

SCOPE

Contemporary Research Topics

art & design 29:
Hospitality & Tourism
July 2025

Reflective Piece

<https://doi.org/10.34074/scop.1029004>

**MISE EN PLACE FOR THE SOUL:
A CULINARY FRAMEWORK FOR WELL-BEING**

Sarj Hada

Published by Otago Polytechnic Press.

CC-BY the authors.

© illustrations: the artists or other copyright owners or as indicated.

MISE EN PLACE FOR THE SOUL: A CULINARY FRAMEWORK FOR WELL-BEING

Sarj Hada

Cooking is a *craft*, I like to think, and a good cook is a craftsman—not an artist. There's nothing wrong with that: The great cathedrals of Europe were built by craftsmen—though not designed by them. Practicing your craft in an expert fashion is noble, honorable, and satisfying.

Anthony Bourdain, *Kitchen Confidential*

INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

Born in Kathmandu, Nepal, as a member of the Newar tribe, I am reminded of the richness of my cultural heritage. The Newar tribe is one of the four dominant tribes that, to me, represent Nepal. The Newar people of Nepal excel in various crafts: architecture, building, sculpting, painting, music, poetry, writing, and more (Manandhar, 2018). Craftwork forms our meaning and purpose within the Newar community and culture.

I have been in the hospitality industry for 21 years now, starting at the age of 19 as a kitchen hand. It was only recently that I began to view my work as a craft, as Anthony Bourdain expresses in the epigraph. Previously, it was just a job for me.

One of the significant lessons that I learned from my experience working in restaurants is that kitchens do not discriminate based on a person's past or country of origin, as long as that person follows the group's rules and rituals. In my case, the kitchen felt like a perfect home away from home, where I could socialise, earn a living, and feel welcomed and part of the community. As eloquently stated by Bourdain (2000), the restaurant “underbelly” may seem dark to some, but to those who have lived and breathed it, it offers a way of life that is familiar and comforting.

For many years early in my career, I completely immersed myself within the restaurant kitchen; so much so that it became my family and my life. However, I eventually realised that this confined life was unsustainable. I was burning the candle at both ends and had not been back to Kathmandu in seven-and-a-half years since leaving at the age of 19. I had solely focused on work and socialising with colleagues, at the expense of my roots. I knew something had to change, and that I needed to make more time for myself, my girlfriend, and my family back home. I needed to reconnect with my roots and take time for rest, relaxation, and self-care.

Points raised by chef Ben Shewry recently made me realise the importance of freeing oneself from the yoke of work. After watching Shewry on the *Chef's Table* documentary in an episode about his journey with Attica, I was inspired by his perspective on culinary craftwork. His stance on work-life balance and sustainability left a lasting impression on me. In particular, Shewry's comments about the reasons for developing a four-day working week for his staff at his restaurant resonated with me:

I'm 40, I've averaged 75 hours per week in kitchens since the age of 14. I've already worked roughly the same number of hours as a person averaging 40 hours per week throughout their career to retirement age. So no, I don't feel 'amazing'. I feel like I'm 65! (Shewry, as quoted in Valmorbidia, 2017)

Immersing yourself solely in your work or craft can be destructive. From another recent documentary about Chef Sean Brock, I learnt how he had worked himself to the point of total exhaustion and almost died. Brock, who was 39 at the time, attributed his extreme work habit to one key incident: he had worked for 10 months straight to address a negative review that their restaurant had received. For Brock it took coming close to death to realise that he had to change his entire way of life and how he approached work (Kinsman, 2020).

Chef Magnus Nilsson of Sweden is another advocate for chefs trying to achieve a balance between work and life. Regrettably, Nilsson's attempt to create a sustainable lifestyle for himself while remaining in his career never fully succeeded. In 2019, Nilsson announced he would be shutting his restaurant Fäviken as he still had not achieved balance in his life. After the restaurant's closure, Nilsson was hoping to spend more time with family, fishing, gardening and getting fit, "both physically and mentally" (Street, 2019).

It has been amazing to hear that some of the industry leaders are quite openly talking about the work-life balance issues within the industry and driving the changes required. Shewry, Brock, and Nilsson's views on life and culinary work resonate with my own beliefs. Seeing the bigger picture and learning to balance work and life is important. The failure to reach this balance presents the risk that eventually something in your life will topple: your family, your physical and mental well-being, your creative potential or, worst of all; all of it. Unfortunately, mental breakdown and suicide have become common among professionals within our industry, including a number of well-known Australian chefs in recent times (Harris, 2017).

HOLISTIC BALANCE FOR CULINARY CRAFTWORKERS

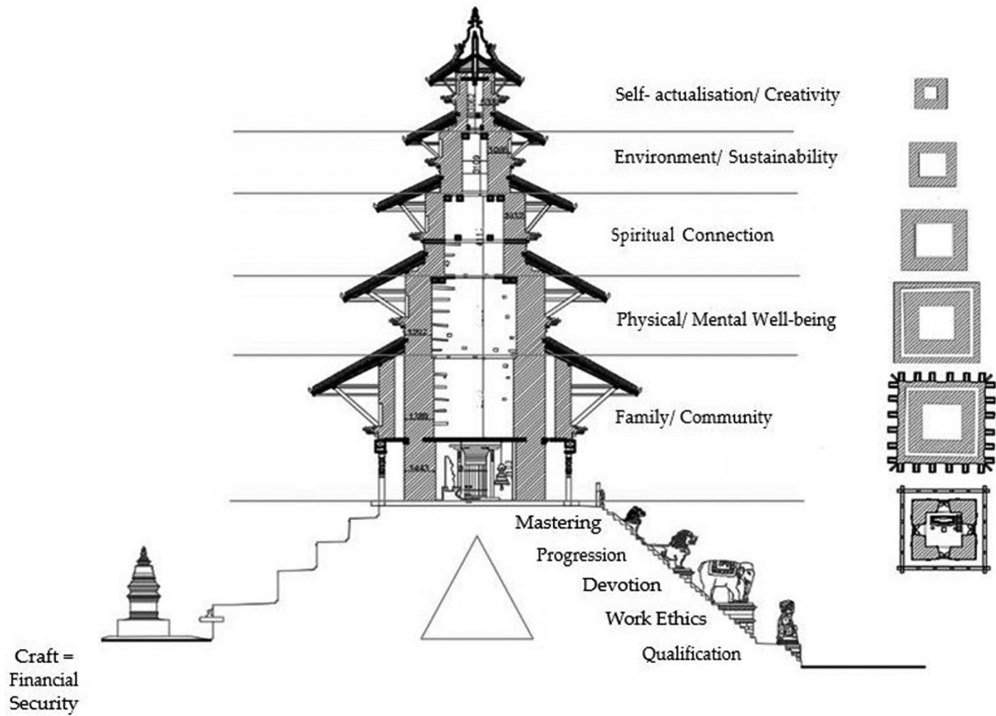
As we navigate through the maze of responsibilities and challenges life presents, the concept of holistic well-being emerges as a guiding light, offering a transformative approach to a fulfilling and purpose-driven life.

As Newar, we practice both Hinduism and Buddhism. Growing up in Kathmandu and practicing both religions hand in hand, I have only recently come to realise that I have been following a holistic well-being approach which is deeply rooted in our Newari culture. According to Mahattanadull (2020, p. 111), Buddhist people believe that "the holistic well-beings characterise the innate body, social moral, calm mind, and the awakening wisdom, respectively. They are the fourfold outcome of the holistic well-beings." For me, this holistic well-being or integral well-being is what Purcell (2021, para. 2) meant when commenting that "Buddhism would have us consider another balancing problem, one that might be even more fundamental: the being-doing balance." Such reflection enables me to embrace the beauty of balance and seek harmony within.

MY FRAMEWORK OF PRACTICE

I have chosen to adapt a Newar temple to express my framework of practice as a culinary professional which includes 11 years in the industry and 10 years as a culinary educator. As I reflect on my past, I am reminded of the richness of my cultural heritage as a member of the Newar tribe. Growing up, I was constantly surrounded by our vibrant festivals, which we celebrated with our families, our community, and as a whole nation.

"In Newar culture," Parish says, "a moral god animates the mind, so the efforts of individuals to monitor their inner life often draw on a sense of presence of a divine agency" (1991, p. 316). Within this framework there are three key areas. These areas are the temple foundation, which represents my craft; the main temple room, which represents my family and community, and the ascending towers. These four towers represent my physical/mental well-being; spirituality; the environment/sustainability, and self-actualisation and creativity.



Foundation/Land/Whenua

Figure 1. Sarj Hada, Framework of Practice Model (adapted from Shilpakar et al., 2021).

The image above is a blueprint of one of the most important temples for the Hada people of the Bhaktapur Clan, who are all part of the Newar tribe. The Nyatapola Temple is a five-storey pagoda located in Bhaktapur, Nepal. The temple was erected by Nepali King Bhupatindra Malla during a five-month period from late 1701 to 1702. It is the temple of Siddha Laxmi, the Hindu goddess of prosperity. Although the temple has suffered numerous earthquakes throughout the centuries, it remains standing strong today.

The temple's entrance features five plinths on each step of the foundation pyramid, each guarded by a pair of stone guardians. Each pair is said to be ten times stronger than the one below them. At the bottom are two Rajput wrestlers named Jai and Pratap, said to be ten times stronger than normal men. Above them are giant statues of two elephants, and further up are the statues of two Singhas, mythical big cats found in traditions throughout South and Southeast Asia. Above the cats are the statues of two Sārdūlas, griffin-like creatures from local Newari mythology. On the topmost plinths are the Tantric deities, Simhanī and Vyāghranī, the lioness and tigress deities who are the strongest of all the guardians (Bhaktapur, n.d.).

Upon reflecting on what the temple foundation means to me, I have come to realise that it stands for professional craft. Metaphorically, the bottom of the pyramid represents the working life, which, for me, is the craft of cooking. While I may not perceive myself as an artist in cooking, I am a competitive craftsman to some degree. Over the years, I have learned to hone my craft, which has helped me establish a strong foundation and financial security, enabling me to build my metaphorical temple upon it. The pyramid's different foundation tiers, guarded by strong deities, represent the values and experiences of my 21-year career: qualifications and apprenticeship; a good work ethic; devotion; progression, and mastery of my craft.

My take on the tiers is simple. The first one is: get qualified, no matter what your age. Secondly, practice a good work ethic and learn soft skills, even something so simple as turning up on time with a positive attitude. Develop a devotion to or passion for the art of cooking. Progression, for me, means understanding one's craft deeply. Finally, mastery is the confidence to expand and explore different routes with your team members, much as a seasoned mountain climber would do.

Reaching the top tier is not the finish line. If one chooses, one can continue building upwards. In my case, the main body of the temple represents a connection with family and community, and the second tier represents looking after your well-being, followed by finding a spiritual connection if necessary. For me, this last step involved reconnecting with my ancestry and appreciating my new home, and being proud of both. Being connected to my environment means spending time outside in nature; and I am fortunate enough to live in Mamaku, where nature surrounds us in abundance. My self-actualisation tier involves immersing myself in visual arts after work and domestic chores. I began painting again in Sydney in 2005. Growing up in Kathmandu, surrounded by various art forms, it felt natural for me to step away from my life in the kitchen and pick up the paintbrush to decompress. Art has brought me immense joy and enriched my life and continues to do so. My paintings have since been exhibited in multiple galleries across Australia and Aotearoa.

Getting back to craft again and describing it with just these five values and the body of the temple is not that easy. Within these values lie numerous sub-values. I often tell our culinary students that cooking is a valuable skill for life, even if they do not plan to work in the industry or eventually decide to leave it. It can help them take care of themselves and their families by knowing how to utilise commodities, maintain balanced nutrition, and save money. As Michael Ruhlman (2020) attests, cooking is a fundamental element of human survival, and is a skill that can be passed on to others as a social tool to bring families and communities together. The kitchen should be a place of nurture and balance, where one wants to be, not a place where we are forced to work extreme hours. We should not feel guilty for taking time off to work on the main body of the temple and the upper tiers of the temple as represented in the framework of practice model.

As illustrated in this reflection, many leading chefs are challenging the traditions of the past and reimagining how we work in kitchens. Taking inspiration from Ben Shewry, Sean Brock, and Magnus Nilsson, along with my own experiences, I have learned to appreciate the craft of cooking while maintaining a balance in my life. I now understand that life extends beyond work, and prioritise my physical and emotional well-being to continue building upon the foundation I have created. The pyramid's foundation, where we practice our craft, needs to be a sustainable environment which contributes to holistic well-being.

APPLICATION OF MY FRAMEWORK IN THE TEACHING SPACE

My core Newar values, centred on the interconnected well-being of people and the environment, have always guided my career, especially as a culinary educator. My journey through teaching has not been smooth sailing; I have faced many challenges and continue to. The world of academia and the trials our learners face, both in and out of the classroom, seem to change every year. I still remember my first day teaching Level 3 STP Secondary-Tertiary Programmes students in Ōtara and watching the movie *Dangerous Minds* that evening to prepare for the next day. My time in commercial kitchens, contrasted by the positive experiences of later years in Australia, really highlighted the need for a more balanced professional existence. That is a philosophy I now integrate into my teaching in Aotearoa, New Zealand.

A 2020 study at the University of Queensland (Robinson & Bremmer, 2020), which involved interviews with 53 chefs (39 with teaching experience) and 148 culinary students, directly explored the question of whether culinary educators act as agents in the socialisation of toxic kitchen cultures. The findings of this research were concerning, highlighting a clear mirroring of aggressive and negative industry practices within culinary education itself. This

exposure to toxic behaviours in what should be a safe and supportive learning environment highlights the critical need for educators to actively disrupt this cycle.

As an instructor, while large-scale industry reform is complex, my direct influence comes from first being aware of these harmful behaviours, then demonstrating positive conduct, and actively combating discrimination. My pedagogical journey over the past ten years has been about moving away from negative industry traditions to create a supportive space for the holistic growth of my learners, directly addressing the issues highlighted by studies like the one by Robinson and Bremmer (2020), from the University of Queensland. Understanding how vulnerable newcomers are, and acknowledging research showing that harmful industry norms often continue in educational settings (Lee et al., 2018; Robinson & Bremmer, 2020), my main goal is to create a fundamentally different learning environment. Creating such an environment involves a deliberate focus on work-life balance and fostering respectful dialogue. Embracing *manaakitanga* (hospitality), *kotahitanga* (unity) and *whanaungatanga* (relationship), my classroom celebrates diversity, encourages collaboration, and prioritises strong interpersonal connections.

FINAL THOUGHTS AND WHAT COMES NEXT

Over the last few years, I have consciously strayed from traditional teaching norms, embracing my own style and recognising my distinct approach compared to those of many peers. In my classroom, I emphasise the importance of interests beyond the kitchen and a healthy work-life balance, highlighting the unsustainability of a life solely focused on work and the challenges of transitioning out of a career without supportive external connections. I have also recognised the vulnerability of newcomers to potentially unhealthy industry socialisation. While the culinary industry faces long-term sustainability challenges, I believe that we as culinary educators can play a role, however small, in fostering positive change.

Extensive, compelling statistics reveal significant challenges within the hospitality industry: concerning suicide rates in Australia (Burnett et al., 2022), high rates of abuse in New Zealand workplaces (Williamson et al., 2022), and a link between bullying and negative outcomes (O'Driscoll, 2012), all stemming from a historical reliance on abusive motivational tactics (Hoel & Einarsen, 2003).

As a culinary educator, I see it as my crucial responsibility to disrupt this cycle. By consciously modelling positive behaviours and cultivating a learning environment built on respect, empathy, and well-being, I aim to equip future culinary professionals with the resilience and ethical compass needed to adopt and drive positive change. Despite the profession's systemic issues of unsustainable hours and exploitative practices, education has the transformative potential to be a "circuit breaker" to halt the perpetuation of harmful cultures. My ultimate goal is to empower my students not only to achieve technical mastery but also to become advocates for a more humane and sustainable future for the culinary world.

Sarj Hada (ORCID ID: <https://orcid.org/0009-0008-8624-647X>) is an academic staff member at Toi Ohomai Institute of Technology. Born in Nepal, he holds an Australian citizenship and currently resides in Rotorua. Having worked in the culinary industry and academia for 22 years, he also practices various forms of visual arts and has held exhibitions in Sydney, Auckland, and Rotorua. His research interests include culinary practices and visual narratives.

REFERENCES

- Bourdain, A. (2000). *Kitchen confidential: Adventures in the culinary underbelly*. Bloomsbury.
- Burnett, A., Wong, Q., Rheinberger, D., Zeritis, S., McGillivray, L., & Torok, L. (2022). Suicide among hospitality workers in Australia, 2006–2017. *Social Psychiatry and Psychiatric Epidemiology*, 57, 1039–1047. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s00127-022-02229-7>
- Harris, A. (2017, July 30). Sydney chefs undergoing a cultural shift to get fit after shock deaths of two high-profile chefs. *Daily Telegraph*. <https://www.dailytelegraph.com.au/news/nsw/sydney-chefs-undergoing-a-cultural-shift-to-get-fit-after-shock-death-of-two-high-profile-chefs/news-story/fa5b15c4e3016d61777d8f10f55bc166>
- Hoel, H., & Einarsen, S. (2003, October). *Violence in hotels, catering and tourism* (Working paper W.211). International Labour Office, Geneva. https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/@ed_dialogue/@sector/documents/publication/wcms_161998.pdf
- Kinsman, K. (2000, February 13). What Sean Brock learned about his brain when it broke. *Food & Wine*. <https://www.foodandwine.com/sean-brock-sobriety-6410286>
- Mahatthanadull, S. M. (2020). Holistic well-beings promotion for balanced way of according to Buddhist Psychology. *JIBSC, Journal of International Buddhist Studies College*, 6(1), 111–121. Academia.edu. https://www.academia.edu/43150188/Holistic_Well_beings_Promotion_for_Balanced_VWay_of_Life_according_to_Buddhist_Psychology
- Manandhar, R. (2018, June 6). *A short introduction to Newa language and literature*. Medium. <https://razenmanandhar.medium.com/a-short-introduction-to-newa-language-and-literature-2c4b99ab8115>
- Nyatapola: The tallest Nepalese temple of Nepal. (n.d). *Bhaktapur*. <https://www.bhaktapur.com/discover/nyatapola-temple/>
- O'Driscoll, M. P. (2012). Workplace bullying in New Zealand: A survey of employee perceptions and attitudes. *Human Resource Management International Digest*, 20(3) <https://doi.org/10.1108/hrmid.2012.04420caa.012>
- Parish, S. (1991). The sacred mind: Newar cultural representations of mental life and the production of moral consciousness. *Ethos*, 19(3), 313–51.
- Purcell, S. (2021, April 27). What the Buddhist being-doing balance is (and why it matters for happiness). *The Apeiron Blog*. <https://theapeiron.co.uk/what-the-buddhist-being-doing-balance-is-and-why-it-matters-for-happiness-3754394cda82>.
- Robinson, R., & Bremmer, M. (2020, July 10). *Are culinary educators an agent in the socialisation of toxic kitchen cultures?* [PowerPoint slides]. University of Queensland, Business School.
- Ruhlman, M. (2020). *Had something to say – Cooking* [Video]. Vimeo. <https://vimeo.com/16092198>.
- Shilpakar, R., Maskey, P. N., & Silpakar, P. (2021). Construction technology of multi-tiered temples and their rehabilitation after 2015 April Earthquake in Bhaktapur. *Progress in Disaster Science*, 10, 100177. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.pdisas.2021.100177>
- Valmorbidia, A. (2017, September 29). The birth of the four-day work week in Australian kitchens. *Broadsheet*. <https://www.broadsheet.com.au/melbourne/food-and-drink/article/the-birth-four-day-work-week-australian-kitchens>
- Williamson, D., Rasmussen, E., & Palao, C. (2022). *Voices from the frontline*. AUT University School of Hospitality and Tourism. https://www.aut.ac.nz/_data/assets/pdf_file/0004/642874/Voices-From-The-Front-Line.pdf