

Indian Guru Seeks to Love the World Personally

By Sarah Tippit



LOS ANGELES (Reuters) - In the City of Angels, which some say can be among the most cutthroat places on Earth, thousands of people from all walks of life have been lining up for a free hug and a pat on the back.

This is not just any hug, it is the mother of all embraces from none other than the "Mother of Immortal Bliss," a.k.a. Mata Amritanandamayi, a humble Hindu woman with a diamond stud in her nose who is fast becoming a world-renowned spiritual leader, like Mother Teresa or Mohandas Gandhi.

Cherubic, always smiling, the tiny woman whom friends call Amma or Ammachi made her way from her home in southern India to Los Angeles last week on a 10-city U.S. tour ending July 17 that includes stops in Santa Fe, Dallas, Chicago, Washington, New York, Smithfield (Rhode Island) and Boston.

The drill is the same wherever she goes. From dawn to late at night people stream toward her. One-by-one they place their heads on her breast or belly or shoulder for a hug. She pats them on the back, chucks their chins, listens to their woes, smooths their hair, smiles broadly and whispers heartfelt blessings into their ears, sometimes drying their tears.

Rapidly growing in popularity and a sought-after guest, Amma, 46, goes where she is summoned and does not publicize her visits. She stays where people offer lodging, asks for nothing, eats little and spends up to 18 hours a day -- rarely moving from her seat -- hugging, praying for, and blessing anybody and everybody who comes to her.

She never seems to tire or get sick. "We can't keep up with her. I have to go to bed. She keeps going. You wake up and she's still at it. After 15 hours she's radiant," her spokesman Rob Sidon said.

Proceeds from snacks sold at her appearances and money donated directly to her go to one of several charities begun in her name, which to date include four hospitals, 33 schools, 12 temples, 25,000 houses for the poor, an orphanage, pensions for

50,000 destitute women, a home for senior citizens, a battered women's shelter and various technical education projects.

In the United States her followers have organized schools in San Francisco and Santa Fe, New Mexico. Her assistants work on a gratis basis, said Sidon, who left a lucrative marketing career to volunteer for her organization.

Although some people claim she has cured their ailments or provided divine advice, she does not claim to be a messiah, nor does she seek converts to her Hindu religion. Rather, her aim is to spread pure, heartfelt, divinely inspired love to everyone in the whole world who asks for it, and so far she has personally touched and prayed for more than 20 million people.

GOOD EFFECT ON BAD DOGS

“In France Catholic nuns come to her, in Japan Zen Buddhist monks come, she's universal,” Sidon said. “She stands up after having sat for 13 hours, fresh as a daisy. The only telltale sign of wear and tear is a large black streak on her white linen sari from all the tears shed on her shoulder.”

In her travels she has sucked poison from a leper's lesions in India, cradled AIDS ([news](#) - [web sites](#)) patients in San Francisco, hugged tough New York cops and embraced movie stars with equal energy and concern. She has been a featured speaker at the United Nations ([news](#) - [web sites](#)) and has advised world leaders, particularly in India.

“She doesn't fear anything. Rabid dogs sit next to her and calm down,” Sidon said.

For a week in Los Angeles, a steady stream of locals poured into the lobby of a Hilton hotel to see Amma. Forlorn-looking businessmen in suits, college students, women with sick children and various artists and performers, some in white, braved sweltering heat and heavy traffic to sit for hours on the hotel lobby floor, cross-legged and barefoot, waiting.

One-by-one they moved along the line for her “darshan,” or blessing, reverently kneeling before her throne, a wooden chair covered in candy pink fabric and adorned with roses.

“Often holy people don't touch followers or allow themselves to be touched, but she breaks tradition and hugs everyone,” Sidon said.

She smiled broadly at each person who came before her as assistants directed their arms around her and their heads to her incense-scented breast. The point was to place oneself in the center of her being, they said.

Against a backdrop of soft, tinkling music played by orange-clad swamis sitting cross-legged behind her, she went to work, hugging, stroking backs, chucking chins, smoothing hair, kissing cheeks, whispering in peoples' ears words of love spoken in her native Malayalam: daughter, daughter, daughter or son, son, son or truth, truth, truth.

She squeezed each one tightly as if to press her love into their very soul. They came up crying, beaming, dazed. Children looked unafraid. Adults looked childlike and

rapturous.

With a radiant, utterly guileless expression, she wiped tears and held faces in her cupped hands. After a moment she gave them Hershey's kisses wrapped in rose petals, apples containing her love energy and healing packets of sacred ashes, then sent them on their way with blissful expressions.

“I'd like to have another child,” one 46-year-old woman said in a quivering voice, before kneeling before Amma for a blessing. Another woman in a peach sari placed her head in Amma's lap and began sobbing loudly.

For a moment Amma looked pained, as if she was absorbing the woman's sorrow, but she immediately recovered and began to smile again as she dabbed the woman's tears with a tissue handed over by a bystander.

HOLINESS RARE IN L.A.

“That truly was intense,” said Greg, 43, a sculptor, after a blessing by Amma. Greg, who came at the urging of a friend and did not want to reveal his last name, added: “There isn't much that's holy in L.A. I feel very peaceful.”

Amma was born in 1953, the daughter of a poor fisherman in a small village of Kerala in South India. Her father made her drop out of school in the fourth grade to work as a house slave. Early on she became known for radiating an unusual amount of love and light. She began hugging the sick and impoverished in her teens and soon attracted a following.

Despite a limited education, Amma speaks metaphorically, answering all types of questions from world leaders, scientists, farmers who want to know why their cows will not produce milk, and passersby with relationship questions.

Reporters streamed in to see her as well and she was happy to grant interviews in-between blessing people. As a man rested his head on her breast, she answered one reporter's questions in her native language, which was translated into English by her personal assistant, Swami Amritaswarup, an early disciple.

“I seek to give and give and give, to personally wipe away tears through selfless love, compassion and service. I seek to fill the people with ... love,” she said.

“That's what the world wants today because parents are not setting an example for their children and therefore children are not learning how to give and take properly,” she said.

“There is a destructive tendency in the world. You cannot give what you don't have. Even if one has a full tank of gas a car will only run if it has a properly working battery of love. I want to awaken an awareness of a profound feeling of ... love in order to (help) the world to learn and to grow.”