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Meta Praxis

Craft Practice: A Way of Being

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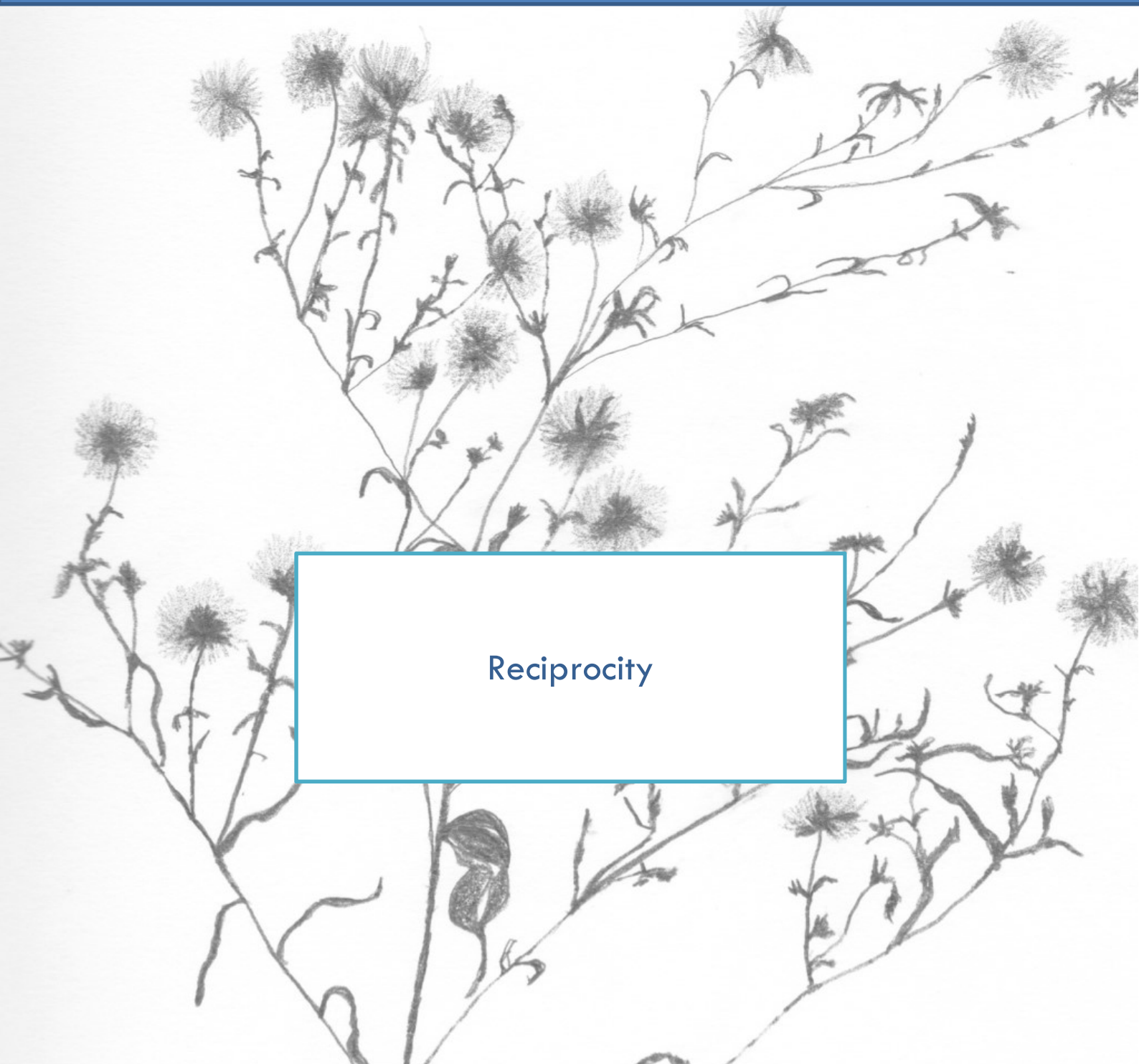
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Reciprocity

Irene Orr
META PRAXIS

Noli Timere

Stay.

Stay exactly as you are
With your dandelion seed
Shirt collar
Frayed, tenuous threads
Hanging on
Knowing the next breeze
May take you.

Stay

A moment longer
Let me wipe the crust from
Your lashes
Wet my handkerchief
To soften misshapen knuckles
Knotted with secrets
Let me expose your
Translucent cheeks
To warmth

Reciprocity

As a maker, the pleasure in making the work extends far beyond when a piece is complete. This usually becomes a giving, a trade, an interaction between the originator and the recipient. The exchange of my labour, thought, skills, is either given, bartered, bought, or exchanged. By that interaction, the nature, intent, touch and generosity of spirit is continued; the story I have started, now carries on its own. Materials contain a life, a connectivity to place and touch. As much as we learn a language of words, we are learning the language of materials. Glen Adamson, curator and author, in his book about the hidden wisdom of objects and the intuitive knowledge contained within, observes:

“It is when we don’t engage with our material environment in a focused manner that we truly lose our way. As a culture we are in danger of falling out of touch, not only with objects, but with the intelligence they embody: the empathy that is bound up in tangible things.

I am speaking here of material intelligence: a deep understanding of the material world around us, an ability to read that material environment, and the know how required to give it new form.”¹

Giving form to the intellect of materials is a reciprocity of making, an understanding, touching the empathy reaches outwards and continues contacting.

I argue this giving exchange - transformative creative reciprocity - or commerce of the creative spirit is vital (“of or manifesting life” from Latin “vitalis” meaning “of or belonging to life”) and, therefore, a primary expression of ontology.

Once while trekking in the northern hills of Thailand, on the borders of Burma, I happened upon an exchange where no language, no pre-knowledge of the exchange that was about to occur was evident. Certainly, I had no prior experience or information about this region or its tribal customs.

The Lisu Hill tribes are a Tibeto-Burman highland tribe, originally from Southwest China. An inherent desire to quest for genuine encounters with other cultures, to touch on the craft intelligence within an authentic tribal group was the drive behind this journey.

I had trekked for a week, in a small group, upwards and deep into the mountainous region known as the Burmese triangle, home to many migrant hill tribes.

At that time, there was no transport available, other than by elephant, prohibitive by cost and ethics on my part. The walk was intensively hot, humid and particularly challenging for me, as I will relate later. The houses were all bamboo and, unlike other tribes in the area, not built

¹ Adamson, 2018, p. Introduction

on high stilts. It was clearly a time of great preparation in the village; unknown to us, our group had serendipitously arrived during preparation for New Year Celebrations. This is the most colourful and important festival for the village. Emphasis was on the best, most decorative dress and an occasion to play music, feast, drink and honour past successes.

I had arrived at the village in a group of six, along with my travelling companion, an intrepid couple from Australia, an Alaskan two years into wandering the wilderness areas of the planet, and our young Thai guide who delightedly explained how much planning, preparation and expectation surrounded this celebration.

My companions had many questions. What should we expect? At what time should the festivities start? How shall we participate? How can we help? All accorded the same response, just wait. And so we did. Hour upon hour passed. We could see instruments being practiced, exquisite costumes being embroidered, meticulous and incomparable jewellery emerging to be cleaned, repaired, compared. We could only look on, not knowing. Time passed, a day passed; I watched, learned, tried to interpret what was transpiring. Eventually, my fellow travellers retired to rest. However, I could feel instinctively something was about to happen. It was late into the night and dark; but an atmosphere beyond description arrested me in this humid remote place.

Slowly, the village women emerged from the huts, laden in historical, matriarchal ceremonial jewellery over the vibrant colours of the extensively and intricately embroidered patterns of their ancestors. The men joined in, but the women were the most resplendent in full dress. As the music started, we congregated outside a hut, the abode of the head tribesman. A circle was formed, and the music guided us through with rhythms and steps. As the dance became fluid, the door opened, and the head of the village emerged to offer a particularly strong brew of liquor. The penny dropped, despite origins in Animism, shamanism and ancestor worship, the Lisu ceremony was recognisable to me through my own culture of New Year (Scotland), where we travel from house to house, bearing gifts, a song, and strong liquor. Like a duck to water, I danced, sang, and, in the tradition I knew, visited each and every hut in the village where offerings were exchanged, given, and we did not stop.

Much has been written about gifts and exchange, particularly pertinent to Lewis Hyde's, *"The Gift"*, in which he investigates the exchange of the gift in ceremonies, and the importance of the exchange *"as a social use far beyond the practical"*.²

I use the example of this story as an observation into the congenital necessity for us as humans to use the act of giving (the gift of exchange) to honour, create, bear witness, commemorate, memorialise, continue traditions, relate stories, and partake in the interconnectedness of our very existence.

² Hyde, 2006

“Furthermore, when gifts circulate within a group, their commerce leaves a series of interconnected relationships in its wake, and a kind of decentralized cohesiveness emerges.”³

As a maker, my intention is to tap into some of these rituals, to release and set in motion an emotional response with a tale to tell. When discharged from our hands, the work acquires its own life and gathers with it a story. Whether it is a piece of jewellery, a piece of cloth woven to be worn, a cup to drink from, or an implement to be used, a true craftsman releases his or her skills through their chosen materials, planting a tale to be discovered.

Whether that story is told about warmth, love, tradition, warning, morals, fertility, protection, it is embodied within the makers desire to communicate through the process of making.

“The gifted artist contains the vitality of his gift within the work, and thereby makes it available to others. Furthermore, works we come to treasure are those which transmit that vitality and revive the soul. Such works circulate among us as reservoirs of available life.”⁴

I know from experience this gift of onward participation, often I meet the recipients of work I have designed, made, crafted, and it is a source of unimagined pleasure to have a heartfelt ‘thank you for being in my life’ through this piece. No matter what the occasion, it is humbling to know you are just the start, a story to become according to the wearer. A combination of perception, agency and material intelligence speaks its language and attracts. It is transferred to the piece through my inception, it is no longer mine, but we are connected. Lewis Hyde invokes magnificently the depth of this ability to harness and set free a reciprocity of related story. He also draws on the inspiration of the well spring of production:

“...most artists are brought to their vocation when their own nascent gifts are awakened by the work of a master. That is to say, most artists are converted to art by art itself. The future artist finds himself or herself moved by a piece of art and, through that experience comes to labour in its service until they can profess their own skill. We come to painting, poetry hoping to revive the soul. Any artist whose work touches us earns our gratitude. The connection between art and gift is when art acts as an agent of transformation that we may speak of as a gift.”⁵

In my work, I meet many people and am often privileged to become acquainted with the continued narrative. A particular lady came regularly to look at, discuss, critique and sometimes buy or commission a piece of work. Our discourse ranged widely on technique, aesthetics, teaching, craftsmanship, politics and a wide range of other subjects. Over time, our relationship went from customer to friend. Often, a

³ Hyde, 2006, p. xvii

⁴ Ibid., p. 27

⁵ Ibid., p. 48

piece was chosen from something I was wearing, which of course was flattering; and, over a long period of time, some intricate designs were realised which were also out of our normal range, eye catching and technically challenging. A lizard carved in gold, with emerald eyes, worn on the shoulder as if escaping from behind a rock, a cascade of fuchsia blooms, enamelled to capture the subtleties of colour present. I always found these encounters such a pleasure, the gift of connecting with engaging company, the gift of being commissioned to make stunning work, the gift of being appreciated.

I knew by this time my friend collected work but wondered how many of these pieces would see the light of day, knowing her work was as a schoolteacher in a fairly rough end of town. I knew these were not for work purposes. After delivering a particularly beautiful piece, we were invited to her house to view other works of craft in her collection.

There, we met the family, her husband, a gentle modest man, passionate about his work as a doctor in an area of severe inequality on the city outskirts. High-rise, poverty of inequality and unemployment had driven him to research and determine better medication, protection, and delivery of fair services to patients plagued by the HIV virus which had devastated this community. He became instrumental in advocating a quality of care, with grassroots research, which led to a practice being rolled out over the country of giving out needles, to stop the practice of sharing them, extremely controversial at the time.

During that pioneering time, he was invited to a fundraising dinner in aid of HIV. The patron was a senior member of the Royal household, who our friend was placed next to at dinner. A professional admiration was struck, and as a consequence, an invite was made to become the Royal Family's Apothecary.

As such, many invitations to The Royal Palace occurred, and the reason to commission our jewellery transpired. Often at these dinners, etiquette sat you beside people who were unknown to you. Conversation to the uninitiated was unnerving. Our (the product of our workshop, not just myself) jewellery, worn on such occasions, was of eye-catching quality and gave an opportunity for conversation to be concentrated in a focused, personal but not overly private pathway. Everyone can relate to craftsmanship in one sense and usually has a story relating to a piece of heirloom, a quirky intimate piece remembered from someplace. Recently it has come to our attention that women use a statement piece of jewellery to make an impact. A spider, a gemstone from a specific country, a gift from someone whose message is clear.

The pieces we had made were used to engage in conversation that transcended place and intimacy, able to start their own story of engagement, technicality and enjoyment, all able to alert and engage the listener with intrigue.

And so, the exchange which started as a gift of craft and skill continued its path, embellishing its narrative in another world, and connected people of multiple nations and status, transforming complex social situations into meaningful interchange of a beautiful piece of craftsmanship into a dialogue of understanding, a level of community and humanity to which we can all relate.

Lewis Hyde argues in *"The Gift"*:

"...that the gift is "my example of the gift of giving of a skill, a sacrifice, a ceremonial artefact, an act of thoughtfulness unencumbered by the weight of commerce".⁶

His analogy of giving using examples from literature, anthropology and economics are all representative of the transformations, movement of change and the cycles of vitality of exchange, to give and receive.

An essence of our humanity is highlighted here, as we, throughout existence, history, religion, folklore, primitive and contemporary life orders, all make preparation and space for a "gift society" to survive. The necessity for these "gifts" to keep moving within our "way of being" is representative of the need to honour and accept the interconnectedness and acceptance of the knowing of change to flow amongst us.

Where this flow of giving and receiving becomes hierarchical, blocked or abused, the very essence of our being suffers. Buddhist philosophy starts with "all is suffering" and we are all able to promote happiness and compassion by being deeply aware of change, acceptance in the impermanence of everything.

In my quest as a maker, a creative artist, am I inherently in the process of engagement of the gift economy, of skill, of change, of connectedness?

Do I, by learning a deep understanding of the nature of materials, the give and take of their properties, the daily lessons in my engagement to mould, invent, and manifest something which, by the way of creative thought process, contribute to the reciprocity of humanity?

Often pieces have value beyond a commercial value.

A young couple came to choose a small item of jewellery. The atmosphere was light-hearted, the interaction free and of no significant commemorative occasion other than amusement. I remember the long time it took to choose a simple piece of low commercial worth. I know within my own working practice to give the same attention to detail to all work on offer, both in its 'gift economy' and in its commerce consequence. A number of years passed until I received a phone call from the lady who was the receiver in this story. She was upset and explained that the chain on the necklace had broken, and it was really important to have it repaired. It was duly returned. The

⁶ Hyde, 2006

nature of our business is that certain items are “out sourced”. This has always been the case. It would not be sensible to make chains, as we are not experts in that field. Chain is one of the few items we do outsource. Sometimes, it is non economical to repair something due to the time and complexity involved, and it is sensible to replace the item. This was done, and a brand-new piece was delivered back with an explanation note. Thinking our customer would be over the moon at our generosity and rapid response, it was incredibly un-nerving to receive an incredibly distraught phone call the following day. It transpired the partner had died, unexpectedly. The necklace’s provenance instantly changed and grew in its “gift economy” more than any value that could be put on it. It was beyond value and irreplaceable. The new piece had no place in this trajectory of events and only served to block the flow of intention.

Luckily, within the workshop nothing goes to waste, all broken items, scrap, filings, sweeps, all are kept to be resmelted at a later date. Luckily, we do not resmelt very often, mainly because it entails sorting clean scrap from contaminated scrap, filings, solder, etc. The said piece was found, repaired and returned, thus allowing it to continue in its place beyond value.

Of course, as a maker, I am attributing a monetary value to the work, in my case a simple formula to play at its heart.

Material cost, including overheads.

Time, making and originality...

Most artist makers struggle with the additional time for development; samples and design, in truth, cannot be valued appropriately until a certain level of circumstances align. Artistic providence, rarity and urgency all play a part. I would argue many of this unchecked time involved becomes part of the gift of the piece.

We give of this, what I shall call “transformative creative value”, freely. It is the part in a piece that is set free, which changes and sets in motion the narrative that no longer is attached to the maker. We seek no reciprocity for this part in our work; our creative itch has been satiated. The consequential gift touches us, moves us, feeds us; and the knowledge we have set in motion and become a transformative discourse, functionality, and gift.

Gratitude is not sought, but often received. Our satisfaction in the work is the knowledge we have initiated a sequence of ritual, ceremony, narrative, seeded in an unwritten language of unconditional giving and receiving. The gift of creative thought is a process of esemplastic cognition and has roots and pathways in cultural histories and experiences, triggers that set off a stream of conscious curiosity that can manifest in emerging ideas. It sets in motion a journey of investigative thought processes with proficiency, igniting the hidden, the unspoken, the beauty, and the raw in ways which give expanse, alertness, understanding and respite from the ordinary. Skill comes from practice, teachings, hours laboured, trial and error. Mostly, it is

the result of recognising a personal stream of conscious and unconscious thoughts, giving space and time for them to ripen, an insatiable desire to query, to investigate and to find an avenue to process this.

“His appeal is made to our less obvious capacities: to that part of our nature which, because of the warlike conditions of existence, is necessarily kept out of sight within the more resisting and hard qualities- like the vulnerable body within a steel armour... The artist appeals...to that in us which is a gift and not an acquisition – and, therefore, more permanently enduring. He speaks of our capacity for delight and wonder, to sense of mystery surrounding our lives; to our sense of pity, and beauty, and pain; to the latent feeling of fellowship with all creation- to the subtle but invincible conviction of solidarity that knits together the loneliness of innumerable hearts, to the solidarity... which binds together all humanity- the dead to the living and the living to the unborn.”⁷

At this point, I would like to draw parallels to meditation training. I seek to become aware of my connectedness; as I become aware, I learn to let go of that which I cannot change; by letting go, I can give space and reflection to the creative in me, a process which in return affects a change. I am not searching or grasping, I am accepting; but, in that action, it allows me to receive.

P.S. Should by any chance an Alaskan who once was on a trek in northern Thailand with a very inexperienced group ever stumble upon this, may I thank you. Thank you for realising I was the vulnerable member on the walk and choosing protectively to walk behind me all the way. Thank you for stopping and sharing your Aladdin’s cave of a rucksack with fresh limes, filtered water, a pen knife to cut out the toes of my newly bought inappropriate shoes, two sizes too small due to a misunderstanding in size translation. Thank you for your wisdom in travel, your humour, and being a teacher in the dignified way of the traveller. A gift.

⁷ Hyde, 2006

Meta Praxis

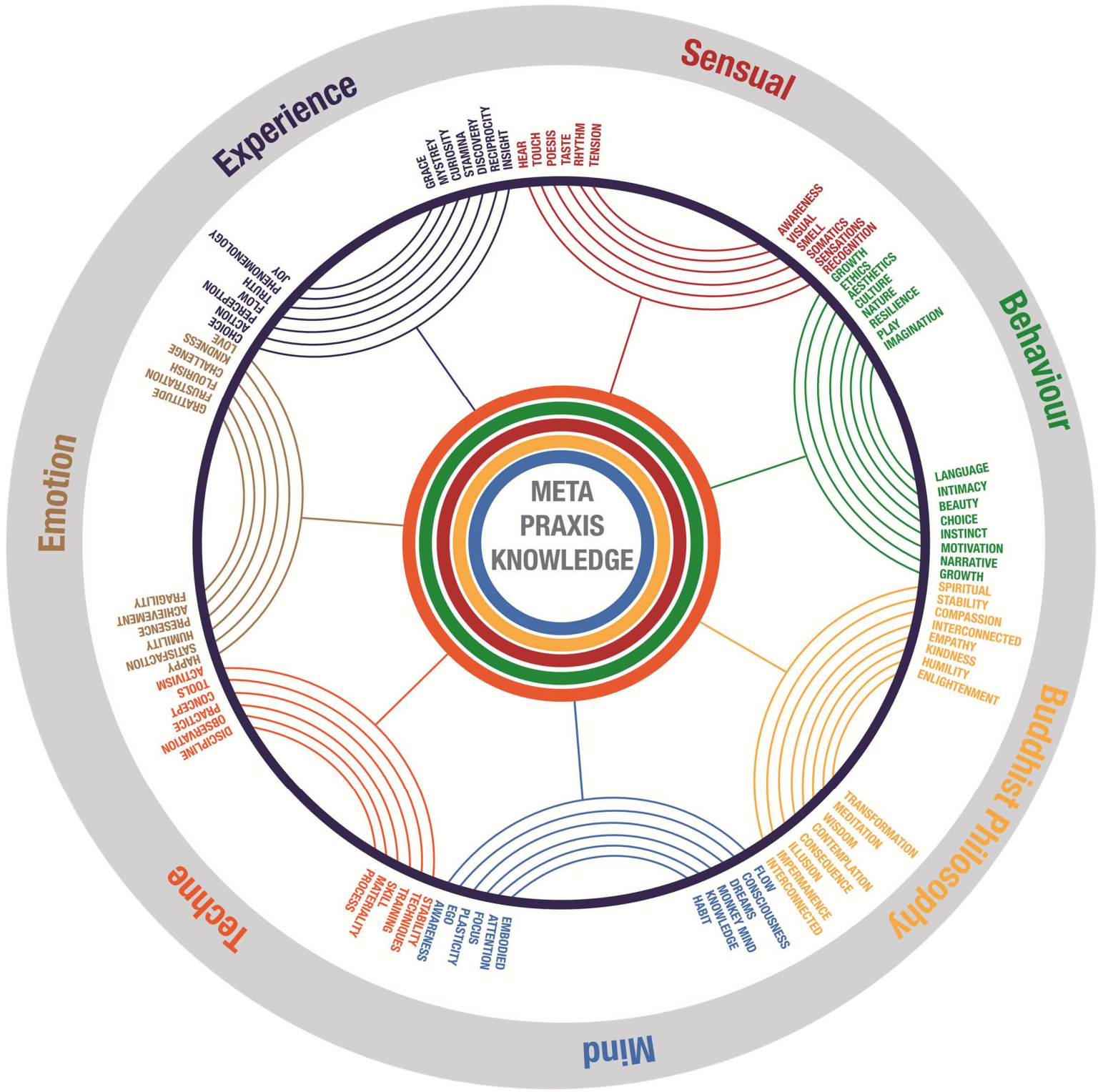
'Meta Praxis' is the potential for human flourishing through an awareness of practice and the value of making craft as an explicit knowledge pathway. Within and beyond the practice, this pathway has the potential to put us in touch with the essential vitality of life and its human value.

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**

