

# 'Ayni'

## The Andean Principle of Reciprocity

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I became interested in psychology because I wanted to find out what makes people tick, specifically I wanted to find out what made me tick. I was caught up in the zeitgeist of my time which still informs my behavior today. Everyone was interested in becoming someone new, in exploring and surpassing the boundaries of our experience, in realizing the full potential of being human or at least have an interesting and fun time trying to get there. Such an endeavor involves a series of mini-revolutions, giving our conceptual framework an occasional jostle, perhaps causing it to tumble down in disarray and then reorganize itself in a more sophisticated--or better yet--a more elegant pattern. The map will never be the territory but the map can become richer, more rewarding, more beautiful. What seemed certain to me from the beginning was that the map had to be a hell of a lot more than intellectual.

One of the more rewarding explorations in my life has been that of studying the mysticism found in the villages of the high Andes of Peru. While an important part of that has been the particular type of mysticism found there--it is an approach that is particularly suited to who I am--a major part has also been that of entering a new culture. Their maps of reality are very different then the ones I have encountered in my own culture. To the degree that I can enter into their experience--and I have a specific strategies for doing that--I find that my experience of the world greatly expands and my map

(though I'm getting tired of using that term) is greatly enriched.

The most important step is to actually notice when they are offering something that is different from the way I normally experience reality. Such occasions are doorways into new experiences and new understandings, as well as confusion and sometimes frustration as I struggle to resolve the conflict between how I am used to interpreting reality and what I'm being offered now. But this confusion is like a sign saying "warning, buried treasure", for the longer the struggle the more rewarding the expansion of my understanding of reality.

The example of this that I would like to present in this article is the Andean concept of "ayni". I have been struggling with this for years, I believe my difficulty in understanding ayni stems from important assumptions buried deep within my culture. But this is exactly the value of such an exploration, to bring to light ideas that inform my behavior and to add alternatives. I don't know how much I can share with you through words, but I hope to at least share some of the territory I have covered, which may then be of service to you in your own explorations.

Ayni is the Andean concept of reciprocity, in general terms it means you don't give without receiving something in return, and you don't receive without giving something in return. This apparently simple concept has arisen in several different contexts in my experiences in Peru in ways that have had pretty complicated consequences for me.

One context is that which is known as a "despacho". A despacho is an offering made to nature within the context of a sacred ceremony. One type of despacho involves wrapping many significant items up in a piece of paper and then burying it in the earth as an offering to the Pachamama (the great cosmic Mother who is the planet Earth). In my Western perspective this is seen as constituting a 'sacrifice', which in turn is generally viewed as being a bribe to nature to get what one wants. That in the ceremony you are often asking something of nature this interpretation would seem to make sense, if the despacho is not a bribe it would seem to be at least a tool for manipulating nature for a desired result. However, as you may have guessed, these interpretations are completely wrong. The despacho is neither a bribe nor a tool, it is an act of love, like giving flowers to a loved one, or a child giving something made in school to his or her mother, only a very cynical person (perhaps a scientist) would see these acts as ones of manipulation. If we experience the earth as a loving mother who gives us so much then we will want to give something in return, it balances the relationship, not within an economic metaphor, but as a matter of harmony and love.

The second context in which I have struggled with my understanding of ayni is a biggie. It involves paying the paq'os (Andean mystics/healers) for the ceremonies they hold in our behalf and for cleaning our energy and for the other various things they do for us. This seems to bring to the surface all sorts of issues for me, or at least it used to. My culture has very strong views about the relationship of the sacred and the secular, particularly when it comes to money. When I participated in my first 'karpay' (sacred ceremony) on the slopes of Apu Pachatusan in Peru I got in touch with a very strong sense of the sacred, and then when the ceremony was over it was time to pay the paq'os. It just didn't seem right to me to pay for a sacred experience. I can see the roots of this reaction in the history of my culture; in the purchase of pardons from priests, in the hypocrisy of televangelists raking in money by asking people to put God over their material needs. As the anthropologist Gregory Bateson pointed out there is an interesting relationship between the sacred, the secular, and the profane. When the sacred and the secular are mixed inappropriately we get the profane. But this is part of our heritage as children of Descartes, for we separate the secular and the sacred in ways that other cultures do not. And we live in a culture whose primary religion is based upon the teachings of a man who said it would be easier for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to get to heaven, while its economic

system is based upon capitalism.

Another, similar situation arose for me during that first trip to Peru. The students at my university had raised money for me to buy medicine for the children of the Andes who suffer from a particular skin disorder. When I arrived in Peru I inquired of my guide exactly what medicine I should buy and where I could purchase it. He told me, quite gently, that it would be much more helpful for me to give the money to the children's parents and then they could buy what the children needed most. I initially had a hard time with this, in my culture giving money as a gift is seen as being very impersonal, the sort of gift you give somebody when you don't want to bother to find out what they actually want. But I did it anyway.

I now view the situation completely differently. I love to give money to the people of Peru, my friends. As I write this I'm trying to track back to what made the difference for me. Partly it comes from knowing just how much my money helps these people, I feel that I can make a difference in their very ability to survive, and their survival has become incredibly important to me. Not only am I helping them to survive I am helping their culture to survive, for when they receive money in exchange for sharing with me that aspect of their culture that I find so beautiful--an aspect of their culture that goes back thousands of years and is in danger of being swept away by modern Western influence--I'm nurturing its survival. But mainly I think that my change in attitude is simple one of stepping out of my cultural values and entering into theirs.

The final context in which I would like to discuss ayni involves the interchange of our two cultures. The Andean culture offers a way of relating to nature and the cosmos that is full of wisdom and love, it is a lot to offer. This 'way' consists, among other things, of a variety of meditative processes and ceremonies. Some people have gone to Peru and have returned to lead workshops and write books teaching people about this way, teaching the techniques outside of the larger context of ayni. It is my belief that these processes and ceremonies are removed from their context at the expense of depriving them of their true essence. Ayni is not something tacked on to the meditative and ceremonial processes, it is an essential aspect, and to present them out of that context is to present something different (and less) than what they really are. In this case ayni would involve giving back to the people of the Andes something of value in exchange for what they are giving us. This has been my goal, and the goal of many other people I know and respect. When we gain something by sharing with our culture what we have learned in Peru, we make sure that something of value makes its way back to the people of the Andes. I would like to advocate that you do the same, if at some point you benefit from what the Andean people have to offer then make sure they get something in return. In this way you may truly come to understand the heart of the Andes.

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