



CEREMONY OPERATION GUIDE

Zhen Institute Retreat Preparation Guide

I. The Sacrament and Its History

This sacrament is a living tradition with a lineage far older than any of us.

1. **Stoned Ape Theory** (~100,000–200,000 years ago): Terence McKenna speculated that this sacrament may have catalyzed the expansion of human consciousness itself, suggesting it has been shaping humanity since before we knew we were being shaped.
2. **Prehistoric Use** (est. 6,000–9,000+ years ago): Rock art across multiple continents shows humans in relationship with this sacrament since deep prehistory, before written language, before civilization, pointing to a bond between this sacrament and human awareness that is as old as awareness itself.
3. **Mazatec Tradition** (documented 16th century, likely far older): The Mazatec people of Oaxaca have held this sacrament, called *teonanácatl* or "flesh of the gods," in sacred healing ceremonies called *veladas*, guided by *curanderas* who work with it not as a substance but as a living spiritual intelligence.
4. **Soma and the Vedic World** (~1,500–500 BCE): Some scholars propose that Soma, the divine drink praised throughout the Hindu Vedas, was derived from this sacrament, suggesting a thread of sacred use woven through the earliest known spiritual literature of India.
5. **Eleusinian Mysteries** (1,600 BCE – 392 CE): For over two thousand years, ancient Greece's most sacred initiations centered on a psychoactive drink called *kykeon*, now widely believed to have contained ergot or fungal compounds, taken as the threshold into direct encounter with the divine.

Several of the ancient world's most significant thinkers were documented initiates, and the direct influence of the sacrament is traceable in their work:

- Plato wrote in the *Phaedo* that "he that has been purified and initiated shall dwell with the gods," and structured both the *Symposium* and the *Allegory of the Cave* around the staged revelation of the Eleusinian rite — using initiation not as metaphor but as the actual blueprint for philosophical ascent.
- Socrates, recorded throughout Plato's dialogues using the specific language of the Mysteries, said in the *Phaedo* that becoming a true initiate was the work of his entire lifetime — and that the philosopher and the initiate were the same person.
- Aristotle stated explicitly that initiates into the Mysteries did not go to learn something but to feel something — a distinction that describes precisely how this sacrament transmits what cannot be taught through argument alone.
- Cicero, a Roman initiate, wrote that through the Mysteries humanity was "brought out of our barbarous and savage mode of life" and given "the power not only to live happily, but to die with a better hope", words any ceremony-goer would recognize.



- Aeschylus, father of Greek tragedy, was nearly put to death for allegedly revealing the secrets of the Mysteries in his plays, suggesting his work was not metaphor but testimony, and that what he was trying to put on stage was what the sacrament had directly shown him.

6. **Aztec Sacred Use** (14th–16th century): The Aztecs used teonanácatl in ceremony to induce visions and commune directly with the gods, understanding it not as a substance that alters the mind but as a messenger that opens a door.
7. **Spanish Conquest and Suppression** (16th century): Spanish conquistadors and the Catholic Church systematically drove these traditions underground, labeling them heretical and demonic, yet the Mazatec and other indigenous peoples continued holding ceremonies in secret, preserving what they knew could not be lost.
8. **Western Discovery** (1957): R. Gordon Wasson participated in a Mazatec velada with the curandera María Sabina and published his account in Life magazine, the first time this sacrament entered Western mass consciousness, opening a door María Sabina would grieve for the rest of her life: "From the moment the foreigners arrived, the saint children lost their purity. They lost their force; the foreigners spoiled them."
9. **Harvard and the Counterculture** (1960s): Timothy Leary and Richard Alpert, later known as Ram Dass, brought this sacrament into Harvard's psychology department and then into the counterculture, catalyzing a generation's awakening while triggering a political backlash that would shape the next fifty years.
10. **Criminalization** (1970): The Controlled Substances Act classified this sacrament as Schedule I, halting scientific research and criminalizing ceremony, not because it was proven harmful, but because the culture around it was threatening to those in power.
11. **Underground Continuity** (1970s–1990s): Even through prohibition, the ceremony continued. Ethnobotanists like Terence McKenna kept the knowledge alive in writing, indigenous communities never stopped, and a quiet network of practitioners held the tradition through the dark years.
12. **Modern Re-emergence** (1990s–present): Research resumed at Johns Hopkins, NYU, and Imperial College London, and through the advocacy of MAPS, demonstrating profound efficacy for treatment-resistant depression, end-of-life anxiety, addiction, and the kind of existential suffering that conventional medicine cannot reach. We are now in a genuine renaissance, legal, scientific, and ceremonial.

We receive this sacrament carrying the prayers of elders and wisdom keepers who came before us, in gratitude and humility, willing to be reminded, willing to be found, willing to be guided.

II. What We Believe

What this sacrament has shown us, across traditions, across centuries, and in this room

1. This sacrament is received not as a drug but as a sacred gift with its own intelligence, its own intention, and its own timing.

2. The sacrament does not heal you. It uncovers what's there, accelerates what is already moving. Every person carries within themselves the complete capacity to awaken and be remembered whole.
3. What you encounter tonight is real. Your experience belongs entirely to you, and no one else's is more or less valid.
4. The sacrament reveals what is already there. States of unconditional love, peace, and wholeness are not created by it. They are uncovered.
5. Difficulty is not a detour. The hard passages often carry the deepest gifts. Trust that what arises is what was ready to be seen.

III. The Ceremony

The Arc

Tonight moves roughly through five phases. Let the full arc complete before making meaning of any single moment within it.

1. **Opening:** We begin together, sometimes in silence and sometimes with music, with an invocation to mark the threshold between ordinary and ceremonial time. The sacrament is then received collectively, at one moment, as a single act of shared intention.
2. **Onset** (~20–45 minutes): A quiet time after receiving the sacrament before effects begin. Rest, breathe, let yourself arrive. The ceremony has already started inside you.
3. **Journey and Deepening** (~3–5 hours): The heart of the ceremony. The sacrament does its work. Your only task is to be copassionate present to whatever arises and let it move through you. At some point I will come around quietly to check how each person is feeling. If you feel the sacrament has not fully opened, or if you are ready to go further, you are welcome to ask for more — you do not need to wait for me. Before you say yes, check in honestly: is this coming from courage, or from desire? From genuine readiness, or from fear of missing out? Feel for the yes in your body. A real yes is grounded. As long as you are not chasing a high, going deeper is always worth considering. An experience like this, held in a ceremony, does not come often. If the answer is no, that is complete.
4. **Softening:** The intensity gradually releases. What arose becomes available for reflection and integration. Let yourself land slowly.
5. **Closing:** We close as we opened, together, with intention. See There is space for gentle sharing if you feel called, though never required.

The Music

The ceremonial playlist is carefully sequenced to mirror the arc of the sacrament's phases, from opening to depth to softening and return. It is designed to support your process without directing it. Think of it as a current to float on when your own navigation feels uncertain. Silence is also woven in deliberately. Both sound and stillness are doing their work.

What May Arise

There is no correct experience. Everything below is normal. You are always welcome to check in with your facilitator if something feels like too much.

In the body: Shaking, trembling, heat, cold, nausea, tingling, energy moving, or sudden deep stillness. The body has its own way of releasing. Let it.

In the mind: Unexpected memories, looping thoughts, sudden clarity, confusion, or the dissolving of your familiar sense of self. All temporary. All part of the work.

In the emotions: Grief, joy, fear, love, rage, tenderness, or a yearning you cannot name. Emotions move like weather. When given space, they pass.

In the spirit: A presence that feels vast. A love that feels unconditional. A recognition that feels more like remembering than discovering. A wholeness where the boundary between self and everything else disappears. All of it is safe. All of it is already within you.

Healing does not need to be hard, depends on how you lead it and hold it.. Let beauty and ease in as fully as you let the difficult things in.

IV. Working with Your Experience

These are your tools. Return to them as many times as you need.

1. **Breathe:** Always available. When you do not know what to do, return to the breath.
2. **Smile:** Watch yourself the way you would watch a child navigating something hard, with warmth and no urgency to fix. That quality of witnessing changes everything it touches.
3. **Feel the body:** When the mind travels far, come back to sensation. Weight, temperature, the mat beneath you, the air on your skin. Let the body anchor you.
4. **Let it move:** Emotions complete when given space to be felt. You do not need to resolve them or make them stop. Feel them, and they will move.
5. **Become the witness:** If something frightens you, step back. You are not the fear. You are the one aware of it. From there you can be present without being consumed.
6. **Return to your intention:** When lost, come back to why you are here.
7. **Ask for support:** Always available, always welcome. You can ask to have your hand held, to be held, to have water, to be accompanied to the bathroom, or simply to have someone sit beside you. Asking is not weakness. It is wisdom.

See the door that has opened. Be courageous. Walk through it. Something will have been given to you.

V. Ceremony Principles

These agreements make depth possible, for you and for everyone in this room.

1. **Begin together:** Take nothing until the opening is called.
2. **Finish together:** Remain until the ceremony formally closes. Your presence holds the container for others.
3. **This ceremony lives here:** What happens in this room and in the field we create together stays here. The sacrament works within the container we build. Honor it.
4. **Silence:** Once we open, the space is held in silence. If something needs to be said, bring it to a facilitator, not to another participant.
5. **Sound is part of the ceremony:** Laughing, crying, sighing, even speaking in the depths of the journey — these are natural expressions of the sacrament moving through you. Be aware of your volume and your impact on others, but do not suppress what is alive. We will handle anything that needs handling.
6. **No touching:** Do not initiate physical contact with other participants. If you need grounding or comfort, come to a support person.
7. **Stay on your mat:** Your mat is your sanctuary for the duration of the journey. If you feel called to move or dance, let a facilitator know and we will create space for that outside the room but within our space.
8. **Honor your needs:** Bathroom visits are fine. Move slowly and return directly. Signal us if you would like company. If your process needs more space or more time, ask your facilitator and we will take care of it.
9. **Your only responsibility is yourself:** You do not need to take care of anyone else's experience tonight. The most powerful thing you can offer the room is your own full presence. If you feel love or compassion for someone moving through something, hold it quietly. That energy reaches them. You can share it in words after we close.
10. **Be compassionate with yourself:** Whatever arises, meet it with the same tenderness you would offer someone you love.
11. **Be compassionate with others:** If someone nearby is crying, laughing, shaking, or moving through something intense, let them be. What they are in is theirs. Trust us to handle what needs handling.
12. **Use your reactions as mirrors:** If someone else's experience triggers something in you, that signal belongs to you. Get curious about it rather than acting on it.
13. **Express your needs:** If you need something, signal a facilitator. You are allowed to ask for what you need, with kindness.
14. **Trust the process:** Difficulty means something important is happening. Stay, breathe, let it move.
15. **Remember it ends in a few hours:** You will land. The ground will be there.
16. **There are no bad journeys:** Darkness and difficulty carry gifts. No experience in this room is a failure, Name your challenge and we will alchemize it together..
17. **Phones off and away:** This space is protected from the ordinary world for the duration of the ceremony.

A Closing Word

Bring the fullness of yourself tonight. Your courage, your honesty, your willingness to not know.

Remember to breathe. Remember to smile. Come back to the body. Feel the sensation beneath the thought. Let it move through you. Ask for support when you need it.

The container is strong. The sacrament is wise. You are not alone. You are loved, always have, always will

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