

## **THE SYDNEY MORNING HERALD**

**Tuesday, April 11, 2000**

# **12 million hugs but Mother never gets sore arms**

**by Ali Gripper**

Ammachi, one of India's most revered spiritual teaches, should know how to give a decent hug by now. She is, after all, one of the world's top huggers and claims to have embraced more than 12 million people in her crusade for love and compassion.

At Sydney Airport yesterday, Ammachi – known simply as The Mother – adjusted her white sari, walked straight into the arrival lounge and hugged a few more.

Like the Queen's wave, her signature blessing is known as a kind of shorthand.

Surrounded by about 100 devotees, all dressed in white, she would offer a child-like gaze, some light touches on the arms and back and then a feathery embrace. No bear hugs, no fervent clasping to the bosom.

She hugs everybody, she said through an interpreter – office workers, airline staff, even journalists and politicians.

"There is no difference. I hug everybody," she said. "It is like asking a child if they want to be hugged. Do you hug a child? Yes, always."

Although television reporters have been known to flinch as she moved to hug them – presumably because of the danger to their neatly pressed suits – many others have been moved to tears.

Some have even sold their homes and given up their jobs to devote themselves to their work helping the poor and destitute.

One of these at the airport yesterday was Mr Ron Gottsegen, 62 who gave up his job as the head of a US electronics company to run one of her hospitals in Kerala, India.

"You become very peaceful around her. Her presence awakens you to the truth in yourself. Around her, my heart always feels full," he said.

Another American joined in: "There's a lot of people posing as gurus out there, but I'm telling you, she's the real deal."

In India, crowds of up to 100,000 sometimes gather to see her. She says her personal best hugging record is 15,000 people in one day. And she claims that she never gets sore arms: "Where there is love, there is no pain."

Ammachi will be leading group meditation and giving individual blessing at the Petersham Town Hall next Monday from 7 pm until late, and on Tuesday from 9.45 am to 6.30 pm. She was last here in 1998.

**(Courtesy of The Sydney Morning Herald)**