**FINDINGS**

Our findings suggest that neither gender nor age seem to have a significant effect on how devotees view Amma and their relation to her. All participants:

- View Amma as ‘Mother’, either symbolically or as a divine incarnation of the Goddess
- Conceive of this motherly quality of Amma’s to be expressed through an energy of unconditional love and comfort, as experienced mostly through her hugging darshan (meeting with a guru/holy person)
- Believe that the energy of love and comfort seems to be best expressed through a female form and essence
- Recognize a difference and significance between following a female spiritual leader and following a male
- Recognize an imbalance in our society, favoring and representing masculine divine and human qualities over feminine
- One participant stated that it is “psychologically freeing” to view God as female  
  (Respondent 8)
- Another participant stated, “True feminine energy is missing from our society and the way it’s structured... It’s a really powerful energy and I think our society misses out a lot by not tuning into that energy... Amma is proof that that power exists.”  
  (Respondent 2)

Most participants mentioned women’s significance within Amma’s organization:

- Female devotees, in the United States (Our interviews suggest that this may not be true in Amma’s native India)
- Females have equal access to all positions within Amma’s organization, such as the priesthood which is traditionally reserved for high-caste males
- Amma’s organization encourages female lay devotees to be active participants and empowers women to utilize and expand their individual skills within the Mission

**AMMA’S BIOGRAPHY**

- She has been labeled the “hugging saint,” as she embraces all that come to her with love and affection. Mata Amritanandamayi spreads her embrace around the world through her darshans (meetings with a guru/holy person) and her message of peace and love (selfless service). She has been acclaimed as a post-modern saint by liberals and conservatives alike in many nations, with her freely given love and acceptance, as well as her traditional Hindu teachings.
- Rising up out of poverty and social inferiority as a low-caste, dark-skinned Hindu female from a small fishing village in southern India, Amma has become a prominent female guru, claiming thousands of followers around the world. Her teachings encompass a change in social structures, while reiterating traditional dharmas (duties/obligations) and traditional religious practices.
- Amma’s focus on selfless service has produced ashrams and spiritual centers in thirty-three countries. Her charitable service endeavors include hospitals, hospices, care for the elderly and widows, orphans, elementary schools, as well as various technical and medical colleges. She has also dedicated herself to disaster relief and has built over 25,000 homes for tsunami victims and the poor (cornell, 2001, 8-10).
- Amma encourages women to establish their own identities, and thus recreate society. She warns, though, that such freedom also entails responsibility and is not a license to act any way one wants. Today, women are living in a world democratically by and for men, both should be aware of their unique dharma (duties). Men and women have to support and complement each other and have cooperation and respect for one another (Amma, 2003, 43-57).

**REGARDING THE FEMININE**

- Amma’s teachings: “Woman is the creator of consciousness,” on the Self, rather than on love and comfort. Former TM-sers spoke of recognizing a connection in consciousness with Amma, with an emphasis on her perceived transcendent qualities and abilities. These devotees seem to approach the Amma movement seeking a balance between the masculine and feminine. They speak of Maharsi Mahesh Yogi, the late TM founder and leader, as having a masculine energy who has imparted the discipline of meditation, whereas, Amma, with her feminine shakti (energy), provides connection and comfort. A common saying attributed to Amma by devotees states, “Maharsi is your father and he gives you knowledge, and I give you love.” (Respondents 4 & 5)
- The two formerly Christian devotees who had some influence from other Eastern religions expressed many of the same sentiments, yet emphasized the qualities of love and comfort.
- The one participant who had been an Amma devotee since the age of nine did not see Amma as guru, but as a literal mother. Beyond unconditional love, this devotee stressed her relationship with Amma, both emotionally and spiritually. This devotee experienced a feeling of perpetual care from Amma, whom she felt was always with her.

**FINDINGS, cont.**

Whereas all participants, regardless of gender or age, agreed on the function and value of Amma’s female gender in her spiritual leadership, devotees did vary in their emphasis, depending on their previous spiritual influences and practices:

- The four devotees with a primary background in Christianity focused on Amma’s motherly qualities and presence, emphasizing her love and comforting appeal. These devotees put the greatest importance on having female spiritual leadership and feminine conceptions of the divine in a society with predominantly masculine-oriented spirituality.
- The four devotees with a primary background in Transcendental Meditation (TM) largely drew upon their experience in the TM movement in creating meaning from following Amma. These devotees also spoke of Amma’s love, although their focus was on “consciousness,” on the Self, rather than on love and comfort. Former TM-sers spoke of recognizing a connection in consciousness with Amma, with an emphasis on her perceived transcendent qualities and abilities. These devotees seem to approach the Amma movement seeking a balance between the masculine and feminine. They speak of Maharishi Mahesh Yogi, the late TM founder and leader, as having a masculine energy who has imparted the discipline of meditation, whereas Amma, with her feminine shakti (energy), provides connection and comfort. A common saying attributed to Amma by devotees states, “Maharsi is your father and he gives you knowledge, and I give you love.” (Respondents 4 & 5)
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**CONCLUSIONS**

- Our findings suggest that there is indeed a difference between viewing the Divine as feminine or masculine.
- Most of our respondents are clearly drawn to Amma because of her gender.
- Our respondents believe that Amma, as a female guru, is meeting spiritual needs that they felt were unsatisfied within their previous spiritual paths.

**SUGGESTED FURTHER RESEARCH**

- Our respondents feel that there is an imbalance in the exclusively masculine conception of the Divine in the West, missing the feminine. We suggest further research to determine how prevalent this imbalance is within the larger society and in what ways people are attempting to address this perceived imbalance.
- There were indications that following a female spiritual leader can be spiritually, emotionally and socially empowering for female devotees, but this is a complex issue which requires more in-depth investigation.
- The spiritual backgrounds that devotees bring to their encounters with Amma appear to have a profound influence on how they interpret their relationship with Amma; this was most evident when interviewing former practitioners of TM. Since this was an unanticipated finding, we were not prepared with questions to address this issue and we believe further research is necessary on this topic in order to fully understand Amma’s appeal as a female spiritual leader.