

New Yorkers Embrace Loving Message Of India's "Hugging Saint"

By: Tetiana Anderson



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A spiritual leader and humanitarian who has literally touched millions of people across the world welcomed thousands of devotees into her arms in Manhattan Sunday. NY1's Tetiana Anderson filed the following report.

With open arms, Sri Mata Amritanandamayi Devi, known to her followers as "Amma," has literally touched more than 30 million people around the world. For the past month, the so-called "hugging saint" has criss-crossed North America, offering words of encouragement and prayer to anyone who comes forward.

On Sunday, thousands of people came to get a hug from Amma in the Hammerstein Ballroom in Manhattan, and followers said something as simple as Amma's embrace can be a life-changing experience.

"When you see her and she hugs you, you just get rewards beyond belief," said devotee Erica Hayward.

"I was a little bit skeptic. I don't know if it was just love. It was a beautiful experience," said Patricia Muller, who was in tears following her embrace.

People meditated in Amma's presence and waited in line to soak in her simple message, that the world needs more unconditional love.

"Its an uplifting healing, connecting of the heart energies," said devotee Jerry Adler.

Amma is considered a mystic by most, and has been known to sit for more than 20 hours at a time, until all her devotees have had a chance to get what they came for -- a good old-fashioned hug.

"I have offered myself to society, so I don't really expect anything back. Also, in true love there is only giving, there is no taking," Amma said through an interpreter.

Her spokesman said Amma's charity, Embracing The World, has given more than \$60 million to disaster relief around the world.

In her native country of India, she has taken in 50,000 orphans and provided some \$60 million in medical services.

In the United States, she feeds some 75,000 people each day through her soup kitchen.

"She sees all beings as part of oneself, so in that way she feels very connected and feels a great sense of empathy," said Dan Marshall, who has volunteered for Amma for 10 years.

It has been said that Amma demonstrated heightened spirituality at a very early age.

"Amma was born enlightened," says Rosemary Haggblad, who has volunteered for Amma for 20 years.

Whether it is because of Amma's deep mysticism or something much less rare, those who are swallowed by Amma's embrace find it easy to become part of her mission to spread love and compassion.