

Ayni – the force of reciprocity

The low clouds are like fog banks around the Andean peak. It is early morning. I have traveled thousands of miles, halfway around the earth, to these high altitudes where the air is thin. For five long years I have waited to get here, since I first learned about the indigenous people's beautiful and timeless wisdom.

I am standing here looking at one of the most beautiful and mysterious places in the world, Machu Picchu, the Inca's secret city, while cold pricks my face and the fog only occasionally lets me glimpse the greatness of the place. I am here to start my journey into the Andean tradition, to learn to "see" with all my senses. And I increase my attention and listen to my instructor.

"We live in Kausay Pacha – the world of living energy. Everything in the universe is living and mutually connected - from the smallest creature on earth to the stars in the sky. "Kausay" means abundance and "Pacha" means living, and for these people, the name of our planet and our universe is *"the world of living abundance."*

He continues by saying this belief or worldview is the opposite of how we Westerners experience and define the world. Deep in our subconscious, we perceive the world as a place where there is not enough, where there are shortages – in other words, a flawed place. The starting point in life tends to create personalities that are ego-centric or even selfish. We become anxious when it appears to us that our needs cannot be met, and we are ready to fight to ensure we get what we think we deserve.

In other words: if you think the world is inadequate, you will probably fight to get what you need. You will use your skills and power to control the world to get what you want. This perception is the key to how we position ourselves in the world: do we experience ourselves as one, or are we apart from the whole?

We are whole divine beings

My teacher continues. "Like all creatures, humans are created as an image of the whole. Everything living is whole and exists only by virtue of the divine energy that brought it to life. This means *we are born with divine potential*. Every person is born whole and can grow and manifest himself in his own unique beauty – his own part of the universe's divine oneness."

In this conviction lies another powerful key; In the Western world, our cultural and religious convictions instill a belief that we are sinful, because we were thrown out of the Garden in ancient times after sinning. As a result, every person born is subconsciously regarded as a sinner who must make an effort to deserve a place here. How can we ever rely on ourselves and our inner strength when, at a deep subconscious level, we perceive ourselves as wrong, sinful, outside the whole and absolutely not divine?

The morning air suddenly becomes thinner and colder. I consider myself a free, democratic and holistic woman, and I have traveled a long road to learn how to create more balance in the part of the world that I live in and love. In my mind, I know what he is describing are great, easily understood truths. How hard can it be? Have I really traveled so far to receive such simple wisdom? And what shall I do the rest of the time? Could it be that simple? When I understand it with my fine attributes and skills, why not?

Here is a mental European! My brain and my Western way of thinking and responding have already kicked in. What is happening is that my dualistic way of relating to the world is trying to find solutions, answers, explanations, counterarguments – anything – to avoid feeling and sensing the signals coming from every part of my existence. I know the world is abundant: I have read it in scientific books and my values reflect it. I like to share, and believe we can only become wiser by sharing. Nevertheless, I too fall short. I do not always have the energy to share when I am under pressure. And I must acknowledge that, even though I think I do well, my behavior is not always consistent with what I would like to do. Behind my ideas turning on themselves lies the sadness and impotence of feeling wrong. The feeling of being unable to change much, to create balance for

myself and those around me, and to make a difference in the world. If it can look so simple and understandable, why does the world look as it does? Perhaps it is not that simple after all ...

Perception and energy

It dawns on me that no separation or dualism exists in this tradition. *All is one.*

As if my teacher reads my thoughts, he says “Therefore, we know the best way to live our lives is to live in harmony with the natural *flow*. And since we each contain the whole and the divine power, we can restore the oneness, harmony and balance, if we want and choose to. We do this by connecting ourselves with the world of living energy we exist in. Here, we are not separated from the world of living energy – we are one with it. It is about perception; that is, sensing or perceiving the energy that exists within and between all living things. It is just as natural for us as it is for you in the Western world to have a mental idea or explanation of why things exist. Our tradition is practical, and it means we use our energy to generate visible results that nature and humans both can enjoy. All is energy and mutually connected. For us, dualism as you know it does not exist. We have no concept of positive and negative energy. There are only differences, each of which is honored for the special contribution it makes to the whole. We sense whether the energy is light, free flowing and alive, or if it is heavy and flowing slowly or sluggishly. We speak of light energy, which is what the whole universe is made of, and heavy energy, which only we human beings can create, if we block the natural *flow* and thereby create stagnation.”

He points to the stream running beside us in a finely laid channel, and continues, “It is easy to understand if you look at the flow of energy in this stream. If water can run unimpeded, the natural flow is in harmony. If some branches and dead leaves block the stream, and dam it, the water will stop and stagnate behind the dam. The natural flow has stopped. It is easy to understand that I can, with my hands, remove the obstacle and restore the natural water flow. Humans have the same opportunity and the same choice every second. We can create harmony in the *energy flow* by being one with the life force – one with the world of living energy.”

Ayni – the force of reciprocity

The Andean tradition is extremely flexible and, above all, spacious. It has structure, but no rigid rules and dogmas. Therefore, only one commandment or moral rule exists in the Q’ero tradition: the law of *ayni* – the sacred art of reciprocity. *Ayni* is simply a reflection of the reality that exists in the energy world, where everything is mutu-

ally connected and interrelated. *Ayni* is therefore simply a description of reality and seeks to remind us of our innate abilities as co-creators of our world.

The law of *ayni* is a multifaceted concept. But, put simply: “When you give something, you are entitled to get something back, and when you get something, you have an obligation to reciprocate and give something back.” When the Q’ero call it the sacred art of reciprocity, it is because they want to bring the energy back to the divine – to that which is One. *Ayni* is more than that, however. It is about lifting each other up to higher levels so that everyone grows. It is about sharing, so all have what they need. It is about sharing knowledge and wisdom so that humanity grows and harmony is strengthened. *Ayni* is a form of equality. But it is an equality that lifts all at the same time to ever-higher common heights, instead of pulling some up and others down so that all, in time, meet in the middle and stay there.

It seems wise and warm, what the Q’ero know, are and do. Or it is also the sun’s light that is now taking power, chasing the clouds away and warming my face, so that the magic of this place emerges in full splendor. To imagine that it is possible to manage ourselves and our businesses with *ayni*! The dream is both beautiful and attractive, but my “realistic” mental brain kicks in again, and I ask “How do you approach asking people who are used to fighting for power to change and share instead?”

When I ask my question, his face lights up in a huge smile. “To know your own strength and capability is one of the most important skills in our world. It is about mastering the energy and seeing visible practical results that can be translated into the greatest common good in daily life. So, as often as possible, we take the opportunity to challenge each other to see who is strongest and who masters the challenge. The principle of *ayni* enters in the sense that the “winner” is required to teach the “loser” how he won. That is, if the loser wants this knowledge, of course. So “the struggle” for power does exist in our culture, but we see it more as a “game” in which we can experience our inner power while contributing to the growth of the whole.

An important element in the universe

Ayni also describes the exchange of energy that we constantly share with each other, nature, the elements and the cosmos. When the Q’ero exchange energy with trees, they do not say, “go exchange energy with the tree.” Instead, they say, “Go share your *ayni* with the tree.” Because they always see this as an equal exchange. The tree has something for us, but we also have something to give the tree.

This exchange can be explained scientifically with an example familiar to most of us. We need oxygen to

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behind *ayni*
– the energy of reciprocity –
tells me I am important,
that I am valuable,
that I am an important piece
in the universe,
that I have much to give
and much to receive.
That it actually is the most
important thing in life:
to share
and be one
with all other
living things.”

survive, and plants and trees produce oxygen. Trees and plants need carbon dioxide to survive, and we produce that every time we exhale. You could say that the exhalation of plants is our inhalation and vice versa. It is a perfect example of *ayni* and how nature itself is arranged according to the law of *ayni*.

The sun is shining, and the doubts in my mind have evaporated. Perhaps this place itself is *ayni*? Something, anyway, has penetrated my defense mechanisms and softened me, pulling this moment to itself and letting it be nourished and rest in a rare calm and balance. The energy behind *ayni* – the energy of reciprocity – tells me I am important, that I am valuable, that I am an important piece in the universe, that I have much to give and much to receive. That it actually is the most important thing in life: to share and be one with all other living things.

For a moment, my thoughts fly back to my own world. It dawns on me how useful this way of seeing the world will be for people. In that *ayni* is always an equal exchange, it implies we each have something to give that is just as valuable as what nature, the elements and our Mother Earth have to give us. In our Western society, many of us more or less consciously struggle with feelings of inferiority, low self-esteem or lack of confidence. Many people believe they have nothing, or nothing valuable, to offer others. Some people lurch the other way, compensating for their lack of inner strength by desperately holding on to what they alone know. They think themselves as being alone, outside the whole and so wish neither to give nor receive. These thoughts and misunderstandings reveal the Andean tradition's only commandment, *ayni*, with perfect clarity and strength. When we oppose the natural energy *flow*, and so block the interaction and equal energy given us by nature, we create heavy energy and stagnation. The *flow* stalls. In its extreme, *ayni* is about creating, or even recreating, the basic peace and joy the world exist by.

I have now given myself over, and am willing to let the wisdom of *ayni* be a conscious part of my life.

The article is an excerpt from the book, *Common Ground*, published in August 2009. The book's authors are Dorthe Steenberg (Power Spirit), Sascha Amarasinha (Respond), Tina Monberg (Mediation Center) and Gitte Larsen (Editions and House of Futures).

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FACTS ABOUT THE Q'ERO

The indigenous people, the Q'ero, live in the Peruvian Andes. They are descendants of the Incas, and bearers of a wisdom tradition that stretches back 16,000 years. Wisdom, whose highest purpose is to honor natural harmony and reciprocity, for the benefit of life: people, animals, nature, the planet. It is a practical tradition, which, through the ability to sense energy, enabled the Incas to create the world's biggest peaceful empire. For the Q'ero, all living things are mutually connected. We are all a part of each other, we are brothers and sisters, we are One world. We are One. And the earth and all living things are our common ground.

The Q'ero are a nation, or tribe, of 400 Peruvian Indians living on the edge of extinction under extreme weather conditions, at an altitude of about 4500 meters on the Andean plateau. We could call them the Andean priests' "Oxford." In the late 20th century, after more than 500 years of isolation, they chose to contact the outside world to share their wisdom. Q'ero prophecies say we are approaching the "time when we meet ourselves again." The time has come for us again to remember and choose to live in intentional reciprocity.