

Sunday Herald Sun, November 19, 1995

Bliss is in the arms of Mata

By: Bryan Patterson

The Mother of Bliss has bruises on her arms and legs from clasping hundreds of followers to her breasts.

Still she draws them forward, rocking them like children in her arms, murmuring words of love, kissing their hands and dropping rose petals on their heads.

It takes more than three hours for about 300 devotees and admirers of Mata Amritanandamayi to be given the Darshan blessing at Ormond Hall in Prahran.

Follower, who call the visiting 42-year-old Hindu holy woman, Ammachi or Mother say the unconditional embrace is religious experience that opens up the soul. Certainly there is peace in her presence.

An attendant swami, clad in orange, says Mata has hugged more than 10 million people worldwide. He has seen her hug thousands in a 24-hour session. "She will not leave until she has seen and touched them all," he says.

Mata was born in a fishing village in southern India to parents who did not understand her spiritual behavior.

According to legend, she was thrown out on the street to starve. A cow came and gave her milk, a dog brought food packets, and a cat meditated with her.

In a vision she heard the voice of God telling her to awaken mankind. She then became known as Mother.

She is now a major Indian spiritual leader who addressed heads of state gathered in New York for the 50th anniversary celebrations of the United Nations last month.

She is in Australia for a series of seminars and blessing sessions – the last today at Lord Somers Camp, Somers.

The embrace that has become her trademark is, she says through an interpreter, a "transmission of spiritual energy".

When asked if she considers herself divine – as some of her followers claim – she shakes her head but says that she has come to know her own "true nature", and that nature is God. True happiness, she says, is possible by diving deep into yourself to find God.

"You just have to realize that you are dreaming. You have to come out of the dream; to awaken yourself to realize what you and God are".

By: Bryan Patterson

The Sydney Morning Herald, Monday 11 November, 1996

Mother of a saintly hug that's one in 11 million

By Helen Pitt – Religious Affairs Writer

The Hindu spiritualist Ammachi must have hugged more than 11 million people.

She added more than 100,000 to her hug tally this year on her 43rd birthday, when devotees from across the world make a pilgrimage to her fishing village home in southern India.

This weekend, more than 3,000 Sydneysiders joined the queue for one of the trademark bear hugs from the woman known as a saint in India.

Ammachi was at North Sydney Girls' High School as part of a 10-day tour – her sixth - to Australia. Her hugs, known as “darshan”, are a Hindu blessing said to have restorative powers for spiritual healing. “The hug is like any relationship – it is direct physical contact”, one of her followers, Mr James Conquest, a Melbourne barrister, said.

Ammachi, or “Mother” as she is known to her followers, radiates warmth and understanding, and her hugs are a transfer of that warmth according to Mr Conquest.

“Her message for Westerners is she can help us have some degree of calmness of mind to help us be happy and useful people”, he said. The “back to basics” approach preached by Mata Amritanandamayi as she is known in India is said to be the essence of compassion.

She will continue her tour on the Gold Coast today and in Melbourne later in the week.

By Helen Pitt – Religious Affairs Writer

Gold Coast Bulletin, Monday November 23, 1998

Hug guru spreads message of love

By Rebecca Saunders

HUNDREDS of people yesterday lined up for a hug and blessing from Indian spiritual leader Ammachi.

The Divine Mother, as she is know, was at the Tallebudgera Recreation Camp where she has conducted a three-day workshop as part of a 10-day national spiritual tour.

Her message, which she has been delivering for the past 12 years on tours around the world, is to bring love and compassion into the lives of everyone.

In India she is compared to the late Mother Teresa and claims to have cured people of terminal illnesses during the 12 million hugs, kisses and talks she has shared with people.

The elderly, teenagers and parents with children yesterday formed two lines down the hall, listening to songs by Indian performers as they waited for a hug during what she called the darshan.

Loose-fitting which clothing was the uniform of the day out of respect to the guru.

James Taylor, a mathematics teacher from Byron Bay who made the rip to the Coast for the free weekend workshop of medication and speeches, enjoyed the hugging experience.

“It was very nice. You can’t really describe it,” said Mr Taylor.

“It brings some people to tears. I’m more a sympathetic supporter, rather than a follower.

“And there is no hard sell her, no pressure to by anything.”

Mr Taylor said Australians were fortunate there were only a few hundred people present yesterday rather than the 10,000 to 20,000 people who visit her in India.

Ammachi, whose full name is Mata Amritanandamayi Devi, has established orphanages, schools and housing programs for the poor.

Her most recent project is a 800-bed hospital in New Delhi that is free to the poor.

By Rebecca Saunders

WEEKEND November 14, 1998

In good spirits

By Jill Fraser

Hindu guru Ammachi is on her way to Melbourne. Jill Fraser met her – and found it an enlightening experience.

SHE has been declared living saint, voted Hindu of the Year and placed in the company of Mahatma Gandhi and Mother Teresa.

She has also hugged more than 11 million people around the globe, a fact which has made the tiny Indian guru, Mata Amritanandamayi, an international identity.

In the East she is widely recognized for her humanitarian projects. But in the West she is known only as “the Saint with the healing hug”. Her record for physical embraces is between 50,000 and 100,000 people in one sitting.

Whenever she is in residence at her ashram in India, a queue winds its way around the narrow streets and ends up at the feet of the 44-year-old spiritual leader who tirelessly greets every person with a hug. Ammachi, or Holy Mother, as she is affectionately called, rocks, pats and soothes. Then, wiping the tears that flow from her emotional recipients, she dots their foreheads with sandalwood paste, sprinkles petals over their heads, and gives them a lolly.

Her 11th annual visit to Australia later this month is expected to attract an audience of thousands.

So who is the woman who dresses in a simple white sari and has managed to transcend the West’s cynicism?

Her devotees claim she is an “enlightened” soul. The night before Ammachi was born, so the story goes, her mother dreamt that she had given birth to the Hindu god, Krishna. When the baby arrived it was dark blue – the color of Krishna – and when it moved it formed a perfect yoga pose.

At six months the child was chanting the names of the Hindu gods, and by five she was dancing and singing in “god-intoxicated bliss”. But what at five seemed cute, at nine was eccentric. Her embarrassed parents treated her as a slave and locked her outside the house without food or water. It is said that animals fed and cared for her.

Interviewing Ammachi is an experience that has no comparison. It is like being engulfed in a thick, safe, soft, woolly wrap. Her deep brown eyes flashed, her white teeth sparkle and an enormous diamond stud glistens in her left nostril. But her constant hand patting, arm rubbing and crooning are quite disconcerting.

If she is “enlightened” shy has she returned to earth? Through an interpreter she says she has “attained the state of perfection, or realization” and has “to this level to enable people to understand the godly experience and lead them to that goal”.

What about miracles? Ammachi’s intention, the devotee explains, is not to perform tricks but to inspire people. There is only one recorded incident of her showing proof of her powers. “I will do it once, but never again,” she said then apparently turned water into milk and then a sweet pudding, which she fed to more than 1000 people.

BARRISTER James Conquest, notional co-ordinator of Ammachi's Australian tour, admits his own initial skepticism.

“I believe you should always doubt. You're mad if you don't. That's my whole premise of going into anything,” he says. “I haven't been able to avoid the cynicism of my profession as a barrister, and for the first two or three years after meeting Mother, I examined and analysed everything.”

He's now adopted his guru's philosophies, but he complete renunciation of worldly goods – after his mentor's example – it still beyond his reach.

Attendance at Ammachi's public program is by donation only, and proceeds go to charity. Free clinics, dispensaries, housing projects, orphanages, feeding programs for the poor, schools, colleges and vocational institutes are just a few of the charitable works she has instigated.

Under the banner Amrita Institute of Medical Science and Research Centre (AIMS) – a registered public charitable trust – the group has begun its biggest project to date, an 800-bed multi-specialty hospital at Cochin in southern India. Stage One was recently opened by the Indian Prime Minister.

In reply to a question about the poor image that gurus have, Ammachi says. “If someone tries to force their rules or ideas on you, you should know he is a false teacher. A true master makes no claims about anything. He doesn't care whether you surrender to him or not”.

“Highly evolved souls have always existed and they always will”, she adds. “They are like the open space or the boundless sky”.

By Jill Fraser

Tuesday, April 11, 2000

The Sydney Morning Herald

By Ali Gripper

Ammaachi, one of India's most revered spiritual teaches, should know how to give a decent hug by now. She is, after all, one of the world's top huggers and claims to have embraced more than 12 million people in her crusade for love and compassion.

At Sydney Airport yesterday, Ammaachi – known simply as The Mother – adjusted her white sari, walked straight into the arrival lounge and hugged a few more.

Like the Queen's wave, her signature blessing is known to a kind of shorthand.

Surrounded by about 100 devotees, all dressed in white, she would offer a child-like gaze, some light touches on the arms and back and then a feathery embrace. No bear hugs, no fervent clasping to the bosom.

She hugs everybody, she said through an interpreter – office workers, airline staff, even journalists and politicians.

“There is no difference. I hug everybody,” she said.

“It is like asking a child if they want to be hugged. Do you hug a child? Yes always.”

Although television reporters have been known to flinch as she moved to hug them – presumably because of the danger to their neatly pressed suits – many others have been moved to tears.

Some have even sold their homes and given up their jobs to devote themselves to their work helping the poor and destitute.

One of these at the airport yesterday was Mr Ron Gottsegen, 62 who gave up his job as the head of a US electronics company to run one of her hospitals in Kerala, India.

“You become very peaceful around her. Her presence awakens you to the truth in yourself. Around her, my heart always feels full,” he said.

Another American joined in: “There's a lot of people posing as gurus out there, but I'm telling you, she's the real deal.”

In India, crowds of up to 100,000 sometimes gather to see her. She says her personal best hugging record is 15,000 people in one day. And she claims that she never gets sore arms: “Where there is love, there is no pain.”

Ammaachi will be leading group meditation and giving individual blessing at the Petersham Town Hall next Monday from 7 pm until late, and on Tuesday from 9.45 am to 6.30 pm. She was last here in 1998.

By Ali Gripper