Serenity, Solace, Self-Knowing and a Good Scolding - It's all in Mother's Fond Embrace
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Almost as magical as Amritanandamayi Ma's ashram is the experience of getting there. From the train station at Amritapuri, three-wheeled autos head into lush forests, then along narrow sand trails through coco palms and banana groves. Arriving at a lagoon, you board a long, canoe-like craft for the 500-foot ride across clear, shallow waters. Walking the winding footpaths on her peninsula, which occasionally becomes an island, is an experience of unadulterated delight, the ground is soft white sand cooled and shadowed by draping vines and weeping willows. Woven grass huts are everywhere, some tea stalls, others one-room homes. Nearby, fishermen pole their bowl-shaped boats in blue-green water never more than waist deep. Changing tides constantly remold an intricate coastline so the paths frequently become little rivers, ankle deep. Naturally, it's best to walk barefoot. But who cares about getting a little wet? Who even notices in such an atmosphere, so primordially beautiful yet never quite permanent? It's like an enchanted Disneyland, but better. Such is the lush land of Amritapuri, birthplace and home of Mata Amritanandamayi Ma, world-renowned Hindu guru recognised by her devotees as the Holy Mother Herself.

Ammachi, as she is affectionately known, is a rare mystic soul accessible to anyone and everyone. Utterly simple, yet stoically strong, she is humble, unshakeable and awesomely self-sacrificing, as you will soon see. She's been called a fragrant lotus born of India's deeply spiritual soil. Through the power of her austerity and attainment, her fragrance has spread to many countries, where it has entranced and attracted thousands of spiritually starved seekers. Some enjoy the sweetness as she passes, while others feel the irresistable inner command to follow as she directs-to find that divine fragrance within themselves. Those who choose thus must be dedicated, for Ammachi is a strict and fearless guru, a stern taskmaster who can and does push herself and followers beyond all limits-a way among India's divinely identified souls.

Ammachi's life itself is her message and teaching. "An unbroken stream of love flows from me towards all beings in the universe," she once affirmed, "That is my inborn nature." Her methods are both traditional and seemingly unorthodox. She is not one to give spiritual discourse or discuss the inner realities philosophically, though she has proved herself capable of that. She prefers to work at the "real-life" experiential level: working hand-in-hand with devotees engaged in mundane service; leading sweet sessions of devotional song; inspiring worship in temples and at home and founding significant social services such as orphanages, hospitals, educational facilities and homes for destitute women. She blesses those who come to her through Krishna and Devi bhava and hugging. Yes, hugging, though that word is far too trite to describe the magical embrace Ammachi gives. Consider this.

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Hours and Hours of Hugs

Satsang with Ammachi is not a trivial affair. It may last 6 or 8 hours, or more. In the hall of her 10-story pink ashram 1,200 or more devotees may gather after a full day of karma yoga (Ma offers three darshans daily). Seated in a simple throne-like chair on the festooned stage, Ma is flanked by 30 brahmacharis seated on mats on her right, 30 brahmacharinis on her left, all dressed in white. Between talks and stories by Ma, they forcefully lead hours of bhajans they have composed in praise of Shakti. Eventually, everyone present will come forward for a blessing and embrace from Mother. Jack Kornfield explained his experience in his book, Joys of Integrity. "It was a very healthy kind of religious experience. There were about eight-hundred or a thousand people there and she took everyone onto her lap one at a time. She sits there, even if it takes all night, until there is no one else to put in her lap. People get in a line. It's not like a quick hug, kind of pushing you away, waiting to get to the next person like a politician. She grabs you, holds you and kind of rubs you a little bit, whispers in your ear, `Blessings on you, my son.' `Blessings, my daughter,' and rubs you some more. After a while, you think your time is up and back off. She grabs you again, hugs you a little longer and whispers things. Then she puts some blessings into your hand. Then the next person, for three hours, five hours, twelve hours-until she has hugged every person in that room. It was wonderful! There was the sense of people really being touched by it."

There are accounts of healings attributed to her hugs. Some have lost body consciousness in inexplicable divine bliss. The tireless attention, love and devotion she pours into this almost daily blessing is mind-boggling, and one wonders how she can sustain the effort. One pilgrim tells how he had settled in his room, along with seven others, at 3am when the darshan concluded. Twenty minutes later came a knock at the door, and a call for everyone to "please join Ma outside." Stumbling into the dark, he was handed a large basket and soon found himself ferrying dirt to a small dike being built. It seems high tides had flooded the ashram contaniment system. There, in the night, standing knee-deep in tidewaters, was Ma, quietly and firmly directing the emergency effort, obviously having done it many times before. Stumbling to bed near dawn, he noticed Ma was still there, the last to leave the task. She was there a few hours later at morning darshan!

Blissful Bhavas

Krishna and Devi bhava are the outer manifestations of Ammachi's inner union with the Divine. During each satsang, Ammachi disappears behind a screen where she dons a special silver crown and clothing particular to Krishna or Devi (a colorful sari for Devi). She may carry a flute (for Krishna) or an implement of Devi's. She returns to bestow the blessings of the God, as the channel of the God. Devotees do not question the transformation. Her love-filled darshan has melted many skeptics and non-believers. She explains, "Mother is not manifesting even an infinitesimal part of her spiritual power during the bhavas. If it were to be manifested as it is, no one could come near! All the deities of the Hindu pantheon, who represent the numberless aspects of the One Supreme Being, exist within us. A Divine Incarnation can manifest any of them by mere will for the good of the world. Krishna bhava is the manifestation of the Purusha or Pure Being aspect, and Devi bhava is the manifestation of the Eternal Feminine, the Creatrix, the active principle of the Impersonal Absolute. Here is some girl who puts on the garb of Krishna and after some time that of Devi, but it is within this girl that both exist. It should be remembered that all objects having a name or form are mere mental projections. Why decorate an elephant? Why should a lawyer wear a black coat, or why does a policeman wear a uniform and a cap? These are merely external aids meant to create a certain impression. In a like manner, Mother dons the garb of Krishna and Devi in order to give strength to the devotional attitude of the people coming for darshan. The Atman, or Self, that is in me is also within you. If you can realise that Indivisible Principle ever shining in you, you will become That."

Her parables and stories are an important medium for her message, always simple, always full of meaning. To wit: "Our surroundings greatly affect us. A parrot

raised in a church or temple will say God's name, but a parrot raised in a bar will always use vulgar language."

A Real-Life Guru

Ammachi has an intimate, motherly relationship with her closest disciples, working with them side-by-side in mundane daily tasks. In this way she discovers the most subtle character flaw needing adjustment. She then gives the appropriate corrective measures, often to the chagrin of the disciple. This personal approach is rather strict, and her disciples are strong as a result.

Not everyone is ready for such scrutiny, as the following story retold by Swami Amritananda Puri, illustrates. "Her utter simplicity often beguiles the unfamiliar person whose concept of a guru is that of one in an ivory tower, surrounded by scholastic disciples. The first brahmacharins were trained by Amma herself in every field of day-to-day life, from cooking to sweeping the yard and milking the cows. One such handiwork taught by Amma was to intertwine coconut leaves to thatch the hut which needed yearly renovation. We were busy with such work on one occasion. By noontime, when we were taking a break, we all had soot, dust and cobwebs all over. Though we noticed two well-dressed persons standing a few yards away closely watching us, our minds were set upon Amma and even more on the cup in her hands. They waited for some more time and then abruptly left. As soon as they left, Amma laughed aloud and said, `They came here looking for a jnani, a great guru. Finding me in this condition, they left, fully convinced that this is some crazy girl.'"

A Life of Divine Surrender

The daughter of a poor fisherman, Ammachi showed early signs of divinity. The birth itself, which was foreseen by a wandering sadhu, was painless for her mother (a joyful character who still lives in the ashram), and Ammachi did not cry, but beamed a happy smile. At six months she began speaking prayers and singing songs in praise of Krishna. Her fervor increased, and by age six she was found daily immersed in japa, devotional singing and quiet meditation. This estranged her from family and friends who did not understand. She quietly suffered hurtfulness at their hands, even physical abuse, always accepting her pain as a lesson from which to

grow. Taking refuge in her deep spirituality, she waited for her first devotees. In the mid-70s she had a series of profound visions and meditative experiences which firmly established her intimate relationship with the Divine Mother and set her on her present mission to "Give solace to suffering humanity." Her mission has matured into a dynamic global congregation. She runs an orphanage near her ashram for poor villagers, housing about 400. She has constructed hospitals in Bombay and Ernakulam and industrial and computer training centers to help poor students get vocational skills. She advocates the establishment of schools at every ashram to impart right religious education, stressing that, "the awakened man solves all his problems for himself and becomes a blessing to society." She actively tours the globe in a tireless routine of satsang and darshan held at most major cities, delivering divine love to all who come.

Ammachi has initiated eleven senior disciples into the holy order of sannyasa, including two sannyasinis. She has carefully followed tradition here by having Swami Dhruvananda of the Ramakrishna Order give the rites of sannyasa to Swami Amritaswarupananda, her first renunciate. Since then, Amritaswarupananda has performed the rites with Ammachi attending and giving diksha.

In 1993 she was named one of three presidents of Hinduism by the Parliament of the World's Religions in Chicago, USA. That same year Hinduism Today bestowed a well-deserved "Hindu of the Year" award upon her.

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Sidebar: Mother's Miracles

Text:

A 1988 biography of Ammachi by Swami Amritasvarupananda includes ninety pages of first-hand accounts of miraculous happenings experienced by devotees. Here are two brief excerpts.

A girl named Shayma lived nearby the ashram and suffered from breathing troubles. One day, she had a severe attack and was rushed to the hospital, but it was too late. The doctors declared her dead. The grandmother, overcome with grief and weeping aloud, carried the child to the temple and laid the body on the seat upon which Mother gives darshan. Mother was deeply immersed in devotional song in a nearby house when she suddenly left for the temple. Mother sat on the floor, took the child in her lap and meditated for a long time. Slowly, the child opened her eyes and revived.

Sri R. Reddiar of Quilon narrates: "A girl belonging to our family ran away from the house. We went to see the Holy Mother and told her about the missing girl. Mother said, `The girl will be back home seven days from today. You don't have to go anywhere searching for her.' Amma gave seven wicks to us and instructed us to light one each day saying, `When you light the last wick, the officials will inform you of her whereabouts.'

"Not being fully convinced, we ran here and there, but in vain. We were distressed and went again to Mother. But she chided us, `Why did you waste so much time and money when Mother has already told you what to do? You will get the girl back.'

"We had burned the wicks each day and on the seventh day, we lit the last one during the twilight hour. As it burned, the phone rang. It was answered and the message was given, `Your child is under the custody of the Madras Police. She had gone to a goldsmith to sell a gold ornament. The shopkeeper, feeling doubtful of her, informed the police.' Thus, exactly as foretold by the Holy Mother, the lost girl was found."

Sidebar: Man and Nature

Text:

excerpted from Mother's answers to questions on environmental issues presented by Mr. Sam La Budde, a leading environmentalist in the US. Ammachi shows a shrewd understanding of the root cause of the modern-day exploitation of nature.

"It is religion that helps a person maintain the awareness that he or she is not separate from nature. Without religion, mankind loses that awareness. Religion teaches us to love nature. In truth, the progress and prosperity of mankind depend solely on the good which man does for nature. Religion helps to maintain a harmonious relationship between human beings, between the individual and society and between man and nature. This is like the relationship between pinda-anda, the microcosm, and brahmanda, the macrocosm. Our great ancestors understood this. That is why they gave so much importance to nature worship in religious practices. The idea behind all religious achara, practice, was to closely associate human beings with nature. By establishing a loving relationship between man and nature they ensured both the balance of nature and the progress of the human race."