



The Skeptics SA guide to Breatharianism

In most religions self-starvation is associated with spiritual enlightenment. From ancient times mystics have claimed it produced ecstatic experiences and a closeness to their god, and it is true that prolonged fasting can produce altered states of consciousness, even hallucinations, and this may explain the origins of such beliefs.

However, while ascetics live on very small amounts of food, they never stop eating completely. Even Simon Stylites, the (in)famous Christian ascetic, of whom it was claimed that for forty years before Lent, ate nothing at all, did, at other times, eat a small handful of dried peas each day. Deluded as they might have been, they were not crazy enough to stop eating completely. Yet, despite the obviousness of this fact, some people believe it is possible to live without eating.

This belief is called Inedia, and those who adopt this practice are called Inedics. More recently 'Breatharianism' has come to be the more widely used term to describe this practice, based upon the Inedic claim that they breathe in a life-giving energy from the air, hence the name 'Breatharianism.'

It is a common teaching of many religious groups that there exists certain cosmic 'ener-

gies' that give life to all living creatures. One of these energies is called prana. Often called the 'cosmic life-force', it is an important part of Ayurvedic and Tantric Buddhist teachings.¹ However, while they teach that prana gives life to humans and that a steady flow maintains good health, neither group has ever claimed that it is possible for humans to live on prana alone. Despite this, some groups and individuals in the West have adapted aspects of these teachings, and twisted them to support their own bizarre beliefs.

Breatharianism is one of these. It has taken certain Ayurvedic and Theosophical teachings on prana and 'adapted' them to support their claims that humans do not really need to eat, that prana alone will supply all the nourishment a person will ever need. This strange belief originated most recently with Wiley Brooks, who in the 70s claimed he had not eaten for twenty years (he was once 'caught' buying Twinkies in a 7-11 store), and has been adopted by others such as Ahmen Heaven of Hawaii² and Ellen Greve of Brisbane, Australia.

Greve, better known by her 'spiritual' name, Jasmuheen, has turned this nonsense into a major money making enterprise. Although

she claims she was inspired by St Germain, a legendary 16th century figure (claimed to be one of the first Breatharians), and has combined elements from Mysticism, Theosophy, Ayurvedic, Tantric Buddhism, the 'I Am' philosophy, and New Age teachings into her own particular style of Breatharianism. She is described as "...truly a brilliant example of beauty, mental power, and human potential³ and presented as an individual of extraordinary abilities, who has attained an extremely high level of physical, mental and spiritual development, ... part of a team that has pioneered and successfully implemented a specific process to allow her physical body to be 'pranically fed.'" As of mid-1993, she has taken her physical nourishment purely from liquid Light.⁴

According to her own sources she has studied Metaphysics, Eastern philosophy, New Age thought, Reiki I & II, and Magnified Healing. She is described as 'an experienced metaphysical counselor and channeler'⁵, and is claimed to be in contact with the Ascended Ones.⁶ Because of her advanced spirituality she is able to live on nothing but prana ('liquid light'), with the occasional cup of herbal tea, and a biscuit.

According to her literature, anyone who receives her training, offered at great cost

through books and lectures, can also attain a similar level of spiritual advancement and live completely without food. Of course, when others try to duplicate her feats, they soon fail, and several people have died following her guidelines. However, Jasmuheen disavows any responsibility for their deaths, attributing them simply to a lack of faith.

As the spokesperson for the Movement of an Awakened Positive Society, she is presented as an extraordinary guru, with answers to major economic problems that have defeated all previous experts; She claims to have hit upon a solution to world hunger — that in time, we can all learn to live on air alone.⁷ In this way the starving Third World inhabitants could learn that they really do not need to eat; instead of wasting time growing food, they could devote their activity to spiritual progress. Even better, by no longer wasting vital funds to import food, they could significantly decrease their foreign debts.

So what can one make of Jasmuheen's claims? To begin with, Jasmuheen was not the first to claim to be able to live without food or water. There have been others who made similar claims, however, when tested all were exposed as frauds. It is worthwhile comparing Jasmuheen with one of these, Sarah Jacob, who was born 12 May 1857 at Llandyfeil, Wales, the daughter of simple uneducated farmers.

In February 1867 Sarah complained of stomach pains. These were followed by a number of fits that lasted over a month. Sarah was unconscious for most of that time, eating very little. By August her daily food intake was down

to four small cups of rice or oats mixed with milk. By October it was said she was eating only a teaspoon of food each day, and finally, it was claimed that on 10 October she stopped eating completely.⁸

The local vicar, Rev Evan Jones, who ministered to Sarah until her death, initially suspected fraud. He impressed upon her parents the dangers of any deceit, but they insisted there was no fraud, that Sarah had really stopped eating, and that this miracle had been brought about by God. Despite misgivings, on 19 February 1869 he wrote to the newspaper, *The Welshman*, suggesting that the situation was worthy of medical investigation.

In May, a public meeting was called to adopt the vicar's suggestions, and several local men were appointed to maintain a watch on Sarah. For fourteen days, from 22 March to 5 April, they kept her under observation, and at a meeting on the 7 April reported that none had seen Sarah eat.

Unfortunately the surveillance had been poorly conducted. There were no restrictions on the movement of Sarah's parents or her six year old sister (who all slept in the same room). Even worse, observers had been forbidden to search her bed. There had been lapses in the watches: observers fell asleep, some left before the end of their shift, several had consumed alcohol on watch and one had been drunk.

On 30 August 1869 she was visited by Dr Fowler (later to publish a book on the matter)⁹, despite not having eaten for so long, he was surprised to note that her face

was plump, her cheeks rosy, her eyes, "bright and sparkling", her muscular development appeared to be normal, and she had a reasonable layer of fat on her body. He concluded that Sarah suffered 'simulative hysteria' with a tendency for fasting, what today we would call Anorexia.

He reported these findings in a letter to *The Times*. A second public meeting was called at which time it was agreed to conduct the investigation properly, and to use four trained female nurses to properly supervise Sarah. Sarah's parents and sister were moved out of the room, which was also cleared of all unnecessary furniture, and a plain iron bed replaced the former bedhead.

Now, only the nurses and immediate family were permitted near Sarah, and when family members approached Sarah, they were carefully searched for food.

Other precautions were implemented. It was known that other frauds of this type had used accomplices who gave them towels or cloths to suck that had previously been soaked in gravy, milk, or arrowroot, and then, after being dried, they appeared like a normal towel or cloth. Another very common ruse was to have an accomplice pass food from their mouths while kissing them. Caution was taken to prevent such ruses being used.

Now, only the nurses were permitted to use towels on Sarah, while her parents and sister was strictly forbidden to kiss her, a practice that had formerly been quite common, especially between Sarah and her sister.

The watch began on 9 December. It was immediately noted that Sarah passed urine several times, and defecated once. Under the secure supervision Sarah began to quickly deteriorate, and soon displayed signs of mental and physical agitation. By 3:00 am on the 16th her lips and mouth were dry and parched, and she was extremely distressed. At 11:00 am the vicar pleaded with her parents to discharge the nurses and allow Sarah to eat. They refused, unwilling to accept the possibility that starvation could possibly be the cause of Sarah's illness¹⁰. By the afternoon it was clear that Sarah was dying, but her parents still remained unconvinced and all pleas to halt the test had no effect on them, for they expected she would miraculously recover.

At 3:30 pm the next day Sarah died of starvation. It was obvious that her claims had been false, and that she had previously existed on small amounts of food passed by her sister while being kissed or handed to her under the blankets.

Like Sarah, Jasmuheen was put to the test and just like Sarah she failed: the only difference was that modern medical ethics did not allow the test to go to the same extremes as those experienced by Sarah.

In 1999 Jasmuheen agreed to be tested by 'Sixty Minutes'. Both parties agreed to test conditions, and Jasmuheen was accommodated in a motel room, provided with water, but under strict observation. Within a day she was showing adverse physical signs. She blamed this upon the proximity of the motel to a main

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road, which she claimed, restricted the amount of nutrients in the air. 'Sixty Minutes' moved her to a motel out in the country, where the air was pristine. She remained there for three days continuing to deteriorate. She was dehydrated, haggard, her pulse had doubled, and she was on the verge of a breakdown. Fearing irreparable kidney damage Dr Berris Wink urged her to end the test. On that basis 'Sixty Minutes' humanely ended the test.

While morally this was the only decision they could have made, it was obvious that such a decision would invalidate the whole purpose of the test, for, as this author predicted, it would not be long before Jasmuheen would be claiming the 'Sixty Minutes' test as a personal victory. This is precisely what has happened: she now claims the test proved that her theories work, conveniently overlooking the fact that she was on the verge of serious organ failure.

Facts are soon forgotten; besides what good are facts in the face of implacable belief? Her followers believe so strongly in her abilities that, even if they were to see the video, they would refuse to accept the facts, claiming it to be fraudulent, that it had been manipulated to make her look bad.

It would be fine if only Jasmuheen, like gurus of old, went out into the desert to harangue the occasional passerby. Unfortunately, modern technology enables her to reach a worldwide audience of the naive and credulous: those who inhabit the fringe world of alternative therapies and New Age ideas are the ones at risk. Look at the facts — Jasmuheen herself

has demonstrated that her own claims do not work — what further evidence is required?

Laurie Eddie

Notes

- 1 For more details on other forms of 'energy', see Skeptics brochure *Mystical Healing Energies*.
- 2 This is actually the name he uses. He can be found on the Web at <AhmenHeaven@aol.com>
- 3 <www.rawfood.com/breatharian.html>
- 4 Jasmuheen <www.rawfood.com/jasmuheen.html>
- 5 Jasmuheen, op cit
- 6 The 'I AM' movement claimed certain mortals, (including Jesus, St. Germain and others), had gone through several incarnations to achieve a transcendental state. It was claimed that they now worked through human representatives, delivering a secret knowledge, an idea that Jasmuheen appears to have adopted. Such claims were not original, HP Blavatsky claimed to be inspired by similar beings, called 'Mahatmas' or 'the Hidden Masters' who lived in Tibet.
- 7 All they need is the air ... <news.bbc.co.uk/hi/english/uk/newsid_454000/454313.stm>
- 8 William A. Hammond, *Spiritualism and Allied Causes and Conditions of Nervous Derangement*, New York; G.P Putnam's Sons, 1876

9 *A complete History of the Welsh Fasting Girl with Comments thereon, and Observations on Death from Starvation*, London, 1871.

10 The parents seemed to have been innocent dupes in the whole affair, having complete faith in all that Sarah claimed. They were both convicted of manslaughter, and imprisoned. Her father received twelve months and her mother six months, both with hard labour.

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