

# Smoothing path of hugging saint

U.S.-born Hindu priest looked at law, chose higher truth

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by Angela Jeffs

Brahmachari Shantamrita Chaitanya turns heads as he paces the pavements of the city -- any city, anywhere. Tall, dark and American, he wears orange-colored robes that should, according to the orthodox rules of Hinduism, be of a different hue. "Initiated 'brahmachari' (celibate priests) wear yellow. After receiving initiation as full renunciates, they are called swamis and wear ocher or red robes, Amma is choosing we wear this color, which is somewhere in-between."

Amma, from "ammachi," meaning "holy mother," is Mata Amritanandamayi, acknowledged throughout India as a living saint. Born in 1953 into a poor fishing family in Kerala, on the southeast coast of the tip of the continent, she was radiating spiritual joy and singing devotional songs from the earliest age, and teaching universal love by the time she was a teenager.

"Not only does she embrace all religions, by she will embrace and console anyone in need," said Br. Shantamrita, sitting on the grass in Yoyogi Park last week in bright spring sunshine. "She's tiny, under 5 feet (150 cm), and yet she's been known to hug 20,000 people in a single session. Beyond normal ego, she eats frugally yet exudes boundless energy and compassion. In her homeland - and increasingly abroad - she's known as the hugging saint."

Shantamrita, meaning "peaceful" and "eternal," is affectionately known by Amma's Japanese followers as Shantaji. (Chaitanya is "consciousness.") He arrived in Japan April 14 from her ashram in Kerala, where he normally resides with some 1,000 followers, who include 200 other brahmacharis. His job: to prepare for her ninth visit to Japan from May 28 to 31, during which time she will be speaking, singing, mediating and hugging daily from 9:30 a.m. to 1:30 p.m., then 6:30 to midnight, at Yomiuri Land Kaikan on the Keio Line.

She first came to Japan in 1990, then missed 1991 but has since visited every year. In recent years, Shantaji says, it seems as if, the world is waking to her existence and the extent of her work in southern India, running three orphanages, a Western-style hospital offering free care, a housing project for 25,000 women and numerous schools, ayurvedic medical clinics, ashrams and temples. The media coverage of her U.S. world tour was amazing - the New York Times, Chicago Tribune, San Francisco Chronicle and Boston Globe all reported in full.

"As Amma's representative visiting Japan I'll be speaking Sunday 23rd in Sendagaya Kumin Kalkan in Harajuku from 6:30 to 9:30," he said. "This is a special program for the English-speaking community in Tokyo. I'll be showing an introductory video on Amma, then conducting 'bhajans' (devotional singing) and mediation. Entry is free. We rely on donations, nothing more."

This extraordinarily humble yet charmingly direct young man was born Brandon Paul Smith, near Stanford University in California. By his own admission he was a strange little boy with few friends, always seeking something "but not so aware of what it was." It's easy now to look back with hindsight, he says, but for years he stumbled along, getting so many things wrong.

A friend in elementary school kindled his interest in Japan. In 1984, at the age of 15, he home-stayed with a family in Hyogo Prefecture. "I was fascinated by Japanese culture and keen to learn the language." Growing up in affluent international Silicon Valley, with little exposure to the deeper principles of life, he got the idea to use "Nihon-go" to make a lot of money.

But even after graduating from high school somehow he felt shortchanged. "There were no lessons on morality, and though raised with Christian values, I never felt any electrifying current in my heart." Only after going to university for Asian studies and philosophy, reading scriptures from all around the world, was there an awakening. "I began to feel this deep yearning to seek out what is truly important."

There are two types of people, and neither are right or wrong, he believes: those concerned with the outside world (astronomers, nuclear physicists) and insiders who rely more on their intuition (poets and spiritual seekers.) Even while studying Eastern philosophy, he identified more with outsiders, because his father was a lawyer and he grew up in the Western tradition of believing justice was the highest truth. "I wanted to push myself, to feel I was living. I wanted a challenge, not a 9 to 5 job. The answer, I thought -- don't laugh -- was the military."

In fact he had his whole life mapped out: military, law, politics. Now he can see how desperately he was groping in the dark, and how such moves would have been the most dreadful mistake. "I respect those who follow that path, but realize I would never have fitted in. I liked the way both the military and legal profession pushed for self-perfection, but in time I began to seek a path that involved more subtlety -- a quest for inner self-perfection." Accepted for officer candidate training in 1990, with one week to decide, his brother rang with an invitation to meet an Indian guru.

My brother had dropped out of Stanford after a skiing accident left him paralyzed," Shantaji explained. "This seemed to alter his focus from the physical to spiritual. Curious that he seemed to be more content rather than feeling angry and deprived, I went along and was overwhelmed by Amma's warmth and compassion." She seemed beyond labels like age, sex, status, creed, race expressing her love for the self, which she sees in everything, by hugging. "She'll sit 10 hours, just listening, caressing, wiping away tears, without eating or even going to the toilet. Unlike us, her energy is not limited by individual ego, which obstructs the high inner self like the clouds obstruct the sun. Some people feel something instantly when they meet a saint, like dry leaves igniting when they come near a flame. My condition could be likened more to charcoal-- it took me some time to grasp Amma's greatness." What did initially impress was her selflessness and the dedication of her monastic disciples. Thinking them the true embodiment of the soldier ideal to which he had earlier aspired, he asked her what he should do. "I told her I was 22, with only a small college loan to pay off, then I was free to follow her." Instead -- much to his surprise-- he was told first to go out into the world, work, and make friends. "I thought what sort of spiritual advice is this? In fact, the next two years were vital preparation in realizing dreams that otherwise might' have haunted me all my life."

Calling his college professor for some ideas as to what to do, "he said he was just about to call me with the perfect job!" The remote village of Otsuki, located in Kochi Prefecture on Shikoku, had the enlightened idea to invite a young foreigner with some Japanese language facility to act as a cultural ambassador: organize events, teach a little English, translate documents, and talk in local schools.' "It was similar to Monbusho's international coordinator project, but this community wanted to do things their way."

Everything clicked into place. He had the most wonderful time, and is now in the perfect position to help smooth Amma's path when she comes to Japan and then moves on to the U.S. on each annual world tour. When she first came in 1990, it was because she felt her children in Japan were suffering, depending on external

material things for happiness and feeling lost and empty. But it was hard without a go-between who could bridge difficulties of culture and language.

From 1991 until the autumn of '93, Shantaji helped coordinate Amma's Japan tour from Shikoku, after which he left Japan for India, to join her ashram as a lifelong brahmachari. In 1996, at the quest of Ammachi's Japanese supporters, he helped establish the Mata Amritanandamayi Center in Tokyo's Sugi'

Most of the year he is based in Kerala, where he's trying to learn Amma's language, Malayalam, and live a life that is far more demanding than military, law or politics, "I carry no money, have no possessions barring the clothes I wear, and follow a strict routine of work and spiritual practices. But the happiness of my life deepens immeasurably day by day. Not many people get the opportunity to serve a saint; I'm only unhappy when ego gets in the way."

The knowledge that God is inside him is enough, he says. But there is another source of happiness: his parents have moved next door to Amma's ashram in Santa Fe, NM. "I used to be angry with them for not giving me a clearer moral lead. Now I realize that in their own way they were also seeking a deeper meaning to their lives." Just as he and his brother were a decade past. Just as most people are today.