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Last Updated: Thursday, 6 December 2007, 13:04 GMT

A hug from Amma



Hugging all over the world: Amma in New York, Santiago, Zurich, Rio

By Mario Cacciottolo
BBC News

When it comes to being tactile, the British are notoriously, well, hands-off. So what leads hundreds of people to travel to a giant hall in London all for a hug?

"Yes," replies the bus driver, somewhat wearily, for the third time, "this does go to Alexandra Palace".

Amma, the "Hugging Saint", is in town. And this procession of slightly disoriented passengers are among the crowds making their way to be embraced by her at the north London venue.

For 30 years Indian spiritual leader Mata Amritanandamayi, to give her her real name, has been hugging people, leading some to give her a saintly nickname.

This really is as simple as it sounds.

Amma sits on a slightly elevated seat. Strangers come before her, kneeling, and she embraces each as though they were her own flesh and blood.

“ The time it takes and money it costs to fly over from Australia is worth it for a hug with Amma



”

Suraj Vagjiani

Time spent with Amma is free and she does not promote any particular faith, being for "all religions and none". She is said to have doled out some 26 million hugs, or "darshan", as the experience is known. Each is counted off with a clicker.

She has said that to hug someone is to symbolise giving, and that her embrace should help awaken the spirit of selflessness in people.

But there's more than just a cuddle being dished out here. Her charity, the Mata Amritanandamayi Math, has UN consultative status and claims to have built more than 36,000 homes and several hospitals for India's poor.

Small hours

Now, for the 20th year, she is back in the UK, and the main hall at Alexandra Palace thrives with the smell of incense and the sound of musical chanting.

Rows of neatly stacked chairs are filled with people waiting for Amma's highly efficient army of volunteers to marshal them for their darshan experience.



Katarina Diss said she was left "dazed" by her hug

One such volunteer Julia Lewis, a 36-year-old management consultant, says no-one leaves unhugged.

"Amma will stay until 2am, 3am, 4am or later, until there is no-one left. She does not get up, she'll just sit there the entire time and has about an hour and a half to sleep before she starts again."

Katarina Diss, 52, of Bedfordshire, is one of those at the event who has experienced darshan for the first time.

"It's difficult to put into words," she says. "You are touched by something very profound that ripples through you. It's something that's going to unravel itself over time, I think."

Australian Suraj Vagjiani is testament to the sort of devotion that Amma commands. When he heard she was appearing in London he scraped together £650 for a one-way ticket just to see her - although a trip to India would have used fewer air miles.

12,000-mile hug

"I love to experience time with Amma. The time it takes and money it costs to fly over from Australia is worth it for a hug with Amma."

What is it about a hug that has these people so enraptured?

“ I don't expect anything from anyone - my life is to give, not to take ”

Psychologist Dr Elvidina

Amma

Adamson-Macedo says being hugged can release powerful natural chemicals in the body.

"Beta-endorphins are released when you are relaxed, and are a natural opium. A hug can induce that in a person.

"Opening your arms is the act of a mother, who is ready to comfort her child. But it's not only the action, it's everything that comes with it - the emotions and affection that's translated into a non-verbal action.

"But it has to be right. It would not work if it was just a performance."

It sounds credible, but Amma doesn't have a monopoly on embracing. So what's her magic?

Special vibrations

I'm about to find out. I approach as she holds a constant

stream of people close, murmuring in their ears, laughing and smiling like a playful schoolgirl at those who kneel before her. She hands out sweets, presses apples into palms and swiftly scatters flower petals through the air.

Some seem relaxed. Some are beaming from ear to ear. A few are overcome and simply sob in her arms. Amma takes each one in her stride, remaining a warm and comforting rock to which they literally cling. It is a moving sight, and strangely not uncomfortable.



Your correspondent gets a hug and some comforting words

While continuing to hug, she explains through a translator that "everything in this world has a vibration".

"Every emotion that you can think of has a vibration," she says. "Love is a very special, very uplifting vibration.

"That's what I'm trying to give people. It's like visiting a perfume factory. Consciously or unconsciously you will carry that fragrance around with you."

When asked what she gets out of hugging people, she lets out a short, excited giggle, as though the question had caught her by surprise.

"I don't expect anything from anyone. My life is to give, not to take."

Now it's my turn to experience darshan. I kneel before Amma and shuffle forwards. She flings her arms open with a delighted smile that reminds me of the infrequent occasions that I go back to see my mother.

Heart leap

Amma takes me in her arms and I melt naturally into her embrace. Everything goes black. There is noise out there, but it seems to just become an indecipherable hum. It's just calm and comfortable in my head and heart.

Her robes are beautifully fragrant, and for the rest of the day I keep getting wafts of it, distracting me momentarily from whatever I'm doing.

Amma murmurs into my ear, repeating something that sounds like "Lo, Lo, Lo." Whatever the words, they have a power.

She kisses my forehead and cheek, and finally we part. She lifts up my hands and kisses them, and that for some reason makes my heart leap.

There are beaming smiles all round. I thank her and to my surprise, as I stand, I'm a little wobbly on my feet.

Amma, incidentally, means mother. On the way home, I call mine.

Amma is appearing at Alexandra Palace until Friday, 7 December. Sessions begin at 1000 and 1900 GMT.