

Welcome to Amma's Centre in France





Making bread together at the Amma's Centre



Meditation in the bee sanctuary



Pottery exhibition in the park

Visitors' handbook & guidelines for community living

ONE GOLDEN RULE :

SHRADDHA, OR LOVING AWARENESS

Awareness and alertness, in a spirit of kindness towards oneself, others and one's surroundings

« Spirituality can be summed up in one word: «Shraddha» »

Amma

The information, explanations, and guidelines for community life given in this handbook provide a clear framework for the Centre and yourself, so that your stay is as rich and fulfilling as possible. Should you have any questions, please feel free to contact a member of the Welcome Team.



Amma's visit to the Centre Amma in 2011

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INTRODUCTION – PRESENTATION

Built as a manor house in the 13th century in a large park with adjoining fields and three ponds, LE PLESSIS consists of a farmhouse with outbuildings including stables, a sheep barn and storage barns.

This all adds up to around 3,000 sq m. of covered buildings on 6 hectares of land.

In May 2002, ETW-France acquired Le Plessis, and made it Mata Amritanandamayi's (Amma) official ashram in France.

As part of a local heritage circuit, this superb fortified farmhouse is gradually being restored to historic conservation standards, and, at the same time, being converted into a model ecological site.

Who is Amma?

Amma is a leading humanitarian and spiritual figure from India, who has received worldwide recognition for her action and her message of peace. She has received many awards, in particular the Gandhi-King Prize for Non-Violence.

The essence of spiritual life consists in perceiving the underlying unity in all that is. In this respect, Amma's teaching is universal.

Whenever asked what is her religion, she answers "Love". Amma asks no one to believe, nor change their culture; she merely asks us to seek our real nature and to have faith in ourselves.

Amma's dedication to serving others has given birth to ETW. EMBRACING THE WORLD is a global network of charitable projects conceived by the Mata Amritanandamayi Math (an NGO with special consultative status to the United Nations Social and Economic Council).

Aerial view of the Centre



The purpose of Amma's Centre in France

The Centre offers activities inspired by Amma's message of peace and open-heartedness, to enable each and everyone - women and men of all origins - to feel supported in their search for harmony within themselves, with others and with nature.

This Centre encourages the development of values and qualities such as tolerance, supportiveness, ecological awareness and a sense of responsibility.

Amma's Centre is the headquarters of ETW-France, the French branch of the international NGO founded by Amma, Embracing the World. The organisation includes 5 departments: Values and Education (teaching, seminars), Humanitarian action (e.g. tsunami aid, community outreach), Ecology (multiple green initiatives with GreenFriends), Heritage and Youth.

The Centre offers a wide range of activities and programmes, so that everyone can select the ones best suited to them.

The Centre is part of the «Ecosites Sacrés» network, which brings together communities and sites from different spiritual traditions under the banner of ecology, for their mutual enhancement while remaining respectful of each member's specific character.

The Centre is open to anyone, and any activity in harmony with its purpose and community lifestyle.



At the helm of the Centre

At Amma's request, the Centre has been directed since its opening in 2002 by Brahmacharini Dipamrita Chaitanya, who coordinates all activities in Amma's name in France.

Bri Dipamrita made her first trip to India in 1971. Deeply stirred by the country's spiritual wealth, she spent the subsequent years deepening her spiritual search, going to meet Ma Anandamayi, Arnaud Desjardins, Sri Desikar, and many Tibetan lamas in exile.

Bri. Dipamrita met Amma in Madras (Chennai) in India in 1988; from then on, she gave up her work as a teacher of physics and yoga to go and live near Amma and serve her. It was in 1977 that she received the Brahmacharya, the traditional initiation in India of renunciate students.

Amma then sent her to lead programmes in Europe for several months from 1998 to 2002 when the first Amma Centre was opened in Europe and entrusted to her care.

Governance

The Centre is divided into a number of hubs, each with its own coordinator. A general coordinator is in charge of making sure these sections work together harmoniously.

This mode of operation ensures the fair distribution and organisation of the various activities and responsibilities.

The governance resource kit (available at the welcome desk) explains the Centre's "technical" operating rules, together with the tools and procedures for running constructive meetings, making consensual decision-making and applying decisions.



YOUR ARRIVAL AT THE CENTRE

The Welcome Desk is toward the end of the left hand building



1/ Welcome desk

The first thing to do when you arrive is to go to the welcome desk to register your arrival, find out which room you're in, and pay your contribution. In the reception area, you'll find a notice board and various documents about the Centre, its programmes and events, and about Amma and her work.

To help us make sure everything runs smoothly for our visitors, please inform reception of your arrival and departure dates and times 3 days in advance. If you have any special needs, we need to know them in advance too.

For the sake of hygiene, please cover your mattress with a sheet, and put a pillow-case on your pillow (see section on "Services" below if you have not brought bed linen). Also, please do not move mattresses or blankets out of the room.

NB : you are responsible for your personal belongings, your papers, money and valuables.

2/ Your room

Make yourself at home. In each room you will find a document "Le Dharma de la Chambre". Please read it carefully on arrival. The men's rooms and women's rooms are separate, by day and by night. Families need to find out from the welcome desk what shared rooms are available.

Kindly inform the desk of any problems you may encounter.

NB: Safety standards require that we stick to a set number of sleeping spaces, so you are asked to make sure that you sleep where you were allocated to.

The Fauvette room in the public access wing



The Ecological Bungalow near the kitchen garden



A TYPICAL DAY AT THE CENTRE

1/ Usual daily schedule

6-7 a.m.	Archana (reciting the 1000 Names of the Divine Mother)
7 a.m.	Individual practice of IAM meditation, or other meditation or yoga exercises
8.-8:30 a.m.	Breakfast in silence
8:50	House meeting for organisation/information
9-12 a.m.	Seva (selfless service - meditation in action)
12.15 a.m.	Meditation in the temple (guided by Bri Dipamrita, or in silence)
12:30-1:15 p.m.	Lunch in silence
2-5 p.m.	Optional seva or free activity
5-6 p.m.	Tea (at 4 p.m. on Saturdays and Sundays)
6:15-7:30 p.m.	Bhajans (devotional songs), Arati and prayer for peace.
8 p.m.	Supper. Conversation allowed, including with Bri Dipamrita
8:30-10:30 p.m.	Free evening
11 p.m.	Silence please, the Ashram is asleep! Ashram in silence until the following morning (kindly respect the slumber of your brothers or sisters)

Saturdays - 5:15 p.m.: Satsang or questions & answers with Bri Dipamrita or alternative programme when she's away.

Sundays 5:15 p.m.- Class in devotional songs.

NB: Rounds are carried out morning 5:30 and night 22:30 to open and close the Centre. If you go out, either be back by 22:30 or inform someone please.

2/ The bell

The day unfolds to the rhythm of the bell which signals the start of each activity. It is rung 8 times in the course of a normal day.

In community life, time-keeping is important so that things run smoothly.

The bell also provides an opportunity to practice attentiveness.

(read 'The bell' document on the notice board in the reception area).



3/ The morning house meeting and seva

At 8:50 a.m. everyone gathers in the foyer for the morning meeting, known as "the seva meeting". It is during this moment of togetherness that crucial information about the day's schedule is given, and the various tasks are shared out between the participants.

In the course of a usual day, each member is invited to participate in morning seva. Tasks are diverse: cooking, gardening, housework, sewing, etc. and each person shares in the life of the Centre according to their abilities. Seva is often an opportunity to acquire new skills, or to share them with others. It's also one of the spiritual exercises that Amma particularly recommends: selfless service in awareness (see the booklet on spiritual practices).

4/ Mealtimes

Each mealtime, preceded by a prayer in Sanskrit (of which you'll find the translation in the dining room), is a moment to nourish awareness and fraternal communion, even silently.

Meals served at the Centre are ovo-lacto-vegetarian and home-cooked. A proportion of the vegetables are grown in the Centre's organic vegetable garden. If you require a special diet, you need to inform the Centre when you register to discuss what can be provided.

Breakfast and lunch are taken in silence (see the paragraph below on silence). Anyone wishing to have conversations during these meals (with family or visiting friends) may go to the library or outdoors. Be aware that some people may wish to remain in silence, so try not to disturb them. Supper time, on the contrary, is a time for dialogue, especially with Amma's representative: feel free to go and sit next to her.



Silent meal in the park

5/ Afternoon activities

Seva is optional in the afternoon. Everyone is free to use the time as they wish, provided that activities are in harmony with the purpose of the Centre. Here are a few suggestions: walks in nature, singing practice, reading, study of texts, meditation, silent retreat, yoga, or just friendly conversation. The library (which includes a selection of videos), the foyer, Parvati and Saraswati rooms, as well as the temple are at your disposal (see section on the Centre's Dharma).

6/ The practices

Today, neurosciences have proven that regular practice of yoga and meditation produces many benefits. These practices have existed for thousands of years, especially in India, and have enabled millions of practitioners to discover the limitlessness of human potential! Indeed, the difficulties we experience are caused by a lack of mastery and understanding of our mind and emotions. These difficulties can make us 'lose it' or prevent us from acting rightly. Mastery can be acquired by proper training of the mind.

A day at the Centre is punctuated by 4 moments of special practice, in which you are invited to join:

- morning recitation of the 1000 names connects us to the Supreme Consciousness of which, in reality, we are but one manifestation (form).
- performing seva with awareness and a spirit of selflessness helps us to see how we function, and to purify our heart.
- a midday meditation helps us to develop the witness, and enhance our awareness.
- at the end of the afternoon, singing helps us let go of the mind, open our heart, and express our thirst for beauty, love and light.

Detailed explanations on how and why we practice are available at the desk and in the temple in the booklet on spiritual practices.



Bhajans during a spiritual retreat

THE CENTRE'S ESSENCE AND GUIDING PRINCIPLES (DHARMA)

1/ The temple: a space for reflection, the heart of the ashram

The temple is the heart of the ashram and at the heart of our sadhana (spiritual practice).

Silence is required in this sacred space, except when there are collective spiritual practices taking place.

The temple is for silent meditation, prayer or reading. No yoga, no IAM, nor playing musical instruments or singing. This space must remain available at all times for anyone seeking a quiet moment, or time out to get through a rough patch.

Please be careful not to make noise during group practices as you enter or leave the temple - no need to give a hug when greeting someone, save it for another time, a smile will do.

To preserve the silence around this space, it is just as important to be attentive and avoid making noise outside the door, in the stairway, in the hallway, or below the windows...Shraddha!

Life sometimes brings up challenging moments. Certain emotions or tensions may surface at the Centre. If we try to escape them in different ways, they will not be able to teach us anything. Let us find a way to remain open, and welcome them, rather than cutting short a process of liberation. Our transformation is intimately linked to the way in which we go through these difficult times. The benefit we derive from our stays depends above all on us and the intensity of our determination to awaken. "Awaken, my children..." Amma tells us.

For a better understanding of the importance of silence and the temple for our inner freedom, you may consult the booklet on spiritual practices.

Group spiritual practice in the temple



Group discussion in the library



2/ The library and the foyer

These areas are available in the evenings and afternoons if you are not doing seva. You will find here a collection of books and films, plus a wide range of literature as well as a computer. The foyer is a place where silence is expected for relaxation, reading, and study by the fireside. If you use the piano or the television in the library, please ensure that you do not disturb the welcome desk, or carry on watching past 22:30. Please remove your shoes before entering the library; however, this is not required for the foyer.

Be sure to keep these spaces tidy, and remember to switch off lights and appliances. These rooms may be used for meetings or workshops.

3/ The multi-purpose areas

There are different halls that can be made available: the Parvati and Saraswati rooms and/or the big Amrita Hall (summertime). Yoga, or any other physical exercise, and meditation, can be practised there. Open in the morning before breakfast, during the afternoon and in the evening, these halls can also be used for meetings or workshops in the context of ETW-France activities.



4/ The kitchen

Only people doing seva are allowed in the kitchen. In compliance with French legislation on health and safety in institutions open to the public, strict regulations apply to everyone in the kitchen without exception. These regulations will be explained to you at the start of your seva.

Apart from the necessary practical exchanges, seva in the kitchen is carried out in silence as far as possible.

"Many people are going to eat what you have prepared. If you let your mind wander while you are cooking, that will have a negative effect on them. However, if you chant your mantra, the food will benefit them." Amma

Warm beverages are available at all times in the tea-room next to the dining room.

5/ Care and non-wastage

Shraddha is also about taking care not to waste resources.

- ➔ **Electricity:** each person takes care to switch off the lights when they are the last to leave a room, and also to switch off appliances after use (computer, photocopy machine, printer, video player etc,)
- ➔ **Heating:** when the heating is on in a room, all doors and windows must be kept shut. When airing, be sure to turn the radiators down to 1, and close the windows again within a few minutes! 19°C is enough for daytime. At night, as the French environment and energy regulation agency (ADEME) recommends, a temperature of 16° or 17° even improves the quality of sleep, and is healthier.
- ➔ **Food:** we can all contribute to minimal waste by only helping ourselves to what we can actually eat. Let us be attentive when we help ourselves, knowing that you can always come back for more.
- ➔ **Maintenance and repairs:** through inattention, or impatience, and even brusque gestures, objects get damaged and broken. Let us develop such a quality of attentiveness and awareness (that's where silence during seva is helpful) to prevent damage if it can be avoided. Each visitor is asked to take responsibility for what they might have damaged by replacing or repairing it. Kindly report any damage to help us take care of this unique and precious place.
These various points may be brought up again during your stay and your cooperation would be appreciated.



The kitchen garden (curate's garden)

COMMUNAL LIVING AT THE CENTRE AND GETTING ALONG TOGETHER

1/ Being centred and encouraging silence

Being self-aware and attentive towards others is a fundamental aspect of life at the Centre and helps to create favourable conditions for contemplation. Silence helps us to sharpen our awareness and our perception of the present moment. So, we ask everybody to participate in making this a calm and peaceful place.

Ashram life also has its moments of fun and festivities, consciously chosen and experienced.

Certain residents or visitors may have chosen to remain withdrawn and to wear a 'silence' badge. Please help them to respect their choice.

"We are so used to talking, that the mind will tempt us into chatting about pointless things. In fact, true maunam (silence) consists in talking moderately while controlling the mind. However, since it is our natural tendency to chatter mindlessly without any control, we should observe total silence to give our mind the necessary training." Amma



A moment of refocusing during a workshop

2/ Sense of the sacred, our connection with the Centre

Amma has visited the Centre on several occasions. Spiritual practices are performed here daily. The Centre has been refurbished, partly thanks to the effort and dedication of volunteers, with a view to transforming a simple farmhouse into a place of spiritual renewal, as a symbol of our own transformation. Each detail has been carefully thought out to serve as a reminder of the Centre's purpose and to connect us to it. This is what makes it important and sacred! So let us develop a sense of respect and sacredness towards the Centre, thereby contributing to its true beauty, at once harmonious and sober, and a doorway to the eternal.

Let's keep the centre clean and tidy, and do our best to create a joyful and harmonious atmosphere here. A human being is able to transform a place, and a place can transform a human being. Do not lose sight of the hope that brought us here, and let us love and respect this place and its mission.

N.B. Programmes and events proposed by the Centre are chosen according to specific criteria. No parallel activities (treatments, massages or meditations) can be proposed to or by the visitors staying here.

To avoid any confusion, the Centre does not promote or advertise any workshops or conferences which are not part of its programme.

3/ Code of conduct and expected standards of behaviour towards others

Living in a community brings rich discoveries and shared experiences, and helps bring to light our potential and talents. It is also inevitably a source of interpersonal tensions and occasional conflicts. We should welcome such events as opportunities to work on ourselves, to practice tolerance, detachment and discrimination. Listening to others and showing an interest in them helps us to open our hearts and experience the joy of sharing.

Let's strive to nurture overall well-being and thereby uphold the Centre's purpose at all times.

Amma speaks of her ashrams as being like washing machines which spin rocks with sharp edges...over time, and thanks to the rubbing together, the angles get worn down and the rocks become nice smooth pebbles.

To assist us in this process, we have drawn up a code of conduct on expected standards of behaviour, which can be found in the governance resource kit available at the welcome desk.



A time for sharing over supper

4/ The relationship with Amma's envoy

Amma appoints a person to represent her and to run the Centre. Amma's envoy (currently Brahmacharini Dipamrita Chaitanya) ensures that the Centre stays true to its purpose and to Amma's instructions.

As the spiritual representative, she is also there to guide people towards a better understanding of Amma's teachings, through the satsangs, the spiritual programmes and all other useful means.

To some people, she may come across as rather demanding, and disturb their ego which is used to getting its own way: yet another opportunity for furthering spiritual understanding and growth.

The essence of the envoy's role lies in the relationship he or she has with Amma, in the responsibility and trust Amma vests in the envoy. Thus, the role is sacred above all else. Be aware of that.

Bri. Dipamrita is available to answer your questions:

- during the evening meal,
- during the Saturday afternoon "Question and Answer" sessions, and during the spiritual programmes.
- you may also take an appointment with her for an individual talk (see the procedure in the reception area).

5/ Social familiarity and social courtesy ('Tu' or 'Vous')

It is up to each person to assess what is the right attitude and avoid imposing on others an unwanted degree of familiarity, whether by using the familiar 'tu', or by hugging them.

Let us bear in mind that marks of friendship ought to be shown consciously, not automatically.

As for Bri Dipamrita, she wishes to employ the more formal 'vous' between herself and all persons with whom she was not already using 'tu' before.

Amma sent her to serve in her French Ashram. This is done to assist us in maintaining a mutually respectful distance and to remind us of our overall Golden rule : shraddha-awareness.

6/ Children

The centre is open to all. This means that both children and babies are welcome.

They may take part in the different activities according to their ability.

During their stay, children remain entirely under the responsibility of their parents and should never be left without an adult being present. Please be watchful because there are areas that present a certain hazard (ponds, building work, workshops...)

The Saraswati room is suited to children; there, you can find reading books, comic books, colouring books, videos and games. Parents are asked to ensure that times and areas reserved for silence are respected (the temple, complete silence during meditation, meals) and also quiet times (bedrooms, meetings, etc.)

Children on the swings in the courtyard



Indian dance performance



The entrance to a beehive in the bee sanctuary



A blue tit returning to her nesting box in the park

GUIDELINES FOR COMMUNAL DISCERNMENT

1/ Cell phones and computers

It is recommended that cell phone use be kept to a minimum, and these must be turned off during group activities. Please do not use them inside the buildings to avoid disturbing the atmosphere and the residents. Step outside to make your calls.

In bad weather, the library and dining room (outside of mealtimes!) are available.

The use of laptop computers is allowed except during the times for seva, in the library, the foyer, or the dining room.

2/ Pets

Pets are not permitted anywhere within the Centre grounds, and this includes all outside areas, especially the central courtyard, the half-moon pool, the parks and vegetable gardens.

3/ Alcohol and tobacco

Smoking, drinking alcohol, and use of drugs are all strictly forbidden at the Centre.

Smokers are asked to go outside of the ashram premises. There are three places where you may smoke:

- near the small south-western tower
- on the path along the east side (north of the vegetable garden);
- outside the big hanger.

4/ Dress etiquette

The very purpose of this Centre implies compliance to certain rules with respect to clothing. The key is modesty and decency. It is best to have your shoulders covered.

No swimsuits please (except at the half-moon pool!)

Shorts are allowed outdoors, but legs should be covered in the temple, and if possible during mealtimes.

Beside these few rules, each person should ask themselves whether their clothing is appropriate. Inside the temple, clean clothes and a decent sitting position are required.

Meditation and conversation in the park



The temple door at the Amma Centre



5/ Cars

Cars must be parked in one of the two parking areas of the Centre - either outside the wall near the north gate, or in the inside parking on the north-east of the courtyard.

Temporary parking is allowed at other places for specific purposes such as loading or car-pooling.

Please drive at a maximum speed of 20km/h within the grounds of the Centre.

All cars remain totally under their owner's responsibility.

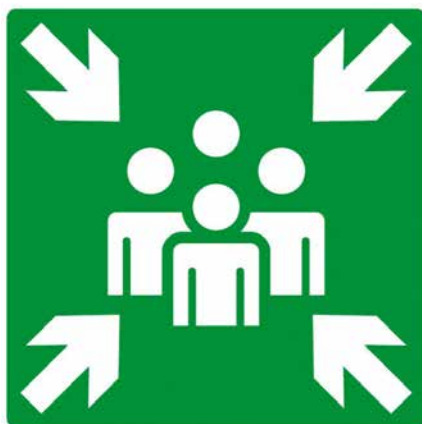
6/ Safety rules

There are some basic safety rules we ask you to follow:

- never use open flames (candles, incense, etc.) in the bedrooms, WC, passages...
- on building sites, wear and ensure the use of Personal Protective Equipment whenever necessary, and be methodical about tidying up all dangerous tools.
- in the event of a fire alarm, the assembly point is in the centre of the inner courtyard, around the round tower.

In case of injury, a first aid kit is available in the library.

Ambulance (SAMU): Dial 15 / Fire brigade: Dial 18 (see a person in charge)



Assembly Point sign in the central courtyard

7/ In case of sickness

Visitors who are sick and possibly contagious are asked not to come to the Centre to avoid infecting other visitors.

To take best care of visitors, the Amma Centre asks anyone who gets sick during their stay to consult a doctor, or get one to visit if they are unable to go out. Please inform the welcome desk who can assist you with this.

The doctor may ask the visitor to return home if they are able to travel, to avoid infecting other people.

Because each person is responsible for their own health, anyone who is sick and wishes to remain at the centre Amma is requested follow the doctor's prescription for an effective recovery.

Doctors:

- Dr Tallet, 4 rue de la gare, Courville sur Eure (02 37 23 20 79)
- Dr Pouget, 1 bis rue Pont de l'Aumône, Pontgouin (02 37 37 43 69)



Wearing helmets is compulsory on building sites

SERVICES AT THE CENTRE

The centre offers several services :

➔ **BED LINEN:** in case you forgot to bring them, you can hire sheets and a pillow-case at the welcome desk

Fitted under sheet 2 euros

Top sheet 2 euros

Pillow-case 1 euro

A full set of bed linen: 5 euros

Towels 1 euro each

➔ Laundry: 1.5 euro

➔ Internet : for personal use if absolutely necessary, WIFI internet access.

Ask the welcome desk for the code – 1 euro per day

Use limited to the stated times

➔ Telephone : in case of an emergency, ask at the welcome desk

➔ Carpool to/from the train station at Courville-sur-Eure :

A service is available for pick up and drop off at the station for a contribution of 4 euros per trip, divided by the number of passengers (for more than 3 people, a contribution of 1.5 euro will be asked)

Give at least 3 days' notice of your arrival time

Courville Taxis : 02 37 23 33 19 or 02 37 23 26 76



Laying a brick path for the kitchen garden



The 12:15 meditation in the temple



A Tai Chi class during a youth weekend



HAVE A GOOD STAY !

