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Open Arms, Opening Hearts

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DANVERS - In a hotel ballroom that usually hosts corporate types sipping wine and nibbling hors d'oeuvres, barefoot people in jeans and T-shirts sat on the floor for hours - waiting to receive a hug.

Mata Amritanandamayi, known simply as "Amma" (Mother) to millions of followers, has been dispensing hugs for hours on end. At the Sheraton Ferncroft on Wednesday, she began at 10:30 a.m. and did not stop - not for meals, not for the bathroom - until 4:30 p.m. That night, after sermons and songs, she started over and hugged through the wee hours of Thursday, until the last person had left. This serial hugger has doled out something like 21 million hugs so far, including 18,000 in one marathon session in India. She's still hugging, despite the carpal tunnel syndrome that has resulted from pulling people into the crook of her right arm, their heads resting on her chest, while she strokes their backs with her left hand. She beams and chants in her native tongue, "Daughter, daughter, daughter," or "My son. Love you, love you, love you."

Born nearly 50 years ago into poverty in southern India, the diminutive Amma has been nicknamed "The Hugging Saint" for the "darshan," or blessed hug, she has been dispensing since she was 21. Her appearance in Danvers was the 10th stop in an 11-city tour of the United States. The last stop is Bryant College in Smithfield, R.I., where her free public program begins tonight at 6:30. There will be a talk, meditation, songs - and hugs.

In Danvers, Amma delivered 2,500 hugs, which she and her followers believe represent divine love. A Hindu, she does not attempt to convert people of other religions. There are Jews, Christians, Hindus, Buddhists, and atheists in her crowds. If she has a dogma, it is simple: Love and serve one another. She doesn't ask for money, but she does sell jewelry, clothing, books she has written, and other items, with the proceeds going to her charities. Over the years, she has raised tens of millions of dollars. She doesn't bill herself as a healer, though people ask her to cure their cancer, grant them a baby, or help their cat.

The charitable programs she supports include soup kitchens and battered women's shelters across the United States and orphanages, schools, hospitals, rest homes, a hospice, temples, and an AIDS center in India. She has built 25,000 houses for the homeless in her native land and provides pensions for 50,000 destitute women. In 2002, she received the United Nations' Gandhi-King Award for Nonviolence. The three previous winners were Kofi Annan, Nelson Mandela, and Jane Goodall.

Cynthia Gramer of Boston was in Danvers with her 11-year-old twins, Hannah and Lucas. As the three of them inched closer up the aisle for their hugs, Gramer's eyes brimmed with tears. Amma took the three of them at once in her embrace, then showered them with rose petals and gave each a kiss - a Hershey's Kiss. Afterward, Gramer said, "She is the embodiment of unconditional love. That's all she is." Gramer, who learned of Amma through a friend five years ago, said she has become a different person since following Amma's teachings: "My heart has become more open. She really has changed my life."

It wasn't long before the front of Amma's white sari was stained with makeup and tears. As a group behind her played Indian devotional music, she spoke to a reporter, and one of her swamis translated. "Poverty and starvation are our greatest enemy, more than war," Amma said. "All the

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crimes . . . start from poverty and starvation. May God give us strength to eliminate these enemies." She cautioned people not to live in the past, "which is gone like a canceled check. All we have is the present moment. Use it well."

As she spoke, she took a woman and her children into her arms and embraced them. The son held up his stuffed monkey, which Amma kissed. "Love is the foundation of life," she continued. "Like the body needs nutritious food to grow, our soul needs love to grow."

Bob Sinicrope of Milton first met Amma in India during a spiritual retreat in 1999. He quickly became a devotee and now volunteers while she's on tour. After Sept. 11, 2001, he flew to London - for a day and a half - to hear, see, and hug her. "It was a pretty scary time," said Sinicrope, who is the jazz director at Milton Academy. "I just felt like I wanted to touch base with her." He also took what he called his "Bush tax refund," added to it, and paid \$748 for a house to be built in India - one of 100,000 Amma has planned. "They're very simple but vastly superior to what people have," he said.

But his favorite thing is The Hug. "It's overwhelming to feel that much love, energy and compassion," he said. He and his wife, Frances, waited until 2 a.m. Thursday for theirs.

Ray Grigonis, a carpenter, had made the trip from Brockton with his wife, Shelley Hines. He'd heard about Amma from friends. He was waiting for a hug, which would come later that night.

"A hug from her brings out the good things inside you," he said. "In this world today, we need as much help as we can get."



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