emphasized Amma and her M.A. Mission’s performance of service on behalf of the “poorest of the poor” nor on content that emphasized how the “poorest of the poor” reacted to being beneficiaries of Amma and her M.A. Mission’s service (Madigan 1998). Rather, they focused primarily on

content that emphasized Amma and her M.A. Mission's application of donated funds to programmatic (vs. administrative) expenses. After sharing with me how "pleasantly surprised" she was to see documentation that verified Amma and her M.A. Mission's reliance on "volunteers" (vs. paid employees), Jill remarked, "I guess, if I buy anything while I'm [at Amma's M.A. Math], I won't feel weird about it."¹⁰⁴ This comment suggested to me that what Jill discovered through her research was, for her, a newfound level of comfort with Amma and her M.A. Mission.

Encounter Amma

With their feelings of skepticism assuaged, all individuals among whom I conducted dissertation research pursued opportunities to encounter Amma.¹⁰⁵ For a few, this meant traveling to her M.A. Math. For most, it meant traveling to one of her U.S.-based M.A. Centers or to one of her U.S.-based non-ashram public satsang program locations, for participating in her version of the darshan ritual. Such locations are typically hotels and conference centers. What does this experience look like; feel like? Especially for individuals in the admirer stage of the AHP, what behaviors are common reactions to receiving a hug from Amma? To answer these questions, I detail the first darshan experiences of several individuals. I also detail one of my own darshan experiences.

I received Amma's darshan a total of seven times; twice in India and five times in the United States. The first time that I received Amma's darshan occurred in 2008 at her M.A. Math. At the time, Amma gave darshan from the stage of her M.A. Math's bhajan hall every Wednesday, Thursday, Saturday, and Sunday she was in residence at that facility and not traveling. With open sides and a large, domed ceiling, this hall resembled, as Ganaka told me in

an informal conversation that I had with him in 2008 at Amma’s M.A. Math, an “airplane hanger.” In 2008, Ganaka was a householder devotee. Originally from Madison, Wisconsin, he and his wife (Paadini) relocated to Amma’s M.A. Center Chicago shortly after her M.A. Mission’s establishment of it in 2012. The last time that I received Amma’s darshan occurred in the context of her Summer 2015 New York Public Satsang Program. I detail my most recent time that I received Amma’s darshan. I detail it vs. my first darshan experience for three reasons. First, I provide a detailed description of first time that I received Amma’s darshan elsewhere (Esche-Eiff 2009). Second, as I stated earlier, most Americans travel to one of Amma’s M.A. Centers or to one of her non-ashram public satsang program locations in the United States, for receiving her hug. And, third, the five times that I received Amma’s darshan in the United States were nearly identical in terms of their proceedings. Who did what, in what order, and how not only looked and sounded but even smelled remarkably similar. As a result, I consider the most recent time that I received Amma’s darshan representative as a window into this aspect of the admirer stage of the AHP.

My Darshan Experience: Amma’s Summer 2015 New York Public Satsang Program; Jacob K. Javits Convention Center; New York, New York; July 14th

Located on the eastern banks of the Hudson River in Hell’s Kitchen, Manhattan, New York, New York, the Jacob K. Javits Convention Center is a large, upscale facility. With 760,000 square feet of exhibition space, it dwarfs not only the historic walk-up but also the new construction high-rise apartment buildings that surround it (Jacob K. Javits Convention Center 2021). Although I could not locate a record of how many individuals attended Amma’s Summer 2015 New York Public Satsang Program, I estimate that approximately 6,000 attended on each of its three days. I arrived at this number by multiplying the maximum capacity of the hall where

Amma held her Summer 2015 New York Public Satsang Program, i.e. the Jacob K. Javits Convention Center's former North Hall, by 110 percent. The Jacob K. Javits Convention Center's former North Hall measured 110,000 square-feet (Empire State Development ND). With 80,000 square feet of exhibition space, it had a maximum capacity of 5,500 individuals (Jacob K. Javits Convention Center ND).

I note here two caveats. First - when American devotees attend one of Amma's public satsang programs, they sometimes do so for two of its two or three total days. Given this, if I were to use my above estimate of daily attendance to calculate an estimate of overall event attendance, I could end up double- or triple-counting unique attendees. I do not provide an estimate of overall event attendance for this reason. Second, Amma led an all-audience meditation and/or gave a satsang at least once a day over the course of her Summer 2015 New York Public Satsang Program. When she led an all-audience meditation, attendees occupied nearly all chairs in the Jacob K. Javits Convention Center's former North Hall. When she gave a satsang, attendees also stood elbow-to-elbow around the perimeter of that hall. For these reasons, I estimate daily attendance slightly higher than maximum capacity.

For comparison, when Amma made her first yatra to New York in 1987, approximately forty individuals came to see her (Kuruvilla 2013). Indicating that this was then a typical turnout for Amma in the United States, the *New York Daily News* reported that these approximately forty individuals came to see her not in a large events center like the Jacob K. Javits Convention Center but rather in a "small rented room" that the M.A. Mission reserved for the occasion (Kuruvilla 2013).

When I entered the Jacob K. Javits Convention Center on July 14, 2015, I found myself in a vestibule filled with approximately 300 members of her global following. It was 8AM.

While seemingly homogenous in terms of their ethnicity (nearly all appeared to be of European descent), these individuals' ages ranged from birth to approximately eighty. Most wore Western; however, about forty percent of women and twenty percent of men wore a combination of Western and Indian attire. Jeans and a *kurta* (long tunic) were a popular choice.

I grew surprised and irritated. I grew surprised, as – despite instructions not to do so – these several hundred members of Amma's global following had already formed a queue to receive “darshan tokens.” Some crouched while others sat on the floor, suggesting a certain amount of restlessness due to having been there for some time already. I came across these instructions on July 12, 2015, upon paging through the “Program Guide” to Amma's Summer 2015 New York Public Satsang Program. Admittedly, these instructions were subtle; “Approximately two hours before each program [i.e. at 8AM (on July, 14, 2015, Amma's Summer 2015 New York Public Satsang Program had a scheduled start time of 10AM)], a line will form outside of the hall ... Tokens will be handed out one hour before Amma arrives” (M.A. Mission 2016a, 9). By 2019, the M.A. Mission revised its language to be more direct; “10AM: The token line opens. To ensure everyone has an equal chance of getting an early token, please refrain from forming a line until then” (M.A. Mission 2019c).

Unlike my surprise, my irritation did not stem from a single but rather several past M.A. Mission experiences. Whether it was at Amma's M.A. Math or in the context of a public satsang program at one of her M.A. Centers or non-ashram public satsang program locations in the United States, when I witnessed Amma give darshan to American members of her global following, I witnessed her prioritize first-timers above everyone else. As Karthika told me over the course of an informal conversation that I had with her in 2008 at Amma's M.A. Math, Amma does this because “Waiting is hard for Westerners. They expect instant gratification.” Perhaps

sensing my desire for elaboration, Karthika continued, stating that, for Westerners whom are new to a spiritual practice, “small tests are the best teachers.” Presuming that Amma would prioritize first-timers on July 14, 2015, I expected to receive a “darshan token” for an early evening, perhaps a 5PM or 6PM, vs. a morning or afternoon darshan. However, after seeing approximately 300 members of her global following already queued to receive “darshan tokens,” I phoned my husband whom was traveling with me at the time to let him know that I likely would not return to our hotel room until much later.

In the M.A. Mission, a “darshan token” is a small, square piece of paper that indicates a darshan seeker’s approximate place in the “darshan line” that ends in Amma’s embrace (Figure 4.3).¹⁰⁶ It does this by means of an alpha-numeric code.



Figure 4.3: The “darshan token” that I received on July 14, 2015, at the Jacob K. Javits Convention Center in New York, New York (site of Amma’s Summer 2015 New York Public Satsang Program). “i-2” indicates my approximate place in that day’s “darshan line.”

To claim one's approximate place in that line, a darshan seeker presents his or her "darshan token" to an "anchor." A darshan seeker should only do this upon receiving word that the alpha-numeric code on his or her "darshan token" is up. In 2008, "number changers" announced which alpha-numeric codes were up via a poster-sized flipchart. They flipped its pages with a homemade hook and rod device. By 2015, "number changers" upgraded their method of communication to include high-definition projectors and projection screens.

"Anchor" is a public satsang program seva position. According to a 2016 M.A. Mission document titled "Darshan Line Positions," individuals in this role bear the responsibility of policing entry into the "darshan line."

Check token number of each person wanting to enter the line. ONLY allow those with the correct token number to enter the line ... MAKE SURE ALL FAMILY MEMBERS HAVE THE CORRECT TOKEN NUMBER. If someone asks to be put into the line with a token number that has not yet been posted, DON'T put them into the main line ... Every person must have a token: infants, elderly – *everyone.*" [M.A. Mission 2016b, 1]

I downloaded this document from TourComm. TourComm is a Google Site. In 2016, American members of Amma's global following with at least coordinator-level public satsang program seva positions used it to access instructions on how they and their lower-ranking teammates should execute their roles. As Swami Shantamritananda Puri (then Brahmachari Shantamrita Chaitanya) stated while leading a "team leaders" meeting in 2016 at Amma's M.A. Center Chicago, "tour coordinators at the national level" upload these documents to TourComm. I acquired access to TourComm after being appointed to the role of "seating coordinator."¹⁰⁷ As I mentioned earlier, I held this public satsang program seva position for the two months leading up to and during Amma's Summer 2016 Chicago Public Satsang Program. This event ran from June 26 – 29 of that year. In this role, I managed a team of sevites, for seating everyone whom attended that public satsang program.

Interestingly, “darshan tokens” are not just tools for exercising managerial control over large crowds of darshan seekers. They are also sacred objects (Durkheim 1995). I say this, as “darshan tokens,” by obligating darshan seekers to adhere to Amma’s instructions to practice patience and therefore control of the ego by waiting, refer to the idea of and encourage behaviors that devoted disciples like those in “anchor” public satsang program seva positions translate as “right” submission to their necessarily superior guru. Hence, Karthika’s reference to the process of waiting, first, to receive a “darshan token” and, then, to enter the “darshan line” as a “test.” Similarly for darshan seekers, “darshan tokens” communicate religious meaning. This is because, for such individuals, each “darshan token” is an opportunity for Amma to acknowledge the intimate relationship that she has with every member of her global following via an expression of favor. To illustrate, I return to my experience at the Jacob K. Javits Convention Center on July 14, 2015.

While just inside the vestibule where I found myself upon entering the Jacob K. Javits Convention Center, I made a quick scan of the “darshan line.” To my surprise, I saw three points of entry. I stood motionless. “Is this the ‘darshan line,’” I wondered? “Why does it have three points of entry?” Perhaps in response to my lack of movement, a woman approached me. “Hi! Can I help you?” She wore a gold sash over a bright blue kurta. Based on her colorful (vs. all white) Indian attire, I assumed her a householder devotee. While I did not think anything of it at the time, I later learned in my role as “seating coordinator” that every individual who fills a “darshan flow” public satsang program seva position wears a sash. The color of this sash corresponds with the “department” in which he or she performs public satsang program seva. Sash colors are standardized in the North American M.A. Mission context and therefore the same at all of Amma’s public satsang programs in the United States. They include purple for

“darshan flow coordinators,” gold for “darshan token assistants,” red for “greeters,” green for “‘darshan line’ and hall seaters,” blue for “assisted [disabled] darshan assistants,” and pink for “post-darshan seaters.” “Darshan flow” refers to “the flow of [public satsang] program guests from their arrival at the program site through the darshan process” (M.A. Mission 2016c, 1). I located this description of the position in a 2016 M.A. Mission document titled “Darshan Flow Coordinator.” Like, “Darshan Line Positions,” I downloaded this document from TourComm.

As I learned, the M.A. Mission practice of individuals in public satsang program seva positions wearing color-coded sashes is less about providing public satsang program attendees with helpful points of reference (as I stated earlier, I only learned the meaning of these color-coded sashes after being appointed to the role of “seating coordinator”) than it is about availing a fleet of surveillance tools to the broader sevite group (Foucault 1995). Indeed, individuals in public satsang program seva positions use these color-coded sashes for making knowable and policing each other’s seva practices. Hence, Jyoti issued to me the following warning: “Don’t let anyone see you remove your sash.” She did this after instructing me and all members of my seating team to take off our sashes just prior to Amma leading a given day’s all-audience meditation. At such times, we were to secure for ourselves any previously vacated “prime seats.” In this context, “prime seats” refers to chairs that are in close proximity to Amma. “Amma should not be doing meditation to an empty seat,” remarked Jyoti. She shook her head, suggesting deep disapproval over the prospect of such an occurrence. I asked Jyoti the reason for her warning. While recommending that I self-police to evade reprimand from my inevitable monitors, she responded, “I don’t want you to give anyone the wrong impression. You’re not using your position [as ‘seating coordinator’] to save yourself a ‘prime seat.’ That would be the opposite of selfless service, right? But, [your fellow sevites] would never know that, and I don’t

want you to get in trouble.” This conversation took place on June 27, 2016, at Amma’s M.A. Center Chicago. This was the first day of Amma’s Summer 2016 Chicago Public Satsang Program. At the time, Jyoti was a householder devotee from Chicago, Illinois. For several months leading up to and during Amma’s Summer 2016 Chicago Public Satsang Program, Jyoti served as “darshan flow coordinator.”

Back in the vestibule of the Jacob K. Javits Convention Center on July 14, 2015, I supposed that the “darshan token assistant” in front of me had paid to have her outfit professionally laundered. I supposed this based on the crisp creases than ran down the undersides of her kurta’s sleeves. “What might be the significance of this? Could her neat and tidy appearance reflect how she thinks about the public satsang program context? If yes, what could that imply about how she thinks about and approaches her public satsang program seva?” Distracted by my internal monologue, I did not reply to her initial question right away. “Hi,” she repeated. “Do you need some help?” “I’m sorry,” I replied. “Yes, thank you! Is this the ‘darshan line?’” While shaking her head, “yes,” she asked if I had received Amma’s darshan earlier that year. I relayed that I last received Amma’s darshan just a couple of weeks ago on July 1, 2015. This occurred during Amma’s Summer 2015 Chicago Public Satsang Program at her M.A. Center Chicago. In reaction, this “darshan token assistant” pointed a finger towards the far end of the vestibule. When I walked in that direction, I noticed a series of small signs taped to the tops of stanchion posts. According to them, darshan first-timers should enter the “darshan line” via its first point of entry. Individuals who had received Amma’s darshan in the past but not yet in 2015 should enter via its second. And, lastly, individuals who had received her darshan already in 2015 should enter via its third. I complied and entered the “darshan line” via its third point of entry to find myself at its very end.

Shortly after 9AM, the “darshan line” started to move. After approximately twenty minutes of shuffling, I reached the doors that separated the vestibule from the Jacob K. Javits Convention Center’s former North Hall. There, another “darshan token assistant” wearing a gold sash handed me a “darshan token.” Based on his Western (vs. Indian) attire, I assumed him a householder devotee. I glanced down at my “darshan token.” “Wow, that’s [*referring to the alpha-numeric code on my ‘darshan token’*] a lot lower than I expected.” A smile spread across this “darshan token assistant’s” face. Then, he leaned towards me and whispered, “Someone [*emphasis on ‘someone’*] must want you here.”

A “hall seater” wearing a green sash made a quick motion with her hands. “Follow me,” she exclaimed! Like the “darshan token assistant” who helped me to enter the “darshan line,” this “hall seater” wore a colorful kurta with crisp creases that ran down the undersides its sleeves. “Everyone was intentional getting dressed this morning,” I thought. I followed this “hall seater’s” directive and entered the Jacob K. Javits Convention Center’s former North Hall. Once approximately twenty other individuals did likewise, this “hall seater” paused the “darshan line.” “Wait here,” she instructed. Then, she turned to peer down two aisles that separated three banks of folding chairs. Each bank included approximately fifty rows of twenty folding chairs. All faced a stage. At the center of this stage was a wide upholstered chair and microphone stand. A series of gold curtains and burgundy garlands hung from scaffolding to give both an ornate backdrop. Speakers and projection screens flanked the stage on either side. I presumed that this “hall seater” was awaiting a cue from a fellow sevite before instructing us further.

I continued to take in my surroundings. Like I did on the first and second days of Amma’s Summer 2015 New York Public Satsang Program, I was struck by the size of the Jacob K. Javits Convention Center’s former North Hall. In addition to its impressive square footage,

this room featured walls that appeared to me no less than forty feet tall. They formed the base of a cathedral ceiling that raised the highest point of this room at least another twenty feet in the air. Despite its enormity, however, the overall space – being replete with large windows that radiated natural light – seemed inviting. In being cooled by an air conditioning system so powerful that it prompted Karthika to layer a cable-knit sweater over her half-sari, it also seemed – to me, a Midwesterner with admittedly little tolerance for Manhattan’s breezeless summer heat - comfortable.

Amplifying the at-once inviting and comfortable feel of the hall, members of Amma’s global following from her satsang groups in the Tri-State area worked with those from her M.A. Math to install a number of amenities. Due to their abundance, particularly notable to me were booths at which individuals could purchase non-perishable goods. Even after having encountered these non-perishable goods on July 12-13, 2015, I remained – on this, the third and final day of Amma’s Summer 2015 New York Public Satsang Program – astonished by their variety, both in terms of the product categories that they spanned and the degrees to which they referred to Amma directly and indirectly. Non-perishable goods that referred to Amma directly did so by including her likeness. Those that referred to Amma indirectly did so by including or by themselves being signifiers of her home country or the Hindu religious tradition. In short, members of Amma’s global following established an extensive marketplace.

Specific non-perishable goods available for purchase included photographs and paintings of Amma; books and DVDs about her and her M.A. Mission; CDs of her satsangs and invited lectures; “Amma dolls;” as well as M.A. Mission-branded merchandise like t-shirts, bags, and tumblers. M.A. Mission-branded merchandise commonly featured her FBO’s trademarked phrases (e.g. “Mata Amritanandamayi Math” and “Embracing the World”) alongside the mantra,

“Om Lokah Samista Sukhino Bhavantu.” The latter is a popular Sanskrit manta among members of Amma’s global following. It means “May all beings everywhere be happy/free [from suffering].” Additional non-perishable goods available for purchase included Indian clothing like *salwar* suits (women’s tunic, pant, and scarf ensembles) and *sherwanis* (men’s coat-like garments); malas; as well as scarves and jewelry that featured mandalas, elephants, and Hindu deities.

Whether they refer to Amma directly or indirectly, American devotees perceive all goods that they purchase in the context of M.A. Mission social life – during public satsang programs, included – as greater in value than their equivalents available for purchase in the wider consumer market. This presumed greater value flows from such goods signifying Amma herself. With Amma represented in these goods, they become symbolically significant as transformative agents, understood as capable of changing individuals’ thought patterns and behaviors and therefore as important facilitators for helping spiritual seekers to “become like [Amma]” and progress towards embodiment of the spiritual truth that all are essentially one (Srinivas 2012).¹⁰⁸ Especially for American householder members of Amma’s global following - i.e. for individuals whom lack indicators of devotional status like white, yellow, or saffron robes - this presumed greater value also flows from such goods signifying closeness and dedication to Amma. Demonstration of this particular combination of characteristics commonly affords prestige among devotees, for example, in the form of appointments to coveted public satsang seva positions that are close in proximity to Amma. In Chapter Seven, I discuss American devotees’ seva practices as demonstrations of closeness and dedication to Amma. American devotees perform such practices in part to earn appointments to coveted public satsang seva positions from devotees with what Lucia (2014) calls “proxemic authority.” As Lucia (2014) argues,

devotees with proxemic authority wield power in the social hierarchy of Amma's M.A. Mission. This power stems from their generally greater amount of time in Amma's fold. As I illustrate in Chapter Seven, one of the ways in which devotees with proxemic authority wield power in this context is by regulating access to Amma through appointments to coveted public satsang seva positions.

Goods that Amma had at one point or another worn or otherwise used are considered blessed and of greater value still. This is because, much like Prasad, these goods are understood as imbued with Amma's powers. Illustrating that they attach heightened value to goods that Amma had at one point or another worn or otherwise used, American devotees pay prices not uncommonly marked-up 50% or more vs. their unblest equivalents.

In addition to booths where attendees at Amma's Summer 2015 New York Public Satsang Program could purchase non-perishable goods, members of her global following from her satsang groups in the Tri-State area worked with those from her M.A. Math to set up an area where individuals could purchase refreshments. This area was roughly 1,200 square feet in size. Refreshments included Indian foods like *chana masala* (chickpea curry), *avial* (mixed vegetable curry), *pazham pori* (fried bananas), and *samosas* (fried pastry with a savory filling); coffee, *chai* (tea), and espresso-based drinks like cappuccinos and lattes; as well as freshly squeezed juice. "India is being consumed, literally," I thought. A booth dedicated to the sale of Ayurvedic oils and powders that researchers at Amma's Amrita Ayurveda Medical College and Research Center in Amritapuri, India, compounded stood immediately adjacent.

Beyond goods, attendees at Amma's Summer 2015 New York Public Satsang Program could visit a variety of booths to purchase services. Examples included Ayurvedic massages and Jyotish readings. At one booth, attendees could, as its sign stated, "order a *puja*" (ritual act of

worship). In 2021, the cost of ordering a puja depended on puja type and ranged from USD 130 - 600 (M.A. Mission 2021a). Amritapuri.org is the main website of Amma's M.A. Math. According to it, senior members of Amma's global following at her *Brahmasthanam* (abode of Brahman) temples in India perform these pujas. They typically do this on days that have special relevance to the puja requestors' Jyotish charts (M.A. Mission 2021a). In doing so, these senior brahmachari(ni)s and swami(ni)s make offerings to particular incarnations of the divine, oftentimes by burning those offerings in the flames of small lamps.

Scattered among these booths stood a variety of others dedicated to the distribution of information about Amma and her M.A. Mission. I explored each over the course of Amma's Summer 2015 New York Public Satsang Program. When I did, I was welcomed by a Western or Indian householder or monastic devotee and then invited to speak with him or her, read pamphlets, and/or watch videos, usually for learning about Amma's global network of M.A. Mission facilities (beyond ashrams, these include charitable institutions like elder care facilities and orphanages as well as hospices, hospitals, secondary schools, and universities) or for learning about her M.A. Mission's larger seva initiatives. Examples of such initiatives include disaster relief such as what members of Amma's global following undertook in the wake of the 2004 Indian Ocean Tsunami, Hurricane Katrina, and the 2010 Haiti Earthquake; food, healthcare, and housing for the poor; education for women and special needs children; and community outreach on topics related to public health and sustainability. On several occasions, I was invited to discover opportunities for taking up residence at the then-expanding M.A. Center Chicago. I was also invited to participate in Tri-State area satsang group activities and practice Amma's trademarked variety of meditation [Integrated Amrita Meditation Technique (IAM)].

I overheard an exchange between a mother and her daughter. They stood in-line to purchase Indian food. While tugging on the hem of her mother’s kurta, the daughter asked to visit a booth where several devotees were unboxing “Amma dolls;” “Mom, I want to go over there,” she exclaimed! “Ok,” replied the mother. “It’s safe. You can go.” The daughter stood still, indicating that it was abnormal for her to stray when in public. However, something about this context was different. As the nearby speaker poles – draped in caution tape with the mantra, “Om namah shivaya,” (vs. “caution”) - suggested, it was sacred (Figure 4.4). As a result, different rules applied.



Figure 4.4: In the former North Hall of the Jacob K. Javits Convention Center in New York, New York (site of Amma’s Summer 2015 New York Public Satsang Program), tape bearing the mantra, “Om namah shivaya,” drapes a speaker pole. Photo courtesy of Elisabeth Bloom. I include it with her kind permission.

“Come along,” said the “hall seater.” I and the approximately twenty other individuals who were waiting to do so fell into a single-file line and followed this devotee down one of the

two aisles that separated three banks of folding chairs in the Jacob K. Javits Convention Center's former North Hall. When we reached the fifteenth row from the stage, this "hall seater" stopped and turned to face us. "File all [*emphasis on 'all'*] the way in," she instructed. One individual failed to comply, leaving two seats empty. In response, this "hall seater" wagged her finger; "Please, don't save seats. Everyone in your party should already be with you." The non-compliant individual looked at her, sighed, and shifted two seats into the row. Once our row no longer presented a gap, this "hall seater" departed, presumably to escort another group of attendees into the hall.

With their seats secured, the spiritual seekers in my row took a moment to relax. This included examining the envelope that each of them picked up from his or her chair prior to sitting down. The left side of this envelope displayed a group of Indian children. Several stood with the palms of their hands together in *pranamasana*. Pranamasana is a prayer pose. Derived from the Sanskrit word, *pranam* (prostration), it connotes humility and reverence. The right side of this envelope displayed the following message: "PUJA DAKSHINA. This offering made during worship symbolizes the dedication of one's heart and mind to the Supreme Being. This donation goes to support Amma's charitable projects in India. Your gift is sincerely appreciated and is tax-deductible." I wondered to whom these children were directing their pranams. "Were they directing their pranams to the divine; to me? If to me, why? Because I am someone in whom the divine necessarily lives? Because I am a potential donor?" While pondering these possibilities, I noticed the woman to my left tuck a USD 20 bill into her envelope. Perhaps in reaction to my gaze, she leaned towards me and - not unlike how Jon and Kim emphasized Amma and her M.A. Mission's performance of service on behalf of the "poorest of the poor" - asked, "Amma does such wonderful work for the children, doesn't she" (Madigan 1998)?

Shortly after 10AM, the din of conversation that had filled the Jacob K. Javits Convention Center's former North Hall since earlier that morning dissolved to a hush. At the same time, attendees who had been sitting in rows of folding chairs closest to the stage stood up. Most brought the palms of their hands together to stand in pranamasana. Like a wave that started at the front and then extended to the back of the hall, other attendees did likewise. A bell rang, and roughly eight swami(ni)s in ochre-colored robes emerged from a doorway to the left of the stage. Amma followed unhurriedly in their wake. Dressed in a simple, white sari and adorned only by a few malas made of tulsi wood and a single sparkling nose stud, this short, plump Indian woman sauntered towards the stage. With her arms outstretched and smile wide, she greeted attendees, lightly touching the fingers of those whom extended their hands in her direction.

Once on-stage, Amma turned to face her already captivated audience. She brought the palms of her hands together and, after a brief moment of standing in pranamasana, directed everyone to sit down. "Irikku, irikku/ഇരിക്കൂ ഇരിക്കൂ (sit, sit)," she said, all the while making a downward motion with her hands. Everyone complied. Amma then propped herself atop the wide, upholstered chair that sat at the center of the stage. She arranged herself into padmasana.¹⁰⁹

While speaking through a swami whom translated her message from Malayalam into English, Amma invited everyone in the audience to join her in what she termed a "white flower meditation for world peace and divine grace." "Amma wants you to close your eyes," said the swami. In slow, measured speech, he instructed us to "Visualize white flowers of peace showering down from the skies to the earth, to all of nature, the mountains, lakes and forests, to all the people and animals." After pausing to breathe deeply, he added, "Now, Amma wants all

of her children to chant ‘Om Lokah Samista Sukhino Bhavantu.’” The crowd chanted this mantra in unison for approximately five minutes.

Amma opened her eyes, signaling to the crowd that the all-audience meditation portion of the third and final day of her Summer 2015 New York Public Satsang Program was over. In response, a “number changer” flashed the alpha-numeric code “a-1” onto the pair of projection screens that flanked the stage. This led approximately fifty attendees to form a queue leading towards two “anchors.” Like all other individuals in public satsang seva positions related to “darshan line” seating, these “anchors” wore green sashes. One by one, they looked at the “darshan token” of each attendee whom entered the queue. Given their role, I presumed that they were checking to confirm that each displayed an “a-1” alpha-numeric code. Darshan was underway.

Consistently during interviews and informal conversations, the American devotees among whom I conducted dissertation research described darshan as that special moment in which a person will experience Amma’s divine powers, or “grace,” to the fullest extent possible. Echoing this sentiment, Priya stated the following in an interview that I conducted with her in 2008 at her then residence in Grafton, Wisconsin: “A person is always able to feel Amma’s presence, but to be in her physical presence intensifies the experience.”¹¹⁰ American devotees tend to describe their first darshan experiences as simultaneously familiar and new, like they had “come home” while partaking in “an incredible vastness, ... silence, and peace,” the likes of which they not only never encountered but also never thought possible.¹¹¹ “I remember ... feeling like I was floating in ... timeless place,” recalled Priya. “It was truly [*emphasis on ‘truly’*] amazing.”¹¹²

Admirers similarly tend to describe darshan as that special moment in which one will experience something extraordinary about Amma. However, this “something” is not Amma’s “grace.” It is her goodness, considered by admirers an admirable but nonetheless very human trait. To this point, Caroline mentioned that she does not “see [Amma] as divine ... just a really special lady.”¹¹³ Later in the interview that I conducted with Caroline in 2015 at her residence in Madison, Wisconsin, she stated, “I don’t think anything [Amma] does is beyond the scope of what a human can do.”¹¹⁴ In 2015, Caroline was an admirer. Referring to the seva projects that Amma’s M.A. Mission sponsors, Caroline added, “[Amma] does a lot of good things ... more than what most [people] do, but nothing that she does is impossible for a human ... She’s a really great example of a good human being. There’s nothing wrong with bowing down to that.”¹¹⁵ Caroline concluded our conversation with a statement in which she stressed Amma’s humanity and acknowledged her deservedness of special status due to difference; “Before going to receive darshan [during Amma’s Summer 2014 Chicago Public Satsang at her M.A. Center Chicago], I tried to think of something to say to her, and I couldn’t ... I tried for ... two hours to think of something, and I was like, ‘I can’t think of anything.’ ... I can’t handle celebrities. I’m such a star-struck person.”¹¹⁶

For admirers, the idea of someone personifying goodness is not extraordinary by itself. As Caroline suggested, everyone is capable of exhibiting the trait. However, because Amma’s M.A. Mission - perceived by admirers and devotees alike as an extension of Amma the godperson and humanitarian - sponsors seva projects on the scale that it does and because Amma hugs as many people as she does, admirers consider her an extraordinary example of goodness personified. Illustrating this sentiment as it relates to Amma’s version of the darshan ritual, Julian stated, “It’s a really significant thing to see somebody hugging, hugging, and hugging.”¹¹⁷

In 2016, Julian was an admirer. Later in the interview that I conducted with him in 2016 at his residence in Wauwatosa, Wisconsin, he noted, “Amma is a complete stranger to me. I don’t know her, and she doesn’t know me, yet she invited me into her arms and gave me a solid embrace. It was like she actually [*emphasis on ‘actually’*] deeply cared about me. That type of kindness is refreshing. It felt great. She’s a role model.”¹¹⁸

Whether they are devotees or admirers, the act of participating in Amma’s version of the darshan ritual brings many tears. Implying that this reaction is a common one, Karthika stated in an interview that I conducted with her in 2008 at Amma’s M.A. Math that “People cry when they go for [Amma’s] darshan. They just do.”¹¹⁹ While addressing her then six years of experience witnessing what she approximated to be “hundreds of thousands” of individuals receive Amma’s darshan, Karthika described this ritual as a culminating moment that evokes tears as expressions of catharsis or elation after years of emotional build-up; “Maybe, for so long, they’ve [*referring to darshan-seekers*] kept ... many things inside ..., and in Amma’s arms [they] feel so secure [that they] release everything, or maybe they cry out of happiness for feeling like they’ve finally found someone that they’ve known forever!”¹²⁰ The latter was Karthika’s experience when receiving Amma’s darshan for the first time. This occurred during Amma’s 2002 Chicago Public Satsang Program at the Westin Lombard Yorktown Center in Lombard, Illinois; “I thought, ‘No, no, I’m not going to cry,’ but ..., as I got closer ... to Amma, I felt like the greatest thing ever was about to happen - so beautiful - and I just started crying.”¹²¹ In 2002, Karthika was an admirer. She became a householder devotee shortly after her first darshan experience. She renounced in 2003.

The intensity with which Karthika reacted to this experience did not surprise me. Like many admirers, Karthika was undergoing a period of personal crisis at the time of her first

darshan experience. As she explained in my 2008 interview with her, “College wasn’t very satisfying.”¹²² Without passion for the subjects that she was studying, Karthika “felt lost.”¹²³ In this context of disappointment and confusion for what her life would look like in the future, Karthika’s receipt of her first hug from Amma proved cathartic. It provided her with a sense of direction about which she grew excited, bringing her to tears; “[When] Amma took me [in her arms] and said, ‘My darling daughter,’ ... I knew she was my mother. I felt like I wanted to give my life for [her].”¹²⁴ “It was pretty powerful,” recalled Karthika.¹²⁵

Like Karthika, Chetas first came to Amma during a period of personal crisis. At the time, he was nearing the end of his master’s degree program and wanted to “make [his] life an offering, ... to serve others” but didn’t know how.¹²⁶ Unlike Karthika, the reason why Chetas first came to Amma was not to receive the guidance and protection of a guru whom would help him to tide over this period of personal crisis (Warrier 2005, 87). Rather, he first came to her because his family “pushed” him to do so.¹²⁷ As Chetas explained during an interview that I conducted with him in 2016 at Amma’s M.A. Center Chicago, “My family told me that [Amma] was a very special being.”¹²⁸ Later in that same interview, he added, “Given my confusion, they thought she might give me some sage advice.”¹²⁹ Not unlike Chetas, Priya first came to Amma because her family “dragged” her to Amma’s 2002 Chicago Public Satsang Program at the Westin Lombard Yorktown Center.¹³⁰ In an interview that I conducted with her in 2008 at her then residence in Grafton, Wisconsin, she described herself as having been “crabby and difficult.”¹³¹ She had no interest in attending the event.

Although neither Chetas nor Priya wanted to meet Amma, both had what they described as “moving” experiences once they did.¹³² While referring to darshan as that special moment in which a person will experience Amma’s “grace,” they stressed the ritual’s capacity to transform.

Hence, when discussing her first darshan experience, Priya called it “life changing.”¹³³ Speaking in more philosophical terms, Chetas termed his the “beginning of a paradigm shift.”¹³⁴ The below comes from my 2016 interview with Chetas. In it, he roots this “paradigm shift” in his acknowledgment of seva practices as a means to achieve personal transformation.

I was interested in spirituality, ... but the people who I met at the time weren't living it ... I thought, “These guys, they're not living that life,” ... so [spirituality] sadly ended up an academic endeavor and not much else for me ... [When] I met Amma in June of 1990, that all changed ... Having been brought up in Silicon Valley, I thought the recipe for happiness was taking the maximum, ... but here's someone doing the opposite; [Amma] was giving [*emphasis on “giving”*] the maximum ... I was experiencing what Thomas Kuhn would have called a “crisis moment,” you know, where you come face-to-face with an anomaly that your current paradigm can't rationalize away ... I wondered, “Was my current paradigm inherently flawed?” I had to figure it out!¹³⁵

Although atypical, initial reluctance to meet Amma is not unheard of among American devotees. In addition to the kinds of skepticism that I addressed earlier, I found that this reluctance stems from the very context in which American devotees first hear about Amma, i.e. from family members and friends. I say this, as - compared to other categories of people (e.g. neighbors, co-workers, strangers) - family members and friends tend to be afforded greater license in the United States to “pester,” as one devotee put it, sometimes to the point of disinclination. I met this devotee in 2015 while in line to receive a “darshan token” on the third and final day of Amma's Summer 2015 New York Public Satsang Program at the Jacob K. Javits Convention Center. “It took me several months,” she said. “But, I ultimately persuaded my mom [*pointing to the woman in front of her*] to come with me to last year's [summer New York public] satsang [program]. And now, she's here because she [*emphasis on ‘she’*] asked to come!”

Periods of crisis and persistent family and friends are far from an exhaustive list of the contexts in which Americans find themselves motivated enough to encounter Amma, though. Beyond the contexts of research into Amma and her M.A. Mission's seva projects that I

addressed earlier, there is also the context of immersion in daily ashram. Here, I refer specifically to the context of daily ashram life into which the children of householder devotees living at Amma's M.A. Centers in the United States are born. Priya's daughter, Saira, is one of these children. I first met Saira in 2015. This occurred at her then residence. It was a small one-bedroom apartment in the dormitory building of Amma's M.A. Center Chicago. At the time, Saira was nine months old.¹³⁶ Towards the end of the day when I first met Siara, Priya and I took her to the kitchen/dining hall of this facility. There, we sat at a long table, ready to partake in what Priya termed a "special fellowship meal" in honor of Amma's 62nd birthday. American devotees use the term "fellowship meal" to refer to a meal that they prepare and enjoy as a group. I watched several other householder devotees take turns holding Saira. As if to explain these devotees' interest in her daughter, Priya leaned towards me and whispered, "Saira is the [M.A. Center Chicago's] first baby." Later that evening, Priya shared with me concerns that she had over this attention potentially posing a barrier to Saira as she learns to act selflessly. As if to stress the need to counteract any egoism that might crop up as a result of this attention, Priya added, "We'll see how this plays out."

Not quite a year later in 2016, Priya described Saira's first darshan experience in an interview that I conducted with her at Amma's M.A. Center. Therein, she described it as an extension of Saira's daily ashram life. On the first day of Amma's Summer 2015 Chicago Public Satsang Program at her M.A. Center Chicago, "[Saira] and I walked to the [this facility's] main hall and picked up darshan tokens. We walked back home, ate lunch, and meditated. After [Saira's] nap, we walked back to the [main] hall. I did some seva with her strapped to me in her little carrier. Then, we had darshan!"¹³⁷ Like Priya and Chitas did when describing their first darshan experiences, Priya described Saira's in transformative terms. "[Saira's] first darshan was

really [*emphasis on 'really'*] beautiful. Amma scooped her up, ... smiled at her, and gave her a big hug. [Saira] loved it! ... Not too long afterwards, [Saira] started looking at pictures of Amma, pointing to them, and saying 'Ka[l]i.' I have no [*emphasis on 'no'*] idea where she learned to call Amma that! It must have been Amma's grace at work."¹³⁸

By 7PM, I had been participating in public satsang program activities in the former North Hall of the Jacob K. Javits Convention Center for eleven hours. This included perusing booths where attendees at the event could purchase goods and services. It also included participating in "white flower meditation for world peace and divine grace" and a recitation of the *Sri Lalita Sahasranama* (devotional work that lists the 1,000 names of Devi in her manifestation as the Hindu pantheon's Divine Mother goddess). I watched as a group of ten musicians dressed in Indian attire performed bhajans while sitting atop a large rug spread out on the floor directly in front of the stage where Amma sat performing her version of the darshan ritual. One played the *sitar* (stringed instrument of the lute family), five the *tabla* [set of hand drums, including a *bahya* (treble drum) and a *dahya* (bass drum)], and one the flute. The remaining three clapped and sang into microphones while keeping their eyes closed and swaying their bodies from side to side. All faced Amma.

Some of the bhajans that these musicians performed were in English. Others were in Malayalam. To help me sing along, I kept my eyes fixed on the transliterations that scrolled across the projection screens that flanked the stage. "i-2"; the alpha-numeric code on my "darshan token" flashed onto these screens. Recognizing this as my cue to re-enter the "darshan line," I approached a pair of "anchors." They stood near a sign that was affixed to and hoisted approximately eight feet in the air by a metal pole. It read "Darshan Line." Based on these "anchors'" colorful (vs. all white) Indian attire, I assumed them householder devotees. After

glancing down at my “darshan token,” one nodded to the other, prompting the latter to escort me to the first unoccupied folding chair in two lines of approximately thirty folding chairs each. “Sit here,” she instructed. Then, she handed me a sheet of paper. Laminated and with a header that included the words, “Please Read – IMPORTANT,” it detailed an institutionalized set of expectations concerning how to interact with Amma while participating in her version of the darshan ritual, i.e. submissively:

When you go for Darshan, please keep in mind not to go all the way against Amma’s chair. Please leave a few inches of space between Amma’s chair and yourself, bend forward from the waist, place your hands on either side of Amma’s chair, and please support your weight on your hands. Please do not lean against Amma. After you have received Darshan, please stand up and walk back to the same side [of the stage] that you came from. A monitor will invite you to sit in a chair near Amma for some time. Thank you for reading these notes with your love and cooperation. [M.A. Mission NDc]

After roughly twenty minutes of chair-hopping, I reached a short staircase that led to the stage where Amma sat performing her version of the darshan ritual.¹³⁹ A “gatekeeper,” identifiable as such by her green sash and position relative to the stage, extended her hand in my direction and held out her palm. I recognized her from my stints conducting research at Amma’s M.A. Math. She was a renunciate devotee. “May I see your ‘darshan token,’ please,” she asked? “Gatekeeper” is a public satsang program seva position. Similar to “anchors,” individuals in this role are responsible for policing access to Amma during darshan. They are also responsible for maintaining a steady flow of darshan seekers into Amma’s embrace. The following statement comes from the 2016 M.A. Mission document entitled “Darshan Line Positions”:

THIS IS A KEY POSITION ... DETERMINE HOW MANY PEOPLE [there are] IN EACH PARTY IN [the darshan] LINE ... CHECK THE TOKEN OF EACH PERSON IN THE LINE ... Each person ... must have a token with the CORRECT NUMBER ... MAKE SURE THE FIRST ADULT IN EACH PARTY IS HOLDING THE TOKENS FOR THE ENTIRE PARTY ... Gatekeeper regulates the flow of families and singles from [the darshan] line, ideally allowing for 2 singles in between families/groups to make an easier flow up to the Chair. [M.A. Mission 2016b, 2-3]

In this context, maintenance of a steady flow of darshan seekers not only suggests “gatekeepers” appeasement of Westerners’ aversion to waiting. As I stated earlier, Karthika noted the following over the course an informal conversation that I had with her in 2008 at Amma’s M.A. Math: “Waiting is hard for Westerners. They expect instant gratification.” It also suggests “gatekeepers” submission to Amma. As a fellow sevite told me while addressing crowd management during an informal conversation that I had with him during Amma’s Fall 2015 Northern California Retreat at her M.A. Center in Castro Valley, California, “Our actions have a direct impact on how long Amma will need to sit here.”

I showed my “darshan token” to this “gatekeeper.” She nodded and stepped aside, making room for me to pass by and access the staircase that led up to the stage. I removed my shoes, placed them in a pile that included other darshan seekers’ shoes and bags, and ascended upwards. Once on the stage, I continued chair-hopping until a brahamcharini in an all-white half-sari asked me if I spoke English. “Yes, English,” I replied. She relayed my answer to Amma in Malayalam; “Inglisil/ഇംഗ്ലീഷിൽ (In English).”

Yet another brahmacharini handed me a tissue and instructed me to wipe my face, so as not to dirty Amma’s sari. I glanced a few feet ahead of me to where Amma was sitting and noticed that her sari was already discolored due to contact with darshan seekers’ makeup, tears, and sweat but complied nonetheless. This brahmacharini then helped me into a kneeling position. “Scoot forward,” she said while quickly - but gently - patting my back.

As soon as I reached Amma, a swamini in an ochre-colored robe took my hands, placed them on either side of Amma, and lowered my head until it touched her chest. Amma wrapped her arms around me and stroked my back. Between every two or three strokes, she ran her fingers through my ponytail. Rose and sandalwood combined with makeup, sweat, and tears

combined to give her a scent that was at once floral, woody, and not unlike yeast. Over the loud, devotional music that filled the hall, I overheard Amma conversing in Malayalam with an Indian man whom I recognized from my fieldwork and his pictures in M.A. Mission publications as Swami Amritaswarupananda Puri.

Amma gave me a squeeze. Then, she lifted my head and pressed it against her left cheek. In a heavy, Indian accent, Amma whispered, “My daughter, my daughter, my daughter.” After approximately ten seconds of cradling my head, she stroked my right cheek and pulled herself back, revealing a wide smile. Unlike when she was conversing with Swami Amritaswarupananda Puri, Amma seemed in this moment only focused on me. Still smiling, she looked into my eyes, stroked my right cheek a final time, and – without breaking eye contact – maneuvered a Hersey’s Kiss into my left hand.

I recognized this bestowal of Prasad as Amma’s cue to the swamini to direct me off the stage and decided to make use of the seconds before this senior member of Amma’s global following could hook her hands under my forearms to state the following to Amma in Malayalam: “Amma, njaan (name of my life-long friend turned informant – possessive formulation) koottukariyanu/അമ്മ ഞാൻ ... കൂട്ടുകാരിയാണ് [Amma, I am the friend of (name of my life-long friend turned informant)].” Up until this moment, my experience participating in Amma’s version of the darshan ritual on July 14, 2015, was reminiscent of my previous experiences doing so in the United States. If not out of habit, why did I say the above to Amma? As Karthika suggested in an informal conversation that I had with her earlier that day, my dedication to learning Amma’s “mother tongue” of Malayalam was indication that I was growing more open to receiving her “grace.” In presuming Amma’s “grace” transformative, it was also - for Karthika - indication of my inevitable devotion growing immanent. “You really

should say something to Amma,” exclaimed Karthika! “She’ll be so proud.” Not wanting to disrespect my friend-turned-informant’s belief in Amma’s extraordinary capacity to transform people, I complied. Amma responded to my statement with a concise “Ate/അതെ (Yes)” and wobbled her head from side to side. Given how Amma’s head wobble was slow and smooth vs. rapid and jerky, I assumed it her way of conveying to me acknowledgment and understanding of what I had said. In being more of a continuous figure eight motion than a single tilt and accompanied by a smile, I also assumed it her extension of an invitation to converse further. The swamini reacted by retracting her outstretched arms. I took this as confirmation that my assumptions were correct and addressed Amma again. “Avar enre kutumbamannu, enre annujattiyum ammavanre makalumannu/അവർ എന്റെ കുടുംബമാണ്, എന്റെ അനുജത്തിയും അമ്മാവന്റെ മകളുമാണ് (They are my family, my younger sister and my cousin).” At the same time, I pointed to my sister and cousin. They were one and two positions behind me in the “darshan line.” In 2015, my sister and cousin lived in New York, New York. Because they were admirers of Amma and because the three of us saw it as a rare opportunity to spend time together, we went to her Summer 2015 Public Satsang Program as a family unit on July 14, 2015. Amma’s smile widened; “Varu, varu/വരൂ, വരൂ (come, come),” she instructed, while stretching her right arm towards my sister and cousin. The swamini stepped aside, making room for my sister and cousin to pass. With smiles across their faces, they popped up from their chairs. Hurriedly, they lowered themselves to their knees and shuffled forward. Upon reaching Amma, she wrapped the three of us in her arms and called us “Enre kuttikal/എന്റെ കുട്ടികൾ (My children).” Then, Amma gave each of our backs a quick pat, as if to say, “Look up!” When we did, she showered us with two handfuls of red, pink, and white rose petals. I felt a tap on my left shoulder. It came from the swamini. Taking this as her way of communicating that it was

time for my sister, my cousin, and me to leave the stage, I pressed the palms of my hands pressed together and thanked Amma for her darshan; “Nandi/ନନ୍ଦି (Thank you).”

Karthika met my sister, my cousin, and me at the bottom of the short staircase that led the three of us off the stage and back onto the main floor of the Jacob K. Javits Convention Center’s former North Hall. “I watched your darshan,” exclaimed Karthika! “It was so [*emphasis on ‘so’*] sweet!” Then, she asked the three of us a question that echoed Chetas’ and Priya’s earlier comments regarding Amma’s version of the darshan ritual and its capacity to transform; “How do you feel?” “I feel great,” responded my sister. “Same,” said my cousin. Karthika then looked at me and nodded her head, as if to stress the well-founded nature of her conviction.

Perform Seva

I stated earlier that most Americans, despite eventually regarding Amma as a purna avatar of Devi, first hear about her in Christian charitable or humanitarian terms. They also engage in information seeking behaviors that confirm for them Amma and her M.A. Mission’s involvement in works that meet Christian charitable or humanitarian interpretations of “good.” Importantly, the Christian charitable and humanitarian intentionalities that these behaviors reflect do not evaporate away in the immediate aftermath of an initial encounter with Amma. They persist and, in doing so, carry forward into Americans’ initial seva translations and practices. I say this as individuals in the admirer stage of the AHP limit their seva translations and practices to acts of service that they perform on behalf of the “poorest of the poor” (Madigan 1998). They perform these acts of service on an occasional but nonetheless recurring basis and in the context of what they term “volunteer events” that representatives from overseeing organizations schedule weeks if not months in advance.

I add that by “intentionality,” I do not mean “purposefulness” or “deliberateness.” Rather, I mean “aboutness” in the phenomenological sense of the word. Here, I draw on Jackson (1996). According to him, people are essentially beings in as opposed to apart from the world. They are neither wholly solitary nor introspective but consistently engaged in the “lifeworld.”¹⁴⁰ This includes when they are striving for solitude and/or opportunities for introspection. For this reason, “consciousness cannot be understood in isolation, as pure cognition or disinterested observation” (Jackson 1996, 29). It must be understood as active and outgoing, as something pointing beyond itself. Hence, in building on Jackson (1996), Duranti (1997) describes intentionality as the representative nature of consciousness. It is “the property of human consciousness to focus on something, to be about something” (Duranti 1997, 318).

To illustrate admirers’ extension of Christian charitable and humanitarian intentionalities into their initial seva translations and practices, I describe three encounters that I had with such individuals. The first two took place during Amma’s Summer 2015 Chicago Public Satsang Program at her M.A. Center Chicago. The third took place on April 2, 2016, or on the first “Seva Saturday” of April 2016, at that same facility.

Christian Charitable Seva Translations and Corresponding Practices

Once off the stage where I received Amma’s darshan and back on the main floor of her M.A. Center Chicago’s bhajan hall, I remembered that I was scheduled to be someplace soon. I flipped through my fieldnotes and found a note that I had made to myself. It indicated the kitchen/dining hall of this facility as that someplace. Per my note, I and approximately ten other Summer 2015 Chicago Public Satsang Program attendees were to report there at 4:00PM on July

2, 2015, for performing seva practices in the form of chopping apples that a local orchard had donated to Amma's M.A. Center Chicago earlier that week.

Because I had appointments to conduct several interviews on this, the second day of Amma's Summer 2015 Chicago Public Satsang Program, I had not planned to partake in this particular seva practice. Nevertheless, I agreed to do so after being approached the previous day by a woman in the bhajan hall of Amma's M.A. Center Chicago. Based on her colorful (vs. all white) Indian attire, I assumed her a householder devotee. She had an outgoing personality. I surmised as much based on her willingness to walk up to me, i.e. someone with whom she might have devotion to Amma in common but was nonetheless a stranger, and strike up an impromptu conversation. "Hi! My name is [Bindu]," she said, while smiling brightly. "Have you signed up for seva today?" "Not yet," I replied. This prompted Bindu to point to the small white board that she was carrying. It read, "Kitchen Seva." As if to render her plea more persuasive, she added, "We really [*emphasis on 'really'*] need help chopping apples." Bindu then went on to explain that she and several other American householder devotees who live at Amma's M.A. Center Chicago were attempting to turn these apples into salable bakery items. However, with few spiritual seekers agreeing to perform this seva practice, they were starting to grow anxious; "If we don't get more help, we might not have enough to sell for breakfast tomorrow, and people will be hungry."

I asked Bindu why only a handful of Summer 2015 Chicago Public Satsang attendees had agreed to perform this seva. Had she only just started recruiting? Had the spiritual seekers whom she approached already committed themselves to alternative seva practices, perhaps with conflicting schedules? For Bindu, the issue seemed to be more about interest. She replied, "I think most people here just see 'kitchen seva' as 'grunt work.' But, if you're doing it with love,

you know, you're giving of yourself, your time, it's seva, too." Struck by Bindu's use the word "too," I asked her to elaborate. "Well," she paused for a moment. "It's definitely a lot easier to get people excited about Mother's Kitchen!" Mother's Kitchen is an M.A. Mission seva initiative. Started in 1996 by members of Amma's global fellowship in San Francisco, California, its original and, in 2016, then current purpose was to establish forums in which devotees "prepare food [for] ... and serve the needy directly" (M.A. Mission NDd).

I include here a note about the life cycle of proceeds originating from the sale of goods (e.g. Amma dolls) and services (e.g. Jyotish readings) that devotees produce or otherwise provide in performing seva practices at Amma's public satsang programs and retreats in the United States. As I discovered, the vast majority of proceeds originating from these sales eventually funnel through Amma's global network of charities, for funding her M.A. Mission's larger seva initiatives. I say this not only because of what I learned from conversations that I had with American devotees but also from signs that I founded taped to registers at Amma's Summer 2008, 2009, and 2015 Chicago Public Satsang Programs; her Summer 2015 New York Public Satsang Program; her Fall 2015 Northern California Public Satsang Program; and her Fall 2015 Northern California Retreat. I also say this based on the program efficiency indicator that I calculated for Health Care Charities, Inc. This is one of Amma's U.S.-based charities. Between tax years 2005/2006 – 2009/2010, its program efficiency indicator hovered between 98.19% and 99.82% (Table 4.2).¹⁴¹ This indicates that the vast majority of funds collected by Health Care Charities, Inc. went towards reconciliation of programmatic (vs. administrative) expenses.

Program Efficiency Indicator	<u>2005-06</u>	<u>2006-07</u>	<u>2007-08</u>	<u>2008-09</u>	<u>2009-10</u>
Line 13: Program Services Expense	\$2,269,371	\$2,333,662	\$1,735,983		
Line 25 (Part IX, Column B): Program Services Expense				\$5,863,941	\$1,912,681
<i>Total Program Expenses</i>	<i>\$2,269,371</i>	<i>\$2,333,662</i>	<i>\$1,735,983</i>	<i>\$5,863,941</i>	<i>\$1,912,681</i>
Line 17: Expenses	\$2,311,311	\$2,364,269	\$1,753,002		
Line 25 (Part IX, Column A): Total Functional Expenses				\$5,874,786	\$1,925,705
<i>Total Expenses</i>	<i>\$2,311,311</i>	<i>\$2,364,269</i>	<i>\$1,753,002</i>	<i>\$5,874,786</i>	<i>\$1,925,705</i>
Program Efficiency Indicator	98.19%	98.71%	99.03%	99.82%	99.32%

Table 4.2: Healthcare Charities, Inc. program efficiency indicator for tax years 2005/2006 – 2009/2010.

In this context, spiritual seekers’ seva practices are not just value-rational in the sense that they are disinterested. They are also not just instrumentally rational in the sense that they are about extinguishing prarabdha. Upon becoming translated as income for Amma’s FBO, spiritual seekers’ seva practices assume a different social life. They become instrumentally rational in financial, programmatic, and therefore very worldly ways, all of which ultimately ladder up to what Warrior (2003a) describes as institution building and expansion. She writes that in its form as a spiritual practice, seva “secures the enthusiastic participation of [Amma’s] followers in [her M.A. Mission’s] institution building activities. [It] thus works as a self-propelling force within the [M.A. Mission], ensuring its continued growth and spread” (Warrior 2003a, 279).

When I entered the kitchen/dining hall of Amma’s M.A. Center Chicago on July 2, 2015, I introduced myself to the woman whom I, after noticing the small clipboard that she had tucked inside her white half-sari, supposed to be the brahmacharini in charge of “kitchen seva.” “Namah Shivaya! I’m Karen. I signed up with [Bindu] to help chop apples.” After glancing down at her clipboard, this bhramacharini placed a checkmark next to my name and invited me to get to

work; “Can you go over to that chopping station?” She pointed to a small table in the far corner of the room. As if to communicate disappointment over the group’s lack of progress, she went on to add, “The barrel over there is still full.”

I walked over to my assigned chopping station and was greeted by two fellow sevites. “Hi! I’m Kathryn. “This is Susan.” “Hi,” added Susan! “Nice to meet you.” Based on their greeting (“Hi” vs. “Namah Shivaya”) as well as their Western attire, I assumed them admirers. “Hi,” I responded! “I’m Karen. Is this your first time at one of Amma’s satsangs?” Susan was first to reply; “It’s mine. Kathryn asked me to come with her.” “I was here [*referring to Amma’s M.A. Center Chicago*] last year when Amma came,” said Kathryn. “It was really inspiring.” I took Kathryn and Susan’s willingness to chat as an opportunity to ask about their typical seva practices, if they had any; “Is this [*referring to ‘kitchen seva’ at Amma’s M.A. Center*] what you normally do for seva?” “Seva?” Susan looked puzzled. “It’s like charity work,” whispered Kathryn, seemingly embarrassed over her friend’s confusion. “Oh,” Susan paused for a moment. “My church organizes volunteer events at the Ronald McDonald House in Oak Lawn, [Illinois]. I’ve gone a few times. I helped to make lunches for the families staying there.” “I come [to Amma’s M.A. Center Chicago] once every other month, or at least I try to,” said Kathryn. “We [*referring to herself and other participants in Seva Saturdays at Amma’s M.A. Center Chicago*] make meals for the homeless at [name of homeless shelter in Aurora, Illinois].” “What made you decide to chop apples today?” Curious why they were performing a seva practice that did not conform to their shared seva translation as acts of service that one does on behalf of the “poorest of the poor” or otherwise destitute, I posed this question to Kathryn and Susan (Madigan 1998). “A young woman asked if we could help,” said Kathryn. “And,” Susan interjected, “she really [*emphasis on ‘really’*] seemed to need help. Saying, ‘No,’ felt impolite.”

“It’s like charity work;” when I asked admirers to describe seva, most responded with statements that were similar if not identical to this one by Kathryn. For them, “charity work” implied acts of service that one performs on behalf of the “poorest of the poor,” typically on an occasional but nonetheless recurring basis and in the context of what Susan termed “volunteer events” that representatives from overseeing organizations schedule weeks if not months in advance (Madigan 1998). In other words, when I asked such individuals to describe seva, most responded with answers that implied synonymousness with episodic performances of Christian charitable service. And, their seva practices implied similarly. Others responded with answers that implied rootedness in humanitarianism. I provide the ethnographic vignette below to illustrate.

Humanitarian Seva Translations and Corresponding Practices

Like I did on most Seva Saturday mornings, I walked straight from my car to the kitchen/dining hall of Amma’s M.A. Center Chicago, ready to spend the next four hours or so preparing food. Because April 2, 2016, was the first Seva Saturday of the month, the beneficiaries of my morning seva would not be my fellow sevites. Rather, they would be the residents of a nearly homeless shelter in Aurora, Illinois. Immediately, I ran into Paadini. “A lot of people showed up to help today,” she exclaimed! “That’s wonderful,” I responded! “Should I still plan on cooking? If you have enough people in the kitchen, I could help elsewhere.” Paadini took a moment to scan her surroundings before answering my question. “Some of the people who came today are new [to participating in Seva Saturdays at Amma’s M.A. Center Chicago]. So, yes, still plan on cooking. You can show them [*referring to the newcomers*] how we do things in the kitchen.”

Following Paadini's instructions, I hurried to my usual spot at the stainless-steel island of the industrial kitchen at Amma's M.A. Center Chicago's. "Wow; [Paadini] was right," I thought. "A lot of people did show up to help today!" I add that, when I prepared food for my fellow sevites on most Seva Saturday mornings, I did so with approximately five other householder devotees. When I entered the industrial kitchen of Amma's M.A. Center Chicago on April 2, 2016, eight individuals were busying themselves. Of these eight, I didn't recognize three. Of them, two wore sweatshirts bearing the words "Amma," "Embracing the World" (refers to Amma's global network of charities), and "Volunteer."

I first encountered these sweatshirts during Amma's Fall 2015 Northern California Public Satsang Program at her M.A. Center. At the time, I was perusing the contents of a booth from which attendees at this public satsang program could purchase M.A. Mission-branded merchandise like t-shirts, bags, and tumblers with trademarked phrases like "Mata Amritanandamayi Math" and "Embracing the World." "Namah Shivaya;" I greeted the woman whom was overseeing this booth. Based on her colorful (vs. all white) Indian attire, I assumed her a householder devotee. "Do you have any more of these sweatshirts?" I posed this question after noticing that each of the "volunteer" sweatshirts on display were either large or extra-large in size. "I'm sorry," she responded. "These are all I have left. I sold most of what I had on the first day of [Amma's Fall 2015 Northern California public satsang] program."

Back in Elburn, Illinois, on April 2, 2016, I greeted one of the sevites whom I didn't recognize from my previous experiences participating in Seva Saturdays at Amma's M.A. Center Chicago. The words "Amma," "Embracing the World," and "Volunteer" peeked out from the top of her apron. "Hi, I'm Karen. I like your sweatshirt." "Thanks! I'm [Anne]," she responded. "Is this your first time coming [to Amma's M.A. Center Chicago]?" Anne responded to my question

with a story; after first hearing about Amma from her sister, she drove the forty miles from her home in Elmhurst, Illinois, to Amma's M.A. Center Chicago, for receiving Amma's darshan in the context of her Summer 2015 Chicago Public Satsang Program. "I really wanted to meet her," said Anne. "When my sister told me about Amma, she made her sound like such an amazing person ... That's where I got this sweatshirt." Given the wide variety of Western and Indian apparel that is commonly available for purchase at such events, I asked Anne why she opted to purchase the sweatshirt that she did. "Amma's charities run completely [*emphasis on 'completely'*] on volunteers. Disaster relief, food for the homeless, everything. It's all done by volunteers. It's amazing, so impactful," she said. "Impactful;" I found Anne's use of this word interesting. For her, what types of practices, done on behalf of whom, in what contexts, etc. have impact enough to merit this description? To answer these questions, I asked Anne about her typical seva practices, if she had any; "Is this [*referring to the preparation of food for eventual distribution to the residents of a nearly homeless shelter in Aurora, Illinois*] what you normally do for seva?" "Feed the homeless? Oh, yes," exclaimed Anne! She went on to explain that - while she sometimes does this as part of participating in Seva Saturdays at Amma's M.A. Center Chicago - she more often delivers food items that she collects from members of her church to food pantries in her local community. "I've done that for a long time," she concluded. In short, while Anne's seva practices, focused as they were on the "poorest of the poor," reflected an intentionality rooted in Christian charitable ideals, her decision to extend those seva practices into the context of Seva Saturdays at Amma's M.A. Center Chicago reflected a second intentionality not unrelated to humanitarianism (Madigan 1998).

CHAPTER CONCLUSION

American devotees undergo one of three series of experiences while participating in M.A. Mission social life. These series of experiences correspond with their progression through what I term the “admirer,” “initiate,” “ashramite,” and “renunciate” stages of the two most common variations of the ADLC. I term these the “American Householder” (AHP) and “American Renunciate Pathways” (ARP). Factors that differentiate these stages include non-devotee vs. devotee, non-ashramite vs. ashramite, and householder vs. renunciate distinctions. They also include ways in which spiritual seekers translate and practice seva. When in the ashramite stage of the AHP, spiritual seekers translate and practice seva narrowly. They do this by limiting their seva translations and practices to acts of service that they perform on behalf of the “poorest of the poor” (Madigan 1998). They perform these acts of service on an occasional but nonetheless recurring basis and in the context of what they term “volunteer events” that representatives from overseeing organizations schedule weeks if not months in advance. As I argue, this suggests that, rather than through the Hindu concept of seva, initial participation in Amma’s M.A. Mission by Americans oftentimes makes a back-door entry through the more familiar and familiarly auditable concepts of Christian charitable service and humanitarianism.

I continue my discussion of the ADLC in Chapters Five and Six. In Chapter Five, I detail the M.A. Mission experiences of spiritual seekers in this life cycle’s initiate stage. In Chapter Six, I detail the M.A. Mission experiences of spiritual seekers in this life cycle’s ashramite and renunciate stages. These include such individuals’ seva translations and practices.

CH. 5: THE AMERICAN DEVOTEE LIFE CYCLE - INITIATE STAGE

In this chapter, I detail the series of experiences that spiritual seekers in the initiate stage of the American Devotee Life Cycle's (ADLC's) American Householder Pathway (AHP) undergo while participating in M.A. Mission social life. I also detail their seva translations and practices. I do this to continue fleshing out my answers to the two questions that I posed at the onset of Chapter Four. First, what does the ADLC look like? And, second, how do the seva translations and practices of American members of Amma's global following change over the course of this life cycle?

CHAPTER ORGANIZATION

I break this chapter into four sections. In each, I describe one of the M.A. Mission experiences that comprise the initiate stage of the AHP. These include choosing to pursue discipleship, requesting and receiving a mantra, requesting and receiving a spiritual name, and beginning new spiritual practices. As part of describing the new spiritual practices of individuals in this stage of the AHP, I detail their seva translations and practices. As I show, unlike spiritual seekers in the admirer stage of the AHP, those in its initiate stage include in their seva translations references to Christian charitable intentionalities focused on the divine as represented in the "poorest of the poor" (Madigan 1998). They also include references to Hindu intentionalities focused on the divine as represented in all. Consistent with their new seva translations, these spiritual seekers include in their seva practices acts of service that they perform not only on behalf of the "poorest of the poor" but also on behalf of other (affluent) devotees and Amma's M.A. Mission. Compared to their counterparts in the admirer stage of the

AHP, individuals in its initiate stage perform seva practices in a wider variety of contexts and in more of an ongoing manner. These findings point to the syncretic nature of this devotee life cycle stage.

CHOOSE TO PURSUE DISCIPLESHIP

Consistently in informal conversations and interviews that I conducted with American devotees, they described darshan as that special moment in which a person will experience Amma's divine powers, or "grace," to the fullest extent possible. For them, to undergo this experience is "moving."¹⁴² By using the word "moving" here, American devotees do not only reference the emotional responses that participation in Amma's version of the darshan ritual tends to evoke. As Karthika stated in an interview that I conducted with her in 2008 at Amma's M.A. Math in Amritapuri, India, "People cry when they go for [Amma's] darshan. They just do."¹⁴³ American devotees also reference its transformative powers. In this way, they echo Babb's (1986, 79) description of darshan as the Hindu ritual whereby "you somehow become what you see." Hence, Priya called the first time she received Amma's darshan "life changing."¹⁴⁴ Chetas likewise referred to his as the "beginning of a paradigm shift."¹⁴⁵ I add that, beyond Babb's (1986) description of darshan, these statements by Priya and Chetas echo Lucia's (2014) on the topic of the ways in which practitioners of metaphysical religion conceptualize "spirituality." For such individuals, "spirituality" signifies an eclectic combination of beliefs and practices as well as the overarching idea of personal transformation vis à vis understanding of, emulation of, and/or unification with a superhuman power (variously conceived). And, when Priya and Chetas arrived in Amma's embrace, a change did take place. Something shifted. I say this, as it was in the context of their initial participation in Amma's version of the darshan ritual

that they recognized her as a superior guru and chose to pursue discipleship. To this point, Chetas stated the following in an interview that I conducted with him in 2016 at Amma’s M.A. Center Chicago in Elburn, Illinois: “I knew in that moment [*referring to his first experience receiving Amma’s darshan*] that [Amma] was my spiritual guide ... I knew [that] I wanted Amma to be the focus of my life.”¹⁴⁶ This statement by Chetas mirrors the following by Karthika that I referenced earlier: “When [spiritual seekers] meet Amma, they know she’s real.”¹⁴⁷ Both statements underscore their speakers’ steadfast confidence in Amma’s avatarhood. Because she is a purna avatar of Devi in her manifestation as the Hindu pantheon’s Divine Mother goddess and therefore transcendent and absolute divinity itself, spiritual seekers, when they meet Amma, will (passively) recognize her as such and choose to pursue discipleship.

Despite the frequency with which I heard such comments, I argue that, for American members of Amma’s global following, active (vs. passive) guru choice is a significant aspect of their entry into Amma’s fold (Warrier 2000; Ibid 2005). I root this argument in two findings. First, most spiritual seekers first hear about Amma in Christian charitable or humanitarian terms. Of those whom first hear about her in such terms, many engage in information seeking behaviors that confirm for them Amma and her M.A. Mission’s involvement in works that meet Christian charitable or humanitarian interpretations of “good.” Second, most American devotees are aware of disingenuous gurus. Of those whom first hear about Amma in Hindu terms, many reflect on certain gurus’ behaviors to deem them worthy of the discrediting label. Taken together, these findings indicate that American members of Amma’s global following are accustomed to performing – and, indeed, do perform – personally meaningful evaluations of potential spiritual guides’ deservedness of their devotion, for example, in the forms of attention, time, and/or money. Amma is not an exception to this rule. I argue elsewhere that American devotees base

their evaluations of Amma's deservedness on her adherence to a particular set of Hindu and Christian ideals (Esche-Eiff 2009). Which of these sets of ideals American devotees base her deservedness on depends on their histories of socialization into the Hindu and/or Christian traditions.

Amma's Adherence to Hindu Ideals and Her Similarities to Jesus Christ

Of the American devotees among whom I conducted dissertation research, many were familiar with the Hindu tradition prior to first hearing about Amma. If not due to previous experience as followers of other Indian spiritual leaders, they were familiar with this tradition due to formal education and/or independent study. These individuals based their initial evaluations of Amma's deservedness on her austerity (in the form of her simple appearance) and selflessness (in the form of her sponsorship of her M.A. Mission's seva initiatives). For them, Amma's adherence to these ideals symbolized her embodiment of spirituality's ultimate goal of self-realization. In this context, "self-realization" refers to a spiritual seeker's recognition of his or her as well as all other beings' essential non-duality. For American devotees, "non-duality" refers to the idea that all beings have in them a spark of absolute divinity, or *Brahman*, the eternal essence of the cosmos that is also the "true self" of all. In effect, for them, "non-duality" refers to essential similitude with the divine. Given the omnipresent nature of divinity, it also refers to essential similitude with all beings on earth.

Nearly all American devotees among whom I conducted dissertation research had personal experience and therefore intimate familiarity with the Christian tradition prior to first hearing about Amma. These individuals based their initial evaluations of Amma's deservedness on her similarities to Jesus Christ. These similarities included her life story, replete with stories

of performances of miracles (Puri 1988). They also included her spiritual teachings. While differently predicated on the idea that all are (vs. are one in) god, Amma's promotion of seva to the ranks of ideal spiritual practice mirrors Jesus Christ's call to "love thy neighbor" (Prat 1950, 272). As this suggests, similar to how initial participation in Amma's M.A. Mission by Americans tends not to happen through the Hindu concept of seva but rather makes a back-door entry through the more familiar concepts of Christian charitable service and humanitarianism, American devotion to Amma tends not to flow solely out of socialization into the Hindu concept of the purna avatar. Instead, it also flows out of a context of familiarity provided by her similarities to Jesus Christ. I say "also flows out of" because many American devotees among whom I conducted dissertation research based their initial evaluations of Amma's deservedness on a combination of Hindu and Christian ideals. As spiritual seekers who resemble practitioners of metaphysical religion, they share a predilection for à la carte religiosity. As a result, they have personal experience with and are used to drawing on multiple religious traditions when making decisions about their spiritual lives (Albanese 2008; Bender 2010; Lucia 2014).

REQUEST AND RECEIVE A MANTRA FROM AMMA

In the Hindu Tradition, mantras are ritual formulations of truth-expressing sounds. While mantras commonly invoke specific gods or goddesses, they sometimes take abstract concepts like "sukhino" (happiness/joy, although specifically as it relates to release from suffering) as their focus. For practitioners whom chant them, mantras that invoke specific gods or goddesses are means by which to summon the necessarily transformative energies of those deities. It follows from this that mantras are very different from prayers (Perry 1985). To explain, I summarize McComas Taylor's (2015) argument contained in his article, "How to Do Things

with Sanskrit: Speech Act Theory and the Oral Performance of Sacred Texts.” Therein, he analyzes the role of *Bhagavata-katha* (divine narrative) performances in productions of power and authority in the context of the International Society for Krishna Consciousness – or, as it is more popularly known, the Hare Krishna Movement. In doing so, he builds on Stanley Tambiah’s (1990) discussion of ritual and magical acts – a discussion, which draws on J.L. Austin’s (1967) Speech Act Theory - to argue that mantras, beyond being prayer-like means of invocation, are instruments of change not only with respect to the mental and emotional states but also the overall characters of the individuals whom chant them. Given this, mantras should be understood as performative utterances (Austin 1967; Taylor 2015). More than just a series of words strung together, they are actions that accomplish things in their speakers’ social worlds. Reflecting such an understanding of “mantra,” Priya stated the following about her own in an interview that I conducted with her in 2016 at Amma’s M.A. Center Chicago: “When I chant my mantra, I can feel [*emphasis on ‘feel’*] Amma’s presence. Even though her body is way over on the other side of the world [at her M.A. Math], it’s like her sankalpa [divine intention or resolve; in the M.A. Mission, Amma’s divine intention or resolve to make good on her divine mission to uplift humanity through selfless service] is right here [*points to her heart*] with me.”¹⁴⁸

Importantly, for American devotees, it is not just the act of chanting one’s mantra that accomplishes something in a spiritual seeker’s social world. The very act of requesting (and receiving) a mantra accomplishes something, as well. To explain, I include several notes about mantra diksha. Mantra diksha is the ritual whereby a guru bestows a mantra onto a spiritual seeker. When discussing mantra diksha in general, American devotees refer to it as that special moment in which a guru and devotee solidify their relationship. When discussing Amma’s version of the mantra diksha ritual, they refer to it as that special moment in which Amma

acknowledges and, given how she performs the ritual on-stage during the darshan portions of her public satsang programs, presents a spiritual seeker as a devotee to other members of her fold. In this way, Amma's version of mantra diksha is a rite of passage that includes initiation into the role of devotee as well as a particular community (Turner 1969). Life cycle-wise, it marks one's departure from the admirer and entry into the initiate stage of the AHP. I underwent Amma's version of the mantra diksha ritual and therefore transitioned into the initiate stage of the AHP on June 25, 2014. This was the third and final day of Amma's 2014 Chicago Public Satsang Program at her M.A. Center Chicago. I describe my experience undergoing this ritual in the section below.

My Mantra Diksha Experience: Amma's 2014 Chicago Public Satsang Program; M.A. Center Chicago; Elburn, Illinois; June 25th

In the bhajan hall of Amma's M.A. Center Chicago, the alpha-numeric code on my darshan token flashed across two projection screens that flanked a stage at the center of which Amma sat in padmasana atop of a wide, upholstered chair. Recognizing this as my cue to do so, I presented my darshan token to an "anchor" whom I identified as such due to his green sash and proximity to the entrance to the "darshan line." This "anchor" inspected my "darshan token." After doing so, he invited me to sit in the first unoccupied folding chair in two lines of approximately twenty folding chairs each. I thanked him; "Namah Shivaya." Immediately upon taking my seat, a brahmacharini in an all-white half-sari approached me. Like the "anchor," she wore a green sash, indicating that her public satsang program seva related to management of the "darshan line." "Would you like to read about mantra," she asked? "Yes," I responded. This prompted the brahmacharini to hand me a laminated sheet of paper. It invited darshan seekers to request a mantra from Amma.

“Should I ask Amma for a mantra?” After pondering this question for a moment, I decided, “No. That would be inappropriate. After all, to request a mantra from Amma would be to request initiation into her following.” Karthika was thrilled by the possibility. While standing next to me, she exclaimed, “Are you going to ask Amma for a mantra? That’s so exciting!” Ultimately, I decided to ask Amma for a mantra. I decided to do this for two reasons. First, as an anthropologist with interests on the subject, I wanted to extend my dissertation research into this aspect of the AHP. Second, while I do not ascribe other-worldly characteristics to Amma, I do consider her, as Caroline put it, “a really great example of a good human being.”¹⁴⁹ I wanted to feel closer to the goodness that I saw and admired in her.

I note here that American devotees frequently liken Amma to “a mirror.”¹⁵⁰ They use this phrase to refer to the commonly held American devotee belief that Amma exposes and responds to the needs of others (vs. her own). Given their confidence in Amma’s personification of selflessness, I suspected that they would support my decision to ask Amma for a mantra. While chair-hopping through the “darshan line” in the bhajan hall of Amma’s M.A. Center Chicago, I asked Karthika her opinion on the matter. “I’ve told you this before,” said Karthika. “Amma is what people need when they need it.” I took this as confirmation of Karthika’s approval.

When I reached Amma, I requested a mantra. “Amma, enikku mantram venam/എനിക്ക് മന്ത്രം വേണം (Amma, I want a mantra).” Amma responded, “Malayalatti! Veno?/മലയാളത്തിൽ! വേണോ? (In Malayalam! Do you want)?” I confirmed my desire; “Ate, venam/അതെ വേണം (Yes, I want).” With that, Amma handed me a slip of paper. It had the word “mantra” printed on it. I felt a tap on my left shoulder. It came from a swamini dressed in an ochre-colored robe. Recognizing this as my cue to leave the stage, I stood up. I felt another

tap, this time on my right shoulder. It came from a householder devotee dressed in colorful (vs. all-white) Indian attire. “Come with me,” he instructed. “I’ll take you to mantra orientation.”

After leading me off-stage to a circle of eight unoccupied folding chairs, this householder devotee turned around, left, and returned with six other individuals. With furrowed brows that suggested seriousness, he spoke while referencing a piece of paper. Given his next statement, I supposed that this piece of paper included an institutionalized point of view regarding the significance of Amma’s version of the mantra diksha ritual; “When you accept a mantra from Amma, you don’t just accept her gift of a special word or phrase. You accept her sankalpa. When you accept Amma’s sankalpa, you accept her as your guru.” He concluded his speech by emphasizing the intimate nature of the guru-devotee relationship; “Your mantra will be your personal link to Amma. Don’t share it.” Then, this householder devotee leaned towards me and whispered, “When you think of god, who or what comes to mind?” I penned my answer to his question on the index card that I found on my chair upon initially approaching it. He addressed the group; “Everyone, when you’re done, I’ll collect your cards.” After doing so, he instructed us to form a single-file line; “Line up in the same order that I collected your index cards.” We complied and followed him back up the short staircase that led to the stage where Amma was still performing her version of the darshan ritual.

The same swamini who cued me to leave the stage a few hours earlier motioned for me to sit next to Amma. I observed Amma give darshan to two darshan seekers. “Ninnal (name of my life-long friend turned key informant – possessive formulation) koottukariyano/നീങ്ങൽ ... കൂട്ടുകാരിയാണോ? Are you (name of my life-long friend turned key informant – possessive formulation) friend?” Amma asked me this question while giving darshan to a third darshan seeker. Amma’s recollection surprised me. “Ate/അതെ (Yes),” I replied. Then, Amma showered

me with a handful of pink rose petals. A swami dressed in an ochre-colored robe handed my index card to Amma. After glancing at it, Amma said something to him in Malayalam. She spoke swiftly. Hence, I was not able to understand her. Reacting to Amma’s comment, this swami reached into a small box, removed a slip of paper, and passed that slip of paper to Amma. “Ninnal asramattilekk matannumo/നിങ്ങൾ ആശ്രമത്തിലേക്ക് മടങ്ങുമോ [Will you return to the ashram (*referring to the M.A. Math*)]?” I responded to Amma’s question in the affirmative; “Ate, enikk enre koottukariyum ammayeyum kananam/എനിക്ക് എന്റെ കൂട്ടുകാരിയും അമ്മയെയും കാണണം (Yes, I want to see my friend and Amma).” Amma smiled and handed me the slip of paper. It contained my mantra, written in Sanskrit. She also handed me two Hershey’s Kisses as Prasad.

My “mantra orientation” facilitator motioned for me to follow him. I did, at which time he led me to a backstage area where I found the rest of the individuals in his session of “mantra orientation” sitting in yet another circle of folding chairs. A swami joined us. He reminded us that that mantra diksha solidifies the guru-devotee relationship. Then, he emphasized the importance of chanting our mantras. He instructed us to do this frequently and on a regular basis. According to him, doing so would strengthen our relationships with Amma; “You each should chant your mantra at least one hundred times a day. This will tighten your bond with Amma and help you to take greater spiritual strength from her power.” During our last twenty minutes together, this swami taught all new initiates to pronounce their mantras. At the same time, he answered questions from the group. One of the initiates asked, “Swami, what if this mantra [*referring to the mantra that she had just received from Amma*] is different from the one that I got from [name of different Indian spiritual leader]?” Silence replaced quiet conversation. “One mantra is plenty,” said the swami, indicating that one guru is also plenty.

Despite Amma's religious inclusivism, most American devotees' guru loyalties are "exclusivist" or, even more specifically, what I call "serial exclusivist" in orientation (Warrier 2005). By this, I mean - unlike "inclusivist" guru loyalties, or those that permit a spiritual seeker to attach himself or herself to several gurus simultaneously - those of most American devotees emphasize the importance of attachment to Amma alone (Warrier 2005). This includes if a spiritual seeker had attached himself or herself to a different guru in the past.

REQUEST AND RECEIVE A SPIRITUAL NAME FROM AMMA

To strengthen the guru-disciple relationships that they share with Amma, American devotees do not only chant their mantras. They also pursue spiritual names from her. American devotees' experiences doing so are not unlike those of children undergoing *namakarana* (Hindu child-naming ceremony). I summarize these similarities here.

Namakarana

In the Hindu Tradition, *samskaras* are rites of passage that mark moments of progression through such stages of the human life cycle as birth, childhood, initiation, marriage, and death. According to David Knipe (2006), *namakarana* is the fifth of twelve *samskaras* in the Hindu Tradition.¹⁵¹ Family members perform it on behalf of a child when that child is between ten and twelve days old. When they perform *namakarana*, family members bestow onto the child a name that celebrates a certain desirable quality or preferred deity. They do this to encourage him or her to act in ways that will develop the desirable quality at the expense of other, undesirable qualities; hence, *namakarana* has a purifying aspect. It follows from this that *samskaras* reflect the word's alternate definition, which refers to mental habits, or – as Christopher Framarin

(2018) argues – standing (vs. second-order) desires. Family members also perform this ceremony to initiate the child into a family and provide him or her with a family identity.

Amma Bestows “Right” Spiritual Names

American devotees’ experiences requesting and receiving spiritual names from Amma are not unlike those of children receiving names from their parents upon undergoing namakarana. This is seen, for example, in the care that Amma takes to select names that reflect her American devotees’ positive qualities. To illustrate, I provide Leela’s description of her experience requesting and receiving a spiritual name from Amma. Leela provided this description during an interview that I conducted with her in 2009 at a coffee shop in Wauwatosa, Wisconsin. At the time, she was a householder devotee.

I just felt moved to ask [for a spiritual name]. It was on a Devi bhava night [during one of Amma’s public satsang programs in the United States]. You [are only supposed to] ask [for a spiritual name] on Devi bhava nights. It was funny because there was this little book, and [Amma] was flipping and flipping back and flipping more, looking for something that would describe me. She was looking hard to get the right name, and then she gave it to me!¹⁵²

As this Leela’s recollection of this experience suggests, spiritual names that American householder devotees receive from Amma symbolize her basic acceptance of them as her children as well as their basic acceptance of her as their mother. Contrastingly, the spiritual names that approximately fifty renunciate members of Amma’s global following received upon undergoing sannyasa diksha on March 13, 2020, symbolized their initiation into the Puri order of the ten monastic lineages set forth by Shankara (M.A. Mission 2020b). Reflecting her acknowledgment that American householder devotees’ spiritual names express Amma’s dual role as guru and mother as well as spiritual seekers’ dual roles as devotees and children, Karthika recalled for me the moment in which she requested and received a spiritual name from Amma. In

doing so, she also illustrated my earlier point regarding American devotees' confidence in the existence of a unique bond that connects each of them to their guru. Karthika shared her recollection of this experience in an informal conversation that I had with her in 2009 at the Westin Lombard Yorktown Center in Lombard, Illinois. This facility was the site of Amma's 2009 Summer Chicago Public Satsang Program.

I got my name in Rhode Island. I followed Amma there because I wanted to attend her retreat at Bryant College ... A brahmacharini overseeing the darshan line said Amma was giving names. I wanted one. I felt like Amma was my true mother, and I wanted to be with her ... My name wasn't in the book that Amma uses to pick out names, and, at that time, I was the only [Karthika]. I found out this year that there's another one. I'll admit, I'm a little jealous someone else has my name.

BEGIN NEW SPIRITUAL PRACTICES

Once initiated into Amma's fold, American devotees seek out opportunities to participate in her M.A. Mission's social life in a greater variety of contexts and more frequently. They do this by conducting internet searches and talking with family members and/or friends whom are also devotees. Opportunities that they find and take advantage of include additional public satsang programs and retreats. Some attend satsangs at local M.A. Centers. If no M.A. Centers are nearby, some attend regular meetings of local satsang groups. Satsang groups are groups of householder devotees whom meet, usually at fellow devotees' homes, on a weekly or monthly basis to engage in spiritual activities. I add that, by "additional public satsang programs," I mean more public satsang programs than the one every few years, which American devotees typically attend when in the admirer stage of the AHP.

In this environment of increased participation, American devotees undergo socialization into new spiritual practices. In the context of retreats, new spiritual practices include engaging in one-on-one dialogues with Amma during "Q&A sessions." A "Q&A session" is an event during

which Amma answers spirituality-related questions from an audience. She does this in the context of retreats and on Monday, Tuesdays, and Fridays at her M.A. Math. In 2016, Amma held four retreats in the United States. She held three at M.A. Centers (her M.A. Center in Castro Valley, California, between June 10-12 and November 27-29; her M.A. Center New Mexico in Santa Fe, New Mexico, between June 20-22). She held one at a hotel (the Marriott Renaissance Center in Detroit, Michigan, between November 21-23). Some individuals in the initiate stage of the AHP attend one retreat a year. Others attend one retreat every few years. Others still do not attend retreats.

Also in the context of retreats, new spiritual practices include receiving “Prasad (blessed food) lunch and/or dinner” from Amma. In Amma’s M.A. Mission, “Prasad lunch or dinner” refers to a meal that Amma serves to her disciples. She serves these meals in the context of retreats and on Tuesdays at her M.A. Math. I received “Prasad lunch” from Amma on December 23, 2008. After placing a “closed” sign on the counter of the Western Café of Amma’s M.A. Math, Karthika grabbed my hand and led me towards a loosely formed line of female devotees on the southern side of that facility’s Devi temple. From my far-away place in-line, I noticed that, on the opposite side of this temple, a group of male devotees were forming a second queue.¹⁵³ Several devotees next to Amma scooped the contents of large, metal vats onto plates. One by one, they handed those plates to Amma. Amma then passed them to her rapidly approaching devotees. Amma did not eat. After she fed everyone in the crowd, she exited the temple. I was assigned the seva position of “Dinner with Amma – Line Monitor” upon checking into Amma’s Fall 2015 Northern California Retreat at her M.A. Center in Castro Valley, California, on November 16, 2015. My responsibilities in this position included ensuring a quick and steady flow of devotees exiting a “Prasad dinner” line. I describe my experience undergoing

orientation for and carrying out this seva position when addressing the role of proxemic authority in co-productions of Amma's charisma among American members of her global following in Chapter Seven (Srinivas 2010).

In the context of satsangs (here, I adopt American devotees' alternate use of the term to refer to events during which they perform spiritual practices as a group) at local M.A. Centers, new spiritual practices include attending satsangs (in this context, spiritual lectures given by one of Amma's senior disciples) and participating in "fellowship meals." In 2016, Swami Shantamritananda Puri (then Brahmachari Shantamrita Chaitanya) hosted satsang once a week at Amma's M.A. Center Chicago. Of devotees in the initiate stage of the AHP whom live what they consider a comfortable driving distance away from Amma's M.A. Center Chicago, some attend satsang at this facility. They typically do this once a month. As "fellowship meals" follow satsangs at Amma's M.A. Center Chicago, such individuals participate in these events with similar frequency.

In the context of regular meetings of local satsang groups, new spiritual practices include listening to pre-recorded satsangs by Amma and participating in "reflection," "book club," and "fellowship meals." American devotees use the term "reflection" to refer to group reflection on inspirational statements by Amma. They use the term "book club" to refer to group reflection on book passages about Amma. In 2016, "satsang coordinators" hosted regular meetings of their local satsang groups weekly or once a month. Of devotees in the initiate stage of the AHP whom do not live what they consider a comfortable driving distance away from one of Amma's M.A. Centers, some attend regular meetings of their local satsang group(s). They typically do this once a month or once every other month. As "fellowship meals" occur in the context of regular meetings of local satsang groups, they participate in these events with similar frequency.

New Seva Translations

Beyond new spiritual practices, individuals in the initiate stage of the AHP undergo socialization into new seva translations. Indeed, while participating in M.A. Mission social life in a greater variety of contexts and more frequently, they become increasingly exposed to Amma's main spiritual teaching derived from the Hindu notion of Brahman. Despite becoming increasingly exposed to Amma's main spiritual teaching, however, such individuals do not adopt its associated translation of seva completely. I say this because American devotees in this stage of the AHP - although they make reference to the Hindu notion of Brahman in and therefore no longer limit their translations of seva to acts of service that one does on behalf of the "poorest of the poor" - still include such references to Christian charitable intentionalities in their descriptions of the spiritual practice (Madigan 1998). This points to the syncretic nature of this particular devotee life cycle stage. To illustrate, Isabelle made the following statement in an informal conversation that I had with her in 2016 while driving ice cream cakes from Amma's M.A. Center Chicago to a nearby homeless shelter in Aurora, Illinois: "Amma says god is everywhere. God is in you, me, animals, the trees. That's why what I'm doing now [*referring to the act of driving ice cream cakes to a nearby homeless shelter*] is seva. It's selfless. It's not about me. It's about other people, the spark of god that's in them." Later in that same informal conversation, Isabelle referred to her seva practices as "outreach;" "Once people see everything we [*referring to American devotees at Amma's M.A. Center Chicago*] do, all the opportunities we have to get involved, they come back!" Before pulling up to the homeless shelter, she added, "I really hope some of the people here [*referring to Amma's M.A. Center Chicago*] today will come back and help with [name of nearby homeless shelter in Aurora, Illinois]. It's my favorite seva. I'd do it all day everyday if I could!"

New Seva Practices

Consistent with their new seva translations, individuals in the initiate stage of the AHP adopt new seva practices that are broader in terms of their application to a wider variety of beneficiaries in a wider variety of contexts. They also perform seva practices in more of an ongoing manner than their counterparts in the admirer stage of this pathway. Therefore - while such individuals continue to perform seva on behalf of the “poorest of the poor” or otherwise destitute, for example, in the context of recurring but nonetheless occasional “volunteer events” that representatives from overseeing organizations schedule weeks if not months in advance – they also perform seva practices on behalf of affluent individuals (Madigan 1998). They do this namely on behalf of other devotees in the context of public satsang programs, retreats, as well as satsangs and Seva Saturdays at local M.A. Centers or during regular meetings of local satsang groups. They also perform seva practices on behalf of Amma’s M.A. Mission. In an interview that I conducted with her in 2015 at Amma’s M.A. Center Chicago, a devotee in the initiate stage of the AHP described her past and then current seva practices. It reflected this combination of seva to the “poorest of the poor” or otherwise destitute, other devotees, and Amma’s M.A.

Mission:

I’ve followed Amma for a long time. I became a devotee after she first came to the United States in the 1980’s ... Before Amma built the [M.A. Center Chicago in 2012], I went with [other members of] a satsang group [in Chicago, Illinois] to retirement homes. We would sing for the residents there, play board games, help cook meals. Now, I mostly help in the kitchen [at the M.A. Center Chicago]. On some Seva Saturdays, I help cook meals for people at [name of homeless shelter in Aurora, Illinois]. On other Seva Saturdays, I help cook fellowship meals [for other sevites]. When Amma comes, I always help [the M.A. Center Chicago] get ready [to host her public satsang programs]. I maintain [the M.A. Center Chicago’s] website, too.¹⁵⁴

Interestingly, in this stage of the AHP, individuals refer to their seva practices as “assigned.” Beyond a general lack of “individual initiative and enterprise,” this suggests that

they attach an institutional aspect to their seva practices (Warrier 2005, 85). While their seva practices are not always about “institution building,” they are always about the institution to some degree (Warrier 2003a).

Past Spiritual Practices with Modifications

Spiritual practices in which individuals in the initiate stage of the AHP engage but are not new due to previous M.A. Mission experience include attending satsangs given by Amma and receiving her darshan. They engage in these spiritual practices periodically in the context of public satsang programs and retreats. Other spiritual practices in which individuals in this stage of the AHP engage but are not new include participating in “white flower meditation for world peace and divine grace,” archana [ritual recitation of the Sri Lalita Sahasranama (1,000 names of Devi in her manifestation as the Hindu pantheon’s Divine Mother goddess)], ritual recitation of Amma’s Astottara Sata Namavali (her 108 names), arati (ritual offering of light to Amma), and bhajan-singing. They engage in these spiritual practices periodically in the context of public satsang programs and retreats. Some also engage in these spiritual practices in the context of satsangs at local M.A. Centers or regular meetings of local satsang groups. They also engage in these spiritual practices at home several times a week (with the exception of arati; for safety reasons, Amma does not encourage open flames in private residences). They chant the mantras that they receive from Amma at home on a daily or almost daily basis.

CHAPTER CONCLUSION

Unlike spiritual seekers in the admirer stage of the AHP, those in its initiate stage include in their seva translations references to Christian charitable intentionalities focused on the divine as represented in the “poorest of the poor” (Madigan 1998). They also include references to Hindu intentionalities with roots in the idea of omnipresent divinity on which the Hindu notion of Brahman is predicated. Consistent with their new seva translations, these spiritual seekers adopt new seva practices that are broader in terms of their application to a wider variety of beneficiaries in a wider variety of contexts. They also perform seva practices in more of an ongoing manner than their counterparts in the admirer stage of this pathway. Therefore - while such individuals continue to perform seva on behalf of the “poorest of the poor” or otherwise destitute, for example, in the context of recurring but nonetheless occasional “volunteer events” that representatives from overseeing organizations schedule weeks if not months in advance – they also perform seva practices on behalf of affluent individuals (Madigan 1998). They do this namely on behalf of other devotees in the context of public satsang programs, retreats, as well as satsangs and Seva Saturdays at local M.A. Centers or during regular meetings of local satsang groups. They also perform seva practices on behalf of Amma’s M.A. Mission. This points to the syncretic nature of the initiate stage of the AHP.

I continue my discussion of the ADLC in Chapter Six. There, I detail the experiences of spiritual seekers in the ashramite and renunciate stages of the ADLC’s American Householder and American Renunciate Pathways, respectively. I also detail their seva translations and practices.

CH. 6: THE AMERICAN DEVOTEE LIFE CYCLE - ASHRAMITE AND RENUNCIATE STAGES

In this chapter, I detail the series of experiences that individuals in the ashramite stage of the American Devotee Life Cycle's (ADLC's) American Householder Pathway (AHP) undergo while participating in M.A. Mission social life. I also detail those that individuals in the renunciate stage of this life cycle's American Renunciate Pathway (ARP) undergo. As part of detailing these individuals' M.A. Mission experiences, I detail their seva translations and practices. I do this to round out my answers to the two questions that I posed at the onset of Chapter Four. First, what does the ADLC look like? And, second, how do the seva translations and practices of American members of Amma's global following change over the course of this life cycle?

CHAPTER ORGANIZATION

I break this chapter into two sections. In section one, I describe the M.A. Mission experiences of individuals in the ashramite stage of the AHP. In section two, I describe the M.A. Mission experiences of individuals in the renunciate stage of the ARP (hereafter simply the "ARP").¹⁵⁵ In both sections, I detail these individuals' seva translations and practices. As I show, whether in the ashramite stage of the AHP or the ARP, spiritual seekers rely predominantly on the idea of omnipresent divinity in which the Hindu notion of Brahman – or, as American devotees tend to describe it, the eternal essence of the cosmos that is also the "true self" of all - is rooted to describe seva. Consistent with their new seva translations, they adopt new seva practices that are broader in terms of their application to a wider variety of beneficiaries in a wider variety of contexts. They also perform seva practices in more of an ongoing manner than

their counterparts in the initiate stage of the AHP. Therefore, in addition to performing seva practices on behalf of the “poorest of the poor,” other devotees, and Amma’s M.A. Mission, they perform seva practices on behalf of animals and the environment more broadly (Madigan 1998). They do this in the context of recurring but nonetheless occasional “volunteer events” that representatives from overseeing organizations schedule weeks if not months in advance, public satsang programs, retreats, and satsangs and Seva Saturdays at local M.A. Centers. They also do this in the context of daily ashram and non-ashram life. By “non-ashram life,” I mean moments in which these individuals go to work, school, the grocery store, etc. As a result, when compared to their counterparts in the admirer and initiate stages of the AHP, these spiritual seekers’ seva translations and practices reflect greater calibration to Amma’s main spiritual teaching that one ought to approach all of his or her interactions as opportunities to perform seva

ASHRAMITE STAGE OF THE AMERICAN HOUSEHOLDER PATHWAY

In this section, I detail the M.A. Mission experiences of individuals in the ashramite stage of the AHP. These experiences include visiting Amma’s M.A. Math in Amritapuri, India (if they had not done so already), relocating to a place of spiritual significance, and beginning new spiritual practices. I also describe their seva translations and practices.

Visit Amma’ M.A. Math and Relocate to a Place of Spiritual Significance

If they had not done so already, individuals in ashramite stage of the AHP visit Amma’s M.A. Math, so long as they have the funds and leisure time to do so. They do this because they believe such visits, by affording increased access to Amma’s physical presence, also afford greater access to her necessarily transformative “grace.” As Priya stated in an interview that I

conducted with her in 2008 at her then residence in Grafton, Wisconsin, “A person is always able to feel Amma’s presence, but to be in her physical presence intensifies the experience.”¹⁵⁶ Individual stays at Amma’s M.A. Math tend to last a few weeks to several months. While those of most spiritual seekers in this stage of the AHP occur once every few years, those of some like Paadini and Ganaka occur annually. Due to the frequency of their visits, they purchased a flat in the Ayurveda Research Center of Amma’s M.A. Math. This research center is located just beyond the walls of her M.A. Math.

After making an initial or second trip to Amma’s M.A. Math, many individuals in this stage of the AHP express a desire to relocate to this facility. They aspire to do this for continuing their lives as householders but with greater access to Amma’s necessarily transformative “grace.” They also aspire to do this for continuing their lives as householders but in the context of a community that regularly avails opportunities to engage in spiritual practices that facilitate immersion in what I detailed in Chapter Three as Amma’s type of spirituality. Some hope to do this to undergo a trial period for potential future renunciation. Priya was one of such devotees.

Priya first told me about her plans to relocate to Amma’s M.A. Math in an interview that I conducted with her in 2008 at her then residence in Grafton, Wisconsin. In that interview, she stated, “I don’t think monasticism is for me, so I don’t think [*emphasis on ‘think’*] I’d ask Amma to become a brahmacharini. I might want to have children. But, really, I don’t know.”¹⁵⁷ This statement by Priya suggested to me that she considered her trial period at Amma’s M.A. Math an opportunity to self-determine which pathway was most appropriate for her. Ultimately, Priya decided neither to reside at Amma’s M.A. Math nor to renounce. As Priya explained in an informal conversation that I had with her in 2015 at Amma’s M.A. Center Chicago in Elburn, Illinois, she came to this decision after reflecting on personal medical needs as well as her desire

to have children; “It [*referring to residency at Amma’s M.A. Math*] was too hard with the pollution. I have asthma, so that was difficult. And, I just felt like, after being there three months, maybe this isn’t right for me ... I wanted to have children. Even though I felt like [*living at Amma’s M.A. Math*] would be amazing for my life, I didn’t want my future children growing up so far away my parents.”¹⁵⁸

According to American devotees, relocation to Amma’s M.A. Math requires her permission. Although several of the individuals in the ashramite stage of the AHP among whom I conducted dissertation research requested and received Amma’s permission to relocate to this facility, several others like a devotee with whom I had an informal conversation on a Seva Saturday in 2015 at Amma’s M.A. Center Chicago requested and did not receive her permission to do so. Recounting her experience, she remarked, “Amma said I needed to get my life in order. Before moving to [*her M.A. Math*] I needed to be more secure. So, I sold my car and came [*to her M.A. Center Chicago*] to participate in [*the M.A. Mission’s*] Karma Yoga Program.” I return to the topic of Amma’s expectation that American members of her global following finance the lives that they carry out at her M.A. Centers later in this chapter. To an extent, these include American renunciate members of her global following.

According to the website of Amma’s M.A. Center Chicago, the M.A. Mission’s Karma Yoga Program is one in which participants immerse themselves in daily ashram life at one of Amma’s M.A. Center’s in the United States. Beyond engaging in group worship activities, they perform seva practices for six hours every day. After two weeks, a committee consisting of M.A. Center resident devotees determine if the participant is “a good fit” (M.A. Mission 2021c). If he or she is, members of this committee offer the participant the opportunity to continue participating in the M.A. Mission’s Karma Yoga Program, for a period up to two months (M.A.

Mission 2021c). In 2016, several of Amma’s M.A. Centers in the United States were sites at which one could participate in the M.A. Mission’s Karma Yoga Program. These included her M.A. Center Chicago and her M.A. Center in Castro Valley, California.

If they are unable to relocate to Amma’s M.A. Math - for example, due to personal reasons or failure to earn Amma’s permission to do so – devotees in the ashramite stage of the AHP relocate to one of her M.A. Centers in the United States. They do this for continuing their lives as householders but in the context of a community that regularly avails opportunities to engage in spiritual practices that facilitate immersion in Amma’s type of spirituality. As Paadini mentioned in an informal conversation that I had with her in 2016 at Amma’s M.A. Center Chicago, “We have such a rich community here, so many opportunities to grow. We’re really blessed.”

While Amma does not require spiritual seekers to obtain her permission before relocating to one of her M.A. Centers in the United States (according to Priya, obtaining the permission of a monastic whom oversees such a facility is sufficient), many seek it out to confirm that the move is “right” for them. As a householder devotee told me in an informal conversation that I had with her in 2016 at Amma’s M.A. Center Chicago, “I know some people just ask swami [*referring to Swami Shantamritananda Puri (then Brahmachari Shantamrita Chaitanya)*] if they can move [to Amma’s M.A. Center Chicago], but I really wanted to get Amma’s blessing. When Amma nodded her head, ‘Yes,’ I knew that I made the right decision.”

Begin New Spiritual Practices

As part of participating in daily ashram life, individuals in the ashramite stage of the AHP are exposed to yet another set of new spiritual practices. These include partaking in

spirituality-related classes. An example of a class in which devotees whom relocate to Amma's M.A. Center Chicago participate is "Gita Glass." In 2016, "Gita Class" was a workshop that Swami Shantamritananda Puri (then Brahmachari Shantamrita Chaitanya) led on the topic of spiritual lessons to take from the *Bhagavad Gita*. At the time, he held "Gita Class" on a weekly basis in the puja hall of Amma's M.A. Center Chicago. Of the individuals in the ashramite stage of the AHP among whom I conducted dissertation research, most participated in "Gita Class" at this facility once every other week. I attended a session of "Gita Class" in 2016. In that session, Swami Shantamritananda Puri read aloud from the *Bhagavad Gita's* twelfth chapter, titled "The Way of Love." Upon reaching its end, he paused, took a deep breath, and, then, began leading the approximately twenty individuals in attendance in a conversation about the chapter's underlying spiritual message. I recognized all attendees as residents of Amma's M.A. Center Chicago. In 2016, Swami Shantamritananda Puri was the only renunciate in residence at this facility. Hence, all except him were householder members of Amma's global following. Following roughly an hour of conversation, the group concluded that - if, as Krishna told Arjuna, "selfless service can lead you at last to complete fulfillment" - then it is not just concentration on the eternal, indefinable godhead but also, just as Amma teaches, *seva*, performed as part of living life as a renunciate or householder, which can bring about spiritual growth (Easwaran 2008, 208). I address American devotees' equal valuation of the spiritual merits of householdership and renunciation later in this chapter.

Other examples of classes in which devotees whom relocate to Amma's M.A. Center Chicago participate are those on Integrated Amrita Meditation Technique (IAM) and Amrita Yoga. IAM is Amma's trademarked variety of meditation. Given its trademarked nature, Amma's M.A. Mission requires participants to consent to confidentiality. To this point, I found a

disclaimer in an online registration form for IAM-20 (20-minute class on IAM), which requires registrants to agree to this statement: “I agree to keep the contents of the Course and the handouts in confidence. This means, DO NOT share any materials or handouts with others, teach others the technique, or post IAM course information on any website or social media site including Facebook, Instagram, WhatsApp, YouTube, etc” (M.A. Mission 2021b).

Amrita Yoga is Amma’s M.A. Mission-branded (but not trademarked) variety of yoga. In 2016, only members of Amma’s global following whom underwent the appropriate M.A. Mission training were allowed to teach IAM and Amrita Yoga classes. The following statement to this effect comes from the aforementioned online registration form for IAM-20: “All of our instructors have been rigorously trained. If students with only a little experience try to teach the Course, its integrity and its effectiveness will be compromised” (M.A. Mission 2021b). Members of Amma’s global following with the appropriate M.A. Mission training hold IAM classes on a weekly basis at Amma’s M.A. Center Chicago and several times a week at her M.A. Math. They hold Amrita Yoga classes periodically at Amma’s M.A. Center Chicago and several times a week at her M.A. Math. Most devotees living at Amma’s M.A. Center Chicago participate in IAM classes every other week. They participate in Amrita Yoga classes when offered. Most of those living at Amma’s M.A. Math participate in such classes on a weekly basis.

Like their parents, most children of devotees whom relocate to Amma’s M.A. Center Chicago in the United States participate in spirituality-related classes. Amrita Bala Kendra (ABK) is one of these classes.¹⁵⁹ ABK is the M.A. Mission’s religious curriculum for devotees’ children aged four to twelve. I assisted Lakshmi with teaching ABK to the children of devotees living at Amma’s M.A. Center Chicago on several Seva Saturdays in 2016. At the time, Lakshmi

held the position of “M.A. Center Chicago ABK Coordinator.” Like “Satsang Coordinator,” “ABK Coordinator” is a formally recognized role in Amma’s M.A. Mission. In it, a devotee uses an institutionalized curriculum for socializing the youngest members of Amma’s global following into her spiritual teachings. This includes Amma’s main spiritual teaching that one ought to approach all of his or her interactions as opportunities to perform seva. Given all beings’ essential non-duality, such is – more than any other spiritual practice - appropriate worship of the divine. Here, “non-duality” refers for to essential similitude with the divine. Given the omnipresent nature of divinity, it also refers to essential similitude with all beings on earth. Lakshmi held ABK on a weekly basis at Amma’s M.A. Center Chicago. Of American devotees’ children whom participated in ABK at this facility, all did so every week.

To illustrate my above point regarding ABK socializing the youngest members of Amma’s global following into her main spiritual teaching, I provide a description of time when I helped Lakshmi teach ABK. On March 12, 2016, I and three ABK students played a game that I selected from the M.A. Mission’s religious curriculum. One by one, we took turns rolling a hand-made die. Its sides had the following words written on them: “right action,” “love,” “peace,” “non-violence,” “truth,” and, on three sides, “you pick.” One student rolled the die. It revealed the word “love.” Then, in accordance with the M.A. Mission’s religious curriculum, I recited a story from the “Love” chapter of a booklet. It involved several children ignoring a fellow playground go-er. “How would you respond to that situation,” I asked? The student who rolled the die replied that he would be selfless and play with the excluded playground-goer. This student then concluded his answer with the cautionary note that future events will cause bullies to feel the lack of love that they cause others to feel. In effect, beyond echoing Amma’s main

spiritual teaching, this student stressed the karmic consequences of failing to follow that spiritual teaching.

New Seva Translations

Individuals' adoptions of new seva translations in the context of increased participation in M.A. Mission social life do not cease with their transitions from the admirer to the initiate stage of the AHP. Rather, they extend into the moments that mark their transitions from the initiate to the ashramite stage of that pathway. Hence, rather than refer to it as service that one performs on behalf of the "poorest of the poor" in the context of occasional but nonetheless recurring "volunteer events" that representatives from overseeing organizations schedule weeks if not months in advance, individuals in the ashramite stage of the AHP refer to seva as an "attitude" (Madigan 1998).¹⁶⁰ As I argue, this suggests that, compared to the seva translations of individuals in the initiate stage of the AHP, those of individuals in this pathway's ashramite stage reflect an even greater degree of calibration to Amma's main spiritual teaching that one ought to approach all of his or her interactions as opportunities to perform seva. Indeed, they understand seva not as a category of certain acts of service that a person does on behalf of certain beneficiaries in certain contexts but rather as an ongoing approach that one applies to his or her engagement with the world and its human and non-human inhabitants. To illustrate, when I asked Priya to describe her seva practices in an interview that I conducted with her in 2016 at Amma's M.A. Center Chicago, she did so in inclusive terms:

I don't really think about seva that much. You know, there's so much talk about seva, and sometimes I see egos getting involved. People say they stay up at night to do this seva, or they worked hard on that seva, and so-and-so is lazy and not doing seva ... I feel like seva, it's not an action. It's more of an attitude. It's about loving and being of service to others, even in little ways, like by offering a smile ... So, my motto is to try and remember god not by doing this and that seva but by being as helpful as I can wherever,

whenever, and for [whom]ever I can ... It's not about deeds. That's not what god made me for.¹⁶¹

Later in that same interview, Priya described her seva practices in routine terms, thereby illustrating not only her socialization into Amma's main spiritual teaching but also the cosmic consequences thereof; "I don't really think about karma and reincarnation that much, either ... In my day-to-day life, it's something that I accept as a reality for me, ... the world, and the cosmos, but I'm not ... thinking like I'm going to go do seva and earn some good some karma ... I just do it!"¹⁶² I add that, while individuals in the ashramite stage of the AHP refrain from including in their seva translations references to Christian charitable intentionalities focused on the divine as represented in the "poorest of the poor," they do discuss seva in Christian charitable (and humanitarian) terms when describing the spiritual practice to individuals whom they presume are not already aware of Amma (Madigan 1998). They do this for the same reasons that Priya noted in an interview, which I conducted with her in 2008 at her then residence in Grafton, Wisconsin, i.e. ease of translation and greater likelihood of positive reception due to concept familiarity.

New Seva Practices

In the ashramite stage of the AHP, individuals' new seva practices reflect their new seva translations. They are broader in terms of their application to a wider variety of beneficiaries in a wider variety of contexts. They are also more frequent. Therefore, in addition to performing seva practices on behalf of the "poorest of the poor," other devotees, and Amma's M.A. Mission, they perform seva practices on behalf of animals and the environment more broadly (Madigan 1998). They do this in the context of recurring but nonetheless occasional "volunteer events" that representatives from overseeing organizations schedule weeks if not months in advance, public satsang programs, retreats, and satsangs and Seva Saturdays at local M.A. Centers. They also do

this in the context of daily ashram and non-ashram life. By “non-ashram life,” I mean moments in which these individuals go to work, school, the grocery store, etc.

I provide a summary of Priya’s seva practices to illustrate. On the first Seva Saturday of nearly every month, Priya performs seva at Amma’s M.A. Center Chicago by preparing food for distribution to residents of a nearby homeless shelter in Aurora, Illinois. On other Seva Saturdays, she performs seva at Amma’s M.A. Center Chicago by preparing “fellowship meals” for all devotees at this facility to enjoy as a group. Outside of Seva Saturdays, Priya performs seva either at Green Friends Montessori School by developing curriculum for and leading classroom activities at this environmentally focused school. While located on the grounds of and founded by devotees living at Amma’s M.A. Center Chicago, Green Friends Montessori School claims itself to be a “secular organization;” according to its website, “Diverse religious beliefs of students and families are respected, as well as the spirituality of the individual child, in keeping with Montessori principles” (Green Friends Montessori School 2021). It “offers nature-based Montessori education for children ages 3 – 6th grade” (Green Friends Montessori School 2021). In 2018, children enrolled at this school included the children of devotees as well as non-devotees. In addition to performing seva in such regulated contexts as Seva Saturdays at Amma’s M.A. Center Chicago and Green Friends Montessori School, i.e. in contexts where the seva practices available to be performed are structured according to the norms of overseeing organizations, Priya performs seva by “loving and being of service to others, even in little ways, like by offering a smile.”¹⁶³ She does this spontaneously in the context of daily ashram and non-ashram life.

Priya addressed her seva practices in the form of curriculum development for instruction at Green Friends Montessori School in an interview that I conducted with her in 2016 at Amma’s

M.A. Center Chicago. In that interview, she highlighted several types of beings/entities as the recipients of her selfless service. Beyond the divine, these included affluent individuals (i.e. children enrolled in private elementary education), Amma's M.A. Mission, as well as the environment. She also reconciled the fact that she accepted income from Green Friends Montessori School with the disinterested nature of seva; "Seva is an attitude. If I approach my work with an attitude of love, of selflessness, then it's seva":¹⁶⁴

I love environmental education. I'm really passionate about it ... God and nature are one. When we serve nature, we serve god ... For the three months I was living at [Amma's M.A. Math], I spent a lot of time looking for opportunities to do [environmental education] there, but I didn't find any ... When I left [Amma's M.A. Math] and came back [to the United States], it was with such a heavy heart. I really [*emphasis on 'really'*] wanted to live in one of Amma's communities. I thought [her M.A. Center] might be an option, so I applied to three or four [environmental educator] positions in the San Ramon area ... None of the outdoor schools there had any openings ... I found a part-time environmental educator position at [name of nature center in Wisconsin]. I did that for a little while and pretty quickly took over coordinating all [of that nature center's] educational programming ... Soon after we [*referring to herself and her husband*] moved to [Amma's M.A. Center Chicago], another devotee suggested that I teach Montessori. She knew about my passion for environmental education and had just asked Amma for permission to help [her M.A. Center Chicago] start its own Montessori school. Amma loved [*emphasis on 'loved'*] the idea! ... The next time I saw Amma, I asked for her blessing [to teach at her M.A. Center Chicago's then prospective Montessori school]. She gave it to me right then and there! I was so [*emphasis on 'so'*] happy! I signed up for classes to get my Montessori teaching credentials and starting creating a nature-based curriculum that would inspire children to love and serve the environment.¹⁶⁵

Other ways in which devotees whom live at Amma's M.A. Center Chicago perform seva on behalf of the environment include rebuilding the local bee population through a permaculture approach to bee yard maintenance. It also includes rebuilding the local monarch population. Hence, while walking straight from my car to the kitchen/dining hall of this facility on the morning of a Seva Saturday in 2015, I ran into two women whom were in the process of releasing a monarch. "Hi, Karen," said one of the women. "We'll meet you in the kitchen soon.

We just need to find a good spot to release this monarch. It was too chilly when he crawled out of his cocoon earlier this morning.”

As I mentioned earlier, individuals in the initiate stage of the AHP refer to their seva practices as “assigned.” Interestingly, in the ashramite stage of this pathway, they no longer use this word to describe their seva practices. Rather, they refer to some of their seva practices as “official.” They refer to others as “unofficial.” Hence, when I asked a householder devotee and M.A. Center resident whom I found sanding a statue of Hanuman at this facility if he considered his actions seva, he answered, “Yes, [*pause*] but, it’s not my ‘official’ [*emphasis on ‘official’*] seva.” Comments like his suggested to me that, unlike the seva practices of individuals whom have not yet, those of individuals whom have entered into the ashramite stage of the AHP incorporate a relatively high degree of “individual initiative and enterprise” (Warrier 2005, 85). This is not to suggest that only such individuals’ “unofficial” seva practices demonstrate “individual initiative and enterprise” (Warrier 2005, 85). In helping to create a new M.A. Mission seva infrastructure (Green Friends Montessori School) in which she performs one of her “official” sevas, Priya demonstrates a high degree of “individual initiative and enterprise” (Warrier 2005, 85).

Past Spiritual Practices with Modifications

The spiritual practices in which individuals in the ashramite stage of the AHP engage but are not new due to previous M.A. Mission experience depend on where they relocate. Given this, I list these spiritual practices as they pertain to individuals living at Amma’s M.A. Center Chicago and at her M.A. Math in separate paragraphs below.

For individuals living at Amma’s M.A. Center Chicago, spiritual practices in which they engage but are not new include attending satsangs given by Amma and Swami Shantamritananda Puri. They attend satsangs given by Amma periodically in the context of public satsang programs, retreats, and visits to her M.A. Math. They attend satsangs given by Swami Shantamritananda Puri on a weekly basis at her M.A. Center Chicago. Other spiritual practices include receiving Amma’s darshan, participating in on-on-one dialogues with Amma during “Q&A sessions,” and participating in “fellowship meals.” They receive Amma’s darshan periodically in the context of public satsang programs, retreats, and on Wednesdays, Thursdays, Saturdays, and/or Sundays during periodic visits to her M.A. Math. Like their attendance at satsangs given by Amma, their participation in one-on-one dialogues with her occurs periodically, namely in the context of retreats and on Tuesdays during visits to her M.A. Math. As “fellowship meals” follow satsangs given by Swami Shantamritananda Puri at Amma’s M.A. Center Chicago, individuals living at this facility participate in these events with similar frequency. Still other spiritual practices include participating in “white flower meditation for world peace and divine grace,” archana [ritual recitation of the Sri Lalita Sahasranama (1,000 names of Devi in her manifestation as the Hindu pantheon’s Divine Mother goddess)], and ritual recitation of Amma’s Astottara Sata Namavali (Amma’s 108 names). They engage in these spiritual practices periodically in the context of public satsang programs and retreats as well as daily in the context of group worship at Amma’s M.A. Center Chicago. They engage in arati (ritual offering of light to Amma) and bhajan-singing on a weekly basis in the context of satsangs at Amma’s M.A. Center Chicago. They chant the mantras that they received from Amma on a daily basis at home, usually in front of homemade alters comprised of photos of Amma, “Amma dolls,” and/or objects blessed by Amma.

For individuals living at Amma’s M.A. Math, spiritual practices in which they engage but are not new include attending satsangs given by Amma and senior members of her global following. They attend satsangs given by Amma periodically in the context of public satsang programs and retreats. They also attend satsangs given by Amma on Tuesdays at her M.A. Math. They attend satsangs given by senior members of Amma’s global following at least once a week. Other spiritual practices include receiving Amma’s darshan, receiving “Prasad lunch” from Amma, and participating in on-on-one dialogues with Amma during “Q&A sessions.” They receive Amma’s darshan periodically in the context of public satsang programs and retreats. They also receive Amma’s darshan on Wednesdays, Thursdays, Saturdays, and/or Sundays at her M.A. Math. They receive “Prasad lunch” from Amma and participate in one-on-one dialogues with her during “Q&A sessions” on Tuesdays at that facility. Still other spiritual practices include participating in “white flower meditation for world peace and divine grace,” archana [ritual recitation of the Sri Lalita Sahasranama (1,000 names of Devi in her manifestation as the Hindu pantheon’s Divine Mother goddess)], ritual recitation of Amma’s Astottara Sata Namavali (Amma’s 108 names), arati (ritual offering of light to Amma), and bhajan-singing. They engage in these spiritual practices periodically in the context of public satsang programs and retreats as well as daily in the context of group worship at Amma’s M.A. Math. They chant the mantras that they received from Amma in their dormitories on a daily basis, usually in front of homemade alters such as what I described above.

AMERICAN RENUNCIATE PATHWAY (OPTIONAL EXTENSION OF THE AMERICAN HOUSEHOLDER PATHWAY)

In this section, I detail the M.A. Mission experiences of individuals in the ARP. These experiences include visiting Amma’s M.A. Math (if they had not done so already), requesting

and receiving Amma's permission to renounce, renouncing and relocating to Amma's M.A. Math, and beginning new spiritual practices. I also describe their seva translations and practices. As I stated earlier, individuals in the ARP translate and practice seva in ways that parallel how those in the ashramite stage of the AHP translate and practice seva. Individuals in these stages of the ADLC apply their seva translations and practices to a similarly wide variety of beneficiaries in a similarly wide variety of contexts. They also practice seva in an ongoing manner. I draw out these parallels when addressing renunciates' new spiritual practices. I label these seva translations and practices as "new," as not all individuals who transition into the ARP do so from the ashramite stage of the AHP. Some (like Karthika) transition into the ARP from the initiate stage of the AHP.

Visit Amma's M.A. Math

If they had not done so already, individuals who desire to renounce visit Amma's M.A. Math. Like their counterparts in ashramite stage of the AHP, they do this to "accelerate ... the spiritual process" via increased access to Amma's physical presence and therefore her necessarily transformative "grace."¹⁶⁶ Hence, in an interview that I conducted with Karthika in 2008 at Amma's M.A. Math, she stated the following: "When I saw Amma for the first time, I thought, 'Wow, she's so small, but her presence is so big! Amma has so much compassion, but her body is so small. I was taken aback ... I knew I wanted to spend the rest of my life at Amma's side, at the feet of her motherly love.'¹⁶⁷ I clarify here that - while it is in the context of undergoing their first experiences receiving Amma's darshan that most American devotees recognize Amma as not just an adequate but rather a superior guru and choose to pursue discipleship - it is in the context of visiting her M.A. Math that most of those whom pursue the

ARP recognize renunciation as the capacity in which they desire to carry out that discipleship. For some, it takes yearlong stays at Amma's M.A. Math to arrive at this realization. For others, it takes months; for others still, a few short days.

Another reason individuals who desire to renounce visit Amma's M.A. Math is to undergo a trial period for embarking on that experience. In an interview that I conducted with him in 2008 at Amma's M.A. Math, Vijaya described his initial visit to this facility in just such terms; "I wanted to try out [residence at Amma's M.A. Math] ... and see how it felt ... You don't have to bear the weight of your whole future on your shoulders. [A trial period] allows you to not think beyond one year ... your only goal is to see how you feel at the end of the year."¹⁶⁸ In an interview that I conducted with him in 2016 at Amma's M.A. Center Chicago, Chetas likewise described Amma's M.A. Math as "an opportunity to figure out which path is best."¹⁶⁹

Of the American devotees among whom I conducted dissertation research, seven decided to pursue the ARP. Five were female, Two were male. All considered themselves members of the United States' middle class and led financially secure lives prior to doing so. Their ages at the time of renouncing ranged from nineteen to roughly thirty. None had spouses, children, or full-time jobs. As a result, they had few if any responsibilities that posed a challenge to their pursuit of this pathway.

Request and Receive Amma's Permission to Renounce

Upon nearing the end of their visits to Amma's M.A. Math, individuals who decide to pursue the ARP approach Amma to gain her approval. They do this during the darshan portion of the satsangs that she hosted at her M.A. Math on Wednesdays, Thursdays, Saturdays, and Sundays. According to American devotees, unless a spiritual seeker receives Amma's approval,

he or she can neither begin the process of renunciation nor relocate to her M.A. Math as part of that process. Karthika described her experience requesting Amma's permission to renounce in an interview that I conducted with her in 2008 at Amma's M.A. Math; "When I came [to Amma's M.A. Math] the first time, I knew I wanted to stay longer. I stayed for six months and then went back home for the summer. When I came back [to Amma's M.A. Math] in December, I asked Amma if I could stay for good as a brahmacharini. Amma said, 'Yes!'"¹⁷⁰ Chetas' receipt of Amma's approval was less immediate. He recalled this turn of event in an interview that I conducted with him in 2016 at Amma's M.A. Center Chicago:

"Are you ... ready for initiation [*referring to initiation into monasticism*]?" That's what Amma asked me. She told me I should think about it and let her know. So, I thought about it ... I thought, "You don't want to have a wishy-washy attitude. No one's forcing you to do this. If you want to do it, it's up to you. But, to be clear, it's like marriage ... You're marrying yourself ... to spiritually. So, you have to be clear that's what you want." ... I felt like ... this is the only thing I could see myself doing with full commitment ... I realized that it was the path that fits me the most ... I didn't want anything else."¹⁷¹

Like those by Vijaya and Chetas that I included above, this statement by Chetas confirmed for me that the ARP is an optional extension of the AHP. Amma does not expect American devotees to commit to a particular pathway at the onset of their devotion. Agency remains them. I add that, as I stated earlier, Hindu belief, in having long upheld Manu's (1969) claim that sannyasi(ni)s - because they are the only spiritual seekers to renounce all trappings of worldly life - are the only spiritual seekers capable of ridding themselves of prarabdha and therefore of arriving at self-realization, has long assigned greater spiritual value to renunciation vs. householdership. Householder and renunciate members of Amma's global following challenge this view. For them, what determine a spiritual seeker's ability to rid himself or herself of prarabdha is not the pathway that he or she pursues but rather the degree to which he or she demonstrates commitment to seva (by frequently applying his or her seva translations and

practices to a wide variety of beneficiaries in a wide variety of contexts) while pursuing that pathway. Priya's statement that I included earlier in this chapter illustrate this perspective.

Individuals who pursue the ARP feel similarly; hence, they also challenge traditional Hinduism's unequal valuation of householdership vs. renunciation. To this point, Chetas stated the following in my 2016 interview with him at Amma's M.A. Center Chicago:

The more a person strengthens himself or herself through spiritual practices, the more that person can offer the world ... Selfless, it's axiomatic ... Do you want to do it [*referring to selflessness*] as a monk or just do it on your own? ... Who's to say this renunciate is more selfless than that householder? ... Maybe one day this renunciate will do a great job of being selfless but then the next day not so much. Maybe it's the same ... with that householder ... And, as you become stronger, you're more likely to choose the right path. You're not choosing monasticism or marriage out of weakness ... you're choosing it from clarity and strength ... For some people, it's like, "Wow, the joy of raising kids! ... I'm going to offer my time and energy, and it'll ... help me grow because ... I'm going to have tough times, but ... I want to embrace that challenge." For other people, it's austerity ... Amma doesn't feel like one path is better. But, it's important for you to ... understand which one fits you.¹⁷²

Renounce and Relocate to Amma's M.A. Math

There exist three levels of renunciation in Amma's M.A. Mission. These are the levels of the brahmachari(ni), senior brahmachari(ni), and swami(ni). According to Amritapuri.org, spiritual seekers whom Amma grants permission to renounce begin the process of doing so by attending a series of classes led by swami(ni)s or a senior brahmachari(ni)s.¹⁷³ These classes take place at Amma's M.A. Math. They primarily consist of lectures on Hindu spiritual texts such as the *Upanishads*, *Bhagavad Gita*, *Bhagavatam*, and *Ramayana*.¹⁷⁴ To a lesser degree, they include lectures on how to perform *homas*. Homas are ritual acts of worship in which one makes offerings to gods by burning items in a fire. The act of burning symbolizes the items' consumption by the divine. Following completion of these classes, initiates take two oaths. The first is an oath of asceticism; the second of celibacy. Once initiates take these oaths, they are

considered brahmachari(ni)s. In this role, they wear white as a symbol of their spiritual status and take up residence at Amma's M.A. Math. There, they live in simple flats in that facility's Devi temple or one of its multi-story dormitories. Although living quarters are separated by sex, men and women interact, albeit infrequently. Commingling of the sexes is a rare phenomenon in ashram contexts in India. Many ashrams there do not house both sexes. Some spiritual orders, while they accommodate, go so far as to establish separate ashrams for their male and female renunciates (King 1984).

Until March 13, 2020, Amma had not formally initiated any members of her global following into brahmacharya [level of renunciation associated with senior brahmachari(ni)s] or sannyasa [level of renunciation associated with swami(ni)s] for twenty-two years. By "formally initiated," I mean initiated via the rituals of brahmacharya and sannyasa diksha (Esche-Eiff 2009). In my 2016 interview with him at Amma's M.A. Center Chicago, Chetas attributed this lack of formal initiation into monasticism to Amma's emphasis on disinterested action in the form of seva practices (vs. status differentiation):

My batch was the last one. It was in the fall of 1997 ... [Amma] is very much focused on ... the non-duality of spirituality. I think it's [*referring to the lack of formal initiation into brahmacharya and sannyasa in Amma's M.A. Mission*] is a representation of that. She doesn't feel the need to have monks separate from everyone else, to make the distinction that this person is different from that person. We're all running around doing seva.

As Swami Dayamritananda Puri and Swami Shantamritananda Puri (2020) shared in an address that they gave via YouTube on March 19, 2020, Amma's decision to formally initiate a group of more than 260 members of her global following into brahmacharya and sannyasa after a twenty-two year hiatus was in response to her divine mission to uplift humanity in the context of the then emerging Coronavirus Pandemic; "A sannyasin is an offering to the world ... Amma has offered all of us [*referring to her newly initiated monastic disciples*] to the world so that the

world will become a better place ... Please understand that Amma is doing her duty and whatever she can from here [*referring to her M.A. Math*] ... so that we can move forward in this time of darkness.” Swami Dayamritananda Puri concluded his and Swami Shantamritananda Puri’s (2020) address with the following call to all members of Amma’s global following to perform seva practices: “We have to be compassionate at this time ... We have to expect people to be ... angry ... nervous ... afraid, but ... when people are shouting at us ... imagine they are also Amma’s children and try to help We can help others quite a lot, even if we cannot go out from our homes... We can call and talk to people, console them ... That is our duty at this time.”

As Warriar (2005, 2000) discovered through her ethnographic research, Indian renunciate members of Amma’s global following, when they vow to live ascetically, promise to forsake all material possessions save a few basic items. Examples of these items include a *mala* (string of prayer beads) and a white, yellow, or ochre-colored robe.¹⁷⁵ The purpose of giving up material possessions to this extent is to establish feelings of detachment from the worldly life that Indian renunciate members of Amma’s global following perceive as inconsequential to the wellbeing of their eternal souls. Warriar (2000, 2005) adds that, because Indian renunciate members of Amma’s global following have only a few material possessions, the M.A. Mission provides for their housing, food, medical care, and other necessities. While they do not formally vow to do so, these individuals also sever ties with their family members and friends. Puri (1988) writes in his account of Amma’s life that she stated the following to an Indian brahmachari whom asked to take a short leave from her M.A. Math, for paying a visit to family members:

My son, you say that you don’t have relatives, possessions, and so on, and yet you go home ... In the beginning, [renunciates] should stay away from their families. Otherwise, because of their attachment to the family, they won’t achieve any progress in their sadhana. Being attached to one’s family is like storing sour things in an aluminum vessel: the vessel will develop holes, and then you can’t keep anything inside ... Attachment to anything but God eats away at our spiritual growth. Attachment is a *sadhak’s*

[renunciate's] enemy. He should see it as an enemy and stay away from such relations.
[Puri 1999, 283-284]

I detail elsewhere that, unlike their Indian counterparts, American renunciate members of Amma's global following, when they transition from the role of householder to that of renunciate, vow to limit but not forsake all material possessions (Esche-Eiff 2009). This is because Amma expects Western brahmachari(ni)s to finance a portion of their lives at the M.A. Centers where they reside. To do this, American renunciate members of her global following employ a blend of strategies. These include relying on family members to contribute funds as well as taking regular, usually annual, one- to three-month-long leaves from the M.A. Centers where they reside, for moving back in with family members and working part-time jobs. When I asked Karthika in an informal conversation that I had with her in 2009 at Amma's M.A. Math to reconcile this reality with the conventional trappings of asceticism, she told me, "It's harder for Americans to hand over their money than it is for Indians. Indians aren't as attached to their money." In Karthika's mind, the act of an American renunciate handing over his or her money is an act of asceticism, even though it necessitates prior ownership of that money. Like the above comments by Chetas, this finding suggests that not only American householder but also American renunciate members of Amma's global following perceive the conventional trappings of renunciation insufficient to facilitate arrival at spirituality's ultimate goal of self-realization. Something else is just as if not more important to that process. That something is seva.

New Seva Translations

The seva translations of individuals in the ARP mirror those of individuals in the ashramite stage of the AHP. Like them, they no longer include references to Christian charitable intentionalities in their descriptions of seva, unless they are discussing the spiritual practice with

people whom they presume are not already aware of Amma. Hence, when talking with fellow devotees, individuals in the ARP – rather than describe seva, for example, as service that one does on behalf of the “poorest of the poor” (Madigan 1998) or otherwise destitute – describe it as an “a way of life.”¹⁷⁶ Karthika provided the following definition of seva in an interview that I conducted with her over the course of Amma’s Fall 2015 Northern California Retreat at her M.A. Center:

Whatever work we do, as long as we do it with the right intention and a big heart, Amma is happy. And, it doesn’t matter what work it is ... cleaning toilets, picking up trash outside ... all works are equally important ... Even the smallest thing - a kind word, a smile - can be seva ... It becomes your everyday life. It’s not about temporal boundaries, like my seva is ABC, and I do it at XYZ times. It’s a way of life. If I ... see something that has to be done ... it’s automatic ... It’s like the air you breathe.¹⁷⁷

Like the statement from Priya that I included earlier, this one by Karthika indicates an understanding of seva that reflects Amma’s main spiritual teaching with heightened precision. Karthika perceives seva not as certain acts of service that a person does on behalf of certain beneficiaries in certain contexts but rather as an ongoing approach that one applies to his or her engagement with the world and its human and non-human inhabitants.

New Seva Practices

Like individuals in the ashramite stage of the AHP, those in the ARP perform seva on behalf of a wide variety of beneficiaries in a wide variety of contexts. They also perform seva on an ongoing basis. Hence, in addition to performing seva on behalf of the types of beneficiaries whom they served prior to transitioning into the ARP [i.e. the “poorest of the poor” or otherwise destitute, affluent individuals (e.g. other devotees), and Amma’s M.A. Mission], they perform seva on behalf of animals and the environment more broadly (Madigan 1998). They do this not

only in the context of public satsang programs and retreats but also in the context of daily ashram life.

I provide a summary of Karthika's seva practices to illustrate. Every day at Amma's M.A. Math, Karthika performs seva by overseeing the operations of that facility's Western Café. In doing so, she manages a team of householder and renunciate devotees that prepare and deliver to paying customers orders of food items like pancakes, omelets, and - from the adjacent barista - cappuccinos. This includes ensuring that all members of her team compost all food waste. Episodically at Amma's M.A. Math, she organizes photographs and interviews with Amma in her M.A. Mission's archives. In the past, she also acted as protector and spokesperson for any hair that members of Amma's global following donated to her M.A. Mission. As Karthika shared with me in an informal conversation that I had with her in 2008 at Amma's M.A. Math, Amma's M.A. Mission was then in the process of launching a "Hair Project" whereby it would produce and donate wigs to people whom had lost their hair due to illness or injury. In the roles of protector and spokesperson, Karthika collected, dried, and stored ponytails of donated hair. She also gave interviews about the M.A. Mission's "Hair Project" via Amrita Television. According to its website, Amrita Television is "a 24-hour Malayalam Free to Air (FTA) General Entertainment Channel also covering the News and current affairs segment" (Amrita TV 2021). It is owned and run by Amma's M.A. Mission. In the context of public satsang programs and retreats, Karthika performs seva in a variety of ways. She does this by serving in multiple "darshan line positions," washing fruit that Amma receives from and gives as Prasad to attendees. She also performs "flower seva." When I asked Karthika in an interview that I conducted with her during Amma's Summer 2015 New York Public Satsang Program at the Jacob K. Javits Convention Center in New York, New York, if she was assigned or chose these

seva practices for herself, she replied, “Really, I just do whatever is needed.” This includes “even the smallest thing - a kind word, a smile.”¹⁷⁸

Past Spiritual Practices with Modifications

Spiritual practices in which renunciates engage but are not new mirror those of householder devotees living at Amma’s M.A. Math, except for the fact that renunciates who are senior brahmachari(ni)s or swami(ni)s oftentimes lead group worship activities.

CHAPTER CONCLUSION

In this chapter, I detailed the series of experiences that individuals in the ashramite stage of the ADLC’s American Householder Pathway (AHP) undergo while participating in M.A. Mission social life. I also detailed those that individuals in the renunciate stage of this life cycle’s American Renunciate Pathway (ARP) undergo. As part of detailing these individuals’ M.A. Mission experiences, I detailed their seva translations and practices. As I showed, whether in the ashramite stage of the AHP or the ARP, spiritual seekers rely predominantly on the idea of omnipresent divinity in which the Hindu notion of Brahman is rooted to describe seva. Consistent with their new seva translations, they adopt new seva practices that are broader in terms of their application to a wider variety of beneficiaries in a wider variety of contexts. They also perform seva practices in more of an ongoing manner than their counterparts in the initiate stage of the AHP. Therefore, in addition to performing seva practices on behalf of the “poorest of the poor,” other devotees, and Amma’s M.A. Mission, they perform seva practices on behalf of animals and the environment more broadly (Madigan 1998). They do this in the context of recurring but nonetheless occasional “volunteer events” that representatives from overseeing

organizations schedule weeks if not months in advance, public satsang programs, retreats, and satsangs and Seva Saturdays at local M.A. Centers. They also do this in the context of daily ashram and non-ashram life. As a result, when compared to their counterparts in the admirer and initiate stages of the AHP, these spiritual seekers' seva translations and practices reflect greater calibration to Amma's main spiritual teaching that one ought to approach all of his or her interactions as opportunities to perform seva. Given all beings' essential non-duality, such is - more than any other spiritual practice - appropriate worship of the divine.

What is the process whereby American devotees become socialized into embodying this spiritual teaching and the notion of essential similitude with the divine and all beings on earth that it implies? I answer this question in Chapter Seven. There, I use Weber's (1978) theory of charisma to analyze the process whereby American devotees and Amma co-produce her charisma.

CH. 7: “MAKING GOD’S LOVE MANIFEST”: AMERICAN EXPRESSIONS AND PRODUCTIONS OF AMMA’S CHARISMA

In this chapter, I use Weber’s (1978) theory of charisma to analyze the process whereby American devotees and Amma co-produce her charisma. In doing so, I answer the following questions. First, what extraordinary capacity do American devotees attribute to Amma? Second, what is the process whereby they and she co-produce this particular expression of her charisma? And, third, what is the role of seva (selfless service) in this process?

CHAPTER ORGANIZATION

I break this chapter into two sections. In section one, I introduce the extraordinary capacity to transform people that American devotees attribute to Amma. By “extraordinary capacity to transform people,” I mean the extraordinary capacity to encourage spiritual seekers over the course of their progression through the American Devotee Life Cycle (ADLC) not only to understand themselves and the world in which they live but also to act in that world differently. By “differently,” I mean according to what I term a “sevite habitus” informed by the spiritual truth that all are essentially one. According to American devotees, such is “god’s love,” which Amma makes manifest in them - by virtue of her necessarily transformative divine powers, or “grace” - in the form of a desire to perform seva practices on behalf of all always.¹⁷⁹ This is Amma’s charisma and the reason for her appeal to Americans. Because American devotees regard such behaviors as proof that a spiritual seeker is “become[ing] like [Amma],” i.e. as proof that he or she is progressing towards achieving “the goal” of becoming an embodiment of spirituality’s ultimate goal of self-realization, this “sevite habitus” should be understood as a divine habitus.¹⁸⁰ In this context, “self-realization” refers to a spiritual seeker’s

realization of his or her as well as all other beings' essential non-duality. For American devotees, "non-duality" refers to the idea that all beings have in them a spark of absolute divinity, or Brahman, the eternal essence of the cosmos that is also the "true self" of all. In effect, for them, "non-duality" refers to essential similitude with the divine. Given the omnipresent nature of divinity, it also refers to essential similitude with all beings on earth.

In section two, I detail the collaborative process whereby this happens. Motivated by proxemic desire, American devotees pursue opportunities to be near Amma (Srinivas 2010). These include opportunities to perform seva practices in her presence. In this context, "proxemic desire" refers to the common American devotee desire to be near Amma, for the purpose of confirming - vis-à-vis their nearness - their status as "good" devotees (Srinivas 2010). When successful at locating and seizing such opportunities (typically with greater regularity the further they are in the ADLC), American devotees find themselves on the receiving end of praising and scolding behaviors that Amma performs in reaction to their seva practices. They interpret Amma's praising behaviors as indication that their seva practices are "good" (demonstrate progression towards realization of the spiritual truth that all beings are essentially one by serving a wide variety of beneficiaries in a wide variety of contexts as well as in an ongoing manner). They interpret her scolding behaviors as indication that their seva practices are "bad" (fail to demonstrate progression towards realization of this spiritual truth by not doing the above). Because American devotees perceive Amma as a purna avatar of Devi in her manifestation as the Hindu pantheon's Divine Mother goddess and therefore transcendent and absolute divinity itself, they also perceive her as a superior guru. As a result, when American devotees find themselves on the receiving end of Amma's praising and scolding behaviors, they respond. They do this by continuing their "good" and discontinuing their "bad" seva practices. Hence, they demonstrate to

themselves and those around them the gradually transforming personhoods that they attribute to Amma.

I include in this section a discussion of Bourdieu's (1990) theory of habitus. I do this to conceptualize the seva practices that I argue are American expressions of Amma's charisma as performances of "embodied history" (Bourdieu 1990). I conclude this section with a discussion of Greti-Iulia Ivana's (2017) expansion of Jocey Quinn's (2005) theory of imagined social capital. I do this to analyze the behaviors that American devotees display towards members of Amma's global following whom inhabit positions of what Lucia (2014) calls "proxemic authority." By "proxemic authority," Lucia means power that devotees wield in the social hierarchy of Amma's M.A. Mission as a result of length of time in her global following. As I show, one of the ways devotees with proxemic authority wield power in Amma's M.A. Mission is by regulating access to Amma through appointments to highly coveted public satsang seva positions that are close in proximity to her.

AMERICAN EXPRESSIONS OF AMMA'S CHARISMA

After checking into Amma's Fall 2015 Northern California Retreat in the dining hall of her M.A. Center in Castro Valley, California, on November 16, 2015, I ran into Karthika. "Karen! Namah Shivaya!" "Namah Shivaya, [Karthika]! I was just about to take a walk and explore the grounds [of Amma's M.A. Center]. Want to join me?" While breathing a deep sigh of what sounded like relief, Karthika responded, "Yes! That sounds amazing. I've been so [*emphasis on 'so'*] busy helping everyone from [Amma's] M.A. Math [in Amritapuri, India] wrap up [her] public [satsang] program. And, tomorrow's going to be crazy with Amma's retreat underway. I could use a moment to relax. Have you seen the [meditation] labyrinth" (Figure

7.1)? “Labyrinth,” I asked? “No. I didn’t know [Amma’s M.A. Center] had one.” “Come on,” instructed Karthika. “It’s so peaceful there.”



Figure 7.1: On November 16, 2015, an American householder devotee walks the meditation labyrinth at Amma’s M.A. Center in Castro Valley, California. Another sits in quiet meditation.

Karthika and I hiked for approximately twenty minutes. During that time, we passed an apple orchard, a “Center for Equestrian Arts,” and several ponds that had paddling in them what Karthika called “the ashram’s resident swans.” When we arrived at the labyrinth, I noticed two householder devotees. One was walking the labyrinth’s winding path. Another sat in quiet meditation. “Let’s sit here,” suggested Karthika. She pointed to a wooden bench. “I don’t want to disturb their [*referring to the householder devotees*] meditation.”

“Are you enjoying your time at Amma’s [M.A. Center]?” I responded to Karthika’s question with an enthusiastic “Yes!” “I am especially enjoying all the opportunities to practice seva.” “You know you can practice seva anytime, right? Not just during Amma’s public [satsang] programs and retreats.” While referring to her understanding of Amma as transcendent and absolute divinity, Karthika went on to add, “God is everywhere. Amma is everywhere. She

creates opportunities for us to love and serve all the time.” Embarrassed by my response’s lack of calibration to Karthika’s understanding of her beloved guru, I fell silent. Then, as if to console me, Karthika added, “But, when we’re near Amma, those opportunities become clearer, so we’re more inclined to get involved.” This statement by Karthika echoed the following by Priya: “A person is always able to feel Amma’s presence, but to be in her physical presence intensifies the experience.”¹⁸¹ Like Priya’s statement, Karthika’s suggested that - because it affords direct access to her necessarily transformative divine powers, or “grace,” via her physical presence - proximity to Amma “accelerate[s] the spiritual process.”¹⁸²

Beyond this similarity to Priya’s statement, I heard in Karthika’s a potential intersection between what she considered Amma’s capacity to transform people and seva practices. I decided to ask Karthika’s permission to turn our informal conversation into a formal interview, for delving into this potential intersection. “Do you have a most memorable seva moment?” Karthika responded to my question with a look of confusion. “A most memorable seva moment? Memorable in what way?”¹⁸³ “In whatever way is most meaningful to you,” I replied. Karthika paused. “Well, there is one [seva moment] from more than ten years ago that I still remember like it was yesterday.”¹⁸⁴ “Oh, wow,” I exclaimed! I was intrigued by the emphasis that Karthika placed on the age of her memory. “It was on December 26, 2004.”¹⁸⁵ Karthika’s chipper voice turned somber. “That was the day that the [2004 Indian Ocean] tsunami hit [Amma’s M.A. Math].”¹⁸⁶

Amma’s Extraordinary Capacity to Transform People

According to Karthika, just before the 2004 Indian Ocean Tsunami hit Alappad, or the peninsular village in which Amma’s M.A. Math is located, she instructed everyone at that

facility to gather not in its bhajan hall but rather in its Devi temple, for partaking in her version of the darshan ritual. Karthika recalled that, while Amma didn't give a reason for the last-minute change of location, everyone complied without complaint. "It wasn't long afterwards that the tsunami hit," said Karthika.¹⁸⁷ Once it did, Amma directed a few of her devotees to make use of the time between waves to round up her M.A. Math's elephants, cows, and goats. She instructed them to take its elephants across the backwaters by boat; to bring its goats and cows inside the temple. She instructed everyone else to climb upwards to safety.

"I remember looking around and wondering where Amma was. I didn't see her," said Karthika.¹⁸⁸ Afraid, Karthika peered down from her position of relative safety approximately six stories above the rushing waters that were then cascading over the walls of Amma's M.A. Math. She spotted Amma on the first-floor balcony of its Devi temple. "There she was, ripping off her sari," exclaimed Karthika!¹⁸⁹ "Eventually, she was down to just her undergarments and a shawl. A few days later, Amma told everyone [at her M.A. Math] that she wasn't going to let a dang sari hold her back from saving anyone."¹⁹⁰

I attended a session of "ashram orientation" in 2012. In that session, one of Amma's senior disciples stressed the importance of modest dress at Amma's M.A. Math. Given his message, I asked Karthika what she thought about Amma "ripping off her sari."¹⁹¹ "It was beautiful," responded Karthika.¹⁹² "As usual, Amma wasn't thinking about herself. She was only thinking about others."¹⁹³ Karthika added, "Amma always says that her physical body is unimportant, but I was afraid for her."¹⁹⁴ Suggesting that the several devotees who had started to crowd around her felt similarly, Karthika told me that she overheard them tell Amma about their plans to bring her a boat. "Amma got so angry," recalled Karthika.¹⁹⁵ "'Don't bring me a boat,' she said. 'Bring the villagers all the boats you can find. Most of them don't know how to swim!

... “from that moment on, everyone at [Amma’s M.A. Math] sprang into action It was remarkable.”¹⁹⁶

Karthika described the seva practices that she and her fellow devotees performed in the days, weeks, and months that followed the 2004 Indian Ocean Tsunami.

I had never seen so many devotees serving so tirelessly ... We collected and distributed food and clothes ... So many people lost everything. We provided shelter to people at Amma’s [bio-tech campus of her Amrita] university. We re-built homes, ... made them into two-story buildings. We re-built parts of [Amma’s M.A. Math], cleaned up its grounds. We built a bridge across the backwaters. Clearly, people and animals [in Alappad] needed better access to [Kerala’s] mainland. We replanted trees, fed stray dogs. We provided mental health services. Sometimes, we just sat with people ... Once things became less dire, we provided camps for children, yoga classes. We played games with them, performed skits with them. That was fun. We even gave them swimming lessons.¹⁹⁷

In an informal conversation that I had with Karthika after Cyclone Tauktae battered Alappad in 2021, she again made reference to an intersection between what she considered Amma’s capacity to transform people and the seva practices that she and her fellow devotees performed in the days, weeks, and months that followed the 2004 Indian Ocean Tsunami. As Karthika stated, Amma’s necessarily transformative “grace” generated in her and her fellow devotees a *sevite habitus* that, in being informed by the spiritual truth that all are essentially one, led them to act selflessly.

It’s by Amma’s grace that we even thought to re-build those homes as two-story buildings. They were single-story buildings before the [2004 Indian Ocean] tsunami. We could have re-built them that way. That would have been the easier thing to do. But, we weren’t think about ourselves, about how tired we were. We were thinking about the villagers. So, we pushed ourselves to serve them the best we could.

I provide this ethnographic vignette for two reasons. First, like other American devotees whose thoughts on the matter I referenced earlier, Karthika perceived Amma as a *purna avatar* of Devi in her manifestation as the Hindu pantheon’s Divine Mother goddess and therefore transcendent and absolute divinity itself. In perceiving Amma as such, Karthika also perceived

her as the embodiment of spirituality's ultimate goal of self-realization. I add that, because Karthika considered Amma without an ego to pacify, it made sense to her that her beloved guru and godperson responded to the catastrophic events of December 26, 2004, in that way that she did, i.e. by personifying seva (selfless service). Hence, while Karthika thought Amma's actions "beautiful," she reserved the word "remarkable" to describe what she saw in her and her fellow devotees' seva practices as Amma's capacity to encourage spiritual seekers not only to understand themselves and the world in which they live but also to act in that world according to a seville habitus informed by the spiritual truth that all are essentially one.¹⁹⁸ Indeed, by performing seva practices on behalf of a wide variety of beneficiaries and - as her use of the word "tirelessly" suggested - in an ongoing manner, Karthika and her fellow devotees demonstrated socialization into such a seville habitus.¹⁹⁹

But, for American devotees, socialization into a seville habitus informed by the spiritual truth that all are essentially one does not occur overnight. Rather, it occurs gradually over the course of the ADLC. For introducing this idea as well as American devotees' attribution of socialization into such a seville habitus to Amma, I now turn to detailing a series of conversations that I had with Karthika and Priya.

"I Used to See ... Difference ... Now, I ... See Oneness"

Pointing to the steadfast nature of her confidence in the following ideas, I note here that November 16, 2015, was far from the first time that I heard Karthika refer to Amma as the embodiment of spirituality's ultimate goal of self-realization. It was also far from the first time that I heard her refer to Amma's capacity to encourage spiritual seekers not only to understand themselves and the world in which they live but also to act in that world according to a seville

habitus informed by the spiritual truth that all are essentially one. To illustrate, in an interview that I conducted with her in 2008 at Amma's M.A. Math, Karthika stated the following: "Amma is ... divine love. She has no ego."²⁰⁰ For demonstrating that she "has no ego," Amma "loves everyone and everything ... When she [practices] her love, like when she hugs people for hours on end without taking a single break to eat or go to the bathroom, she never expects anything in return ... Her love is pure. It's unconditional ... No one else has that kind of love."²⁰¹ Karthika went on to add that, while "no one else has" it, Amma gradually socializes spiritual seekers into an approximation of "that kind of love;" "The more [a spiritual seeker] stay[s] with Amma, ... the more [he or she] become[s] like her ... That is the goal ... I used to see so much difference in the world. Now, I am starting to see oneness in everything. It's a very slow process."²⁰²

In an interview that I conducted with her in 2014 at Amma's M.A. Center Chicago in Elburn, Illinois, Karthika expanded on these statements to situate Amma's socialization of spiritual seekers into an approximation of the "pure ... unconditional" love that flows from her ego-lessness in a context of seva; "Amma trains us [*referring to her devoted disciples*] to let go of our egos, to be selfless ... When we do seva, we change. God [*referring to the spiritual truth that all are essentially one*] takes birth in us."²⁰³

As I mentioned earlier, Priya described Amma in similar terms in an interview that I conducted with her in 2008 at her then residence in Grafton, Wisconsin; Amma is "an incarnation of divine love!"²⁰⁴ Over the course of that same interview, Priya echoed Karthika's understanding of "divine love" by emphasizing its roots in the ego-lessness that stems from the Hindu notion of advaita (essential non-duality) and is the precondition for self-realization.²⁰⁵

It [*referring to "divine love"*] is the kind of devotion [that] the lover [has] for the beloved ... Like [what] Krishna [has] for Radha ... In the Western world, we don't have that concept ... In Christianity, we have ... bridal mysticism ... In Western culture [more broadly], [we have] love that is ... based on sex and romance ... In the spiritual sense,

[love is] the yearning of the soul to reunite with the Divine, the yearning of the atman [(individual soul)] for the jiva [(individual life form)]. So, I would describe [divine love] like that, the yearning of the lover for beloved, the yearning of the soul to reunite with the Divine.²⁰⁶

Such an understanding of Divine love inspires an image of a god who is waiting to be reached, vs. that of the Christian god who is far away and, through the person and works of Jesus Christ, strives to reconcile the world to himself (Lipner 1998). In an interview that I conducted with her in 2016 at Amma's M.A. Center Chicago, Priya expanded on these comments. In doing so, she echoed Karthika's assertion that Amma socializes spiritual seekers over the course of the ADLC into an approximation of her ego-lessness. She also echoed Karthika's situation of that socialization in a context of seva; "Amma slowly trains us to live life with an open heart, an attitude of love, ... to show compassion to everyone and everything ... [Amma] is making god's love manifest in us."²⁰⁷ I detail the process whereby this happens in the section below.

AMERICAN PRODUCTIONS OF AMMA'S CHARISMA

Weber (1978) inverts Sohm's (1901) characterization of charisma as a spiritual fact to reconceptualize it as a product of reciprocal relationships that the charismatic leader and his or her followers perform. I add that they perform these reciprocal relationships continuously over time. In doing so, the charismatic leader acts out possession of "gifts of body and mind" (Weber 1978, 1112). By this, Weber (1968, 48) means attributes that "set [the charismatic leader] apart from ordinary men." Upon deeming such actions sufficient evidence thereof, the charismatic leader's followers confirm his or her possession of extraordinary attributes and confer onto him or her the authority to which they ultimately render themselves dutiful subjects.²⁰⁸ I say that the charismatic leader and his or her followers perform these reciprocal relationships "continuously over time" because the unstable nature of the authority that flows from charisma demands it.

If those to whom he feels sent do not recognize him [as their charismatic leader], his claim collapses; if they recognize [his charismatic authority], he is their master as long as he “proves” himself ... He gains and retains it solely by proving his powers in practice. He must work miracles, if he wants to be a prophet. He must perform heroic deeds, if he wants to be a warlord. Most of all, his divine mission must prove itself by *bringing wellbeing* [Weber’s emphasis] to his faithful followers; if they do not fare well, he obviously is not the god-sent master. [Weber 1978, 1112-1114]

Similar to how Weber (1978) locates charisma and its productions in reciprocal relationships, I found that the process whereby Amma and American devotees co-produce the extraordinary capacity to transform people, which they attribute to her is - as my use of the word “co-produce” suggests - collaborative in nature. Beyond spiritual seekers seeking out and seizing opportunities to be near Amma, it involves Amma performing praising and scolding behaviors in reaction to the seva practices that they perform in her presence. Spiritual seekers react to Amma’s praising and scolding behaviors by continuing what they interpret as their “good” seva practices (demonstrate progression towards realization of the spiritual truth that all beings are essentially one by serving a wide variety of beneficiaries in a wide variety of contexts as well as in an ongoing manner) and discontinuing what they interpret as their “bad” seva practices (fail to demonstrate progression towards realization of this spiritual truth by not doing the above). As a result, they demonstrate to themselves and those around them the transforming personhoods that they attribute to Amma.

It follows from this that, unlike how Hallstrom (1999; 2004), Gold (2005), Srinivas (2010), and Khandelwal (2012) - while they do not deny that Indian gurus’ charisma requires recognition by their followers - identify such figures’ charisma as attributes that refer to himself or herself (these attributes commonly include the capacity to transcend worldly categories like gender and ethnicity), I identify Amma’s charisma as an attribute that refers not only to Amma but to her followers, as well. In upholding Amma as a purna avatar and therefore tasked with the

divine mission of uplifting humanity [interestingly, this divine mission is similar to that which Weber (1978, 1114) describes as “bringing wellbeing”], American members of her global fellowship make her extraordinariness as much about themselves as they do about her.

I note here that, although they disagree on the reasons why gurus are becoming increasing popular among members of India’s urban middle class, Sallow (1982), Kakar (1983), Varma (1998), Urban (2003), and Warriar (2000; 2005; 2006) are similar in that they all locate this phenomenon in the broader context of Indian economic liberalization. While economic liberalization is hardly unique to India, it is not the context in which I locate Amma’s attractiveness to Americans. That context is a changing American religious landscape marked by increasing participation in metaphysical religion (Albanese 2008; Bender 2010; Huffer 2010; Ibid 2011; Lucia 2014; Pew Research Center 2019; Srinivas 2010). Because one of the defining characteristics of metaphysical religion is the overarching idea of personal transformation vis à vis understanding of, emulation of, and/or unification with a superhuman power (variously conceived, Lucia 2014), I argue that it is ultimately through their own perceived transformations that American devotees give Amma her uniquely American relevance.

In my description of Amma’s charisma, why do I reference habitus (Bourdieu 1990)? I could have termed that which Amma socializes American devotees into something else; an “attitude” or “a way of life,” for example.²⁰⁹ To explain, I now turn to addressing Bourdieu’s (1990) theory on habitus.

Habitus

For turning it into a mediating construct that revokes what Loïc Wacquant (2016, 65) calls the “common-sense duality between the individual and society,” Bourdieu (1990, 53)

redefined “habitus,” an old philosopheme with roots in Aristotle’s (1998) notion of “hexis,” to mean the “systems of durable, transposable dispositions” that result from “conditionings associated with a particular class of conditions of existence.”²¹⁰ Despite it having been revolutionary as an attempt at examining “the dialectic of the internalization of externality and the externalization of internality,” Bourdieu’s (1977, 72) theory of habitus came under criticism. This was due in large part to deterministic accents that stem from Bourdieu’s (1990) aspirations to maintain distance from empirical objects of study, for focusing on the underlying structures that shape their social worlds.

Since the history of the individual is never anything other than a certain specification of the collective history of his class or group, each individual system of dispositions may be seen as a structural variant of all other group or class habitus. “Personal style,” the particular stamp of marking all products of the same habitus, whether practices or works, is never more than a deviation in relation to the style of a period or class. [Bourdieu 1977, 86]

In focusing on social relations not as ties that are empirical and subjective but rather as interconnections between structurally established positions, statements like this one suggest that “habitus itself ... act[s] and interact[s in the social world], instead of people with a given habitus doing so in a meaningful way” (Wacquant 2016, 56). Therefore, they provide foundation for what is currently a vast social science literature that debates if Bourdieu’s (1990) theory is less of a bridge between structure and agency than it is a sophisticated account of structuralism (Adams 2003; Atkinson 2010; Halle 1993; Kogler 1997; Lamont 1992; Widick 2003).²¹¹ Despite this shortcoming, though, I find the concept helpful for conceptualizing the seva practices of American devotees as performances of “embodied history” (Bourdieu 1990, 56). As I demonstrated earlier, the seva practices of American devotees change over the course of the ADLC. Specifically, they change to reflect socialization into a sevite habitus informed by the spiritual truth that all are essentially one by becoming performed on behalf of a wider variety of

beneficiaries in a wider variety of contexts as well as in more of an ongoing manner. In detailing the process whereby this happens, I therefore detail that which American devotees undergo to accumulate particular personal histories that they ultimately embody in their seva practices. I say “personal histories,” because no two experiences undergoing this process are exactly the same. Depending on where spiritual seekers are in their progressions through the ADLC (not all spiritual seekers progress or want to progress through all of its four stages), which opportunities they locate and seize to be near Amma, how they perform seva practices when in Amma’s presence, etc., their experiences differ.

While I find Bourdieu’s (1990, 56) theory of habitus helpful for conceptualizing the seva practices of American devotees as performances of “embodied history,” I do so with the understanding that - unlike Bourdieu’s (1990, 56) characterization of the notion as “unconscious” or “forgotten” - it is, for American devotees - something to remember and reflect on, for ensuring their spiritual growth. Hence, Karthika and Priya were able and chose to articulate what they saw as their slow progressions towards realizing “the goal” of “become[ing] like [Amma].”²¹²

Amma Praises

On March 12, 2016, I and three ABK students arranged ourselves on the floor of a classroom at Amma’s M.A. Center Chicago, ready to delve into that week’s lessons from the M.A. Mission’s religious curriculum for devotees’ children aged four to twelve. I heard a commotion erupt next door. “What’s going on in there?” “Oh,” said Lakshmi. “The AYUDH youths are preparing a skit that they’re going to perform during Amma [Chicago Public Satsang] program in June.” AYUDH stands for “Amrita Yuva Dharma Dhara.” Comprised of Sanskrit

words, the phrase translates to mean “the youth that perpetuates the wheel of dharma” (righteousness).²¹³ According to the 2007 edition of *Embracing the World for Peace and Harmony: The Humanitarian Activities of Sri Mata Amritanandamayi Devi*, it refers among members of Amma’s global following to “the youth wing” of her M.A. Mission (M.A. Mission 2007, 60). Participation in it is open to devotee and non-devotee youths aged fifteen to thirty.

The youth wing of the MAM offers guidance and selfless-service activities for young people. Participants are instructed in yoga, meditation and self-discipline. They also engage in spiritual discussions, take part in community-service projects and conduct drug-and-alcohol-awareness seminars. Inspired by the scriptural truth “the whole world is God alone,” the youth groups spread awareness that every place and object is permeated by the Divine and is therefore sacred. [M.A. Mission 2007, 60]

The 2013 edition of this publication, retitled *Embracing the World: The Humanitarian Initiatives of Sri Mata Amritanandamayi Devi (Mata Amritanandamayi Math)*, provides the following examples of “community-service projects” that members of Amma’s AYUDH participate in: “activities [include] caring for the elderly, homeless and handicapped and empowering young people ... [they also participate in] charity concerts and environmental activities” (M.A. Mission 2013, 48).

After I and the ABK students finished our lessons for the week, I went next door. “Namah Shivaya! Mind if I watch you practice?” “Not at all,” replied one of the AYUDH youths. “Maybe you could give us some feedback.” “Absolutely,” I said. “What is your skit about?” As she went on to tell me, Amma maintains that young people are “distracted” by technology. Lakshmi chimed in; “Amma prefers that they play outside, take care of nature, and band together to do seva. It’s better for them, and they help make the world a better place in the process.”

On June 27th, 2016, or the first day of Amma’s Summer 2016 Chicago Public Satsang Program at her M.A. Center Chicago, I approached the AYUDH youths who were then sitting

just to the side of the stage at the center of which Amma sat in padmasana atop of a wide, upholstered chair. “Namah Shivaya! Good luck,” I whispered. “Are you nervous?” “I was, but I’m not anymore,” replied one of the AYUDH youths. She added, “I could sit here and watch Amma all day. She radiates love!” When the AYUDH youths finished their skit, Amma smiled, clapped, and tossed handfuls of rose petals in their direction. They discussed her reaction at their next meeting. “Amma was so happy!” “She was,” added Lakshmi. “You did a great job sharing her message with everyone at her [public satsang] program. You all should be very proud.” “I can’t wait to perform again next year,” exclaimed another of the AYUDH youths. Everyone nodded in agreement.

Proxemic Desire

American members of Amma’s global following covet such opportunities be near Amma. To illustrate, I provide the following description of my experience being assigned and carrying out the seva position of “Dinner with Amma – Line Monitor” during Amma’s Fall 2015 Northern California Retreat at her M.A. Center in Castro Valley, California. Upon checking into the event on November 16, 2015, I noticed in my registration packet a list of seva positions to which I had been assigned. They included “Dinner with Amma – Line Monitor.” According to its description, my responsibilities in this seva position would include ensuring a quick and steady flow of devotees exiting the “Prasad dinner” line that following evening. “Oh, we’ll be doing seva together!” One of the householder devotees overseeing registration glanced down at my open packet. He added, “It’s a pretty great seva. Don’t forget to come to orientation tomorrow.” Unsure what he was referring to, I look back down at my registration packet and noticed a small slip of paper:

Your help is needed! We are counting on you to help serve dinner with Amma! Please attend the short meeting in the Dining Hall at 5:30PM on Day 2 of the retreat to find out where you will stand. Those who attend the meeting [*M.A. Mission's emphasis*] will have the opportunity of having their name pulled out of the "hat" for the positions **nearest** [*M.A. Mission's emphasis*] Amma ... We request that if you have had a chance to serve close to Amma in the past two years, ... you accept another serving position so as to give others a chance.

On November 17th, 2015, I entered the Dining Hall of Amma's M.A. Center at 5:30PM. I saw a group of approximately fifteen individuals gathered together. Assuming them fellow "Dinner with Amma – Line Monitors," I walked in their direction. "Namah Shivaya! I'm here for orientation." "You're in the right place," answered a householder devotee who was holding a hat. "Before we get started," let's see who's going to serve closest to Amma. Upon calling out each of a select few names, the group clapped and cheered. "Jai, ma," exclaimed one of the selectees! "Jai" is derived from the Sanskrit word, "jaya." It translates to mean "victory" or "hail." "Ma," derived from the Sanskrit word, "matra," translates to mean "mother." American members of Amma's global following use the phrase to indicate praise to or admiration of Amma.

At 7:30PM, Amma entered the Dining Hall of her M.A. Center. Approximately one thousand retreat attendees were already lined up to receive her "Prasad dinner." One by one, they approached Amma. She responded by passing each a plate that the selectees passed to her pre-filled with several types of Indian food. Noticing that one devotee hadn't exited the line after receiving "Prasad dinner," I stepped in and directed her do so. "Namah Shivaya. Follow me, please." The devotee heeded my instructions, albeit begrudgingly. "Why did you do that," she asked, her brows deeply furrowed? "I'm sorry," I replied. "Amma has so many people to feed. We need to keep the line moving." With a harumph, this devotee then quickly left.

For what reasons do American devotees covet opportunities to be near Amma? As I learned, there are three. First, while American members of Amma’s global following use the term “darshan” almost exclusively for referring to Amma’s version of the ritual, they do not disregard its more traditional reference to that Hindu ritual in which one beholds the image of and, as a result, absorbs the powers of a deity. Hence, the statement by an ABK youth that she “could sit .. and watch Amma all day [because] she radiates love.”

Second, like how Srinivas’ (2010, 166) notion of proxemic desire insists, American devotees covet opportunities to be near Amma because to be near Amma evidences “their worth ...as ‘good’ devotees.” Srinivas writes the following about proxemic desire among devotees of Sathya Sai Baba:

Devotees measure their proximity to Sai Baba as evidence of their worth: if they are “good” devotees of Baba, they believe they will get a good darshan, possibly even get a private darshan with the possibility of a one-on-one conversation with Sathya Sai Baba (Shaw 2000, 257-264). Conversely, a bad darshan, either being ignored by Sai Baba and/or being seated far away, all denote more painful, patient spiritual work to be done. [2010, 166-167]

As I illustrated earlier by recounting an interaction that I had with a “darshan token assistant” during Amma’s 2015 New York Public Satsang Program at the Jacob K. Javits Convention Center on July 14, 2015, American devotees interpret opportunities to be near Amma as expressions of her favor. I briefly summarize that interaction here. Upon looking at the “darshan token” that this “darshan token assistant” handed me, I felt pleasantly surprised by its alpha-numeric code. “Wow, that’s [*referring to the alphanumeric code on my ‘darshan token’*] a lot lower than I expected.” A smile spread across this “darshan token assistant’s” face. Then, he leaned towards me and whispered, “Someone [*emphasis on ‘someone’*] must want you here.”

Not all opportunities to be near Amma are considered equal, though. To this point, I learned that, for American devotees, proxemic desire to be near Amma and, as a result, obtain

evidence of “their worth ... as ‘good’ devotees” becomes especially heightened when opportunities to be near Amma include opportunities to perform seva practices (Srinivas 2010, 166). This is because, for American devotees, opportunities to perform seva practices in Amma’s presence are also opportunities to demonstrate and obtain confirmation from Amma that one is following her main spiritual teaching (to approach all interactions as opportunities to perform seva) and therefore doing her type of spirituality well. If American devotees receive such confirmation, for example, in the form of a shower of flower petals, they respond by continuing their “good” seva practices. Hence, an ABK youth’s comment that she “can’t wait to perform again next year.”

Opportunities that American devotees have to be on the receiving end of praising behaviors that Amma displays in reaction to their seva practices occur throughout the ADLC. With that said, they tend to become more frequent the further one is in this life cycle, up to a point, due to greater access to Amma. To this point, Karthika shared in an interview that I conducted with her in 2015 at Amma’s M.A. Center that Amma will mention “in passing” in the context of daily ashram life if a devotee “did a good job” performing seva practices.²¹⁴ I say “up to a point,” as Amma will give such reinforcement so long as the devotee “needs it [*referring to reinforcement*].”²¹⁵ According to Karthika, Amma only praises devotees who have not yet made what she considers sufficient progress towards adopting a sevite habitus informed by the spiritual truth that all are essentially one; “If you don’t need it [*referring to reinforcement*], Amma won’t give it. It’s unnecessary.”²¹⁶ About herself, Karthika stated, “I don’t feel like I need Amma to say that.”²¹⁷ Echoing Karthika, a householder devotee with whom I had an informal conversation in 2015 at Amma’s M.A. Center Chicago, stated, “Amma wouldn’t want to build up anyone’s ego unnecessarily.”

Lastly, American devotees covet opportunities to be near Amma because such opportunities – if they include opportunities to perform seva practices – are also opportunities to receive guidance from Amma on how to improve with regards to following her main spiritual teaching and therefore do her type of spirituality better. This guidance typically comes in the form of scolding behaviors that Amma performs in reaction to such individuals’ seva practices, leading them to discontinue those, which they interpret as “bad.” To illustrate, I describe what I found to be a particularly telling turn of events that I witnessed unfold during Amma Fall 2015 Retreat at her M.A. Center.

Amma Scolds

On November 16, 2015, or the first day of Amma Fall 2015 Retreat at her M.A. Center, I entered Amrita Hall. I was excited to observe Amma’s version of the darshan ritual in the context of one of her retreats for the first time. Upon passing through its main doors, I found myself face-to-face with a householder devotee holding a sign. It read, “show your wristband.” I revealed mine, and – after noticing that the main floor of Amrita Hall was already packed with attendees – walked past this householder devotee to climb up a set of stairs to a balcony and claim a vacant seat. Once situated, I scanned the rest of the balcony, curious how many vacant seats were left. I saw another householder devotee holding a sign. It read, “please show your smile.” I thought very little of this until Amma – in a move that, especially in the context of darshan, seemed oddly abrupt – stopped hugging retreat attendees to summon the latter of the two householder devotees on-stage. Answering Amma’s call, he approached her. For a brief moment, Amma and this householder devotee conversed through a renunciate devotee whom acted as a translator. Amma then took this householder devotee’s sign, held it above her head,

and posed for a picture. I glanced back at the former householder devotee. He did not have his sign.

During “Q&A session” on November 17, 2015, Amma again spoke through a renunciate devotee to share with everyone in attendance what had transpired the previous day.

During the retreat, if you have to enter [Amrita] hall, you need to show your wristband ... one of Amma’s sons had a sign [above] his head. [He] was standing there on the balcony with a sign saying, “please, show your smile.” Amma saw this person ... [His sign] was like a light. [It was] like he [had] fixed a light on [this sign] ... Amma [then] called him aside and asked him why he was holding that [sign] ... He explained that the person ... at the door checking wristbands didn’t smile at him ... He thought it was a good idea to ... smile. So, Amma took [his] sign and placed it [above] her head.

While still speaking through a renunciate devotee, Amma stated that the picture, which she posed for “already [earned] 4,000 likes on Facebook [*audience laughed and clapped*].” As if to stress the gravity of the spiritual lesson contained in this picture, she added, “Within six hours [*audience laughed and clapped again*]!” Amma then went on to clarify this spiritual lesson, that being the imperative to regard all of one’s interactions as opportunities to perform seva practices, i.e. as opportunities to act selflessly and therefore demonstrate socialization into the spiritual truth that all are essentially one.

Whatever we ... are doing, we should also be able to [do it with a] smile ... That’s the one simple mistake of selfless service. Be happy and spread happiness. That helps our heart’s flower to blossom and [the hearts’ flowers of] others, as well. And like that, we can make the entire world a beautiful garden. Even if it may not happen, there is no harm in seeing such a beautiful dream [*audience claps*].

Like opportunities that American members of Amma’s global following have to be on the receiving end of praising behaviors that Amma displays in reaction to their seva practices, those that they have to be on the receiving end of scolding behaviors that she displays occur throughout the ADLC, albeit with greater frequency the further one is in that life cycle, due to greater access to Amma. Hence, a householder devotee with whom I had an informal

conversation in 2015 at Amma's M.A. Center Chicago stated, "I've definitely seen Amma scold devotees, especially those that are close to her. I've seen her throw candy [Prasad] at them, like when they're not paying attention to what they're doing. It's important to be mindful of your actions. If you're not, you're probably in your own head and not thinking about the people in front of you. That's not a very selfless place to be."²¹⁸

Because they enjoy less access to Amma, American devotees in the admirer and initiate stages of the ADLC tend to use moments in which devotees in the ashramite and renunciate stages of that life cycle find themselves on the receiving end of scolding behaviors that Amma displays as tools for identifying and discontinuing their own "bad" seva practices. To illustrate, I describe an interaction that I had on December 19, 2015, with two householder devotees at Amma's M.A. Center Chicago. While preparing that night's "fellowship meal," I and two other householder devotees discussed my experience participating in Amma's Fall 2015 Retreat at her M.A. Center. "Did you have a wonderful time?" "Yes," I replied! "I especially enjoyed the Q&A session. I had never been to one before." I described Amma's reaction to the signs. Immediately, the other of the two householder devotees scrolled through his phone to reveal the picture for which Amma had posed. "I download all of Amma's Facebook pictures," he announced. "I really like this one, though. It reminds me how to do seva well." The householder devotee who prompted our conversation nodded her head in agreement. "Absolutely," she remarked. "It reminds us how simple seva can and sometimes should be. It's about acting selflessly, no matter what we're doing."

Beyond scolding, devotees in the ashramite and renunciate stages of the ADLC also find themselves on the receiving end of guilt-inducing behaviors that Amma displays in reaction to their seva practices. She does this not only in the context the public satsang programs and retreats that

these devotees typically help to set up but also in the context of daily ashram life. To demonstrate, in my interview that I conducted with her on November 16, 2015, at Amma's M.A. Center, Karthika detailed a time when, after Amma displayed guilt-inducing behaviors, she altered her "bad" seva practices to render them "good."

It was Amma's birthday, and, as you know, [Amma's M.A. Math] gets really busy for the several days around [her] birthday. Everyone wants to be with Amma ... We [*referring to herself and several other renunciate devotees at Amma's M.A. Math*] were setting up the bhajan hall, lining up thousands and thousands of chairs. Amma kept walking around and saying, "The chairs are dirty. The chairs are dirty." We hadn't cleaned them. We just wanted to get the chairs set up as quickly as we could. There were so many. We weren't thinking about the people who would be sitting in them ... When I looked back at Amma, she was cleaning the chairs! Immediately, everyone [*referring to the renunciate devotees who were setting up the chairs*] grabbed buckets and sponges. We scrubbed all the chairs. It was so embarrassing ... It was like when the tsunami hit, when Amma ripped off her sari and sprang into action to serve others. She motivated everyone else to do exactly that.²¹⁹

In an interview that I conducted with him in 2016 at Amma's M.A. Center Chicago, Chetas echoed Karthika's assertion that, by displaying guilt-inducing behaviors, Amma motivates spiritual seekers to "spr[i]ng into action and serve others."²²⁰ As he stated, "Amma's examples move us to regret our bad decisions and make good ones."²²¹ And, indeed, in perceiving Amma as not just an adequate but rather as a superior guru who is uniquely equipped to mediate divine grace, knowledge, and power to them, her devoted disciples, spiritual seekers in all stages on the ADLC, when they find themselves on the receiving end of Amma's guilt-inducing (or scolding) behaviors, become "move[d] ... to regret [their] bad decisions and make good ones" (Gold 1988, 17).²²² The following statement reflects this. It comes from an email that Jyoti sent in her position as "Summer 2016 Chicago Public Satsang Program – Darshan Flow Coordinator" to all seating coordinators, myself included, after the conclusion of this event.

I am so grateful to all of you for offering your time and ... love to Amma and Her children ... The beauty of this seva [*referring to seating attendees at Amma's public satsang programs*] is ... its generosity of love ... There is probably not a seating team

member that didn't experience [this]. So, let me wax philosophically for a moment. What I understand from Amma's teaching ... is that: as seekers on the spiritual path, we are developing the qualities to be able to give unlimited compassion while ... at the same time potentially receive some of the hottest responses. This means that we are being given, as seating sevites, an unparalleled opportunity for growth. There may have been times during this weekend [when] I did not live up to Amma's ideal ... But, now I have the opportunity for the next level in that spiritual path, that of reflection, in order to make compassionate adjustments for next year ... With Amma's Grace, we can build upon our own spiritual growth while at the same time serve ... Her children. Could Amma be holding us in a more precious place as spiritual seekers? [Jyoti (pseud.), email to author, July 1, 2016]

Fake It 'Till You Make It

Not all opportunities to be near Amma are considered equal; hence, my finding that, among American members of Amma's global following, proxemic desire to be near Amma becomes especially heightened when opportunities to be near Amma include opportunities to perform seva practices (Srinivas 2010). This is because opportunities to perform seva practices in Amma's presence create space for potential occasions in which to obtain confirmation that one is following Amma's main spiritual teaching and therefore doing her type of spirituality well. They also create space for potential occasions in which to receive guidance on how to do her type of spirituality better. But, not all American devotees enjoy frequent access to Amma. As a result, not all enjoy frequent access to these coveted occasions. While this is partly due to spiritual seekers in the admirer and initiate stages of the ADLC participating in Amma's M.A. Mission less frequently and in fewer contexts than those in the ashramite and renunciate stages of this life cycle, it is also due to spiritual seekers in the ashramite and renunciate stages of the ADLC restricting access to Amma. To explain, I address Lucia's (2014) notion of proxemic authority.

Proxemic Authority

Building on Srinivas' (2010) notion of proxemic desire, Lucia (2014, 206) argues that guru-led organizations and their followings generally tend to base their social hierarchies on a similar system of proxemics; "Proximity to the guru equates to power in the organization, and, reciprocally, power in the organization equates to proximity to the guru." In Amma's global following, "The hierarchical system of authority ... radiates from Amma as the central charismatic authority toward the periphery, a hierarchy I call 'proxemic authority'" (Lucia 2014, 206). She adds that devotees' positions of proxemic authority within this hierarchy depend on length of time in Amma's global following; "Those who have been with Amma the longest tend to occupy higher positions of proxemic authority than those who are newer to the movement" (Lucia 2014, 206).

As I found, spiritual seekers in the ashramite and renunciate stages of the ADLC tend to occupy positions of proxemic authority that are higher than those, which their counterparts in the admirer and initiate stages of that life cycle tend to occupy (Lucia 2014). I say, "tend to occupy," as some spiritual seekers in the initiate stage undergo just as much if not more time "with Amma" than do those in the ashramite and the renunciate stages (Lucia 2014, 206). Therefore, they occupy similarly high positions of proxemic authority (Lucia 2014). Displaying their relatively high positions of proxemic authority, spiritual seekers in the ashramite and renunciate stages of the ADLC regulate access to Amma (Lucia 2014). They do this, for example, by appointing spiritual seekers whom appear appropriately socialized into a sevite habitus informed by the spiritual truth that all are essentially one to public satsang and retreat seva positions that require proximity to Amma.

Potential appointees are aware of this and, in hopes of gaining access to these seva positions, perform seva practices that they presume mirror those of their potential appointers. To this point, Julian stated the following in an interview that I conducted with him in 2016 at his residence in Wauwatosa, Wisconsin:

I don't think it [*referring to spiritual seekers' motivations for performing seva practices that they suppose will meet potential appointers' definition of "appropriately socialized"*] is fake, per se, but I think [you] fake it 'till you make it ... you're doing something and doing something ... you ... inevitably have to pick up the characteristic.²²³

The "imagined social capital" of seva practices that spiritual seekers like Julian perform while "faking it," although it reshapes their estimations of what is probable, does not necessarily affect the estimations of others. To explain, I now turn to addressing Ivana's (2017) expansion of Quinn's (2005) theory of imagined social capital.

The Imagined Social Capital of Seva Practices

Building on Bourdieu's (1985, 248) definition of social capital as a property of the individual that - in being linked to "a durable network of more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance or recognition" - he or she can use for maintaining or advancing position-wise in those relationships, Quinn (2005; 2010) offers the idea of imagined social capital. Unlike Bourdieu's (1985) social capital, Quinn's (2005; 2010, 68) imagined social capital, which she frames as "the benefit that is created by participating in imagined or symbolic networks," does not require social bonds to be factual in order to be effective. However, as Ivana (2017, 58) points out, because "the relevance of imagined social capital resides in how social actors envision and interpret their belonging to a network on the basis of a typified view of the characteristics of the members of that network, rather than by virtue of a factual bond between

them,” imagined social capital does not always produce its desired results. As she states, “I might feel I belong to an imagined community, yet the fact that I find that empowering does not mean people who come in contact with me will estimate my imagined social capital or ... make sense of me according to it” (Ivana 2017, 58-59)

This is sometimes the case among spiritual seekers in the admirer and initiate stages of the ADLC. When spiritual seekers in the ashramite and renunciate stages of this life cycle pass over those in the admirer and initiate stages for appointments to public satsang and retreat seva positions that require proximity to Amma, this is typically partly due to those spiritual seekers failing to demonstrate progression towards realization of their and all other beings’ essential non-duality by performing seva practices on behalf of a wide variety of beneficiaries in a wide variety of contexts and in an ongoing manner. For spiritual seekers in the ashramite and renunciate stages of the ADLC, an example of seva practices that does this adequately is laborious kitchen work that one performs on multiple Seva Saturdays at Amma’s M.A. Centers. It is also due to failure to demonstrate such progression by acting selflessly, for example, by smiling at fellow sevites, while performing such seva practices. I provide the example of my appointments to the public satsang program seva positions of “Assisted Darshan Assistant” and “Seating Coordinator” to illustrate.

Upon arriving at Amma’s M.A. Center Chicago on May 7, 2016, I entered its industrial kitchen, ready to spend the next four hours or so preparing food for residents of a nearby homeless shelter in Aurora, Illinois. “Karen! Thank goodness you’re here,” exclaimed Paadini. “There is a lot of unexpected work to do today. I don’t have anyone to help in the kitchen.” “Don’t worry,” I responded. “I know where the meal schedule is. I can make headway.” After several hours, only a few additional Seva Saturday sevites joined me in the kitchen. I decided

that the time to multi-task had arrived. “Namah Shivaya. Can you start making some salads for tonight’s ‘fellowship meal?’ I don’t know how the rest of the day is going to go, but I don’t want it to end with nobody having anything to eat.” “Sure, salads seem easy enough,” replied a fellow sevite. “Great! Thanks so much.” Towards the end of the day, Paadini pulled me aside. “Thank you so much for being so willing to help today. It was crazy, but you kept an open heart. Are you planning on coming to Amma’s [Summer 2016 Public Satsang] program?” “Yes, of course,” I answered. Paadini then went on to say that she was going to nominate me for the public satsang program seva position of “Assisted Darshan Assistant.” My responsibilities in this role included assisting darshan seekers who were elderly, disabled, or had small children to reach Amma for receiving her darshan. “It’s a very special seva,” said Paadini. “So close to Amma. But, please, don’t say anything. I don’t want anyone to get hurt feelings.”

A few days later, I received a phone call from Jyoti. According to Jyoti, Lakshmi had been so impressed by my willingness to assist her with teaching ABK to the children of devotees living at Amma’s M.A. Center Chicago on several Seva Saturdays that she shared my phone number. “I was wondering if you would like to help with seating at Amma’s [Summer 2016 Public Satsang] program.” “Paadini already nominated me to help with assisted darshan,” I replied. “But, I would love to help when she doesn’t need me.” This prompted Jyoti to ask if I would like to train to act as “Seating Coordinator.” My responsibilities in this role included managing a team of sevites, for seating everyone whom attended Amma’s Summer 2016 Public Satsang Program. Then, as if to reassure me, Joyti stated, “Don’t worry, your duties won’t take you away from Amma.”

CHAPTER CONCLUSION

As I showed in this chapter, American devotees attribute to Amma the extraordinary capacity to transform people. By “extraordinary capacity to transform people,” I mean the extraordinary capacity to encourage spiritual seekers over the course of their progression through the American Devotee Life Cycle (ADLC) not only to understand themselves and the world in which they live but also to act in that world differently. By “differently,” I mean according to what I term a “sevite habitus” informed by the spiritual truth that all are essentially one. According to American devotees, such is “god’s love,” which Amma makes manifest in them - by virtue of her necessarily transformative divine powers, or “grace” - in the form of a desire to perform seva practices on behalf of all always.²²⁴ This is Amma’s charisma and the reason for her appeal to Americans.

I then detailed the process whereby Amma and American members of Amma’s global following co-produce this particular expression of her charisma. Motivated by proxemic desire to locate and seize opportunities to be near Amma, American members of Amma’s global following commonly find themselves on the receiving end of praising and scolding behaviors that she performs in reaction to their seva practices (Srinivas 2010). Upon interpreting Amma’s praising and scolding behaviors as guidance to do so, American devotees continue their “good” (demonstrate progression towards realization of the spiritual truth that all beings are essentially one by serving a wide variety of beneficiaries in a wide variety of contexts as well as in an ongoing manner) and discontinue their “bad” (fail to demonstrate progression towards realization of this spiritual truth by not doing the above) seva practices. As a result, they demonstrate to themselves and those around them the gradually transforming personhoods that they attributed to Amma.

Lastly, I used Lucia's (2014) notion of "proxemic authority" and Ivana's (2017) expansion of Quinn's (2005) theory of imagined social capital to analyze spiritual seekers in the ashramite and renunciate stages of the ADLC as gatekeepers of coveted opportunities to be and perform seva practices near Amma. At no point in the process of its production is Amma the sole arbiter of her charisma.

CH. 8: CONCLUSION

This dissertation set out to use Max Weber's (1978) theory of charisma to analyze the process whereby American devotees and Amma co-produce her charisma. While focusing on the lives, spiritual practices, and habitus of such individuals, it aimed to answer the following questions (Bourdieu 1990). First, what extraordinary capacity do American devotees attribute to Amma? Second, what is the process whereby they and she co-produce this particular expression of her charisma? And, third, what is the role of seva (selfless service) in this process?

As I showed in Chapter Three, American devotees perceive Amma as a *purna avatar* of Devi in her manifestation as the Hindu pantheon's Divine Mother goddess and therefore as transcendent and absolute divinity itself. In perceiving Amma as such, they also perceive her as a superior guru who is uniquely equipped to mediate "divine grace, knowledge, and power" to them, her devoted disciples (Gold 1988, 17).

In Chapters Four through Six, I turned my attention to the series of M.A. Mission experiences that I argued represent the stages of the American Devotee Life Cycle (ADLC). I term these stages the "admirer," "initiate," "ashramite," and "renunciate" stages. As I demonstrated, spiritual seekers' seva translations and practices differ across these stages. When in the admirer stage, individuals limit their seva translations and practices to acts of service that they perform on behalf of the "poorest of the poor" (Madigan 1998). They perform these practices on an occasional but nonetheless recurring basis and in the context of what they term "volunteer events" that representatives from overseeing organizations schedule weeks if not months in advance. This suggests that, rather than through the Hindu concept of seva that is central to Amma's type of spirituality, initial participation in her M.A. Mission by Americans oftentimes makes a back-door entry through the more familiar concepts of Christian charitable

service and humanitarianism. Spiritual seekers in the initiate stage differently include in their seva translations and practices acts of service that they perform on behalf of other (affluent) devotees and Amma's M.A. Mission. When performing seva practices, they do so in a wider variety of contexts and in more of an ongoing manner than their counterparts in the admirer stage. Differently still, spiritual seekers in the ashramite and renunciates stages include in their seva translations and practices acts of service that they perform on behalf of the environment. When performing seva practices, they do so in a wider variety of contexts and in more of an ongoing manner than their counterparts in the initiate stage. As a result, their seva translations and practices reflect greater calibration to Amma's main spiritual teaching that one ought to approach all of his or her interactions as opportunities to perform seva. Given all beings' essential non-duality, such is - more than any other spiritual practice - appropriate worship of the divine. For American devotees, "non-duality" refers to the idea that all beings have in them a spark of absolute divinity, or Brahman, the eternal essence of the cosmos that is also the "true self" of all. In effect, for them, "non-duality" refers to essential similitude with the divine. Given the omnipresent nature of divinity, it also refers to essential similitude with all beings on earth. And, according to American devotees, this is "the goal," to "become like [Amma]," to progress towards embodying the spiritual truth that all are essentially one through seva practices.²²⁵

Lastly, in Chapter Seven I detailed the process whereby this happens. As I showed, American devotees attribute to Amma the extraordinary capacity to transform people. By "extraordinary capacity to transform people," I mean the extraordinary capacity to encourage spiritual seekers over the course of their progression through the ADLC not only to understand themselves and the world in which they live but also to act in that world differently. By "differently," I mean according to what I term a "sevite habitus" informed by the spiritual truth

that all are essentially one. According to American devotees, such is “god’s love,” which Amma makes manifest in them - by virtue of her necessarily transformative divine powers, or “grace” - in the form of a desire to perform seva practices on behalf of all always.²²⁶ This is Amma’s charisma and the reason for her appeal to Americans. Motivated by proxemic desire, American devotees pursue opportunities to be near Amma (Srinivas 2010). These include opportunities to perform seva practices in her presence. When successful at locating and seizing such opportunities (typically with greater regularity the further they are in the ADLC), American devotees find themselves on the receiving end of praising and scolding behaviors that Amma performs in reaction to their seva practices. They interpret Amma’s praising behaviors as indication that their seva practices are “good” (demonstrate progression towards realization of the spiritual truth that all beings are essentially one by serving a wide variety of beneficiaries in a wide variety of contexts as well as in an ongoing manner). They interpret her scolding behaviors as indication that their seva practices are “bad” (fail to demonstrate progression towards realization of this spiritual truth by not doing the above). Because American devotees perceive Amma as a purna avatar of Devi in her incarnation as the Hindu pantheon’s Divine Mother goddess and therefore as transcendent and absolute divinity itself, they also perceive her as a superior guru. As a result, when American devotees find themselves on the receiving end of Amma’s praising and scolding behaviors, they respond. They do this by continuing their “good” and discontinuing their “bad” seva practices, thereby demonstrating to themselves and those around them the gradually transforming personhoods that they attribute to Amma.

Especially in the context of a changing American religious landscape marked by increasing participation in metaphysical religion and its practitioners’ shared focus on the overarching idea of personal transformation vis à vis understanding of, emulation of, and/or

unification with a superhuman power (variously conceived), I suggest that qualitative social scientists conduct additional research into the lives, spiritual practices, and habitus of devotees, for arriving at a fuller understanding of the (little studied) processes whereby Indian spiritual leaders' charisma gets produced. As Weber (1978) implies and my examination of the process whereby American devotees and Amma co-produce her charisma suggests, such figures are far from the sole arbiters of their charisma. Projects seeking to understand them and the power that they wield in the material world therefore require an emphasis on the role that spiritual seekers play in the construction of the source of that very power.

NOTES

¹ While American members of Sri Mata Amritanandamayi Devi's global following use several names to refer to her (e.g. "Ma," "Mata," "Ammachi"), "Amma" is the one that they use most often. It translates from Malayalam to mean "mother." Malayalam is the official language of Kerala. Kerala is the state in southern India where Amma was born in 1953. It is also where the headquarters facility of her transnational faith-based organization (FBO) is located. Because "Amma" is their preferred name for Sri Mata Amritanandamayi Devi, I use it to refer to her.

² Karthika [pseud.], interview by Karen Esche-Eiff, digital recording, 12 November 2008, M.A. Math, Amritapuri, India.

³ I detail the stages of the ADLC in Chapters Four through Six. I term these stages the "admirer," "initiate," "ashramite," and "renunciate" stages.

⁴ According to a letter that Amma's FBO sent to the Under Secretary to the Government of India – Ministry of Home Affairs, FCRA Section, "the Organization that was known as the Mata Amritanandamayi Mission was dissolved and merged with the Mata Amritanandamayi Math on 29th September 1998" (M.A. Mission, June 16, 1999). In 2009, Amma's FBO went through a second period of re-positioning, this time to bring the various national-level non-profit organizations that, between 1998 – 2009, Amma's M.A. Math had established in multiple countries under the auspices of a single non-profit organization and therefore a "more accessible and universal identity" with roots in the imperative to "love and serve" (Embracing the World 2019). The name of this larger parent non-profit organization is "Embracing the World." Despite these changes, American members of Amma's global following frequently refer to Amma's FBO and its repertoire of seva projects as her "M.A. Mission." They sometimes also use it to refer to her global following. I therefore do so, as well.

⁵ I provide descriptions of American spiritual seekers' experiences participating in Amma's version of the darshan ritual in Chapter Four.

⁶ All names except those of individuals to whom I refer in their official positions in Amma's M.A. Mission are pseudonyms. I assign Indian pseudonyms to individuals whom received a spiritual name from Amma. I assign Western pseudonyms to individuals whom did not receive a spiritual name from Amma.

⁷ This dissertation is not about Hindu nationalism, for example in the form of the Indian state patronizing Hindu institutions (see McKean 1996). I nevertheless include mention of the Kerala High Court's issue of an injunction on the publication, circulation, and sale of *Oru Sanyasiyude Velippeduthalukal* (Malayalam for "Revelations by a Hindu Religious Mendicant") for the several reasons that I outline in this chapter.

⁸ Karthika [pseud.], personal communication, digital recording, 25 June 2014, M.A. Center Chicago, Elburn, Illinois.

⁹ Karthika [pseud.], personal communication, digital recording, 25 June 2014, M.A. Center Chicago, Elburn, Illinois.

¹⁰ Interestingly, in making this statement, Amma echoes Weber's (1972, 357) apocalyptic predictions concerning "gifts of body and mind" in "rational culture" (1978, 1112). As he argues, if tethered to institutions, they become stripped of their innate potencies.

¹¹ *Mata* translates from Sanskrit to mean "mother;" *Amrita* "bliss."

¹² By 2009, Amma's M.A. Mission had M.A. Centers in the following Indian cities: Ahmedabad, Bangalore, Baroda, Calcutta, Chennai, Coimbatore, Davengere, Delhi, Ernakulam, Ettimadai, Hyderabad, Kozhikode, Kannur, Kodungalloor, Kollam, Madurai, Mananthavady, Mangalore, Mumbai, Mysore, Palakkad, Powai (Mumbai), Pune, Thalassery, Trissur, and Thiruvananthapuram (M.A. Mission 2009b). It also had M.A. Centers in Argentina, Australia, Belgium, Brazil, Finland, France, Germany, Japan, Malaysia, Mauritius, Reunion Island, Singapore, and the United States (M.A. Mission 2009b).

¹³ By 2019, Amma's M.A. Mission had M.A. Centers in the following Indian cities: Alappuzha, Amdavad, Bangalore, Bhubaneswar, Calcutta, Changanassery, Chennai, Coimbatore, Davengere, Delhi, Durgapur, Ernakulam, Ettimadai, Hyderabad, Idamattom, Irinjalakuda, Kanyakumari, Kasaragod, Kattapana, Koyilandy, Kozhikode, Kannur, Kodungalloor, Kollam, Madurai, Mananthavady, Mangalore, Manjeri, Mumbai, Mysore, Nagercoil, Palakkad, Pune, Tanur, Thalassery, Thiruvalla, Trissur, Thiruvananthapuram, Uttarkashi, Vatakara, and Virudhunagar (M.A. Mission 2019b). It also had M.A. Centers in Argentina, Australia, Bahrain, Belgium, Brazil, Figi, Finland, France, Germany, Japan, Kenya, Malaysia, Mauritius, Mexico, the Netherlands, Reunion Island, Singapore, Spain, Switzerland, the United Kingdom, and the United States (M.A. Mission 2019b).

¹⁴ For a description of the spiritual activities that American devotees partake in when participating in regular (usually monthly) meetings of Amma's satsang groups in the United States, see Chapter Five.

¹⁵ For American experiences encountering Amma, see Chapter Four.

¹⁶ In the context of Amma's M.A. Mission continuing to expand its network of M.A. Centers in the United States, leading members of some satsang groups have opted to relocate themselves and their families to those M.A. Centers. Of the American members of Amma's global following among whom I conducted dissertation research, most moved to Amma's M.A. Math, M.A. Center, or M.A. Center Chicago. As a result, several of the satsang groups that I mention in this dissertation are no longer active.

¹⁷ I discuss Swami Dayamritananda Puri's and Swami Shantamritananda Puri's initiations into *sannyasa* [according to Manu (1969), the last stage of the ideal Hindu life; in Amma's M.A. Mission, the third of three stages of renunciation] on March 13, 2020, in Chapter Six.

¹⁸ Priya [pseud.], personal communication, digital recording, 30 October 2015, M.A. Center Chicago, Elburn, Illinois.

¹⁹ The term “middle class” as it is understood in the West does not translate well into Indian contexts. This is largely due to the confluence of caste and class in India. While class is a contemporary notion associated with scholastic achievement and economics, caste is linked to historical ideas about individual birthrights due to accumulation of karma. According to Hindu scripture, there are four Indian castes. Highest of these is the *Brahmin* caste, which is made up of educators, scholars, and priests. Below it are those of the *Kshatriyas* (warriors), *Vaishyas* (businesspersons), and *Shudras* (manual laborers). Persons labeled as “untouchable” are considered so lowly that they reside outside this schema (Vaid 2007). Several ethnographers have attempted to reconcile the idea of being “middle class” in contemporary India. See Brekenridge (1995) on this subject. For a discussion of Indian colonial intelligentsia in the late 18th and early 19th centuries (once considered synonymous with the Indian “middle class”) see Bayly (1983).

²⁰ Narratives of imbalance being a psychological problem have a long history in India. Indeed, they are replete in the *Carakasamhita*, or that text considered foundational to *ayurveda*, India’s ancient system of medicine (Wujastyl 2003). *According to the Carakasamhita*, when the digestive process is kept in good order by way of “good lifestyle,” the body’s substances remain balanced, and the individual stays healthy (Wujastyl 2003). When the digestive process is aggravated by “poor lifestyle,” these substances become imbalanced, and the individual turns ill. Concerning what constitutes “good lifestyle,” the *Carakasamhita* asserts, “Someone who desires what is good for him here and hereafter should suppress the urges towards impetuous and dishonorable deeds of mind, speech, [and] body. The intelligent person suppresses the urges of greed, grief, fear, fury, pride, shamelessness, envy, and excessive passion ... as well as of covetousness” (Wujastyl 2003, 54). It is a concept not unlike the Bengali notion of *mon kharap*, or “bad mind,” which Ecks (2005) describes as a generalized sense of discontent brought about by inequity between the “hot,” out-of-control belly and the “cool,” controlled mind. Significant to add here is Eck’s (2005) note that by translating “good health” as proper alignment between the belly and the mind, ills are untranslatable into purely somatic terms.

²¹ Kamsa is the ruler of the Virishni and a mythical character. Hiranyakasipu is a power-seeking deity. Ravana is the main antagonist in mythic-epic, the *Mahabharata*.

²² Priya [pseud.], interview by Karen Esche-Eiff, digital recording, 20 November 2008, informant’s residence, Grafton, Wisconsin. As I mentioned earlier, Priya relocated in 2013 to Amma’s M.A. Center Chicago in Elburn, Illinois. This occurred one year after the M.A. Mission’s establishment of the facility in 2012. Hence, my inclusion of “then residence” above.

²³ Karthika [pseud.], interview by Karen Esche-Eiff, digital recording, 25 June 2014, M.A. Center Chicago, Elburn, Illinois.

²⁴ Priya [pseud.], interview by Karen Esche-Eiff, digital recording, 20 November 2008, informant’s residence, Grafton, Wisconsin.

²⁵ Hindu Reformer, Swami Vivekananda, was the first to popularize the notion of karma yoga as disinterested worldly action. Interestingly, many of Amma's original disciples came to her from his Ramakrishna Mission, thereby suggesting familiarity with his teachings (Esche-Eiff 2009, Warriar 2000).

²⁶ Priya [pseud.], interview by Karen Esche-Eiff, digital recording, 20 November 2008, informant's residence, Grafton, Wisconsin.

²⁷ Priya [pseud.], interview by Karen Esche-Eiff, digital recording, 20 November 2008, informant's residence, Grafton, Wisconsin.

²⁸ Priya [pseud.], interview by Karen Esche-Eiff, digital recording, 23 January 2016, M.A. Center Chicago, Elburn, Illinois.

²⁹ I could not locate an English translation of Sohm's (1970) book, *Kirchenrechr.* As a result, I took the above quote from a translation that Smith (1998) provides.

³⁰ My project is concerned with Weber's (1972; 1978) formulation of charisma as put forth in *Economy and Society: An Outline of Interpretive Sociology*, not his formulation as put forth in *Politics as a Vocation*. In the former, Weber (1978) describes charisma as revolutionary, as an "'emotional life-force' antagonistic to the dreary ... iron cage" (Mitzman 1970, 304). In the latter, he abandons this poignant description of charisma. In a kind of personal protest against its potential social irresponsibility, Weber (1972) de-emphasizes charisma's radical spirit and re-characterizes it as controlled passion; hence, the distinction that he ultimately draws between the "charismatic hero" and the "genuine man."

³¹ Sathya Sai Baba continues to have a global following posthumously.

³² Like "orthodox" Advaita Vedanta, or that interpretation of Hinduism which Paul Hacker (1947, 1955) upheld as the historical alterity to Neo-Vedanta, Neo-Vedanta promotes similitude between the atman (individual soul) and Brahman (absolute divinity). Unlike "orthodox" Advaita Vedanta, however, Neo-Vedanta situates Brahman as less transcendent than it does immanent. In this way, it rejects "orthodox" Advaitans' claims that the phenomenal world is illusory and makes for easier application of spiritual practices like seva to worldly life. I put the "orthodox" in quotation marks because - despite Western scholars' history of generally supporting Hacker's (1947, 1995) assertion that it can be traced back to eighth-century Indian philosopher and avatar of Shiva, Shankara - Advaita Vedanta does not have a fixed canon or creed (Madaio 2017). Highlighting what he found over the course of his research into the historiography of Advaita Vedanta to be a diverse array of Medieval developments in Advaita Vedantic tradition(s), James Madaoi (2017, 3) argues that, rather than espouse "a static school, conflated with the historical Shankara, as the alterity for Neo-Vedantic borrowings and inventions," scholars of Indian religion ought to upend notions of Advaita Vedantic orthodoxy by promoting "a de-essentialized, polyvalent, and theologically expansive Advaita Vedanta" (2017, 10). I add that, while Hacker (1947, 1955) is often credit with coining the term "Neo-Vedanta," he did not use the term. The term that he used was "Neo-Hinduism." Also not of his own invention, Hacker (1947, 1955) borrowed the term "Neo-Hinduism" from Jesuit missionary

and Sanskritist, Antoine, whom himself borrowed it from Bengali philosopher, Seal (Madaio 2017). Antoine and Seal restricted their use of the term to commentaries on works by Bengali author, Bankim Chandra Chatterjee (Madaio 2017). Hacker (1947, 1995) expanded it to include manifestations of Western influence on religious life in India. He considered these merely passive derivations of the colonial encounter and thus largely inauthentic in character.

³³ This type of Hindu cosmology contrasts dramatically with that found in the *Vedas*. The *Vedas* are one of Hinduism's oldest collections of sacred works. In the *Vedas*, there is much emphasis placed on problems of ritual pollution effected by women and *sudras* (members of Hinduism's lowest caste). *Dalits* (untouchables) are considered so polluted that they do not rank in the Hindu caste system.

³⁴ Examples of these items include a *mala* (string of prayer beads) and a white, yellow, or ochre-colored robe. In Amma's M.A. Mission, brahmachari(ni)s wear white robes to symbolize their asceticism. Senior brahmarchi(ni)s wear yellow robes to symbolize their hopes to encounter the flame of renunciation. Sannyasi(ni)s wear ochre-colored robes, symbolizing their oneness with that flame.

³⁵ I return to discussing renunciation by American members of Amma's global following when addressing what I term the "renunciate stage" of the American Devotee Life Cycle in Chapter Six.

³⁶ Karthika [pseud.], interview by Karen Esche-Eiff, digital recording, 12 November 2008, M.A. Math, Amritapuri, India.

³⁷ Karthika [pseud.], interview by Karen Esche-Eiff, digital recording, 22 December 2008, M.A. Math, Amritapuri, India.

³⁸ Karthika [pseud.], interview by Karen Esche-Eiff, digital recording, 25 June 2014, M.A. Center Chicago, Elburn, Illinois.

³⁹ Priya [pseud.], interview by Karen Esche-Eiff, digital recording, 23 January 2016, M.A. Center Chicago, Elburn, Illinois

⁴⁰ These satsang groups are no longer active, due to its coordinators having relocated to Amma's M.A. Center Chicago in Elburn, Illinois.

⁴¹ Individuals among whom I carried out dissertation research gave their personal consent to be included in my work. I ascribe them pseudonyms to protect their identities. I assign Indian pseudonyms to individuals whom received a spiritual name from Amma. I assign Western pseudonyms to those whom did not receive a spiritual name from Amma. I address and situate in the ADLC the process whereby a spiritual seeker requests and receives a spiritual name from Amma in Chapter Five.

⁴² My registration fees to attend Amma's 2015 Northern California Retreat were USD 255.00.

⁴³ All research activities with minors were limited to participant observation and had explicit parental consent to be included in my work.

⁴⁴ Intimate relationships are not new to ethnography. In fact, they have quite a long history in anthropology, having gained a foothold during the early part of the twentieth century with paradigmatic and methodological revolutions set forth by Malinowski and his fellow adherents to the Polish modernism movement. According to Cooley (2003, 7), they considered “the peasant class as containing something essential for Slavic nations that did not yet have their own states.” Cooley (2003) terms this idea “peasant-love,” implying that its emphasis on the ethnographic present as opposed to the past required the forging of close relationships with informants.

⁴⁵ Like most hagiographies, Puri’s (1988) biography is a flattering account of Amma’s life by a member of her following that provides others therein with a theological framework by which to make sense of her (Krueger 1999). After Amma’s rise to international popularity in the late 1980’s, several other hagiographies about her emerged. These includes texts by Savitri Bess (2000) and Judith Cornell (Cornell 2001).

⁴⁶ See Esche-Eiff (2009) for a description of Amma’s typically simple, white attire and what it signifies to American members of her global following.

⁴⁷ In the Hindu tradition broadly, the ochre-colored robe symbolizes that the wearer is in *sannyasa*, or the last stage of the ideal Hindu life that is associated with asceticism. In Amma’s M.A. Mission, it symbolizes that the wearer is in the third of three stages of renunciation. I address these levels of renunciation in Chapter Six.

⁴⁸ In addition to the “eternal heritage,” “singular personality,” and “holy [wo]man,” Gold (1988) includes what he terms the “unifying truth” in his typology of “immanent foci.” He defines the “unifying truth” as “diffuse and unlimited, a unifying truth underlying the forms of all religions” (Gold 1988, 21). Due to its diffuse and unlimited nature, Gold (1988, 21) finds that the “unifying truth” “does not by itself support any large-scale religious tradition.” He therefore spends little time discussing it.

⁴⁹ “Om namah Shivaya” is a Sanskrit mantra that translates to mean “I bow to the Auspicious One inside all of us.” It first appeared in a Vedic prayer to *Rudra*, whom is an early aspect of Shiva, or the Hindu pantheon’s destroyer deity (Arya and Joshi 2001). In this context, “shiva” retains its original translation meaning “auspicious” or “kindly” (Embree 1966).

⁵⁰ Kshatriyas are warriors and constitute one of the four *varnas* (castes) of Hindu society. I add that, when one thinks of Indian society, one also tends to think of caste. According to Nicholas Dirks (1992), this is due to caste having been portrayed as expressive of the former. In his seminal work, *Homo Hierarchicus*, Louis Dumont (1966) offers a structuralist attributional theory of caste. For an ethnosociological/interactional theory of caste, see McKim Marriott (1959, 1968) and Marriott and Ronald Inden (1977). Additional theories of caste include those by Kathleen Gough (Marxist theory of caste, 1981), Bernard Cohn (1987) and Dirks (Chicago School theory of caste, 1992), Susan Bayly (Cambridge School theory of caste, 1999), and

Srinivas (Village Ethnography theory of caste, 1955, 1959). Areas where these theories differ include the following: caste is - inborn vs. acquired, rooted in qualities vs. rooted in transactions vs. rooted in economic disparities, immutable vs. mutable, monolithic vs. locally constituted, native to India vs. the product of colonization, and self-reproducing vs. reproduced by interactions among caste members. I add that, despite Dumont (1966) linking occupation with caste and Gough (1981) calling for economic changes to bring about the elimination of caste, caste and class are not one in the same in India.

⁵¹ Priya [pseud.], interview by Karen Esche-Eiff, digital recording, 20 November 2008, informant's residence, Grafton, Wisconsin.

⁵² Priya [pseud.], interview by Karen Esche-Eiff, digital recording, 20 February 2016, M.A. Center Chicago, Elburn, Illinois.

⁵³ Karthika [pseud.] asked that I not disclose the name of her and her family members' previous guru, as "Many people still follow her." Over the course of our informal conversation on July 1, 2015, she added that she "would not want to be the reason anyone would question their faith."

⁵⁴ Karthika [pseud.], interview by Karen Esche-Eiff, digital recording, 22 December 2008, M.A. Math, Amritapuri, India.

⁵⁵ Karthika [pseud.], interview by Karen Esche-Eiff, digital recording, 22 December 2008, M.A. Math, Amritapuri, India.

⁵⁶ Karthika [pseud.], interview by Karen Esche-Eiff, digital recording, 22 December 2008, M.A. Math, Amritapuri, India.

⁵⁷ Karthika [pseud.], interview by Karen Esche-Eiff, digital recording, 22 December 2008, M.A. Math, Amritapuri, India.

⁵⁸ Karthika [pseud.], interview by Karen Esche-Eiff, digital recording, 22 December 2008, M.A. Math, Amritapuri, India. Chetas [pseud.], interview by Karen Esche-Eiff, digital recording, 28 April 2016, M.A. Center Chicago, Elburn, Illinois.

⁵⁹ This description refers to Devi in her incarnation as *Kali*. Kali is the Hindu pantheon's bloodthirsty goddess, destroyer of evil.

⁶⁰ Priya [pseud.], interview by Karen Esche-Eiff, digital recording, 20 November 2008, informant's residence, Grafton, Wisconsin.

⁶¹ Dilip [pseud.], interview by Karen Esche-Eiff, digital recording, 20 February 2016, M.A. Center Chicago, Elburn, Illinois.

⁶² Also in the content of the Hindu reform movement that he led, Swami Vivekananda promoted and fueled the expansion of that interpretation of Hinduism which Paul Hacker (1947,

1995) is often credited with terming “Neo-Vedanta.” Responding to colonial critics’ view of Hinduism as the religion of superstitious idolaters, he framed its Neo-Vedantic interpretation as a universal religion. He did this by pointing to the similitude that it locates between a singular, nirguna (formless) god and all beings on earth as evidence of the broader Hindu theological framework being monistic (vs. polytheistic) in character and therefore more palatable to Western ears as well as founded in tenants that are the “common centre” of all the world’s religions (Huffer 2010). He also framed Hinduism’s Neo-Vedantic interpretation as the main defining characteristic of Indian society and culture (Huffer 2010, McKean 1996). Lise McKean (1996) writes that, in this way, Swami Vivekananda became the leading proponent and organizer of a religiously infused Indian national identity.

⁶³ Karthika [pseud.], interview by Karen Esche-Eiff, digital recording, 25 June 2014, M.A. Center, Elburn, Illinois.

⁶⁴ Karthika [pseud.], interview by Karen Esche-Eiff, digital recording, 25 June 2014, M.A. Center Chicago, Elburn, Illinois.

⁶⁵ Karthika [pseud.], interview by Karen Esche-Eiff, digital recording, 25 June 2014, M.A. Center, Elburn, Illinois.

⁶⁶ The Kurukshetra War is a mythic-epic war that is attributed to the Pandavas and Karuvas branches of the North Indian royal family (Fitzgerald 1983, 612).

⁶⁷ The cosmos represented in the *Mahabharata* and the *Bhagavad-Gita* that it includes is steeped in notions of Hindu Brahminism, not Vedic Brahminism. Fitzgerald (1983) dates India’s transition from Vedic Brahminism to Hindu Brahminism to the 1st century A.D. He states that the *Mahabharata* and the *Bhagavad-Gita* that it includes can be considered the culmination of the *Upanishads*, paving the liturgical way, so to speak, for what was then a new spirituality in India.

⁶⁸ Karthika [pseud.], interview by Karen Esche-Eiff, digital recording, 12 November 2008, M.A. Math, Amritapuri, India.

⁶⁹ Karthika [pseud.], interview by Karen Esche-Eiff, digital recording, 12 November 2008, M.A. Math, Amritapuri, India.

⁷⁰ By “a description of the ADLC,” I mean the typical series of experiences that individuals undergo while participating in M.A. Mission social life and the meanings that they attached to these experiences. I discuss both in this chapter and in Chapters Five and Six.

⁷¹ Karthika [pseud.], interview by Karen Esche-Eiff, digital recording, 25 June 2014, M.A. Center Chicago, Elburn, Illinois.

⁷² I discuss my experience undergoing mantra diksha – my experience undergoing “mantra orientation,” included - later in this chapter.

⁷³ Priya [pseud.], interview by Karen Esche-Eiff, digital recording, 23 January 2016, M.A. Center Chicago, Elburn, Illinois.

⁷⁴ As I mentioned in Chapter One, Swami Amritaswarupananda Puri was Amma's first disciple. He authored *Mata Amritanandamayi: A Biography* (1988). Members of Amma's global following consider this work Amma's authoritative biography. This includes American members of Amma's global following. They consider Swami Amritasvarupananda Amma's official biographer.

⁷⁵ See Manu (1969). While not to be conflated, the Sanskrit terms "ashrama" (life stage) and "ashram" (Hindu center) share the same root. That root is "srama." Meaning "toll" or "fatigue," it relates to the effort that a spiritual seeker makes while progressing towards liberation from samsara (tiresome cycle of birth, death, and rebirth that Hindus believe all beings to undergo).

⁷⁶ While brahmacharya is traditionally upheld in Hinduism as the first of four stages in the ideal Hindu life that, according to the *Laws of Manu* (1969), ends in renunciation, it is differently understood in Amma's M.A. Mission as the second of three stages of renunciation. Among American members of Amma's global following, brahmacharya is part of the last stage in the ADLC, i.e. the one and only stage of the American Renunciate Pathway (optional extension of the American Householder Pathway). As I mentioned earlier, the *Vedas* is Hinduism's oldest collection of sacred texts. As I stated earlier, American members of Amma's global following root their understanding of "guru" – or, even more specifically, of "satguru," i.e. of a self-realized master and spiritual teacher whom was born self-realized – in that series of conversations, which the *Bhagavad Gita* attributes to princely warrior, Arjuna, and his ishta-devata, Krishna.

⁷⁷ Priya [pseud.], interview by Karen Esche-Eiff, digital recording, 23 January 2016, M.A. Center Chicago, Elburn, Illinois.

⁷⁸ I return to the notion of "proxemic desire" (Srinivas 2010) that this behavior reflects and discuss the role that it plays in productions and expressions of Amma's charisma among American members of her global following in Chapter Seven.

⁷⁹ Karthika [pseud.], interview by Karen Esche-Eiff, digital recording, 26 June 2016, M.A. Center Chicago, Elburn, Illinois.

⁸⁰ In 2012-2016, Amma spent the months of January, August, September, and December at her M.A. Math.

⁸¹ For more on how M.A. Mission practices challenge to the norms of hierarchy that tend to characterize the guru-disciple relationship, see Esche-Eiff (2009).

⁸² All research activities with minors were limited to participant observation and had parental consent to be included in my work.

⁸³ See Lewis (2003) and Pike (2004) for discussions on New Age religions in the United States. See Frøystad (2019) for a discussion of “New Age Hinduism.”

⁸⁴ Warriar (2000, 2005, 2006) stresses the “middle class” socio-economic status of Indian members of Amma’s global following. She adds that, due to affluence stemming from their “middle class” status, the vast majority enjoy easy access to a wide variety of “middle class” media sources. Indians first hear about Amma through these “middle class” media sources. I clarify here that, in India, the practice of gurus reaching out to potential new “middle class” disciples via “middle class” media sources is far from unique to Amma. Indeed, locating this behavior in the phenomenon of “Evangelical Hinduism,” Gupta (2009, 261) challenges perceptions of Indian “exceptionalism” by showing how, similar to the ways in which American “holy men” like Billy Graham and Jerry Falwell used television for “whipping up collective effervescence,” “hyper-gurus” like Amma have long used “middle class” media sources to grow their “middle class” discipleships in India (Copeman and Ikegame 2012a; Ibid 2012b; Dasgupta 2005; Durkheim 1995; Gold 1988).

⁸⁵ I return to the theme of passive vs. active guru choice that this perception reflects later in this chapter.

⁸⁶ Priya [pseud.], interview by Karen Esche-Eiff, digital recording, 20 November 2008, informant’s residence, Grafton, Wisconsin.

⁸⁷ Jill [pseud.], interview by Karen Esche-Eiff, digital recording, 10 August 2012, M.A. Math, Amritapuri, India.

⁸⁸ Jill [pseud.], interview by Karen Esche-Eiff, digital recording, 10 August 2012, M.A. Math, Amritapuri, India.

⁸⁹ Priya [pseud.], interview by Karen Esche-Eiff, digital recording, 20 November 2008, informant’s residence, Grafton, Wisconsin.

⁹⁰ Karthika [pseud.], interview by Karen Esche-Eiff, digital recording, 22 December 2008, M.A. Math, Amritapuri, India.

⁹¹ Vijaya [pseud.], interview by Karen Esche-Eiff, digital recording, 21 December 2008, M.A. Math, Amritapuri, India.

⁹² Vijaya [pseud.], interview by Karen Esche-Eiff, digital recording, 21 December 2008, M.A. Math, Amritapuri, India.

⁹³ Vijaya [pseud.], interview by Karen Esche-Eiff, digital recording, 21 December 2008, M.A. Math, Amritapuri, India.

⁹⁴ Vijaya [pseud.], interview by Karen Esche-Eiff, digital recording, 21 December 2008, M.A. Math, Amritapuri, India.

⁹⁵ Vijaya [pseud.], interview by Karen Esche-Eiff, digital recording, 21 December 2008, M.A. Math, Amritapuri, India. I return to the theme of passive vs. active guru choice that this comment reflects later in this chapter.

⁹⁶ Karthika [pseud.], interview by Karen Esche-Eiff, digital recording, 22 December 2008, M.A. Math, Amritapuri, India.

⁹⁷ Karthika [pseud.], personal communication, digital recording, 25 June 2014, M.A. Center Chicago, Elburn, Illinois.

⁹⁸ I return to the theme of passive vs. active guru choice later in this chapter.

⁹⁹ See Esche-Eiff (2009) for an example of the ways the M.A. Mission makes seva, a form of disinterested action, auditable.

¹⁰⁰ Shore and Wright (2000, 59) provide five definitions of the term “audit.” It is “(1) a statement of account, [a] balance sheet; (2) [a] periodical settlement of accounts between landlord and tenants; (3) [an] official examination or verification; (4) [a] hearing, enquiry, judicial examination; [and] (5) ... [a] reckoning, settlement, especially Day of Judgment.” In stemming from the Latin word “audire,” which means “to hear,” each of these definitions evokes scrutiny and judgment. Importantly, prior to the 1980’s, the term “audit” as well as the scrutiny and judgment that it implies was limited to the realm of financial management. After 1980, it migrated into other domains. There, the audit as a practice manifested in tools for assessment and took on significance as a new form of neo-liberal governmentality. Hopgood (2008) equates neo-liberal governmentality with the extension of private sector norms into public and civil society life, for the purpose of evidencing their “improved” performance. Shore and Wright (2000), writing about “audit culture” in higher education, add to this definition the self-regulation of the individual. They argue that individuals in domains where the audit migrated found themselves persuaded into establishing new genres of expert knowledge from which to develop normative grids, supposedly neutral and rooted in principles of efficient management, for measuring and regulating their own performance. Seeing such monitoring and control practices as vehicles for facilitating events of public inspection, Power (1997) termed them “rituals of verification.”

¹⁰¹ As Barnett (2005, 2008) argues, one of the changes that that humanitarianism saw in the 1990’s was, as an offshoot of its institutionalization and rationalization, its transformation into a “field,” i.e. a professionalized sector with specialized areas of knowledge, codes of conduct, measures of performance, etc.

¹⁰² “Retreat of the state” (Matthews 1997) refers largely to governments in the United States, western Europe, and Japan recoiling from their historical role of social welfare providers in the mid-twentieth century.

¹⁰³ Changed government-NGO relationships exist in India, as well. Though, the reason for those changed relationships differs from what Matthews (1997) and Stein (2008) attribute to “retreat of the state.” Suspicious that organizations like the M.A. Mission allocate their foreign donations to criminal endeavors like money laundering in support of terrorism, the Government

of India has progressively increased its enforcement of the 1976 Foreign Contributions Regulation Act (Srinivas 2006). It has done this since roughly the early 2000's. Bornstein (2009) and Warriar (2005) note that FBOs have come under particular scrutiny, due to rising suspicions that such organizations contribute to the burgeoning underground economy of donations led by "paper" charities. To render themselves complaint with the 1976 Foreign Contributions Regulation Act, NGOs undergo a yearly audit during which the Ministry of Home Affairs, Foreigners' Division, FCRA Wing uses techniques of assessment borrowed from the realm of financial management to verify that foreign donations are being allocated to endeavors congruent with original reasons for charter. The penalty for failing to comply with this requirement is denial of access to foreign donors. I note here that, like many Indian NGOs, the M.A. Mission was chartered under a state as opposed to a national act. The name of this act is the Travancore-Cochin State, Literary, and Charitable Societies Registration Act of 1955. While this act requires NGOs chartered under it to keep records of all donations received, it does not penalize those that fail to comply as severely as does the 1976 Foreign Contributions Regulation Act.

¹⁰⁴ Jill [pseud.], interview by Karen Esche-Eiff, digital recording, 10 August 2012, M.A. Math, Amritapuri, India.

¹⁰⁵ I return to the notion of "proxemic desire" that this behavior reflects and discuss the role that it plays in American expressions and productions of Amma's charisma in Chapter Seven (Srinivas 2010).

¹⁰⁶ As Karthika explained to me over the course of an informal conversation that I had with her at Amma's M.A. Math in Amritapuri, India, on December 20, 2008, darshan seekers did not always need a "darshan token" to receive Amma's embrace. Senior members of Amma's global following established this requirement in the late-1980's, as a way to manage the progressively increasing number of individuals whom seek out Amma's embrace in the context of her yatra.

¹⁰⁷ I return to the subject of my appointment (who appointed me, in what context, and why) when discussing American expressions and productions of Amma's charisma in Chapter Seven.

¹⁰⁸ Karthika [pseud.], interview by Karen Esche-Eiff, digital recording, 12 November 2008, M.A. Math, Amritapuri, India.

¹⁰⁹ As I mentioned in Chapter Three, padmasana is a meditative pose. It is popularly known as the lotus position.

¹¹⁰ Priya [pseud.], interview by Karen Esche-Eiff, digital recording, 20 November 2008, informant's residence, Grafton, Wisconsin.

¹¹¹ Jordan [pseud.], interview by Karen Esche-Eiff, digital recording, 27 May 2009, coffee shop, Wauwatosa, Wisconsin. Priya [pseud.], interview by Karen Esche-Eiff, digital recording, 20 November 2008, informant's residence, Grafton, Wisconsin.

¹¹² Priya [pseud.], interview by Karen Esche-Eiff, digital recording, 20 November 2008, informant's residence, Grafton, Wisconsin.

¹¹³ Caroline [pseud.], interview by Karen Esche-Eiff, digital recording, 30 October 2015, informant's residence, Madison, Wisconsin.

¹¹⁴ Caroline [pseud.], interview by Karen Esche-Eiff, digital recording, 30 October 2015, informant's residence, Madison, Wisconsin.

¹¹⁵ Caroline [pseud.], interview by Karen Esche-Eiff, digital recording, 30 October 2015, informant's residence, Madison, Wisconsin.

¹¹⁶ Caroline [pseud.], interview by Karen Esche-Eiff, digital recording, 30 October 2015, informant's residence, Madison, Wisconsin.

¹¹⁷ Julian [pseud.], interview by Karen Esche-Eiff, digital recording, 29 February 2016, informant's residence, Wauwatosa, Wisconsin.

¹¹⁸ Julian [pseud.], interview by Karen Esche-Eiff, digital recording, 29 February 2016, informant's residence, Wauwatosa, Wisconsin.

¹¹⁹ Karthika [pseud.], interview by Karen Esche-Eiff, digital recording, 22 December 2008, M.A. Math, Amritapuri, India.

¹²⁰ Karthika [pseud.], interview by Karen Esche-Eiff, digital recording, 22 December 2008, M.A. Math, Amritapuri, India.

¹²¹ Karthika [pseud.], interview by Karen Esche-Eiff, digital recording, 22 December 2008, M.A. Math, Amritapuri, India.

¹²² Shalika [pseud.], interview by Karen Esche-Eiff, digital recording, 21 December 2008, M.A. Math, Amritapuri, India.

¹²³ Shalika [pseud.], interview by Karen Esche-Eiff, digital recording, 21 December 2008, M.A. Math, Amritapuri, India.

¹²⁴ Shalika [pseud.], interview by Karen Esche-Eiff, digital recording, 21 December 2008, M.A. Math, Amritapuri, India.

¹²⁵ Shalika [pseud.], interview by Karen Esche-Eiff, digital recording, 21 December 2008, M.A. Math, Amritapuri, India.

¹²⁶ Chetas [pseud.], interview by Karen Esche-Eiff, digital recording, 28 February 2016, M.A. Center Chicago, Elburn, Illinois.

¹²⁷ Chetas [pseud.], interview by Karen Esche-Eiff, digital recording, 28 February 2016, M.A. Center Chicago, Elburn, Illinois.

¹²⁸ Chetas [pseud.], interview by Karen Esche-Eiff, digital recording, 28 February 2016, M.A. Center Chicago, Elburn, Illinois.

¹²⁹ Chetas [pseud.], interview by Karen Esche-Eiff, digital recording, 28 February 2016, M.A. Center Chicago, Elburn, Illinois. As I mentioned in Chapter Three, in 2016, Chetas was a male renunciate devotee of European descent living at Amma's M.A. Center Chicago. He was originally from Michigan and approximately fifty years old.

¹³⁰ Priya [pseud.], interview by Karen Esche-Eiff, digital recording, 20 November 2008, informant's residence, Grafton, Wisconsin.

¹³¹ Priya [pseud.], interview by Karen Esche-Eiff, digital recording, 20 November 2008, informant's residence, Grafton, Wisconsin.

¹³² Chetas [pseud.], interview by Karen Esche-Eiff, digital recording, 28 February 2016, M.A. Center Chicago, Elburn, Illinois. Priya [pseud.], interview by Karen Esche-Eiff, digital recording, 20 November 2008, informant's residence, Grafton, Wisconsin.

¹³³ Priya [pseud.], interview by Karen Esche-Eiff, digital recording, 20 November 2008, informant's residence, Grafton, Wisconsin.

¹³⁴ Chetas [pseud.], interview by Karen Esche-Eiff, digital recording, 28 February 2016, M.A. Center Chicago, Elburn, Illinois.

¹³⁵ Chetas [pseud.], interview by Karen Esche-Eiff, digital recording, 28 February 2016, M.A. Center Chicago, Elburn, Illinois.

¹³⁶ I say, "then residence," as Saira and her parents relocated to one of the fifteen single-family homes located on the grounds of Amma's M.A. Center Chicago after the completion of my dissertation research.

¹³⁷ Priya [pseud.], interview by Karen Esche-Eiff, digital recording, 23 January 2016, M.A. Center Chicago, Elburn, Illinois.

¹³⁸ Priya [pseud.], interview by Karen Esche-Eiff, digital recording, 23 January 2016, M.A. Center Chicago, Elburn, Illinois.

¹³⁹ For a discussion on how Amma's version of the darshan ritual is unconventional, see Esche-Eiff (2009) and Warriar (2005).

¹⁴⁰ Edmund Husserl (1980) differently uses the term "lifeworld" (*lebenswelt*) to describe a generally predefined sequence of future experiences, fixed by intersubjective standards that count as "normal."

¹⁴¹ Internal Revenue Service, Form 990, Health Care Charities, Inc., 2005-06; Internal Revenue Service, Form 990, Health Care Charities, Inc., 2006-07; Internal Revenue Service, Form 990, Health Care Charities, Inc., 2007-08; Internal Revenue Service, Form 990, Health Care Charities, Inc., 2008-09; Internal Revenue Service, Form 990, Health Care Charities, Inc., 2009-10

¹⁴² Chetas [pseud.], interview by Karen Esche-Eiff, digital recording, 28 February 2016, M.A. Center Chicago, Elburn, Illinois. Priya [pseud.], interview by Karen Esche-Eiff, digital recording, 20 November 2008, informant's residence, Grafton, Wisconsin.

¹⁴³ Karthika [pseud.], interview by Karen Esche-Eiff, digital recording, 22 December 2008, M.A. Math, Amritapuri, India.

¹⁴⁴ Priya [pseud.], interview by Karen Esche-Eiff, digital recording, 20 November 2008, informant's residence, Grafton, Wisconsin.

¹⁴⁵ Chetas [pseud.], interview by Karen Esche-Eiff, digital recording, 28 February 2016, M.A. Center Chicago, Elburn, Illinois.

¹⁴⁶ Chetas [pseud.], interview by Karen Esche-Eiff, digital recording, 28 February 2016, M.A. Center Chicago, Elburn, Illinois.

¹⁴⁷ I return to the theme of passive vs. active guru choice later in this chapter.

¹⁴⁸ Priya [pseud.], interview by Karen Esche-Eiff, digital recording, 23 January 2016, M.A. Center Chicago, Elburn, Illinois.

¹⁴⁹ Caroline [pseud.], interview by Karen Esche-Eiff, digital recording, 30 October 2015, informant's residence, Madison, Wisconsin.

¹⁵⁰ Karthika [pseud.], interview by Karen Esche-Eiff, digital recording, 22 December 2008, M.A. Math, Amritapuri, India.

¹⁵¹ Most sources concerned with Hindu rites of passage list twelve to sixteen *samskaras*. Some concerned with Hindu ritual more broadly list as many as forty (Knipe 2006).

¹⁵² Leela [pseud.], interview by Karen Esche-Eiff, digital recording, 23 May 2009, coffee shop, Wauwatosa, Wisconsin.

¹⁵³ While conducting research at Amma's M.A. Math in Amritapuri, India, I noticed that Amma's devotees, when engaged in spiritual activities, commonly separated themselves by sex. They did not do this in the United States.

¹⁵⁴ Aarna [pseud.], interview by Karen Esche-Eiff, digital recording, 12 September 2015, M.A. Center Chicago, Elburn, Illinois.

¹⁵⁵ The American Renunciate Pathway, which is an optional extension of the American Householder Pathway, includes the renunciate stage only. Given this, I refer to the renunciate stage of the American Renunciate Pathway simply as the American Renuncaite Pathway, or ARP.

¹⁵⁶ Priya [pseud.], interview by Karen Esche-Eiff, digital recording, 20 November 2008, informant's residence, Grafton, Wisconsin.

¹⁵⁷ Priya [pseud.], interview by Karen Esche-Eiff, digital recording, 20 November 2008, informant's residence, Grafton, Wisconsin.

¹⁵⁸ Priya [pseud.], interview by Karen Esche-Eiff, digital recording, 23 January 2016, M.A. Center Chicago, Elburn, Illinois.

¹⁵⁹ None of my informants whom relocated to Amma's M.A. Math in Amritapuri, India, had children; thus, my research activities at that facility did not extend to ABK.

¹⁶⁰ Priya [pseud.], interview by Karen Esche-Eiff, digital recording, 23 January 2016, M.A. Center Chicago, Elburn, Illinois.

¹⁶¹ Priya [pseud.], interview by Karen Esche-Eiff, digital recording, 23 January 2016, M.A. Center Chicago, Elburn, Illinois.

¹⁶² Priya [pseud.], interview by Karen Esche-Eiff, digital recording, 23 January 2016, M.A. Center Chicago, Elburn, Illinois.

¹⁶³ Priya [pseud.], interview by Karen Esche-Eiff, digital recording, 23 January 2016, M.A. Center Chicago, Elburn, Illinois.

¹⁶⁴ Priya [pseud.], interview by Karen Esche-Eiff, digital recording, 23 January 2016, M.A. Center Chicago, Elburn, Illinois.

¹⁶⁵ Priya [pseud.], interview by Karen Esche-Eiff, digital recording, 23 January 2016, M.A. Center Chicago, Elburn, Illinois.

¹⁶⁶ Priya [pseud.], interview by Karen Esche-Eiff, digital recording, 20 November 2008, informant's residence, Grafton, Wisconsin.

¹⁶⁷ Karthika [pseud.], interview by Karen Esche-Eiff, digital recording, 22 November 2008, M.A. Math, Amritapuri, India.

¹⁶⁸ Vijaya [pseud.], interview by Karen Esche-Eiff, digital recording, 21 December 2008, M.A. Math, Amritapuri, India.

¹⁶⁹ Chetas [pseud.], interview by Karen Esche-Eiff, digital recording, 28 February 2016, M.A. Center Chicago, Elburn, Illinois.

¹⁷⁰ Karthika [pseud.], interview by Karen Esche-Eiff, digital recording, 22 November 2008, M.A. Math, Amritapuri, India.

¹⁷¹ Brahmacharya in Amma's M.A. Mission is not to be confused with brahmacharya as it is described in the *Laws of Manu* (1969). While brahmacharya in Amma's M.A. Mission is, like Manu's (1969) brahmacharya, predicated on one putting oneself at the feet of a master, brahmacharya in the M.A. Mission is itself a spiritual reality. Manu's (1969) brahmacharya is only spiritually significant in relation to the life stages that follow it. As I stated earlier, those are the life stages of grihastha (the life stage of the householder), vanaprastha (the life stage of the forest-dweller), and sannyasa (the life stage of the renunciate). I add that, Amma's renunciate disciples enter brahmacharya only after transitioning into the second of two brahmachari(ni) levels in her M.A. Mission. Hence, I consider such individuals Amma's high-ranking brahmachari(ni)s. Chetas [pseud.], interview by Karen Esche-Eiff, digital recording, 28 February 2016, M.A. Center Chicago, Elburn, Illinois.

¹⁷² Chetas [pseud.], interview by Karen Esche-Eiff, digital recording, 28 February 2016, M.A. Center Chicago, Elburn, Illinois.

¹⁷³ As I stated earlier, Amritapuri.org is the main website of Amma's M.A. Math in Amritapuri, India.

¹⁷⁴ The *Bhagavatam* is considered a puranic text of Hindu literature. Its primary focus is on bhakti, or devotion, to the incarnations of Vishnu, particularly Krishna. The Ramayana is a Hindu epic that detail the duties of different relationships.

¹⁷⁵ In Amma's M.A. Mission, brahmachari(ni)s wear white robes to symbolize their asceticism. Senior brahmarchi(ni)s wear yellow robes to symbolize their hopes to encounter the flame of renunciation. Sannyasi(ni)s wear ochre-colored robes, symbolizing their oneness with that flame.

¹⁷⁶ Karthika [pseud.], interview by Karen Esche-Eiff, digital recording, 16 November 2015, M.A. Center, Castro Valley, California.

¹⁷⁷ Karthika [pseud.], interview by Karen Esche-Eiff, digital recording, 16 November 2015, M.A. Center, Castro Valley, California.

¹⁷⁸ Karthika [pseud.], interview by Karen Esche-Eiff, digital recording, 16 November 2015, M.A. Center, Castro Valley, California.

¹⁷⁹ Priya [pseud.], interview by Karen Esche-Eiff, digital recording, 23 January 2016, M.A. Center Chicago, Elburn, Illinois

¹⁸⁰ Karthika [pseud.], interview by Karen Esche-Eiff, digital recording, 12 November 2008, M.A. Math, Amritapuri, India.

¹⁸¹ Priya [pseud.], interview by Karen Esche-Eiff, digital recording, 20 November 2008, informant's residence, Grafton, Wisconsin.

¹⁸² Priya [pseud.], interview by Karen Esche-Eiff, digital recording, 20 November 2008, informant's residence, Grafton, Wisconsin.

¹⁸³ Karthika [pseud.], interview by Karen Esche-Eiff, digital recording, 16 November 2015, M.A. Center, Castro Valley, California.

¹⁸⁴ Karthika [pseud.], interview by Karen Esche-Eiff, digital recording, 16 November 2015, M.A. Center, Castro Valley, California.

¹⁸⁵ Karthika [pseud.], interview by Karen Esche-Eiff, digital recording, 16 November 2015, M.A. Center, Castro Valley, California.

¹⁸⁶ Karthika [pseud.], interview by Karen Esche-Eiff, digital recording, 16 November 2015, M.A. Center, Castro Valley, California.

¹⁸⁷ Karthika [pseud.], interview by Karen Esche-Eiff, digital recording, 16 November 2015, M.A. Center, Castro Valley, California.

¹⁸⁸ Karthika [pseud.], interview by Karen Esche-Eiff, digital recording, 16 November 2015, M.A. Center, Castro Valley, California.

¹⁸⁹ Karthika [pseud.], interview by Karen Esche-Eiff, digital recording, 16 November 2015, M.A. Center, Castro Valley, California.

¹⁹⁰ Karthika [pseud.], interview by Karen Esche-Eiff, digital recording, 16 November 2015, M.A. Center, Castro Valley, California.

¹⁹¹ Karthika [pseud.], interview by Karen Esche-Eiff, digital recording, 16 November 2015, M.A. Center, Castro Valley, California.

¹⁹² Karthika [pseud.], interview by Karen Esche-Eiff, digital recording, 16 November 2015, M.A. Center, Castro Valley, California.

¹⁹³ Karthika [pseud.], interview by Karen Esche-Eiff, digital recording, 16 November 2015, M.A. Center, Castro Valley, California.

¹⁹⁴ Karthika [pseud.], interview by Karen Esche-Eiff, digital recording, 16 November 2015, M.A. Center, Castro Valley, California.

¹⁹⁵ Karthika [pseud.], interview by Karen Esche-Eiff, digital recording, 16 November 2015, M.A. Center, Castro Valley, California.

¹⁹⁶ Karthika [pseud.], interview by Karen Esche-Eiff, digital recording, 16 November 2015, M.A. Center, Castro Valley, California.

¹⁹⁷ Karthika [pseud.], interview by Karen Esche-Eiff, digital recording, 16 November 2015, M.A. Center, Castro Valley, California.

¹⁹⁸ Karthika [pseud.], interview by Karen Esche-Eiff, digital recording, 16 November 2015, M.A. Center, Castro Valley,

¹⁹⁹ Karthika [pseud.], interview by Karen Esche-Eiff, digital recording, 16 November 2015, M.A. Center, Castro Valley, California.

²⁰⁰ Karthika [pseud.], interview by Karen Esche-Eiff, digital recording, 12 November 2008, M.A. Math, Amritapuri, India.

²⁰¹ Karthika [pseud.], interview by Karen Esche-Eiff, digital recording, 12 November 2008, M.A. Math, Amritapuri, India.

²⁰² Karthika [pseud.], interview by Karen Esche-Eiff, digital recording, 12 November 2008, M.A. Math, Amritapuri, India.

²⁰³ Karthika [pseud.], interview by Karen Esche-Eiff, digital recording, 25 June 2014, M.A. Center Chicago, Elburn, Illinois.

²⁰⁴ Priya [pseud.], interview by Karen Esche-Eiff, digital recording, 20 November 2008, informant's residence, Grafton, Wisconsin.

²⁰⁵ Priya [pseud.], interview by Karen Esche-Eiff, digital recording, 20 November 2008, informant's residence, Grafton, Wisconsin.

²⁰⁶ Priya [pseud.], interview by Karen Esche-Eiff, digital recording, 20 November 2008, informant's residence, Grafton, Wisconsin.

²⁰⁷ Priya [pseud.], interview by Karen Esche-Eiff, digital recording, 23 January 2016, M.A. Center Chicago, Elburn, Illinois.

²⁰⁸ According to Weber (1978), the charismatic leader does not derive his or her authority from the will of the people. Rather, the charismatic leader derives it from the duty to recognize

such authority that his or her followers instill in themselves upon confirming the charismatic leader's possession of "gifts of body and mind" (Weber 1978, 1112-1113).

²⁰⁹ Priya [pseud.], interview by Karen Esche-Eiff, digital recording, 23 January 2016, M.A. Center Chicago, Elburn, Illinois. Karthika [pseud.], interview by Karen Esche-Eiff, digital recording, 16 November 2015, M.A. Center, Castro Valley, California.

²¹⁰ Aristotle (1998) uses the term "hexis" to refer to an acquired yet entrenched state of moral character that orients an individual's feelings and desires. As a result of doing so, it also orients his or her behaviors.

²¹¹ For a discussion of Bourdieu's (1977; 1990) practical theory as less of a substantialist account of social structure than his theory of habitus, see King (2000).

²¹² Karthika [pseud.], interview by Karen Esche-Eiff, digital recording, 12 November 2008, M.A. Math, Amritapuri, India.

²¹³ As a stand-alone word, "auydh," translates from Sanskrit to mean "peace."

²¹⁴ Karthika [pseud.], interview by Karen Esche-Eiff, digital recording, 16 November 2015, M.A. Center, Castro Valley, California.

²¹⁵ Karthika [pseud.], interview by Karen Esche-Eiff, digital recording, 16 November 2015, M.A. Center, Castro Valley, California.

²¹⁶ Karthika [pseud.], interview by Karen Esche-Eiff, digital recording, 16 November 2015, M.A. Center, Castro Valley, California.

²¹⁷ Karthika [pseud.], interview by Karen Esche-Eiff, digital recording, 16 November 2015, M.A. Center, Castro Valley, California.

²¹⁸ This comment seemed to contradict Karthika's that she, a renunciate devotee, no longer requires Amma's intervention to act selflessly.

²¹⁹ Karthika [pseud.], interview by Karen Esche-Eiff, digital recording, 16 November 2015, M.A. Center, Castro Valley, California.

²²⁰ Karthika [pseud.], interview by Karen Esche-Eiff, digital recording, 16 November 2015, M.A. Center, Castro Valley, California.

²²¹ Chetas [pseud.], interview by Karen Esche-Eiff, digital recording, 17 October 2015, M.A. Center Chicago, Elburn, Illinois.

²²² Chetas [pseud.], interview by Karen Esche-Eiff, digital recording, 17 October 2015, M.A. Center Chicago, Elburn, Illinois.

²²³ Julian [pseud.], interview by Karen Esche-Eiff, digital recording, 29 February 2016, informants' residence, Wauwatosa, Wisconsin.

²²⁴ Priya [pseud.], interview by Karen Esche-Eiff, digital recording, 23 January 2016, M.A. Center Chicago, Elburn, Illinois.

²²⁵ Karthika [pseud.], interview by Karen Esche-Eiff, digital recording, 12 November 2008, M.A. Math, Amritapuri, India.

²²⁶ Priya [pseud.], interview by Karen Esche-Eiff, digital recording, 23 January 2016, M.A. Center Chicago, Elburn, Illinois

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APPENDIX: GLOSSARY

Advaita	Essential non-duality. Among American members of Amma's global following, refers to the idea that, because everyone and everything has the spark of absolute divinity in them, all are essentially one.
Amma	Meaning "mother."
Amrita	Meaning "immortal." The spiritual name that Amma's senior disciples gave her (Mata Amritanandamayi) means "mother of immortal bliss."
Amsa avatar	Partial manifestation of the divine.
Arati	Ritual offering of light to a deity.
Archana	Ritual recitation Amma's 1,000 names, also called the "Sri Lalita Sahasranama."
Artha	Material prosperity.
Ashram	Hindu center.
Ashrama	Life stage.
Astottara Sata Namavali	In Amma's M.A. Mission, her 108 names.
Atman	Individual soul.
Avatar	Incarnation of the divine.
Avesa avatar	Temporary manifestation of the divine.
Avial	Mixed vegetable curry.
Ayurveda	A traditional system of medicine from India.
Bahya	Treble drum.
<i>Bhagavad Gita</i>	Popular Hindu epic that recounts philosophical conversations attributed to princely warrior, Arjuna, and Krishna (an incarnation of Vishnu, the Hindu pantheon's maintainer or preserver god).

Bhagavatam	A puranic text of Hindu literature. Its primary focus is on bhakti, or devotion, to the incarnations of Vishnu, particularly Krishna.
Bhajan	Devotional hymn.
Bhakti	Meaning “devotion.” In the Hindu tradition, it refers to devotionalism, or that “form of Hinduism in which devotion ... to the deity is accorded the greatest value” (Fuller 1992:156).
Bhava	Meaning, "mood."
Brahmachari(ni)	Probationary monastic or “junior monk.”
Brahmacharya	Ashrama (life stage) of the student.
Brahman	Absolute divinity, or the eternal essence of the cosmos as well as the core essence of all deities and all beings on earth. Also referred to as the "supreme consciousness."
Brahmasthanam	Abode of Brahman.
Brahmin	Highest varna (caste) in Hindu society. It is made up of educators, scholars, and priests.
Chai	Tea.
Chana masala	chickpea curry.
Dahya	Bass drum.
Dalit	Untouchables. In Hindu society, considered so polluted that they do not rank in the Hindu caste system.
Dan	Donation.
Danadharma	Religious giving to brahmins.

Darshan	Meaning “to see.” In the Hindu tradition, it refers to the ritual of viewing the sacred, most commonly in the image of a deity while at a temple (Babb 1986; Eck 1981). This ritual is not a passive exercise in observance. It should be understood as an (inter)active process of becoming (Lucia 2014). Fuller (1992) notes that Hindus, in beholding the image of a deity, believe themselves to absorb the powers of that deity. In Amma's M.A. Mission, "darshan" refers to the ritual in which she hugs individual devotees.
Devi	In the Hindu pantheon, the Great Goddess and the Divine Mother. As the Great Goddess, she is the female manifestation of Purusha (the Supreme Being). As the Divine Mother, she is the core form of every Hindu goddess. She is abstract female divinity.
Devi bhava	Meaning, "mood of Devi." In Amma’s M.A. Mission, the ritual in which Amma emerges from behind a curtain to reveal herself not in her typical white but rather in a colorful sari. In such moments, she also wears a golden crown. In the United States, these behaviors are Amma’s cues, for example, to public satsang program attendees to form and, for approximately fifteen minutes, walk in a circle in front of her while singing bhajans (hymns). With her body trembling to suggest that she is undergoing transition, Amma showers public satsang program attendees with handfuls flower petals. According to American members of Amma’s global following, Amma – in displaying these behaviors - reveals to them her true identity as a purna avatar (“full or perfect” incarnation) of Devi in her manifestation as the Hindu pantheon's Great Mother goddess (Puri 1988:197).
Dharmasatra	Body of Sanskrit texts that outlines Hindu standards of behavior from the point of view of Brahmanical authors who, according to Glucklich (2011) and Lariviere (2004), aimed to reconcile local customs (necessarily dynamic) with Vedic religious law (presumedly timeless).
Dhrama	Duty or righteousness.
Durga	The Hindu pantheon’s warrior goddess.

Ganesh	Hindu god of wisdom and prosperity and a male aspect of Brahman (absolute divinity).
Grihastha	Ashrama (life stage) of the householder.
Guru	Self-realized master and spiritual teacher.
Half-sari	Woman's ensemble consisting of a full-skirt, blouse, and wrap.
Hanuman	As the monkey god in the Hindu pantheon, a symbol of the mind that becomes disciplined. He is also the loyal companion of Rama (an avatar of Vishnu, the Hindu pantheon's maintainer or preserver god).
Homa	Ritual act of worship in which the practitioner makes an offering to the divine by burning that offering in a fire.
Ishta-devata	Personal or preferred way of perceiving god.
Ista	Meaning "cherished."
Jiva	Individual life form.
Jyotish	Hindu system of astrology.
Kali	The Hindu pantheon's bloodthirsty goddess, destroyer of evil.
Kama	Pleasures.
Karma	Meaning "acts."

Karma yoga	A Hindu method of salvation. According to it, just as interested actions done in past lives produce present suffering, interested actions done in a present life will produce future suffering. It follows from this that participation in nishkam karma (disinterested action, or action that one does without interest in the fruits of that action) is vital to overall wellbeing. Only by practicing nishkam karma can a karma yogi (practitioner of karma yoga) rid himself or herself of prarabdha (burdens of karma), attain moksha (liberation from samsara, meaning the tiresome cycle of birth, death, and rebirth that Hindus believe all beings to undergo), and - as a result - arrive at spirituality's ultimate goal of self-realization. Among American members of Amma's global following, "self-realization" refers to a spiritual seeker's recognition of the spiritual truth that, because everyone and everything has the spark of absolute divinity in them, all are essentially one.
Karma yogi	Practitioner of karma yoga.
Krishna	An incarnation of Vishnu (the Hindu pantheon's maintainer or preserver god).
Krishna bhava	Meaning "mood of Krishna [an incarnation of Vishnu (the Hindu pantheon's maintainer or preserver god)]."
Kshatriya	Refers to the warrior varna (caste) of Hindu society.
<i>Mahabharata</i>	Written between 400 B.C.E. and 500 A.D., this work recounts events attributed to the mythic-epic Kurukshetra War.
Mala	String of prayer beads.
Mantra	Ritual formulation of truth-expressing sounds.
Mantra diksha	Ritual whereby a guru bestows a mantra onto a spiritual seeker, thereby solidifying the guru-devotee relationship.
Math	An ashram (Hindu center).
Moksha	Liberation from samsara (the tiresome cycle of birth, death, and rebirth that Hindus believe all beings to undergo).

Mon kharap	Bengali notion of "bad mind," which Ecks (2005) describes as a generalized sense of discontent brought about by inequity between the "hot," out-of-control belly and the "cool," controlled mind.
Namakarana	Hindu child-naming ceremony.
Neo-Vedanta	Type of Hindu cosmology positing "that enlightenment is the realization that the individual soul and the Absolute are one and the same, and that ultimately all distinctions are illusory" (Khandelwal 2012:209).
Nirguna	Formless, disembodied.
Nishkam karma	Disinterested action, or action that one does without interest in the fruits of that action.
Om lokah samista sukhino bhavantu	Mantra that means "May all beings everywhere be happy/free (from suffering)."
Om namah shivaya	Meaning "I bow to the Auspicious One inside all of us." Members of Amma's global following chant this mantra in commemoration of absolute divinity, which they believe to reside in all beings. As I learned, they also use it in colloquial speech to mean "hello," "goodbye," "thank you," and "excuse me." This includes American members of her global following.
Payasum	Sweet milk pudding.
Pazham pori	Fried bananas.
Pranam	Prostration.
Pranamasana	Prayer pose. Derived from the Sanskrit word, "pranam" (prostration), it connotes humility and reverence.
Prarabdha	Burdens of karma.

Prasad	Meaning “gracious gift.” In the Hindu tradition, it refers to an offering that a spiritual seeker makes to a deity and then consumes. Upon presenting an offering to a deity, the spiritual aspirant considers the offering blessed. Upon consuming it, the spiritual seeker considers himself or herself imbued to some degree with the powers of the god or goddess to whom he or she made the offering.
Puja	Ritual offering.
Purana	Ancient tale.
Puri	Refers to one of the ten monastic lineages set forth by Shankara [eighth-century Indian philosopher and avatar of Shiva (the Hindu pantheon’s destroyer deity)].
Purna avatar	A “full or perfect” incarnation of the divine (Puri 1988, 197).
Purusha	Supreme Being.
Ramayana	Hindu epic that details the duties of different relationships.
<i>Rig Veda</i>	One of Hinduism's oldest collections of sacred works.
Rudra	An early aspect of Siva (the Hindu pantheon’s destroyer deity).
Sadhana	Spiritual disciplines and practices.
Salwar	Women’s tunic, pant, and scarf ensemble.
Samosa	Fried pastry with a savory filling.
Samsara	The tiresome cycle of birth, death, and rebirth that Hindus believe all beings to undergo.
Samskara	Predominate tendency inherited from past lives.
Sankalpa	Divine intention or resolve. In the M.A. Mission, Amma’s divine intention or resolve to make good on her divine mission to uplift humanity through selfless service.
Sannyasa	Ashrama (life stage) of the renunciate.

Sannyasi(ni)	Religious practitioner who has undergone initiation into a specific spiritual order.
Sant-poet	In the early history of the bhakti tradition of Hindu faith, devotional poets who wandered from temple to temple composing and singing bhajans (hymns) about their personal experiences with the divine. They unsettled the then widespread opinion that commoners command little to no spiritual merit.
Sari	Strip of unstitched cloth draped over the body and pleated in the front. It is worn over a petticoat and blouse.
Sat	Meaning "company of the good."
Satguru	Self-realized master and spiritual teacher who was born self-realized.
Satsang	Derived from the Sanskrit word "sat," it means "company of the good." American members of Amma's global following use this term to refer to a spiritual lecture that Amma or one of her senior disciples gives. They also use it to refer to groups of householder devotees whom meet, usually at fellow devotees' homes, on a weekly or monthly basis to engage in spiritual activities.
Seva	Selfless service.
Sevite	Seva practitioner.
Shaivite	Meaning "devoted to Shiva."
Sherwanis	Men's coat-like garments.
Shiva	The Hindu pantheon's destroyer deity.
Sitar	Stringed instrument of the lute family.
Sloka	Poetic verse.
Sri	Honorific prefix ascribed to deities, venerated persons, and celebrated works.

Sri Lalita Sahasranama	1,000 names of Devi in her manifestation as the Hindu pantheon's Divine Mother goddess.
Sudra	Lowest varna (caste) in Hindu society. It is made up of laborers.
Sukhino	Happiness/joy, although specifically as it relates to release from suffering.
Swami(ni)	Sannyasi(ni) (religious practitioner who has undergone initiation into a specific spiritual order).
Tabla	Set of hand drums, including a bahya (treble drum) and a dahya (bass drum).
<i>Upanishads</i>	Collection of texts that offers commentary on the <i>Vedas</i> (one of Hinduism's oldest collections of sacred works).
Vaishnavite	meaning "devoted to Vishnu."
Vanaprastha	Ashrama (life stage) of the forest dweller.
Varna	Caste.
Vedanta	Meaning "of the <i>Vedas</i> " (one of Hinduism's oldest collections of sacred works).
<i>Vedas</i>	One of Hinduism's oldest collections of sacred works.
Vishnu	The Hindu pantheon's maintainer or preserver god.
Yatra	Meaning "journey." Refers to a pilgrimage that a spiritual seeker makes to a site of spiritual significance. In Amma's M.A. Mission, a trip that Amma makes to a city in which a sizable number of her followers reside.
Yoga	Self-discipline.

CURRICULUM VITAE

Karen M. Esche-Eiff

RESEARCH and TEACHING INTERESTS

Anthropology of religion, charisma, charity, philanthropy, humanitarianism, non-profit institutions, medical anthropology, suicide, mental health and illness, consumer behavior, marketing research, India.

EDUCATION

- 2021 Ph.D. in Anthropology, University of Wisconsin – Milwaukee. Chair: Dr. Erica Bornstein. Dissertation: “Making God’s Love Manifest”: American Expressions and Productions of Charisma in Sri Mata Amritanandamayi Devi’s Global Following.
- 2012 Graduate Certificate in Non-Profit Management, University of Wisconsin – Milwaukee, Milwaukee, Wisconsin.
- 2009 M.S. in Anthropology, University of Wisconsin – Milwaukee, Milwaukee, Wisconsin. Chair: Dr. Erica Bornstein. Thesis: Beyond Borders of Belief: Milwaukee Devotees in the Mata Amritanandamayi Mission in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, and Amritapuri, India.
- 2005 B.A. in Anthropology, Marquette University, Milwaukee, Wisconsin.
- 2004 B.B.A. in Business Administration, Saint Norbert College, De Pere, Wisconsin.

SPECIAL RESEARCH and TEACHING TRAINING

- 2016 Online instructional technology training taken through North Iowa Community College (re: Canvas).
- 2014 Online teaching best practices training taken through the University of Wisconsin – Green Bay in Green Bay, Wisconsin, as an Advanced Online Teaching Fellow (re: Quality Matters).
- 2012 and 2013 Summer intensive Malayalam courses taken through the American Institute of Indian Studies in Thiruvananthapuram, India, as a Foreign Language and Area Studies Fellow.
- 2010 Online instructional technology training taken through the University of Louisiana – Monroe (re: Moodle) and Southern New Hampshire University (re: BlackBoard).
- 2007 Global health graduate elective course taken through the University of Wisconsin – Madison in Madison, Wisconsin.

ACADEMIC POSITIONS

- 2020 – Present Guest Lecturer; Northwestern University; School Journalism, Media, and Integrated Marketing Communications; Integrated Marketing Communications.
- 2017 - 2018 Adjunct Instructor; Mount Mary University; School of Humanities, Social Sciences, and Education; Anthropology.
- 2014 - 2016 Associate Lecturer, University of Wisconsin – Milwaukee, College of Letters and Science, Comparative Ethnic Studies

2012 - 2016 Associate Lecturer, University of Wisconsin – Green Bay, College of Liberal Arts and Sciences, Anthropology.

2011 - 2016 Adjunct Instructor, North Iowa Area Community College, Social Science Department, Anthropology

2010 – 2013 Adjunct Instructor, University of Louisiana – Monroe; College of Business and Social Sciences, Anthropology.

2011 - 2013 Adjunct Instructor, University of Wisconsin – Milwaukee, College of Letters and Science, Anthropology.

2011 - 2012 Adjunct Instructor, William Peace University, School of Professional Studies, Anthropology.

2011 - 2011 Adjunct Instructor, Southern New Hampshire University, School of Arts and Sciences, Anthropology.

2010 - 2011 Teaching Assistant, University of Wisconsin – Milwaukee, College of Letters and Science, Anthropology.

APPLIED POSITIONS

2017 – Present Senior Customer Insights Analyst, Kohl’s Corporation.
Seasonal, campaign, store experience, category/brand, corporate social responsibility, and broader macro trend research.

2016 – 2017 Consumer Insights Analyst, Kohl’s Corporation.
Seasonal, social media, and corporate social responsibility research.

COURSES TAUGHT

Northwestern University
Consumer Insight (IMC 301, supported instruction as industry advisor)

Mount Mary University
Applications in Medical Anthropology (ANT 395)

University of Wisconsin - Green Bay
Varieties of World Culture (ANTHRO 100, online)
Myth, Ritual, Symbol, and Religion [ANTHRO 320, online, Quality Matters (QM) certification earned September 2, 2014]
Medical Anthropology (ANTHRO 340, online)

University of Wisconsin – Milwaukee
Global Violence, Disease, and Death (ETHNIC 375)
Introduction to Linguistic Anthropology (ANTHRO 105)
Introduction to Linguistic Anthropology (ANTHRO 105, as independent study)
Applications in Linguistic Anthropology (ANTHRO 361, supported instruction as teaching assistant)

North Iowa Area Community College
Cultural Anthropology (ANT 105, online)
Cultural Anthropology (ANT 105, correspondence, as independent study)

University of Louisiana – Monroe
Cultural Anthropology (ANTS 2007, online)

William Peace University
Cultural Anthropology: People and Culture (ANT 214, online)

Southern New Hampshire University
Introduction to Cultural Anthropology (ATH 111, online)

ETHNOGRAPHIC RESEARCH (academic)

Amritapuri, India; Castro Valley, California; and Chicago, Illinois; New York, New York (July 2015 – June 2016). Research on American expressions and productions of charisma in Sri Mata Amritanandamayi Devi's global following; focus on *seva* (service). Co-PI.

Kerala, India (June 2012 – August 2013). Research on processes of cultivating anti-suicidal personhoods in the Mata Amritanandamayi Mission. Co-PI.

Amritapuri, India; Lombard, Illinois; and Milwaukee, Wisconsin (December 2006 - July 2009). Research on American *seva* practices in the Mata Amritanandamayi Mission; focus on *seva*. Co-PI.

Milwaukee, Wisconsin (January 2006 – May 2007). Research on commodifications of social justice in fair trade coffee sales. Research assistant.

ETHNOGRAPHIC RESEARCH (selected, in-person applied)

Atlanta, Georgia (December 2019). Research on the holiday shopping process, focus on the role of loyalty programs in retailer choice. PI.

Chicago, Illinois (April 2019). Research on the Kohl's Toy vs. Kohl's Lego customer and path to purchase. Research consultant.

Atlanta, Georgia, and Chicago, Illinois (October 2018 – December 2018). Research on the holiday shopping process; focus on shifts in customer psychographic segment perceptions of and shopping behavior at Kohl's and competitor stores across the holiday timeframe. PI.

Austin, Texas, and Minneapolis, Minnesota (July 2018 – September 2018). Research on the back-to-school shopping process; focus on the near- and long-term business impacts of first vs. subsequent shopping trips. PI.

Dallas, Texas, and Paramus, New Jersey (July 2018 – August 2018). Research on corporate social responsibility; focus on cultivations of loyalty. Co-PI.

Chicago, Illinois, and Los Angeles, California (May 2018). Research on Amazon returns as a trip driver. Co-PI.

Milwaukee, Wisconsin (February 2018). Research on in-aisle displays' influence on quality perceptions, navigation, findability, and conversion. PI.

Chicago, Illinois, and Los Angeles, California (November 2017). Research on Amazon mini stores at Kohl's as drivers of new customer engagement. PI.

Paramus, New Jersey, and Phoenix, Arizona (October 2017 – December 2017). Research on the holiday shopping process; focus on the relative impact of value (broadly conceived) across the holiday timeframe. PI.

Indianapolis, Indiana, and Los Angeles, California (July 2017 – September 2017). Research on the back-to-school shopping process; focus on the role of national vs. private brands. PI.

Minneapolis, Minnesota (June 2017). Research on loyalty programs; focus on customer vocabularies of loyalty. Focus group moderator.

Los Angeles, California (May 2017 – June 2017). Research on the in-store shopping experience; focus on the impact of navigation and findability on under-conversion. Co-PI.

Chicago, Illinois, and Nashville, Tennessee (October 2016 – December 2016). Research on the holiday shopping process; focus on store choice in the context of fluctuating practical vs. emotional shopping needs. PI.

Milwaukee, Wisconsin (September 2016 – November 2016). Research on the Kohl's Cares Merchandise Program; focus on customer expectations of transparency and accountability in corporate philanthropy. PI.

San Diego, California, and Paramus, New Jersey (August 2016 – October 2016). Research on the shopping process for children's apparel; focus on millennial parent-centennial child shopping dynamics. Co-PI.

Chicago, Illinois, and Dallas, Texas (July 2016 – September 2016). Research on the back-to-school shopping process; focus on millennial parent-centennial child shopping dynamics and the gender politics of school dress codes. Co-PI.

ADDITIONAL FIELD RESEARCH

Milwaukee, Wisconsin (August - December 2005). Study of skeletal remains found at a 19th century almshouse. Research assistant.

San Ignacio, Belize (July 2005). Excavation and cataloging of artifacts found at archaeological site, Pook's Hill. Laboratory assistant and excavator.

PUBLICATIONS

- 2018 Back-to-School Confidence: What It Looks Like, Why It Matters to Customers, and What That Means for Kohl's. Newsletter Article, Kohl's Corporation.
- 2018 Holiday Shopping Seamlessness: What It Looks Like, Why It Matters to Customers, and What That Means for Kohl's. Newsletter Article, Kohl's Corporation.
- 2017 Knowing and Supporting What Holiday Shoppers Value Most. Newsletter Article, Kohl's Corporation
- 2017 Findings from the Field: Holiday 2016. Newsletter Article, Kohl's Corporation.

- 2009 Beyond Borders of Belief: Milwaukee Members of the Mata Amritanandamayi Mission in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, and Amritapuri, India. M.S. Thesis, Department of Anthropology, University of Wisconsin - Milwaukee.
- 2009 Comprehending Amma: The Influence of Linguistic Ideology upon a Contemporary Godperson. *Field Notes: A Collegiate Journal of Anthropology* 1(1): 65-76.

PRESENTATIONS

Conference Presentations

- 2013 Saving Farmers from Structural Perpetuations of Indignity: Towards Cultivation of the Antisuicidal Subject in an Indic Faith-Based Voluntary Organization. Paper presented at the annual meeting of the Central States Anthropological Society, St. Louis, Missouri, April 4-6.
- 2012 Saving Farmers and Their Dependents from Modern Imbalance: Cultivation of the Antisuicidal Subject in an Indic Faith-Based Voluntary Organization. Paper presented at the annual colloquium series of the University of Wisconsin – Milwaukee Anthropology Student Union, Milwaukee, Wisconsin, April 20.
- 2010 Translations of Service: Seva and Milwaukee Members of the Mata Amritanandamayi Mission in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, and Amritapuri, India. Paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Anthropological Association, New Orleans, Louisiana, November 17-21.
- 2010 Towards a Christian Translation of Seva? Compassionate Service in the Mata Amritanandamayi Mission. Paper presented at religious humanitarianism workshop, Humanitarianism, Religion, and Faith, sponsored by the Centre on Conflict, Development and Peacebuilding/Graduate Institute of International and Development Studies, Geneva, Switzerland, July 2-4.
- 2010 Translations of Seva among Milwaukee Members of the Mata Amritanandamayi Mission in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, United States, and Amritapuri, India. Paper presented at the annual meeting of the Central States Anthropological Society, Madison, Wisconsin, April 8-11.
- 2009 Beyond Borders of Belief: The Mata Amritanandamayi Mission in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. Paper presented at the joint biannual meeting of the Society for Psychological Anthropology and the Society for the Anthropology of Religion, Asilomar, California, March 27-29.
- 2009 Global Mission, Local Action: The Mata Amritanandamayi Mission in Amritapuri, India, and Milwaukee, Wisconsin. Poster presented at the annual meeting of the Society for Applied Anthropology, Santa Fe, New Mexico, March 17 – 21.

Invited Lectures

- 2020 Push and Pull Strategies for Socializing Internal Business Partners into Customer Insights, Sharpr, Zoom, October 8.
- 2016 Productions of Seva Subjectivity and Religious Charisma in Devotionalist Faith: Ethnographic Explorations of Seva among Americans in the Mata Amritanandamayi Mission, Marquette University, Milwaukee, Wisconsin, April 26.
- 2013 Interviewing in Anthropological Fieldwork: Problems and Prospects. University of Kerala, Thiruvananthapuram, India, July 25.

- 2010 Hindu Saints and Goddess Worship, University of Wisconsin – Milwaukee, Milwaukee, Wisconsin, November 4.
- 2007 Captive Daughters: Child Prostitution in India, University of Wisconsin – Milwaukee, Milwaukee, Wisconsin, November 26.

Interviews

- 2018 Off the Clock with Karen Esche-Eiff: An Anthropologist at Kohl's. Kohl's Corporation, February.
- 2017 UWM Anthropologist Takes Research to Kohl's. UWM College of Letters and Science: In Focus, June.

CONFERENCES ATTENDED (beyond those presented at)

- 2018 A.C. Nielson Center's Marketing Research Summit. A.C. Nielsen Center for Marketing Research, Madison, Wisconsin, October 18.
- 2018 Business Problem Solving and Influence. CEB Market Insights Leadership Council, Atlanta, Georgia, March 20.
- 2017 Impact-Focused Insight Generation, CEB Market Insights Leadership Council, Northbrook, Illinois, March 7.
- 2013 Annual Meeting of the American Anthropological Association, Chicago, Illinois, November 20-24.
- 2013 The Future of NGO Studies Conference, DePaul University, Chicago, Illinois, November 19-20.
- 2012 Global Capitalism's Search for Stability: Enter the New Quintet and Other Emerging Powers, University of Kerala, Thiruvananthapuram, India, June 27.
- 2011 Annual Meeting of the American Anthropological Association, Montréal, Canada, November 16-20.
- 2011 Mental Health: From Vision to Action, Labor Party, Dublin, Ireland, June 2.

AWARDS, GRANTS, FELLOWSHIPS, and SCHOLARSHIPS

- 2014 Advanced Online Teaching Fellowship, Center for the Advancement of Teaching and Learning, University of Wisconsin – Green Bay, \$2,000.00. Funded curriculum development.
- 2013 Graduate Student Travel Award, University of Wisconsin – Milwaukee, \$700.00. Funded travel to the University of Kerala in Thiruvananthapuram, India, for an invited lecture.
- 2013 Travel Award, Center for South Asia, University of Wisconsin – Madison, \$1,000. Funded travel to India for study of Malayalam and Ph.D. dissertation research.
- 2013 Foreign Language and Area Studies (FLAS) Fellowship, United States Department of Education/Center for South Asia, University of Wisconsin – Madison, \$5,500.00. Funded study of Malayalam and Ph.D. dissertation research in India.
- 2012 Graduate Student Travel Award, University of Wisconsin – Milwaukee, \$375.00. Funded travel to the annual meeting of the Central States Anthropological Society in Saint Louis, Missouri, for a conference presentation.
- 2012 Student Appropriations Committee Grant, University of Wisconsin – Milwaukee, \$1,500.00. Funded planning efforts for a Central States Anthropological Society paper panel.

- 2012 John Palmer Smith Scholarship, University of Wisconsin – Milwaukee, \$450.00. Funded graduate certificate coursework in non-profit management.
- 2012 Foreign Language and Area Studies (FLAS) Fellowship, United States Department of Education/Center for South Asia, University of Wisconsin – Madison, \$5,000.00. Funded study of Malayalam and Ph.D. dissertation research in India.
- 2011 Student Appropriations Committee Grant, University of Wisconsin – Milwaukee, \$455.00. Funded planning efforts for the annual colloquium series of the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee Anthropology Student Union.
- 2011 Student Appropriations Committee Grant, University of Wisconsin – Milwaukee, \$1,384.00. Funded planning efforts for student participation in the annual meeting of the American Anthropological Association in Montréal, Canada.
- 2011 Helen Bader Institute for Non-Profit Management Scholarship, United Way/University of Wisconsin – Milwaukee, \$307.00. Funded graduate certificate coursework in non-profit management.
- 2010 Graduate Student Travel Award, University of Wisconsin – Milwaukee, \$200.00. Funded travel to the annual meeting of the American Anthropological Association in New Orleans, Louisiana, for a conference presentation.
- 2010 Graduate Student Travel Award, Centre on Conflict, Development and Peacebuilding/Graduate Institute of International and Development Studies, CHF 1,565.00. Funded travel to religious humanitarianism workshop, Humanitarianism, Religion, and Faith, in Geneva, Switzerland, for a workshop presentation.
- 2009 Graduate Student Travel Award, University of Wisconsin – Milwaukee, \$983.70. Funded travel to the joint biannual meeting of the Society for Psychological Anthropology and the Society for the Anthropology of Religion in Asilomar, California, for a conference presentation.
- 2004 Social and Cultural Sciences Student Grant, Marquette University, \$500.00. Funded B.A. coursework.
- 2002 Abbot Award, Saint Norbert College, \$4,000.00. Funded B.B.A. coursework.
- 2001 Presidential Scholarship, Saint Norbert College, \$20,000.00. Funded B.B.A. coursework.

HONORS

University of Wisconsin - Milwaukee

Summa Cum Laude (Ph.D., M.S., and graduate certificate)

Dean's List all semesters

Nu Lambda Mu membership

Lambda Alpha membership

Marquette University

Magna Cum Laude (B.A.)

Dean's List all semesters

Pi Gamma Mu membership

Saint Norbert College

Magna Cum Laude (B.B.A.)

Dean's List 5 of 6 semesters

Sigma Beta Delta membership

Phi Beta Delta membership

SERVICE

Event Organizer

- 2012 Conference Organizer, Milwaukee, Wisconsin, April 20, conference title: Mental Health and Cultural Estrangement: (Re)Integrating Culture into Frameworks for Understanding Issues in Mental Health, keynote speaker: Dr. Laurence Kirmayer.
- 2008 Panel Co-Organizer, Milwaukee, Wisconsin, March 20, panel title: Brewing Social Justice: A Conversation about Fair Trade Coffee.
- 2005 Film Screening Organizer, Milwaukee, Wisconsin, December, film title: The High Cost of Low Prices.
- 2005 Film Screening Organizer, Milwaukee, Wisconsin, November, film title: The Corporation.
- 2004 Film Screening Co-Organizer, Milwaukee, Wisconsin, November, film title: The Weather Underground.

Peer reviewer (manuscripts for books)

- 2013 Cambridge University Press

Peer reviewer (manuscripts for journals)

- 2016 - 2017 Field Notes: A Journal for Collegiate Anthropology
- 2010 - 2012 Field Notes: A Journal for Collegiate Anthropology

Peer reviewer (manuscripts for magazines)

- 2010 - 2011 Popular Anthropology

Service to a College or University

Anthropology Student Union, University of Wisconsin – Milwaukee

2010-2012, Treasurer (elected position)

2009-2010, Secretary (elected position)

2006-Present, Member

Green Energy Summit Planning Committee, Milwaukee Area Technical College

2009-2011, Program Co-Chair

Giving Campaign Committee, Milwaukee Area Technical College

2009, Member

Search and Screen Committee – School of Public Health, University of Wisconsin – Milwaukee

2008-2011, Graduate Student Representative (appointed position)

Community Emergency Response Taskforce, Milwaukee Area Technical College

2008-2010, Member

Parking Committee, Milwaukee Area Technical College

2008-2010, Member

Sustainability Committee, Milwaukee Area Technical College

2006-2010, Member

Anthropology Club, Marquette University

2005, President (elected position)

2005, Treasurer (elected position)

Service to a Business or Industry

Advisory Board, Dynata - Knowledge Management for Insight and Marketing Teams

2018 – Present, Member

Kohl's Corporation

2021, Intern Coach (intern awarded full-time position)

2020, Intern Coach (intern awarded full-time position)

LANGUAGES

English First Language

French Advanced

Malayalam Intermediate

Latin Beginner