

Collaborative Harm Reduction and Psychedelic Education at Burning Man

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AT THE 2013 BURNING MAN event in Nevada, I had the opportunity to volunteer with both the MAPS Zendo Project and the Full Circle Tea House, two psychedelic harm reduction spaces that offer medical professionals and volunteers training in assisting individuals in altered states of consciousness, and that educate visitors in drug safety and self-care practices.

Similar to the peer-to-peer education movement within gay communities to promote safer sex during the HIV epidemic (Shepherd & Turner, 1999), the Tea House and the Zendo Project both use peer education to train volunteers in best harm reduction practices for their community, thus educating the whole community and reducing the number of people taken into hospital care or custody after consuming psychedelics.

Through this work, the psychedelic community has the opportunity to teach the general public that we are responsible and capable of caring for each other. This allows space for a new dialogue focused on increasing the benefits of psychedelics while simultaneously reducing their risks.

The Zendo Project (zendoproject.org) creates a safe space for processing difficult psychedelic experiences with the assistance of trained sitters. Guests learn that even challenging

experiences can be beneficial, and are educated in post-trip integration, essential for maximizing the benefits of any experience.

In 2013, 140 individuals, including medical professionals, therapists, student therapists, and volunteers, attended the four-hour training session, learning to hold space and monitor the health and safety of guests while simultaneously caring for themselves. Volunteers gained real-world experience working with people on psychedelics, and were encouraged to share best practices gained from their sitting sessions with other volunteers.

The Zendo Project also acts as a hub for drug information by passing out cards from the harm reduction organization DanceSafe (dancesafe.org), which list drug effects, dosages, addiction potential, and safety tips for popular recreational drugs (including alcohol and tobacco). Missi Wooldridge, Executive Director of DanceSafe, says that these cards will soon be updated to include information on new research chemicals, including the synthetic cathinones (often sold as MDMA or “bath salts”), MXE (often sold as ketamine) and 25I-NBOME (often sold as LSD).



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In the coming years, the Zendo Project will work alongside DanceSafe to add drug testing services, chemically identifying substances brought in by guests and providing advice and counseling on their use. This, in combination with the updated educational cards, will help to reduce the number of guests who struggle after taking misidentified research chemicals.

Drug testing has already been effective at the Boom Festival in Portugal, allowing guests to learn about the effects, potential risks, and dangerous combinations of substances before consuming them. Initial research from the Netherlands and Switzerland suggests that implementing drug testing services may contribute to a slight decline in drug use overall, and a significant decline in multi-drug use and drug overuse (Bücheli, *et al.*, 2012).

The Full Circle Tea House (fullcircleteahouse.com) was founded in 2011 by Annie Oak, former Burning Man Ranger and founder of the Women's Visionary Congress, a 501c3 nonprofit devoted to promoting diverse traditions of consciousness inquiry (visionarycongress.org). It's the perfect space to rest and feel connected, offering calming and hydrating herbal and caffeinated teas in the Chinese Gong Fu ceremonial style, plenty

of shade, mountains of pillows and blankets, and zero electronic music. The Palenque Norte lecture series (palenquenorte.com) hosts educational lectures on psychedelic research, spirituality, and community activism in a revival tent next door.

The space is not specifically a psychedelic care facility, though it does offer one-on-one support for guests and is always located near a medical unit. While the Zendo Project and Black Rock Ranger models gather demographic data on guests and are obligated to report cases of domestic violence to the police, the Tea House gathers no data on guests unless necessary for emergency medical care. Organizers of the Tea House believe this is a responsible approach when working in communities of drug users, whose privacy is often violated. It also allows for the support and education of individuals who are not comfortable sharing their information.

Annie Oak estimates that several thousand guests were served over two weeks of continuous tea service at Burning Man 2013, and many more during other events that year. Few Tea House guests have required the intense one-on-one care provided by the Zendo Project; rather, the Tea House acts as a pre-crisis risk reduction space, caring for guests before they



Photo credits (above, above right): Geneva Photography

need intense care. “After 16 years on the playa, we’ve learned that harm reduction often comes down to hydration, rest, the avoidance of alcohol, and quiet, supportive conversations that take place in community spaces,” explains Annie.

Tea House volunteers are trained both in Gong Fu tea service and in psychedelic care services in group settings. Servers keep an eye on guests in the space, especially those who are sleeping, and are trained to respond in case of emergency. Volunteer medical professionals are included in shifts whenever possible.

Annie estimates that the Tea House trained 300 tea servers in 2013, and that over 900 servers have been trained in the last three years at Burning Man and other events. She is also working to establish a crew of Shura Rangers (named in honor of Sasha Shulgin) who will be trained in psychedelic care, as well as CPR, tea service, and peer counseling, and who will offer additional support at festivals and events.

The Zendo Project and the Tea House were located on opposite ends of the playa in 2013, connected by radio and the Rainbow Bridge Art Car (donated to MAPS by David Bronner of Dr. Bronner’s Soaps) shuttling guests between the spaces

while providing mobile tea service. The Rainbow Bridge allowed guests who had completed intensive time in the Zendo to travel to the Tea House for alcohol-free integration, rest, and rehydration. Similarly, any guest who came to the Tea House requiring one-on-one care was transported to the Zendo.

Tea House and Zendo Project volunteers will be offered joint psychedelic care and CPR training by a licensed trainer prior to Burning Man 2014. Both groups hope to increase the number of emergency medical technicians (EMTs) capable of dealing with overdose and other situations involving psychedelics. Annie Oak stresses the importance of having volunteers with medical training who can address breathing problems and other medical issues in harm reduction facilities and rest spaces. The goal is to ensure that there are volunteers capable of triage and handling medical emergencies available during every shift in both spaces.

At Burning Man 2014, the two spaces will once again be positioned on opposite ends of the playa. The Tea House will also establish a space for the care of individuals who require more privacy, and the Zendo Project may be joined by a small adjacent Tea House.



(From left) Annie Oak serves tea; attendees share company and tea service at Psychedelic Science 2013; the Rainbow Bridge art car; Anna Szostek and Linnae Ponté at Burning Man 2013.

The Tea House and the Zendo Project plan to test their first combined space at another smaller festival in 2014. The combined model will feature a Tea House in front that invites guests to hydrate and rest, and a secluded Zendo Project space next door for guests who need quiet rest or support from trained sitters.

In combination with drug testing organizations like DanceSafe, these sister spaces are training teams of psychedelic therapists and tea servers capable of crowd management and emergency medical care, while providing guests with education in the appropriate, safe, and effective use of psychedelic substances.

Peer education and compassionate support allow the psychedelic community to teach the public that we are capable of taking care of ourselves, and that psychedelics can be safe and beneficial in the right contexts.

The Tea House organizers are currently raising funds to build a new facility with built-in washing facilities for tea cups. To learn more and support the project or volunteer as a tea server, please contact the Tea House Logistics Mistress at ah@well.com.

Due to increased interest, the Zendo Project will only

be accepting medical professionals, therapists, and therapists in training as volunteers this year. To get involved or learn more, contact Linnae Ponté at linnae@maps.org.

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