

# Learning in the Intimacy of the Guru-Disciple Relationship

## The Case of Mother Amma and her Finnish Follower

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Our article has two aims: first, to track the ethos of learning and the importance of the guru-disciple relationship in the Amma movement, and secondly, to explore the ways in which one Finnish disciple frames her life through this special relationship. The narrative of the disciple becomes especially interesting in that she is a long-term devotee from Finland who has a background in formal academic learning and works in a socially highly valued and demanding profession – and yet has chosen to invest a considerable amount of time and energy to spirituality and committed herself to a close and intimate guru-disciple relationship that guides her personal and work life as well as her overall understanding of learning. Our case study, drawing especially on such materials as Amma’s public discourse and one extensive individual narrative, complemented by ethnographical observations in the ashram in India, shows how pervasive the language and ethos of learning can be in a spiritual context, and what the intimacy of the teacher-student relationship may provide to highly educated individuals in contemporary largely secular Western society.

### Introduction

Evening at 5 pm is the only time of day when most of the ashramites come together. Nowhere else have I experienced such deep silence and anticipation as when sitting in the ashram’s *darshan* hall with thousands of devotees, just a few minutes before Amma is supposed to arrive on the

stage. And I’ve certainly never before witnessed so many people arise and stand up so silently and earnestly as they did when they finally saw their master<sup>1</sup> arriving in a modest procession, accompanied by a few monastic disciples. (Field diary, Mällinen, author’s translation)

So that at this point, one encounters and accepts having a guru in one’s life. But Western people don’t really understand this, since there hasn’t been any concept of guru [here] ... What is a guru? Don’t know.<sup>2</sup> (Interview with “Liisa”, Utriainen)

Utriainen met the interlocutor in an online interview that dealt with learning from religion and spirituality. After no more than six minutes had passed and some general background issues had been dealt with, the interviewer wanted to know why the interlocutor had chosen to study medicine. She answered: “Actually, it came

- 1 Although “master” linguistically refers to a male, it is commonly also used of female spiritual leaders in our research context.
- 2 All translations from Finnish to English are by Terhi Utriainen unless stated otherwise.

from Amma. Amma, my spiritual guru, that is, it came from her.”

It was this response, highlighting the importance of the spiritual teacher not only to the private but also to the professional life of the interlocutor, that set the authors of this article<sup>3</sup> to track the ethos of learning expressed in the Amma movement and how this ethos is reflected in the account of one of its devotees, to whom we have given the pseudonym Liisa. We became especially interested in the nature of the relationship between the religious teacher (*guru*) and her disciple (*shishya*), and in what ways this long-term intensive relationship was lived both offline and, since our case includes Covid-19 time, online.

Religious and spiritual teachers and disciples have been studied before (see e.g. Broo 2003; Berliner and Sarró 2007; Healy 2016; Ketola 2002). We wish to note two recent studies in the context of Neo-Hinduism<sup>4</sup> that in important ways illuminate the contemporary phenomena. Antoinette DeNapoli (2023) provides a detailed ethnographic account of two female gurus in South Asia, including their interactive social-media platforms, arguing that their charisma and authority are based on their emphasis of affective personal relations with their disciples, social justice and gender equality. These female gurus

are considered divine teachers, leaders and mothers in women’s bodies. DeNapoli calls them “influencers” (“experts by those who follow them”; p. 14), who create and offer new ways of practising Hinduism and new kinds of authority positions for women in the patriarchal South Asian context. In his micro-sociological research, Matteo Di Placido (2022, 23) concentrates on the role of *satsang* (congregational meetings) and prayer as self-transformative rituals and disciplines in the formation of the guru–disciple relationship in a Neo-Hindu movement. Both DeNapoli’s and Di Placido’s studies, albeit different in their theoretical framings and outcomes, exemplify the micro-level focus on the close and complex interaction between spiritual teachers and disciples.

Our exploration is also greatly indebted to previous research on the Amma movement and in important ways relies on it. In particular, the studies conducted by Johanna Ahonen (2015) on Finnish devotees, Amanda Lucia (2013, 2014, 2018) on American devotees, and Maya Warrior (2005) on Indian devotees, have been of great significance for our understanding of many important dynamics in the movement.

Regarding our understanding of learning, we draw on some key concepts in social and adult learning, especially those in the theories of experiential learning (Kolb 2014), communities of practice, apprenticeship, and situational learning (Lave and Wenger 1991; Wenger 2009), and narrative learning (Rossiter and Clark 2007; Hallqvist 2014). All these theories highlight learning, from slightly different perspectives, as something that happens between people in significant relationships, practices and processes, as well as in emotionally important situations. We also make use of the distinction between formal,

3 Mällinen has done fieldwork in the ashram and is preparing her Ph.D. thesis on the identities of Mother Amma’s Finnish long-time followers. Utriainen has conducted interviews with Finns who have acquired academic education and who also have long-term investment in learning from spirituality in the research project “Learning from New Religion and Spirituality”. The interview with “Liisa” is one of these interviews.

4 On the development and core ideas of Neo-Hinduism, see e.g. Huffer 2011, 382–84, 388; Komulainen 2023, 264–66.

non-formal and informal learning (Rogers 2014) when exploring the different learning trajectories of our interviewee. In the case of Liisa, formal learning means learning in the structured academic curriculum of medical school, whereas non-formal and informal learning include her various alternative and spiritual learning ways, contexts and relations.

The article is based on the following materials: 1. printed and online documents produced in the Amma movement, 2. live and documented broadcasts by Amma to her global community of followers, and 3. the field diary made by Mällinen between 2020 and 2023 documenting life in the *ashram*, online meetings and *satsangs* held in Finland, as well as 4. one long qualitative interview with a Finnish follower (Liisa) conducted by Utriainen in 2023. All these materials are analysed through the lens of learning and the interactive guru–disciple relationship.

### The story of the guru and her followers

In 1953, a girl named Sudhamani Idaman- nel was born into a poor, low-caste Hindu family in the South Indian state of Kerala. When only nine years old, she was forced to quit school due to domestic responsibilities. Despite the girl’s lack of formal education, she subsequently became the teacher of millions of disciples of different religious backgrounds. Nowadays, Mata Amritanandamayi Devi (Mother of Immortal Bliss), better known as Mother Amma, is one of the most popular and well-known of the contemporary gurus worldwide. Most of her students understand Amma to be self-enlightened and revere her as their guru and an incarnation of a goddess. Thus, as shown in her hagiographies, she is regarded as possessing salvific knowledge and being the ultimate teacher due to omniscience and omni-

potence (Charpentier 2010, 99, 121–25, 155; Lucia 2013, 523–30).

Amma’s spiritual empire started to expand from the beginning of the 1980s after her *ashram* (monastery) was formally established. She became world-renowned from the beginning of the 1990s after starting regular world tours. Currently her many philanthropic projects are under the umbrella organization Embracing the World (ETW), whose branded slogan is “love and serve”. It concisely summarizes the universal, inclusive message that Amma wants to communicate. During her career as a guru, Amma has gained vast media attention and acknowledgments for her humanitarian efforts and teachings, which are concretized in her trademark *darshan*<sup>5</sup> gesture of hugging. She appears as someone who by her very example teaches even those who do not explicitly become her students. As a spiritual teacher, Amma has a diverse following; no religious conversions or radical lifestyle changes are expected from students (Lucia 2013, 523–24; Raj 2004, 205–10). This personal freedom is highly valued amongst her disciples, for whom the most important aspect of discipleship is an intimate one-on-one bond with their master; this was revealed in recent research on the Amma movement in Denmark, Finland, India, Mauritius and the United States (Ahonen 2015; Lucia 2014; Warri- er 2005; Qvortrup Fibiger 2017).

It is noteworthy that many of Amma’s Indian devotees are well educated, with their occupations varying from lawyers, health-care specialists, scientists and engineers to government officials, teachers, journalists and corporate managers, among others. Our interlocutor, Liisa, is thus not

5 Arguably the most important element of Hindu worship, *darshan* literally means “seeing” (Eck 1998, 1–3).



Amma on tour amidst her followers.

an exception but rather a representative member of this group, and Mällinen has made the same observation when visiting the *ashram*. These devotees endorse Amma's view that rationality provides only a limited means of understanding and must be complemented by the realm of experience (Warrier 2005, 7–11, 109).

Learning in some ways always takes place in an intersubjective world (Lave and Wenger 1991; see also Utriainen *et al.* in press), and in the ethos and rhetoric of the Amma movement the most profound learning is understood and expected to happen through the guru–disciple relationship. The apprenticeship between a guru and a devotee is so essential that the dyadic relationship itself can be seen as the core or central node in the community of practice in this particular context. The centrality of

this relationship shows also the importance of “community lore”, a concept that we borrow from Olivia Cejvan's (2023, 322–34; see also Cejvan in this special issue) fresh research on learning in an esoteric initiatory community in which individuals learn and practise to a large extent on their own: “Participants relate to each other through the stories, teachings, and scripts” (p. 334). The content of the community lore (regularly told in collective offline and online meetings) in the Amma movement very much emphasizes each follower's personal relationship with the guru.

### Amma's “Hinduness”

Situating the Amma movement on the map of Hinduism<sup>6</sup> is not unequivocal. It distinctly belongs to the devotionalist *bhakti* tradition, where individuals seek spiritual salvation by means of intense devotion to particular gods under the guidance of spiritual preceptor. However also the paths of *karma* (action) and *jnana* (knowledge) are seen as legitimate means to attain salvation. The Amma movement cannot unambiguously be ascribed to any one Hindu devotionalist tradition – Shaiva, Vaishnava or Shakta – since devotees are encouraged to worship God in the form they can best relate to (Warrier 2005, 4–5). Amma's devotees also vary in their perceptions of exactly what or who Amma is in relation to God/

6 On Hinduism more broadly, see e.g. Fuller 1992; Flood 1996. C. J. Fuller (1992, 5–6) remarks that popular Hinduism can be distinguished from textual, philosophical religion and themes central in the scriptures are not necessarily central to ordinary people's religiosity. Gavin Flood (1996, 239) notes that although Advaita Vedanta is probably the most widely known Indian philosophy (at least in the West), it cannot be taken to be only representative of Vedantic thought.

Goddess (see e.g. Lucia 2014, 21–22, 147; Raj 2004, 212). Irrespective of differing perceptions, however, all devotees regard Amma as their guru, or spiritual teacher.

Like many contemporary transnational Neo-Hindu gurus, Amma frequently uses a universalizing rhetoric of spirituality. As she states, “my religion is love”; teaching that all religions are different pathways to the same goal, she appeals to ever-increasing crowd of Western people who identify themselves as “spiritual but not religious” (SBNRs). What on the surface might look like “Hinduism without religion”, as Amanda Huffer (2011) puts it, is actually rooted in the monistic Advaita Vedanta strain of Hinduism. In Advaita Vedantic universalism worldly alterities are regarded as not real but illusions of the mind. In non-dualistic monism the ultimate sameness and equality of all phenomena can be recognized (pp. 376–81).

Despite the pluralistic rhetoric that downplays apparent differences, Amma’s organization instantiates systematized Hindu orthopraxy in the form of classically Hindu rituals, scriptural references and devotional music. It also supports a commonplace Hindu administrative structure of traditionally initiated monastic disciples in its ashrams (see e.g. Charpentier 2010, 175; Raj 2004, 216; Warriar 2005, 6). Additionally, Amma encourages devotees to practise daily mantra recitation, meditation and yoga (Huffer 2011, 391). On the other hand, Amma emphasizes that each student has their own spiritual path. She states: “The master indicates what form of spiritual practice you should do ... He or she instructs you according to your qualifications” (Amritanandamayi 2002, 158–59; 2006, 40, 69). Thus, following Amma is a path (*marga*) of spiritual growth, through which one is supposed to learn to know God or realize ultimate truth. This is the type of

Eastern spirituality that has increasingly attracted Western (and Finnish) people, as it enables individual ways of practising one’s belief (see e.g. Komulainen 2023, 276; Qvortrup Fibiger 2017, 82, 93–94).

### Guru-*shishya* relationship

M. K. Raina (2002, 168) suggests that the guru tradition might be even older than Indian history, being the most prominent feature of Hinduism still central in Indian religiosity: “the guru has special sanctity and significance since he [*sic!*] is the source of all learning”. The earliest Hindu texts to describe the guru-*shishya* (disciple) relationship are the classical Upanishads,<sup>7</sup> which emphasize dialogue between teacher and student. The so-called *gurukula* system, a model of education by the guru, is known already from Vedic times, though it has undergone many revivals and is now part of many present-day ashrams (Pechilis 2012, 114, 118; on the chronological development of the guru tradition, see Broo 2003, 73–76). The guru-disciple relationship is considered to be a very close and intimate one based on a kind of reciprocal contract (Charpentier 2010, 59–61, 102). Amma reinforces this closeness by using a mother-child metaphor in her discourse (Warriar 2005, 29; see also Qvortrup Fibiger 2017, 90).

Rather than being specifically Hindu, the guru tradition could be seen as a cultural model or a cultural framework (Ketola 2002, 114; see also Babb 2000, 4–6). Furthermore, it must be noted that though the word “guru” is sometimes used (especially outside the South Asian context) in a much more mundane way, even then it usually refers to some kind of expert or leader,

7 Scholars date the classical Upanishads from the seventh century BCE to the beginning of the Common Era (Pechilis 2012, 114).



a person who is skilled in something and gives advice to others (see e.g. Broo 2003, 209; Raina 2002, 176).

Etymologically speaking, gurus are above other types of teachers. The basic signification of the Sanskrit noun *guru* is heavy; the term refers to a person who possesses much knowledge. Another etymological explanation is that the word *guru* is derived from two roots: *gu*, meaning darkness or ignorance, and *ru*, meaning light or complete annihilation (Charpentier 2010, 15, 59–60). This explains the Upanishadic invocation to God regularly recited by Amma’s devotees:

*Om asato ma satgamaya  
tamaso ma jyotirgamaya  
mrityor ma amritam gamaya*

O Supreme Being, lead us from  
untruth to truth  
from darkness to light  
and from death to immortality  
(Amritanandamayi 2006, 8)

It is apparent that the conception of guru is more complex than just a teacher or preceptor (Raina 2002, 179). As gurus are believed to manifest and embody divinity, they also should be worshipped as or at least on an equal level with God (Charpentier 2010, 61, 221; Ketola 2002, 93). Amma is thus understood and approached as both God and mother, and often referred to as the Divine Mother.

The guru’s role is not limited to the oral instructions they give in their physical form, as the guru remains in various forms with the disciple until the end of their lives-long spiritual journey (Raina 2002, 177). Mällinen has heard Amma’s devotees witness being with their master even in earlier incarnations. Ideally the guru and disciple develop a mutually dependent, loving relationship where the guru assumes a

semi-parental role: “The relationship is thereby mutually constituted and reciprocal, even as it demands the complete voluntary submission of the disciple to the guru’s will” (Lucia 2018, 980). It is traditionally taught that people cannot gain salvation except through “the Master of Truth” (Raina 2002, 171, see also Charpentier 2010, 16), and Amma teaches accordingly: “in order to reach the ultimate goal, you need a spiritual master” (Amritanandamayi 2002, 157). The disciple’s role is one of total, unquestionable surrender to one’s guru (Raina 2002, 183).

Karen Pechilis (2012) makes a relevant point that in Sanskrit there is no distinct term for a female guru. There are not even classical examples of women participating in the Vedic *gurukula* system, in which spiritual students lived with their master. Historically, however, there have been female spiritual teachers at least from the Upanishadic times. Pechilis argues that it is precisely because of women’s exclusion from the more traditional *gurukula* system that they have transgressively enhanced more “pragmatic orientation that relates experience of the world to spiritual knowledge” (p. 114). Thus, female gurus from the past to the present have redefined knowledge and demonstrated personal experience and sustained, pragmatic doing in the world as a path to achieving spiritual evolution (pp. 114–18, 126; see also DeNapoli 2023).

### Achieving intimacy through haptic logics and physicality

Amanda Lucia (2018) uses the term “haptic logics” for the specific structures of guru–disciple physicality. This notion refers to the desire disciples have for concrete proximity to their master.<sup>8</sup> As gurus are thought

8 Lucia (2018, 954) defines this as including “Weber’s idea of charisma with Emile

to embody divinity (Charpentier 2010, 221), physical contact with the guru is believed to be energetically powerful. Not only is the physical contact with the guru sacralized but so are the objects the guru has touched. Believing in transferability of divine energy (*shakti*), devotees often seek to connect with items that their guru has worn or blessed or even partially consumed (Lucia 2018, 953, 965).

The most distinct expression of haptic logics in the Amma movement is her *darshan*, in which Amma embraces devotees individually. Devotees often describe this as a highly emotional and meaningful experience (Ahonen 2015, 113–14; Qvortrup Fibiger 2017, 91). It is not usual for a guru to practise such a level of physical interaction with disciples (Lucia 2014, 53; Warriar 2005, 28). Through this conduct, Amma not only defies traditional caste boundaries and common Indian rules governing gender relations but also transcends the common perception of *darshan* (Raj 2004, 214).

Charpentier (2010, 44–45) states that *darshan* “has no full equivalent in Western religious activity or conduct”. Traditionally, *darshan* refers to religious seeing or the visual perception of the sacred. According to Diana Eck (1998, 1), it is “the single most common and significant element of Hindu worship”, including a kind of touching and even a form of knowing. The sacred is seen as present in the image, be it anthropomorphic, theriomorphic<sup>9</sup> or without any dis-

Durkheim’s idea of the apotheosis of the sacred in an individual, as well as his notion of the extraordinary contagiousness of the sacred”. Lucia also remarks that it is precisely haptic logics that enable the malpractice and scandals so ubiquitous among modern gurus.

9 This adjective signifies (especially a deity) having an animal form; for example, in the

cernible form. When the worshipper sees the deity (for example, in the form of a guru) and is seen by the deity, the shared exchange through their eyes is held to carry blessings of the divine (Eck 1998, 1–9, 32; see also Babb 2000, 214–15).

As it is not always possible to maintain physically close guru–disciple relationships, intimacy can be achieved through various alternative means, such as technology (Copeman and Ikegame 2012, 23). According to Jyri Komulainen (2023, 275), corporeality does not require the guru’s physical presence, as it can be reproduced by various means. Some devotees believe that Amma’s energy can be felt wherever her photographs are displayed, though most also explain that she is never truly absent from anywhere. Comprising a unique form of iconography are handmade Amma dolls, whose clothes are made of materials Amma has worn and who are approached as her. The sanctity surrounding diverse imagery derives coherently from the traditional Hindu belief that the deity inheres in their image, which functions as “*darshan in absentia*”. Furthermore, many followers recount that they interact with Amma through dreams and meditative states and even through magical events, signs and symbols, which are interpreted as the guru’s divine interventions and lessons (Copeman and Ikegame 2012, 26; Lucia 2014, 6, 60–68).

While the majority of Amma’s disciples live around the world, it is important for most of them to visit Amritapuri *ashram* regularly (Qvortrup Fibiger 2018, 87, 89). The *ashram* is described as a special place where Amma’s energy overflows. One of Mällinen’s interlocutors said that during

Hindu context monkey-headed Hanuman and elephant-headed Ganesha are theriomorphic deities.

her *ashram* stays she feels “the learning process intensifying”. This is in accordance with the belief that “the very presence of a real master will fill you with bliss and weaken your *vasanas* (innate tendencies)” (Amritanandamayi 2002, 22). Though a monastic community in essence, the *ashram* has a great variety of optional activities and everyone can make their own daily schedule according to their individual preferences. However, when Amma is physically around, her *darshan* programmes bring most of the *ashramites* together once a day. Darshan procedure enables the closest – even if very brief – interaction devotees can have with their guru. Despite the briefness of the personal *darshan*, Amma appears to create a highly personalized experience for each devotee – embracing, kissing, whispering loving words (usually in the devotee’s native language) – while simultaneously giving both personal and organizational advice to the people around.

### Amma’s teachings and ethos of learning

In the discourse of the Amma movement, the ethos of learning is notably strong, and all kinds of learning – formal, informal and non-formal – are taught as being valued. As a humanitarian, Amma has advanced formal education by establishing various educational institutions, including a competitive university (Raj 2004, 205; Lucia 2013, 529), and she publicly stresses the importance of girls’ education in particular. However, Amma also states “what we learn at a university is less than 10% of what we learn from the universe” and emphasizes that “real learning is through experience alone” (Amritanandamayi 2020). Such views and overall ethos resemble the concept of experiential learning, which highlights the role of both the individual and collective experience and practice, and the processual, ever-present nature of learning (e.g. Kolb 2014).

Amma speaks a lot about education, even of a formal type, which probably resonates with her often highly educated disciples. She emphasizes that “proper education is the wellspring of social justice and a noble culture” (Amritanandamayi 2002, 128). Recently, Amma has also suggested that spiritual values should be included as part of the curriculum in educational institutions because “sustenance of the creation depends on compassion and selflessness” (Amritanandamayi 2023). It is axiomatic that Amma’s discourses about education are often more or less connected to spirituality. As spirituality is something that “teaches us how to manage our life”, it is of utmost importance and should be taught even to small children (Amritanandamayi 2020, 2023).

According to Amma, the ultimate goal of the lives-long learning process is to realize the non-dual truth and accomplish a state where there no longer exists any sense of “I”, only God (Amritanandamayi 2006, 5, 26). While the learning ideology resembles the core ideas of Advaita Vedanta, Amma does not settle for such a philosophical level of teaching but entwines scriptural references with contemporary global issues. She advocates world peace, social justice and equality, and in turn critiques obsessive materialism, excessive consumerism and egotism. The hardships of everyday life and relationships are also often dealt with, and this is done in simple and identifiable language (Warrier 2005, 27, 47–50).

As Amma teaches that the guru creates learning circumstances that fit according to each disciple’s individual tendencies (Amritanandamayi 2002, 22, 26, 30), she thus suggests that learning is situated in the apprenticeship (see Lave and Wenger 1991) and tailored by the teacher to suit every individual student. Furthermore, the strong emphasis Amma puts on *seva*



(selfless service) implies a very practical kind of learning. Regarded as an indispensable component of spiritual practice, *seva* means both the traditional notion of service to the guru and the more modern notion of service to the whole of humanity (Lucia 2013, 526). Hence, *seva* does not signify exactly the same for all, since “each person needs a path best suited to his or her mental disposition. This is why there are so many paths in *Sanatana Dharma*, the Eternal Religion” (Amritanandamayi 2002, 46). It becomes apparent that part of the learning in the guru–disciple relationship is informal, involuntary and subconscious. In the following quotation these aspects of learning show in Amma’s subtle way of describing the relationship between teacher and student:

The master leads the disciple through situations that are necessary to remove the ego. The disciple learns to chisel away the ego. Because of the disciple’s close proximity to the master and the counsel he receives from the master, the disciple develops patience without even being aware of it. The master puts the disciple in situations in which his patience is tested and his anger may arise ... Thus the master uses different situations to eliminate the weaknesses of the disciple and to make him strong. (Amritanandamayi 2002, 26)

### Covid-19 as a learning curve

Basically everything can be interpreted as a divine lesson. While spiritual traditions have responded in many different ways to the Covid-19 pandemic (see e.g. Hammer and Swartz 2021; Kowalczyk et al. 2020), Amma has repeatedly spoken about the virus being a lesson for humanity: “God has knocked us on the head in the form of this virus.” She has stated that the pan-

demic is nature’s warning and reminded about the interconnectedness of humanity and nature: “What is happening in the external environment ... is but a reflection of the harsh climate in our minds” (Amritanandamayi 2020; for the variety of Hindu responses to Covid-19, see Frøystad 2021). Already in the beginning of the pandemic Amma gave various video speeches, teaching and encouraging her global disciples, and daily live broadcasts began in March 2021. These daily streamings from the Amritapuri *ashram* during the pandemic became for many a meaningful way to maintain the guru–disciple bond.

In February 2023, when giving her inauguration speech as the Chair of the Civil 20 Engagement Group (C20) for India’s G20 Presidency, Amma again stressed environmental issues:

we have forgotten the great truth that we are a part of this vast universe. Lately, nature has been giving us a succession of “shock treatments” to remind of this truth. Even so, we continue to behave as if we have Alzheimer’s – incapable of remembering our lessons. Humanity should strive to reach the peak of knowledge. Whatever research is required, it should be conducted. Amma feels that we should also be ready to investigate the power of spiritual thought ... Today our situation is such that, while we have everything, we really have nothing. (Amritanandamayi 2023)

The explanation for the global pandemic and other environmental catastrophes thus lies in humankind’s twisted intellect and supreme attitude: “If the information sits only in the head, it just becomes a burden for ourselves and the others. The information in the head should enter the heart

as knowledge”. When criticizing nature’s exploitation and the prospect of unlimited growth, Amma reminds that not all growth is good, as “cancer cells have limitless growth”. Instead of seeing the world as a business, we should see it as a family. Amma thus notes that attitudinal change, changing our internal climate, is needed in order to change our surroundings; she has long talked about how “thoughts are like a contagious virus” (Amritanandamayi 2006, 73; 2020; 2023).

In addition to talking about Covid-19 as connected to environmental issues, Amma has spoken explicitly about the problems facing education after Covid-19. She has stressed that youngsters’ minds have become weak and many are facing mental health issues. Also, teacher–student bonds have diminished. Amma’s suggestion is that youngsters’ mental health should be strengthened and all nations should increase their budgets dedicated to that. Additionally, spiritual values should be taught to children, because “if we receive values at a young age, we will be able to control lower impulses, negative thoughts and emotions. At present, no one can control their emotions” (Amritanandamayi 2023).

Having traced the ethos of learning as it is manifest in Mother Amma’s own teachings, the second part of the article examines this ethos and the importance of the guru–disciple relationship through the interview account given by a Finnish long-term disciple of Amma.

### **A disciple’s lifetime learning with the guru**

In Finland the Amma movement is probably the most pervasive of Neo-Hindu movements. Since Amma’s first visit to Finland in 1998 her followership has steadily increased and the most long-term of the Finnish disciples have been devoted to their master for three decades. Like else-

where in the world, the Finnish Amma community has porous borders. Not every devotee seeks to come together with others, and many prefer to proceed on their spiritual paths individually. However, after a decades-long quest an official Mata Amritanandamayi Centre has newly been established in the small Finnish town of Leppävirta, which is likely to be an important nexus for the Finnish devotee community. Amma’s visits to Finland have from the start attracted thousands of people, and during the busiest Christmas season there are usually some hundreds of Finns staying in the Amritapuri *ashram* – proportionally more than any other nationality (Ahonen 2015, 106–08). Liisa is one of them.

Our interview with Liisa comprises one case study in the research project “Learning from New Religion and Spirituality”, in which Utriainen conducted nine interviews with highly educated Finns in their forties and fifties who have an interest and investment in various forms of spirituality and who were asked to reflect on the relationship of their formal education, family background and social circles, career path, work life and spirituality. In this small sample of interviewees, Liisa was the only one who identified herself as a disciple of Amma.

In the two-hour online interview, Liisa talks about her school years, search for identity, studies at the university, career path and spiritual thoughts and practices. She comes from a family with more interest in alternative spirituality than in the mainstream religion in Finland, Evangelical Lutheranism.

Six minutes into the interview, Amma is mentioned for the first time. This is when the interviewer asked what had led to Liisa choosing to study medicine in the first place, and she answered: “Actually, it came from Amma. Amma, my spiritual guru, that is, it came from her.” Later, Liisa would

sum up her life with these words: “I have been so deeply grateful to Amma for this, that it was she who gave me my profession ... and that Amma has carried me throughout my career.” This positions Amma as being more than a (religious) teacher in any narrow sense, instead being a supervisor and guru who has guided Liisa’s whole life. Her importance is also shown quantitatively, since Amma’s name is mentioned sixty-seven times in the course of the interview.

### Learning paths and work as *seva*

When describing her youth and school years, Liisa emphasizes her overall dissatisfaction with her social world and her search for meaning and identity. She tells of having been a bit of a “freak” and “ruminant” youngster who did not fit into the “teen-age world of values” and who also criticized the ways that teaching and knowledge were delivered at school: “we didn’t receive a proper education”. She had been missing something “deeper” and “meaningful”, and her criticism also targeted religious education classes. The change came in her mid-twenties when she met Amma and received her first *darshan*, that is, the guru’s hug. She recounts having had a strong feeling that Amma came to Finland to look for her and others like her. Liisa has followed her guru ever since.

Meeting with Amma led to Liisa finding the previously lacking deeper meaning of education and learning. Liisa recounts that Amma showed her, in a deeply emotional inner dialogue, the professional path that she should take. She emphasizes never having waived in her decision to become a medical specialist and feels that her work is her task in this life appointed to her by her guru. Though she does not use the word *seva* in the interview, her description of her work is easily connected to that

Hindu notion. Liisa seems to understand *seva* both as serving the guru and serving humankind.

Liisa also describes having taken some studies in the field of complementary and alternative medicine and reflects that they have been complementary to her formal learning, opening up her frame of mind in different ways from her education in the medical school:

the understanding that a human being is first and foremost a spirit and soul [short pause] and that this body is the manifestation of it. [pause] And all phenomena that we can see in the body primarily exist also on another level. It is this kind of understanding that accompanies me in work-life all the time.

It is these more alternative and complementary studies that have also taught Liisa to understand wider societal issues, such as structural violence. When she talks about women and girls as often being the victims of this violence, we can hear an echo both of Finnish cultural ideology and of Amma’s emphasis on social justice and equality.

Liisa firmly states that when working with medical patients, she uses only the tools and methods of school medicine, but her spirituality provides a larger frame for understanding often complex and difficult human situations. Her own personal spirituality also motivates her to ask about her patients’ religiosity or spirituality, since she finds it to be such an important aspect of life that it should be accounted for. She suspects that this is not usually done in health-care encounters, and that especially other religions than Lutheranism are very little known or understood. For her, helping patients as best she can is what her *karma* has brought her to do, and she says that

deep down the patients are also led by their individual karmic trajectories to come with their illness and distress to their appointment with her. Through this spiritual frame, the meetings between the medical specialist and the patients can be seen as karmic relations.

Despite the deep personal significance of Amma and Hinduism, Liisa states that she cannot openly talk about her spirituality at work.<sup>10</sup> She relates this departmentalization of her secular and spiritual sides of life to the critical and even fearful general attitude towards new forms of spiritualities and complementary and alternative medicine in Finland. Strictly in the hospital context she also understands this from the perspective of patient security.

#### Living as close as possible to one's guru - even during Covid-19

If on the one hand Liisa's work in health-care is important to her, even to the point that she describes it as her true task in life, on the other hand she emphasizes that it is spiritual life that always comes first. It has been crucial for her to be able to organize her life in such a way that she can spend regular periods at the *ashram* with other devotees, where she can be as close as possible to her guru: "it has been a way of life that has made it possible for me to often go to the *ashram*. That's why I have always been on temporary contracts."

After paying visits to the *ashram* for over two decades, Liisa can describe the ways in which the circumstances there have changed, from first having been very modest and monastery-like to later

adopting today's Western standards of comfort and a great variety of spiritual affordances, including yoga courses and art workshops. Liisa still describes the *ashram* as a meaningful community of practice that forms around Amma as its centre – this importance of Amma in the community of individual practitioners can be seen also in the ethnographic vignette in the beginning of the article. Meditation, even when she is not at the *ashram*, is one of the most important ways in which the guru is present.

Liisa takes up the theme of Covid-19 and its implications both for her work and spiritual life. During the pandemic, international disciples could not travel to India, and the virtual lectures that Amma started to deliver after the first year of restrictions became an extremely valuable connection. These daily broadcasts utilize narrative ways of teaching and learning through examples from lived life events of the teacher, and Amma often flavours her teachings by telling memorable stories (see Rossiter and Clark 2007; Hallqvist 2014; on the importance of the life story of the spiritual teacher, see also Annunen and Utriainen 2023). Liisa started to organize her working days so that she could schedule her private meditations as well as take part in Amma's teaching sessions with other disciples in the global community that became virtual in the time of the pandemic. She had heard that this virtual community might include as many as 5,000 people. As we can see, on the one hand Liisa faithfully follows the regular teachings, yet on the other she customizes the provided spiritual programme to fit her own daily schedule and life situation. This kind of personal adjustment is not uncommon in the movement, which does not demand a similar, set ritual for everyone and instead encourages personal learning and ways of practice:

10 It may be especially difficult for academics to be open about their religiosity and spirituality in secular institutions based on a scientific worldview (see e.g. Tiaynen-Qadir et al. 2021).

I can participate every day. ... There are so many hours of daily practice that I don't participate in the whole broadcast. ... they take turns to talk about one verse of the *Bhagavad Gita* for ten minutes. After that there is meditation. I haven't really listened to them all [the broadcasts] but I can make it from work for the meditation. And the meditation is a visualization practice, the theme of which is world peace. ... It lasts about half an hour. After that Amma sings ... and then there is still a speech. ... someone gives a half-hour to forty-five-minute speech on their own path that took them to Amma, and about their own thinking. I haven't really concentrated on those speeches lately. I was in Amritapuri in the autumn and took that practice very seriously, and after that it has been enough for me to do these three practices: the morning recitation, daily meditation and evening practice.

### The guru-disciple relationship as lives-long learning

Liisa describes Amma's omnipresence in her life. She tells of fruits and sweets appearing, as if by magic, at important crossroads of life, and she interprets these as important gifts that remind her of the presence of the guru (as is often mentioned in the community lore of the movement). Her narrative of transformation and conversion begins with her first meeting with Amma, which provoked an immediate emotional turmoil that changed the whole course of her life:

When we reached home, I wanted to be alone, and I sat on my bed and cried. I was like, what had got into me? [short pause] Yes. At that point I went through such a process of how... what should I do in my life?

This meeting is explained as the start of an inner dialogue. Liisa relates that her career path also became clear to her immediately "just like this" (snaps her fingers). She tells of never having been motivated before in quite the same way in terms of anything that she did or studied, thus attributing her investment in long-term academic studies to her spiritual experience.

When Liisa describes her personal relationship with Amma, she does not hesitate to call her guru and God.<sup>11</sup> She describes how Amma gave her a personal mantra as well as a disciple name. According to Liisa, the guru concept is difficult for Westerners to understand, since their culture does not have anything that is quite similar. She explains to the interviewer how the commitment between the guru and the disciple is deep, reciprocal and lasting, since the guru promises to stay with the disciple as teacher and mentor even beyond one lifetime:

At that phase the guru has on their part made a commitment to escort this person all the way to the arms of God. Even if that takes various lives, if that is needed. So it is ... that is the contract. For me, at that point in life, I understood ... that I really wanted to commit myself to this. That even if I was already committed through the mantra, and Amma was committed to me, at that point I once and for all wanted to make it concrete and clear.

Receiving a new name sealed the guru-disciple relationship and made it into an

11 Here her account directly echoes the online and offline pedagogical stories told in the community of practice, as observed by Mäl-linen.



emotional commitment that would transcend one lifetime. As seen in both the extracts above and below, Liisa describes what scholars of religion (Walter and Waterhouse 2001) have called “lives-long learning”.

I have received my every breath as a gift from God. And my purpose here is to serve. And [short pause] to learn to understand that God lives in me, strong, and acts through me. It is difficult to understand this. But I believe in this reality, that it is like this. [short pause] And that all the decisions that I make either take me towards God or away from God. [pause] And that it is through this reincarnation that I have a rich history, the harvest of which I now reap in this life. And I have an extremely strong protector, Amma [short pause] who sees me and who has answered my questions and prayers. [short pause] Amma answers also simply by talking if one asks. [short pause] But my faith is so strong, I have always had such a strong experience of the existence and presence of God inside me that I don't often need to ask aloud, and the answers come in the form of silent wisdom.

The interview with Liisa opens a perspective onto the ways in which the ethos of learning of the spiritual Amma movement can be lived and recounted by one Finnish long-term disciple with a high level of formal education and work in a socially valued profession. Her account especially demonstrates the overarching significance and intimacy and felt reciprocity of the relationship between the guru and their disciple as given from the perspective of the disciple. She also emphasizes that learning with her guru offered her something

important that she had lacked in other learning environments.

### Concluding remarks

Our case study has provided perspectives from two sides on the topic of the teacher–disciple relationship in the context of the Neo-Hindu Amma movement. The language of learning is very prominent in Amma's public discourse. Her formulations of the relationship are based on the long Hindu guru tradition, in which the role of the teacher is conceived as all-encompassing. The guru is not only someone who teaches spiritual knowledge and skills (as distinct from mundane teachers) but one who ideally affects and encompasses all the different spheres of life – and even several lives – as can be seen in the materials published by the movement analysed in the first part of the article. In her own teachings, Amma highlights the importance of formal learning and professional focus in order to support work in the service of social and ecological justice, and it is partly this message that speaks to her often highly educated followers, many of whom may want to use their professional and specialist skills in order to make a difference in the world. In the interview with Liisa, we can see one example of how this emphasis can be lived and interpreted: she recounts receiving her professional calling from her guru and realizes it in her work as a healthcare specialist. We thus get to see not only what the role of the teacher should entail (the promise of enduring and even lives-long commitment and, in Liisa's words, “protection”) but also what the role of the student looks like.

The student, as Liisa explains, is led by the desire to be close to the teacher, a desire that in previous research has been made understandable through the notion of “haptic logics”. Liisa has received an initiation (through accepting her personal

mantra and spiritual name) and sets out on a life that prioritizes the relationship to the guru over all other things. Liisa recounts a life in which formal secular and informal spiritual learning trajectories intertwine into a mutually complementing whole, which the Hindu tradition and the Amma movement know as the notion of *seva*. The Covid-19 pandemic proved that even if physical closeness to the guru is extremely highly valued, guru–disciple intimacy can also be created and nurtured by daily meditations as well as broadcasts and digital contacts in a virtual community of practice around the guru as its key node and centre.

Our findings complement the scholarship on religion and adult learning – both within and outside of the context of Neo-Hinduism. As both DeNapoli (2023) and Di Placido (2022) show in contemporary Neo-Hindu contexts, key dynamics relating to motivation and experience happen in the tight reciprocal interaction between religious practitioners and their leaders and teachers, and this was evident in our case study as well. We also know from previous research that mundane work and secular professions can be interpreted as a divine calling in contemporary lives: Roman Williams’s (2013) research explores Asian university students in the USA with an Evangelical calling who use their professional position for proselytizing purposes. Compared to this, our study suggests that religious or spiritual learning may come to frame life in secular society and its affordances of formal learning also in more subtle and private ways. Our findings come close to recent research on the practices of Buddhist meditation by Finnish healthcare professionals (Husgafvel and Utriainen 2023), which shows how individuals may indeed combine secular and spiritual learning paths in their lives. This combining

can mean complementing formal secular learning, and the knowledge and skills thus acquired, through clearly more spiritual learning trajectories. Alternatively, as Liisa’s interview exemplifies, it is possible to complement spiritual worldview and learning with secular learning. Our research also echoes Michal Pagis’s (2019) research, which shows how *vipassana* meditators in the USA and Israel feel that they need regular periods of retreats with other meditators in order to motivate and revive their own individual practice in the context of secular life. Liisa recounts how the individual learning experience needs temporary support and invigoration in the community of practice of the ashram, thus emphasizing the importance of face-to-face contacts with the guru and the community.

The anthropologists Anna Fedele and Kim Knibbe (2020) emphasize the need to study spiritual selves in secular societies, and our case study contributes to this endeavour by tracking and exploring the intertwining learning trajectories and deep-rooted spiritual and relational aspects that they may sometimes entail. Secular societies such as Finland offer multiple alternatives for highly valued formal learning – simultaneously, however, largely overlooking or undervaluing, if not viewing with suspicion, the ways in which people may complement them with much more non-formal and informal religious or spiritual learning. Furthermore, our case sheds light on the importance of the teacher–disciple relationship, as well as the fact that this kind of special intense and intimate relationship may become a central motivational and experiential affordance for some educated Western individuals. We suggest that future research investigate the range of connections between formal secular education backgrounds and the interest in and engagement with the various forms

of non-formal spiritual learning available in contemporary society. ■

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