

'Hugging Saint' embraces New York City

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Amma, whose given name is Mata Amritanandamayi, has been hugging people for nearly 30 years.

Amma's back - and not a moment too soon.

New Yorkers lined up by the hundreds Tuesday for the warm embrace of the spiritual leader they lovingly call the "Hugging Saint."

And with the heat stifling, gas prices rising and the economy tanking, who doesn't need a hug?

"Her hug is not an ordinary hug," said [Ila Campbell](#), 51, of South Manor, [Long Island](#).

"My feeling is 'Amma, please don't let me go.'"

The 54-year-old Amma, born [Mata Amritanandamayi](#), looked radiant in a white sari, a silver star-shaped ring in her nose. She is here for two more days.



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Campbell, who plans on following Amma to her next stop in [Boston](#), sat with hundreds of devotees in the concert hall of the [Manhattan Center](#) in Midtown.

Many have waited in years past to feel the warmth of the spiritual Hindu woman, who says she supports all religions.

Heather Spillane, 38, an acupuncturist from Midtown, said Amma helps clear her mind.

"In life you're always pushed to the edge and you get irritable, but I'm just not when I'm around her," said [Spillane](#).

"Everyone comes to her because they're in some kind of pain - cancer, love, family, kids. They want something from her. Sometimes they get it, sometimes they don't," explained Spillane, who hopes Amma will let her "reach a peace."

Amma, whose name means mother in her native Malayalam language, grew up in [India](#) amid intense poverty.

At age 8 or 9, she began spontaneously hugging people as a way of showing her compassion for them, her followers said.

She has spent the past 30 years traveling the world, giving an estimated 27 million hugs.

She is expected to hug 20,000 New Yorkers this week.

[Evelyn Mikicic](#), 53, a homemaker from [Astoria, Queens](#), said she plans to come back for more hugs.

"The strength of the love--it's so genuine," said Mikicic, who was visibly choked up. "I'll be back in the next few days."

Clive and Faith Poneroy-Ward brought their children, Claire, 2 1/2, and Bretten, 1, from [Hackettstown, New Jersey](#).

While Amma does not claim to be a faith healer, the Poneroy-Wards credit her with a personal miracle.

"We were married for several years and then we saw her, she hugged me, and (we) conceived," Faith Poneroy-Ward says.

"The purest form of love can change people and that's what I'm trying to do," said Amma, through a translator to the Daily News. "The power of love is in everyone. It has infinite potential in us just as a seed contains a tree."

Amma will be at the Manhattan Center, 311 W. 34th Street, Wednesday and Thursday. First hugs start at 10 a.m. and go to 3 p.m. An evening shift starts at 7:30 p.m. and can go all night.

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