LOVE KNOWLEDGE AND ACTION

The Andean Way,
an Earth-based, heart-centered paradigm cultivated by traditional shamans over the ages, is laid out in three basic principles.

Discovering these three principles allows for us to live in harmony with Creation, whom the Q'ero call Pachamama.

Dr. James E. Williams
met with Sebastian,
a traditional Q'ero shaman

Their friendship led
eventually to a journey to
the high altitude lands of
these pre-Inca mountain people, a
land few outsiders ever get to visit

The first principle of the Andean way is called *munay* in Quechua. It means 'to love'. Not romantic love, but a deep impersonal love that comes from the heart and does not expect anything in return. To the Q'ero, beauty and love are inseparable. When you have these in your heart, you are peaceful.

Munay is inherent in nature. It manifests through a stunning sunset or a luscious fruit, and it is also a quality within us. It manifests when we smile and through kindness. When both outer and inner worlds reflect love and beauty, one manifests benevolence in action and character. To experience *munay*, we must cultivate it through conscious acts of kindness. When the time is right, *munay* manifests; like a hummingbird is attracted to blossoms, love blooms and beauty surrounds us.

I am back in Peru, and I know in my heart that I am ready to make the journey to Q'ero. I left my world behind in stages. I flew from California to Lima, then from Lima to Cuzco, where Sebastian and Jorge are waiting.

The next day, after more than four hours over a switchback dirt road on a rickety bus, we arrive at the small town of Paucartambo, and then on to a small village and the start of a trail for the Q'ero.

The Q'ero pack four horses brought down from their village by Sebastian's youngest son, Rolando, who is just twelve years old. Under a cloudless sky, we make our way along an Incan road through a valley of wildflowers. A clear stream runs through it on our left. Cream-colored llamas graze on the hills.

I walk leisurely along, unaware that we are gradually moving uphill. As the elevation increases, so do my difficulties. At first the walk is easy, but I find breathing difficult. By nine, my hands and feet swell. By ten, my head throbs unmercifully. I have underestimated the altitude and it is taking an early toll on my unaccustomed body.

My swollen feet chafe against the sides of my boots and I have to stop by the stream to soak them in the icy water to slow the inflammation.

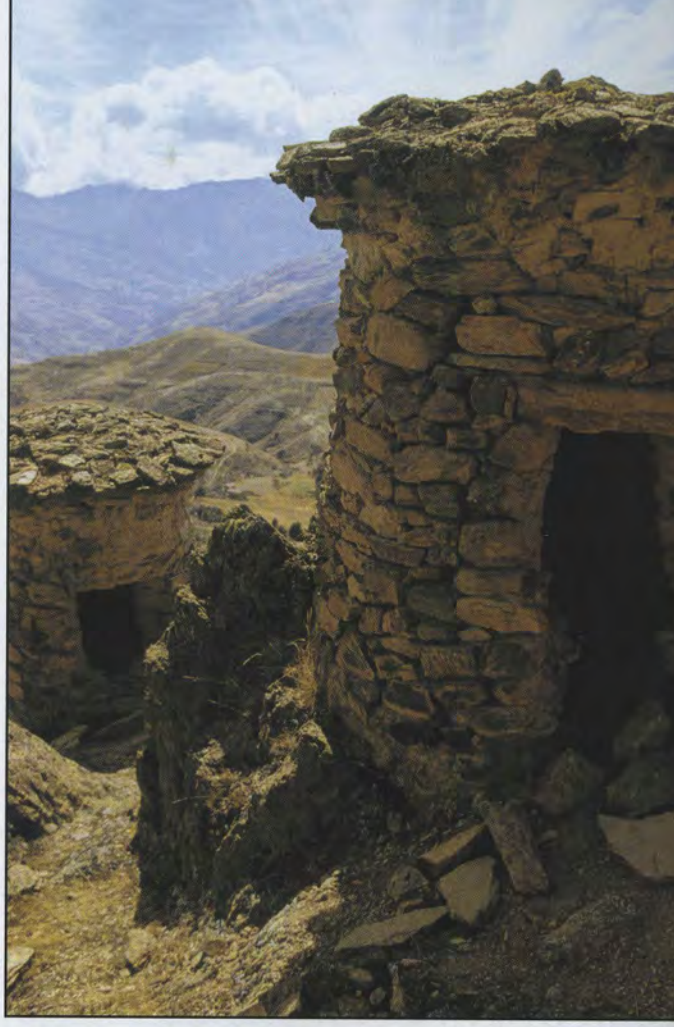
Along the way, Sebastian comments in Quechua, "*Munaycha*. It's so beautiful." He is right: the sky, a cerulean blue, is nearly cloudless; the walls of the valley are covered with tall grass interspersed with countless wildflowers. The beauty eclipses my pain. My emotions soar even though my body aches. For a few hours, harmony reigns and everything is right with the world.

We continue along the Incan road until it separates into three narrower trails. Taking the one to the left, we soon come to an Incan bridge, not much wider than a single person can pass comfortably. It spans a deep ravine, far below, a stream funnels along through the rock bed at an enormous speed.

On the other side of the bridge, the trail turns into a footpath and within a few miles disappears. This is the edge of Q'ero territory, a trackless place into which few outsiders have ever ventured.

Myths say that the Q'ero consider themselves ancestors of the Incas and took to the high mountains to escape repression and enslavement by the Spaniards and conversion by the Catholic Church. Perhaps, as some say, they are ancestors of Incan priests and royalty. To the Q'ero, the truth is simpler: this is their land, the place where they have always lived. They were here before the Incas. They endured the Spaniards, the cruel hacienda system, and the Peruvian government. When I asked them how long they have lived here, they say 'forever.'

Around noon, we stop to rest. In front of us, immense hills rise up directly in our path. Sebastian and his sons unpack the horses, who put their heads down and graze on the abundant grass. Four hours into the journey and so far the Q'ero



Top: Inca ruins by Paucartambo
Centre: the Q'ero lead the way
Right: cloud-filled valleys

have not eaten or drunk anything other than hot soup in the early morning. They spread their ponchos on the grass and lie down.

"*Munaycha*," Sebastian says. He smiles broadly and, in agreement, the others smile too, revealing perfectly white straight teeth. I would have to be blind not to recognise what he means. Natural beauty surrounds us, wraps us in splendour, and draws us into its silence and peace. In that moment, I begin to understand that the shaman's path is not about the mind but the heart.

After about thirty minutes, the Q'ero re-pack the horses and we continue the journey. Along with us is Lorenzo, Sebastian's brother-in-law and his two younger sons.

Though not traditionally a part of Andean culture, horses have been used since they were introduced by the Spanish. Horses or llamas are used to pack supplies into the villages every few months.

Lorenzo asks me if I want to ride, but I decline. I am determined to walk the entire distance with them. Within an hour, however, the going is difficult. As we gain altitude, my hands and feet swell more and, within a few hours, they are three times their normal size. My head throbs and I am nauseous. I have been at altitudes up to 14,500 feet without symptoms of mountain sickness. But this is above 15,000 feet and we are to go to even higher elevations in the following days.

As a doctor, I know that my body is not adapting rapidly enough to the altitude. Acute symptoms of altitude sickness can occur above 8,500 feet and include swelling of the brain, difficulty breathing, nausea and vomiting, insomnia and frequent wakening at night, heart palpitations, weird dreams, and lack of appetite. When severe, it can cause death from pulmonary edema, the collection of fluid in the lungs.

Despite the increasing altitude, the Q'ero maintain a steady pace and we cover a considerable distance over the next hour. The difficulty of the terrain for me increases by the minute. They continue without letting up until we reach a high knoll with a view of the terrain we had covered. The landscape has changed completely from rich agricultural terraces to wilderness. There are no trees or bushes and everything is uniformly colored a rich sepia due to the dry grass that covers the land. Unusually shaped boulders and giant rocks litter the landscape. Far to our left, a river accompanies us.

To the front, the knoll drops off into an immense ravine. Clouds and mist rise up from the deep valleys below. Drifting like curtains, when they part, they reveal high ragged mountains beyond. One in particular looms over the ravine like a giant sentinel. We have arrived at the entrance to the fabled land of Q'ero.

We stop here and rest again. Sebastian settles on his poncho, as do the others, and he spreads out coca leaves on a cloth. Selecting three large evenly shaped leaves, he forms a *k'intu* offering, and standing, faces the mountain and prays. I follow by making my own *k'intu*, then offer my prayers to the mountain spirits, thanking them for the opportunity to be with them and asking for guidance. Then we chew coca leaves.

We rest on our ponchos for about twenty minutes. More comfortable now as my symptoms have subsided, I watch the clouds and mist weave between the mountain peaks until we are ready to go on.

Top: James and Sebastian perform the *phuku* ritual, blowing on coca leaves during a *despacho* ceremony

Centre: Sebastian prays to the *apus* before he completes the *despacho* by offering the ritual bundle to the flames

Left and opposite: the rugged landscape of the high Andes

"*Munaycha*," Sebastian says again. Pointing to each mountain, hill, and stream, he gives their names in Quechua as if introducing his family.

Sebastian is undergoing a transformation. His face, radiant with love for this land, no longer has the submissive look he uses in Cuzco: he looks now like a warrior. In Cuzco, he is a humble Indian who never speaks unless first spoken to, who keeps his head bowed. As we draw closer to Q'ero, he opens like a flower in the morning sun. By the time we reach his village, he will have become a prince among his people.

"*Munaycha* means *bonito*," he tells me, "beauty." Sebastian points to his chest. "When the heart is not tranquil, the mind becomes agitated. Clear your heart. Free your mind." He points to the surrounding mountains and looks off toward the northeast. "Soon we come to Q'ero."

As he speaks, I experience peace. I sense the power of nature pulsating all around me. The landscape is alive.

In the years that I have known him, Sebastian has demonstrated lovingkindness and benevolence in all that I have seen him say and do. Expressing thanks for every moment and the gifts given, his affection is boundless. At times, he hugs and kisses me with such affection that it is almost embarrassing.

Never taking advantage of his friends, with whom he often stays on his infrequent trips to Cuzco, he always waits for an invitation, even though he is always welcome.

I am awakened from my reverie when everyone gets up at the same time to ready the horses. The clouds have cleared enough to reveal an even higher mountain. "There," Sebastian says, pointing to the peak. "We are going over that mountain."

In half an hour, we reach the base of the peak. The Q'ero encourage me to mount a horse. At first, I think we will circumnavigate the peak because it is so steep. They point out a barely visible trail however, winding through a field of loose gray shale. Once I realise the way is up rather than around, I mount a dark brown horse and we begin the ascent.

The trail is so narrow the horses have to place one foot in front of the other. Andean horses, are descended from the horses of the *conquistadores* and are reported to have the smoothest gait of any breed. They are bred for this type of high-altitude climb and narrow trails: they can walk on a line not much wider than their hooves.

The trail crosses the shale field and pieces slip under the horses' hooves. Slowly and carefully, they labour up the slope, near vertical in places, toward the summit. The air, thinning by the minute, makes it increasingly difficult to breathe. The going is extremely difficult, and more than once a horse falters. I look over the edge to the base of the mountain thousands of feet below.

"If your horse falls, it will certainly be killed," Rolando says. I get the point. If the horse falls with me on it, I will be killed as well. Later, at the bottom, to make his point, Rolando points out the jumbled bones of a horse that had fallen. The black mane and tail are still growing, it seems, out of the bleached bones.

At one point, the trail becomes so dangerous I dismount and go the rest of the way on foot. It is so steep in places that this is more like rock-climbing than hiking. We struggle upward. At the top, we pause. Below us is Q'ero, the land of mist and clouds; large banks of fog move across the terrain like white dragons.

James and Sebastian bow to a rainbow in a waterfall during a ceremony to Pachamama.

The way down is as difficult as the ascent, but it's shorter. The horses have a more challenging time as they need to adjust their weight with each step to avoid falling. At the bottom, there is no trail, but the Q'ero move across the landscape like shadows.

We have not eaten and the two small bottles of water I brought with me are long gone. The Q'ero are impervious to the absence of food or liquids and continue on, even though we have three hours of hard walking to go. Their stamina is so great and their desire to get home before dark so strong that the closer we get to the village the more energy they seem to have.

We cross a rolling plateau cut with rivers and streams. As the sun sets behind the hills, we negotiate a rise in the land. A cluster of mountain peaks looms up behind the rise. The Q'ero quicken the pace to take advantage of the remaining light and we arrive at the base of another immense hill in the twilight.

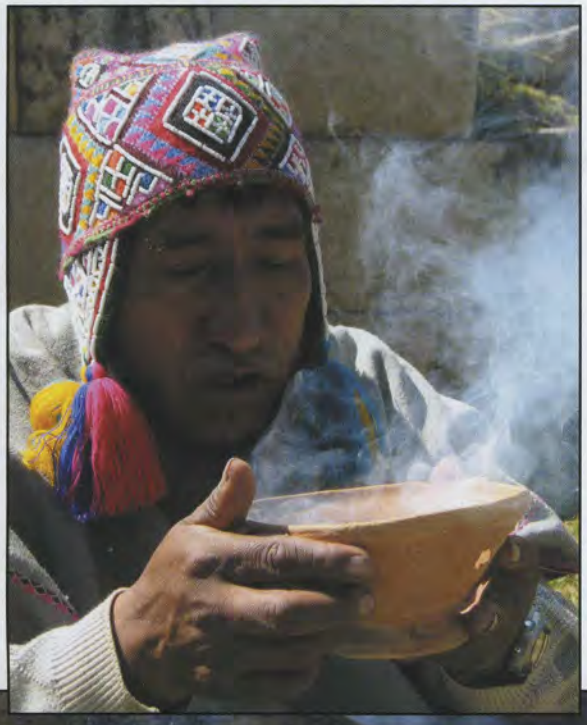
Below: Sebastian prays to the *apus* - mountain spirits - with a bowl of *palo santo*, holy wood incense

Bottom: Traditional Q'ero stone dwellings at an elevation of 14,500 feet

Sebastian points upward, "My village is up there." We labour on and, just as it is getting dark, we arrive at a cluster of barely visible stone huts. Lorenzo unpacks the horses and lets them loose to graze. We enter a hut.

Sebastian welcomes me to his community with a bowl of hot potato soup and a pile of boiled potatoes that are not much larger than my thumb.

I am more exhausted than hungry and, noticing this, Lorenzo spreads clean dry grass on the dirt floor, covers it with a horse blanket, and invites me to lie down. He and his companions are ravenous and eat like they haven't seen food in weeks.



They pass me more potatoes, and encourage me to eat. "It's very cold here," Sebastian says. "If we don't eat potatoes, we can't walk far or work hard in the fields. Eat."

I look at my watch. The trip, if you could call it that, felt more like a forced march of guerrillas chased by government forces - it took ten hours. Lorenzo tells me that the pass we crossed was close to 16,000 feet. Their village is at 14,000. A week later, we will cross passes higher than 18,500 feet.

As soon as everyone has eaten, alpaca skins are spread on the dirt floor and all lie down to sleep. The household consists of twelve people including adults and children. If they sleep pressed to one another, there is just enough floor space for each.

During the night, none toss and turn, snore, or make the slightest sound. They sleep the restful, restorative sleep of infants. Exhausted, I fall immediately asleep, but in the dead of night, I awake to the sound of my heart beating. The darkness inside the hut is complete. No-one stirs. There are no bird or insect sounds, and it is eerily silent. I am disoriented and, for a moment, panicky.

I realise that it's the altitude making my heart labour. Breathing comes in gasps and I have to sit up. Then my respiration is easier and my heart rate normalises. This is to become my sleeping pattern in Q'ero: two hours asleep, one hour sitting up, repeated through the night. I am envious of their ability to sleep deeply.

In the darkness, I feel as if I am in the womb of Pachamama. Brilliant streams of light flash around the hut. This lasts but a few seconds, but I feel I am witnessing the birth of the Universe. Every night, all life is renewed like this and the world is born again in the day. With this, I fall back asleep.

The way of action is called *llank'ay* in Quechua (pronounced 'yan-kay'). The literal translation means 'to work.' The spirit of *llank'ay*, however, goes beyond physical labour and includes mental and creative work, as well as performing ceremonies and healing. Ceremonial life imbues work with meaning and, to the Q'ero, balancing outer activity with inner work is the key to survival. Ceremonial work is not isolated from physical work. The planted field is holy ground just like the mountains.

Love and beauty, *munay*, make daily life pleasing and soften the hard edges of difficulty; but without initiating right action, *llank'ay*, nothing gets done and things stagnate. Action for its own sake can lead to conflict, however. The best outcome of actions proceeds from knowledge, *yachay*. *Munay* becomes impersonal love that embraces all things. *Yachay* becomes the superior consciousness one arrives at through the proper cultivation of love and work, and *llank'ay* becomes right livelihood.

A way of living that is ecologically sound, promotes the welfare of others, and encourages service performed in the spirit of lovingkindness, is central to the higher form of *llank'ay*.

When in harmony, these principles balance an individual. According to Andean belief, only when the emotions, thoughts, and actions are aligned can you be a balanced human.

The altitude, cold, and my injured feet thwart hopes of climbing into the mountains that surround the village. I am idle when I crave activity, and preoccupied with my ailments when I want more time for spiritual insight. I try not to lose sight of my purpose, but it becomes nearly impossible to maintain composure in the midst of my foot pain and the debilitating effects of high altitude.

Though disappointed with myself, I take it as a lesson in the

cultivation of right action. I refocus my attention on survival and not on my personal thoughts, opinions, and desires.

The Q'ero are sympathetic to my plight and their concern is apparent, but they don't coddle me. Instead, they offer helpful suggestions on how I might heal faster and provide me with herbal remedies. It just takes time. They know that and make preparations for the day when I will recover.

My feet gradually heal, and the altitude has less effect on me. When I am able to walk without significant pain, I go to the potato fields. For the Q'ero, to work is to survive. They prepare the fields for planting, sow potatoes, harvest them, and repeat the cycle year after year, century upon century.

Due to the extremes in weather and high altitude, however, each aspect of Andean agriculture requires meticulous planning and co-ordination in accord with seasonal changes.

Q'ero lifestyle is pastoral. They tend llamas, alpacas, sheep, horses, a few cattle, and a pig or two. Domestic work for women includes cooking, spinning and weaving, and working in the fields beside their men. Child care, dish and clothes washing, and cooking are shared by men and women. Communal work called *faena* in Spanish is common among Andeans. Houses are raised in this manner, and if a man is away or sick, his fields are worked by the others until his return.

For traditional Andeans, the cycle of work is ruled by astronomical events such as the solstices, as well as climatic occurrences such as the beginning and end of the rainy season.

Potato planting is crucial. It is timed to the movement of the Pleiades across the heavens. A clear sky filled with bright stars and an unobstructed view of the Pleiades (*Vilcacoto* in Quechua) as they rise in the night sky, is the best time to sow.

It is early June now, potato harvest time. Every member of Sebastian's family is eager to get the potatoes out of the fields, dried, and bagged. Having rested for several days, I feel better and, wanting to work with them, offer to help.

Around midmorning, I go to the fields with Rolando - an hour and a half walk away, following a llama trail along the side of hills. Banks of mist move in and out of the valley below us. Far below runs a fast flowing stream with pools deep enough to dive into if the water weren't ice cold. Rolando tells me that the stream is full of trout and later proves it by bringing home a dozen firm-fleshed fish for dinner.

On the plateau overlooking the valley, we come upon an Incan ruin, it is now just a cluster of stones. An ancient tree with tangled, above-ground roots, the only tree in the entire area, has grown around the stones. The place feels haunted and Rolando avoids it, but I find it fascinating and approach the tree with an offering of coca leaves.

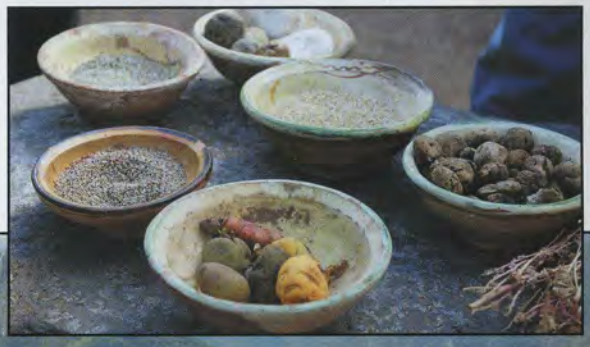
Rolando, maintaining a respectful distance, observes me with interest, but doesn't come closer.

We continue downhill along a draw until we come to the base of a large hill. Mountains rise up in all directions around us. Black soil matted with grass roots, exposed by hand-turning with a crude tool akin to a wooden shovel, lies exposed to the sun. We make our way over the clods of dark earth up the hill to where several members of Sebastian's family are camped in a grass hut, not much larger than a small tent. This is where they sleep and cook when working in the fields.

After a rest and lunch of boiled potato and egg soup, the work of harvesting potatoes continues. Once the potatoes swell in the ground, they are dug up by hand with hoes. The children gather them, and let them air dry. Our job is to carry the potatoes to the top of the hill where we lay them on dry grass. Here, they dry more and much of the dirt falls off. Afterwards, they are packed into sacks for transportation back to the village.

There are 4,000 varieties of potatoes, most are frost-tolerant, an asset at high elevations where freezing temperatures occur in all

Below: potatoes and other staple foods of the Andean Highlands



Ancient Inca terraces make as much use as possible from the mountain slopes

The shaman's work is twice as hard. They marry, have children, and raise families like other members of the community. In addition to routine chores, however, they conduct ceremonies

seasons. The Q'ero cultivate a variety of potatoes and other tubers, often eating them in the same meal. Cooking consists of an open fire where potatoes are boiled in metal pots.

Communal meals are eaten three times daily. Sometimes they add alpaca meat, intestines or other parts, or small amounts of onions, but a typical meal consists of a large bowl of boiled potatoes followed by potato broth.

At first, I couldn't understand how they existed on a high-carbohydrate, low-protein, low-fat diet. Potatoes contain, however, a wide range of vitamins and minerals, especially when grown on nutrient rich soil, as in the Andes. When combined with other tuberous roots that are higher in protein, and provide a balanced if monotonous diet. The addition of alpaca meat, an occasional egg, and trout, adds variety and protein. Judging by their strength and endurance, the Q'ero are in excellent health and their traditional diet suits them.

They rarely drink water, believing that cold water robs the body's energy and makes one intolerant to the extremes in weather in the high Andes. They do, however, drink lots of potato broth, and sometimes drink tea made from wild herbs or coca leaves.

James and Sebastian

The Q'ero approach work with great care. In the field, they treat each potato with importance and cover it with dry grass. They take their work seriously and mostly work in silence, but break into light conversation readily. Smiles flash at every opportunity. Small children and dogs play among the workers, and the children are encouraged to find any remaining tiny potatoes that escaped the gaze of the adults.

After the potatoes are collected and dried, they are bagged and hauled to the village on llamas. Once in the village, each sack is emptied and the potatoes sorted for size and type. Spoiled ones are set aside for the animals to eat.

The Q'ero work co-operatively and harmoniously. They learn from early childhood that survival requires work and co-operation. Never have I seen a show of dominance by one individual over another and, though the work ethic is strong, it is not overbearing. The intensity of the work demands commitment.

Rolando prefers fishing to fieldwork and, since he is a good fisherman, he's often given permission to take his net to the river. Here he fishes for trout and always comes home with at least a dozen.

The Q'ero understand that each person has a unique gift. Some are better suited to tending llamas and alpacas in the heights, often sleeping for days or weeks at a time in makeshift huts of dry grass, or in caves. To keep themselves company, they play bone flutes, whose ethereal sound is heard across valleys and over mountains. Llamas are capable of caring for themselves but must be guarded against attack by pumas, foxes, and by condors during the birthing season.

Others, like Lorenzo, have multiple abilities. During my stay in Q'ero, I observe that he is equally at home cooking as butchering and skinning an alpaca or working the fields.

A rare few, like Rolando, are called to spend time alone in the mountains. First, as young children they are drawn to the rocks and streams where nature spirits dwell. Later, they venture farther into the hills and eventually into the most remote snowcovered peaks.

These individuals become *paqo* (shamans). In Quechua, *paqo* is the same word for a male alpaca, a shorter and stockier version of the llama, but with longer hair prized for its wool. Llamas and alpacas can live at high altitudes in extreme weather, existing on small amounts of sparse grass and herbs, and are content to sleep under the stars. So too the Andean shaman spends time in the high mountains subsisting on wild herbs and coca leaves. Such experiences foster the development of wisdom and other traits.

Though supported by their family and community during periods of training, a *paqo* is not exempt from working in the potato field or from other duties. In fact, the shaman's work is twice as hard. They marry, have children, and raise families like other members of the community. In addition to routine chores, however, they conduct ceremonies of reciprocity.

The Q'ero have an organised system by which they live. It includes routine work as well as ceremonies and celebrations. It requires detailed knowledge of the environment and attunement with seasonal changes, weather, planting cycles, and other natural events. They appear to me to be happy even though they take their duties seriously and purposefully. They are never too busy or serious, however, to acknowledge the natural beauty around them. But more than organisation and routine, which are good habits to cultivate, they live by ancient principles that are rooted in an understanding of the human in relationships to the Earth and nature. In this manner, the circle of life for them is complete.

Dr. Williams's shamanic training and experiences among traditional Native Americans spans a 35-year period. In 1967, he lived a winter with the Siberian Eskimo of St. Lawrence Island and has been apprenticed with medicine men, *curanderos*, *brujos*, and shamans.

He is the author of 'Viral Immunity', 'Beating the Flu', 'Prolonging Health', and 'The Andean Codex.'

He spends much of his time in the Peruvian upper Amazon and Andes

For more information on his work with the Q'ero, visit www.andeancodex.com

This article is edited from his book 'The Andean Codex'. A review of this book appears in this issue of Sacred Hoop.

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