

Who is Michael Werner?

by Thomas Stöckli

Michael Werner, born 1949 in Brunswick, Northern Germany, now lives in Switzerland, near Basle. With a PhD in chemistry, he has for the last 19 years been managing director of a pharmaceutical research institute at Arlesheim. He is married to a school teacher and has three teenage children. After working for many years in the chemical industry, also in South Africa, he taught chemistry and biology at a Waldorf (Steiner) school in Germany for three years.

Having taken virtually no solid food since January 2001,* he has also from time to time gone for longer periods completely without liquids, the longest span so far being ten days.

I have known him for five years and am now in regular contact with him. I know his family, his home and his colleagues at work; and over the whole of this period I have been observing him with growing interest, for the number of my questions has not decreased. The bewildering thing about him is that apart from having no need to eat, and practising this with total consistency, he is an 'entirely normal person' – indeed he refers to himself as 'Mr Ordinary'. As a scientist for whom life also holds a spiritual dimension, however, he feels it is important to share in bringing about the paradigm change which he feels is imminent. As he never ceases to point out, his concern is the imperative necessity to hold a question mark over our one-sided view of the world. And

* See also p. 52.

he endeavours to do this not by working out new theories but by presenting ‘hard facts’ and demonstrable physical phenomena.

The first article about Michael Werner and his form of ‘living on light’ appeared in September 2002,* but it had taken a long time for it to reach publication. The editorial team of the journal in question initially found it somewhat questionable and did not want to go ahead without having prior discussions and adding some kind of disclaimer. Since then, reactions to the article have been entirely positive, both from those in Werner’s immediate environment and from complete strangers. He has received many letters and queries including some from a number of individuals who intended, on the basis of what they had read in the article, to ‘convert’ their eating habits by applying the ‘21-day process’. Some of their reports will be found in this book. The effect of that article is still ongoing, with the number of invitations to lecture increasing year on year. The dam appears to have burst, so that the subject which had been entirely taboo is becoming increasingly acceptable and up for discussion.

Meeting Michael Werner

My first meeting with Michael Werner was in 2001, shortly before Christmas. After a festive dinner at a teachers’ training course – the table laden with a gorgeous selection of specialities from Africa, Russia and Switzerland – I had the opportunity to have a talk with him. I had heard from a friend that for almost a year he had not taken any food and also no longer had any need for it. Following my study of Nicholas von der Flüe I had accepted that there had been people – and even now there could be such – who could find nourishment other than by physical food. I had read Jasmuheen’s book, and had heard there were, in

* Stöckli, 2002.

our time, people who were nourished by 'light', 'prana' or 'ether forces'. I felt somewhat antipathetic towards the book itself on account of its style and content. I found it to be a dangerous counsellor, with its esoteric potpourri and its '21-day process' describing how to abstain totally from food.

My friend, however, had confirmed to me the serious character of Michael Werner – for they were colleagues – and also of his many years of intensive involvement with serious spiritual work. So I had resolved to meet this person.

To take no food for a year and to work in a responsible position as quite a 'normal' and respected colleague, as well as being a family man and scientist, a chemist actually, sounded somewhat unbelievable!

To refute a materialistic world-view

I intended to research this matter seriously and furthermore to suggest that this case should be clinically examined. I was motivated by the following: If it is true that someone could live and be fit and healthy without eating or even drinking, then our conceptions as to what a human being needs to exist are quite practically refuted and this presents us with fundamental questions. Through this unusual phenomenon, perhaps deeper and wider ideas regarding human life in general could be developed.

When I interviewed Werner for the first time, he responded quite openly and spontaneously to my questions. Since 1 January 2001 he had no longer taken any solid food. He still joined in at mealtimes for social reasons, even cooking for his family at times, but since that time did not feel any hunger or thirst. He still drank coffee, various teas, fruit-juices and water, altogether taking between one half and a litre of liquid per day.

He said that he could also go without drinking and had done so for a whole week on three occasions. He was feeling much better than ever before. In the year of 'conversion' he had come to a crisis point physically: a fractured leg, a spine operation and bladder and kidney problems – giving him the feeling that his body, at 51 years of age, was disintegrating. And yet now he was feeling in tip-top condition physically, emotionally, mentally and also with regard to his memory and ability to concentrate. He needed noticeably less sleep, engaged in sports and did his work with enjoyment and engagement.

At our second meeting, at his home on a cool day in May, we sat outside in his garden. I felt chilled by the cool breeze whereas he was in good form, full of activity, using his short midday break for a further talk with me and with his wife before returning on foot, as usual, to his place of work. At the age of 52 he certainly did not give the impression of a starving person, with his sun-tanned complexion and determined gait.

The whole story still seemed so incomprehensible, and it was important to me to get to know his personal environment in order to arrive at a more comprehensive picture. His wife willingly agreed to a meeting and told me that naturally she had followed everything from close quarters. She spoke of how her husband had fared since the 'conversion'. Strangely, she was confident that it would work out well, but in the beginning she had had great doubts as to whether their family life would change radically. Her husband was formerly very fond of food and they had often cooked together for the family. At first it had been a strange thing for the three children to have their father sitting at the table without a plate. But now everything was running without any problems, their private and family life much as it was before. She did mention that neighbours and acquaintances who knew of this change

in her husband could not cope with the subject – one simply didn't speak about it . . .

'Living on light' – a free decision and an offer by the spiritual world

In our very first conversation Werner told me how he had met with the idea of undergoing this 'conversion':

'I had heard of this possibility from a good acquaintance. I then read Jasmuheen's book *Living on Light*, but was not particularly impressed by it. Yet, because of this person I was acquainted with, I recognized that somehow such a phenomenon was a reality – and this reality had something to do with myself. This was early in the summer of 2000. After some months of pondering and examining myself, I decided to undertake the so-called "21-day process". To be frank, curiosity was also part of my motivation. Does it work? And if so – how? I decided to follow the practical advice given in the book. I never had a bad feeling about it. I also knew I would be able to call it off at any time. I was utterly free, it was my own decision, and that was of central importance to me.'

In answer to my question as to how his experience differed from fasting, he replied: 'This is something totally different! With fasting the body mobilizes reserves of substances and forces; you cannot fast for an unlimited time, neither can you go without drinking. But this process I was undertaking was and remains a mental-spiritual phenomenon and requires a special inner tuning. There is actually only one condition: that I can open myself to the thought that I can be nourished by light, by the *etheric*, by *prana* or whatever it may be called. This is the bridge that is needed. Then it will happen. I experienced it as an offer by the spiritual world.'

'In the first seven days I did not drink even a drop of liquid.'

The general view is that you cannot live for more than five days without liquid. But you experience in your own body that this is wrong! Suddenly, you experience that these generally held views do not tally with reality. If someone dies of thirst or hunger, it is because of his or her environment. There is the conviction that without drinking and eating one has to die. This has been the case hitherto, but for the last 15–20 years we have been living in another field of energy with new possibilities. Of course, history shows that there have been exceptional personalities, such as Nicholas von der Flüe or Therese of Konnersreuth – also yogis – who could do this, but for quite normal people, such as myself, this was beyond reach. This is now a new and apparently special dispensation from the spiritual world.’

I could somehow imagine that this was possible – Nicholas von der Flüe’s total renunciation of food had not overturned my view of the world. But I asked myself: What good will this serve? Eating is not only enjoyable, but is also a social activity, closely uniting us with the earth. Werner agreed that this actual point poses the greatest problem. Yet, for him it was not just a question of eating and drinking. It was his evident experience that the generally accepted view of a material-physical world is incorrect:

‘The materialistic world-view can be refuted theoretically, but today this is no longer sufficient. It requires practical, quite concrete proof. Yet all of a sudden my close acquaintances also have a problem with me!’ Even some scientists associated with the work of the Austrian-born ‘spiritual scientist’ Rudolf Steiner* – with which Michael Werner is connected – are not more open.

* 1861–1924. Rudolf Steiner founded the art and science of anthroposophy, a discipline that incorporates methods of personal development and philosophical and spiritual investigation, as well as fresh approaches to practical activities in fields such as medicine, agriculture, education, architecture, and so on. See also Appendix.

In other words, everyone reacts individually. He is experiencing the whole scale of responses: from interest and openness right through to denial and defensiveness. Nevertheless, he was greatly astonished that hardly anyone had shown any *serious* interest in this phenomenon. ‘Somehow I have the feeling: it is simply too much for most people. They repress it; for every scientist it causes anxiety that they will have to revise their world-view.’

I sensed Werner’s disappointment. Yet he could also appreciate those people who meet the phenomenon with an open mind. I felt I was one such person. A modern spiritual world view presents ways of thinking that allow the unusual to be admitted in principle and all phenomena to be taken seriously. Only after a careful assessment should a judgement be made. And yet I found that Jasmuheen’s book still brought up a number of problems for me. For this reason I probed again: ‘What is your position with regard to some of the highly problematical aspects of the so-called “New Age?”’ He replied: ‘I cannot say anything regarding the person of Jasmuheen. I know too little about her. Concerning her book, readers have to use their own discrimination in judging it. The centre of the book – some thirty pages describing the “conversion” – is not written by Jasmuheen but by Charmaine Harley and is, in my opinion, fine. One can easily have questions about the rest of the book. I can only repeat that personally I have not experienced the process of “conversion” as life-threatening. I always knew that I could stop at any time. After all, every dogmatic and radical attitude can present a danger to life.’

Matter as ‘condensed light’

For me there were still points of conflict. I continued to question Werner’s spiritual path, and whether, since his ‘conversion’, he

had had any specific spiritual experiences. ‘For the last 25 years I have lived intensively with anthroposophy and have worked out my own spiritual path of inner exercises. I was able to deepen my meditation and my spiritual endeavours. My deeper connection with the spiritual world did not happen automatically by renouncing physical food, but because I strive for it. One does not slip effortlessly into the spiritual. I could never be party to such a path. I am left entirely free. Neither is there any organization posing any expectations or obligations on me. I myself know of no other person practising this, except the acquaintance I have mentioned.’

I kept on probing: As a scientist, how could he explain to himself the phenomenon of ‘living on light’? Werner’s answer was: ‘I have read everything by Rudolf Steiner concerning the process of nutrition and have found nothing that I have experienced as problematic with regard to this phenomenon, but neither have I found any direct explanation. The closest bridge I found was in a lecture in which Steiner said that matter is “condensed light”.* Matter, therefore, is light and there are different ways to turn light into matter. The concept “light” would not apply in too narrow a sense. It is the whole “etheric” [life] environment, which we can “inhale” with our whole sensory organization, as Steiner repeatedly explained. This could be called “living on light”. After eating and drinking, our body breaks down the material aspect completely and it is then partly restructured and enlivened anew in order to build us up and maintain us. This helps the body to maintain its structural principles. “Living on light” would in some senses be a simplification of this process, in that the body does not require solid matter but receives its building substances and structuring

* R. Steiner, 1995 (see lecture of 27 May 1910).

forces directly from other sources. I can only say that through this phenomenon I have found an entirely new relationship to my body and to earthly substances. I experience it in a very inward way, yet without turning away from matter and the earth. Connected with this, however, is also an act of consciousness in that, by devotion and turning towards physical substances around me, I cultivate a conscious relationship. Otherwise, it might perhaps go astray and become a lower egotism. Even when we talk about “living on light” we are not concerned with the effects of physical light. Light, as such, is in any case invisible. What matters is the whole energy-environment, which we may call “ether-forces”.

To become an ‘icebreaker’ – to overcome scepticism

Scepticism, and usually also disbelief of this extraordinary phenomenon, can surely only be cleared away by strict scientific testing.* I therefore asked Werner how he would respond to a scientific project in which he would be isolated for 3–4 weeks, observed minutely and medically tested. Werner stressed that he would willingly cooperate fully with such an experiment. He added that physiological tests had already been done on him. A thorough examination at a university clinic had produced medical results that his blood plasma, as well as its chemical composition, his urine and basic metabolism and respiratory system revealed no exceptional data – there were no deviations from accepted normal standards. All of this is, of course, not yet convincing to the sceptics – could he be eating secretly? Only a scientifically designed and monitored experiment could establish the phenomenon as concrete fact. For Werner this would mean a positive challenge to

* See more about this on pages 130–158 and 215–219.

science ‘in the classical sense’. Science has always made progress through such challenges. People are needed in our scientific establishments who can muster the courage to become ‘icebreakers’.