

## **“The Power of Love”**

On September 27<sup>th</sup>, 2007, a diminutive and humble woman from a small fishing village in Kerala, Southern India, turned 54. Her birthday party was huge. 150,000 people attended. Former US President Bill Clinton sent his birthday wishes, as did the President and Vice President of India, the head of UNICEF and many other leading world figures. Amma, who is known around the world as the Hugging Saint, was a year older. However, the message she has spent more than three decades tirelessly spreading is timeless.

"Human beings, animals, trees and plants – for anything to grow, love is needed," said Amma in her birthday address. "The seed becomes a sapling, the sapling becomes a tree, and the tree gives flowers and fruits to the world. All this is possible only when it is nurtured with love. The power of God, which lies dormant in the human mind, can only be awakened and made vibrant through love. Love alone makes a human being divine. When one is devoid of love, one becomes like an animal."

Amma spoke of the increasingly prevalent tendency for people to rush through their lives. "We are living in an age where no one has any time for anyone else or, for that matter, even for themselves," said Amma. "As we rush to try and finish our various tasks as quickly as possible, we hardly find time to breathe. You may have seen the signboards that read 'Speed thrills but kills.' This saying does not only hold true when it comes to driving. It is relevant for any one who doesn't know how to control the speed of life. ... Many of us spend our days and nights holding our cell phone to our ear, our eyes glued to the computer screen. As such, we don't have time to listen to our near and dear ones – or even to simply be with them. We don't have time to look at our friends' faces. Even those who have planted beautiful flowers in their gardens and backyards rarely find a single moment to enjoy their beauty. Excessive speed ruins the beauty of everything."

Instead of receiving gifts to mark her birthday, Amma gave more on that day than most of us will ever give in a lifetime. She began embracing the thousands of birthday visitors at about 1pm in the afternoon and did not stop until 4am the next morning. Free food was provided for one and all, and Amma announced two new social welfare projects aimed at fighting the epidemic of suicide amongst Indian farmers: 30,000 full scholarships for educating the children of farmers living below the poverty line; and a project to provide vocational training and start-up capital to help 5,000 groups of women from agricultural families to form home-based businesses.

“Amma” is an affectionate term in India, which translates as “Mother”, and Amma lovingly refers to those who come to see her as her “children”. Amma is more formally known as Mata Amritanandamayi, and her charitable organization is known as the M.A. Centre (or Mata Amritanandamayi Centre).

The M.A. Centre already has a long list of humanitarian projects under its belt to assist the poor and needy, some of which include hospitals, orphanages, cancer hospices, old age homes, training academies, tsunami reconstruction projects, pensions, prostitute rehabilitation programs and environmental projects. The M.A. Centre also provides other essential services to the destitute in India such as free food, clothing, legal services and housing. Amma has promised to build and donate 100,000 houses for the poor in India, and the M.A. Centre has already delivered on more than 30,000 of these.

Amma's international branch organizations in areas such as the US, Europe and Australia provide regular distributions of free food to the homeless through a program known as “Amma's Kitchen”. Another program, known as “Green Friends” conducts regular tree plantings, and its members also practice eco-meditation, a method of re-establishing the vitally important harmony between nature and humanity.

As part of the M.A. Centre's long-term tsunami relief and rehabilitation program, Amma gave out more gifts on her birthday: she handed over the keys to pre-schools built by the M.A. Centre in India. This was followed by the distribution of sewing machines to impoverished women, and a sponsoring of traditional wedding items, such as wedding outfits and gold ornaments, for many poor couples who wish to have a traditional ceremony, but cannot afford one.

Amma's life is one of constantly giving – this is her message, and in turn her message is her life. Indeed, actions speak louder than words. In addition to Amma's many charitable and humanitarian works, it is estimated that she has personally hugged over 25 million people world-wide. She began hugging people in her native Kerala en masse at the tender age of 17, regardless of their social standing, caste or gender. This seemingly simple act was in fact a radical one, as it broke many social conventions and taboos. Yet, it came about as a natural expression of Amma's love and compassion, and her intense desire to sooth other people's pain.

Amma began conducting regular international tours in 1987, and has been doing them ever since, spending a large part of every year traveling around the world to pour out her love to people of all races, religions and creeds. Amma has been coming to Australia regularly since the early '90s, and is planning to visiting again in March/April 2008.

Amma does not preach the benefits of any one religion over another, but talks more generally of fostering a spirituality and faith in God that is accepting of others' beliefs, and seeks to focus on the unity and beauty that can exist in diversity rather than on differences in semantics. Amma embraces everyone equally, and often says that she sees every man, woman and child as inseparable from her own self. When Amma is asked why she has dedicated her life to soothing the hearts and wiping the tears of millions, she simply shrugs and says: 'That is like asking the river why it flows; or the sun why it shines. That is its nature. It cannot do otherwise.'

Amma ended her birthday address by requesting (as she has done many times in the past) that her children work to serve the poor and suffering of the world.

"Service to such people is what Amma sees as worship of God. Amma is praying that the attitude of sacrifice awakens in her children. Let the world see through Amma's children that the streams of love, compassion, selflessness and sacrifice have not evaporated from the human mind. May my children become the light of the world."

- NOVA Magazine, December 2007.

