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## My Meeting With Amma - The Hugging Saint

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"I am an Interfaith ordained minister," said the woman with curly hair and olive skin, wearing comfortable fatigue jeans. Smiling, she sat down in the queue next to the crowd control barriers behind me and in a skillful much practiced gesture slipped off her high heeled boots to wear what looked like ballet shoes.

"I can marry people of any religion, conduct funerals, naming ceremonies..." I had never met anyone Interfaith before, in fact didn't even realise that the concept of being Interfaith existed. Nor for that matter would I have met the Spanish tour guide ahead of me who took people on adventure tours of Asia & Africa or the intriguing trio of Russian teenagers who seemed to be in high spirits as they chatted non-stop to each other in the queue ahead of me.

There we were, a motley crew of nationalities, from all over the universe--and perhaps some from the other world too, my writers' brain insisted--all lining up from 8.00 am that morning at Alexandra Palace, London to pay our respects to *Amma*--the saint who was taking over the world with hugs. Volunteer after volunteer, radiant and beaming stopped by and asked "First time? It's going to be an experience you will not forget." After yet another kindly soul told me with a grin that I needed to take a *Before the Hug* and *After the Hug* picture my cynicism kicked in.

I had first heard of *Amma*, many years ago but having spent my growing years in India ensured a healthy scepticism for God Men/ Women of any kind. Yet fifteen years after leaving the Motherland, here I was paying *darshan* to an avatar of the Godly kind. The passage of time--it seemed--had done much to heal my cynicism. I was now western enough to quest for spirituality and not be ashamed to admit it, unlike back home where any such declaration would have been met with a level of scorn among the young upwardly mobile circle which I would normally hang out with.

Pushing aside the rising taste of disbelief, I willed myself to go with the flow for the next few hours. I resolve just be in the moment and enjoy the festive environment around me. All around me I saw various Benetton ad-frames-of people queuing up to be hugged. As the time came close I watched carefully as each of those hugged seemed to get up with a befuddled and sometimes beatific look on their face which declaring to the world that their hug was mind-blowing. When my turn came I leaned down on the floor and found myself enfolded in a bosom within which I swear I could feel a large heart overflowing with generosity. My surprised senses registered that her *saree* smelt of rosewater, comfortingly taking me back to the *pujas* my family had performed in India. She whispered a Sanskrit word over and over again in my ear. I can't recall now what it was, but it was hypnotic at that time. And then it was over, I was rushed out of the embrace and bewildered, blinking in the brightness of the non-embrace I walked out, wearing my coat, switched on my blackberry. I went to work and about my normal chores for the rest of the day not sure if THE hug had made any difference.

I still don't know what it was all about. All I can say is that I woke up the next morning feeling like a mill<sup>28,404</sup> people like hopeful, ecstatic and looking forward to the day. It was as if I had been given a big jolt of energy and couldn't stop smiling. days later I still feel good. I wonder if this is what it was all about. Is this why people keep going back annual infusion of strength. Perhaps. I will definitely go back when she visits London again next year and I hope I can also persuade my husband to come with me. After all as mere mortals we can all do with a bit of help with a divine being!

Have you been to see *Amma* in London or anywhere else in the world. What was your experience? I'd love to hear from you.