

FIRE DANCING IN GREECE

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All over the world there are some people who have the exceptional capacity to dance, walk or even stand unharmed on burning coals. This feat must not be confused with shows organized as tourist attractions which can easily be spotted as frauds. In Northern Greece there are a few small towns where Anastenarides, as fire dancers are called, gather every May 21 to dance on burning coals for three consecutive evenings. Anastenarides live in nearby villages or cities and are feared, admired and generally tolerated by their neighbors, but excommunicated by the church as heretics. They are normal family people, mostly simple workers of low educational level. They consider themselves healers of all the community.

Before confronting the fire, they prepare themselves all day long in the house of their leader, dancing to the sound of monotonous, primitive and highly suggestive music. But the basic preparation takes years, and more specifically begins about a month before the celebration with strict adherence to moral principles, moderate food intake (generally without meat) and abstinence from sex. The ritual dancing takes place over burning coals spread over a circular area of about 4 to 8 meters, until all the coals are reduced to ashes: the temperature of the coals at the perimeter is 220°C, at the center it reaches 450°C [2,9].

Following a close study of Anastenarides for two consecutive years, the following remarks are offered:

- They are not in a state of hypnosis or trance since they are able to answer to the slightest external stimuli and generally are very irritable;
- Although they do not have the technical knowledge, they have achieved some kind of self-regulation, similar to

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autogenic training, that enables them to have greater control over body functions than usual;

- They reinforce this before the fire dance by means of rituals, special day-long dancing (always to the same music), and group dynamic techniques. The latter are very interesting from the psychologist's point of view. In the preparatory stage, they enact in a kind of psychodrama, all their personal and minority-group conflicts and problems, reaching a highly charged emotional state in which anger is one of the strongest components. Thus the fire to be conquered is the symbol of everything that is evil. By triumphing over the fire with the help of Saints Constantine and Helen (celebrated on May 21) they reach a catharsis for themselves and for all the community. This also means good health, rich harvest and future protection from calamities. The group offers the enhancement of self-suggestion and support in overcoming fear of the fire.
- The crucial point is the absolute faith in the possibility of doing it. Greek, Philipinos, Mohammedans, and Indian fire dancers use different kinds of religious faiths to achieve the strength of absolute belief.

In this context, the firewalking experiments of the Soviet Valery Avdeyev are very important and enlightening. In a press interview he explained that he had trained himself in self-regulation techniques and was able to walk unharmed over a big bonfire, when the thought and the will to overcome it "consumed all" of him. On another occasion, when he could not enter into the proper state of mind, he was burned [3]. We can see that the common points between the Anastenarides and the Soviet firewalker are the previously achieved capacity of some kind of self control and the absolute belief in being able to do it.

Anastenarides have been subjected to almost all current medical and psychiatric tests, even injections of endorphin antagonists, without conclusive results [1,2,4]. In this study high-frequency photography was used as in previous psychiatric research, because of its potential for revealing

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bioenergetic states and changes in living organisms [5,6]. Kirlian photographs of hands and feet of Anastenarides (total 11 subjects) were taken during preparation, fire dancing and everyday life (after 3 months) on Kodak Ektachrome T slides 10x12 cm and 13x18 cm. The images were compared with those of special states, such as hypnosis, yogic meditation and autogenic training (AT), before and during these states. In all the above conditions, including fire dancing, an increase of the corona discharge can be observed, compared to the corresponding rest conditions, as is to be expected if the assumption that they all imply an increase of the bioenergy field is correct. In the high-frequency images of the hands during fire dancing a pattern similar to those of intense emotional arousal is seen, different from the color and pattern of relaxation states (hypnosis, yoga, AT). The Kirlian photos of the feet show a remarkable increase of the length and density of the streamers and sparks of different colors. This is not dependent on the mechanical act of dancing, since the same image was given while at rest.

At this point I would like to express the hypothesis that in firewalking not only there is an increase of bioenergy as in other special states, but that a kind of bioenergetic protective shield is formed. Victor Inyushin and Alexander Romen postulate that, in special extreme conditions, man can display exceptional capacities by increasing (voluntarily or not) his amount of "biological plasma," as can be seen in a high-frequency field [7,8]. In the case of fire dancers, the "bioplasma" protects from burns because the charged particles or free electrons that form it produce a state of superconductivity of the skin [9,10].

What is remarkable is the fact that the soles of Anastenarides during fire dancing are paradoxically cool and dry. It is also well known that they never go into the fire unless they feel ready. Some refer to this feeling of readiness as "the call" from the saint, others as a special feeling like being pushed, i.e., from the nearby wall or the floor. Could it be that subliminal information about the completion of a protective energetic shield reaches the consciousness?

This study is far from complete. Fire dancing is

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tangible proof that the range of psychophysical potential of man is much wider than officially believed. It should be investigated with a scientific mind and all the means at our disposal.

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