

Jul. 28, 2004. 06:40 AM

Thousands turn out for 'hugging saint'

Amma embraces 8 1/2-hour marathon
Makes final local appearance tonight

LESLIE SCRIVENER
FAITH AND ETHICS REPORTER

Come to Amma! We have ? some 5,800 of us, barefoot and on our knees.

Our glasses and purses have been put aside, and not only are we facing the hugging saint of south India, we are being enveloped by her. We cannot breathe. We are pressed into her pillowy bosom. She is murmuring "daughter, daughter, daughter."

We are ready to get up, but Amma holds us still. We have been hugged enough. A big, warm kiss, and we are released. Amma is laughing, her teeth startlingly white. Our knees are trembly, our heads light.

Amma hugs all night. On Monday, 5,800 people were each given a number to line up for a hug in a Mississauga hotel starting at about 10:15 p.m. Though it's not known how many stayed till the end, Amma definitely did. She continued until every last person who could stay awake had been enfolded in her arms. The last hug was at 6:45 a.m. Some wept. Some laughed. Some clung to her as if she was love incarnate.

Her full name is Mata Amritanandamayi, which means mother of immortal bliss, but she is known as Amma, or mother. She is 50, and the story of her childhood in an impoverished Indian seaside village in Kerala is the stuff of tragedy. She was abused by her family, who thought her to be crazy and treated her as a servant.

Her visit to Toronto ends tomorrow, when thousands more will likely come to meditate, chant and be wrapped in her arms.

Her reputation has spread mostly by word of mouth. In the last 30 years she has drawn more and more attention for the particular kind of devotion ? *bhakti* it's called in Hindi ? that she inspires in her followers.

But she also teaches compassion for the poor and has helped build 25,000 low-cost homes, a well-equipped, 800-bed hospital, and a large ashram in south India.

"She is a self-realized person, a saint with a message of love," says Raman Nair, a retired engineer who is the contact person for the Toronto centre of Amma's international organization. Since they first met in 1989, Amma and the charitable work that she urges her followers to perform have become the focus of Nair's life.

"She just hugs and kisses, something no saint has done ? they usually keep their distance. She says, don't even say 'I love you,' say 'I am love.'"

Nair says Amma, who has been staying with him on this visit, wants people to do some practical good in their everyday lives. "People ask about releasing *kundalini* energy and tantric practices. Amma says not to worry about that. Do what you can for others."



KAZUYOSHI EHARA/TORONTO STAR
About 5,800 people waited in line Monday night at a Mississauga hotel to get what 7-month-old Sai Jasmine Seepersad is receiving here from Amma. Known as the "hugging saint," Amma has been described as "a self-realized person."

'Skeptics come ... and they go away completely transformed' Bipin Nair, Toronto

Speaking through a translator ? one of several black-bearded, orange-robed swamis seated with her on a stage hung with gold, red and green bunting, and a string of brilliant white lights ? Amma told the overflow crowd that we should love everyone equally.

Love is the foundation of a happy life.

Like many in the hall, Swapna Natarajan, a former social worker and a Burlington mother of two, had heard of Amma from her family in India and was anxious to meet her. She added that her mother had died last year and she was suffering from the loss.

"I was told she carries lots of divine energy and brings peace of mind," she said. "I almost didn't come, but something pulled me. I do feel happier, and everyone's smiling and that's a good thing."

Her father, Krishna Swamy, is a retired commodore in the Indian navy who's here on a visit. He said he was interested in coming because Amma's reputation isn't based on miracles but on her message of love.

Volunteers were anxious that reporters meet a range of Amma's followers, and introduced a microbiologist and stockbroker.

"The bliss of being in her lap was a moment of transformation," said John Weiss, the stockbroker, from Tucson. Like Amma and many of her followers, he was wearing white.

Toronto microbiologist Bipin Nair, is drawn to her life of service to humanity. He acknowledges that many doubt the powers of so-called holy people.

"Skeptics come, saying this must be another farce, and they go away completely transformed. As Amma says, `One has to be receptive to God's grace. You have to open the windows of your heart.'"

The story of her life, as recorded by Swami Amritaswarupananda, begins with the revelation that Amma was born the colour blue, the same colour as the Hindu deity Krishna. As she grew, her family would find her lost in trances, and they thought she was crazy. While other children in her family were educated, she did not go beyond Grade 4.

In her 20s, affected by visions of the divine, she spent days in meditation, and lived on leaves and water for months. Local people came to recognize her as an enlightened being, and devotion to her followed.

She now receives international accolades. In 2002, she was awarded the Gandhi-King Award for Non-Violence. This month she delivered the keynote address at the Parliament of the World Religions in Barcelona.

Amma's final public program in Toronto takes place tomorrow at 6:30 p.m. at the Delta Meadowvale Resort and Conference Centre, 6750 Mississauga Rd. Admission is free. More information is available on the Web at <http://www.amma.org>.

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