On the Inca Trail: Discovering the Secret of Trephination.

During our visits to Peru, two facilities helped us to recover from the long flight and the jet lag. The first one was the hospitable hotel Bolivar in Lima, with its comfortable beds, large bath tubs, and its old world charm. The second was Casa Vasca, a little restaurant located right around the corner and serving excellent Basque dishes. We also discovered that in the "Inca Pharmacy, right across the street from Bolivar," it was possible to get virtually any medicines without prescription. This included Ketajet, which was the South American trademark for ketamine, a "dissociative anesthetic" with strong psychedelic properties.

Christina and I have taken ketamine on several occasions in foreign countries – in India, Bali, and Brazil – and discovered that the experience connected us to the archetypal worlds associated with these cultures, the psyche of their people, and their art. We purchased a bottle of this substance, excited about the possibility of experimenting with it in Cuzco, the ancient capitol of the Inca empire. It seemed like a unique opportunity to explore the secrets of the Inca society, the world of its gods, and its glorious artistry. However, the session turned out to be one of the most difficult experiences of my life.

After our arrival in Cuzco, we took ketamine in the evening in our hotel. As soon as the substance started to have the effect, I found myself surrounded by four muscular Inca warrior-priests in their ritual attire. They had elaborate headdresses and tunics made of colorful plumage. Their ears and bodies were adorned with heavy gold jewelry. I felt the iron grip of their hands on my wrists and ankle. Then a particularly richly decorated man, who looked like a high priest approached me with a hammer and chisel and started relentlessly pounding on my skull.

It took me a while before I realized what was happening to me. During our stay in Lima, we had visited the anthropological museum and saw a large number of trephinated skulls. The texture of the bone surrounding the wounds indicated that the individual

survived the procedure. The captions accompanying them explained that these trephinations showed the medical skills of the ancient Incas. They were most likely surgical interventions removing tumors or some other pathological conditions. I remembered the strange and unexplainable discomfort I had felt watching these perforated craniums.

Now I was experientially identifying in the most realistic and convincing way with an individual subjected to this procedure. Although I felt drugged in a way that was different from the effect of ketamine, which was very likely some kind of premedication used in the ritual, the intensity of pain involved was beyond anything I could have even imagined before it actually happened to me. However, in spite of the agony I was in, I was flooded with some extraordinary insights illuminating the nature of the procedure I was subjected to.

This was not a surgical intervention, but a right of passage, similar to various indigenous rituals in other culture, involving excruciating pain, such as the Lakota Sioux Sun Dance or the subincision of the Australian Aborigenes. Part of it was clearly an ordeal testing the power of one's mind over the world of matter. The initiate had to demonstrate his capacity to endure extreme physical suffering and remain unperturbed. But the main purpose of the trephination was to remove the obstacle between one's brain and the Sun God, the ultimate deity of the Incas, so that his energy could enter the initiate's inner being.

I had to think about a man, whom I had met during my visit in an Amsterdam antique store. He somehow managed to convince a neurosurgeon to remove part of his cranium and create an opening similar to those resulting from the Inca trephination. We had a long discussion and he claimed that this operation greatly accelerated his spiritual development. He described the procedure and its effect in a book he had written

Now, when I understood the nature of the procedure I was subjected to, I tried very hard to assume the stoic state of mind expected from the initiates. But it was a very

difficult task, since the torture was intolerable. I called on my intellect for help; I realized that the effect of ketamine was approximately fifty minutes to an hour, so that my agony was time-limited. Once in a while, I looked at my watch checking the time, but the little hand barely seemed to move. Finally, after what seemed like eternity, an hour elapsed since the administration of ketamine. But to my utter consternation, that did not end my suffering. The pharmacological effect of the drug subsided, by the excruciating pain remained.

Christina had the usual course of the ketamine experience and after a discussion during which we shared our experiences, she fell asleep. I was lying in my bed in agony, unable to sleep, experiencing every headache that anybody had in the entire history of humanity. For the following day, we had planned a trip to Machu Picchu, the famous ancient fortress city of the Incas. When it was time for our early breakfast, we got dressed and walked down to the dining room. I felt nauseated and every step down the stairs felt like another blow of the high priest's chisel. I watched Christina eat her breakfast, myself unable to ingest anything.

My agony continued during the train ride to Machu Picchu. The workers who welded the rails had not done a great job and every time the wheels crossed the place where they were joined, it felt like another blow of the chisel. It seemed that my rite of passage was still going on and that it would never end. Then suddenly, about half way to Machu Picchu, the pain suddenly stopped and I went into a state of ecstasy. We reached the train station and a small van took us to the entrance of the ruins after having negotiated the access road with many switchbacks.

It was a beautiful sunny day and the sightseeing in the ancient city high in the Andes was an unforgettable experience. I had a strong sense of belonging to the place, as if I had actually once lived there. After lunch, we roamed around in the ruins and then decided to climb Huayna Picchu, which means in Quechua Young Mountain, the steep peak overlooking the historical site. The climb was steep and long, but it rewarded us with a fantastic view of the ruins of Machu Picchu, the Old Mountain. Until this day, the

visit of this magic place, following my experience of the trephination ritual, remains one of the most powerful memories of my entire life.