

# Shamanism in the High Andes and the tradition of don Alverto Taxo

## The Shamanic Way of life of the High Andes

The shamanic wisdom and way of life in the high Andes is as rich, profound, and complete as any mystical system in the world, including those of ancient China, Japan, and Tibet, and as earth honoring as any of the indigenous traditions have been. Its health promoting and healing practices are as powerful and yet as profoundly simple as any to be found anywhere, and this wisdom is desperately needed in modern western civilization.

The healing wisdom of this great tradition has helped me learn how to clear my heart of things that are in the way of living with an open heart in the world. It has taught me how to clear my heart of old wounds and problem patterns, so I can love deeply. It has taught me how to bring the powers of the heart [Condor] and the powers of the mind [Eagle] into proper balance and right relationship, and has helped me to love the Earth and the Cosmos with my whole heart, and greet every being I meet as the sacred being it really is. It has taught me to align my life with the Ashpamama, the Earth Mother, and with the Great Force of Life.

It is my purpose here to acquaint you with a little bit of the flavor of the Andean mystical path in general, to help orient you to a system of knowledge and practice that is quite different from our own, --yet is amazingly elegant and simple in principles and practices which we need if we are to avoid ecological disaster on this planet. Elsewhere I present the wisdom and teachings of don Alverto Taxo on this website, for those who wish to know more of the beauty and power of this path of the heart. This page is still in process, but I share what I can now.

## The Five Principles of Andean Wisdom

**Munay:** Practicing loving [with open heart]

**Yachay:** We need the right kind knowledge guided by wisdom to live in beauty.

**Llankay:** Right action, such that you do good work and leave a good legacy.[becoming a good ancestor]

**Kawsay:** Respect for life and life-sustaining processes.

**Ayni:** Reciprocity is the guiding principle of the Andean shamanic path.

The centrality of a clear and open heart and the appreciation and cultivation of beauty is implicit in all of these principles. The indigenous peoples of the Andes, Kichwa and Qero, live by these shamanic principles, the shamans, or Paqos and Iachaks as they are called are simply the exemplars and transmitters, healers and wise elders of this shamanic way of life that is essential to all.

## Andean Sacred Cosmology

One way the Kosmos is experienced is like a nested series of Eggs, one inside the other. Think of Russian dolls or Chinese boxes. The Ultimate Reality in unmanifest form is called Jatun [pronounced 'hatoon'], which means the Great Force of Life. This is the Andean experience of the Godhead... Everything that is, is a manifestation of the Great Force of Life and arises within it. Hence "*Todo es Sagrado*", everything is sacred. Also within this infinite Egg or sphere is another, called, Wirococha, which is a lake of memory and wisdom, and has features similar to the collective unconscious. Within this Egg is a more specialized one called Pachamama, which is the Cosmic Mother, or Mother Nature. She is the manifest universe which we know, and within Her is another egg or sphere, called by the Kichwa, Ashpamama, or Earth Mother. Each being on earth is alive and is an expression of Ashpamama, and all the other Cosmic Eggs [spheres] as well. We are each Mother Earth walking! Because Ashpamama is the most tangibly intimate being we experience, many of the Andean spiritual practices are addressed to Her, Her Elements, Earth, Wind, Fire, and Water, and to the stars and orbs of the Heavens [Pachamama]. Many ceremonies, including altars, despacho offerings, and ceremonies take place right here on the Earth Mother and consist of Her materials: the elements, flowers, foods, colors, and in a spirit of reciprocity and gratitude. Through all things, the Great Force of Life is implicitly and sometimes explicitly honored, for the Earth Mother is a tangible or manifest expression of Jatun. There are more 'Cosmic Eggs' within this cosmology, but here I am just trying to give you the flavor of it. Relationship and reciprocity of relations is integral to this cosmology and way of life.

## The Andean Psychology & The Shaman's Three World Cosmology:

If you have been interested in shamanism for awhile, you will probably know about the three worlds of the shaman. There is this world, sometimes called middle world, there is an upper world, and there is a lower world. Anthropologists have talked about these three worlds being connected through a central axis, like a sacred tree or cosmic mountain which some shamans use to climb or descend and move between these worlds. These worlds are realms of consciousness, and constitute a kind of transpersonal psychology in shamanic idiom. In the Andean system, evident in the Qero and Kichwa tribes, these three worlds are called Ukupacha [Underworld], this physical world, called Kaypacha, and the divine or Heavenly world, called Hanaqpacha. They are planes of consciousness, and in the Andean shamanic systems, they are present in everyone, and anyone can and should do their work in each. In Macchu Picchu and at other temples in the High Andes, there is a theme carved in the stones of three steps. These constitute a symbol of the path of development through these three worlds or planes of consciousness. It is a kind of developmental map. They are laid out in this order.

**Kaypacha:** Your first step of mastery in life is to develop and be able to manifest things from the heart (Condor) in the ordinary physical world. You need the power of the mind, (Eagle) to know how to do this and do it well. It involves not only vision, planning, and skill, it requires thinking as well. But this is a stage to be transcended and included in the next step, which is entering the Cave of the Heart and doing your inner work in the underworld of Ukupacha.

**Ukupacha:** Is the underworld or Cave of the Heart. There are a number of ritual caves in the temples of High Andes created by the Incas to do just this kind of inner work or interiorizing. It is the step or phase in which you do a lot of interiorizing. This word 'interiorizing' means that you actually create this interior by going into it and working it.

In this inner work you get to know your inscapes, examine the contents of your heart, identify and remove old wounds and problem patterns, stuff you need to let go of so that your heart can be open and unobstructed, and so love towards all beings can flow out, such that you can create a life of beauty and be in balance. The concept of Ukupacha is like the western 'unconscious', because one will find memories, instincts, and impulses in there, as well as problem patterns [complexes] and other contents associated with the unconscious. But in this Andean psychology what you are discovering and grappling with as you interiorize are all manifestations of Ashpamama..... This is no Christian Hell with punishment, it is a sacred place of transformation at the personal level. You enter it intentionally so that you can do your inner work, clearing out the way to move into the next step or transpersonal planes of the Hanaqpacha.

**Hanaqpacha** is the ultimate or transpersonal planes where the subtle spiritual beings and the ultimate Great Force of Life [Jatun] can be directly experienced and clearly known. This developmental step is lifelong and involves integration with all of your life, in every time and place of your living.

In the Andean Sacred Cosmology and correlate Three Worlds, the path of the heart is implied throughout. It is a path of opening your heart and greeting every being you meet with love. It is a mutually beneficial path of reciprocity, and is guided and inspired by the Quest for genuine beauty in living. Thus the heart is implicit throughout the process of traversing this path, and because harmony and balance are also implicit principles of this path, the mind must come into proper relationship and balance with the heart. The mind has many beautiful powers, such as logic, conceptual thinking, the ability to plan, but disconnected from the heart it tends to fragment things, and it has no inherent sense of direction or value, these must be got from some other place, within or without. The human being needs a good head on the shoulders, and a good heart, but the proper relationship in guiding your step is to move with the Invitations which arise in the heart, and use the mind to help you do it, to help you manifest and make it happen in this world [Kaypacha]. As part of a shaman's initiation, the work in Ukupacha is itself in service of a Quest for clarity and light, and to be that clarity and light.

The adept shaman knows how to get out of the way and let things unfold in their own order naturally. Thus the shaman, Paqo or Iachak, knows how to be with the fog, knows the value of the fog, of the unclear, and can wait for it to self-clarify. The heart is a perceiver and guides them in this as in every step. Once the crown of consciousness has moved from the head to the heart, the mind becomes the great servant of the heart. The mind can now be a servant in helping to manifest the Invitations from the Great Force of Life that ever arise in the heart. In this way heart and mind become one, and the most advanced shamans on this path know how to follow the direction or invitations of the Great Force of Life.

### **Practices [Meditations]**

I mentioned already the importance of the Earth Mother and any of Her manifestations as comprising focus for many of the sacred ceremonies and practices of the Andean shamanic paths. In the path of the Iachak, beginning with Elements of Earth, Air, Fire, Water served as the foundational practices for me and these were progressively built on such that you end up seeing these elements in all things, and can attune to the Divine through anything or person. Your own body becomes a portable altar with all the elements already mixed in it. Yet special altars, Mesas, colorful and tasty despachos, and so on are beautiful focal points for practicing this path, expressing your joy and gratitude, centering yourself, dropping any unnecessary baggage you are carrying around. They all help slow you down, help you connect, and enter into real relationship with things.

The method of teaching these practices begins very simply, and with earthly things that are normal and close at hand, and then deepening into them through feeling and attention. Spiritual practice becomes a way of reciprocity, gratitude, and healing in one practice. Imagine sitting quietly on the bank of a creek such that you connect by letting yourself feeling the flow and merge with the river, in your heart. As you do so and feel the beauty of this flowing water, you can add to that the releasing into that stream of any unnecessary luggage, stuff you no longer need or want. You can use any of the Elements to do this, fire to center and warm you and to burn up and transform things you no longer need. You can let the wind relax and open you, and give up to it stuff you don't need as it blows across your face and through your hair. You stand in the wind and merging with it in your heart, invite it to expand your consciousness. On your in-breath you can take in the beauty of nature, or the wisdom you want, and let go on the out-breath of old patterns or habits that are in the way of open hearted living. This is a great oversimplification of a kind of spiritual practice that can only be understood as it is practiced. In the Andean system of teaching, each practice is added to and higher levels of practice added onto it so that your knowledge and transformation accumulates through time and experience. My favorite ceremony, learned from don Alverto, has been to turn eating into a sacred ceremony. In the ceremony of eating I feel the love of Mother Earth in each bite of

food, eating slowly, without thought, and savoring the flavors and aromas, and expressing gratitude as I enjoy it. Food is an immediate way, as you eat from your heart, of connecting to the Earth Mother. But anything, in this ancient shamanic system, can become a spiritual practice if you allow it be so.

One thing about the tradition of the Taita Iachak which don Alverto prizes in traditional form of shamanic training is learning by quiet and carefully observation and awareness. From my years of working with don Alverto I eventually came to sense that the invisible template of his teaching method regarding any particular practice is the same as the 3 worlds 3 steps model discussed above, and mirrored in Inca temples. He begins in Kaypacha having you learn to become aware of your breathing and learn what you discover about Kaypacha yourself in the Kaypacha from that. Then he adds to that knowledge and practice an additional step of Ukupacha, an interiorizing move, wherein he invites you to find and let go of anything that you no longer need. After you share what you have found with these practices, he adds a third tier or step of contemplation on top of all this, which has to do with the transpersonal fact that there is no death really. Things change their form...but Consciousness is eternal, you are the eternal Wind, a pneuma, or if working with Fire, you are the Eternal Flame, or you are the ongoing Flow [Water] or you are the Earth, the Ground of phenomena arising in this time and place, in the next time and place and so on. Thus within the space/time of a few hours or days he can take you from a new and simple practice of something ordinary and natural to a high level taste, at least, of your unmanifest spiritual nature, or Ushai, that is manifesting itself right here in physical world of Kaypacha,... in this form of "presentation" that shall pass. "There is no death, really", he says.

Another feature of this teaching method is that this template is expressed in work with any of the Elements, so if you know how to go all the way in one, you will also pickup quickly how to go all the way with another Element.

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