

Solace in 'divine' embrace

Devotees believe woman heals, soothes with touch

BY ALEXIS CHIU
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SAN RAMON -- She is known as Ammachi, or Divine Mother. A small, smiling woman in an unadorned white sari, she draws masses with the simplest of promises: a hug.

And hug she does.

On Saturday morning, hundreds of people from the Bay Area and around the country lined up at a San Ramon spiritual center. A 10-second embrace from the 46-year-old South Indian native brought both the curious and the faithful to tears.

"Life is like a cloudy, stormy, cold day," said a weeping Tom Neuman, 52, who came from Watervliet, Mich., to see Ammachi, who is visiting the Bay Area on a 10-city tour. "When you're in her presence, it's beautiful, sunny and warm."

Devotees compare Ammachi to such figures as Mother Teresa and the Dalai Lama, and some call her a living saint. Her touch, they say, is an expression of unconditional love that is therapeutic for the healthy and healing for the infirm.

To the strains of Indian devotional songs called *bhajans*, Ammachi took men, women and children in her arms, rocking them gently as she whispered blessings in their ears and rubbed their backs. Each supplicant was then showered with rose petals and treated by Ammachi to a Hershey's kiss.

"Once you hug her, you always want it, every single moment of your

life," said S. Rajan, a New York resident who embraced Ammachi with his parents, who live in San Jose. "As human beings, we have to go through certain things. She just makes the path easier."

According to biographical literature, Ammachi was born in the state of Kerala to a fisherman of modest means. Her given name is Mata Amritanandamayi, which means "mother of immortal bliss."

Friends and followers say she became an outcast because her skin had a strange bluish tint. For that reason, or in spite of it, Ammachi was attuned to the suffering of others from a young age. She once stole her mother's gold bangle and gave it to a poorer family, said Swami Amrit, one of Ammachi's first followers.

"Sorrow is the best teacher," Ammachi said Saturday, in her native Malayalam, as she embraced a weeping woman.

She met with resistance, particularly from her family, because her behavior was unconventional -- especially for a woman. But Ammachi's reputation as a healer and spiritual guide spread by word of mouth, arriving in the United States in the past several years.

Though she was raised Hindu, Ammachi embraces people of all religions. Her dedication is legendary among her devotees, who say she sleeps only two hours a night.

"When you have real love for others, you don't feel a burden," she said through a translator. "There is no effort involved."

Ammachi charges no fee for her hugs. Through private donations and sales of everything from food and flowers to bags and silk, she has founded or inspired the foundation of hospitals, orphanages and schools in India and soup kitchens in the United States, along with two spiritual centers -- in New Mexico and San Ramon.

When asked why she devotes her life to hugs and (chocolate) kisses, she replied: "It's like the flowing nature of the river. Do you ask the river, 'How do you flow?' There is no answer for it."

Ammachi, who counts Silicon Valley workers among her recent visitors, said spirituality and technology are not enemies. But she warned that in the race for success in science "people forget about their inner life."

The Bay Area is the second stop on Ammachi's swing through the United States.

Organizers said Ammachi has hugged millions -- as many as 20,000 a

day in India -- and will embrace hundreds of thousands more in such cities as Chicago, Dallas and Boston. Her European tour, with stops from Helsinki, Finland, to Turin, Italy, begins in October.

Ammachi will remain at the Mata Amritanandamayi Center through Thursday, dispensing hugs to people like Krishnamurthy Ramalingam, a 30-year-old software engineer who lives and works in Santa Clara.

``It's as if you're reaching a supreme consciousness," he said of Ammachi's hug. ``It's a totally divine feeling."

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