



Spiritual leader Mata Amritanandamayi gives hugs to hundreds Saturday at the Westin Hotel in Lombard including Proveen and Vidya Parameswaran of Wisconsin.

Paul Michna | Staff Photographer

## Spiritual leader spreads message one hug at a time

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Thousands flocked to Lombard Saturday to feel the power of a single embrace.

Humanitarian and spiritual leader Mata Amritanandamayi of India, also known as Amma, spent hours giving out her signature hugs to those who knelt before her.

Some went to her Saturday with specific concerns they hoped she could ease for them. Others said they simply wanted to feel the sense of peace that comes from her touch.

Shirley Bremer of Wilmette has visited Amritanandamayi for the past five years, wanting to feel the "openness and her pure love that just radiates from her" and she hopes that feeling will extend to her children as well.

Amritanandamayi, 54, is considered by some to be among the world's most influential religious leaders, working for numerous charities worldwide to build hospitals and orphanages, provide disaster relief, feed the poor and most recently, fight the epidemic of farmer suicides in India.

On an even more personal level, she is estimated to have given more than 27 million hugs to those who visit her.

She currently is in the midst of a 10-city U.S. tour, including this weekend's programs at the Westin Lombard Yorktown Center that are expected to draw thousands.

On Saturday, she said through a translator that she is trying to instill self confidence and faith in those she meets and also calls upon them to be role models for others.

"They are not like a candle that needs to be lighted but they are self luminous like the sun," she said. "They have infinite inner capacity, the strength and self confidence to face the greatest challenges of life."

Sheila Clark of Urbana felt Amritanandamayi's embrace for the first time Saturday and said it was "amazing." She has issues both with her health and from her childhood that she is working through and hoped the spiritual leader could help.

"I'm still vibrating from it. It's this amazing energy you feel go through your entire body," Clark said, her eyes glistening.

Jay Chennat of Ann Arbor, Mich. has been visiting Amritanandamayi for the past 10 years and said her hugs give him a "great love and serenity and a feeling you are being cared for." He calls her a "spiritual inspiration."

"She is a very direct person with a lot of compassion and sincerity and she does what she preaches," Chennat said.

Amritanandamayi will be in Lombard again today from 10 a.m. until 2 p.m. and 7:30 p.m. to 2 a.m. at the Westin, 70 Yorktown Center. The program is free and open to the public.