



Don't Try This at Home

Some of the most astonishing feats ever accomplished (or supposedly accomplished) by men are the incredible demonstrations of Indian fakirs and gurus. The word *fakir* often brings to mind the image of a thin, old Indian man, lying on a bed of nails, walking on hot coals or accomplishing any other kind of apparently impossible demonstration. It is said that years of practice and meditation are needed in order to master these peculiar abilities and that they are precluded from mere mortals.

Since these are just the kind of claims that provoke the curiosity of people like myself and my friend Luigi Garlaschelli, a chemist at the University of Pavia and a noted expert on religiously related paranormal claims, a few years ago we decided that we were going to test some of the fakir demonstrations.

The episode that sparked our curiosity was a meeting with famed Indian skeptic Basava Premanand. Premanand, who was born in Calcutta in 1930, is an Indian magician and leader of the Indian Skeptics; he has devoted his abilities and full time work to the investigation of supernatural claims in India and the subsequent revelation of the tricks and frauds he found. CICAP (the Italian Committee for the Investigation

of Claims of the Paranormal) has twice invited Premanand to Italy in order to present his work to the Italian public. Luigi and I spent hours with him discussing Indian fakirs and gurus; he is a very likeable fellow, kind and helpful in

unfortunately not one of them was authentic, they were all accomplished by trickery."

"What kind of trickery?" we asked.

"You see, there are four different ways to obtain a 'miracle': by sleight of

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Luigi Garlaschelli holds a flaming torch for a demonstration.

all of his descriptions and has a good sense of humor, especially when relating some of the most bizarre episodes he happened to be involved in.

"Have you ever seen a real miracle?" we asked him.

His response: "I've seen a lot, but

hand, by the use of chemical compounds, by mechanical means, and, finally, using some little-known facts about the human body."

Premanand then went on to describe all of the tricks he found and that we subsequently put in practice.

We asked him how he became interested in such phenomena. "When I was a kid," Premanand told us, "I believed in miracles. I was fascinated by stories of magic powers and yogis. Being a Hindu boy, I too wanted to possess these powers and so I set forth

Massimo Polidoro is an investigator of the paranormal, author, lecturer, and co-founder and head of CICAP, the Italian skeptics group.

looking for a guru willing to teach me. My search took me to various gurus: among the first was Swami Sivananda Maharaj, then the only living disciple of Ramakrishna Parmahansa, the guru that

into some sort of Occidental disciples of Premanand.

Here, for your enjoyment, are some very impressive feats that may give the impression that one is a "human

of the information contained in these pages. *In other words do not try this at home!* We discuss them for *informational purposes only*.

While yogis kept explaining to others how to obtain perfect health, they themselves had various kinds of health problems.

claimed he had seen God and had shown It to his disciples. I went to the Swami and asked him to show me God, exactly like Parmahansa had shown It to him; he confessed he hadn't really seen It. In those days, furthermore, I observed a recurring fact: while yogis kept on explaining to others how to obtain perfect health, they themselves had various kinds of health problems: rheumatisms, liver deficits, asthma, diabetes, cancer. . . . I asked one of the gurus about this and he said: 'I could instantly be healthy if I want to, but I am voluntarily paying for the sins I committed in a previous life.' It was quite clear even then that my attitude was not welcome and, usually, when I started questioning what I saw I was inevitably asked to leave the temple."

Premanand, who is also the author of thirty books in malayalam (the language of his country) and five in English, told us of his ultimate goal.

"My desire is to build a research center in India where all the miracles and psychic phenomena will be exhibited and explained with a library on religion, magic, science, etc. But this costs money and, unfortunately, I cannot conjure up money from thin air!"

It was right after meeting this very peculiar and inspiring man that we decided to put his suggestions to practical use and see if we could turn ourselves

salamander," a fireproof man or woman! Premanand taught us these demonstrations and, since we ourselves were able to perform them, we think that anyone, with due care and preparation, could be able to present them. Before going any further, however, you should take note that we strongly discourage any attempt to reproduce the demonstrations described here, unless you are being helped by some expert in the field, and that we cannot be held responsible for anything arising from an improper use



Famed Indian skeptic Basava Premanand "eats" fire.

Playing with Fire

Any demonstration that involves fire has quite a strong impact on the lay public, since anyone knows from childhood the kind of threat it represents. However, if handled very carefully and if one takes all the necessary precautions, it is possible to demonstrate feats that appear to be more impressive and dangerous than they really are.

It is possible, for example, to light a torch and pass it close to the skin without getting burned. How? Well, first of all you prepare the torch: you need a wooden stick about an inch thick; wrap a rope quite a few times around one end of the stick and then immerse this end in kerosene. Let the excess drip off and then light the rope with a lighter or a match. With kerosene you obtain quite a big flame, with dark smoke, that you can pass under your forearm without burning your skin (though your hair probably will get burned). Always keep the flame in motion and never stop it close to the skin. You can start by moving the flame from your elbow and then finish by passing under your hand and finally away.

Fire-eating

You don't really "eat" fire, but you can put a flame in your mouth without getting burned. You need a torch built as described above and some kerosene. Immerse the torch in kerosene and then light it. Again, let the excess kerosene drip off before you attempt your demonstration. Tilt your head backward, open your mouth and slightly breath out: never breath in! Put the torch in your mouth, without rushing but also without hesitation: instantly close your mouth. You won't feel any pain and the torch will extinguish itself: this happens because without oxygen the flame can't stay alive. Be careful only to use kerosene, never use alcohol, gasoline,

or any kind of solvent: their flames are too hot and can easily burn you.

Camphor Eating

Premanand also showed us how you can keep a piece of flaming camphor in your mouth (the kind used to keep insects away from your clothes) or toss it from one hand to the other without damage. "In 1977," Premanand told us, "a film artist of Kerala published an article challenging me to burn camphor on the hand and wave it before the idol in the temple. He said that his godman, Swami Satyananda Saraswathi, the International President of Vishwa Hindu Parishad, burns camphor on his hand and waves it before the idol of Shri Rama in his temple. This was considered to be a miracle. I told him that this stunt can be done by children of five. And in the end they even eat the fire. If this godman really has supernatural powers let him keep the camphor in his beard, light it, and wave it before the idol without getting his beard singed. The godman did not accept the challenge."

For these demonstrations you need a large camphor cube (pure, not synthetic) and a match box. Hold the camphor cube between the thumb and index finger and light it. You can keep the burning camphor on the palm of your hand as long as it never remains on the same place but is moved about on the palm as you wave your hand. When the palm gets hot transfer the camphor to the other hand and wave it as before. Later, when both the hands have absorbed enough heat and might burn, place the burning camphor on your tongue. When you feel the tongue getting hot, blow out the fire by breathing out, or close your mouth and the fire will get extinguished by itself.

Licking Red-hot Rods

"While talking to the District Education Officers at Delhi," Premanand said, "one of them from Gharwal district told me he had seen an oracle, possessed by the deity, licking a red hot poker until it was cold. He wondered how a person could lick a red-hot iron unless he had supernatural powers."

This time, I didn't need to wait for Premanand to tell us the solution to this mystery. When I was living in Florida to work with James Randi, he once told me a very revealing story: "In my youth, I worked Saturdays at an aluminum foundry in Canada. It was

my delight to watch and speak with some of the old-timers there, and one chap used to astonish me by washing his hands, scooping the dross from the surface of some molten metal, then splashing his hands in it! Told by him that I could do another related stunt, I

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Basava Premanand licks a red-hot poker.

got my nerve together and alone one afternoon in the garage of my home, I heated a soldering 'copper' in a blowtorch flame, and when it was glowing brightly red, I licked it with my bare tongue. As I brought the thing close to my face, I felt the extreme heat of it on my face, to the point where it was almost unbearable. I rushed indoors to examine my tongue in the bathroom mirror. It was intact, and hasn't stopped moving since. There was no trace of any burn, and I was ecstatic. My mother never found out."

At the end of the lengthy discussions we had with Premanand on the mysteries of the East, which no longer appeared as mysteries, there was one more thing that Basava Premanand told us. "You know, I told you I had one desire: to create a research center in India for the investigation of psychic phenomena. Well, to tell you the truth I also have one other wish."

"And what is it?" we asked.

"It's simple, I'd like to witness a real miracle before dying."

I think that could be a wish that many of us would subscribe to. . . .

Further Reading

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