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Humanitarian stops through LA for thousands of hugs

 Jun 15, 2009 | [Brian Watt](#) | KPCC

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Thousands of people are lining up at a hotel near L.A. International Airport for a hug. Not just any hug, says KPCC's Brian Watt, but a big one from a woman many people consider a saint.

Brian Watt: Her name is Mata Amritanandamayi. Before the hugging begins, she sits on a cushioned bench to meditate and pray for a while with the people who've filled a large, fully lit ballroom to see her. Some sit close to her on the ballroom floor – others occupy rows of chairs, waiting their turn.



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[Sound of meditation]

Watt: Some visitors wear flowing white Indian robes. Others arrive in casual street clothes. They all know her as "Amma" – or mother. Many people say there's a maternal quality to her hugs.

John Mistler: When you see your mom, after you haven't seen her for a while, and she gives you a big hug. And you just kinda let go and you become that little child again. It's a little bit like that.

Watt: Film and TV composer John Mistler of Marina Del Rey got in line with his wife three hours before the hugging started. Amma embraced both of them at the same time.

Mistler: She chants into your ear. What I heard her say was "mama, mama, mama."

Watt: The short, dark-skinned Indian woman smiles and takes each person's head in her hands and presses it into her shoulder. Each hug lasts 30 seconds or so.

Amma might kiss a hugger's head and present him or her with an apple, a chocolate kiss, and flower petals. Before or after the hug, there's time to meditate or watch one of her speeches, simultaneously translated into English, on a video screen.

[**Video translation:** Do I experience the source of compassion within me?]

Watt: Some people come to her with questions about their future, or their purpose in life. The answer isn't always perfectly clear – Amma doesn't speak English. But people like Sarah Couger of Studio City say they leave the encounter feeling as if something important has happened.

Sarah Couger: Watching her give the hugs moved me to tears. It actually brought me to tears. And I see a lot of people are crying as well just from watching and not even having the experience themselves.

Watt: For almost four decades, Amma has made it her mission to promote peace and harmony by embracing the world. The daughter of a poor fisherman from Southern India has reportedly hugged more than 28 million people all over the world. That's what she's famous for.

Her network of charities, with the blessing of the United Nations, has rebuilt tsunami-destroyed homes and fed homeless people in the Southland. Her hugs have been known to inspire people to volunteer. Sarah Couger is a stay-at-home mom for now, but she knows she wants to do more.





Sarah Couger: I can tell you that I've had it in my heart for a long time to do something to help kids with special needs. I just don't know the path that that'll take. Maybe that will unfold for me now.

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STAFF PICK

Peter Stenshoel


Samosa House on 11510 W Washington Blvd

Combined with an Indian food store (formerly Bharat Bazaar), the owners have made every effort to make diners feel relaxed. A well-kept secret meeting place for spiritual intellectuals.

The three-course buffet is \$10.99 or so and is not "endless," but includes roti bread, white or brown rice, raita (yogurt sauce), and your choice of generally consistently excellent vegetarian Indian dishes.

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Watt: Amma was born into the Hindu faith. She says she's not asking anyone to change their religion or adopt a new one, only to spend some time in the glow of *her* religion – the one she describes simply as love.

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