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10-hour wait, 3-second hug Motherly guru draws throngs of seekers to East Bay temple

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Thousands of followers of India's "hugging saint" have come during the past week to a barn-like temple tucked away in the East Bay hills, looking for a little love.

"People wait 10 hours for a three-second hug," said Bill Gasko, 65, a physicist from Massachusetts who also goes by "Suchindra."

They are here to see Amma, a 51-year-old woman from a poor fishing village in southern India who presides over a network of schools, hospitals, soup kitchens, orphanages and shrines covered with photos of her own smiling face.

Many Amma devotees once were devotees of Indian gurus with checkered pasts -- including the late Bhagwan Shree Rajneesh and the late Swami Muktananda Paramahansa.

Gasko used to follow Amrit Desai, a yoga teacher disgraced in a sex scandal at the Kripalu Center for Yoga and Health in Lenox, Mass.

"Things got out of balance with all that male energy," Gasko said. "It's time for women teachers."

Another longtime Amma follower at the East Bay temple, which is hidden away in the woods between Castro Valley and San Ramon, Cathi Schmidt, 56, was a devotee of Muktananda from 1973 until he "left his body" in 1982. Muktananda opened dozens of meditation centers in North America during the 1970s and attracted some 20,000 devotees.

Muktananda was known as "the guru's guru" and "swami of the stars," but his reputation was tainted posthumously by a 1983 expose charging that he had seduced young girls,



stashed funds in a Swiss bank account and privately exhibited a sometimes violent, vindictive temperament.

"There were lots of rumors going around toward the end, but we had no firsthand experience of that," Schmidt said.

Her years with Muktananda, she said, were an effort to recreate mystical states she had experienced by taking psychedelic drugs.

"I thought, 'Hey, if my mind can feel unity with all of creation under a mind-altering drug, my mind should be able to do that without taking anything, ' " she said.

While Muktananda had "a very powerful electric energy," Schmidt said he was surrounded by people who were "not always kind and gentle."

Amma, on the other hand, "comes from a state of infinite compassion."

"The difference between Muktananda and Amma is the difference between a father and a mother," said Schmidt. "Your father is the authority figure who walks off and goes to his den. Mother is always right there."

Willa Bepler, 27, was raised amid followers of Rajneesh, an irreverent Indian philosopher who attracted thousands of Westerners with a blend of Eastern mysticism and Western hedonism.

Rajneesh was known as the "free-sex guru" and famous for his fleet of Rolls-Royces. His communal city in central Oregon collapsed in 1985 after revelations of bizarre poisoning plots and widespread wiretapping.

Rajneesh pleaded guilty to charges of immigration fraud, was deported to India and died there 1990.

Bepler said she found the Rajneesh scene "creepy."

"There were lots of open sexual experiences and lots of chaos," she said. "Boundaries were crossed."

Bepler, who met Amma two years ago in India, said she couldn't compare her current spiritual teacher with the guru she grew up with.

"To me, you can't compare Amma to anyone else on the planet," she said. "This community is very safe. It's about service."

Amma does not dwell on the scandals involving East-meets-West gurus who came before her.

"There is a natural tendency for people to experiment," the guru said. "They go to one spiritual master and then go to another, but ultimately they have to come to a point where

the real search begins. That point has come."

"People are looking for love," she said. "There is so much dryness in society today. Only feminine energy alone can bring that love and compassion and create a balance between action and love."

Amma sat at the front of her temple in white robes, hugging devotees as she answered questions through an interpreter in Malayalam, her native tongue.

Many of the disciples left in tears, carrying away a few flower petals or Hershey chocolate kisses she had pressed into their hands.

They exited through the Amma gift shop, where they could buy Amma books, Amma photos, Amma T-shirts and other Amma paraphernalia.

Many followers see Amma as an avatar, a deity come to Earth.

Her own literature calls her "a phenomenon that happens once in 1,000 years."

Gasko, who was raised a Catholic, said Amma was "like Christ becoming a reality."

Amma was a bit more modest.

"I don't have any claims," she said, giggling. "I have offered myself to society. Once you attain the highest state of consciousness, you become an offering to the world. In the absence of ego, you can't claim anything.

"Everyone is an avatar," she said. "Everyone is self-realized. Everyone is enlightened. My god is people. My god is creation."

In her native India, Amma has shocked the religious establishment by conducting Hindu rites normally reserved for male priests. Because she was born into one of India's lower castes, even her hugging violates social custom, but she hugs anyone who comes her way -- somewhere between 25 and 30 million people so far.

Yet Amma can be cautious. Asked whether she thinks gays should be allowed to marry, the Mother of Immortal Bliss got diplomatic.

"There is a lot of physical freedom in this country, and I am for love and freedom," she replied. "However, I can neither say the government is wrong nor the gays are right."

Amma will be in the Bay Area until Sunday, when she heads to Los Angeles for the next stop on her summer tour, which ends July 28 in Toronto.

More information is available at www.amma.org.

Gotta get a guru

Many devotees of Amma once followed other Indian gurus but turned to her after their spiritual leaders were disgraced.

Amrit Desai was a leader at the Kripalu Center for Yoga and Health in Lenox in western Massachusetts who was disgraced in a sex scandal. The organization says his practice of yoga combines the strengths of Hatha and Raja styles into one system.

Swami Muktananda

(1908- 1982), was a yogi who opened meditation centers in North America during the 1970s and attracted about 20,000 devotees. After his death, his reputation was tainted by allegations he had seduced young girls and hidden funds.

Bhagwan Shree Rajneesh

(1931-1990), founder of the Rajneesh Foundation International, is one of the most controversial of modern gurus. Facing serious criminal charges, he was deported in 1981 from the dilapidated ranch his group had bought in Oregon.

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