

# Hindu holy woman draws a crowd of devotees in Lynnwood

Friday, June 1, 2001

LYNNWOOD -- India's "hugging saint" lived up to her reputation yesterday. She applied her famous clinch one squeeze at a time to everyone who approached, and almost 1,000 did -- all before lunch.

Hindu holy woman



They queued up, two by two, and shoeless -- some in socks, others with toes exposed -- and inched forward on the carpet of a vast Embassy Suites Hotel conference room just south of Interstate 5.

Hugs for all ... holy woman  
Ammachi opens a U.S. tour at the Embassy Suites Hotel in Lynnwood. She describes her gift as like a flower and likens her skeptics to insects trying to destroy it. *Paul Joseph Brown / Seattle Post-Intelligencer*

The attraction: Mata Amritanandamayi, a 47-year-old Hindu holy woman known by her shortened names, Ammachi, Amma, Mother or just plain Ma.

Through an interpreter, she described her gift as if it were a flower, beset by hummingbirds that suck its nectar and by insects -- skeptics -- determined to destroy it.

"She says the flower just is," said the interpreter, Swami Anrits Swanup, who stood behind her as the faithful approached. "The flower releases its beauty and its fragrance to everyone."

Few here would disagree.

"She is a saint and she knows it," said Judy Dunsire of Seattle,

slipping back into her shoes. "She knows she's in the presence of the divine."

Dunsire and her husband, Chuck, whose bad knees made progress down the aisle difficult, arrived early. They took a number, got in line, and had their hugs by 11 a.m.

"My acupuncturist told us about this four years ago," Judy Dunsire said. "There is such a powerful feeling of love in her presence. Her eyes exude it. It just pours out."

"For me," said Chuck Dunsire, "Amma is one of any number of spiritual leaders whose message is one of love and brotherhood; who talks about our 'oneness' and the universality of spirituality."

The Dunsires don't plan to attend other sessions during Ammachi's weekend-long appearance. But they did plan to cap their day with a spiritual experience of another kind -- watching Ichiro perform at Safeco Field.

Ammachi arrived in Seattle from Japan Wednesday to kick off a six-week, 10-city tour of the United States. Yesterday's two public hugs -- called *darshans* -- Sanskrit for "audience in the presence of a saint" -- will be followed today, tomorrow and Sunday by a series of retreats that require registration and a \$200 fee.

A final public hug -- free, as was yesterday's -- will be available starting at 6:30 p.m. Sunday at the Embassy Suites. Ammachi's followers say she leaves no one unhugged and will stay the night if necessary to get the job done.

The money, together with proceeds from the sale of tapes, CDs, photos, key rings and all manner of other Ammachi paraphernalia -- including a comic book and an aromatherapy gizmo that fits the receptacle of a car cigarette-lighter -- is said to go to the philanthropist guru's many charities.

They range from orphanages and homes for the destitute to the 800-bed Amrita medical center in Cochin, India, a coastal city not far from the village of Kerala, where Ammachi was born in 1953 into the impoverished family of a fisherman.

As her story unfolds, she is ostracized for her dark skin, devalued as a girl and schooled to no more than a fourth-grade level. But she nevertheless recognizes her spirituality early in

life, and by the time she reaches her 20s begins to attract a following through her insistent good deeds, her wisdom and her healing hugs.

What's it like, this hug?

"You get a feeling of spiritual uplifting," said Kathryn Boyd of Bainbridge Island, an administrative assistant at Seattle Central Community College.

Boyd, follower No. 488, wrapped her ticket around the stems of an iris and a peony, and waited patiently among the chairs that flanked the aisle.

She said she knew she was on to something years ago when she attended one of Ammachi's earlier Northwest appearances.

"I was in the back of a room much like this one, where they were selling all the CDs and videos," she said. "What happened was, I felt some hand rubbing my head, but there was nobody near me. So I said to myself, OK, she's the real thing. But I can't explain it."

At another Ammachi appearance, at the Scottish Rite Temple on Capitol Hill, she said the guru's hug brought tears that flowed unchecked and for no discernible reason.

"Just being in this woman's presence is uplifting," Boyd said. "You get *something*."

Canadian Dave Pratt, a 42-year-old social worker, came down from Nelson, B.C., to feel the presence of Ammachi's love.

"Just let go," he advised. "Relax and see what happens. This is a non-rational process at work."