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San Francisco Chronicle

## Arms around the world

### Visiting Indian guru wants to hug every person on the planet

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Hillary Clinton may be attracting long lines back East for her book signings, but another woman -- a guru from India who is on a mission to hug everyone in the world -- drew a crowd of her own Tuesday to the East Bay.



Mata Amritanandamayi, known to her followers as Amma, the hugging saint, sat in a Castro Valley prayer hall for hours on a throne decorated with silk flowers, accepting flowers and fruit and drawings before giving everyone -- from babes in arms to elderly supplicants -- a hug.

And not just a little "thanks for coming, nice to see you" kind of hug. Sometimes she drew several people at a time to her bosom, rubbing their shoulders and arms while smiling beatifically. At other times, she embraced just one person for long moments, soothing each as they cried or laughing along with those overcome by giggles of joy.

As they stood, the followers beamed or wiped tears from their eyes or walked away speechlessly, awed by the woman in the white sari who claims to have hugged 21 million people since she was a young girl in southern India.

The Castro Valley Mata Amritananda Center, which is something of a mecca for Amma devotees, is the second stop on her 10-city U.S. tour that began earlier this month in Seattle and will include stops this summer in Los Angeles, New York and Washington, D.C.

Amma, who turns 50 in September, will be in Castro Valley for 12 days and is expected to give about 1,200 hugs each day, said spokesman Rob Sidon of San Francisco.

Candice Munger, 22, of Colorado Springs, was first hugged by Amma in 1996 and has since lost count of the number of embraces. But that didn't dim her enthusiasm as she eagerly

waited for another chance to come face to face with Amma on Tuesday.

"It's the experience of being held when you're sad or being enthused when you're excited," she said after being embraced. "She's somebody who can see right through you. It's almost that she knows me more than I know me."

Munger, who will be married in July in a ceremony presided over by Amma, took her wedding sari for the woman to bless on Tuesday. She and others said they love Amma like a mother.

Amma, who conducted media interviews while keeping up her hugging, sees herself that way as well. Asked what she gets out of hugging thousands of people a day, day after day, she smiled as she replied in her native dialect.

"It's like asking a mother 'What do you get from hugging your baby?' " Amma said through her interpreter, Swami Amritswarup.

"Sometimes she'll receive 35,000 people a day," Amritswarup added. Amma turned and spoke to him, and he quickly translated "she will do it faster" when that many show up.

To keep the crowds moving, people are handed stickers and wait patiently, first sitting and then kneeling in lines on the floors. Before hugging Amma, they must wipe their faces with tissues.

Volunteers at the center said people have come not just from throughout the United States but also from other countries to bask in Amma's presence.

Among the foreign travelers were Stephen Fairclough and his wife Diana, who left their home in Victoria, B.C., to see Amma first in Seattle and then in Castro Valley. They first met her in 1997 on a trip to India.

"She's one of the more sparkling ones," said Fairclough, who's been meditating since the early 1970s and who has met a variety of gurus over the decades. "She's just the embodiment of love. It just pours out of her. She's really mother; she's the epitome of every mother."

Shakir Akbar, 25, of Flagstaff, Ariz., had never met Amma before he went to Castro Valley on Tuesday at the urging of a friend. After his hug, he seemed overwhelmed.

"It was wonderful. Very nice, refreshing," he said. "You have to experience it for yourself. Words kind of belittle the experience."

One of the best parts, he said, was watching the other followers receive their embraces. Hundreds of people sat or stood for hours watching Amma before they wandered over to a gift shop to buy photos of her, along with the kind of beaded jewelry she wore, Indian saris and other clothes and souvenirs.

Along with the hugs, Amma answers questions, Sidon said, ranging from why people's cows

aren't giving enough milk to scientists asking about work they're doing or "a priest wondering if he should remain a priest."

"She'll sometimes whisper something, or it could be as general as 'darling daughter, darling daughter,' " Sidon said.

Sidon said that Amma has a hand in many charities, and that she is not espousing any particular religious beliefs but instead "firmly believes that all the religions are great and they all lead to the same path."

Followers say different people see her in different ways.

"You can take her as a sweet woman from India who gives you hugs up to the divine mother incarnate," said Stella Petrakis, 55, of San Francisco.

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