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DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

Meta Praxis

Craft Practice: A Way of Being

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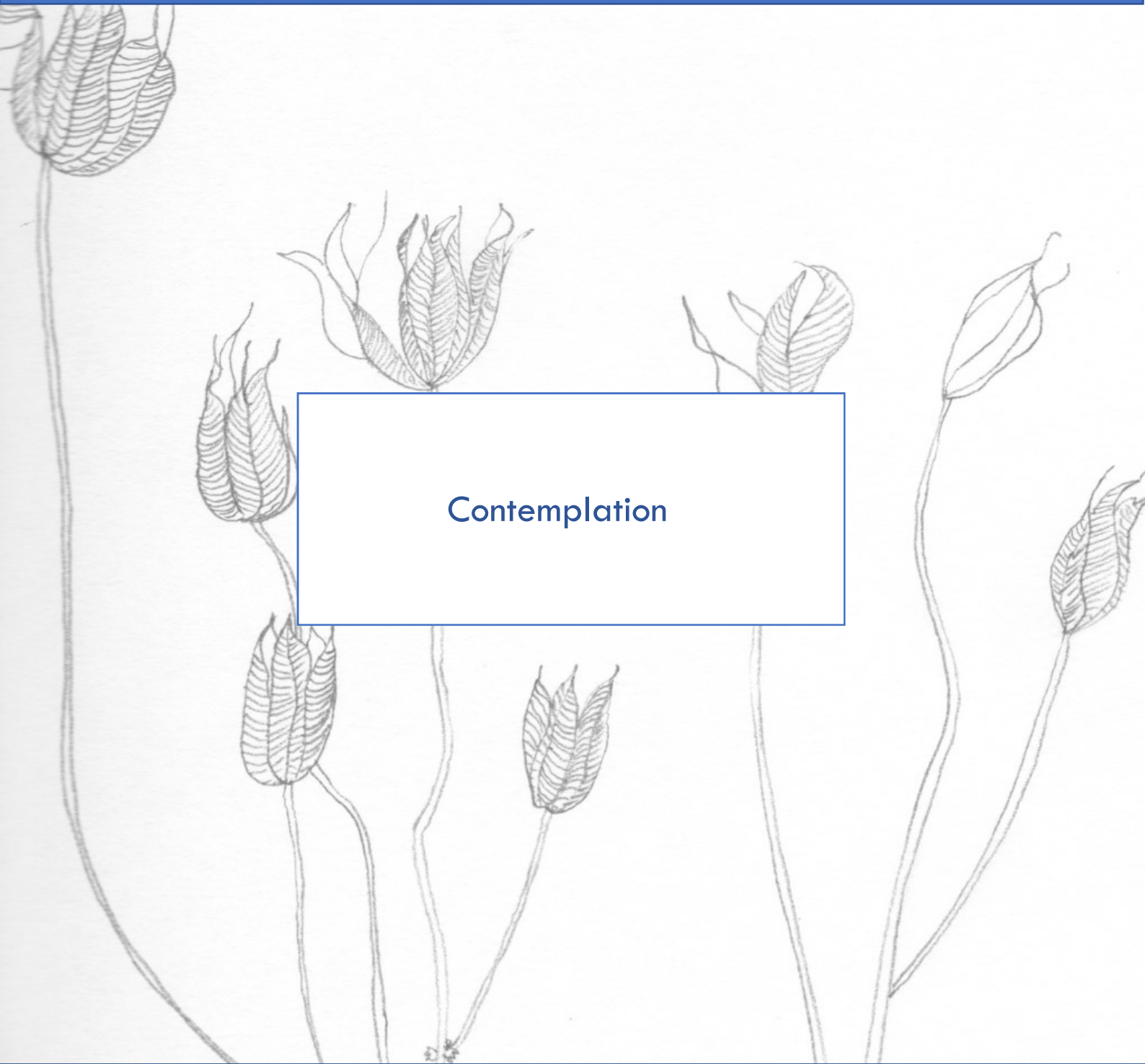
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Contemplation

Irene Orr
META PRAXIS

Snow falling on Blossoms

A pen: resting in solitude:
Way up the Glen inside
The Bothy.

The window exposes a bench, a pail,
Chopped wood, a notice:
Please leave only tins; the mice eat the rest.

The snow caught you
By surprise, your fine lithe limbs
Boots clad in leather scored by bracken, boulders,
Watermarks

The trace of where you walked,
Smothered.
As we sat watching snow falling on blossoms
It caught you up in the corrie,
Exposed,

The scrap of torn paper

Marks
In gratitude

To those who risked all
Looking,

As the snow melted:
The blossoms continued to fall.

Contemplation

Practice – meditation and making

Buddhism is a deep well of 2000 years of direct experience teaching. It is practice-based experiential knowledge through teachings. What might we find there within and beyond its influence, its teachings, now, having seeped out from its roots integrating into many areas of our lives? A new language has emerged from wellness, the arts, politics, and education all stemmed from the language of Buddhism. Mindfulness, contemplation, meditation, compassion, empathy, impermanence, interconnectedness, training the mind, as words they have a certain meaning, an interpretation through translation, offering a wide view point in an intellectual and cultural sense of the meaning. These words are only an opening into their true meaning, words only convey a portion of the complexity of their depth. If we consider these words as keywords, as the aperture and access point to a practice which, by entering into and through, we come to an understanding that reaches far beyond what the translated word can convey. The origins of the words in Sanskrit already hold the multiple meanings as description and sadly some of the nuances are lost in translation to English.

“The Sanskrit language has been the traditional means of communication in Hinduism, Jainism, Buddhism and Sikhism. Sanskrit literature holds the privilege of being used in ancient poetry, drama and sciences, as well as religious and philosophical texts. The consonant’s and vowels are flexible enough to be grouped together to express nuanced idea. In all, the language is like an endless ocean without a base due to its reach, complexity and hundreds of words to express a single meaning or object.”¹

We use the single word meditation, although there are approximately 150 types of meditation. Mindfulness is one such practice, which came into usage from Buddhism and translates as “remembering the training” or “awareness”. Our immediate translation has become “being in the present moment”. However, crucially **as a practice**, which is where the **true values lie**, it is in the realisation that only through practice the words’ meanings are effective in life. Buddhism, once an isolated philosophy of teachings is now contributing to a world seeking a more acceptable, non-confrontational and contented place to inhabit. It is within the teachings and the practice of meditation where I have found familiar and/or distinctive experiences within the practice of making. Both practices of meditation and making are observation of phenomena (that which appears) but come from within, and the true value of both practices takes us within, and beyond, to connect with our humanity. Both practices open us up to nourishment by being a gateway to the connectivity of life forces. Within a Buddhist practice I am

¹ Ancient History Encyclopedia, n.d.

observing the nature of my mind, patterns rhythms and processes and with this awareness I can train to be attentive to my responses and choices. Within making we are observing the nature of our materials, rhythms and patterns and embodied senses and training skills to bring forth form. I am relating experience to training and attending to to my sensory system from within to make connections.

Why Buddhism? Buddhism brought us mindfulness; and, although now the word is overused, losing its original Buddhist complex and deeply layered meaning of “remembering the training”; the core practice is remarkably profound and affective to open up a training in awareness. John Yates, neuroscientist and meditation master states:

“Attention and awareness are two different ways of knowing the world. Attention singles out some small part of the fields of consciousness to analyse and interpret it. Peripheral awareness provides the overall context for conscious experience.”²

The mind’s ability to wander, to overreact, or to be in awareness at that moment is one method of meditation amongst many, that can, through training and skill, link to a more profound world view. It needs to be done by entering the process of understanding and the subtle transformative qualities the practice can have. I have particularly chosen to look and practice Buddhism as a philosophy rather than a religion. Although regarded also as a religion, my perspective, for the purpose of this research, is to study the nature of the mind, a practice-based philosophy of life. What can training the mind teach us about being human? My experience within this investigation has an open mind around faith, certainly it has no place within it for dogma, but certainly it embraces the spiritual, that which is inexplicable, the mysteries and wonders we encounter within our emotional sensual being, still unsolved. One such conversation with Lama Rinchen Palmo explained, “Creativity is investigating what is beyond, spirituality is ‘knowing’ there is a beyond.” The connection of meditation and of making takes us through a process in awareness into a deeper understanding of human values. Awareness in Buddhism also has a greater significance than our language implies. It is within awareness (emptiness or ‘ultimate’) the ‘space’ which is ever constant that consciousness takes place. Our capacity to shift our actions, thoughts and direction into a more satisfying clearer route can be part of a training, part of being creative, part of making.

There is a confluence of nurture, training and observation accessed within meditation and making, it is within the practice, the doing, the connected participation that opens and informs. Both meditation and making come from within, are experience

² Yates, 2017, p. 22

from immersion in producing a different kind of knowledge. They have different motivations and outcomes, but the actual practices furrow parallel pathways within the encounter. Both are receptive to an awakening of our sensual being; both, crucially, can only be activated by connection through experience. The mind is the raw material in meditation. Material is the raw ingredient in making.

John Yates continues in his comprehensive guide, *“The Mind Illuminated”*, observing:

*“Know thyself” is the advice of sages. To live life consciously and creatively as a work of art, we need to understand the raw material we have to work with. This is nothing other than the continuously unfolding stream of conscious experience that is our life.”*³

The essential values lie within the process; it leads me to awareness. Meditation and flow are often used as descriptive states of mind in the arts, in making. Through direct involvement of both, I have tried to illuminate the similarities and differences.

John Yates describes meditation:

*“Meditation is the art of fully conscious living. What we make of our life - the sum total of thoughts, emotions, words, and actions that fill the brief interval between birth and death - is our one great creative masterpiece. The beauty and significance of a life well lived consists of not only the work we leave behind, or in what history has to say about us. It comes from the quality of conscious experience that infuses our everyday waking moment and from the impact we have on others.”*⁴

My trajectory is built on first-hand participation through meditation and making, recognising the commonality of training within experience, awareness of thought processes, making conscious choice, a unity or flow of mind and body, and the intention to make for beneficial reason through access within the practice of realising sensation, emotion, the nature of materials, actions and the mind.

To meditate, I must find the space to look at the mind, to clear the path for attention to and take notice of what is going on within it.

In making, A clear space makes provision for the creation of form, to be attentive and focus on the task in hand, to access ‘Meta Praxis’, beyond the practice.

³ Yates, 2017, p. xix

⁴ Ibid., Introduction xix

Insights

Making:

As I settle to work, I always need a ritual to help settle myself, a chair, a certain window open, silence or music to drown out clutter and help focus (the lens of attention). Hammers, files, rulers, saw blades and accompaniments set out so when the creative process starts nothing interrupts or corrupts the thought process, so ideas can flow without interference. A personal interaction with my chosen materials guides me, and, if all goes according to plan, I will take notice and respond to my movements, ideas will align, a sharpening and a learned focus will appear and relate into the work as it evolves.

The goal is simple - to make a satisfying piece; the complexities and skills need training, to take note, to allow the idea and the work itself to breathe into its form. This correspondence between mind, hand, materials and tools is choreography of intense detail. However, as in a dance, a memory becomes embedded so the practice eases as that memory becomes an inherent quality of practice.

As tensions release, a freedom and skill merge with hand and imagination to allow original work to evolve. The aim simply is to allow the work to appear and acknowledge it to make a better knowing than before, as I questioned, responded to, reacted with, entered into and observed minute and interconnected actions so I cannot remain unchanged by these actions and subtly am transformed by them.

Practice uses informed guided memory; reading, requires another discipline. Doing is knowledge producing. Reading is knowledge receiving.

Everyone can learn technique, usually by a teacher who informs the student of an appreciation of materials and specific execution of production methods. Awareness of pitfalls is useful but usually this is where the biggest lessons are learned. The difference between understanding, theorising, and actually doing, are entirely different knowledge routes.

To read about a practice, either in meditation or in making, is one thing, to do, see, make mistakes, feel from the inside and engage in the complex undertaking of producing results is entirely another way of being and knowing.

To read about a physical practice engages with your cognitive self. To actively make engages physically with your whole mind and body. The difficulties are directed to self, and, therefore, only unravelled by developing mechanisms to understand self. Dexterity, visual composition and intuition all require a knowing of what, how and why, only to be answered by doing.

Meditation:

I am a novice and start at the beginning, bringing to experience a record of a learning practice. A simplicity of language and intention belie the complexities of the task ahead, the goal crystal clear but only achieved wholly by the most experienced practitioners, often after a lifetime of dedication.

This thesis pays tribute and respect to those who have embarked on that path. My personal account is just that, perceptions and insights gained to begin to understand how our minds work for reasons to learn, create understanding, for the benefit of recognising change and the way I think and therefore the way I am and, as a specific consequence, the subtle change of my connections to my environment, relationships and my work. Through this process, the inevitable shift in thinking will change attitudes and, hopefully but not arrogantly, make changes for the benefit of all.

Through meditation, the simple process of sitting still and allowing thoughts to come and go, ebb and flow, to notice and be aware, take a look at the thunderous whirlpool of our minds' workings that contain all our emotional relationships to our perceived environments and relationships.

Akong Rinpoche founder of Samye Ling Monastery, Scotland, and meditation master called it "*Taming the Monkey*":

*"If we can imagine a monkey jumping up and down at the windows of an empty house, we will have some idea of what kind of mind we have. Like the monkey, our emotions are up one minute, down the next."*⁵

This is such a simple exercise, which enables us to enter the most astonishing intricacies of thought, of ultimately seeing our minds in action, i.e. "*Taming the Monkey*". Thoughts start leaping up all over. We are all, by our very nature of being human, moving through a labyrinthine of reactions, responses, nurture, environment, culture, a series of communication signals build up to make me who I am.

I can, through practice, learn to take notice of this torrent of thoughts and reactions. By the simple act of taking note, I subtly become aware. Calmness appears as I learn to watch, but not enter, what cannot be changed, altered or even exist in the first place. By noticing and being aware and in the moment, I have already made a change.

Thich Nhat Hanh poet, Zen Master, in "*The Miracle of Mindfulness*" asks:

"Of course, to take hold of our minds and calm our thoughts, we must also practice mindfulness of our feelings and

⁵ Rinpoche, 1994, p. 22

*perceptions. To take hold of your mind, you must practice mindfulness of the mind. You must know how to observe and recognize the presence of every feeling and thought that arises in you. The Zen Master, 'Throng Chiev', wrote, 'If the practitioner knows his own mind clearly; he will obtain results with little effort. But if he does not know anything about his own mind, all of his efforts will be wasted. If you want to know your own mind, there is only one-way: to observe and recognise everything about it. This must be done at all times, during your day-to-day life, no less than during the hour of meditation.'*⁶

*"Is relaxation then the only goal in meditation? In fact, the goal is much deeper than that. While relaxation is the necessary point of departure, once one has realized a tranquil heart and a clear mind is to have gone far along the road of meditation."*⁷

Many exercises, rituals and props assist in achieving the goal of total calm, of knowing from the inside. Then, the ability to reach and train our minds and have the capacity to remain calm at all times begins to make sense.

When I say the ritual within my craft practice is meditative, I am in the awareness (the space where things happen) of a unity of that moment.

Ultimately, the aim of Buddhist meditation is for the benefit of us all, to see the interrelated connectedness of everything, the relationship to self and others and, therefore, how we chose to live our lives.

"Pema Chodron", a renowned and popular teacher, author and Abbot, explains impermanence in "*The Places that Scare You*":

*"Ordinary experience is that life goes up and down. People's situations are unpredictable and so is everything else. Everybody knows the pain of getting what they don't want: saints, sinners, winners, and losers. I feel gratitude that someone saw the truth and pointed out that we do not suffer this kind of pain because of our personal inability to get things right. That nothing is static or fixed; that all is fleeting and impermanent is the first mark of existence. It is the ordinary state of affairs. Everything is in process. Everything-every tree, every blade of grass, all the animals, insects, human beings, buildings, the animate and the inanimate- it is always changing, moment by moment."*⁸

⁶ Chödrön, 2001

⁷ Hanh, 1991, p. 37

⁸ Ibid.

Reflections:

The best way to learn something is actually to do it. Learning by doing increases initiative and is a direct contact which reflects in personal and working life, not just by consuming information but by entering relata, often cognitively, manually, joining together as a learned practice and experiential practice. To do this, I must be naturally mindful, be in the moment to complete the task at hand.

I can stay connected to the source of my thought processes and interactions and, as a consequence, guide them with more care and intention. Each minute shift of thought causes a change. To allow the confident to drown out the doubts, then good patterns become habit, and change becomes like waves in the ocean.

I have triggers, resilience, concerns, and all my perspective; but, by just looking at them, noticing my own particular patterns, I allow a substitution from that which blocks me to that which nurtures me.

By the same inquiry, I can observe my response when I read instructions, academic writing, manuscripts, guides; but, until I have physically accessed my task, I have only engaged cognitively rather than connected movement, dexterity, environment and change, which would fully activate all senses to access an alternative learning process.

I can read a travel journal or guide, say of India. I can know and understand its population, religion, cultural philosophies, see the climate, politics and regions, look at its foods, habits, geographical statistics, none of which compare with the onslaught of sights, sounds, smells, and relationships I will enter while actually there in person. This requires being fully present to engage with my whole being, which allows for a deeper understanding and true knowledge route of a personal experience. Although this is entirely my own knowing, it allows me to look again and relates with my cognitive information and, therefore, instructs me on perspective, reactions, experience, and awakens my true self to my sensations and indeed alerts me to my interconnected relationship with my senses and humanness.

By the same token, to cook, by sourcing ingredients, looking at why, how, when ingredients can be acquired, the amount of nutrients, water, climate conditions, optimises the quality of the product. Only by chopping, choosing, smelling, tasting can I really “know” what to do with ingredients. Instructions are one route to doing. Accessing a nurtured intuition (developed over time) and imagination is another route. As one acquires a practice, (repeated exercise in or performance of an activity or skill to acquire or maintain proficiency in it)⁹ some of this

⁹ Oxford Dictionary, n.d.

becomes inherent memory and so the process becomes easier as the activity is instinctive and an embedded knowing.

Therefore, by 'doing', 'being within', 'making', the craftsman is connecting to a memory, building a consciousness route, awakening all their senses, and storing up information, a knowledge which is activated constantly in all their actions, relative to personal experiences.

*"A central feature of art practice is that it embodies ideas that are given form in the process of making artworks. Irrespective of the informing sources, media preferences, or image base, the artist exercises individual control over the creation and presentation of artefacts as forms of knowledge."*¹⁰

Committing to a practice embeds memory (sensory and physical) that, given time, can encourage intuition. Practice is training.

The ability to access embedded memory, process, practice and creativity is particularly powerful when teamed with mindfulness.

Buddhist philosophy talks of a yearning for primordial wisdom only accessible by meditative practice. Deep, constant, continual practice, by its very essence, creates wisdom.

As I try to make sense of myself, in my environment, I resort to trying to categorise ideas, classify marks, resort to taxonomy, pigeon-holing cultural habits, examining details, thought processes, only to discover everything is in constant change from one moment to the next; the threads and lines as discussed in "*Lines*"¹¹ where Anthropologist Tim Ingold explores the interconnected parts of nature, materials, technologies, music, all looked at, developed and invented to make provision for ourselves in a world of constant shifts, that cannot be controlled but understood. He takes the concept of a line, the threads that lead from lines to use as the mechanism of an understanding of the enmeshed interrelated patterns, rhythms, and practical applications that are part of our very being.

*"Life is lived, I reasoned along paths, not just in places, and paths are lines of a sort. It is along paths, too, that people grow into knowledge of the world around them, and describe this world in the stories they tell."*¹²

Ingold takes this concept of knowing from a different perspective into a research project 'Knowing from the Inside (KFI)';

"The KFI project aims to re-configure the relation between practices of inquiry in the human sciences and the forms of

¹⁰ Sullivan, n.d.

¹¹ Ingold, 2015a

¹² Ibid.

knowledge to which they give rise. Its fundamental premise is that knowledge is not created through an encounter between minds furnished with pre-formed concepts and theories but grows from our practical and observational engagement of the world around us. Knowledge comes from thinking with, from and through beings and things, not just about them. Our overall aim is to show how research underpinned this premise could make a difference to sustain ability of environmental relations and to the well being that depends on it.”¹³

Retreat:

A journey: travelling from one place to another; distance; a passage or progress from one stage to another...a beginning with uncharted outcomes. Certainly, all this is true of my journey to an Island to look at meditation and contemplation.

Travelling in Scotland requires careful consideration; all seasons and temperatures are inevitable during the time frame of a week in spring. However, it is a pleasure to place everything I will require into a tiny bag, to condense and simplify. Walking boots, shoes to discard at the temple door, waterproofs, pare everything down to minimal, not just for the sake of weight but as a preparation to let go of my personal clutter of normal life. Light seems a good intention, light of mind, light of possessions, light of luggage. Make room for new ideas.

Even so, I pack two precious items, a blanket and a wool scarf, both exquisite in detail, colour and beautifully woven, warm so I know I will be able to cocoon myself against being cold, sitting still for so long.

Trains, ferry boats, bus; it becomes easy to detect others who are likely to have the same destination, a smile, a rucksack, laughter; maybe a glimpse of thoughtfulness, kindness?

Islands, an island, this island, Holy Isle, a distancing from home, punctuation in a landscape, an embrace of tides and mountains, a microcosm of specific geography, history and climate. So evocative, a meeting of natural phenomena, a collision of elements and thought processes, capturing the imaginations of writers and artists and scientists throughout time. A natural boundary, to view the landscape of geography and mind.

Retreat sounds like going backwards, returning, and hiding, taking myself away from the business of my life. The truth I am expecting is the opposite, and it unfolds and manifests itself in astounding ways. Although I am here on this Island to learn, to discover, to listen and to document, the very process becomes a different practice, a personal immersion that requires full attention, reflection and concentration.

¹³ Ingold, 2015a

A camera felt intrusive, the atmosphere light and warm but also private. The very reason to be here was to learn to be in the moment, to pay attention, to focus on the here and now, and to feel the effect of meditation and silence.

Viewing oneself is not normal practice, but it develops into subtle observations containing questions and answers for a better understanding of interactions, personally and collectively, habits and responses. Making space for study is vital training. To come to an island to have this opportunity is precious enough, to then find an inspirational teacher is gold dust.

Such a personal task; yet, through the commonality of distractions, hurdles and questions, personal also becomes community and collective. First to create space, take away language. How interesting to discover social interactions: “good morning”, “what a beautiful day”, “what are your expectations of today”, alter and clutter the pathway to clarity of thought. Alone and devoid of conversation, a focus shifts, and I am more aware of my surroundings, sounds, and minutiae.

Sitting, just sitting, who would think it is so complicated. I, as a westerner unaccustomed to squatting, bending, stillness. Used to chairs, tables, sofas, we have no patience for the uncomfortable, our bodies softened and out of tune. Being still is astonishingly difficult. Distractions, an ache, an itch, a positive torrent of thoughts, a niggling hunger, a tight piece of clothing, feeling cold, feeling hot, wishing to sneeze, and on and on, incredibly awkward just even to start, to be still, pay attention, listen, be aware, be in the moment.

I wish and desire to aim for an authentic practice, one taught from a depth of training and tradition. I shun any extra ‘props’ for comfort and take up the traditional sitting position. I notice how pleased I am, how easy it is for me, ha! Sorted! I listen to the reasons we sit, the connections between our legs, hands, neck, spine, mind, why our fingers touch in a certain way, how we can maintain good posture to remain in the practice.

Lasting approximately ten minutes sitting, my ankles shift and hurt. I bend and twist to find a spot that is relaxing. I notice all my thoughts have shifted onto the fact I cannot sit still.

It took all week to find a way, sitting for five hours a day....

Once sitting, one can begin...

My thoughts leap constantly, all over the place;
“Taming the monkey” is an appropriate term by Akong Tulku Rinpoche for a meditation process.¹⁴
My personal monkey is alive and kicking.

¹⁴ Rinpoche, 1994, p. 7

My personal film contains: humour, adventure, happiness, sadness, grief, history, fear, contentment, imagination and story.

Quite probably all these thoughts are a commonality and consequence of being and of the human condition. Clearly, we all have nature/nurture experiences which can alter our personal perspectives; however, human traits are universal, and we feel a connection to others during this process.

There are many approaches to meditation and mindfulness; techniques and exercises vary; teachers have their own methods; much literature is available on this subject. My aim is to be simple, to be taught by an authentic, deeply trained and practiced teacher and to listen without pre-conceptions.

My teacher on this Island is a petite French woman, who has completed 12 years of silent retreat. I feel humble and a respect with a strong motivational desire to learn. There is an uncomplicated way about the teaching, words that have been guided and handed down from teacher to teacher to ensure continuity and authoritative source. Realisation of the teaching is complex and personal and difficult. The aim in its clarity is to gain insights to our minds' workings, so that tranquillity can occur in any circumstance, and that insight allows for compassion to be at the forefront of daily life, to the benefit of all.

Try standing in a supermarket queue and someone in front of you is taking forever. Try feeling compassionate to the bank assistant who is explaining why you have been overcharged. Try to feel tranquil towards your teenage son who calls to tell you he has just bent your new car! This is difficult, oh so difficult, and, therefore, a lifelong process of practice.

However, silence lets you hear your own voice. Relaxed, alert sitting allows you to pay attention. Being on an island adds perspective and, slowly, a subtle shift begins to happen, so subtle it is gone and must be drawn back.

This intense feeling of insight, a knowing I also feel when fully engaged with my work of designing, making, being creative. I become the work and it becomes me. There is no distinction; I cannot be other. I can only train and be better.

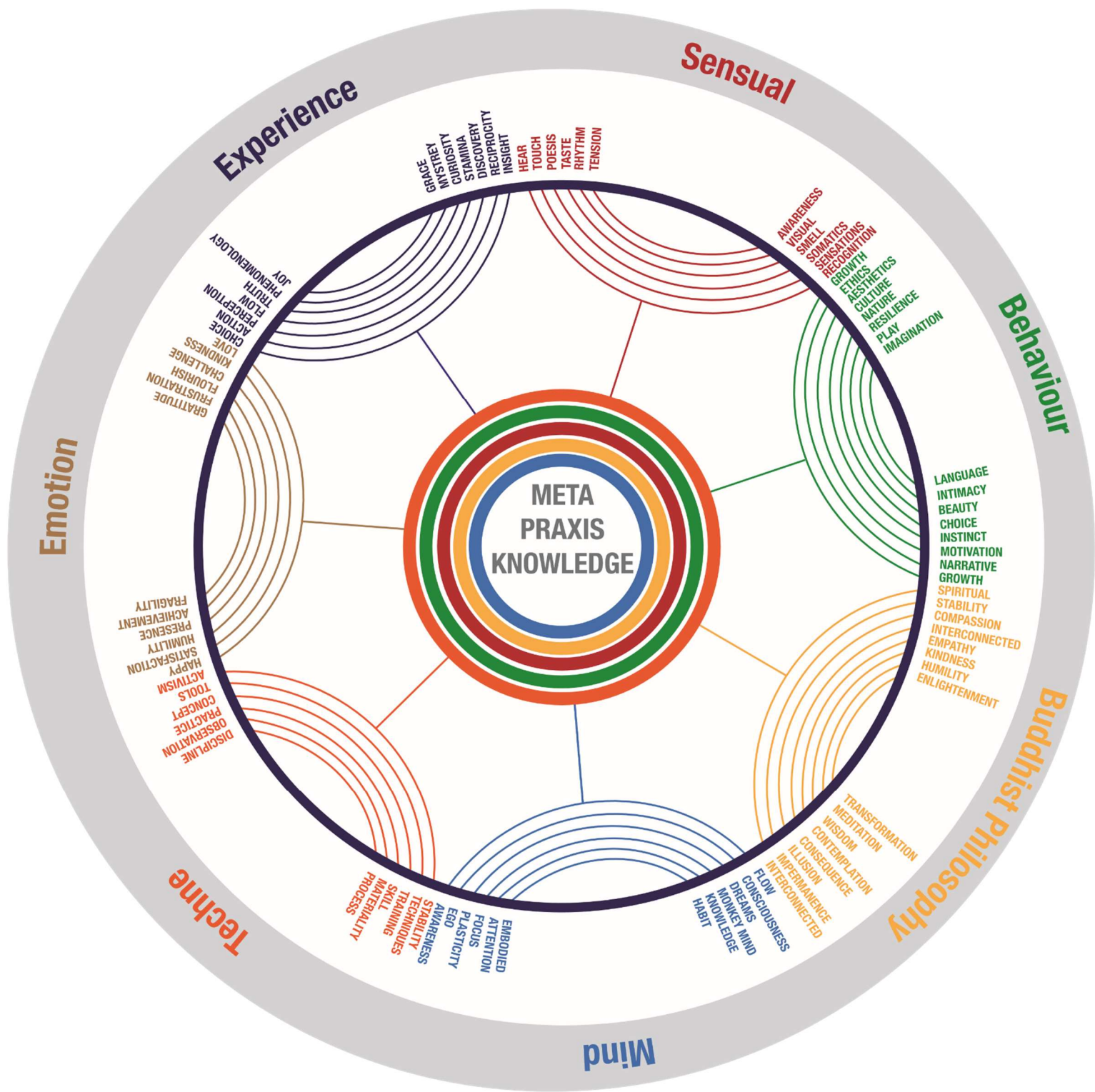
Meta Praxis

'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**

