

# Archetypes of the Feminine in Psychedelic Peer Support

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THE ZENDO PROJECT ([zendoproject.org](http://zendoproject.org)) has provided specialized harm reduction services for those experiencing psychedelic and emotional crises at events in the U.S., Europe, Central America, and Africa. The project has grown into a unique pioneer in on-site peer support services and provision of a safe space for attendees to receive compassionate care.

Inherent in the Zendo Project’s approach to psychedelic support is the co-creation of communities of compassionate care. It is historically females who teach the lessons of attending to emotional experience, healing and spirit: our mothers, nurses, and teachers. When guests receive support in the Zendo they are not simply receiving a quiet place to reflect; they are also experiencing, in the midst of an awakened brain, direct interaction with these feminine archetypes. This experience, in itself, can be enough to minimize potential trauma from a difficult psychedelic experience. The presence of a loving figure softens the emotional impact of difficult experiences.

The Zendo Project’s approach to psychedelic harm reduction prioritizes compassion, safety and human dignity, as well as the basic elements of psychological and emotional first aid. The project’s values and practices are unique in their matriarchal approach, an approach that is seldom considered at large events where many people use psychedelics and risk arrest, psychiatric hospitalization, or other potentially harmful consequences. Most common is the “sedate and restrain” approach, which predates psychedelic peer support and continues to be the status quo in crisis response for emotional and psychedelic crises that do not require medical intervention. This approach focuses on convenience and resource maximization, unfortunately also resulting in loss of the opportunities for growth and insight that psychedelics can offer, even in the midst of difficulty, and potentially increasing traumatic outcomes.

The Zendo Project’s dedication to an alternative approach extends not only to its programming, but also to its staffing. MAPS began offering peer support services at events in 2001. From 2001–2008, peer support services offered by MAPS were pioneered by Rick Doblin and Valerie Mojeiko. In 2012, the department took on the name the Zendo Project and came under the direction of Linnae Ponté. Now directed by Sara Gael, the project continues to maintain a legacy of female leadership. Leadership roles have been occupied by women who’ve created and sustained an inclusive, collaborative model that both informs and reflect the Zendo Project’s approach. Deep presence, nurturing, unconditional acceptance, and cooperation are foundations of the support strategies utilized in the Zendo and the Project’s contributions to the psychedelic harm reduction movement.

## ARCHETYPES AND PSYCHEDELICS

Archetype, in its most literal sense means the original model of something, deriving from the ancient Greek root words *arche* meaning “beginning or original” and *typos*, meaning “pattern or model.” Historically, archetypes are considered representations of the collective human experience that we can all relate to, even if it contains qualities that we do not consciously identify as part of our individual selves. The term was first coined by Plato to name the replicated essence of the true form of actions, things and characters which we carry within ourselves. Centuries later, Carl Jung re-invigorated the term as an expression of the collective human experience, both conscious and un-



conscious. Today, archetypes can be understood as thematic, collectively understood expressions of the human condition. Jung proposed that recognition of archetypes within and around us can serve to provide a greater sense of connection among us and subsequently, influence our psychological health. Indeed, throughout history across the planet, universal archetypes have permeated the mind in relationship, art, spirituality, entertainment, and nearly every other aspect of society.

In psychedelic experiences, not unlike the dream state, an ideal setting for working with archetypes emerges: perspective widens, interconnectedness deepens, and the ego leaves space for direct access to experiences we may not otherwise allow or understand. Over the years, thousands of guests have used the Zendo Project's peer support services. Spend enough time in the Zendo, and it becomes clear that encountering archetypes is inherent to the psychedelic experience and perhaps even essential during a difficult psychedelic experience. Therefore, the project's matriarchal approach offers a vital resource—archetypal femininity—as a response to the guest's basic needs for familiarity, nurturing comfort, and emotional support in order to avoid escalation of difficulty or potentially harmful behavior. Responding with unconditional receptivity and calmness, as the Zendo Project's peer support volunteers are trained to do, is an invitation to embody the archetypally feminine qualities of selflessness, compassion, and surrender while still allowing the guest to remain engaged in their own process.



*The Healer*, by Amanda Sage, oil and casein on wood, 2010, [amandasage.com](http://amandasage.com)

Though common archetypal experiences seen in the Zendo can include what is commonly referred to as light aspects of the feminine, feminine archetypes can also illuminate the shadow aspects of the feminine—wrathful and unloving. Difficult psychedelic experiences frequently encountered in the Zendo can feature frightening aspects of the feminine, such as the frigidity of the queen and the deceitfulness of the lover. In the psychedelic, as well as in the archetypal, both light and shadow

exist. The project's response to all archetypal symbolism, dark or light, is to remain focused on the core values of unconditional presence and acceptance. Approach whatever presents itself as a common collective experience—and an opportunity for connection and psychological growth.

## COMPASSIONATE CARE AND THE GODDESS ARCHETYPE

If in psychology the Mother is the most beloved and most fraught of the feminine archetypes, than in non-ordinary states of consciousness the most potent feminine archetype is the Goddess. As the individual mind expands into the collective with psychedelic assistance, the individual experience of the mother transforms into the Goddess. Both the positive and the negative aspects of the Goddess exist across a range of cultures, including in pre-monotheistic, animistic earth-based cultures, as well as in Hinduism, Buddhism, Egyptian, Western Grecian, and Roman traditions. The ferocious Kali Ma, wise Sophia, lusty Aphrodite, mother Mary, and compassionate Quan Yin are some examples of well-known and widely worshipped Goddesses. These last two representations could be said to embody the qualities of the Goddess of Compassion. Ariel Spilsbury, author of *Alchemy of Ecstasy*, describes the Goddess of Compassion archetype as:

*She who unfolds in mercy, forgiveness, and compassion. Like a Divine Mother who loves all in an impersonal way (rather than a personalized human mother), the Goddess of Compassion represents the benevolent heart that assists all beings in channeling the love of creation into manifest form. She acknowledges and empowers by seeing the potential of each being beyond the limitation of ego, from the perspective of the oversoul rather than the personality (Spilsbury, 1999).*

It should be noted that despite the importance of the feminine elements present in the Zendo Project's approach to care, gender identity and expression of the sitter are inconsequential when providing compassionate care. All genders can embody the Goddess archetype in service to attending to challenging experiences. Compassionate care results in the gift of unconditional acceptance. Unconditional love is frequently a major feature of the enlightened state, a common theme of the psychedelic experience. Zendo Project guests often report that despite being disoriented or uncomfortable due to experiencing difficulties they didn't expect, this spirit of compassion remains cognizant in the following days. The archetype of the Goddess supports the offering of compassionate care in the midst of psychedelic emergencies.

In the psychedelic field, largely occupied by the voices and bodies of white cis-gendered men, the Zendo Project stands in contrast. Though male researchers continue to dominate the field of psychedelic science and research, women are at the forefront of providing care to the thousands of individuals who find themselves lost in distress and confusion in the environ-

ments where psychedelics are used most often: mass gatherings, festivals, and concerts. The receptive, collaborative, and unconditionally accepting elements of femininity are amplified and put into practice when women hold positions of leadership and when the feminine archetype is valued and acknowledged in organizations, independent of the gender identity of staff and volunteers.

In the spirit of collaboration, providing training and supporting others in utilizing the Zendo Project's approach is the focus of the future. The Zendo Project has responded to the growing recognition of its innovative model by increasing training and consultation services offered to event producers, promoters, venues, and emergency service providers. The Zendo Project also supports grassroots organizations in providing similar services in their geographic locations. The continued growth of safe and compassionate psychedelic peer support communities around the world where people feel capable of caring for one another and for themselves is the goal of the Zendo Project, and together with our growing community of supporters, we will continue to make outstanding progress—Goddess willing. 🌀

## REFERENCES

Spilsbury, A., 1999. *Alchemy of Ecstasy: Initiates Guide to the Goddess' Mysteries*. Limited Edition Manuscript.

**Brooke Balliett, LMFT**, is a licensed psychotherapist in Los Angeles, CA. With over a decade of clinical experience in trauma, developmental and depth psychology, Brooke has a passion for treating psychological, spiritual, emotional, and relationship challenges through the development of self-awareness, emotional intelligence, and recognition of the healing power we each inherently hold inside of us. Brooke is the Co-Founder and Clinical Director of the California Center for Psychedelic Therapy; a therapist on the Los Angeles MAPS Phase 3 clinical trial of MDMA-assisted psychotherapy for the treatment of PTSD; maintains a clinical practice specializing in emotional intelligence, Ketamine-Assisted Psychotherapy and Jungian psychotherapy; and also provides direct service, supervision, and training in harm reduction services at events worldwide with the Zendo Project, Kosmicare, and RGX Medical. Additionally, she provides clinical supervision in depth psychotherapy, ketamine-assisted psychotherapy, and psychedelic integration for early career psychotherapists.

**Sara Gael, M.A.**, received her Master's degree in Transpersonal Counseling Psychology at Naropa University. She began working with MAPS in 2012, coordinating psychedelic harm reduction services at festivals and events worldwide with the Zendo Project. Sara was an Intern Therapist for the recently completed MAPS Phase 2 clinical trial of MDMA-assisted psychotherapy for PTSD in Boulder, CO. She maintains a private practice as a psychotherapist specializing in trauma and non-ordinary states of consciousness. Sara believes that developing a comprehensive understanding of psychedelic medicines through research and education is essential for the health and well being of individuals, communities, and the planet.