

## **THE AGE**

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### **The holy mother of hugs embraces Australia by Caroline Overington**

Human beings love to be hugged, but, sadly, not everybody has somebody who wants to hold them. If you are in that awkward position, get off to the Morbid Town Hall tonight, because Mata Amritanandamayi (the holy mother) will be there, waiting to embrace you.

Amritanandamayi (Ammachi for short) claims to have hugged 12 million; hugging is what she does, and she's here to do it for you.

Ammachi, the daughter of a poor Indian fisherman, was beaten as a child, and through this suffering "realized her purpose was to console others" (the literature says) and so now she travels the world and does just that.

In order to receive a hug, one is required to remove one's shoes, take a number and a place in a long seated queue. Some people have been known to wait for eight or more hours for her loving embrace, but in Sydney yesterday most waited no more than an hour.

Ammachi arrived shortly after 9.30 am, revealing herself as chubby smiling and dressed in white robes and jewels, surrounded by apples and sweets. She took a seat in a low, comfortable chair. Bells rang, and her supporters sang an ancient meditation chant.

At the top of the queue were Ammachi's husband and wife team of drivers, Mrs. Janine van der Graaf and Narayan. A management consultant in a cheesecloth shirt, Narayan and his wife were introduced to Ammachi four years ago, when both were hugged which moved them to tears.

"I looked across the room and saw Janine had tears streaming down her face, and I was just crying and crying," Narayan said. "I just couldn't believe the unconditional love emanating from her."

Before getting a hug, one must wipe one's face with tissues, to remove oil and make-up and take off one's glasses and big pieces of jewellery. Also one is reminded not to lean on Ammachi, and to be "especially aware of not letting your elbows dig into her thighs, or put too much weight on her, or embrace her too tightly."

"Her back's just stuffed," says Narayan. "When she sits down, she can hardly get up, but she never complains."

As for the experience itself....huggee to be Declan was feeling anxious. "I don't come from the kind of family that hugs a lot," he said. "My mother's English and my father's a bit of a drinker and we don't express things very well."

When the hugging was over, he said not one word, just got up and left the building. On the other hand, many huggees were profoundly affected by the experience. Some people collapsed into Ammachi's arms and sobbed.

Ammachi will hug Melbournians at the Moorabbin Town Hall from 7pm tonight, and again at 9.30am and 7pm tomorrow.

**(Courtesy of The Age)**