

Spiritual leader hugs way into her followers' lives

Thousands come for the blessings from Amma

Lauren Abdel-Razzaq / Special to The Detroit News

Dearborn— When John Weiss first met the spiritual leader Sri Mata Amritanandamayi, known as Amma, years ago, he was skeptical of the divine claims surrounding her.

Weiss felt like he knew enough to be an expert on meditation techniques, and he doubted Amma's ability to teach him more. But when he met Amma, she made sure he knew he was wrong. That prompted Weiss, of Tucson, Ariz., to try to attend as many appearances by Amma in the United States as he could, and he was one of thousands in line at the Dearborn Hyatt Regency Hotel on Sunday to get personal audience with the native of India.

"I was sitting about 10 feet in front of her, meditating, and every time I opened my eyes she was always looking at me, like she knew when I was going to open them," he said of his first encounter with her. "Suddenly, I felt a tremendous rush of energy, love and bliss."

Known as the "hugging saint" because she embraces everyone who comes to see her, Amma came to Dearborn as part of a two-city North American visit. The stop in Dearborn, which she has been making for years, was organized by followers at her ashram in Ann Arbor.

Sunday, she hugged everyone who waited in a long line that wrapped around the hotel's grand ballroom. Believers approach Amma and either kneel before her or sit on a stool. Wrapped in a billowing white robe and scarf, Amma takes each person into her arms, rubbing them on the back as she chants words and prayers into their ears.

Some burst into tears, others smiled, and some simply stared in wonder at the woman. Some brought photos of loved ones to be blessed. One man brought two bottles of pills and handed them to Amma, who kissed them. Amma tossed yellow and red flower petals over their heads after she hugged them and pressed small gifts into the hands of some — a rose petal, an apple or a chocolate kiss.

"Where there is true love, there is no tiredness — there is enjoyment and newness in every moment," Amma said through an interpreter about her 18-to-20-hour days. "I'm not like a battery that will die away after being used for some time. I am eternally connected to the power source."

Amma, 57, has hugged more than 30 million people and raised money for hundreds of causes such as education, hunger and medical care. Those at the Hyatt on Sunday didn't have to pay to see her, but could donate to one of her many causes. Some of the money collected was going to aid earthquake victims in Haiti.

Suzanne Callon, 52, a nurse from London, Ontario, met Amma on Sunday for the first time. She is staying for the retreat today and Tuesday and says she will come back when Amma returns next year. "I consider myself spiritual in that there are so many things greater than I am, like love and compassion," Callon said. "I can't believe how humble she is. She hugs everybody for hours and hours. It blows my mind."

Linda Gabby, 60, lives at the Song of the Morning Yoga Retreat East in Vanderbilt, Mich., and first met Amma in 1994 in Chicago. She said she didn't know anything about Amma before she met her.

The following year "I felt her presence, her voice, almost continuously," she said. "I could smell the scent of rose petals."

"That which is needed, that desire of the heart, the friendship of God manifests through her."



Sri Mata Amritanandamayi, known as Amma, greets her followers on Sunday in Dearborn. (Brandy Baker / The Detroit News)