

## Thousands wait hours for a hug

Crowd drawn to Amma's open arms at Manhattan Center

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They came by the thousands, from the city and from all over the country, just looking for a hug.

But Mata Amritanandamayi - known to her devotees as Amma - is no ordinary hugger.

The 50-year-old woman from India, who wears a white sari and diamond-studded nose ring, is nicknamed the Hugging Saint for the embraces that have earned her a worldwide following.

By early yesterday morning, more than 2,000 people had packed the hall at the Manhattan Center on W. 34th St., eager for a moment in the arms of the spiritual guru.

Organizers expected 15,000 people to collect hugs during the three-day visit, which ends today.

"I think she's a saint on Earth," said Roxanne Reed, a 55-year-old flight attendant who has followed Amma for 14 years.

"I can't describe it," said Reed, who already had waited for four hours to see Amma and was prepared to wait many more. "You just feel like you've been touched by God."

Amma, whose name means mother in her native Malayalam language, grew up in India amid intense poverty. At age 8 or 9, she began spontaneously hugging people as a way of showing her compassion for them, her followers said.

She has spent the past 30 years traveling the world, giving millions of hugs. She has been known to hug until 5 a.m., making sure everyone in line gets a turn.

"There is no tiredness, there is no boredom," she said yesterday through her interpreter. "Where there is love there is no tiredness. For Amma there is love, nothing else."

Eric Perez, 33, was reared Catholic, but said he has found a unique spirituality in Amma's presence.

"Being here is just an immense feeling of being home," said Perez, of North Babylon, L.I. "She's the feminine face of God. This is the true meaning of religion."



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More than 2000 people lined up to see the 50-year-old known for her hugs.



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Some people believe Amma's touch has the power to heal, though her handlers say she is not a faith healer.

Perez said his physical health and sleep have improved since he began following Amma.

Atman Johnson, 57, of Virginia has spent the past five years traveling to Amma's U.S. appearances so that his 16-year-old son, Param, who suffers from cerebral palsy, can get hugs.

While he doesn't believe Amma has helped to physically heal his son, Johnson is confident her presence has helped to put the teen at ease.

"His body's at peace. There is a calmness from being in her presence," Johnson said. "We're just here to imbibe her energy and bring it back with us."

Rebecca Writer, 42, took two months off from her job as a real estate agent to travel with her two daughters and follow Amma across the country.

"I marvel at how many people have been touched by her," said Writer, of San Ramon, Calif. "Being with Amma is like riding the express train to true happiness and peace."

### **Touched by their angel: I cozy up to Indian guru**

Amma sat at the front of the Manhattan Center hall, hugging those who had taken a number and waited - for hours and hours - to spend a few precious moments in her embrace.

A Daily News reporter took off her shoes and joined the long line of barefoot devotees waiting to experience the hug that Amma's followers say is impossible to describe.

Indian music played in the background as the reporter passed children playing on the ground, elderly men and women sitting in wheelchairs and groups of people meditating.

The reporter finally approached Amma and was directed to kneel by one of the many volunteers, clad in white.

Amma sat among throngs of people, her white sari flowing to the floor.

She gave the kneeling reporter a tender embrace, holding her closely to her chest. She rocked slightly as she began to chant softly in her native Malayalam, an Indian language.

She clutched the reporter tightly, giving off a great warmth, despite the two large standing fans. She seemed oblivious to the crowds waiting for a chance at the same experience.

After about 45 seconds, she loosened her hold and kissed the reporter on the cheek before giving her a parting gift of a Hershey's kiss and a red apple.

It was a nice, warm hug - like one a grandmother would give. But for Amma's followers, it meant so much more.

**Jennifer Lebovich**

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