

How the Hugging Saint brings love to the world

For 30 years Indian spiritual leader Mata Amritanandamayi has been hugging people. Now the woman known as Amma is bringing her message to Europe



by
**Rachel
Porter**

SITTING on her throne of orange silk in a lavishly decorated sports hall, Amma clutches another head to her bosom. The man kneeling at her tiny bejewelled feet snuggles into her perfumed robes, closes his eyes, smiles and waits for a wave of her compassion to wash over him.

Like almost 30 million people before him, he is there to bathe in what she describes as "the unbroken stream of love which flows from Amma to all beings in the universe". This outpouring requires such little effort on her part, apparently, that she can give a rare interview to me while "loving a person wholly and without prejudice".

She chuckles and gesticulates furiously as she tells me the extraordinary story of how a little girl from a poor Kerala fishing village in South India came to be known as the Hugging Saint. Intermittently, she pats the man on the back as if she is burping a baby.

"Even as a little girl, I had a spontaneous feeling of love and compassion for suffering people," she tells me through her translator and most senior disciple, Swami Amritaswarupananda Puri.

"I used to visit 50 to 60 houses a day to collect tapioca peelings to feed our cows. During these visits I saw the harsh realities of life. Families reliant on the catch of the day often had nothing at all to eat.

"I couldn't stand to watch their suffering. I wanted to commit suicide, to jump into the fire. Helping them was the only way.

"I would wash their clothes and take them to my house for a bath. I would steal things from my own family to give to them, for which I was punished. I realised it is my mission in life to serve humanity. To ease pain and poverty."

But is an exhibition hall in a wealthy western country really the best place to do it? "People all over the world, irrespective of nationality, language, religion or material wealth, deserve love and compassion," she says.

I meet Amma in Dublin, en route to London, where she says she hopes to address the critical "poverty of love and compassion" in the UK in time for Christmas.

At a time of global religious unrest, it is easy to see why Amma's non-denominational message has mass appeal. I can see Muslims, Catholics and Jews



Pictures: JOHN COGILL

MANY TALENTS: Amma loves a person 'wholly' but at the same time she can give interviews, as she did with Rachel, inset, and make phone calls

sitting and praying together on bright pink floor mats. They are listening to a band of New Agers jangling tambourines and banging drums. They queue for hug - or "darshan" - tokens, then join the line that winds its way through the throng to the back of the hall.

They are peacefully united by Amma. They say that they don't worship her because she is not a deity and this is not a church. They simply love her because she loves them. Together with the Dalai Lama and the Pope, she was named one of the world's 12 most influential religious leaders.

I pull up a chair at the back of the room, near the stalls selling souvenir dolls, beads "worn by Amma" and "I 'heart' Amma" T-shirts, to collect my thoughts and observe proceedings.

Next to me sits Andrew Lohan, 31, a Dubliner who tells me with tears in his eyes that as a gay Irish Catholic, he has found in Amma's conventions a place to worship, free from judgment.

"Faith has always been important to me but it's 10 years since I felt able to attend mass. Here I



can feel like I'm part of something again. Amma just believes in love and acceptance, nothing more. There's no part of her faith that condemns what I am, or what anyone else is."

I had expected more weeping and wailing at the head of the darshan queue but like every aspect of Amma's operation, including the vegetarian curry production line in the makeshift canteen, it is surprisingly orderly. Her helpers surround the chair, ready to peel off any

clingers-on and direct the next in line into her arms, while Amma maintains a steady hugging pace, keeping one eye on the clock and using a clicker to keep a head count.

At least four of her followers tell me with an identical turn of phrase that in India, where the crowds are often as big as 100,000: "Amma has been known to give darshan for more than 24 hours without a break."

All the while, Amma multi-tasks.

She gives interviews, takes phone calls, holds meetings and, as the head of an ever-expanding charity, makes multi-million pound decisions as she hugs.

"Then when I retire to my room, I read all the letters I have been sent. I call everyone I need to speak to and give them instructions. I take care of the macro management," she says.

Those in her entourage say that she does most of her sleeping on long-haul flights but even then, if fellow passengers request a hug, Amma will oblige.

"There are two kinds of electrical appliance. Some are run on batteries that run down and others, like me, are eternally connected to the power source," she giggles.

But while they all enjoy a good cuddle, it is the more practical applications of Amma's love that really inspire her followers.

In accordance with her mantra - "take the minimum and give the maximum" - volunteers in her organisation, Mata Amritanandamayi Math, or MAM, build homes for the homeless, provide financial assistance for widows, run state-of-the-art hospitals, schools, universities, orphanages and care homes for the elderly, lead reforestation efforts and more besides.

BUT it is Amma's disaster relief projects that have cemented her saintly status. When the tsunami struck on Boxing Day 2003, devastating the area around her ashram in Kerala, Amma's swift action and pledge of £12 million to the relief effort saved countless lives. The campus of her university accommodated 4,000 families, all provided with food, water, clothing, blankets, soap, toothbrushes and toothpaste.

"Although so much food had been lost, somehow Amma provided three meals a day for everyone," says one wide-eyed disciple, echoing the biblical tale of loaves and fishes and demonstrating, perhaps, how the actions of extraordinary people can evolve into "miracles" over time.

Amma is more matter of fact. "As a non-governmental organisation, I could do things better and faster because only I have to make the decisions. I simply tell my children, 'Do this! Do that! Build shelters, fast!' and they do it."

She beckons me; it's time I experienced her legendary embrace. I lean towards her, suddenly my face is buried in her incense-infused shawls. For 30 seconds at least, I feel nothing but the fear it might never end but then there is a feeling of warmth. The hug is heartfelt and unexpectedly touching.

Still, I can hardly claim to be the first to discover that, among her many talents, Amma knows how to give a good hug.

For more information on Amma go to www.amma.org.uk