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DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

Meta Praxis

Craft Practice: A Way of Being

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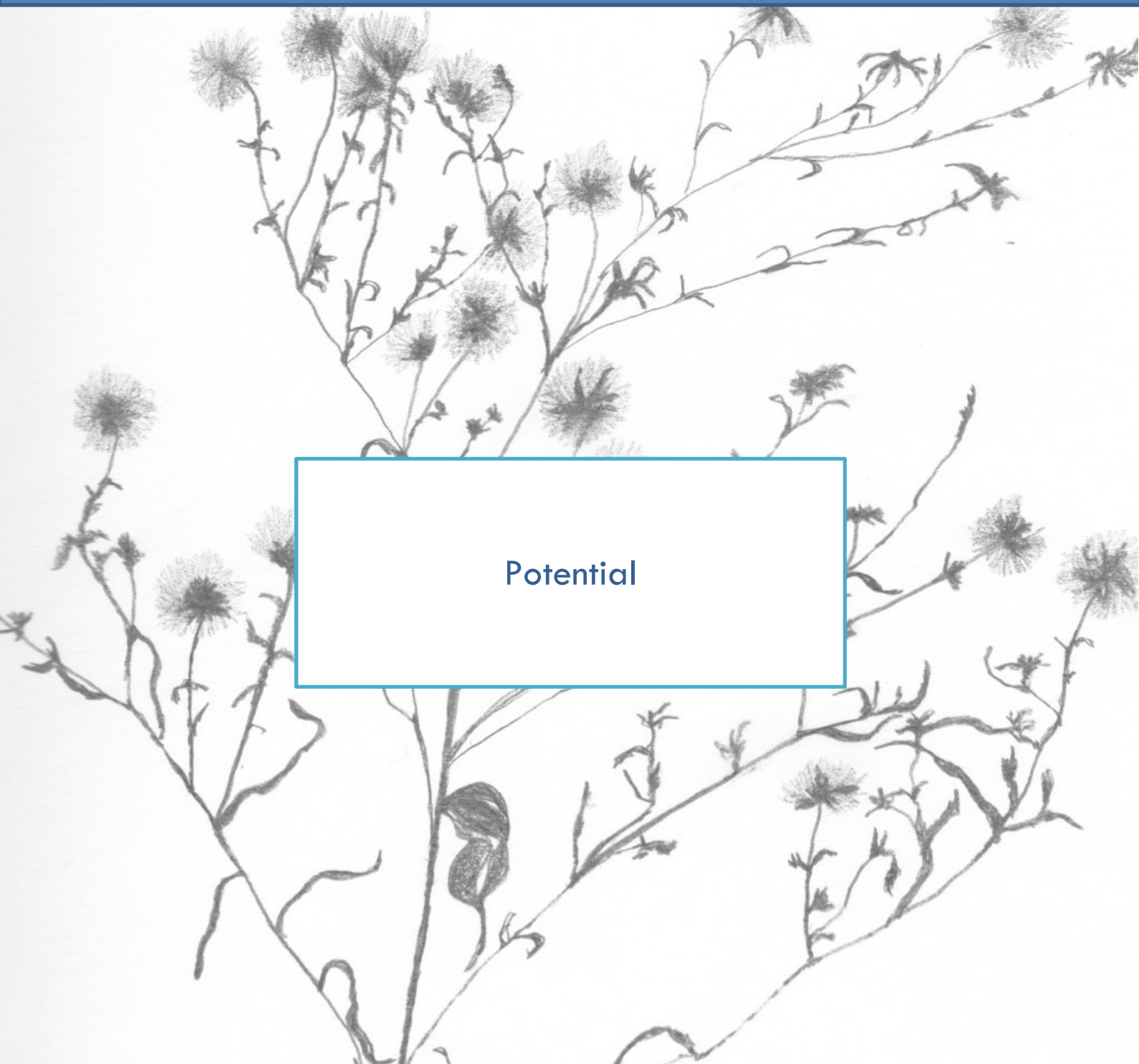
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Potential

Irene Orr
META PRAXIS

Diaphragmatic Roots

Steps swallowed
Rebounding inside
Sphagnum moss
Sundew
Whispering rush
Feet singing from the
Marsh bog
Reverberating skyward
A baritone pulse
Becoming
The song of beginning.

Potential

A tiny island a short ferry ride from the Island of Arran, acquired for the purposes of creating a Centre for Peace, born of a colliding set of dreams, one from the preceding owner, and one from a Lama born in Tibet, living in Samye Ling Monastery Scotland. Holy Isle.

Here reside the residual wild animals, left from an experiment by the University of Glasgow to observe, on an island environment, the habits and behaviour of Eriskay and Sannan ponies and Soay sheep. The project came to an end; but, the story goes, the animals would not, could not, be rounded up, making a definitive refusal to be taken off the island.

Here, in springtime, at least five lambs were born; the previous day was hot, light pouring over the bay, long swathed in winter cloth. The sheep, although wild, are accustomed to human presence. Many people walk along the path where they take shelter; and, today, the birthing of these tiny creatures, a couple of hours old, curled up in the middle of the pathway with the mother munching away close by, was in full view, evidence of the preceding birth still with her. The gulls screeched on the cliff above while the newly sprung ferns unfurl prehistoric fiddleheads and fronds, visibly with the balminess of the air. Two mute swans made their nest on the shore, a huddle of seaweed and twigs, two giant eggs laid cosseted within its bounds. The path nearly touches the outer perimeter of the nest; so, people tread lightly, the birds unperturbed. I am more than an observer as these animals share their intimate behaviours. The potential forces of nature are abundant and in the process of becoming.

I am here on a silent retreat. A meditation course taught by Lama Rinchen Palmo, a French-born Buddhist of great experience and repute, evidenced by the great many people who have come from all corners of the world to be at her teachings.

The journey already is illuminating: mirror sea crossing, porpoises graciously passing by, Holy Isle itself appearing as a mirage, soft blues against soft blue sky against a still sea, imperceptible land nestled in its place.

Already, I feel a sense of calm, a letting go, train, ferry, bus, until the final ferry crosses to this remarkable island, a ten-minute last commute. The days are structured, meditation, followed by teaching, lunch, repeated throughout the day. It is a silent retreat, orchestrated to hear the sounds of your own thoughts as opposed to the sound of conversation. The gardens here are astonishing; the land is rock and sand, but a dedicated group of volunteers have created gardens for the kitchen, for walking around, for flowers, for the ecological ethical terms by which this island lives. A complex system of making their own soil, bracken and seaweed layered with compost, rotted down to nourish the seeds on this inhospitable landscape. It is inspiring, a

permaculture producing fabulous salads, vegetables, herbs and potatoes.

The teachings are complex; this retreat is particularly centred on “the seven points of mind training”.

The practice itself is an intricate set of aphorisms (observations containing truth) set in the 12th century and involves refining and purifying personal motivations and attitudes. It is a set of practices within the Buddhist training according to the importance of training the mind with constant and rigorous exercises to maintain (in this context) a compassionate mind.

I am looking for patterns and thought processes, which are recognisable to me as a craft maker, to observe if the absorption and meditative mind are reachable through practice and have similarities; and, if so, could this be attributable to the feelings of unity in both practices?

I see many relationships, but also some important differences. The singular vital similarity is that both practices are the entry point to the connectivity we have and make, as humans, to our life forces. The practice is key. It is a direct experience into and through to a connectivity, to life itself.

The main differences I experience have to do with the intention of each practice, which is quite different, but we potentially encounter similar paths along the way. This meditation training within this Buddhist practice is motivated by the philosophy of enlightenment, which of course is a different goal to one of becoming a competent maker, at one with oneself and one's materials and tools. However, I am aware that this training has a pathway of recognition in its immersion with training, embodies direct experience, a connective route to a vitality of life, and many other similarities to that of a maker. It is crucially also about creating space and awareness to examine the nature of intent. In Buddhism nature of mind, in craft nature of poesis (bringing into being), this training alerts me to our human interdependence; all my actions have consequences, processes, and potential. Thoughts have magnitude, and modern science is uncovering the understanding of the significance of this. Both meditation and making I believe are intra-experiential teachers of self and our potential for being.

A number of interesting and unexpected issues arise during meditation. I cannot connect to some of the more complex ideas within the teaching. I am left feeling exposed to an arrogance within myself, as I thought I know more than I do. But I am wholly captured by the teachings on wisdom and knowledge. Where does it all come from? Now, as part of the training, I am a little closer to understanding the philosophy within the nature of mind, its observations and the practice, predominately of meditation, the experience without which I would not have the insights it offers. Meditation can bring us to awareness, which in Buddhist teaching is quite different in meaning. Awareness (or mindfulness) is ever present, and it is engaged with through

consciousness. It is within my experience and perceptions, which are ever changing, that my mind brings me to knowing that wisdom is the application of choice within awareness. This is also sometimes called emptiness, not as empty is thought of in the West, but as the space for creativity and potential to exist.

As part of the course, I can ask for a private interview, where I may ask about any difficulties I may be experiencing. I am in awe of this woman, knowing that she has spent years training, studying to reach a “high level of understanding”, as is necessary to become a Lama. A Lama is someone who has attained “Teacher of Dharma” status. Language interpretation is misleading, as there is no absolute accurate translation. Phenomenon, or that which appears or experience, all play into the word Dharma.

Her personal journey, where she talks of a “yearning for wisdom”, answers to questions of the deepest sort. These are for me worth listening to, despite a difficulty in really understanding the detail and complexity.

I had been searching for a personal question, relating to my interpretation of the practice, when unexpectedly there were details in the news of a terrible tragedy in the world. A fellow attendee had to take an emergency boat off the island to attend a seriously sick child abroad. How change can happen so abruptly, our discussions changed from optimism, training and sitting, to those of innocence and duality, the ultimate philosophical questions to stir the soul.

As a consequence of these disturbing events and the resulting intensity of our mood, I went to the private interview with reasons to be light-hearted, to re-address the balance of the previous immediate intensity. A conversation followed, on the nature of making craft, whether drawing was meditation, as I consider my own practice to be. The resulting conversation was thrilling, animated, with interjections of “yes, this is part of good practice” and “full of great motivation”.¹

I returned to continue these discussions in depth with Lama Rinchen Palmo, at her invitation. During further conversations, we discussed the nature and difference of activity verses meditation, spirituality, craft as a direct way to connect to thoughts and expand a space for creativity, growth, and a way of being. This discussion confirmed my thoughts of making as an instrument for form and potential to exist as an entry towards a greater understanding and connection to our humanness. Direct experience within meditation – watching my nature of mind – illuminates the way I ‘experience’ thoughts and opens the potential to understand how my mind gives shape and form to perception. A big part of the invitation to continue this discussion was the acknowledgement of the possibility of this research reaching a wider audience, particularly young students who in a highly stimulated world with distractions and anxiety might find the focus and attention within making, a positive and meaningful learning experience.

¹ Lama Rinchen Palmo, May 2015, personal communication, Holy Isle, Scotland

Lama Rinchen Palmo talked of a “yearning for wisdom” often arising after a trauma or suffering, whereby a journey igniting an enquiry to understand becomes the beginning of a meditation practice. Much of the teaching is to reach a state of equilibrium, to a deeper more compassionate understanding of the nature of mind.

If we look at the creative disciplines, there are similar experiences of observation, attention, whereby we become alert to the connectivity of experience, its agency and our reactions to this.

A description from an interview in Csikszentmihalyi’s book, “*Creativity: The Psychology of Discovery and Invention*”, could also be a description of a meditation. To be “in the moment” mindfulness, there is no past, no future, just the present moment.

“When you are right in the work, you lose your sense of time, you’re completely enraptured, you’re completely caught up in what you are doing, and you are sort of swayed by the possibilities you see in this work” that becomes too powerful, then you can get up, because the excitement is too great. You can’t continue to work or continue to see the end of the work because you are jumping ahead of yourself all of the time. The idea is to be so.... so saturated with it that there is no future or past, it’s just an extended present in which you’re making meaning. And dismantling meaning and remaking it without undue regard for the words you are using. It’s meaning carried to a higher order. It’s not just essential communication, daily communication, it’s a total communication. When you’re working on something and you’ve worked well, you have the feeling that there is no other way of saying what you are saying”²

In discussion with neuroscientist, Dr Richard Davidson, he specifically states flow is not meditation or mindfulness as there is always meta awareness (where we are still alert to our minds workings) present in mindfulness, and not always in flow (where we become fused with our work and mind).³ Also, the intention in flow is different to mindfulness. My own reflection on this is that we as makers not only can reach a place of flow, but there is a quality of mindful action and meditation during the process. These are subtle differences but pertinent ones. In flow, we can merge so deeply with the work that we lose awareness. In meditation, we are aware of our mind’s actions.

“The creative process starts with a sense that there is a puzzle somewhere, or a task to be accomplished. Perhaps something is not right, somewhere there is a conflict, a tension, a need to be satisfied. The problematic issue can be triggered by a personal experience, by a lack of fit in the symbolic system, by the stimulation of colleagues, or by public needs. In any case, without such a felt tension that attracts the psychic energy of the person, there is no need for a new

² Csikszentmihalyi, 1996, p.121

³ Davidson, 2018a

response. Therefore, without a stimulus of this sort, the creative process is unlikely to start.”⁴

Triggers then are important, one born out of inquiry, grief, a search for beauty, truth, or to expose or excise an idea giving it space to breathe, take shape, function.

My conscious motivation watches intently as an idea forms, its journey determined by a collision course of what has gone before: imagination, hard toil, and being aware of the trials and messages conjured up during this process. Sensitivity arises from practice, of recognition of when the colliding elements show promise, an alertness to take it a bit further, or rest, or strain, or exert; each moment guiding the next. Mistakes sometimes lead to adventures in materials, otherwise unexplored. It takes courage to trust to these guiding influences. Whatever the motivation to make, or where it came from, most ideas originate from the process of living and lived experience. I learn to observe, take note, take sketches, allow a period of reflection and acquire experience inform and act upon my thoughts. Combining this with skill, it is possible to enter a realm of “being through making”. Activating my conscious mind, I am engaging with and giving access to the unconscious reservoir of experience and choreographing the work accordingly.

Leading to these moments are all a consequence of what has gone before:

“The influence of historical events on the arts is less direct but probably not less important. It could be argued, for instance that the breakaway from classical literacy, musical, and artistic styles that is so characteristic of the twentieth century was an indirect reaction to the disillusion people felt at the inability of Western civilization to avoid the bloodshed of World War I. It is no coincidence that Einstein’s theory of relativity, Freud’s theory of the unconscious, Eliot’s freeform poetry, Stravinsky’s twelve-tone music, Martha Graham’s abstract choreography, Picassos deformed figures, James Joyce’s stream of consciousness prose were all created - and were accepted by the public - in the same period in which empires collapsed and belief systems rejected old certainties.”⁵

I believe we are all caught in our thoughts, our personal agency and histories. They are all interconnected. By meditating, it is possible to learn to acknowledge this running commentary, and to train my mind to be ‘in the moment’ mindful, not to get caught up in what has past, or what may come in the future. Just to be.

Creatively, I learn to also access these pathways, and work and try, and experiment to also reach a moment of coming together.

⁴ Csikszentmihalyi, 1996, p.95

⁵ Ibid., p. 94

“There is no wealth but life. Life including all its powers of love, of joy, of admiration. That country is the richest which nourishes the greatest number of noble and happy human beings; that man is richest who, having perfected the function of his own life to the utmost, has always the widest helpful influence, both personal, and by the means of his possessions, over the lives of others”.⁶

John Ruskin was an art critic, water-colourist, draftsman, prominent social thinker, patron, and observer of beauty, social systems, and architecture.

Much has been written about and around the life of John Ruskin. I would like to concentrate upon the influence he instigated, pollinating ideas which resonate and continue to affect us today. His drawings I believe were his meditation; his awareness through attention to detail and the relevance of beauty, nature and relationships to him were all integrated.

When John Ruskin wrote *“Unto this Last and Other Writings”*, he had written extensively around descriptions of his observational skills regarding, art, architecture, beauty. His own travels and drawings immersed him in the discovery of detailed description. A life, penetrating exquisite subtleties of shape and colour nuances that allowed his drawings and watercolours to have vibrancy. His accumulated experiences built up, like his watercolour technique, a graduated vision of the relationships or discrepancies between the lives of those who are surrounded by beauty, and, consequently, the poverty of mind and place of others whose lives were bereft of beauty. As a result of his acute focus and observations within his experiences, he became a political social commentator, with opinions regarding the treatment of workers by employers; and he had an unintentional and profound influence on the likes of Ghandi, Tolstoy, William Morris, Oscar Wilde, Schumacher and Gaudi, to name a few. All became major contributors to the world of art, literature, architecture and environmental science.

Dr Suzanne Fagence Cooper, Art Historian, writes on the influence of Ruskin on William Morris, on how to see clearly;

“As William Morris, the poet/maker said, Ruskin seemed to ‘point out a new road on which the world should travel’. He made it possible to say, that I wanted to devote my life to art. To be an art historian, searching for beauty and pointing it out to others, no longer seemed impossible, it seemed essential, a vocation, a way of connecting the present to the past. Standing outside the cathedral in Pisa, asking my students to look at the surface of the curved apse, and the intricate carvings tucked high up under the roofline, I shared with them Ruskin’s watercolour of the same scene, made 160 years before. With his help, they saw that the stones were not just white, but full of mother of

⁶ Ruskin, 1985, p. 222

pearl complexities- pale pinks and soft golds, with silvery blue veins. This was all new. For some it was life changing.”⁷

As Ruskin put it, “to see clearly is poetry, prophecy and religion all in one.”⁸

Here is a description of using colour, a perfect example of looking, of observation in closest detail. Although it is a long example, it does highlight the extremities of his immersion to his subject.

“But observe, it is not enough in general that colour should be graduated by being made merely paler or darker at one place than another. Generally, colour changes as it diminishes, and is not merely darker at one spot than anywhere else. It does not in the least follow that the darkest spot should be the purest; still less so that the lightest should be the purest. Very often the two gradations more or less cross each other, one passing in one direction from paleness to darkness, another in another direction from purity to dullness, but there will almost always be both of them, however reconciled; and you must never be satisfied with a piece of colour until you have both: that is to say, every piece of blue that you lay on must be quite blue only at some given spot, nor that a large spot; and must be graduated from that into less pure blue, - greyish blue, or greenish blue, or purplish blue,-over all the rest of the space it occupies. And this you must do in one of three ways: either, while the colour is wet, mix with it the colour which is to subdue it, adding gradually a little more and a little more; or else, when the colour is quite dry, strike a graduated touch of another colour over it, leaving only a point of the first tint visible; or else, lay the subduing tints on in small touches, as in the exercise of tinting the chess board. Of each of these methods I have something to tell you separately; but that is distinct from the subject of gradation, which I must not quit without pressing upon you the preeminent necessity of introducing it everywhere, I have a profound dislike of anything like habit of hand, and yet, in this one instance, I feel almost tempted to encourage you to get into a habit of never touching paper with colour, without securing a gradation. You will not, in Turners largest oil pictures, perhaps six or seven feet long by four or five high, find one spot of colour as large as a grain of wheat ungraded: and you will find in practice, that brilliancy of hue, and vigour of light, and even the aspect of transparency in shade, are essentially dependant on this character alone; hardness, coldness, and opacity of colour than from nature of colour.”⁹

Ruskin’s lifetime’s acute observations, exquisite sensitivity to detail, attention to change, shape, and colour, throughout his travels in Europe, facilitated a dialogue relating beauty, craftsmanship,

⁷ Cooper, 2019

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ruskin, 1971, p. 149

environment and social cohesion. He pieced together his ideas of the interrelated consequences pertaining to a life of worth, regarding art, beauty, and architecture. He formed influential ideas pertaining to craft, labour, work and ethics. Observation emanating through study of nature, through his drawings, shaped his ability to see beyond his pencil and paper to make connections of the interrelatedness of beauty and society.

Ghandi was given a copy of the essay “Unto this last” and had it translated into Gujarati. He was known to say,

“I translated it later into Gujarati, entitling it ‘Sarvodaya’ (the welfare of all.) I believe that I discovered some of my deepest convictions reflected in this book of Ruskin and that is why it so captured me and made me transform my life.”¹⁰

Here, Ruskin discusses Gothic architecture:

“We must, however, herein note carefully what distinction there is between a healthy and a diseased love of change; for as it was in healthy love of change that the Gothic architecture rose, it was partly in consequence of diseased love of change it was destroyed. In order to understand this clearly, it will be necessary to consider the different ways in which change and monotony are presented to us in nature; both having their use, like darkness and light, and the one incapable of being enjoyed without the other: change being most delightful after some prolongation of monotony, as light appears most brilliant after the eyes have been for some time closed.”¹¹

Ruskin ‘saw’ the interdependence of one action over another, how changes within nature led him to write about changes within social relationships. He perhaps was one of the first commentators of sustainability, well-being and social economy. His exquisite meditations in drawing, keenly led him to these observations, which he pieced together as one of the most influential social philosophies. As was his own prediction, change and his influence evolved, with both regard and disregard, but we all still feel his profound inspiration in politics, economics, art and worldview.

In his commentary on creativity, Csikszentmihalyi interviews a potter, and writes,

“I was thinking how to convey my accumulated wisdom to my granddaughter. And one of the things I thought to tell her is that one tries to do good and one tries to produce something. I find my craft helped me very much to make life meaningful, because once you make a pot and it is outside of you, it makes your life kind of justified and not flimsy. After all you go through, at the end you die, and it makes life much more...well, satisfying, it justifies your existence... Then the question of doing good for society. Don’t forget that all our

¹⁰ Gandhi Foundation, n.d.

¹¹ Ruskin, 2004, p. 33

*contemporaries and ourselves had some big ideology to live for. Everyone thought he had to either fight in Spain or die for something else, and most of us had to be in prison for some reason or another. And then at the end it turns out that none of these great ideologies was worth sacrificing anything for. Even when doing personal good it is difficult to be absolutely sure about. It's very difficult to know exactly whether to live for an ideology or even to live for doing good. But there cannot be anything wrong in making a pot, I'll tell you. When making a pot you cannot bring any evil into the world."*¹²

We all live in a world of experience, observation, consequences, light and dark. Meditation allows us to view this, acknowledge it, accepting the light and dark, seeing where influence can be positive and negative, the point becoming attentive in our attitudes and actions.

I remember a certain student, often late, often tired, quiet and uncommunicative within her year group. However, I did see in her work sensitivity, an acute observation, a striving endeavour and hard work. That is easy to respond to, and one day, after a struggle to move the work forward, she confided in me enormous difficulties at home, so serious it was hard to believe in coping, concentration, and attainment. The one clarity was how her work and this opportunity to make was actually THE pathway to cope. The focus required to make and be creative was the ability to ultimately escape with her own identity, motivation and personality. The work silenced the difficulties and gave opportunity to create a new view of life. It is such a privilege to bear witness to these moments.

As a maker, I recognise that perhaps a significant expression of this is our sensitivity to the consequences of our actions, an awareness of process, taking care of our tools, setting the work up with right intentions, knowing that to race ahead, or not pay attention, listen to the sequence of how the materials interact and result in their specific forms, can lead to difficulty. Such care, and connecting to our observational mind and focus, allows us to become one with our craft, bending, yielding, making correct choices, informed by the physical act of participation, to the point where, body, tool and materials all flow in the right movement. A right consequence of action brought about by "making attentiveness". The significance of this being, of awareness, of being alive and alert, naturally has potential for the same mode of alertness and attention in other aspects of our lives, a sensitivity to the relationship of our interactions with others, our environment, our use of products, and the nurturing of ourselves.

¹² Csikszentmihalyi, 1996, p. 230

Meta Praxis

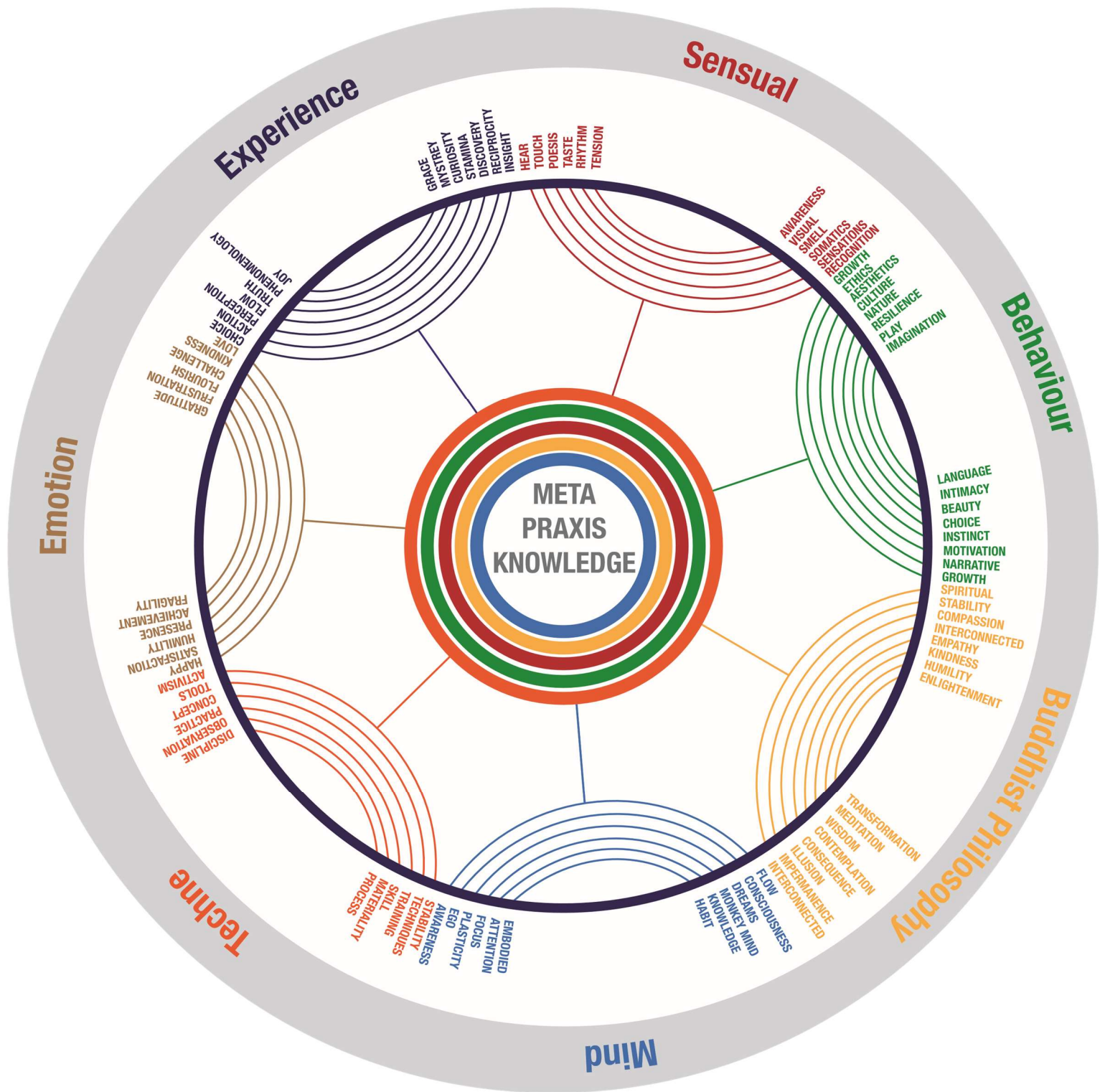
'Meta Praxis' is the potential for human flourishing through an awareness of practice and the value of making craft as an explicit knowledge pathway. Within and beyond the practice, this pathway has the potential to put us in touch with the essential vitality of life and its human value.

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**

