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20 Million Hugs
Indian Holy Woman on 'Hugging
Tour' of United States ... And
World

Mata Amritanandamayi, known affectionately as "Amma" and the "Hugging Saint," cradles producer Buck Wolf. (Ed Mazza/ABCNEWS.com)

By [Buck Wolf](#)

NEW YORK, July 12 — Here I am, in the deep embrace of a stranger. She folds me into her arms, coos into my ear, and gently kisses my temple. Who is this woman?

STORY HIGHLIGHTS

[Swamis](#)

BUCK WOLF



"My son, my son, my son, my son," she says, rocking me back and forth. "Love you, love you, love you."

This tiny, cherubic Indian woman holds and kisses me — just as she has more than thousands of other New Yorkers at Columbia University. They will wait for hours, kneeling in line, for a one-minute caress.

Her name is Mata Amritanandamayi and she is affectionately called "Amma," or "Mother." Her followers compare her to Mother Teresa and say she has embraced more than 20 million people all over the globe.

Amma is now on a 10-city U.S. "hugging tour," which includes stops in Los Angeles, Chicago, Washington and Boston. She is traveling with an entourage of 50 supporters, volunteers who say she is changing the world with simple tenderness.

Swamis Direct Traffic

On my knees, I wait. Chanting, drumming and the twang of a sitar fill the room. At noon, several hundred people, many who had waited since 8 a.m., kneel in concentric circles around her.

WEB LINKS

[Amma's Web Site](#)

Swamis, clad in orange suits, direct the traffic.

Nobody can deny there is something magic about her — it's her energy, an unbelievable ability to work 18 hours a day, often seven days a week. She works in two sessions — morning and evening — always smiles, and breaks only to meditate, eat and sleep.



Amma embraces acerbic ABCNEWS.com overnight producer Ed Mazza at Columbia University. (Buck Wolf/ABCNEWS.com)

This is an easy day for her. In India, she can reach out to 15,000 people. Many unwashed. Many in rags. When it is time to go home to eat her rice and curry supper, her white sari is often blackened from soot.

She has known poverty herself, and her rise to prominence is inexplicable. She came from the Indian state of Kerala. Born to fisher folk in 1953, she left school at a young age to care for her family. In her early 20s, she began offering her blessing to others. The lines around her simply grew, and now she has millions of

followers.

In 1993, Amma served as president of the Centenary Parliament of World Religions in Chicago. In 1995, she spoke at the United Nations' 50th anniversary commemoration.

Cranky New Yorkers Take Hug Break

At Columbia University, many Hindu people kneel on the lines. So, too, do Christians, Jews, and, presumably, people of other faiths. Amma rarely preaches. She says she embraces all faiths. It seems her doctrine is fairly universal — she hugs people as a mother hugs a child.

Her followers refer to this hug as a *darshan* — Sanskrit for an audience or session in the presence of a saint. Her U.S. spokesman Rob Sidon says, "Other holy people in India don't allow themselves to be touched like this. Amma breaks with tradition."

I look around me. Here are fellow New Yorkers — rich, educated, and hardened to flimflams. Why do these people wait for hours? Again I ask, where does she get her energy?

I am next in line, kneeling before Amma, watching her work. She sits on a wooden chair adorned with flowers and caresses a

35-ish man, whispering into his ear. Her eyes are closed. I can't imagine that they have never before met.

Some call it supernatural. There are stories that she has cured lepers. But that is in India. In a city of cranky Americans, it's simply a miracle that hundreds of people will wait in line for something that, theoretically, should be waiting for them when they get home — a simple hug.

"I'm not religious," a 28-year-old banker tells me. "I saw her four years ago in Houston. Now, I just go to her every chance I get. She may be just an old woman who hugs. But there is some beauty in this. Maybe we have to appreciate our need to hug and be hugged — to care for each other."

A Hug and Chocolate Kiss

The area around Amma is crowded, yet serene. Devotees follow an honor system under which those who had never participated in a darshan are allowed to move to the front of the line.

Now my time with Amma approaches. She smiles, pulls me to her chest. I rock back and forth with her. She squeezes my elbows, speaks in her native tongue, and her assistant hands me an apple, a rose petal and a Hershey's chocolate kiss.

I check my watch — 71 seconds. In hugging time, an eternity.

Now we talk. Amma doesn't break for interviews. We speak through her swami-interpreter as she hugs and kisses the next in line.

I ask her where she gets her energy. "It takes no energy to love," she says. "It is easy."

Her spokesman Sidon compares her energy to that of a parent caring for a newborn. "A new mother or father will stay up all night," he says. "The love for the child is more powerful than the fatigue."

This seems too nice. I wonder if I am getting suckered. I look around.

Amma accepts donations. Her people sell books, videos, T-shirts and souvenirs. You can buy an Amma Beanie Baby-type doll for \$180, and she will bless it. That's a little pricey — even in the Big Apple.

But Sidon assures me that the blessings are always free. He couldn't say how much money they raise. But he gave me literature that indicates the proceeds go to several charities begun in Amma's name. They include four hospitals, 33 schools, 12 temples, 25,000 houses for the poor, an orphanage, pensions for 50,000 destitute women, a home for senior citizens, a battered women's shelter and various technical

education projects.

I ask Amma if she will train others. Shouldn't there be an inspirational hugger in every city? She will not open a school, she says.

"What I do was spontaneous. I saw a need. It felt right, and I did it," she says. "You cannot teach love in a book or teach it. You can only show it."

Twenty million hugs. That's a lot. And yet Amma is still an oddity in most corners of the world, a humble proponent of the most primal form of communication. It's so simple, you could laugh at it.

Then again, who couldn't use a nice big hug?

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