

University of Dundee

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

Meta Praxis

Craft Practice: A Way of Being

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Connection

Irene Orr  
META PRAXIS



## Moth

Drawn by moonlight  
Scorched by flame  
Sip the tears from sleeping birds

Migrant scaly speckled wings  
Hook and nexus unhinged  
Translucent corpses turn to  
Dust

Ash debris blows in the draft through the  
Muslin cloth

Silken bag stillness  
Cocooned enchanted revolution

How few you are  
Woolly bear caterpillars  
With your poison hair

Viewed with cautionary tales  
Of what you may become.



## Connection

I connect with my thoughts; I connect through the materials; I connect through the process, the aesthetics, the emotions, the touch, the narrative; and that is just the beginning.

Peter Korn, woodworker, furniture maker and author of *“Why We Make Things and Why it Matters”*, explores the connections and separations we realize as makers. Why might we choose physically and emotionally demanding work, what is the nature of work? He observes:

*“The conversation of object making has coursed through the emergence and decline of civilizations. New voices have interrupted it, technologies have influenced it, but the conversation never abates. The currents we label craft, art and design entered only yesterday in the time scale of history. As they evolve and, eventually dissipate, the conversation will no doubt continue undiminished, for we are an object making species”<sup>1</sup>*

Here, he explains that engaging the physical with the mind (intellect and creativity) can be a holistic experience, harmonizing and balancing ourselves:

*“Woodworking could leave me intellectually unfulfilled. But I found that even so simple an operation as cutting a mortise harmonizes intellect, manual skill, and character that underscore the artificiality of the Cartesian divide between mind and body. When you add the creative component of design, craft becomes a fully integrated application of one’s capacities. Describing this unity, the influential English ceramicist Bernard Leach wrote; ‘A potter is one of the few people left who uses his natural faculties of heart, hand and head in balance’.<sup>2</sup>*

A basic fundamental lesson in jewellery making is to learn how to cut metal. A piercing saw is a specifically designed tool, which sits neatly in our hand. The standard size can comfortably saw into metal of jewellery scale. The saw holds a blade down one side, and different grades need to be considered for the thickness and type of metal to be cut, and the fineness of detail and cut. The blades are fitted by a spring action within the saw, placing the miniature teeth of the blade facing downwards, and using the spring to create the tension and tautness between the two vices, which hold it in place. The tighter the blade, the less vibration in the action and the cleaner, neater and more successful is the cut achieved.

The tension for the saw blade is created by using one’s own body (chest) as a lever, a buttress, which provides the spring action and the level of tension required. Then, positioning oneself with the right action and balance on a chair at a Jeweller’s bench, with correct angle and

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<sup>1</sup> Korn, 2013, p. 33

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., p. 52



relationship between the body and the mind; we can place the blade on the metal and feel the first engagement of both connecting and the first cut. Only then does one proceed with slow, deliberate, smooth-cutting action. A slight wrong movement or uncontrolled action can result in the blade immediate breaking. One learns by practice, patience, feeling, being aware of mistakes, but it is a considerable skill of mind, body, balance, and awareness. Most practitioners quickly get beyond breakages; however, on days of disharmony, the disconnect returns surprisingly fast.

The sequence of learning is cognitive, a relationship between engaged focus, an awareness of stresses, relaxed alertness, co-ordination of thoughts, and actions must co-inside. Going too fast, skipping a stage, not relaxing, not preparing correctly in right sequence, all result in wasted time, broken expensive equipment, and no achievement.

This is the practice.

Soon these skills become second nature. A professional probably does not even think of process after a level of proficiency has been accomplished.

A comparative look at a meditation practice has familiar traits, optimizing environment, conducive habitual movement and balances, all accomplished with intention, skill and motivation.

On meditation practice:

Pema Chodron is a world-renowned Buddhist, whose teachings have reached far and wide by writing accessibly on issues such as meditation, practice and how they integrate from teachings from Tibetan texts to practical applications in our world view today.

*“For one-day (or one week) refrain from something you do habitually do to run away to escape. Pick something concrete, such as overeating, or excessive sleeping, or overworking, or spending too much time texting or checking e-mails. Make a commitment to yourself to gently and compassionately work with refraining from this habit for this one day. Do this with intention that it will put you in touch with the underlying anxiety or uncertainty that you have been avoiding. Do it and see what you discover. When you refrain from habitual thoughts and behavior the uncomfortable feelings will still be there. They don’t magically disappear. Over the years I have come to call resting with discomfort “the detox period” because when you don’t act on your habitual reactions, it is like giving up an addiction. You are left with the feelings you were trying to escape. The practice is to make a wholehearted relationship with that. “Living beautifully with uncertainty and change”.<sup>3</sup>*

When learning a new skill within making, to let go of any preconceived ideas of what I must do is an opening up to potential. Materials, expertise with my intentions and environment must all be

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<sup>3</sup> Chödrön, 2012, p. 36





tuned to work together so a flow evolves. Training and practice go hand in hand. A teacher of experience to call upon when things do not go right, practice to learn the balances within my intentions, and a skill is embodied, good habits over lay bad practice until a harmony takes place.

Pema Chodron clearly recognizing that our relationship with uncertainty is fundamental to everyone, and to face issues rather than ignore them leads essentially to learning, growing and not stagnating. A practitioner, whilst making faces difficulties regularly, it is part of the process to develop a fearlessness in creating, learning the ways of materials and becoming intimate with them.

Neuroscientist Richard Davidson (see the film “Contemplating Making”) founder of the Centre for Healthy Minds, is one of the world’s leading experts on the impact of contemplative practices, such as mindfulness meditation, on the brain. He says that wellbeing is not a static ‘thing’ – but a set of skills that we can strengthen and practice, just like learning to play a musical instrument or ride a bike.

*“The four keys to wellbeing are: resilience, outlook, awareness and generosity. Each of these four is rooted in neural circuits, and each of these neural circuits exhibits plasticity, explains Davidson. We know that if we exercise these circuits, they will strengthen.”<sup>4</sup>*

I, like the majority of makers, can be full of doubt, self-criticism, the internal voice of questioning the validity of my work. My experience is that most creative makers have that same voice, maybe with a different velocity, another angle, a softer sound maybe, but an internal conversation goes with the practice. To continue, I sense we all must make friends with the conversation to proceed. Quiet the turbulent waves and learn to follow the positive or experimental. We do cultivate resilience, and generosity; our practice has these traits inbuilt. Pema Chödrön continues to observe:

*“The underlying anxiety can be very strong. You may experience it as hopelessness or even terror. But the basic view is that if you can remain with the feeling, if you can go with the fear, the resistance in its various forms, you will find the basic goodness. Everything opens up.*

*With this practice, this exploration of inner renunciation we can gradually see beyond our fear-based fixed identity. When we make a compassionate, fearless relationship with the reality of the human condition- with our habits- our emotions- with groundlessness, then gradually something shifts fundamentally, and we experience the sky like, unbiased nature of our mind.”<sup>5</sup>*

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<sup>4</sup> Davidson, 2018b

<sup>5</sup> Chödrön, 2012, p. 36



Peter Korn connects us to embodiment within practice:

*“Having already suggested a variety of ways in which craft can be employed to discover, embody, and communicate a point of view about how life should be lived, I would like to emphasize the timeless quality of that embodiment. Once an object is made, it becomes a physical fact of the universe, essentially unchanging in the scale of human time. To the human mind, where thoughts spring up unheralded only to vanish just as capriciously, the object becomes a memory devise- a tablet on which a maker inscribes a complex of ideas so that he has recourse to them for further thinking.*

*One aspect of this is that each completed work becomes a springboard for the genesis of its successors. As a maker I have the luxury of responding to the visual, the tactile, and functional qualities of a finished piece over time. I observe the responses of others. I sense what works aesthetically and practically- and what does not, what I learn informs subsequent creative efforts through which I will strive for a more compelling and accurate vision.”<sup>6</sup>*

I hear makers commenting ‘it becomes second nature’. As we repeat action and handling of tools, somehow repetition gives us a memory of thought and or action which becomes an embodiment of that action and thought. The more we engrave the memory, the less we need strive for those actions. It is the same to learn how to make a singing bowl sing and how to use a piercing saw.

An accomplished practitioner, of course, will make it all look so easy, which it can be, but usually only after mistakes have been made, or when repetition has been perfected? A traditional way to learn jewellery making as an apprentice would be to be taught how to make hinges, and that is predominately the job of that apprentice, until perfect hinges are made every time. Skills are acquired and built upon, practiced and practiced.

Recently, I learned to book bind with a binder who learned her art traditionally in Florence Italy. Conversation with the owner of the Owl and Lion Bindery in Edinburgh, Isobel Ting:

*“You were shown how to cut paper, exactly. That paper was used to make the books so mistakes were a commercial disaster, those who could not cut perfectly every time simply did not continue as there was no place in the training for them”. That was the case for every step. As you reached the required speed and level of acceptance another skill was included in your repertoire, and the complete apprenticeship might take years.”<sup>7</sup>*

Angela Duckworth, Professor of Psychology and researcher into Grit and Resilience, gives this advice within her investigation into success to cultivating thriving:

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<sup>6</sup> Korn, 2013, p. 60

<sup>7</sup> Ting, 2016, personal communication, Owl and Lion Bindery, Edinburgh, Scotland



*“Ask your kids to do something that will teach them, through experience, deliberate practice and resilience. But also make sure they’re doing things that they find interesting and enjoyable, even if it doesn’t seem that they could ever lead to anything more serious.”<sup>8</sup>*

In meditation practice, the aim is to become aware, mindful in every moment of every day and night, to be aware of one’s faults and failings, dramas and reactions, practicing many techniques with repetition so the practice is embodied and becomes our nature. It is to listen to the conversations we have with ourselves and learn to quiet the turbulent waves and to follow the positive. Through this simple process, we come to realise all actions and thoughts are connected; there is a relationship which extends from thoughts and actions to movement, animate to inanimate, animal to human, plant to place. Our thoughts and actions all create consequences.

Meditation recognizes the relationships between actions, mind, body and how those connections react and respond. Others, such as Martin Luther King Jr, have come to this wisdom.

*“It really boils down to this: that all life is interrelated, we are all caught in an inescapable network of mutuality tied together into a single garment of destiny, whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly. We are made together because of the interrelated structure of reality. Before you finish eating breakfast in the morning, you’ve depended on more than half the world. This is the way our universe is structured; this is its interrelated quality. We aren’t going to have peace on Earth until we recognize the basic fact of the interrelated structure of all reality.”<sup>9</sup>*

We have many routes to connect though our work as craft makers. We can translate resonance through materials, through the aesthetic, through story, often interrelating all these techniques to transmit a reaction, an intimacy of feeling.

I was asked to design rings for a couple, they wanted to have a “connect” with the idea, the materials and a renewal of their story together.

Here, I ask questions, get a narrative going, listen, watch for an image, a moment of inspired thought. The gentleman concerned was an eminent professor, a scientist, and I knew, from long conversations, a passionate believer of good science as a route to discover ways to eradicate disease. His specialty - parasites - however, was not an obvious route for a romantic jewellery gesture. However, intuitively, I had the thought this may hold the story I needed. Their lives had been meeting in the Laboratory; travel had been dictated by work. I had found a key. But to what? As I was about to leave our first consultation, I suddenly asked if he would draw some parasites for me.

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<sup>8</sup> Duckworth, 2018

<sup>9</sup> King Jr, 1967. Sermon on peace.



Of course, by the time the simplicity of line from the body, and the eye had been exchanged for a stone setting, and the grace of this destructive microscopic creature had been given a gentle reworking, chosen in soft red gold with a brushed finish, highlighting the elegant effortless shapes, and set with a row of rubies along the silhouette, I had it in the bag. To all but the wearers, the design was fluid, balanced, graceful; to the wearers, the story, image of the parasite, their own lives was a different tale to tell, a source of many layers and amusement.

David Gauntlett is a sociologist and media theorist. In his book, “*Making is Connecting*”, he examines how we connect to self, to community, to the world in meaningful ways:

*“Making is connecting. It is a perfectly simple phrase, of course. But having spent some time thinking about people making things, and people connecting with others- making and connecting- I realized that it was meaningful, and more pleasing, to note that these are one and the same process: making is connecting. I mean this in three principal ways:*

- *Making is connecting because you have to connect things together (materials, ideas, or both) to make something new;*
- *Making is connecting because acts of creativity usually involve, at some point, a social dimension and connect us with other people;*
- *And making is connecting because through making things and sharing them in the world, we increase our engagement and connection with our social and physical environment”.*<sup>10</sup>

My experiences, within the work I do, endeavor to transmit a connection in the entirety of my choices: the materials chosen, the techniques and tools. All these choices relay messages to travel onwards.

Meditation enables me to connect to these choices, the ones in my mind, and make decisions to the ones with which I wish to travel. When the work I do becomes meditative, I am connected to the embodiment of this, being within this process of bringing forth. These connections have a vitality to them, engaging with deeper relationships beyond and inclusive of intellect.

‘Meta Praxis’, beyond the practice, opens and enlivens me to the possibilities of interconnectedness and alerts me to the consequence of this.

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<sup>10</sup> Gauntlett, 2011, p. 2





## 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.

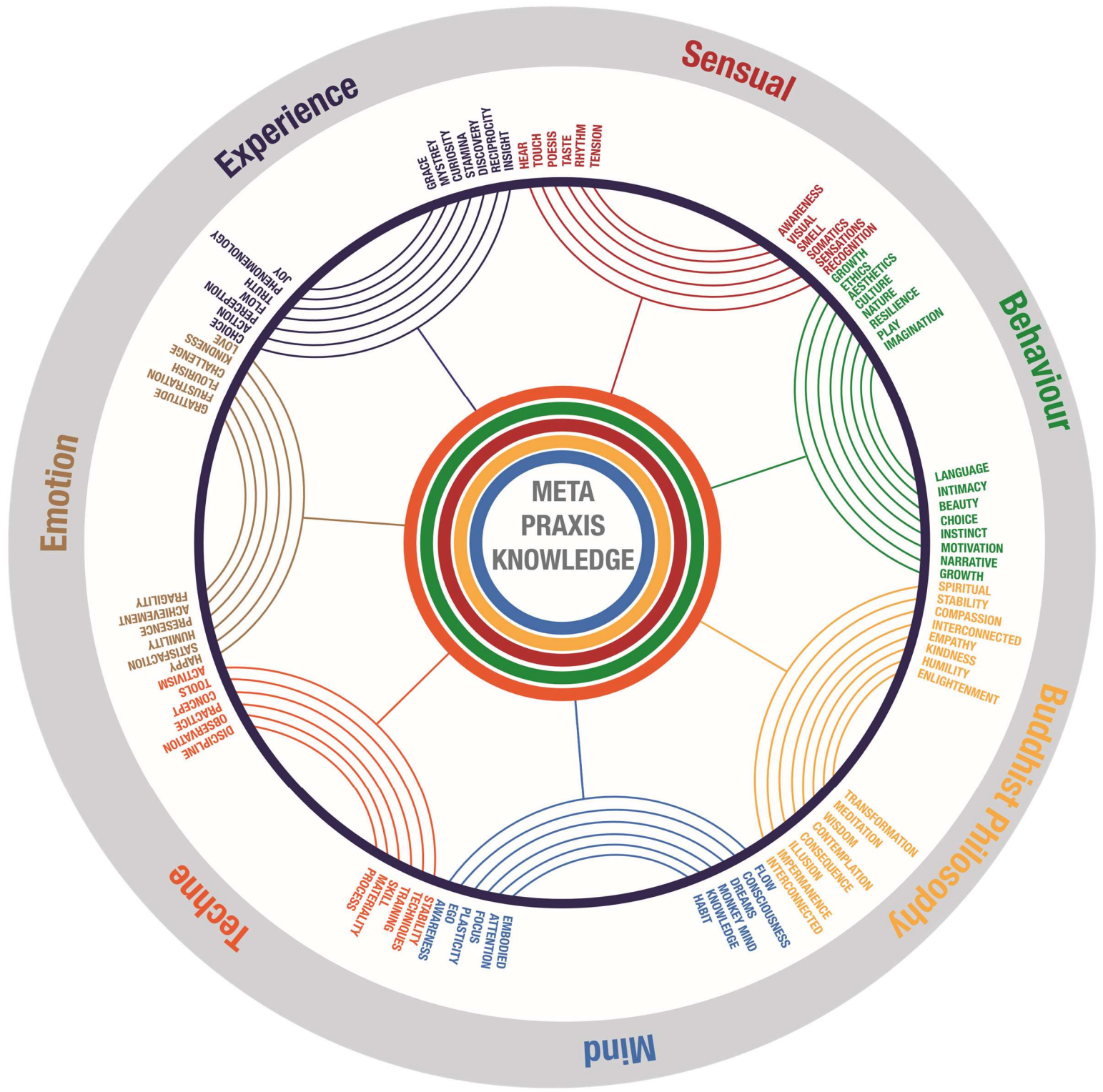
The exposition and articulation of 'Meta Praxis' and its potential is the original contribution to knowledge. This research leads us through interdisciplinary schools of thought (craft practice, Buddhism, anthropology, and neuroscience) to make connections and to set out why and how making craft is an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

