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DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

Meta Praxis

Craft Practice: A Way of Being

Orr, Irene

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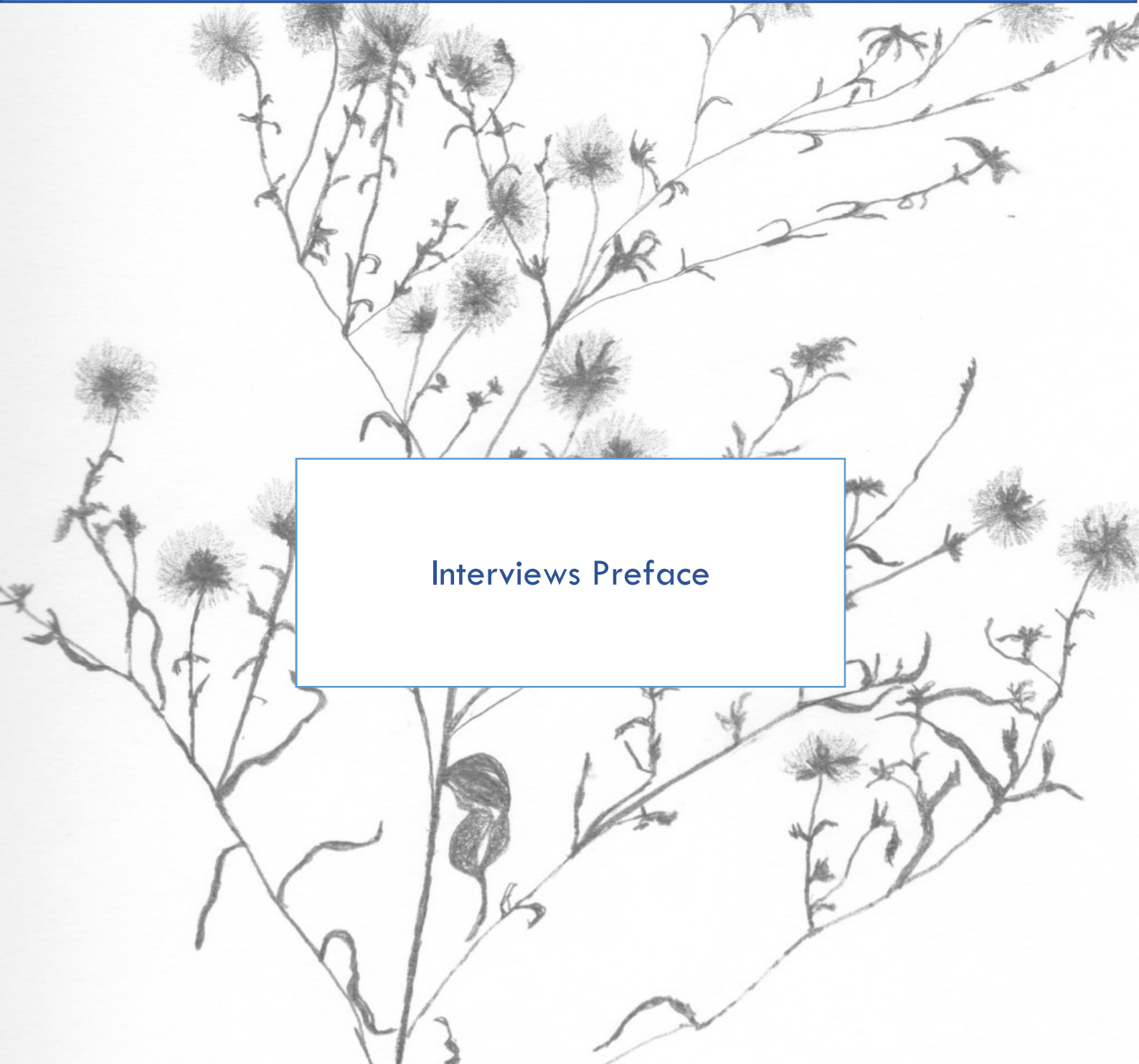
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Interviews Preface



Irene Orr
META PRAXIS

The Interviews

Prologue to 'Contemplating Making' film

Making a life: The interrelated perspectives from craft, anthropology, Buddhism and Neuroscience.

A conversation and correspondence interconnecting:

Making
Craft
Skill
Potential
Creativity
Meditation
Contemplation
Training the mind

Silversmith, Michael Lloyd
Jeweller, Kayo Saito
Craft textile artist, Jason Pollen
Anthropologist, Professor Tim Ingold
Buddhist Lama, Lama Rinchen Palmo
Neuroscientist, Dr Richard Davidson
Mind and Life Mentor, Aaron Stern

My original intention was to interview craftsmen in studios representing various crafts. I know studios to be usually creative spaces exuding active minds imbued with aesthetic tendencies; workshops teeming with embedded stories, intimacy, connectivity, the practicalities that tools hold, coupled with conversations around making practices and process. I thought I would highlight the issues that bring us a commonality amongst makers, throwing into the pot discussions of life choices, to decipher, to examine and to see if there were correlations with a meditation and mindful practice.

What was it I wanted to uncover? Who might be able to talk with me about their own lifetime's personal knowledge, to throw light on the importance of making and whether it was contemplative, and the consequences if it was?

If these conversations could show me the trail to the essence of what the research was trying to get to: whether there is a validity beyond form and function in a making practice, whether the process is a contemplative journey, if there are correlations or parallels in meditation, what is mindfulness, where do its roots lie? As mindfulness has become increasingly exposed to media attention, what are its core constituents? Are they relevant to a maker's community? Do these attributes, if they exist, relate to a maker's community at all?

Can the now secular practice of contemplative practice for wellbeing have any insights or direct connections to making?

As I read, studied, practiced, meditated on retreat, I reflected upon who may have the knowledge to help me unravel these complex questions. Who would have an authority, through a lifetime's work, be willing to open this conversation?

This occurred naturally with craftsmen and women I interviewed (Michael Lloyd, Kayo Saito, Jason Pollen). As I researched more, it became clear that I needed to research the wider, deeper implications of making and to encounter the thoughts and conversations around anthropology - Professor Tim Ingold, Buddhism at its authentic core - Lama Rinchen Palmo, Mindfulness or Contemplative practice, Mind training and Science - Dr Richard Davidson, Learning through Being - Aaron Stern, Mind and life Institute.

As I started out, the interviews I completed were not in my mind. I attracted attention of eminent experts in their respective fields through engaging them in the questions within my research. As the research revealed itself, and I connected with the formation of thoughts, I knew who I most wanted (as authorities in their field) to converse with, to experience their thoughts and findings in relation to my own. I e-mailed, phoned, visited exhibitions, hand wrote, went on retreat, courses, personally pursued, and met those who I thought had a specific wisdom on the subject of practice, a lifelong involvement and through a central conversation of why is "making" specifically in Craft central to being human? What is the practice of mindfulness? What are the origins of its entry to the secular world? Does this relate to my research, and, if so, how? How does scientific research on meditation and contemplative practice, associated to well-being and mind, relate to being a maker, if indeed it does? Unique viewpoints interrelating; all to tell a tale which I hoped would dovetail key elements of the research together.

I knew I had to reach out to others' viewpoints to see where connections, similarities, differences and thoughts were, and where knowledge and wisdom lay.

Originally, I knew I could find a wealth of willing makers amongst a community of friends and colleagues, who would gladly give time and stories to help illuminate my hypothesis that Craft, to make, to be a maker is a way of being in this world, drives us in our thoughts, our motivations, our frustrations, our choices in how we live.

This was, however, tantamount to watering the garden in the rain. Personal connections were, although unique to themselves and their own practice, would have, at their core, a communal well of interest, experience and values. The very factual event of familiarity rendered for conversations of story, but not a wider deeper un-furrowed quest into the unknown.

I decided to cast my net out, with the hope I might entice persons of world repute, experts in their own chosen fields, to engage with me their opinions, experiences, science, behaviour and skills, to examine

the practice of craft resonating in the fields of Anthropology (Growth, Gift Economy, Knowing from the Inside), Buddhism (Meditation, Mindfulness, Wisdom), Neuroscience (Mindfulness, Well-being, Plasticity of the Brain). This, coupled with extensive relevant written work to provide affirmations to my thoughts, guided my investigations.

First, however, I was to interview a craftman of repute, specifically not known to me directly. The interviews introduced here are in chronological order as each interview led me to new research and who may contribute best to that line of inquiry. Each has its own story, depth and connection to this work. As my research developed and my perception of inquiry evolved, so did the scope of my intentions for these conversations.

I also had thought to work with an accompanied filmmaker to film the interviews while I asked the questions. I could, then, concentrate on the conversation, the questions, rather than be tied up with technicalities. Sound was considered. I have limited equipment and technical expertise. Practicalities (cost, travel arrangements, changes of plans, ability to be flexible) led me to not go down this path, and fortunately the resulting spontaneous, personal, intimate and revealing discussions with just myself, a hand-held DSLR camera and a travelling tripod with the person I was interviewing became an asset. Sacrificing perhaps a more professional outcome on sound and lighting, the actual conversations were richer, deeper and more personal as a result. To contribute to the intimacy of conversation, and as part of the reciprocity of skill and concepts, I took with me a selection of my jewellery/artefacts, beautifully wrapped and presented. Before I commenced our discussion, I shared my jewellery as a way to introduce my thoughts, research, and, as an opening to making meaningful connections. My work, therefore, provided some context to the subsequent conversations. I was able to do this with all the interviews, except Richard Davidson and Aaron Stern in the USA, as my baggage allowance prohibited this.

Interview 1

Michael Lloyd: Silversmith

Silversmithing is older than Christianity; the tools and techniques remain similar within a handcraft tradition. It has a purity of function: the tools little changed over centuries. Design is the predominant difference, raising techniques blend classic hand, tool, and skill within the work. 'The Silversmith's Art' at the National Museum of Scotland seemed a good place to start.

The day I visited, Michael was demonstrating his art. I watched as he eloquently talked with his hands, tools and voice, enchanting his audience who were curious to see this magical craft. I waited in line to see closer the movement of his wrists, forefingers and thumbs, how the chasing marks effortlessly became the story on his already raised bowl.

Later, when the room quietened, we spoke for the first time. My encounter with Michael became the first of many fortuitous, miraculous, informative conversations around craft, making and a way of being.

Immediately, Michael was interested, intrigued by my desire to look at the importance of making. What else other than form and function could this way of life deliver? He was more than willing to embark on an exchange and dialogue. He invited me to his studio in the Borders of Scotland.

Time spent with Michael is to enter into a form of contemplation; one of remarkable, observational, sensitive 'ways of being'. By his own admission, he is living his life as a voyage of the daydream. His awareness, a journey of self-taught skills, close correspondence with nature, his process of drawing, connecting, working amongst the company of genius (listening to Bach), inspirations from the world he lives in and creates. This was a phenomenal opportunity to expose the vast wisdom and treasure trove of a man who lives life by making a life. He describes himself as a compulsive maker. He is world renowned, with his work held in collections of both museums and private collectors. He has series of works with names such as 'Vessels of Life'. His poetic view of the world resonates within his work, evocative of the life he leads. Attractive to vessels of remembrance and celebration, he creates visceral responses to his work. In his essay, *Twelve Vessels*, he writes:

*"The idea behind 'Twelve Vessels of Life, Love and Death' had been simmering away for several years waiting for the time and space to enable me to focus, without distraction, on a collection that embraces my love of the natural world and our place within it; a recognition not only of the beauty of nature, but of the profound events that mark our lives as we progress from cradle to grave, of birth, of love, of survival, of loss and of death."*¹

¹ Lloyd, 2010

Throughout this research, I found that those who so readily gave their time and wisdom to me have a grace and generosity which despite often extremely demanding schedules wanted to contribute to the idea of “making as a way of being”. The subject and my line of inquiry was the key component to their willingness to participate as all had a resonating interest in the questions I was posing.

Michael has continued to support my thoughts. On viewing the resulting film, he commented,

“I have now had a little more time to look at your video and have really appreciated some of the comments. It does, of course, make you want to continue the journey and expand on some of the ideas, in my case, the connection between sensuality and consciousness, not to mention mindfulness! I could go on and on!!!”

“Many thanks, again, for involving me in the project which I hope people will find as stimulating as I have.” Michael Lloyd

Quotes:

“I am inspired by Nature; I feel part of Nature.”

“This drive, that to me seems incredibly natural, just to want to produce something you’ve dreamt up.”

“So, the whole thing is very much the voyage of this daydream.”

“There is no separation.”

“Homage to Nature”

“Company of Geniuses”

“Making is part of the human condition”

“Ringside seat to creation”

“Hand raising is concentration dreamt up”

Interview 2

Kayo Saito: Jeweller

West Dean has long been a destination for the craftsman, a stunning location set amongst inspiring gardens. The origins of the house date from 11th century but latterly were occupied by Edward James, a poet and artist himself, who was known for his patronage towards other artists, including Dali and Magritte. He long wished to turn the house into an education centre and wrote to Aldous Huxley about his thoughts. James said:

*"I want to establish an educational foundation where creative talents can be discovered and developed, and where one can spread culture through the teaching of crafts and the preservation of knowledge that might otherwise be destroyed or forgotten."*²

Students can apply and attend short courses, conservation courses and long-term craft directives. Many acclaimed artists go to teach there.

I have much admired and been in awe of Kayo Saito's work. She chooses forms from nature, meticulously manipulates and folds silver and gold into exquisite seeds and pods, and translates these sculptural structures into wearable pieces with masterly rivets, articulation and precision. I arranged to work alongside her at West Dean. Kayo is skilled, open, and shares her considerable knowledge with generosity. Again, another acclaimed artist willing to engage in conversations around making; the importance of the love of making; how practice and process lead to life choices, spilling into home, food, the environment, sound; how all play is an important part in practice; and the process of being inspired, having technical skill, being harmonious with yourself and your craft.

Kayo agreed to be interviewed spontaneously; and, as we sat in a room at West Dean, the conversation revolved around separation, attachment, culture, creative process and assembly of her pieces which she describes as 'like factory work', which I translate as non-thinking work, as she switches from the creative design and form to assembly and function.

Kayo not only brings beauty and a fine finish to her work, but crucially, a grace. Kayo's jewellery is embedded with integration and connection of attitude, working practice and poise.³

² West Dean College, n.d.

³ Saito, n.d.

Quotes:

“It is very instinct work.”

“I have to see the movement.”

“It is a very fine sort of attention.”

“It is not too pretentious; it is more like harmony.”

“I am making a lot of other pieces, and this is the only one in the world and this person is having it. It is beauty.”

“Like a factory”

“More than life”

“Beauty of giving”

“Feel the pieces”

Interview 3

Jason Pollen: Craft textile artist

I met Jason as a part of the 'Knowing from the Inside' (KFI) programme with the Universities of St Andrews and Aberdeen. Headed up by Prof. Tim Ingold, it seeks, through Anthropology, Art, Architecture and Design, to reconfigure the relationship between practices of inquiry in the human sciences and the forms of knowledge to which they give rise. Its fundamental premise is that knowledge is not created through an encounter between minds furnished with concepts and theories, and a material world already populated with objects, but grows from practical and observational engagement with the world around us.⁴

Jason was giving a practice-based workshop for the members of KFI. I also took part in the workshop which explored, shape, colour and perception. I was immediately struck by Jason's use of language, colour, evocation of materials and, consequently, an engaged conversation led to the discovery that Jason was an experienced and practicing meditator. He was willing to discuss with me, for the purpose of this research, his craft and his personal reflections on meditation and its relation to his work.

Jason works predominately with fabric; his first discipline is fine art. However, a period of living in Paris without resources to buy materials led him to make a body of work with found twigs, picked up in the park. This led to a lifetime of exploration in materials, fabric and wood, installations loaded with curiosity, directly addressing his personal voyage of inquiry. Jason says of a selection of his work:

*"Others see us from our surface, and how we present ourselves to the world. We see ourselves from inside our heads, who we believe ourselves to be. There is of course a deeper reality that we cannot fathom: how we undergo an ongoing transformation- not just in appearance but in our experience of time and events- before we cross the bridge into the matter of the universe."*⁵

He explores connection, identity, life forces and explains that he sees little separation in his work as an artist and his practice of meditation, both are his way of being, a way of playfulness, exploration, keeping fresh, becoming as much of the integrated pattern of his lived life as taking a shower or sleeping. Making, meditating, are his daily routine and ritual. He dances, teaches tango, mentors many students and is the embodiment of an artist who assimilates his life choices and echo's his visual observations, sharing them with students, clients and through exhibitions and workshops. His meditation gives him a wisdom and calm investigative voyage which inspires others. He has designed for Donna Karen, Yves St. Laurent and Liberty of London.

⁴ KFI, n.d.

⁵ Pollen, n.d.

On seeing the resulting film of these interviews, Jason commented:

“Thank you so much for this thoughtful, meaningful, beautifully crafted video. May I share it widely? I think many makers and meditators and non-makers and non-meditators will benefit from what you have created. Sending waves of appreciation.

Warmly,

Jason

It’s never a bad idea to follow the white rabbit.”

Quotes:

“I am just manipulating materials, colour, form, shape, lines.”

“It is all a kind of playfulness.”

“I was drawn to meditation probably because it has many of the ingredients.”

“That, I make every day as an artist.”

Interview 4

Professor Tim Ingold: Anthropologist

Professor Ingold is Head of Anthropology at the University of Aberdeen. He has contributed to Anthropology with many publications, including: “*Perceptions of the Environment*,”⁶ “*Lines*”⁷, “*Being Alive*”⁸ and “*Making Anthropology, Archaeology, Art and Architecture*”⁹ all pertinent to this research.

His work was known to me before embarking on this research. However, his work came into prominence with my engagement with ‘Knowing from the Inside’, a five-year project researching a wide arena of topics encompassing knowledge emanating from the inside of the world, not imposed. Through my Supervisor, Dr Emilia Ferraro, I was involved and asked to participate in workshops and presentations regarding this work.

*‘Knowing from the Inside’ seeks to reconfigure the relation between practices of inquiry in human sciences and the forms of knowledge to which they give rise. Its fundamental premise is that knowledge is not created through an encounter between minds furnished with concepts and theories, and a material world already populated with objects, but grows from the crucible of our practical and observational engagement with the world around us. Knowledge, we contend, comes from thinking with, from and through beings and things, not just about them. Our overall aim is to show how much research underpinned by this premise could make a difference to the sustainability of environmental relations and to the well-being that depends on it.’*¹⁰

Tim Ingold is an original and inspired thinker. His radical and sometimes controversial ideas appeal to artists, anthropologists and academics alike. His fresh approach questions perspective, knowledge, growth, craft, and collective human potential; urgent questions driven by an ocean of academic rigor, intellect, an intensive reservoir of material from philosophers, scientists, anthropologists and artists. He proposes anthropology and the arts have similar routes to knowledge through correspondence rather than tangential ethnographic approaches.¹¹ His cross-fertilisation of ideas is original and passionate, provoking, and scholarly, he is a master of walking amongst enquiring minds and lighting the way. His perspective within academia, anthropology and the arts touches and embraces a vast range of urgent issues. His work is iconoclastic, influential and contemporary.

⁶ Ingold, 2011b

⁷ Ingold, 2007

⁸ Ingold, 2011a

⁹ Ingold, 2013

¹⁰ Ingold, 2015a

¹¹ Ingold, 2018

I knew Professor Ingold would be a busy man. E-mails remained unanswered. I waited patiently, knowing a new approach would be required. Eventually, I hand wrote a letter to his Department outlining my research, the intentions and motivation, and why I wanted to interview him and the questions I was asking myself to which he may have some insight. He responded immediately to the handwritten approach. We corresponded for a while until a suitable time arose for us to meet. As it happened, I was invited to his house for tea.

I took with me my hand-held camera and my work, selected into a wooden box (once the home of a musical instrument). This included drawings, experiments with silver, finished jewellery; all wrapped in white linen. This, I unpacked on the kitchen table, and thus followed a dialogue around anthropology, Buddhism, and academia. Such was the range of conversation, that it extended beyond the camera. Professor Ingold is the embodiment of his work, provocative, generous and engaging. An archetypal scholar as one might envisage to a reciprocity of knowledge, a desire to help, an ethos of commitment to the duty of the academic and researcher to share knowledge. His is an affirmative philosophy of a shared inspirational life.

I sent Professor Ingold a copy of my completed video, before presenting it at “Art Materiality and Representation Conference” at the British Museum in 2018 where he was the keynote speaker.

His reply:

*“Dear Irene,
Just lovely!
Tim.”*

Quotes:

“Go to the world, that is where the knowledge is.”

“One is not learning about plants or animals or people one is learning with them.”

“If you are transformed, then it is your responsibility to transform in return.”

“Bring things into presence.”

“We have got far too much information but very little wisdom.”

“So, in essence, we are knowing or doing whatever we are doing, or making, from the inside of this world which is continually unfolding through a process of differentiation within us and around us and that is the existential starting point.”

Interview 5

Lama Rinchen Palmo: Buddhist

I have long traversed the wild back roads down through the Borders of Scotland to Eskdalemuir and Samye Ling, the Tibetan Monastery nestled in the hills. I was there in 2017, studying 'The seven points of mind training', a core Buddhist practice. As I drove away along the white frosted snail trail road leading back up through the Borders, I reflected on the transformation of this monastery, the hundreds and now thousands of people who visit, study and find a piece of the miraculous there. For me, it was the first time I had seen it without diggers and mud. It has been a work in progress for a long time and continues to be so. It was founded in 1967 by two spiritual masters, Akong Rinpoche and Chogyam Trungpa Rinpoche. Stories are a huge part of Tibetan Buddhism, and here I will tell the story of Samye Ling as it has been told to me as a visitor there.

The intricacies and connections in this story are integral to leading me to this research, as the consequences of the people involved have been at the root of a meditation and mindful eruption in the West and the wider secular world.

"Kagyü Samye Ling is the largest Tibetan Monastery in Europe, now offering spiritual, humanitarian, therapeutic guidance in four continents, offering benefits to the lives of tens of thousands of people."¹²

It was not always like this.

The life story of Dr Akong Rinpoche is well documented. Following political unrest in Tibet, he left his role as Abbot of a large thriving monastery, fleeing violence and danger, with a group of 300 people, to attempt passage to India. Only 13 of the group survived.

The hardships encountered meant many died of starvation, while others were forced to boil the leather from bags and shoes to try to stave it off. No nutrition when battling against the weather and terrain caused the shocking loss of life. Once in India, Akong Rinpoche dedicated the rest of his life to alleviate suffering and starvation. He and another young monk, Chogyam Trungpa, were later sponsored by an American (Freda Bedi) to come to the UK (Oxford) to study. Only Chogyam had a bursary, so Akong Rinpoche worked as a hospital orderly supporting them both. He was also trained as a Doctor of Tibetan medicine. During that time, the men heard of a small farmhouse (Johnstone House) occupied by two Canadian Buddhists. They visited, eventually took up residence when the Canadians left, and named it Samye Ling. Both Akong Rinpoche and Chogyam Trungpa's highly regarded standing as teachers (in Tibet) and now their command of English meant they could attract many eminent monks, scholars, fellow teachers and followers to the small farmhouse

¹² Samye Ling, n.d.

to stay not just for a short while but often for months. Samye Ling soon became a centre of meditation and Buddhism within Europe.

Chogyam Trungpa eventually left to the U.S.A. He was one of several pioneer teachers to bring Tibetan Buddhism to the U.S.A. He became a controversial teacher but attracted many influential pupils including Pema Chodron and Francisco Varela, both of whose work is cited in this research. Pema Chodron is a prolific writer and teacher, extensively making accessible Buddhist practice and its influence on accepting life's challenges and anxieties. "*The Places that Scare You*"¹³ and "*Living Beautifully with Uncertainty and Change*"¹⁴ are just two of her publications.

Francisco Varela was a Chilean biologist who became an exile in U.S.A and later in France. "*The Embodied Mind*"¹⁵, a classic book first published in 1991, was one of the first to propose the embodied cognition approach in cognitive science. It pioneered the connections between phenomenology and science between Buddhist practices and science claims that have since become highly influential. Through this cross-fertilisation of disparate fields of study, "*The Embodied Mind*" introduced a new form of cognitive science called "enaction" in which both the environment and first-person experience are aspects of embodiment. Above all, the book's arguments were powered by the conviction that the science of mind must encompass lived human experience and the possibilities for transformation inherent in human experience.¹⁶ Varela was a founder member of 'The Mind and Life Institute' whose mission is to commit research into integrating science and contemplative practice.¹⁷

The Director of The Mind and life Institute is the Dalai Lama. On the board are Dr Richard Davidson (Director of Centre for Healthy Minds)¹⁸ and Aaron Stern (Director of The Academy for the Love of Learning).¹⁹

Both also agreed to be interviewed for my research.

Dr Richard Davidson is a neuroscientist, a colleague and contemporary of Jon Zabab Zinn, Mathieu Ricard and Alan Wallace, whose collective work seeped the Mindfulness movement from the contemplative practice of Buddhist monks into the health and welfare secular world as we know it today.

Mind and life emerged in 1987 from the meeting of three visionaries, Tenzin Gyatso, Adam Eagle and Francisco Varela, a neuroscientist. The three were united in understanding that science had become the dominant framework for investigating the nature of reality and the

¹³ Chödrön, 2001

¹⁴ Chödrön, 2012

¹⁵ Varela *et al.*, 1993

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Stern, 2019

¹⁸ Davidson, 2018a

¹⁹ Stern, 2019

modern source for knowledge that could help improve the lives of humans, and the planet. The three also regarded this approach as incomplete. Whereas science relies on empiricism, technology, objective observation and analysis, the Dalai Lama, Varela and Eagle were convinced that well-refined contemplative practices and introspective methods could, and should, be used as equal instruments of investigation to ensure a wider reaching and more humane science. The Mind and Life Institute was set up to bridge this divide, and advance progress in human well-being.²⁰

In Scotland, Samye Ling continued with Akong Rinpoche, gathering small but loyal and dedicated practitioners who were attracted to this simple place with this highly regarded teacher. Shrapalden Beru, a Tibetan artist, lived at Samye Ling until he was over 100 years old. His authentic painting of the subsequent temple building at Samye Ling added to its reputation. A stupa, further accommodation and gardens were added.

I first visited in early 2000, having been on the lookout for several years, through reading, and attending a course in meditation in Edinburgh. Although I understood little at that time, I was drawn to the philosophy of Buddhism. It resonated, and a curiosity followed.

A following period of uncertainty sent me at last to visit. It is well documented at Samye Ling that the majority of western visitors come after an episode of unexplained change. It is also well recognised within making, a number of students turn to craft after a life in another profession only to find a new approach to thinking, working, a new perspective on living.

The days of a muddy building site are long gone. The Temple is now complete. New dormitories are available for the ever-increasing numbers who visit and attend courses there. There are gardens, a library; it is truly a place of intention and hope, and for many, a spiritual home.

Buddhism is an ancient philosophy with many strands: Zen, Therapenden, Tibetan, to name a few. It is a practice-based spiritual path based on training one's mind and examining the nature of mind.

My experience is that of a beginner, as texts, prayers, training and language are complex, requiring enormous dedication, motivation and teachings by highly trained monks.

To become Buddhist, you take part in a ceremony, "Refuge", dedicating yourself to the benefit of all human beings. The training through meditation, basically, allows you to become aware of the mind's workings, and thus you can become calm, mindful, attain wisdom and ultimately, within Buddhism, the goal is to gain enlightenment. Lighten up from all our attachments which cause us suffering.

²⁰ Mind and Life institute, n.d.

I do not do this, although my respect for the transformative practices and wisdom I have encountered I use every day. I have rooted myself within my family, a career focused on craft, art, teaching and travel. Always, however, through my visits to Samye Ling, I become mindful of the connection of awareness and focus, training to become skilled, to choose a personal mind-set and, crucially being brought into the present moment. There are flickers of recognition in finding calm, peace, intention and, most of all, looking towards a life motivated by what is beyond simply eating, sleeping and working.

For me, meditation is difficult and subtle in its changes. Also, living a life as a maker is not an easy option. Where were the parallels, if there are any?

The story of Samye Ling continues. Akong Rinpoche's brother, Lama Yeshe, had now joined the monastery (having indulged in a western lifestyle, he recognised the benefit of his Buddhist tradition) and turned to a life as a Lama.

Holy Isle was a project born of a dream of Lama Yeshe's, to have a retreat centre for long-term retreatants and a Peace centre, acting as a conference facility available to those in pursuit of benefitting the world, utilising skills such as sustainability, environmental stewardship, mindfulness and organic gardening.

Samye Ling also was unusual by ordaining four women as Lamas (honorific teacher of high spiritual attainment and authority to teach). Lama Rinchen Palmo was one of these women. She moved to Holy Isle to lead the women's long-term retreats.

I became aware of Holy Isle, off the west coast of Scotland, near Arran, and, through a love of wilderness and islands, had long wanted to visit. It was coincidence and timing that led me to Lama Rinchen's course on meditation for the first time. I had by now a glimmer of the benefits of meditation practice and wished to pursue it deeper and further.

Lama Rinchen is known for her 'down to earth' teaching; she runs the women's long-term retreats on Holy Isle and completed 12 years of personal retreat.

Ultimately, for me she is a woman of immense wisdom; the personification, embodiment and humour of someone who has a spiritual practice and is an inspirational teacher.

A retreat with Lama Rinchen is traditional, mostly in silence, sitting in meditation for up to five hours a day, with instruction, for example 'the seven points of mind training'. During the time on retreat, you can ask for a personal 'interview' with your teacher. A long-established opportunity to ask questions in private. These can be anything really, about your practice, a personal enquiry, an intimate place to shift thoughts that are stuck in your life. I had by this time embarked on this research, looking at mind training within my practice of making, within my practice of meditation and reading about Mindfulness and Well-being.

I embarked on a personal journey to interrogate my own findings using the silence of Holy Isle to deepen my practice and examine my thoughts. I was due for a private interview with Lama Rinchen, was still pondering my question to present, possibly on why it is so difficult to sit still. That morning I awoke to the terrible news of an earthquake in Nepal. The number of casualties and injured rose intolerably. A fellow retreatant had come from Nepal, where she lived while studying a specific painting technique (Thangka). It was a wretched time, one full of discussion on human suffering and tragedy.

To walk into the library to speak personally with a Buddhist Lama whose life's work is to examine the nature of mind has a certain resonance, reverence, anticipation.

Lama Rinchen is tiny, sits in an armchair with her legs tucked under her robes, hands, softly resting in her lap, holding mala beads. Given that the morning was heavy with awful news, I felt compelled to change the direction of discussion and, so, began by saying that, in difficult times, I take refuge in drawing and art, and looked for inspiration, creative responses to the inexplicable. We engaged in a conversation around work as a maker; the importance of the connection of hands; how creativity is a vehicle for change. We talked about the importance of observation, awareness, Ruskin, Goethe and philosophy. I explained my interest and Lama Rinchen has since been a voice for me to ask specific questions relating to the complexities of meditation, mindfulness and Buddhism. We agreed to talk more which eventually led to a meeting at Samye Ling mainland for an interview.

There is no doubt now, having completed several interviews with outstanding experts in their fields of practice: Buddhist Lama, artist, anthropologist, scientist, as examples, interviewees who everyone agreed had some resonance with my quest.

The importance of the questions: Why is it important to know how to make things? How does that impact on our ontology? Is making, the interrelated connections within mind and bodily touch, of vital significance for us as human beings?

Lama Rinchen now lives in Brussels, so I needed to find a moment in both our busy schedules to meet. Eventually, we agreed to meet on a day at the end of a week of teaching by an eminent Buddhist that Lama Rinchen was attending. We thought there was enough of a gap between the course ending and her leaving to go back to Brussels for our discussion. We were to meet in Johnston House, Samye Ling; the original farmhouse is now a meeting place. I arrived, extremely early to set up my camera, be composed and to go over my questions. As I drove through the gates of the monastery, Lama Rinchen was walking towards me, so I wound down the window to give greetings and to confirm I would see her later. "Oh, it would be good to do it now", she said, "Johnston House is so busy. We will have many interruptions. Maybe, we can go to your room?" The accommodation there is basic: a small bed, chair and no room for tripods cameras; the lighting was just a bulb and lamp, but here was the moment.... a year of setting up a time and place.... not quite the Temple environment I had envisioned. However, perhaps the immediacy and cramped conditions

led to such a humorous, profound and spontaneous discussion. Far-reaching and generous conversation followed on the nature of mind, meditation, the importance of making, mindfulness, creativity, spirituality and Buddhism.

Quotes:

“Meditation is looking directly at the mind.”

“There is one thing though that must be steady and that’s your own mind, that’s the thing that is going to make the difference, which I feel in mindfulness”.

“So, the learning to become mindful, that’s training.”

“The mind is like a monkey.”

“The meditation as far as I understand it, in Buddhism, in our training anyway is about understanding the mind and the functioning of the mind directly.”

“We are getting away from that experiential kind of way of life where you are hands on with things, and you experience things and your knowledge is your knowledge.”

“We have come to a place of dissociation from experience that we are close to madness in a sense.”

“The mind as a source of knowledge but also the mind that creates concepts and the experience of life.”

“Sanity is at stake.”

“So, there is a need to bring back together the spiritual and the scientific or the material world.”

“When you are doing craft, you are using matter, you are working with matter, but you are working from a spiritual place.”

“Spirituality is love.”

“Creativity is looking beyond. Spirituality is knowing there is a beyond.”

“My practice is training in doing nothing!”

“Meditation looks directly at function of mind”

“Being in the moment”

“Only one who can change things”

Interview 6

Dr Richard Davidson: Neuroscientist

Dr Richard (Ritchie) Davidson is Professor of Psychology and Psychiatry at the University of Wisconsin- Madison and Director for The Centre for Healthy Minds. He is best known for his groundbreaking work studying emotion and the brain. He is a well-known speaker and participant of leading conversations on well-being on international stages such as The World Economic Forum. He is a neuroscientist and named one of the world's top 100 most influential people by Time magazine. He has numerous books and publications attributed to his work.²¹

My personal awareness of Ritchie came about through being introduced to the work of The Mind and Life Institute, which was perceived and emerged from the meeting of three minds, Adam Eagle, Francisco Varela, and the 14th Dalai Lama, Tenzin Gyatso, in 1987. The mission statement of Mind and Life is to alleviate suffering and promote flourishing by integrating science with contemplative practice and wisdom traditions. Whilst neuroscientists and spiritual leaders accepted that science was dominant for investigating the nature of reality and the modern source for knowledge that could help improve the lives of humans on the planet, the three regarded this approach as incomplete. Whereas science relies on empiricism, technology, 'objective observation and analysis', they were convinced that well-refined contemplative practices and introspective methods could and should be used as equal instruments of investigation.

I applied to one of the first conferences with Mind and Life, but as a non-scientist was not accepted at that time. I continued to follow the work and watched as the contemplative practices were scientifically put through their paces. Robust scrutiny introduced by Dr Davidson at the request of the Dalai Lama provided the incentive to analyse and produce data to scientifically follow the instinctive knowledge held by a few monks known to these early scientists in the field and monks from Buddhist meditation practices. They knew by experience the transformational qualities of meditation practice. There are hundreds of meditation practices, mindfulness being one.

Only now, with the publication of "*Altered Traits*"²² does the history, the story and mistakes and difficulties, track the trajectory of the contemplative sciences, its impact worldwide and the path of the mindfulness movement from its roots of Buddhist meditation to secular implications.

Ritchie's laboratory, known for its work in well-being, gave scientific evidence to the 'plasticity of the brain' that the brain is not fixed, but

²¹ Davidson, n.d.

²² Goleman & Davidson, 2017

is malleable throughout life, with certain times being more influential. Therefore, it can be trained and continue to be trained to positive, healthy, flourishing traits building resilience, stamina and compassion.

My own work engages with this notion of training the mind as one might train to be a skilled craft worker. My work always felt contemplative, sometimes meditative. It required rigorous training, a malleable mind, a creative outlook, and skill, which played a big part.

By the time I had embarked on this research, Dr Davidson was of world repute; however, undaunted, I set about planning to capture his attention to the research I was doing, to ask him if indeed there was scientifically any evidence to suggest a making practice was implicated as a contemplative practice and, as a result, could it have a positive impact on well-being.

A thread of interconnected coincidences through friends and colleagues led me to write personally, outlining my lines of enquiry, asking for an interview at a convenient time in his very busy schedule. I had already by now secured an interview with Aaron Stern, also a Director of Mind and Life; and, as it happened, they were about to embark on a joint enquiry to the learning implications of a creative practice through somatic and story.

Does the craft of making have traits like the contemplative practice of meditation and contemplation? What has science discovered so far? “*Altered Traits*” relates the story and history of bringing mindfulness into the secular world and the Dali Lama’s challenge to Richard Davidson to use his skill as a neuroscientist to take meditation back to the science lab to work on useful, evidence-based applications which could be used in schools, clinics, businesses and for those suffering Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD).

Dr Davidson’s ground-breaking work through his centre has far-reaching impact on well-being through the contemplative practices. ‘The Centre for Healthy Minds’ now has 80 full-time scientists, disseminating their practice-based, scientifically evidenced, mind-altering programmes, based on Dr Davidson’s original assumption and personal experience that well-being can be a skill learned. Buddhism has long practiced these skills without the need for science, however the work revealed by evidenced based finding within ‘Centre for Healthy Minds’ has led to his hypothesis that “Well-being is a skill that can be learned like brushing your teeth” being a practice now accepted and introduced within secular institutions as a practical and experienced way to reduce anxiety.²³

The Buddhist answer to ‘How do we know it works?’ is that it is practiced, and the transformative qualities are lived and experienced by Buddhists and meditators continuously expanding in numbers throughout 2000 years. The experience is the teacher.

²³ Davidson, 2018a

For this interview, I travelled to Madison, U.S.A. Dr Davidson had just returned from Russia. Our communications for over a year had led me to this point. At one stage after he had agreed to be interviewed (again, by personal letter, outlining my motivation and the research question and his importance in exposing the plasticity of the brain), I had cold feet. Here was a man whose talks and work are given to tens of thousands of people, conferences with video links worldwide. Turning up from Scotland with my hand-held camera and questions relating to craft suddenly seemed small. I went and have since learned he turns down (due to time constraints) hundreds of requests to be interviewed. On questioning him later after the camera was turned off, he said they, as yet, do not have the language to do the science based-evidence to the arts and creativity, but it was something they were beginning to look at with the Academy for the Love of Learning. It was again the idea of connecting hand, mind, heart into something practical that engaged the Centre and why he invited me to come over. The interview was, in fact, a turning point in my research, as Ritchie pointed out the differences of a Buddhist meditation to the meditative qualities within a practice of for example; rock climbing, jazz musicians, etc. Here we encounter finite perspectives of 'Meta Awareness' (where in meditation you are still cognisant of meditating) to the notion of 'Flow' where we are fused with our practice within a creative field of pursuit. We were at last getting to the root of untangling this research. My own research leads me to embrace both within the process of Making.

Dr Richard Davidson: *"Thank you for doing this important work."*

Quotes:

"Well-being as a skill that can be nurtured and cultivated."

"I am practicing for the benefit of others."

"There is something very different about the psychological quality as well as the neural basis of flow verses the kinds of meditation."

"Meditative awareness that is cultivated from contemplative practice."

"The contemplative traditions, of course, go way beyond mindfulness."

"Completely absorbed in which he or she is engaged, which we describe as experiential fusion."

"Contemplative practice as lifelong practice."

"The invitation of all this work that we take more intentional responsibility for the plasticity of our own brains and shape it in a way."

"That is more conducive to the maintenance of virtue and of other kinds of positive qualities."

"We are interested in thinking about what role artistic expression may play in producing transformative change and how we can actually assess that scientifically."

Interview 7

Aaron Stern: Mind and Life Mentor

Aaron Stern, a musician, teacher and internationally recognised consultant on Learning, is the Founder and President of 'The Academy for the Love of Learning'.²⁴ He is also a board member of Mind and Life Institute.²⁵ He is committed to 'taking the lid off learning', to allow freedom and liberation as a way to question, what is education? What is learning? He is instrumental in courses such as 'leading by being',²⁶ discovering the process of being as a means to wake up.

Aaron was introduced to me by family in New Mexico, U.S.A. I became aware of his teaching, Leading by Being, knew the incredible work of the Academy, the exquisite buildings they occupied, and Aaron's roots within Buddhism, and the Mind and Life Institute. The work of the Academy is predominately concerned with both language and dissemination of secular working within schools, communities, and with the elderly. He was a friend and collaborator of Dr Ritchie Davidson; so, when he agreed to talk with me, I was delighted. Learning, process, spirituality, connectivity and narrative are all part of my research.

Our conversation took place by Skype; and, as evidenced by the transcripts, we had issues of technology and sound, so were interrupted often. However, a fruitful dialogue took place, with nearly two hours of discussion around our common grounds of interest. He was inspired to continue the legacy of Leonard Bernstein, who was a friend and mentor. After a concert in New York they were both struck by the intensity of joy and emotion after the music finished and how that dissipated soon after. Together they dreamt up the desire to investigate this embodied joyous feeling as a continuum for the human spirit.

Quotes:

"Inspires the possibility of well-being among all and is just so beautiful."

"Expressing gratitude"

"Learn to turn crafting mechanism towards the crafting of sense that actually could be in this world differently."

"Crafting a self"

The Interviews consist of around seven hours of rich and multidisciplinary sources. I hope to have created a dialogue highlighting the similarities in conversation as well as examining the details to explore differences between craft practitioners, Masters of

²⁴ Stern, 2019

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Ibid.

their craft (Michael, Jason, Kayo), educators, internationally known in their field (Tim, Aaron), Buddhist Lama (Lama Rinchen) and a neuroscientist (Ritchie). Out of these conversations, I have put together a 30-minute film. It is my belief that there are many more films within this rich resource. I am grateful, overwhelmed and eternally thankful these generous people came onto the path I was walking.

Meta Praxis

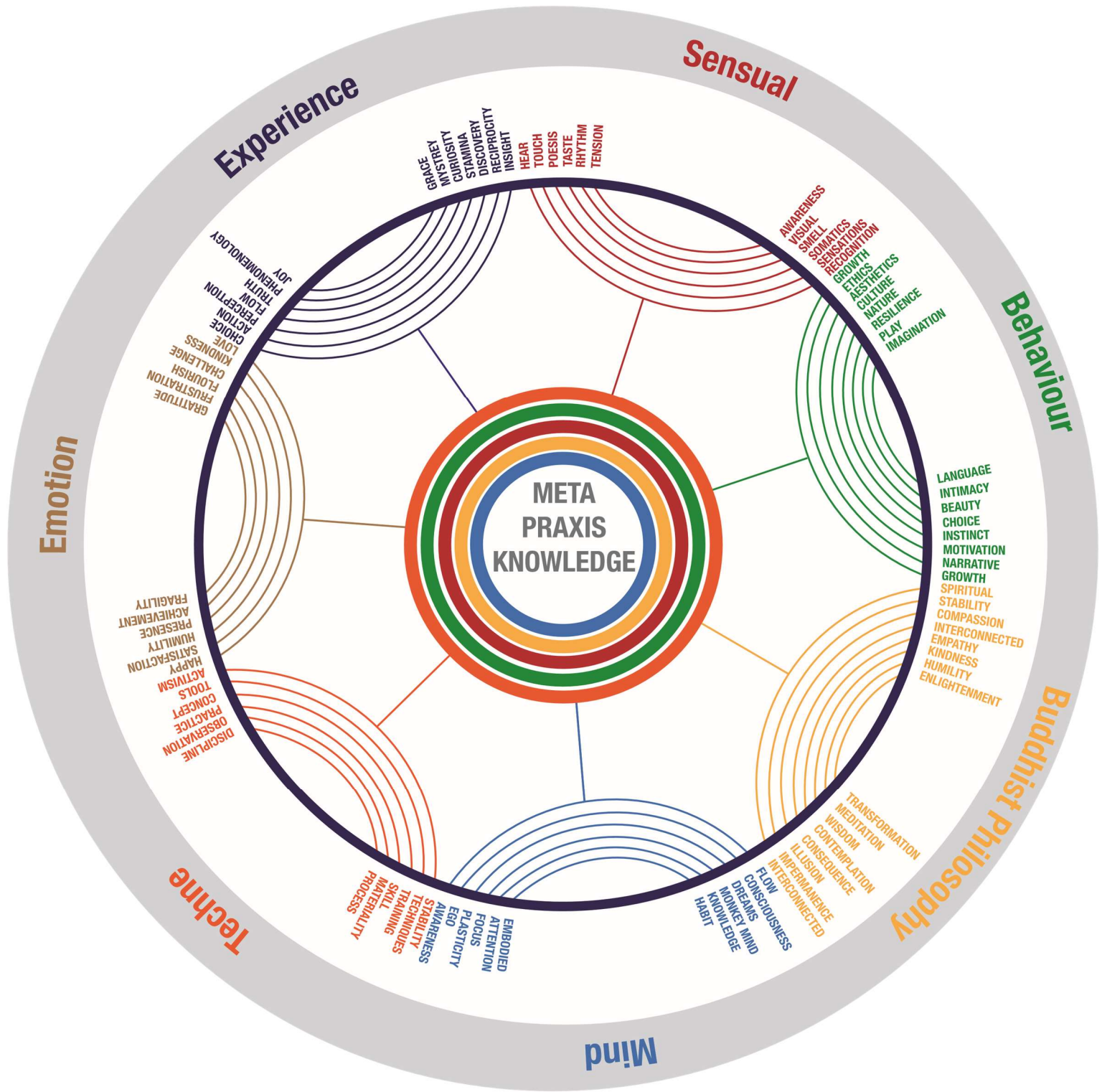
'Meta Praxis' is the potential for human flourishing through an awareness of practice and the value of making craft as an explicit knowledge pathway. Within and beyond the practice, this pathway has the potential to put us in touch with the essential vitality of life and its human value.

The exposition and articulation of 'Meta Praxis' and its potential is the original contribution to knowledge. This research leads us through interdisciplinary schools of thought (craft practice, Buddhism, anthropology, and neuroscience) to make connections and to set out why and how making craft is an explicit knowledge pathway and what is its importance for human thriving.

Chart

The chart represents possible reflections, encounters and human traits explored within the 'reflections'; each has multiple, personal and potential pathways represented in the chart. As the reader engages with the writing in each text, it is possible to explore these routes of knowledge and relate them specifically to the idea of 'Meta Praxis'.

The texts are the reflections of practice, with relevant encounters affirmed through an interdisciplinary approach.



META PRAXIS
CRAFT PRACTICE: A WAY OF BEING

