The United States saw a special session on spirituality when world-renowned spiritual and humanitarian leader Mata Amritanandamayi Devi interacted with leading neurosurgeon-philanthropist Dr. James Doty, the founder and director of the Center for Compassion and Altruism Research and Education (CCARE), at Stanford University here.

"For me, compassion is the most important factor in our lives," said Amma (as Mata Amritanandamayi is known globally) in the 90-minute dialogue that took place in Stanford's packed 1,700-seat Memorial Hall as part of CCARE's ongoing "Conversations on Compassions" series.

"It is the first step. If we take this first step courageously, without fear, then all of our decisions and subsequent actions and their results will have a special beauty, spontaneity and power," she said.

Responding to Dr. Doty's questions, Amma said human calculations might be wrong, but actions born of true compassion would always be right. "This is because compassion is the law of nature, the power of God and the heart of creation," she noted.

"If we tune the individual mind with compassion, then we, as individuals, are no longer really performing actions, but are merely allowing creation to act through us. And this is the power of compassion. In truth, the spiritual path both begins and ends with compassion," she added.

CCARE, which Dr Doty, now 59, started with an initial donation provided by His Holiness the Dalai Lama in 2007, investigates methods for cultivating compassion and promoting altruism within individuals and society through rigorous research, scientific collaborations and academic conferences.

The session concluded with Dr. Doty, CCARE members and audience members coming forward to receive Amma's darshan - her blessings in the form of a motherly hug.

Stanford University noted that Amma has dedicated her life to alleviating the pain of the poor, and those suffering physically and emotionally. Throughout her life, Amma, now 60, has embraced and comforted more than 34 million people, it noted about the spiritual leader whose ashram is headquartered in Kollam district of southern Kerala.

"She inspires, uplifts, and transforms through her physical embrace, her spiritual wisdom and through her global charities, known as Embracing the World. While Amma is widely regarded as one of India's foremost spiritual leaders, she says that her religion is love. Amma has never asked anyone to change their religion but only to contemplate the essential principles of their own faith and to try to live accordingly," the institution said.

Previous participants in CCARE's "Conversations in Compassion" series have included a diverse array of modern luminaries, including philanthropist-entrepreneur Lynn Tilton, director Tiffany Shlain, Buddhist monk Thich Nhat Hanh, neuropsychologist Rick Hanson, Google software engineer Chade-Meng Tan, photographer Lisa Kristine, writer Pico Iyer, Zen Buddhist Roshi Joan Halifax, hotelier Chip Conley, priest and social activist Robert V. Taylor, spiritual teacher Eckhart Tolle and
the English translator to the Dalai Lama, Thupten Jinpa, PhD, as well as several presidents, dean and faculty of Stanford University.