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When Hugs Become a Religious Experience

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I'm a hugger. Giant noble trees, people, fuzzy animals – bring'em on, I'll hug 'em. Not always though. I've got to like them first. I need to sense their innate goodness. But isn't that really most living things? Someone once said that a hug is like a handshake from the heart. And for me, that's absolutely true.

The Sanskrit meaning of the word *darshan* is "auspicious viewing." The concept of darshan is steeped within the Hindu tradition of worship and practice as the "beholding" or "sighting" of a deity, sacred

object or revered person. This experience is commonly held to encompass a reciprocal component resulting in the viewer receiving a blessing. That's why legions of devotees will withstand long and arduous trials simply in order to receive darshan from their gurus or revered persons of choice. Without going into the myriad details of all the varieties of darshans that exist, a contemporary "holy woman," who is commonly known as Amma or Ammachi, offers her darshans in the form of hugs. Literal hugs. And hundreds of thousands of people line up to receive her darshans annually, just as I have over the years when Ammachi annually tours the U.S. and comes to New York -- like she did over this last July 4 weekend.

Please, understand, it's much easier to write about her and my experience attending her events in a cynical, if not Hitchens-snide way, than not. And honestly, I have to sometimes resist the near habit of disdain-filled rolling eyes when I first enter a giant roomful of Caucasians in white Hindu garb with smiley, beatific-like expressions as they sway or meditate behind the constant, live Indian prayer music, while trying to get as close as possible to Ammachi while she's nonstop busy doling out personalized hugs. And that's no small feat. Actually, over the years that I've attended Ammachi's free darshan events, there have been what at least seems to be an increasing amount of South Asians, as well as all sorts of folks of color in attendance. There are also numerous families who bring their children and sometimes sick or elderly others to receive Amma's darshans.

But this blog isn't exactly an article about Ammachi, where she fits into the guru tradition or her Hindu roots. It also isn't about the powerful, pure love that her devotee claim she emanates or the powers of her hugs, said to be able to heal serious maladies, sometimes even spontaneously. And finally, it isn't about her detractors or what can easily be perceived as cult-like aspects of her whole organization. What it is about, however, is my experience with receiving her (and others') darshans as I battle my own cynicism, critical thought and general arrogance. It's also about the efficacy and value, at least through my lens, of Ammachi and her darshans.

Right off the bat, even though I've had numerous darshan's from Ammachi over many years, I've personally never had any epiphany-filled or mystical experience from them. I've witnessed countless people, mostly women, become sob-filled from their hugs. I've heard others speak in glowing terms of a distinct shift of energy or increased vitality that they experienced. But for me, well, once when I had a bad headache and received darshan, I still had just as bad a headache after the hug. So why do I do it? Before even considering any possible religious, let alone spiritual, benefits, let me describe the sheer athleticism of Ammachi. When you evaluate Ammachi by her sheer physicality, it's near Olympian impressive.

Isness: A short, plump, pleasant looking 58-year-old brown woman in a flowing sari enters a large room, sits down and then for 6-12 hours, with no breaks and rarely food, takes the heads of men, women and children (and even an occasional pet) to her chest, bending forward so that her cheek caresses the person's head and/or face as she speaks some incantation by the side of their face, while she wraps her arms around the person's back and sweeps her hand up and down along their spine. She then raises the person's head, gazes into their eyes, hands them a flower pedal or candy and then that person is guided off of her as another person is guided back onto her chest for a brand new hug. This hug, Ammachi's darshan, last about 10 seconds or so. I clocked about five to eight people getting hugs per minute, and that includes the double hugs for couples and children. That's more than 360 people per hour, for numerous hours, day after day.

I don't know about you, but I get tired after shaking hands with four new people at a party. And after I've auditioned actors for my plays -- to have a nonstop barrage of people emoting in my direction -- my tiredness is ancient deep, Sisyphus weary. And that's what occurs 3,000 times a day for Ammachi. Pent up emotions, aspirations and hopes, pains and loss of living and failure of achieving perfection, chronic longing for completeness with an overriding craving for release and relief -- it is all plunked

down upon her. And she, over and over again, delivers what feels like a custom-made hug. And she does this whole thing with an expression of immense concern and compassion, seemingly without judgement, and with the sense of unconditional acceptance and love. Exactly like our mothers are supposed to be or are or were or weren't or should've been. Amma means mother in Hindi.

Is a darshan any different from a fan at a red carpet receiving a smile from Leo or Angelina? Have sports fans not felt blessed when they get to slap the hand of Kobe on his way to his locker? For sure. But then again, Kobe and company don't trade in touches and glances. This is, at best, their byproduct. At best. For Ammachi and others, this is what they do.

As to the spiritual benefits and why I continue to go: the short answer is that, "real" or "not real," the prima facie evidence that Ammachi exhibits every time I've attended is nothing short of amazing. I enjoy basking in the hyper hope and emotions and collective striving for transcendence and peace that mostly permeates the place.

As I've said, it's often a chore to resist cynicism. When I enter the Amma show, all kinds of my personal issues surface. My mind kicks into overdrive full of snide judgements, pronouncements and write-offs. Then, finally, when that's settled down, I can simply be there -- or at least try. I'm more than aware that religious/spiritual/healing events like this are often peopled with troubled, crippled souls. Just as health food stores are filled with the sickliest sorts of folks you'll ever see. But is it because health food makes one ill or because sick people attempting to cure themselves or body-aware people wanting to maintain or enhance themselves are drawn to them? And this informs my conclusions: We get out of it what we put into it. If I ascribe spiritual significance to my hug, I am more likely to experience it in a spiritual way. Does Ammachi possess any particular power? Does Kobe? Yes and yes. Kobe, a master with a ball and a hoop. Ammachi, a master with people's hearts and souls. And her court-side seats are free.