

With Each Warm Embrace, A Guru Shares Her Message

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The Indian guru known simply as Amma came to town yesterday, dispensing her trademark embraces of comfort from the floor of the Hammerstein Ballroom in Midtown Manhattan.

Over the past three decades, Amma, 50, has been fighting world suffering by tirelessly offering hugs, both to strangers and to her legions of followers, who say she has dispensed about 21 million comfort clenches worldwide.

Organizers say that total will grow by about 15,000 during her New York appearance, which continues through tomorrow. Amma hugs tirelessly, stopping only several hours a day for sleep. Her hugs are free, and there are many takers.

Tokens were distributed yesterday to keep order, and a long line of people inched their way up to the smiling woman wearing a white robe. On a chair in front of the ballroom stage, she sat under a long string of light bulbs and was cooled by a pair of strong fans.

Behind her, a chorus sang spiritual songs accompanied by traditional Indian instruments. By noon, there were more than 1,000 shoeless followers inside, many dressed mostly in robes or loose outfits of thin white cotton. Many sat on the floor in meditative positions. There were also many Indian immigrant families seeking hugs for their young children. At the many vendor booths, Amma's likeness was ubiquitous, on photographs, decals, pins, posters and portraits.

A tireless and energetic hugger, Amma pulls her kneeling supplicants firmly to her breast, holds them there in a strong clench and often whispers reassuring words in her native language, Malayalam. She then hands them small gifts such as a Hershey's Kiss, a rose petal or an apple.

"When a child goes to the mother with a heavy heart, the mother responds by hugging and consoling them," explained Swami Rama Krishna, a 48-year-old Hindu monk who has served for 27 years at Amma's ashram in southern India. The swami, with his orange robe and long beard, beamed toward Amma and said it was her hug that got him to forsake his career as a 21-year-old banker in India and follow her.

"After being hugged, people benefit in different ways," he said. "For some, good things begin happening in their life, and they find their problems going away, or others feel strong enough to face their problems."

Amma, whose full name is Mata Amritanandamayi, or "Mother of Immortal Bliss," was born in 1953 to a poor family. She practiced hours of deep meditation as a child and early on became dedicated to alleviating suffering by hugging and by creating charities.

After receiving a hug, Beverly Haupt, 42, a medical assistant from Middle Island, N.Y., stood in the ballroom surrounded by Amma's robe-wearing followers. Ms. Haupt wore jeans, a New York Yankees T-shirt, and a radiant glow on her face rarely encountered in Midtown.

Ms. Haupt said she traveled from Long Island after hearing from a friend about Amma, whom she described as "wonderful and loving and very freeing."

"You can feel the energy," she said. "It's very soothing. It makes you want to go out and