

## **THE AGE, 'WEEKEND'**

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### **In good spirits**

**by Jill Fraser**

**Hindu guru Ammachi is on her way to Melbourne. Jill Fraser met her – and found it an enlightening experience.**

She has been declared living saint, voted Hindu of the Year and placed in the company of Mahatma Gandhi and Mother Teresa.

She has also hugged more than 11 million people around the globe, a fact which has made the tiny Indian guru, Mata Amritanandamayi, an international identity.

In the East she is widely recognized for her humanitarian projects. But in the West she is known only as “the Saint with the healing hug”. Her record for physical embraces is between 50,000 and 100,000 people in on sitting.

Whenever she is in residence at her ashram in India, a queue winds its way around the narrow streets and ends up at the feet of the 44-year-old spiritual leader who tirelessly greets every person with a hug. Ammachi, or Holy Mother, as she is affectionately called, rocks, pats and soothes. Then, wiping the tears that flow from her emotional recipients, she dots their foreheads with sandalwood paste, sprinkles petals over their heads, and gives them a lolly.

Her 11<sup>th</sup> annual visit to Australia later this month is expected to attract an audience of thousands.

So who is the woman who dresses in a simple white sari and has managed to transcend the West's cynicism?

Her devotees claim she is an “enlightened” soul. The night before Ammachi was born, so the story goes, her mother dreamt that she had given birth to the Hindu god, Krishna. When the baby arrived it was dark blue – the colour of Krishna – and when it moved it formed a perfect yoga pose.

At six months the child was chanting the names of the Hindu gods, and by five she was dancing and singing in “god-intoxicated bliss”. But what at five seemed cute, at nine was eccentric. Her embarrassed parents treated her as a slave and locked her outside the house without food or water. It is said that animals fed and cared for her.

Interviewing Ammachi is an experience that has no comparison. It is like being engulfed in a thick, safe, soft, woolly wrap. Her deep brown eyes flashed, her white teeth sparkle and an enormous diamond stud glistens in her left nostril. But her constant hand patting, arm rubbing and crooning are quite disconcerting.

If she is “enlightened” shy has she returned to earth? Through an interpreter she says she has “attained the state of perfection, or realization” and has “to this level to enable people to understand the godly experience and lead them to that goal”.

What about miracles? Ammachi’s intention, the devotee explains, is not to perform tricks but to inspire people. There is only one recorded incident of her showing proof of her powers. “I will do it once, but never again,” she said then apparently turned water into milk and then a sweet pudding, which she fed to more than 1000 people.

Barrister James Conquest, notional co-ordinator of Ammachi’s Australian tour, admits his own initial scepticism.

“I believe you should always doubt. You’re mad if you don’t. That’s my whole premise of going into anything,” he says. “I haven’t been able to avoid the cynicism of my profession as a barrister, and for the first two or three years after meeting Mother, I examined and analyzed everything.”

He’s now adopted his guru’s philosophies, but the complete renunciation of worldly goods – after his mentor’s example – it still beyond his reach.

Attendance at Ammachi’s public program is by donation only, and proceeds go to charity. Free clinics, dispensaries, housing projects, orphanages, feeding programs for the poor, schools, colleges and vocational institutes are just a few of the charitable works she has instigated.

Under the banner Amrita Institute of Medical Science and Research Centre (AIMS) – a registered public charitable trust – the group has begun its biggest project to date, an 800-bed multi-specialty hospital at Cochin in southern India. Stage One was recently opened by the Indian Prime Minister.

In reply to a question about the poor image that gurus have, Ammachi says. “If someone tries to force their rules or ideas on you, you should know he is a false teacher. A true master makes no claims about anything. He doesn’t care whether you surrender to him or not”.

“Highly evolved souls have always existed and they always will”, she adds. “They are like the open space or the boundless sky”.

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