A Darshan Embrace

Experiencing Authenticity and Feeling Witnessed

To Amma, whether they be a fanatic Hindu or a fanatic Muslim or a fanatic Christian, everybody is her children [sic]. If tomorrow Bin Laden were to come and get a darshan from Amma, Amma would hug him. Amma will not even say that, “oh why are you being a fanatic?” For her, everybody is her children [sic]. So in one sense, she embodies the compassion, compassionate aspect of everything. And so she cannot say that this person is wrong and this person is right. She will not say that. Because as I said, to her, everyone is an expression of the Divine. But that doesn’t mean that she says what they do is correct. And personally, I have seen Amma giving advice to people saying that this is not the correct path to follow, you should change. And so, I would say that, Amma, it is according to each person and their ability to understand and listen and to implement those things that Amma gives the advice. And if they are not ready to hear what Amma says, then Amma will not give them any advice. [It is] just like pouring water on a cup that has been kept upside down.

—Br. Dayamrita

In 2008, in the midst of the bustling darshan program¹ in San Ramon, California, a medical van arrived outside of the overflowing darshan hall of the ashram. Personal assistants helped Jason, a severely disabled young man with Lou Gehrig’s disease, enter the sacred space. He arrived lying flat on a portable medical bed, and with the necessary medical accoutrements. Guided by the special needs assistants on the tour staff, he was carefully wheeled to the center of the darshan hall until he
reached Amma’s feet. In response, Amma stood up from her low seat for the first time after several hours of continuous darshan embraces and began to stroke his entire body with her hands. Slowly and deliberately she leaned far over and ran her hands delicately over each of his limbs, his hands and feet, and his torso. Finally, she affectionately stroked his face and attentively applied sandalwood paste to his forehead, all the while patiently and carefully murmuring over him words of affection and blessings. The assembled audience intently observed her maternal care and concern for this acute mind trapped within such a severely challenged physical body. Tears streamed down many of the observers’ faces over the possibility of such unadulterated love and compassion for another. After having come to Amma’s darshan in this manner many times in increasingly severe states of bodily degeneration, Jason wrote online about his first darshan experience with Amma ten years earlier. At that time he was confined to a wheelchair, which he could propel largely by himself. He recounted that initially he was determined to remain strong and not to weep in Amma’s presence. He explained that it was not the unconditional love and attention that she devoted to him that first brought him to tears but instead his father’s darshan experience that moved him to his core. He wrote:

> It was awesome but I didn’t cry so I thought I was safe. But when I wheeled back a few feet and saw her hug my father, I lost it. To see someone treating my big, bad, tough, smart father like her little boy was pretty neat. He didn’t have to be the responsible one for a minute. He could just lay in Amma’s lap and get loved. Then I thought that she does this for millions of people. And not only for that minute does she take our burdens if we let her. She will take all our burdens regardless of how good or bad we think we are. She looked at me [as I was] crying with such an understanding face it melted me.2

In many ways, releasing one’s burdens at Amma’s feet defines the darshan experience. Amma enables her devotees to experience meaningful emotional release from their everyday responsibilities and sufferings by encouraging them to become like little children, sharing their problems, needs, and desires with their mother.3 The abundant and often unexpected emotive tears that tend to accompany the darshan experience derive from this process of unburdening, a process that subsists on the qualities of surrender and relinquishing the ego.

In the Indic context, gurus throughout history have urged (or demanded) their followers to approach them with an aura of complete self-surrender and submission. The famed story of Ekalavya in the Hindu
epic \textit{Mābhābhārata} exemplifies the idealized extent of a disciple’s self-sacrifice as Ekalavya, a proficient archer (so proficient as to fill a barking dog’s mouth full of arrows to silence him without harm), willingly surrenders that which is most essential to his archery skills, his thumb, at the guru’s command. Other Indic stories from Hindu, Sikh, and Jain religious traditions describe disciples who compete with each other for primacy through their demonstrations of who can sacrifice more at the feet of the guru.\footnote{4} Despite the evident potential for abuses of power in the guru-disciple relationship, the tradition (\textit{guru-śisya-parāmpara}) suggests that self-surrender at the feet of the guru leads the disciple toward the transcendence of the self, which is the aim of ascetic practice across the major religious traditions.

Most religious traditions would agree that the submission, sacrifice, and subordination (or even elimination) of the ego-driven self establish the primary foundation for religious experience. In ascetic traditions, the practitioner must be willing to sublimate the individuated self (and all of its accompanying desires, passions, and preferences) to an alternative cosmological goal. The ultimate religious experience, variously interpreted as the entrance into the kingdom of heaven, nirvana, self-realization, and so on, demands some form of self-subordination. Devotees’ first moments of their personal transition from a materially oriented to a spiritually oriented reality depend on their becoming like little children at the feet of a spiritual master, releasing their material burdens, and surrendering their personal control (or the illusion thereof) to God. For devotees, Amma’s darshan experience creates the foundation and the continued affirmation for this transition. They are bolstered by Amma’s warm, fragrant, and maternal reassurances that they are “safe” in such treacherous processes of spiritual transformation, protected by the unconditional love of a mother who engulfs them in her compassionate embrace (see figure 2).

Like Jason, many devotees come to receive Amma’s embrace with the glimmer of hope that she will heal their emotional, mental, or physical ailments. Some seek solace and comfort as a result of previous traumas or cataclysmic life events. Others desire to be seen, recognized, witnessed, and validated. Still others seek to alleviate feelings of melancholia or ennui brought on by the isolationism, fragmentation, and disenfranchisement that characterize much of life in modern society.\footnote{5} Whether experiencing physical, emotional, or merely bourgeois suffering, many devotees come to Amma only after they have exercised numerous other
Figure 2. Amma’s darshan embrace (© MA Center)
available options for healing. When I asked Br. Dayamrita Chaitanya about whether Amma’s darshan embraces were healing, he responded:

Of course. That is the healing factor of love. You know . . . I talked to one of the residents at the ashram and he told me that Amma entrusted him with—at least now in the last four to five years—about fifty or so mental patients, out of which forty or so were highly suicidal and he told me that the only cure for their disease was Amma’s love—the attention that Amma showered on each one of them. They are holding on just because of the love that Amma gives to each one of them. So do you think that it is healing?

The evidence of devotees’ faith in the healing capacities of Amma’s embraces lies in the many severely disabled people who repeatedly attend her darshan programs. Many report miraculous recoveries due to Amma’s blessings. But even if the large number of parents who arrive at Amma’s darshan programs with their wheelchair-bound children will not see their children walk or talk on this day as a result of Amma’s embrace, they still can find comfort in this embrace as they experience a momentary release of their heavy caregiving burdens. Not only do the parents find a temporary respite, but there is always a glimmer of hope for healing and renewal.

Many devotees attend only for the novelty of the experience. Others desire the spiritual energy (śakti) they believe Amma embodies and the comfort and consolation that she imparts through her embrace. For many it is enough to briefly encounter a person they believe to be a sātguru (a realized soul). These devotees tend to be more loosely affiliated with Amma, and they may have begun to attend Amma’s darshan programs only recently. Other devotees are more committed to Amma in particular and stay for the entire program. These devotees aim to spend as much time as possible with Amma, absorbing her spiritual energy.

Some gurus envision darshan as an opportunity to provide devotees with the unmediated experience of divinity through direct contact with audiences. But in the practical, conventional, and immediate sense, modern gurus host darshan programs to bring together in community their followers and potential followers, to display and perform their superhuman abilities and natures, and to proselytize their spiritual messages.6 Mother Meera hosts silent darshan programs in which she quietly gazes into attendees’ eyes, one devotee after another. Sathya Sai Baba used to enter the darshan hall according to his divine whimsy (līlā) and then quietly gaze at the entire audience, pausing poignantly to look at particular individuals before retreating into private darshan meetings with select devotees in a separate room. Karunamayi Ma individually blesses...
her attendees from a raised platform by placing her hands on their temples and third-eye energy centers (chakras). Mata Amritanandamayi embraces her devotees one by one. During darshan the gurus’ gaze is poignantly directed to their audiences with the goal of fostering individuated movements of visual exchange, dialogic interaction, and believed transformation. Each of these gurus offers free darshan events.

Darshan is the intimate process of seeing and being seen by a deity. Hindus describe darshan not as the detached, passive sight of aesthetic observance but with the active transitive verbs of taking (in Hindi, darshan lena) and giving darshan (darshan dena). In modern usage, the term darshan signifies the moment when humans view the supernatural, whether through an icon of a deity (murti), a sacred site (tīrtha), or a living embodiment of the divine (avatar). Through darshan, the deity and the devotee engage in a mutual seeing in “a moment of dramatic spiritual interaction.” This interactive process symbolizes the “desire for fusion—for the subject/object dissolution of the ‘double sensation.’” As Isabelle Nabokov/Clark-Decés explains, “The act of darshan . . . also becomes a form of absorbing, so that any objectification of a supernatural is always a form of assimilation as well.” It is in such moments of Hindu devotional ritual that the individual both recognizes divinity and is recognized as divinity. In Hindu practice, it is through darshan that humanity gains the opportunity to experience the divine on earth. Ideally the darshan experience dissolves the individual ego into cosmic unity with divinity. When interpreted through the advaita vedantic theological ideal of nonduality, the moment of darshan between guru and devotee provides the opportunity for the dissolution of the individuated ego, the symbolic union with divinity, and the intense physical expression of metaphysical cosmic oneness that eradicates duality. Ideally, darshan transforms the individual through these temporary suspensions of the sense of self and individuated difference that incite the recognition of the ultimate similitude between the self and divinity.

Through darshan, devotees not only see the image of the deity but infuse themselves within it in an active process of becoming. Devotees aim to absorb the gaze of the deity and in the process be transformed. As Lawrence Babb suggests, there is a parallel between the impulse behind eating blessed food (prasad), wherein “you become what you eat,” and the process of darshan, in which “you somehow become what you see.” Thus darshan should not be explained in terms of being merely an aesthetic experience—something that one passively witnesses—but, rather, as an agentive interaction—something in which one actively
engages, a transformative and participatory process. A devotee of Mother Meera understands her unique method of silent visual darshan in highly active terms of transformation. She says, “Along with the gaze from Mother Meera’s eyes comes an infusion of light, light designed to heal wounds within the psyche and give a person sufficient power to move from the perspective of the personality to a divine perspective. . . . This is not one woman staring as the other stares back. Instead, one offers the gift of her soft, penetrative gaze, and the other offers the gift of acceptance.” In the Radhasoami tradition the compassionate gaze of the guru during darshan is believed to assist devotees in their spiritual development: “the drishti, the ‘seeing’ or ‘glance,’ of the guru aids the devotee in achieving deliverance.” Devotees of Sathya Sai Baba experience darshan as “a moment of ultimate self-transformation by which they are ‘captured’ spiritually and experience a ‘complete immersion in Sai Baba’s love.’”

Amma’s devotees relate similar experiences of the dissolution of individual boundaries, immersion in divine love, and cosmic awakenings. Shanti relayed a particularly powerful experience of her darshan during one Devī Bhāva night: “As we knelt in front of Amma, she put our heads together, cheek to cheek, and looked straight into our eyes, the right eye on me and the left eye on Caleb. I remember thinking, Oh no! here we go!!! I lost all track of where I was . . . there was no sense of time, the universe was swirling to life in her eye, and then I was in the universe and I sort of felt, for lack of a better word, everything that has ever been and every thing that will ever be in one second. She pulled back and it was over. I totally lost track of where I was for a second. But as soon as she disengaged I was back with no confusion.” Devotees long for the darshan experience because of the potential for this type of transformative experience, the possibility of experiencing a glimpse into the cosmic reality of the divine, and the efficacy of darshan for catalyzing spiritual awakening.

Devotees pursue this possibility for transformative experience through their intimate interactions with the guru during darshan. Amma’s unique offering of a maternal embrace provides temporary satisfaction to devotional communities fueled by what Tulasi Srinivas has called “proxemic desire,” meaning not only the desire to be close to the guru but to be acknowledged as a good devotee. In Amma’s movement, devotees nearly burst with proxemic desire as they rush to catch a glimpse of her as she enters and departs from the darshan hall or crowd as close to her as possible when given the opportunity. Similarly, devotees exhibit the
desire to meld with Amma’s presence through star gazing *sevā* (wherein devotees sit close to Amma and watch her intently in five-minute-long shifts) and even clamor to receive and consume small distributions of special prasad, a food item that Amma has previously sampled, believed to be imbued with sacrality through the ultimate proximity of having once been so close to her mouth.

Sai Baba devotees’ conceptions of self-worth were directly related to their darshan experiences, meaning that good devotees received “good darshans,” and good darshans were marked by proximity to Sai Baba. In Amma’s movement the parallel valence between good devotees and good darshans resonates less because all attendees are granted the intimate proximity of a hug and few devotees would admit to feelings of having received “bad darshans.” All darshan experiences are part of “Amma’s grace” and while their efficacy may not be readily apparent, devotees believe that Amma presents precisely what is needed at that moment. Still, devotees anxiously desire more time in direct proximity to Amma, and they strive to improve themselves internally and behaviorally (to transform themselves into good devotees) in order to receive more of Amma’s positive attention. This substrata correlation between good devotees and good darshans places on the shoulders of devotees the responsibility for the emotional intensity and efficacy of the darshan interaction. If one has a lackluster darshan, then one must go within to find meaning and ultimately to access more significantly transformative darshan experiences.

Many contemporary gurus provide their devotees with public darshan experiences, but they limit their accessibility and visibility to them by appearing in front of large audiences, thus having limited physical contact, or no contact at all, with them. As a result of this restricted access to the guru, devotees often rely on photographs, videos, and websites as mediators for the darshan experience. In these movements (and in the Hindu use of devotional iconography more generally), the darshan experience is necessarily dependent on visuality. Still, as Christopher Pinney rightly points out, “Darshan’s mode of interaction . . . mobilizes vision as part of a unified human sensorium, and visual interaction can be physically transformative.” Similarly, Smriti Srinivas introduces Sathya Sai Baba’s darshan as a “sensorium of the sacred” and centralizes the sensory and somatic nature of the encounter with divine or holy persons in South Asia. Amma’s movement also employs photographic images and websites to augment opportunities for devotees to experience her darshan in her absence. But when she is physically present, the
somatic nature of the divine encounter increases exponentially because of the barrage of sensory stimuli from the darshan hall juxtaposed with the immediate physicality of her embraces.

**TAKING AMMA’S DARSHAN**

The physicality of Amma’s darshan creates a multisensory event that most devotees experience as emotionally overwhelming and spiritually transformative. Amma’s unique presentation of darshan in the form of a hug provides devotees with unusually intimate access to her physical body and thus creates the potential for an overwhelmingly tactile corporeal experience. The physical interaction with Amma during darshan creates the ultimate fulfillment of devotees’ desire for proximity to the guru. Many devotees choose to follow Amma because of this potential for personal attention and physical intimacy. They recall their darshan experiences not only in terms of visuality but also in terms of visceral feelings and multisensory engagement, through touch, smell, sound, and emotion. As such, Amma’s unique innovations to the Hindu ritual of darshan prompt a revisiting of the commonplace understanding of darshan as a visual exchange between deity and devotee.

Pinney notes that darshan, often directly translated into English as “seeing,” has little to do with Western conceptions of aesthetics, usually understood to involve detached observation, the separation between the image and the beholder. Instead, he proposes the term *corpothetics* to signify the “desire to fuse image and beholder, and the elevation of efficacy . . . as the central criterion of value.”¹⁹ Corpothetics (sensory corporeal aesthetics) emphasizes the bodily contingent of the darshan experience and expands the conception of darshan from its ocular restriction to the incorporation of its multisensory dimensions. In a living deity, the eye is also an organ of touch in the sense that it is used to form a connection between the guru and devotees.²⁰ “The perception of the guru, *pir*, or a deity emerges not only from visuality or sound but may include smell, dreams, touch, taste or tears—religious experience is also an experience of the senses.”²¹ In Amma’s darshan, the superimposition of the tactile onto the visual assumes material form because darshan becomes not only the vision of Amma but the bodily experience of her physical embrace. As one might imagine, her devotees place little emphasis on their vision of her during darshan and instead foreground their feelings related to touch, smell, and hearing. They recall “her warmth,” “her beautiful scent,” and “the chanting,” and they describe how these
multisensory experiences catapult them into emotive states that they describe as “intoxicating,” “drunk with love,” and filled with “a deep peace” and “inner stillness and inner luminance.”

One hour prior to the start of the darshan program, a select *brahmacārīṇī* distributes darshan tokens to the queued attendees and *sevites* present (many devotees know her by name because of her administrative control over this important task). Attendees then funnel into the hotel ballroom wherein ashram recordings play Amma’s acceptance speeches for one of the many international humanitarian awards she has received, and promotional videos highlight Embracing the World humanitarian activities. Spliced with *Indic bhajans* (devotional music), the auditory cacophony blends with the colorful atmosphere of throngs of bustling devotees (wearing color) and *brahmacārīṇīs* (wearing white), tables offering a variety of services (Ayurvedic readings, radiance healing, *Jyotish* [vedic astrology] readings, and those highlighting the humanitarian activities of the MA Math [Amritapuri], MA Center [San Ramon], and the local *satsangs*), a *sevā* desk, and a bounty of products for purchase at various merchandise tables, the proceeds of which support Amma’s humanitarian activities—all of these things are positioned along the periphery of the central stage and altar space on which Amma will soon appear.

As Amma arrives, usually in a light-colored sedan, the most ardent devotees rush to the external doors to greet her as the tone of the conch shell reverberates through the hall and vicinity. Amma enters the space with her arms outstretched to graze the similarly outstretched hands of devotees who clamor to gain a preliminary glimpse of her. She stands in meditation while her swamis and *swamini* chant Sanskrit prayers (*ślokas*) and select devotees perform the worship of the guru’s feet (*pada puja*).23 She then makes her way to the stage where she sits and bows to the audience with a respective greeting and prayer. All morning programs begin with a brief meditation, while evening programs consist of longer periods of spiritual talks (given by Amma and her immediate swamis, and/or *brahmacārīṇīs*). During these preliminary portions of the program, audience members are encouraged to maintain a quiet atmosphere and to stay in their seats. Some of the audience sits on the floor space closest to Amma, while others sit in chairs, though the number of chairs in the darshan hall has increased significantly over the past ten years.24 Although the ritualized sequence of these initial formal aspects to the darshan program shares considerable similarities with Sai Baba’s darshan programs, at Amma’s programs there is no reserved seating except for
those who require assisted darshan (those attendees with special needs); a small section is also reserved for VIPs. During darshan programs social hierarchies do not govern devotees’ proximity to Amma: men and women are not segregated, and the only ritually marked entrance is Amma’s (see figure 3).

During the evening programs, at the conclusion of meditation and spiritual talks, the atmosphere lightens and Amma personally begins to lead the audience in singing bhajans, accompanied by her musicians. In 2009, she began to augment her bhajans by simultaneously projecting lyrics (in transliteration and in English translation) onto two large screens adjacent to the central stage. This addition encourages audience participation and assuages the cultural divide between the largely Indic bhajans and their American audience participants. Bhajans are offered primarily in Malayalam, Hindi, Gujarati, Tamil, Telugu, and English, while smaller numbers of bhajans are offered in Spanish, French, Portuguese, Bengali, and Punjabi. Some of the non-Indic language bhajans are translations of Indic bhajans, while others are original compositions by Amma or her devotees around the globe. Presenting devotional music in multiple languages signifies the importance Amma places on appealing to global audiences. For example, during her birthday celebrations in 2003...
Amma sang the popular bhajan “Ishwar Tumhi Daya Karo” (“Lord, Shower Me with Your Compassion”) in Hindi, English, French, German, Italian, Spanish, Czech, Arabic, Hebrew, Japanese, and Malay. Such code switching (the concurrent use of multiple languages) during darshan programs and in Amma’s publications reinforces the idea that everyone is welcome to embrace Amma and her communities. Devotees are invited to experience and perform devotional singing with Amma in their own languages as well as in Amma’s native Malayalam and other Indic vernaculars. Similarly, Smriti Srinivas shows how Sathya Sai Baba used code switching and code blending to become, in Hawley and Juergensmeyer’s terms, a “theological bridge-builder,” appealing to various audiences by approaching them in their own “language of experience.” Multilingualism and the practices of code switching, code blending, and code mixing (in the terms of sociolinguistics) vitalize each movement’s claim to universal applicability. Amma devotees often cite such multilingualism in Amma’s routine devotional music programs as validation of her appeal to diverse cultures and of her movement’s extensive and global reach.

Bhajans often develop into jubilant, energetic, and emotive audience responses to Amma’s impassioned singing, uniting the audience in a communal revelatory experience of divine praise and “collective effervescence.” The devotional singing usually begins with calm and lilting melodies and over time escalates into repeated refrains pulsating with devotional fervor and Amma’s ecstatic cries to “Ma,” the goddess. Many devotees develop highly emotional responses to Amma’s devotional singing and often transform their musical preferences to emphasize recordings of Amma’s bhajans in response. As Pithambara, an older Indian Hindu gentleman with graying hair, kind, twinkling eyes, and a beautiful devotional voice, recounted: “The day when I saw Amma singing I was crying, but not because I was sad. I was crying because that void was filled by her music. Whatever that void that was in me that was filled that day . . . I was crying because they were tears of joy and that only came from her music. And that is when I gave up all of the filmy music and that type of thing and became devoted to bhajans.” In time, Pithambara developed his love for Amma’s bhajans by leading the musical endeavors of his local satsang gatherings, hosting benefit concerts for Amma’s charities, and showering his devotional love on Amma through the sevā of musical performance (see figure 4).

After the emotional climax of ecstatic communal bhajans has receded, Amma immediately begins embracing individual attendees. She
continues the rhythmic process of darshan without interruption until each token holder has received her embrace. Live bhajan musicians maintain their devotional music throughout the program, supplemented by occasional cultural programs and performances. During darshan, attendees kneel before Amma as she folds them into her embrace. Some steal a moment to ask her personal questions (a privilege taken particularly by devotees fluent in Malayalam or Tamil, though others may also have their questions translated by Amma’s immediate attendees for a less fluid conversation). But the majority of devotees rest their heads on the cushion of flower garlands at Amma’s breast, drinking in the experience until she leans forward and chants “My daughter, my daughter, my daughter, my daughter [or son]” deep into their ears and places prasad in their hands, at which point they are lifted by attendees and ushered away. Outside of India, prasad consists of a Hershey’s kiss and flower petals for non-Indians and a Hershey’s kiss, flower petals, and a small brown packet of vibhūti (sacred ash) for Indians. Amma also routinely gives an apple to pregnant women and those who are embarking on new projects. Sometimes she gives an apple without explanation, a representative signifier of her divine whimsy (līlā). For couples who wish to be married or for those who have recently become engaged, she often
pulls a rose from the decorations adorning her low seat and gives it to the couple as prasad. For especially lucky (or blessed) devotees and young children, Amma places an unwrapped Hershey’s kiss directly into their mouths. For special occasions and blessings, Amma dips her ring finger into fragrant sandalwood paste and applies it to the center of devotees’ foreheads. Because all of the aforementioned darshans are infrequent, they incite delight and gratitude among devotees when they do occur. The prasad assistant (as well as the prasad assistant’s assistant) diligently watches Amma in order to quickly and gently place the appropriate prasad in her hand after each darshan embrace.

**Transcending Boundaries of Purity and Pollution**

Amma’s process of giving darshan in the form of an unconditional physical embrace subverts traditional Hindu norms of caste and gender hierarchies, particularly because she was born as a low-caste, dark-skinned female. The physicality of her maternalistic darshan embrace democratizes the darshan experience in two primary ways: it enables all participants to attain the most intimate proximity to the guru, and it publicly thwarts Hindu strictures of purity and pollution regarding the practices of untouchability and gender segregation. In fact, one recent book by a devotee correlates Mahatma Gandhi’s rejection of the Hindu practice of untouchability with Amma’s darshan embrace, arguing that, framed positively, both leaders advocate “touchability.” “Touchability means removing the false sense of separation between our hearts and the rest of the Creation.”  

The author concludes that Amma “is perhaps the most touchable person on the planet. From her internal vision, she tells us: ‘The universe is one, not many. Man has divided the world into fragments, not God. It is man, who, through his thoughts and actions, creates turmoil and disintegration in the natural, harmonious unity of the world. Each atom serves as a building block of this universe and is intrinsically connected to every other atom.’ ” Amma’s public darshan embrace invites a new paradigm of devotionalism that centralizes ritualized bodily contact among strangers (even those of different genders and castes) from within the confines of a culture that carefully guards physical contact and corporeal boundaries as potentially dangerous arenas for bodily pollution (see figure 5).

While Amma’s darshan experience of a hug forms the primary public persona of the movement, it does not result in a *communitas* of hugging
among devotees. The increased physicality present in the guru-disciple relationship in Amma’s movement does not translate into a generalized culture of unusually augmented physical intimacy among devotees. Instead, the movement is infused with a largely ascetic impulse toward sevā in which devotees are encouraged to enact an ethos of loving and compassionate behavior in their routine interpersonal interactions and through their participation in ETW humanitarian campaigns. In the United States, the minority population of dreadlocked countercultural youth who follow Amma on her tour echoes her advocacy for love and
compassionate behavior by hugging each other perhaps more frequently while in her presence. But most devotees view the darshan embrace as a very particular ritually sanctified interaction with their guru, one with specific qualities and particular efficacy.

As the recent “Free Hugs” campaign (2004) demonstrates, strangers are reticent to embrace strangers, even in a Western context. Juan Mann stood holding a sign that read “Free Hugs” in a Sydney shopping mall for fifteen minutes before an elderly woman gave him a hug. Later, as his campaign increased in popularity, he was barred by the authorities because of his lack of public liability insurance. Eventually, Mann’s campaign and his proposition for “free hugs” gained social acceptability but not legal latitude, despite the fact that he garnered ten thousand petition signatures and became a YouTube sensation (with 72 million views as of May 2012, due in part to the support of the band Sick Puppies). In 2013, Brian, an adopter devotee in his mid-thirties arrived at Amma’s Los Angeles darshan programs and stood just outside the darshan hall holding a sign that said “Free Hugs,” silently soliciting free hugs from devotees. After some time Amma officials asked him to leave and he spent the remainder of the evening holding his sign in the front alley silently soliciting devotees as they entered the hotel. His expulsion signified the distinct sacrality that both devotees and Amma officials reserve for Amma’s hugs. In Durkheimian fashion, Amma’s tour staff carefully guarded the boundary between the sacred and the profane, Amma’s sacred hugs and Brian’s profane “free hugs.”

In Western countries, sexuality and sex may be open topics of discourse and practice, but physical embraces among strangers (without the potential for ultimate sexual gratification) are uncommon and violate the everyday practices of social conventions. As Michel Foucault has aptly shown, the hyperverbalization about sex and sexuality in Europe (and in the United States) signifies an inherent sexual anxiety rather than its antithesis. In a recent exhibition of the legacy of American Puritanism, many high school administrators in the United States have become concerned about the ramifications of students hugging in schools. To rectify this situation, a growing number of secondary education institutions in the United States have prohibited not only hugging but all touching among students. The promotion of lasciviousness in media discourse and industry should not prompt the conclusion that Westerners somehow feel more comfortable with hugging strangers than their counterparts do in contemporary India. Both Indians and Westerners fold themselves into Amma’s embrace and willingly surrender their so-
cially constructed reservations against this type of physical intimacy with strangers. This process of surrender marks the first transition to the sacrifice of the individual ego at the feet of the guru.

In India, social conventions and religious prohibitions heavily govern physical contact between strangers. Simply put by Dhara, a young female inheritor devotee, “We [Indians] don’t touch!” Such prohibitions are derived from long-established traditions that locate social and bodily boundaries as contested spaces through which to exert and maintain caste hierarchies. Caste hierarchies and the maintenance of female chastity are intimately related in the conventional Hindu prohibitions against bodily pollution. As Mary Douglas reminds us, “[T]hrough women the blood and purity of the caste is perpetuated. Therefore their sexual purity is all-important, and every possible whisper of threat to it is anticipated and barred against.”36 In the Hindu societal norms of a century ago, Amma, as a low-caste woman, would be relegated to relations with members of her own social station, forced to restrict herself to particular servile forms of employment, and banished from public forums and physical contact with upper castes. Though Article 17 of the 1949 Indian constitution formally outlawed the practice of untouchability (designating classes of people as impure, servile, “untouchable”), caste hierarchy and discrimination in India persists. Amma’s public solicitation of hugs from strangers marks a radical usurpation of Indian societal norms for female behavior and caste relations. No other guru (let alone a low-caste female guru) engages the breadth of global populations (the healthy, sick, old, young, rich, poor, dirty, clean, mentally ill, and so on) with this level of physical intimacy.

Amma intentionally thwarts Hindu social customs with regard to restrictions on purity and pollution; her famed darshan programs publicly challenge conventional social structures on an international stage. She intentionally embraces the sick, the dirty, and the mentally ill of all castes and creeds without outward concern for her personal safety and cleanliness. At the close of darshan programs, Amma emerges wide-eyed and electrified with a broad smile as she exits the darshan hall, but the shoulder of her white sari is usually stained a medium brown with translucent edges encompassing smudges of red, pink, and black from the oils and residual makeup of thousands. Her right cheek bears a darkened impression (a callus, bruise, or both) from the thousands of hugs she delivers each day and night. While attendees encourage devotees to wipe sweat and makeup from their faces and dreadlocked attendees to cover their hair with a shawl, still the process entails that Amma embraces
all of humanity, regardless of an individual’s appearance, hygiene, caste, class, age, gender, or religion. One devotee praises Amma for publicly defying structures of social inequity in the Hindu tradition. She says, “In front of her outpouring of pure Abhimsa [non-violence], the conditioning of caste simply does not exist. Her darshan queue has no social distinctions. In front of her, caste is a moot point, an archaic thought form, from an era when people did not realize they were all children of the same Mother.” 37 Devotees follow Amma as an international spiritual leader and humanitarian dissociated from Hindu mores, but they also simultaneously view her as a Hindu reformer who challenges historical paradigms that do not resonate with their modern liberal democratic sensibilities.

The documentary film Darshan: The Embrace (2006) begins with the opening scene of Amma licking and sucking the pus from the wounds of Datta, a leper who frequented her ashram at Amritapuri to take her darshan, which he believed to have healing properties. When questioned about him, Amma responded, “Mother sees him in the same way as she sees you or anybody else. He is also my child. How can a Mother feel loathing or hatred when she sees her son or daughter, however ugly or badly diseased he or she is? In fact, Mother has a lot of compassion and love for him. Mother’s heart melts when she sees him.” 38 Unlike Catherine of Siena, who famously drank pus in a compulsion to serve humanity through her own suffering, Amma drinks the pus of lepers to model the extremities of unconditional love while emphasizing equanimity as the means to transcend aversion and hatred.39 In her discussion of her behavior toward Datta, she advises, “Children, let your minds open up fully and contain love with all its fragrance and beauty. Hatred and aversion will only make it look ugly. Love towards everyone gives real beauty, enhancing both the giver as well as the receiver.”40 Br. Dayamrita Chaitanya recounted his personal experience of witnessing this transgressive event:

So then I went back to see her a second time and it was this time that I saw Amma licking a leper, the leper, you know Datta the leper, with my own eyes and that is what transformed my life, really. It was when I saw her compassion, when I saw her love I realized that I have never seen [that] in any other human being. And that to show so much compassion to another human being—through her own interactions is what drew me, changed [me], and blew my mind. And even today that is what I see in her.

The stories of Amma’s interactions with Datta are famous throughout her movement. Often cited, for devotees they serve as one of the most
A Darshan Embrace  |  55

extreme examples of Amma’s unconditional love and compassion for everyone, regardless of personal circumstances and her own personal safety. From another perspective, they also demonstrate Amma’s intentional thwarting of traditional Hindu conceptions of appropriate social hierarchies and the ritualistically enforced boundaries demarcating purity from pollution. Hindu concepts of purity and impurity are often closely connected to notions of bodily integrity and the boundaries of the physical self. Those substances that flow over the boundaries of the body, such as menstruation, elimination, wounds, and mutilation, create impurity.”

But in many ways her movement instantiates traditional Hindu divisions (historically often caste-based) that separate her followers into Indians and Westerners, whether in regard to food offerings (between Indian or Western meals and snack shops), clothing stalls (between Indian or Western clothes), or even darshan. During darshan, Indians receive one prasad and non-Indians receive another. In practice, this means that the prasad assistant (and the prasad assistant’s assistant) must attentively scan the line of individuals advancing toward Amma and make quick (and subjective) judgments about the ethnic identity of those waiting to receive darshan. Prasad assistants are eager to please, and they tremble at the opportunity to interface so directly with their beloved guru. One prasad assistant characterized this sevā as “an amazing experience and an intense meditation. . . utterly bliss.” But it is also a task that must be undertaken only after proper training, and then with the utmost care and attention to detail.

As in most Chicago darshan programs, I was assigned in 2008 to take a shift as the prasad assistant’s assistant. Like most devotees, I too had a few butterflies in the pit of my stomach as I approached Amma in anticipation of my minute-long shift. When I finally reached her and was about halfway through my shift, the timekeeper (an austere Indian
Hindu woman from the local satsang) abruptly chastised me for handing out only Hershey’s kisses and flower petals to the prasad assistant to give to a Latino couple who were in Amma’s darshan embrace. She quickly shoved some vibhūti (sacred ash) into my hand and silently scolded me with fierce eyes and a stern facial expression to also place the ash into Amma’s slightly opened hand. Confused and shamed, I asked her afterward (perhaps a bit cynically) if all brown-skinned people were to receive vibhūti, or just Indians. She then realized that the couple was in fact Latino and not Indian, but she shrugged off the mistake without comment.

This momentary conflict highlights the tension in the movement’s transition from an antiquated model of an ethnic dichotomy between whites and Indians to a global organization with complex and multifarious ethnic demographics. What once was a clear distinction between locals and foreigners in India has become a difficult, subjective, and often fallible process of quick, sight-based ethnic identification in the United States and around the world. Local leaders in the movement explain that they continue this practice because non-Indians are not usually culturally familiar with the properties or uses of vibhūti, thus receiving it as prasad would only confuse them. One senior ashram resident explained that many Westerners, not being acclimated to the use and application of vibhūti, were throwing it away, while Indians consider it “a bad omen” not to receive vibhūti from a māhātma like Amma. But as more and more cosmopolitan Indians in Western clothes and non-Indian/nonwhite populations (sometimes in Indian clothing) begin to attend Amma’s darshan programs, the process of instantly distinguishing between the complexions of Indians and non-Indians has already become difficult. To make matters even more complex, non-Indians who are acculturated to Hindu norms often ask, or secretly desire, to receive vibhūti because they believe in its medicinal and auspicious properties.

In this task, devotees demonstrate careful attention to pleasing Amma, particularly when in direct contact with her. Amma has been known to toss aside improper prasad, often with an aggravated glance at the prasad assistant if she or he errs. Devotees view this type of direct reprimand not only as an unfortunate public humiliation but also as contributing to an unnecessary strain on Amma’s already taxed physical body, because Amma must then turn to assemble the appropriate prasad herself. While nearly all mahāsevites (major volunteers) relish in the honor of serving as a prasad assistant because of the proximity to Amma (signified by the fact that the shifts are only one or two minutes in duration),
one devotee confessed to me that she dreads prasad sevā because she gets intensely nervous with the pressure of “getting it right” so close to Amma and in the bustle of the darshan process. What was once a clear distinction between Indians and foreigners (largely white) in the local Indian context has now become a difficult, fallible, and problematic process of ethnic identification as the movement expands into more ethnically diverse territories (largely the United States, South America, and Africa).

Another difficulty with which devotees and casual attendees alike must contend emerges from the awkward scenario wherein one receives less than what she or he had anticipated from the darshan experience. Some react by withdrawing from the movement (which is often the case when there are only minimally established ties), while others justify their experiences and continue to be devoted to Amma. Let down by the darshan experience, newcomers often seem befuddled by all of the “hype” surrounding Amma as a divine persona. Many simply go home disappointed or pass the time by wandering the darshan hall and engaging in shopping, Ayurvedic readings, acupuncture, and so on. When newcomers have a disappointing darshan experience, they rarely pursue further involvement in the movement, though they often recall their experience for some time despite its lackluster effects. But when this occurs among ardent devotees, they often interpret it as Amma trying to teach them some spiritual lesson, such as humility or nonattachment, or to focus on their heart instead of their intellect. This last lesson is a particularly common interpretation when devotees approach Amma for darshan while they are intellectualizing the darshan experience, questioning Amma as a guru, analyzing their place in relation to her or her movement, or focusing on getting an answer to a pressing question or concern. Their vacuous darshan experiences then serve as a reprimand for intellectualizing the “heart journey” of spiritual experience, a common theme in Amma’s discourses.

The frequently repeated idea that “Amma is simply a mirror reflecting the internal nature of the devotee” supplies another common sentiment used to explain these anomalous negative (or, more commonly, merely vacuous) darshan experiences. In this manner, the responsibility for the nongratifying darshan experience is placed squarely on the shoulders of the darshan taker (the devotee) instead of the darshan giver (Amma). Br. Dayamrita Chaitanya explains that even if devotees are initially unimpressed by the darshan experience, “they may think that they did not receive anything; after a while, what happens is they realize
the depth of such things, that experience. It might take them time.” Ardent devotees are able to balance a few unmemorable darshan experiences with their memories of uplifting darshan experiences that occurred in the past and their expectations of the same types of rewarding experiences in the future.

The emotional states, preconceived notions, and dispositions of individuals determine their perceptions of the efficacy and the related affective result from their darshan experiences. The darshan embrace that occurs while Amma is otherwise engaged reveals a polarity of interpretations among devotees. But first, to contextualize, Amma receives individuals and families in a constant procession of sequential darshan embraces, each person receiving her attention for just a few moments. However, because Amma presents herself in the public sphere largely through her darshan programs, it is during her successive darshan embraces that she gives interviews to media representatives, arranges business matters with local satsangs, and manages the major decisions of her organization. While she embraces individuals and manages these affairs, she also pays careful attention to the particular details of the program logistics in that location, often calling for particular mahasemites by name with regard to the details of particular tasks. In tandem with these administrative affairs, devotees often present Amma with significant life crises and questions during their darshan embrace. If the circumstance demands more than a simple answer, Amma often directs devotees to stand at her side, where she discusses their problem at length, as she continues to embrace people in the darshan line in front of her. These simultaneously occurring interactions result in the reality that Amma is sometimes engaged in conversations with others while attendees rest in her lap during their darshan embraces.

The darshan experience is deeply colored by individual perception, which is signified by the fact that casual and ardent devotees interpret their experiences differently, and in sometimes oppositional ways. While newcomers to the movement may be disillusioned with Amma’s apparent multitasking, ardent devotees relish the lengthier darshans that they receive by simply resting on Amma’s breast while she holds discussions with others. Despite the multitudes who surround Amma and demand her attention, at the end of each darshan embrace Amma gives all attendees (regardless of individual distinctions of ethnicity, class, gender, and so on) her absolute, undivided attention for a few moments with a firm grasp, a deep whisper into their ears, and an exchange of prasad. Attendees’ differing interpretations of their darshan experiences may
stem from the lack of recognition among newcomers that this final moment of undivided attention during darshan is in fact their darshan experience. As one senior devotee explained: “Everything else is extra.”

In Chicago (2011), Laura approached me, excited that Amma had placed the top of her head (her center of intellectual activity) right on Amma’s heart and held it there constantly while she discussed matters at length with another devotee. Laura was thrilled at this privilege of an extended darshan and thought it significant that Amma was subtly advising her to think with her heart instead of her scattered intellect. Similarly, early on in my research I was resting my face among the rose garlands on Amma’s chest when my mind began to wander to the conversation that she was having in Malayalam with a standing devotee immediately above my left shoulder. The conversation seemed to be about the petrol and rickshaw costs at one of her secondary schools in Kerala. Curious (and ever the intellectualizing academic), I shifted my attention from the roses and lifted my head in order to watch and listen more carefully. After a few moments of this type of intellectual voyeurism, Amma looked down and frowned at me. She then quickly pushed my head back down toward the roses, chanted in my ear, and released me from her darshan embrace, sending me on my way. Like Laura, I understood this not-so-subtle reprimand to be her direct message not to neglect the emotive and spiritual aspects of the darshan experience in favor of the intellectual. Amma’s message does not support a wholesale anti-intellectualism, but it is certainly an undercurrent to her discourses that focus so attentively on heartfelt love and compassion above all else.

Another devotee initially interpreted her lackluster darshan critically but then, in hindsight, rationalized the experience. “Feeling a nervous excitement, I joined the queue. When I reached Amma’s arms, she whispered something into my ear and pressed her cheek to my cheek. She was talking to a man next to her at the same time, and I was put off by this seeming lack of attention. ‘You should do your job with more sincerity,’ I thought to myself. I was disappointed.” Understood in this type of negative valence, some attendees emerge from Amma’s embrace unimpressed or even disillusioned. Others, as in this particular account, conclude with a buttressing of their faith in Amma’s omnipotence, thinking simulacra of the idea that, “Of course, I did not know [then] that Amma could pay attention to many people at the same time, giving each one exactly what was needed.”47 The variances in interpretation of the darshan experience often solidify the commonplace belief among devotees that the guru functions as a mirror, reflecting that
which devotees present to her. Amma and the administration of the movement also support this interpretation. For example, a recent e-newsletter ran the front-page story with an exchange from the question-and-answer session during the San Ramon retreat in 2011: “One devotee asked Amma ‘why does Amma gets more beautiful and younger, year after year, while we get old and ugly, as years pass by?’ Amma explained that the beauty you see in Amma, is actually the reflection of the love you have for Amma.”

**DARSHAN IN ABSENTIA**

For the significant majority of attendees at Amma’s darshan programs, the opportunity to release their burdens in her embrace presents itself only once or twice a year. Though a miniscule percentage of North American attendees regularly attend congregational gatherings (satsangs) (.01 percent), many reserve time during the lengthy darshan programs to purchase a photograph of Amma at the expansive tables where hundreds of images of Amma are sold in the posterior of the darshan hall. These photographs then often become placeholders for Amma in their home altars, sacred spaces, or eclectic arrangements of spiritual ephemera. Notably, photographic images of Amma represent the visual reminder of her ideal of love and compassion, even for those attendees who may not inculcate themselves fully within the religiosity of Amma’s movement and message. For other more ardent devotees, visual representations of Amma serve as lifeboats and lily pads, proximate reminders of her constant guidance and presence in their lives that sustain them until her next visit.

The twentieth-century German philosopher Walter Benjamin famously argued that the photograph reactivates the object reproduced but cannot reproduce the “aura” of authenticity of the original. In this case Amma’s presence is brought into devotees’ living rooms, offices, vehicles, and so on through photographic representations in an effort to reactivate her presence therein. Still, such representations are at the end of the day merely representations—they cannot effectively reproduce Amma’s “aura” nor an authentic, deeply personal experience of her presence. As mere representations, they suffice to remind devotees of that intimate sense of authenticity that they tactiley receive through her darshan embrace. Notably, herein the photographic image is not dislocated from its initial ritual function, as Benjamin argues it has been in the transition from paintings to photographs, but, rather, the photo-
graphic representation is reinserted as a proximate value of an embodied entity, which is often used in ritual contexts as a proxy for that entity. Devotees sacralize photographs of Amma through worship; as such, these photographs are representational placeholders for devotees who use them for their personal, emotive, and ritual efficacy as reminders of Amma.

Amma’s most fervent devotees usually surround themselves with multiple photographic images and renderings of her that they place on their home altars, bodies, cars, offices, and computers, with the purpose of sacralizing these spaces and reminding them of Amma’s message. Small photos of Amma’s feet, linked to the well-established Hindu tradition of venerating the feet of the deity or guru, are most often found on devotees’ home altars, though they appear elsewhere. Devotees often have a favorite image of Amma; the majority of ardent devotees have an enlarged photograph of that image in the center of their home altars. Photos and artistic renderings of Amma may be purchased at her darshan programs and at the online Amma shop. One can even arrange with Amma’s audiovisual personnel to purchase a photograph of her or his own individual darshan experience (or interaction with Amma during special rituals [pujas], or moments) for a suggested donation, though this service is not advertised publicly. Amma’s organization tightly regulates the dissemination of photographs of her; all cameras and audio and video recorders are strictly forbidden on Amma’s ashram grounds and in darshan halls. These restrictions are in place for the general public in an effort to prevent Amma’s darshan from developing into a touristic experience, wherein camera flashes would envelop the atmosphere and each attendee would have someone take a photo during her or his individual darshan experience. Notably, with Amma’s permission, some members of the press and documentarians are allowed to photograph and film her. Still, while such practicalities and provisions are in place, these restrictions also enable Amma’s organization to control the crafting of Amma’s public image and the potential profits from the reproduction and commodification of her image.

Devotees who yearn for virtual proximity to Amma often pray to her photographic images and talk to them. Some believe Amma’s presence is felt in the environment in which the photos are displayed. The imagery of Amma becomes a mediating tool in her physical absence, though the most ardent devotees would explain that Amma is never truly absent from any space because of her divine omnipresence. Nevertheless, adorning one’s environment with images of Amma provides devotees
with a sense of her physical presence and guidance in their everyday lives. In our conversations, some devotees recounted occasions when these iconographic images “responded” to their interactions with them by turning upside down, falling to the floor, or becoming three-dimensional. Although these events are not heavily emphasized in the movement as they are among Sai Baba devotees, for some Amma devotees they serve as validation that Amma is truly present in their lives, guiding them in their daily decisions and relationships.

For other devotees, the chance encounter with a photograph of Amma becomes an opportunity for personal transformation. Many devotees related transformative moments in their lives in which they were presented with, or stumbled across, a visual image of Amma that inspired them to learn more about her and eventually to seek her out. Bhavana Upadhyaya, in her recent doctoral dissertation on Amma, states that during a hospital visit, when she “was in a deep personal crisis and in despair about life,” a nurse gave her a newspaper photo of Amma that appeared to her like a “beacon of hope.” Devotees often recounted similar moments in which a photo of Amma on a colleague’s desk, in a newspaper, in a vehicle, or at a friend’s home resonated with them to such a degree that afterward they sought out Amma in person. The devotees who related these stories to me often interpreted such events as Amma’s divine intervention. They said Amma “appeared” and “called” them to experience her presence and message.

Because Amma interacts with her devotees through darshan in the tactile experience of an embrace, in her absence many devotees long for this physical contact with the guru. In response to this longing, Amma’s organization created a unique form of Amma iconography: Amma dolls. Amma dolls are sold at darshan programs and at the online Amma shop; they come in three sizes (small, medium, and large) and vary in price from $45 to $180. Devotees purchase special clothing for their Amma dolls; Devī Bhāva outfits are particularly popular. The doll makers (brahmācārīṇīs residing at Amma’s ashrams) hand sew each Amma doll, stuff it with Devī Bhāva rose petals, and adorn it with clothing and embellishments from materials that Amma has worn on Devī Bhāva nights. Prior to their sale, Amma specially blesses each doll. Still, many devotees bring their Amma dolls with them to Amma’s darshan programs to have them specially blessed by Amma; upon the devotees’ request, Amma will adorn their doll’s forehead with a sandalwood dot (ṭikā) during darshan. In addition to Amma dolls, the doll makers recently expanded their repertoire to include the production of Kali,
Shiva, Radha, Krishna, and Jesus dolls (ranging in price from $75 to $250). Selva Raj notes, “The Amma dolls also represent the creative and innovative synthesis of Hindu image culture and American popular culture and market economy. The economic implications of this emphasis on physicality are no less significant, as these items generate sizeable revenue for the movement.” While photos and Amma dolls certainly generate income for Amma’s organization, they are by no means its primary, or even a significant, income source (see figure 6).

Instead, devotees keep Amma dolls as mediating representatives of Amma’s spiritual power and presence that become even more important in her absence. Amma dolls also provide devotees with the opportunity to care for them as if they were Amma herself. They can dote on
them, dress them, place food and drink before them, and decorate them with finery. For many devotees, these dolls are Amma. One devotee explains:

These little “Angels” are Mother’s gift of love and healing to all who are open to their blessings. Sometimes I take her off the top of my bedroom bookshelf and meditate with her in my lap (bliss). Other times, I need only to gaze at her form to feel her with me and loving me. Sometimes, I need a hug from her and that same feeling of all-accepting love and softness is there. It is as if she is my little piece of Mother.53

The “first aid” tent for Amma dolls at darshan programs makes clear the extent to which devotees identify their Amma dolls with Amma herself. Early on in my field research, I walked past a brahmacārīṇī meticulously repairing an Amma doll behind a large trifold cardboard screen erected at the front of her sewing table. Boldly, I asked the seamstress, “Why do you put up the screen? Is it because people would feel funny seeing you take apart their Amma doll?” She raised her head from her sewing, looked at me as though I were completely dense, and said, “Well, of course! This is like an ICU!” I was initially surprised at her vehement reaction, but I should not have been. In Hindu traditions there are strict rules regarding how one should treat and ultimately dispose of a representation of a deity. For example, ideally, both two- and three-dimensional deity representations should be submerged in water (a river or well) to ensure that they never come into contact with human feet or other forms of impurities. In addition, in Hindu religious practice it is customary to adorn, dote on, and feed figurines (murtis), which are viewed as physical embodiments of deities. For devotees, Amma dolls should be treated with the same reverence and respect that would be given to other Hindu images of the divine. The practice of adorning, doting on, and even worshipping Amma dolls as proximate deity representations likely has some relation to many of the Vaisnava traditions of India, in which the religious decorate and adorn small doll-like figurines of Krishna, including the most popular, the baby Krishna (Bala Gopala), for worship, particularly during Krishna’s annual birthday celebrations (Janmashtami).

The sanctity surrounding religious iconography (and Amma dolls) derives from the belief that the deity inheres in its image. Iconographic representations are believed to become increasingly powerful through the darshan process as devotees (and Amma, through her blessing) infuse them with power. Devotees believe that Amma’s blessing magnifies her presence in every Amma doll, and they tend to bring their Amma
dolls for individual blessings when they receive darshan. According to popular understanding in Amma’s movement, the more the devotee cherishes the doll, prays to it, and worships Amma through it, the stronger Amma’s presence in it will become. The Amma doll activates Amma’s presence in devotees’ lives. As Copeman and Ikegame rightly suggest, “The Amma doll seems not to dilute her aura [as Benjamin might have argued] but to reactivate it at home.” It also fulfills the tactile and corporeal void created between the experience of Amma’s darshan embrace and the interaction with two-dimensional photographic representations of her that, to put it simply, devotees cannot hug.

The majority of devotees with whom I interacted sought to reactivate Amma’s presence through the placement and adornment of two- and three-dimensional representations of Amma’s physical body. However, other devotees superimposed their own preferred understanding of divinity onto Amma, viewing her as a black Madonna, the Sri Yantra, or a particular Hindu goddess personified, and so on. Traveling with Amma on her North Indian tour, Judith Cornell desired Amma’s affirmation that Amma was in fact the Sri Yantra. Originally a tantric symbol, the Sri Yantra is an abstract symbol of the feminine energy of the universe. Convinced of this idea, she writes, “How could I explain to her [Amma] that I had been intuitively led to believe that she was the full embodiment of what the Sri Yantra symbol represented? As twilight waned, it took all my courage to boldly pose the intuition as a direct question. ‘Amma, you are the Sri Yantra, is this not true?’ She [Amma] bowed her head and very quietly said, ‘Yes, yes, yes.’” Many Śākta Tantric practitioners in the Śrī Vidyā tradition worship the goddess Lalitā through the Śrī Yantra. As I discuss in the next chapter, Amma often equates herself with—and others equate her with—the goddess Lalitā. Still, this anecdote probably tells us much more about Judith Cornell and her visions of Amma as a devotee than it tells us about Amma’s identity. Remember, the commonly iterated position among devotees referenced previously is that which devotees see in Amma is in actuality a reflection of themselves.

Beyond physical embraces and representational images, many devotees also related to me that they connect with Amma through dreams and meditational states. These intersubjective states of consciousness are ripe for devotees who long for guidance in their lives, and thus they find signs and suggestions in their liminally conscious states. In Indic thought, dream states are often significant allegorical images for meditative states. Upaniṣadic texts establish four states of being: waking,
dreaming, dreamless sleep (all natural states), and the supernatural, transcendent fourth state: unity with the Godhead. The two intermediary states (between waking and the transcendence of self) give the practitioner glimpses of the gods, for example, Vishnu or Rudra, who create (dreaming), or of brahman, who does not create (dreamless sleep). In upaniṣadic thought, human error causes the perception that we are most engaged in reality when in a waking state, while we perceive the other three stages to be progressively more illusory. In contrast, the upaniṣadic authors argue, it is just the opposite. Instead, reality is the transcendence of the self in unity with the Godhead, and the remaining three stages are progressively more illusory. In this view, waking is the most illusory state, a kind of dream, whereas unity with the Godhead represents ultimate reality. The upaniṣadic philosophers point to the frequent confusion of waking, dreamless sleep, and dreaming as suggestive of their illusory unity and their ultimate disjunction from the ultimately real state of unity with the Godhead. According to this reasoning, the progression from illusion to reality is waking, to dreaming, to dreamless sleep, and finally to the ultimate reality of unity with the Godhead. Thus dreaming realities are in a sense more real than waking realities. In dreams one sees both the real (sat) and the unreal (asat); it is this liminal nature of dreaming realities that imbues dreams with such a powerful valence in Indic thought.

In everyday life, dreams are significant for many devotees within Amma’s devotional milieu. Many North American devotees may have absorbed such upaniṣadic ideas through the warp and woof of Indic culture, while others may be influenced by the popular intersection of American spirituality and dream analysis, with roots in Western psychology. Some devotees draw parallels between other religious traditions, such as Native American traditions, in which visions and dreaming are significant forms of supernatural communication with humanity. The strong majority of devotees with whom I interacted were not only acutely aware of their own mental and physical processes (like dreaming), but they also instilled meaning into even seemingly insignificant events. The commonplace adage “everything happens for a reason” colored their realities so completely that the probabilities of chance, chaos, or a random occurrence had little to no explanatory place value in their lives. For these devotees, events occurred because of karmic disposition, or because they are “part of Amma’s divine plan,” or “the universe is sending a message.” These events could be as minute as finding a parking space or stubbing one’s toe or as significant as acquiring gainful
employment, birthing a severely handicapped child, or meeting a suitable spouse. Thus in a world in which there are no accidents, seeing Amma in a dream cannot be dismissed as a chance occurrence. There must be a message therein, and devotees (and would-be devotees) will likely seek to uncover it.

Visitation by the gods characterizes dreaming states of consciousness in Indic dream theory. Divinities of the Hindu pantheon often enter into the dream states of mortals. In fact, the goddess Kali first appears in her contemporary form in the dreams of the Pandava brothers in *Mahābhārata* (10.8.64–65). Such divine interventions may relay important and even practical messages. For example, when Swami Paramatmananda was becoming increasingly frustrated with some of the residents at the Amritapuri ashram, he had a dream, which he recounts as follows:

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

Through Amma’s admonitions in this dream, he recognized the futility of his frustrations with the residents’ behavior. Visitations by Amma in dreams may not only deliver divine messages, but devotees believe that they may also contain glimpses of ultimate reality, signified by the transcendent experience of unity with the Godhead. Thus dream encounters with Amma are highly valued darshan experiences among devotees; many devotees routinely told me stories of dream encounters with their guru. Devotees with whom I conversed viewed dreams that included Amma not as chance occurrences, bringing their deep unconscious to liminally conscious states, but, rather, as emblematic of Amma’s ability to appear metaphysically or her powers of paranormal teleportation to interact with her devotees through their dreams. Numerous gurus in the modern period, including Anandamayi Ma, Sai Baba, Srila Prabhupada, and Yogananda, also visited their devotees in dream states of consciousness, according to devotees’ accounts.

Perhaps even more interesting, however, are the narratives of devotees who relate events in which the guru first appeared to them in dream states prior to their knowledge of or physical encounter with the guru. Several devotees related stories about how they first dreamed of a dark-skinned woman in a white sari and then only later recognized that dream image in a photograph or met Amma in person. While we were sitting
under the night stars at the San Ramon ashram, Maya, a beautiful African American mother in her late thirties, with a bohemian style, told me about how she first met Amma. She explained, “I had a dream about Amma. She came to me in a dream. I dreamed she came to me and told me to surrender and three days later one of her devotees called me out of the blue and said do you want to go see Amma. And of course I said yeah—I want to go see Amma—and I didn’t know who she was at the time.” Later in the interview, she elaborated on this story:

Amma saved my life. When I dreamt about Amma, I was suicidal. . . . I wanted to leave the planet and if it had not been for Amma I probably would have. I think on one side it was Amma and on the other side my daughter. If it hadn’t been for the push-pull of the two of them—you know, like the maiden and the crone or the goddess, then I would have just fallen through the cracks really. So there is nothing anybody could say that could turn me against Amma. [See], it is not part of African American tradition to go to a psychiatrist. . . . So I had to go to that place alone and with Amma. There were many days that I just cried and cried and cried and cried. So she saved my life. I mean I saved my life, but if she had not been holding me and I hadn’t had that—her to just know. Like what she says “I’ll never forsake you, I’ll never let you go.” And I believed her. . . . And I dreamt of her during that period and in the dream she just said, “surrender my child, surrender.” . . . I didn’t even know what it meant. Now of course, coming here, she teaches surrender.

In Maya’s narrative, her dream of Amma (prior to her initial physical encounter with her) mirrors the core impulse of the darshan experience, which encourages devotees to surrender by becoming like little children in the arms of an unconditionally loving mother. Amma encouraged Maya to release her mental and psychological burdens during this metaphysical dream state of consciousness as well as later during her first darshan experience. This metaphysical release of burdens then recurred in the physical darshan experience that Maya sought out several days after her first dream-state encounter with Amma. While the skeptics will certainly view such narratives as fabrications, psychological imaginings, or coincidences, for devotees they are nothing less than Amma’s divine interventions, and, as in Maya’s case, such paranormal events often instill in them an unwavering faith in Amma.

THE QUEST FOR AUTHENTICITY

While darshan experiences in absentia provide a proximate experience of Amma’s darshan, devotees long for the aura of authenticity of the
original, to be in Amma’s presence and to feel the experience of her darshan. This longing for unmediated contact with the divinity that devotees believe to be present in Amma characterizes their desire to remain in the movement. Both Indian Hindus and American metaphysicals who follow Amma long for her darshan because they believe in the authenticity of the experience. The intimate physicality of Amma’s darshan reinforces their belief that Amma is an authentic guru and divine incarnation, a quality that she demonstrates through darshan in unmediated, tactile, and emotionally overwhelming ways.

Indian Hindu diasporic communities in the United States are in many ways engaged in an endless search for authentic Indian experiences. Among the elites in Indian Hindu communities in America, weddings often aim for not only opulence but for a cultural and religious connectivity to India, the communal display of which functions as a form of social capital. From another angle, many families whose children are engaged in the study of classical Indian music take advantage of the immediacy of globalized telecommunications networks by hiring Indian classical music gurus to teach their children via Skype and online audiovisual interfaces. Radha Hegde argues that these new systems of transnational virtual pedagogy are furthered through diasporic communities’ desires for Indian authenticity, represented here through the process of learning from an Indian guru in India. The participants in this reinvention of the guru-disciple relationship as a transnational experience view authenticity as something they can “feel” when learning from an Indian guru. Authenticity is a feeling; for these diasporic communities, it is a feeling of Indianness. The search for authenticity influences their choice of wedding music, venue, attire, decorations, and goods, as well as their choice of classical music gurus, to provide just two disparate examples.

But the search for authentic experiences is not limited to Indian diaspora populations alone. Many have argued that authenticity is an emerging desire for postmodern consumers in general. In a book offering strategies for the business community Gilbert and Pine (2007) argue that businesses must add authenticity (“authenticity of experience”) to the old tripartite model of quality, cost, and availability. The back cover of the book reads, “The more contrived the world seems, the more we all demand what’s real. As reality is qualified, altered, and commercialized, consumers respond to what is engaging, personal, memorable—and above all authentic.” Such statements appear to follow on the heels of critical theorists such as Jean Baudrillard, whose concept of
the “hyperreal” attempts to capture the contemporary expression of postmodernity wherein reality becomes mere simulacra. The cacophony of simulations of reality (media images, photographs, cartography, and so on) supplants the real, creating a postmodernity in which the real is wholly replaced by its simulations. In such a postmodernity, the search for authenticity becomes a search for the real. This may be a futile search. Baudrillard suggests that there has been an eclipse of the possibility of the presence of any real behind or underneath its multiple simulations; the simulacra have effectively replaced the real to the extent that the real becomes obliterated, inaccessible. Nevertheless, it is the experience of the real, the experience of the authentic, that devotees seek in Amma’s embrace. If authenticity is felt through affective, visceral, and corporeal experiences, then the emotive bodily experience of the embrace amplifies the feeling of immediate access to such authenticity. Feeling the void of the simulacra surrounding them, devotees seek out real experiences of authenticity, which many believe they find in Amma’s embrace.

In contemporary guru movements, the search for an “authentic” guru has additional importance because of the nefarious legacy of scandal and corruption that has plagued many transnational global movements throughout history. The majority of Amma’s North American devotees have encountered such movements and charismatic leaders mired in scandal. Many have turned away from these gurus, disillusioned and skeptical about the whole arena of transnational guru movements. Even if devotees have not been disillusioned by “fake” gurus or directly impacted by guru scandals, they still exist within a religious milieu in which such occurrences are commonplace. As a result, many approach the prospect of mental and emotional immersion in Amma’s movement with initial feelings of skepticism, reserved behavior, and timidity.

Darshan, usually one of devotees’ primary encounters with Amma, presents devotees with an immediate, tactile experience. Devotees are encouraged to feel for themselves the experience of authenticity through Amma’s embrace. For them, Amma’s unconditional darshan signifies an emblematic new paradigm of Hindu religiosity as well as a utopian representation of unconditional love, one that is orchestrated in tandem with their humanistic values of the potential of all persons to experience and commune with the divine without the interventions of priestly (or brahmanical) authorities. It is through the darshan embrace itself that many devotees not only return Amma’s embrace but embrace her
as an authentic guru. As Dhara relates about her first darshan experience: “I was such a skeptic, not cynical necessarily, but skeptic[al], . . . But in this experience [her first darshan] I could tell that she was real, she wasn’t a charlatan.” For the initially wary, like Dhara and a significant number of other newcomers, their first encounter with Amma’s darshan is a barometric measure of Amma’s authenticity, which they discern through their immediate, personal, affective, and bodily experience. It is usually after this first immersion experience that devotees begin to populate their environment with representational photographic images of Amma to reactivate the presencing and possibility of what they perceive to be the authentic experience with the real in their lives.

Newcomers to the movement may test Amma’s authenticity during darshan, but ardent devotees experience authenticity by recognizing Amma and presenting themselves to be recognized as similarly authentic selves through the darshan experience. Herein, devotees desire acknowledgment, the acknowledgment of their own struggles and desires, interior experiences, and self-understanding. This momentary exchange of recognition is the acknowledgment of individual authenticities, an ultimate attempt to dissolve the division between individuals, forming a cosmic unity. Framing darshan in this language of recognition, acknowledgment, and authenticity suggests potentially interesting parallels within the dialectical exchanges in contemporary discourses of multiculturalism. In discourses of multiculturalism, authenticity links directly to the ideal of a social identity that one represents (and by which one is represented) in the public sphere. Herein, it is the presentation of an individual and social identity as an authentic self, derived from a romanticist ideal of autonomous identity formation and presentation. As Charles Taylor summarizes, “Being true to myself means being true to my own originality, which is something only I can articulate and discover. In articulating it, I am also defining myself. I am realizing a potentiality that is properly my own. This is the background understanding to the modern ideal of authenticity, and to the goals of self-fulfillment and self-realization in which the ideal is usually couched.”63 Locating such an individuated personal and social identity becomes essential for those who desire to participate in the multiculturalist processes of representation.

Formulated in this way, Taylor argues for a politics of recognition, in which through social encounter the individual (or state) recognizes the other in its presentation of an authentic self. But recognition also shapes our identity, as does its antithesis, misrecognition.64 Critics to such
formulations of multiculturalism as a politics of recognition argue against the ways in which the demand for autonomous identity has the potential to flatten and essentialize individuals and cultures into their most salient or visible features. As such, the demand for recognition of a cultural identity in particular inserts boundaries and standards that define what it means to be a member of that culture. As K. Anthony Appiah explains, “Demanding respect for people as blacks and as gays requires that there are some scripts that go with being an African-American or having same-sex desires. There will be proper ways of being black and gay, there will be expectations to be met, demands will be made. It is at this point that someone who takes autonomy seriously will ask whether we have not replaced one kind of tyranny with another.” Recognition implies a fixed self that recognizes, through certain qualities and attributes, the existence of the other. The often-cited and most problematic notions within the politics of recognition are this imagined fixity of autonomous, sovereign, and authentic identities and the ways in which the object of recognition must have the attributes of designated qualities in order to be recognized. As such, the politics of recognition presents the possibility of essentializing and even solidifying extant cultural stereotypes; it is “a multiculturalism that demands a performance of authenticity.”

One such critic, Kelly Oliver, argues instead for an alternative model of a politics of “witnessing,” in which one experiences and responds to one’s connection to and dependence on others while bearing witness to the ways in which injustices inform this relation. The term witnessing holds multiple valences in legal, social justice, and Christian contexts. Here, I restrict my use of the term to follow Oliver’s intent, wherein a politics of witnessing rejects the autonomy of the subject and accepts an interactive, mutually dependent, and fluctuating relationship to others in the maintenance of subjectivity. For Oliver, such witnessing intimately relates to the ideal of love, which suggests a move toward others, across differences, an openness to otherness that inherently involves a turn toward others. It is precisely this loving openness between the self and the other, as well as the active process of witnessing, that characterizes devotees’ experiences of Amma’s darshan. I have described devotees’ longing for darshan as a desire to see and be seen and as a desire for recognition, but Oliver’s critique suggests that this analysis must push beyond recognition and move into the languages of love and witnessing of the other.

Within the term recognition lies a chasmic space between the self and the other; there is an identified autonomous self that recognizes a
demarcated and bounded other. It is this process of recognition that prasad assistants are encouraged to enact as they filter the darshan queue into “Indian” and “Western” devotees. But the darshan experience, like the concept of witnessing, attempts to dissolve the distance between the self and the other. Witnessing occurs in the inevitable presence of the dependence on others and one’s connection to others. As Oliver says:

If we reconceive of recognition from a notion of vision that emphasizes the fullness of space and the connections—interdependence even—between the visible world and vision, between the seer and the seen, then we begin to move away from the Hegelian struggle for recognition and toward the acknowledgement of otherness. Starting from this alternative notion of vision, otherness or others are not forever cut off from subjects or seers, threatening alienation and annihilation. Rather the gaps or spaces between us open up the very possibility of communication and communion. Vision itself becomes a process, a becoming, rather than the sovereign of recognition. Vision becomes a circulation of energy between and among rather than an artificial and inadequate bridge between a subject and an alien world.69

Amma’s transformation of darshan from a visual encounter between the self and the other to a tactile experience of the other animates a similar reimagining of the role of recognition and vision. The multisensory experience of darshan expands the visual into such connective regions that open to the presencing of the self in the other and the other in the self. The “circulation of energy between and among” the self and the other characterizes the darshan experience that attempts to dissolve the subject/object dichotomy. Amma’s darshan signifies the performative act of connectivity and presencing that such a politics of witnessing aspires to elucidate.

CONCLUSION

My repeated encounters with hundreds of devotees in the environs of Amma’s darshan experiences suggest there is something vital in precisely this experience as a “process, a becoming.” During darshan, devotees long to be seen by Amma just as much as they desire to see Amma. They long for precisely this “circulation of energy between and among” in their intimate embrace with Amma. They desire to be witnessed and comforted in Amma’s embrace, validated as individuals with existence, importance, and special qualities. As much as this may contradict the darshan goal of the subordination of the self in fusion with the divine,
it is an extant desire expressed by many devotees, which derives from the bounded attachments and grasping nature of the ego. Devotees exhibit these ego-driven attachments in subtle mannerisms of self-congratulation and pride that they take on when Amma bestows special treasures on them through darshan (an apple, a conversation, a longer moment of connection) and their envy, jealousies, and frustrations when she does not. Many devotees are self-aware enough to see the folly in such pride, but for others it is all too easy to get wrapped up in the desire for recognition by the guru and to miss the intention of the darshan experience. The temptation to jockey for recognition through the darshan experience may derive from the suggestion that such moments of recognition fulfill a painful void instigated by the misrecognitions and nonrecognitions that occur in the routine interpersonal interactions of daily life.

Devotees again and again recounted their experiences of emotive relief at being seen, understood, and witnessed during darshan. They consistently explained with confidence that “Amma sees everything”; “She knows me better than I know myself”; and “Amma saw right into my soul.” The emotive responses of many during and after their darshan experiences exhibit the intimacy inherent in this mutual seeing. In postmodern capitalist societies, the commonplace inquiry into the well-being of another has developed a level of superficiality, demanded by the quickening pace of globalization, consumer culture, and capital-driven markets, to which the individual submits and reifies as a matter of both necessity and convention. As a result, the inherent intimacy in even a few moments of direct immediate connection engenders more intense personal witnessing than many devotees experience in their mundane activities of worldly experience. The intense immediate witnessing that devotees attain (or believe themselves to attain) through the darshan experience often generates overwhelming emotions that they exhibit through tears, a sense of contentment, laughter, and love.

With that said, it is important to note that the intensity of such a visual and bodily exchange also causes unease and discomfort in those who are unprepared and/or unwilling to engage in such revealing acts of intimate connection. For some, the superficial connections of everyday interactions with others have become so routinized that the visual and physical intimacy inherent within the darshan experience demands too much connection and revelation of the inner self. Those who feel as such largely distance themselves from this intimacy by reserving emotive responses, not wholly engaging in the darshan experience, or reject-
ing the darshan experience. For these attendees, darshan is just a hug, a transient superficial physical connection that will not likely make them want to return to Amma’s programs as devotees.

But for those who do return again and again, the intensity of their longing to be seen and witnessed intimately and wholly sustains one of the powerful intimating factors in their continued devotions. These devotees also believe darshan to be a transformative event; by repeated contact with Amma, they believe themselves to be gradually transforming into better, and more spiritual, human beings. They contend that the darshan experience brings them closer to mirroring Amma’s divine persona and absorbing her spiritual power, and that the more frequently repeated, the greater the intensity of the transformation. The narratives that Amma’s devotees relate about the darshan experience highlight their beliefs in darshan as a symbolic fusion between deity and disciple. Amma’s unique darshan process of an embrace amplifies these feelings of the active dissolution of the subject/object dichotomy. Devotees recount that in the darshan experience “time stood still”; they “lost consciousness” of the distinctions between their two bodies; and they “melt and dissolve” feeling as though they are “diving into an endless something and losing [themselves].” The spiritual transformations invoked in these recollections suggest that devotees come to Amma for darshan embraces not only to see her but for a physical and visceral experience of mutual witnessing that transforms their realities and heightens their spiritual proclivities.