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Tour of Embraces Makes a Stop in Manhattan

By APRIL DEMBOSKY
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The line started outside on 34th Street, entered the lobby and snaked up the stairs to the balcony. It veered left at the aisle, then downstairs again to the rear orchestra section.



Ozler Muhammad/The New York Times
Mata Amritanandamayi, 54, known to her followers as Amma, or Mother, has hugged 27 million people so far. A native of India, Amma is now on a three-day hugathon in New York. [More Photos »](#)

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AP/Wide World
A Lifetime Embracer in Midtown

“Stay to the right-hand side,” one of the line controllers said, kindly but firmly.

Those at the head of the line received a numbered token, a place holder for another line. Some waited up to seven hours for their turn. When that moment finally came, they all got what they came for: a hug.

More than 8,000 people were hugged on Tuesday and Wednesday, and one person was doing all the hugging: Mata Amritanandamayi, 54, known to her followers as Amma, or Mother.

She began hugging strangers in her teens, first on the streets of her village in Kerala, India, then later in living rooms in Madison, Wis., and Dallas. Word spread about her message of unconditional love and, as many of her followers believe, the healing power of her embrace.

Now she draws crowds of thousands to ashrams and conference rooms around the globe, including the Manhattan Center, the performance venue where she is holding a three-day hugathon that is to end Thursday. Her followers estimate that she has hugged 27 million people in her lifetime.

“The feeling is like sunshine or moonlight shining on me,” said Zhen Joy Lin, 45, of Manhattan, who has been hugged at several of Amma’s earlier visits to New York. “I feel the best part of humankind.”

The scale of Amma’s hugging operation is such that it has become an assembly line of love, whose efficiency depends on hundreds of sari-clad volunteers.

Before receiving a hug from Amma, the devotees were helped by at least 10 volunteers. Three collected the numbered tokens and ushered groups of 30 at a time to a double row of conference chairs leading to Amma. Four more guided the devotees forward from seat to seat as the line advanced; another wiped their faces with a tissue, removing sweat and urban grit before it could stain Amma’s white sari.

At the front of the line, a volunteer helped one woman from the chair to her knees. She held her ponytail and pushed her forward into Amma's lap. No seconds were wasted, no energy squandered on Amma reaching forward.

Amma held the woman, first lightly with one arm, then tightly with two. Volunteers to Amma's left prepared a parting gift, a Hershey's kiss and a couple of flower petals, that they slipped into Amma's hand.

"Everybody wants to do that job," said Kelly Flynn, 36, a slow-blinking, slow-talking devotee who has accompanied Amma on her last four world tours. "If staff people fight over anything, it's over that."

As Amma pulled away, she handed the woman her gift, and another volunteer steadied her to her feet and guided her away. The encounter lasted about 30 seconds.

Ms. Flynn met Amma while she was a student at the Berkeley Psychic Institute in California.

"I was developing my abilities, but not becoming open-hearted," Ms. Flynn said. "That's why I switched to Amma." Ms. Flynn left the institute and sold her half of a plant nursery business to join Amma's group of about 150 full-time volunteers on tour. They are paid nothing and cover their own transportation, food, and housing expenses.

Ms. Flynn rode a bus Monday night from Chicago to New York, then slept just two hours on the floor of a nearby gymnasium before reporting for duty to help cook vats of lentil soup and prepare bins of garden salad to be sold to Amma's devotees.

The hugs are free, but during the long wait the visitors can shop at the traveling store for items like scented eye pillows, chanting CDs and acupuncture treatments. The proceeds help to finance Amma's hospitals, orphanages, housing projects and disaster relief efforts, most of which are in India, the volunteers said.

Hugging up to 50,000 people in a 20-hour session, a frequent occurrence in India, would seem to leave no time for her to direct those projects. So sometimes she does it all at once; often, when she is in India, she will speak with her hospital and orphanage directors while the devotees cycle through her arms.

At the Manhattan Center, she was interviewed while engaged in a triple hug, cradling a man in her left arm, his wife and son in her right.

"For me there is no difference between materialism and spirituality; they are one and the same," she said. "For example, if your left hand is in pain, the right hand will spontaneously console the left."

She squeezed the family again, then released them into the crowd. She looked up as she lifted her arm around the next person. "If you ask a river, 'How do you flow?' it can only say, 'I just flow.' So likewise, I just flow."