

Mother of all huggers showers us with the love drug

By Ruth Ostrow

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IT is said that hugging produces feel-good hormones. Just as the cuddle chemical -- oxytocin -- floods the body when we nurture a baby, so too is it now believed to be present when we fall in love, embrace friends and get intimate, according to The US News & World Report.

Dr Helen Fisher, a prominent anthropologist from Rutgers University in New York who wrote the book *Anatomy of Love*, says oxytocin helps us bond with partners as well as offspring. Oxytocin fills us with well-being, calm and a sense of peace. It has a narcotic effect.

Which is why I am thrilled to hear that one of the most famous huggers in the world, the revered Indian guru called Amma or Ammachi, "The Hugging Mother", is in Australia as part of her world tour.

Famed for her charity work, which has included providing 25,000 houses for the poor, and respected by international bodies such as the UN, her followers claim she is the embodiment of Shakti -- the Mother goddess.

Amma travels the globe hugging tens of thousands of people, taking them close to her body and rocking them in a bid to open them up to god.

Watching a video of her life, I notice that everyone who is embraced becomes blissed-out or bursts into tears. Whether chemically induced or not, the passionate emotion she elicits is a poignant reminder of how isolated, emotionally deprived and lonely so many people in the world feel. How desperately in need of a simple hug or stroke many are.

It is also a sad indictment of how removed we are from Mother.

In India the goddess is as important as the god. Hindus revere the feminine, worship Mother Earth, see divinity equally in male and female energy.

So it's not surprising that a female guru has emerged to fill a role that, in the West, would be the exclusive domain of men.

Indeed, so impressed was I with Amma when I first heard about her, that I travelled half way across India to find her. Sadly, I arrived at her ashram in Kerala only to discover she was not home. And here she is, come to visit me instead.

The hall in Brisbane where she will be appearing is filled with intense anticipation. Hundreds of followers await the Mother to come on stage.

Finally amidst the clapping and chanting she emerges -- smaller than I imagined, voluptuous, with a warm, smiling face. She sits humbly in front of us. A strange euphoria fills the room as she talks. Amma explains that we all are sparks of the divine. She is not a god. Rather a spark of divine light acknowledging the godliness in all of us. Thus she bows to us in homage.

She explains that hugging is her way of teaching people to feel the power of source. The feminine way is not the rational, academic way of the male clergy. It is about being tactile and loving.

She says she never tires of hugging.

"To give fills me up. The more love we give, the more love and rewards are bestowed upon us."

Then she begins to chant. When the singing finishes, Amma, or Ma, takes audience with the crowd, hugging each person who comes and kneels at her feet.

We are part of the stampede. People in front of us are crying, sobbing, shaking as she holds them.

Finally our turn comes. My husband goes first. I watch him trembling in her arms and wonder what is happening for him. He walks away before I have a chance to ask.

It is my turn. I am suddenly thrust against her ample bosom. She smells sweet like roses. She is rocking me and whispering things into my ear. And it's honestly one of the most exquisite, unburdening feelings I have ever felt. I feel the rush of bliss.

I'm a person who hugs a lot, yet there is something in this embrace beyond chemicals. I feel as if I'm merging with all things.

My husband, who is a cynical finance journalist, is wandering around in a daze.

"I left my body. I felt I suddenly become her. My heart opened up. I can't explain it. I can't explain it," he keeps saying in the car on the way home.

I know exactly what he means.

Chemicals or divine channelling? We have no answer. Biologists and scientists now say all forms of love can be boiled down to a chemical cocktail of amphetamines and opiates.

But does that explain the mystical specialness of love. And does it matter?

Days later, my husband and I still feel high, and charged with a healthy sense of well-being.

I think the most important thing we learned from the experience was this: Whatever one's spiritual belief is, love giving and receiving this potent elixir is still the closest thing to an ecstatic religious experience we, as humans, can ever have.

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