

Steps 1–3: Building Kaha Through Daily Practice

Orientation-Responsive Practice Selection: Matching Method to Person in the 18-Day Kaha Cycle

Ruku I’Anson (March 2026)

ABSTRACT

Te Poutama o te Ora (TPO) is a nine-dimensional Māori wellness framework that integrates te Ao Māori concepts, contemporary behavioural science, and biblical wisdom. Within Steps 1–3 of the framework, practitioners are invited to establish Kaha — strength and capacity — through consistent daily practice over 18 days comprising two consecutive nine-day cycles. Three methods are available to support this: Anchoring New Practices to Existing Routines, the 3-Tier Integration System, and Simple Daily Tracking. This article argues that requiring practitioners to engage all three methods simultaneously risks compliance fatigue and undermines sustainable habit formation. Drawing on the Three Orientations model embedded in TPO Book 1 (Starter, Middler, Finisher) and on habit formation research (Clear, 2018; Duhigg, 2012), a self-diagnostic framework is proposed through which practitioners identify their dominant orientation and select the single most congruent method for their 18-day cycle. The article presents the diagnostic tool, orientation-to-method rationale, and facilitation guidance for individual and group settings.

Keywords: *Te Poutama o te Ora, Kaha, habit formation, Three Orientations, Māori wellness, nine-day cycle, practice method, orientation-responsive design*

1. INTRODUCTION

The development of sustainable daily practice is foundational to the Kaha-building phase of Te Poutama o te Ora. Steps 1–3 do not ask practitioners to transform

overnight. Rather, they establish the neurological, emotional, and behavioural groundwork upon which the remaining six steps will build. Central to this is the question: how does a person begin, and keep going, across 18 consecutive days?

Three methods have been developed within the TPO framework to scaffold this process. Each is theoretically sound and practically achievable. The design challenge, however, is that practitioners are not a single type. Research in motivational psychology and habit formation consistently demonstrates that the fit between a method and a person's natural engagement style is a stronger predictor of sustained behaviour than the quality of the method itself (Deci & Ryan, 2000; Fogg, 2019). A method that energises one practitioner may create friction for another — not because of willingness or commitment, but because of orientation.

This article introduces orientation-responsive practice selection: a structured process through which practitioners first identify their dominant orientation (Starter, Middler, or Finisher) using a brief self-diagnostic, then select and commit to the single most aligned method for the duration of their 18-day cycle. The approach is grounded in the Three Orientations model articulated in TPO Book 1 and is consistent with the broader TPO principle of dimensional autophagy — redesigning the environment to remove what creates friction, rather than demanding the person overcome their nature by force of will.

Orientation-responsive design does not lower the standard. It removes unnecessary friction between the person and the practice.

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

2.1 The Three Orientations

The Three Orientations model proposes that individuals carry a dominant energy that flourishes in one of three distinct phases of a nine-step or nine-day cycle. These orientations are not fixed personality types but tendencies — patterns of engagement that, when named and honoured, become resources rather than liabilities.

Starters are characterised by the gift of initiation. Their cognitive and motivational resources are most available at the threshold of something new — the blank canvas, the generative leap, the creative beginning. Csikszentmihalyi's (1990) concept of autotelic experience is frequently most accessible to Starters in the opening phase of a cycle, when possibility is most expansive. Their growth edge lies in the iterative middle and the sustained close.

Middlers are characterised by sustained execution. They are most activated when they have structure to push against but sufficient latitude to navigate. Their strength lies in what Duckworth (2016) terms grit — the capacity to maintain effort and interest toward long-term goals. Their growth edge lies at the extremes: the undefined opening and the narrowing close.

Finishers are characterised by completion orientation. They perceive the distance between 'nearly done' and 'actually done' with greater acuity than other orientations, and their motivational systems are most engaged when a finish line is visible. Their growth edge lies in initiating from zero, where the finish line is not yet in sight.

2.2 Habit Formation and Method Fit

Duhigg (2012) identifies three components of the habit loop: the cue, the routine, and the reward. Each of the three TPO practice methods activates this loop differently. Anchoring to existing routines exploits already-established cues, reducing the cognitive cost of habit initiation — a particular advantage for Starters, whose energy is highest at the design phase and must be conserved for the sustaining phase. The 3-Tier Integration System provides a graduated reward structure across daily, weekly, and aspirational frequencies, producing the scaffolded momentum that Middlers require. Simple Daily Tracking creates a visible chain of completed behaviours — what Clear (2018) calls the 'don't break the chain' effect — that activates the completion drive most present in Finishers.

Self-determination theory (Deci & Ryan, 2000) further supports orientation-responsive selection. The theory proposes that autonomous motivation — choosing based on felt relevance and personal fit rather than external prescription — is significantly more

predictive of sustained behaviour than controlled motivation. When practitioners select their method through self-diagnosis rather than having it assigned, the act of selection itself becomes an autonomy-supporting intervention.

2.3 The Nine-Day Cycle and the 18-Day Arc

TPO structures transformation in nine-day cycles, with Days 1–3 oriented toward learning and initiation, Days 4–6 toward deepening and refinement, and Days 7–9 toward mastery and integration. Over 18 days, this pattern repeats twice. The second cycle is not merely repetition — it is an opportunity to consolidate what the first cycle established and to deepen the practice from compliance to embodiment.

Each orientation will experience the 18-day arc differently. Starters will find Days 1–3 alive and Days 7–9 effortful. Middlers will find Days 4–6 their natural home. Finishers will find Days 7–9 energising but Days 1–3 resistant. Orientation-responsive method selection does not eliminate these dynamics, but it reduces unnecessary friction at the hardest phase by embedding structural support within the method itself.

3. THE SELF-DIAGNOSTIC TOOL

The self-diagnostic presented below is designed to be completed at the outset of Steps 1–3, before method selection. It comprises five questions, each offering three response options corresponding to Starter (A), Middler (B), and Finisher (C) orientations. The questions are framed behaviourally rather than attitudinally — they ask what the practitioner tends to do, not what they value or aspire toward.

3.1 Design Principles

- Questions are written in plain, accessible language to minimise interpretation load at the point of entry into the programme.
- Responses are mutually exclusive within each question to reduce ambiguity.
- The diagnostic reveals tendency, not type. Practitioners with distributed responses are encouraged to reflect on which phase of a nine-day cycle feels most alive, and to use that as their orienting data.

- The tool is not psychometrically validated and is not intended as a clinical assessment. It is a structured reflection tool to support self-aware method selection.

3.2 Scoring and Interpretation

Most A responses indicate a Starter orientation and direct the practitioner toward the Anchoring method. Most B responses indicate a Middler orientation and are directed toward the 3-Tier Integration System. Most C responses indicate a Finisher orientation and are directed toward Simple Daily Tracking. Where responses are evenly distributed, facilitators are encouraged to guide a brief reflective conversation about which phase of the cycle tends to feel most energised and which most resistant.

4. ORIENTATION-TO-METHOD RATIONALE

4.1 Starter → Anchor New Practices to Existing Routines

The Anchoring method asks the practitioner to make one key creative decision at the outset: which new wellness practice attaches to which existing daily anchor (morning, midday, evening). This front-loaded design decision is inherently consonant with the Starter orientation — it is generative, open-ended, and occurs at the point of maximum Starter energy. Once the anchor is established, the existing routine carries the new practice through Days 4–9 of each cycle, removing the need for daily re-decision during the phase when Starter attention is most at risk of drifting.

This method leverages what Fogg (2019) terms 'motivation waves' — the Starter's initial motivational surge is used productively in design rather than squandered in early execution, and the anchor structure provides automaticity through the trough. A second design moment at Day 10 (the opening of Cycle 2) provides the Starter with a legitimate new beginning within the same method, sustaining engagement without abandoning the practice.

4.2 Middler → 3-Tier Integration System

The 3-Tier Integration System provides the structured-but-flexible framework that Middlers require. The three tiers — Daily Non-Negotiables, Regular Practices, and Aspirational Rhythms — supply a framework to push against without predetermining outcomes, and the practitioner populates the tiers with their own choices, keeping the process self-directed and autonomy-supporting. The graduated frequency structure (daily, 3–4 times weekly, as possible) mirrors the Middler's natural capacity for sustained but variable engagement.

Critically, the Tier 3 framing — 'aspirational, without guilt if missed' — explicitly removes the perfectionism trap that can cause Middlers to disengage when they cannot maintain uniform performance. This is consistent with Neff's (2011) work on self-compassion as a predictor of sustained behaviour change, and with the TPO principle that Kaha is built through consistency over time, not through flawless execution.

4.3 Finisher → Simple Daily Tracking

The Simple Daily Tracking tool gives Finishers what their motivational architecture most requires: a visible finish line available every single day. Each completed row in the weekly log constitutes a micro-completion event — a small but genuine activation of the Finisher's completion drive. Clear (2018) describes this as the 'paper clip strategy': visible evidence of accumulated completions that becomes self-reinforcing over time.

The act of setting up the tracker on Day 1 — naming three chosen practices, ruling out the grid — also provides just enough initial clarity for the Finisher to begin without requiring complete certainty. This is consistent with research on implementation intentions (Gollwitzer, 1999), which demonstrates that specifying when, where, and what significantly increases follow-through even among those who struggle to initiate. By Day 18, the Finisher holds two full weeks of visible evidence — a concrete and affirmative record of Kaha established.

5. FACILITATION GUIDANCE

The following guidance is offered for practitioners and facilitators introducing orientation-responsive selection at the start of Steps 1–3.

5.1 Framing Orientation as Compass, Not Category

Facilitators should introduce the Three Orientations not as a typology but as a temporary compass for entering the 18-day cycle. The language of 'tendency' rather than 'type' is important: it positions the diagnostic as descriptive of a current pattern rather than prescriptive of a fixed identity, and it leaves room for the growth edges that the cycle itself is designed to develop.

5.2 Individual Settings

In one-to-one settings, the diagnostic can be completed before the first session or as part of it. Where responses are distributed, a brief reflective conversation about phase energy (which part of a project or programme typically feels most alive?) will usually yield a clear enough orientation to proceed. The practitioner's felt sense of which method they are drawn to is itself valid data.

5.3 Group and Whānau Settings

In group settings, naming the three orientations openly and inviting participants to share their identification can build collective appreciation for the different energies required across a full cycle. This framing reduces shame around different starting points ('I always lose momentum in the middle' is reframed as Middler strength at the middle, growth edge at the margins) and supports a whānau model of complementarity — the group embodies all three orientations.

5.4 After the 18 Days

At the close of the 18-day cycle, reflection on the experience — which phases felt energised, which felt resistant, what the method made easier and what it could not hold — provides orientation data for the practitioner's entry into Steps 4–6. This review is consistent with TPO's R-R-R protocol: Review, Reflect, Restore.

6. DISCUSSION

Orientation-responsive practice selection represents a small but significant design shift within the TPO Steps 1–3 framework. Rather than prescribing a single method or requiring simultaneous engagement with all three, it returns agency to the practitioner at the point of entry — the moment when self-determination is most predictive of long-term engagement. The self-diagnostic is deliberately light: five questions, a few minutes, a clear direction. The weight is carried not by the diagnostic itself but by the quality of orientation-to-method match it enables.

A limitation of the current proposal is the absence of psychometric validation for the self-diagnostic tool. Future iterations of the TPO programme would benefit from structured data collection on orientation identification and method completion rates across the 18-day cycle, to refine both the diagnostic questions and the method-orientation rationale. Practitioners are encouraged to note their orientation identification alongside their 18-day tracking data to contribute to this developing evidence base.

A second consideration is the relationship between orientation and the specific dimensions of TPO being worked across Steps 1–3. Practitioners whose practice focus is Taha Wairua (spiritual wellbeing) may find that their orientation manifests differently than in domains such as Taha Tinana (physical wellbeing), where behavioural tracking is more immediately concrete. Facilitators should remain attentive to this dimension-specific variation and invite practitioners to name it where it arises.

7. CONCLUSION

The 18-day Kaha cycle within Steps 1–3 of Te Poutama o te Ora asks practitioners to do something genuinely difficult: to begin something new, to sustain it through resistance, and to complete it with integrity. Orientation-responsive practice selection does not make this easier by lowering the standard. It makes it more possible by removing the friction between the method and the person being asked to use it.

When a practitioner selects their method through self-diagnosis — when they recognise themselves in the description of a Starter, Middler, or Finisher and choose accordingly — they enter the cycle with self-knowledge rather than guesswork. That is itself an act

of Kaha. And it is, in the language of the framework, where the Poutama begins: not with the climb, but with knowing where you are standing.

Ko tōu ara, ko tōu ara — Your path is your path. The method that fits you is the one most likely to hold you.

REFERENCES

- Clear, J. (2018). Atomic habits: An easy and proven way to build good habits and break bad ones. Avery.
- Csikszentmihalyi, M. (1990). Flow: The psychology of optimal experience. Harper & Row.
- Deci, E. L., & Ryan, R. M. (2000). The 'what' and 'why' of goal pursuits: Human needs and the self-determination of behavior. *Psychological Inquiry*, 11(4), 227–268.
- Duckworth, A. (2016). Grit: The power of passion and perseverance. Scribner.
- Duhigg, C. (2012). The power of habit: Why we do what we do in life and business. Random House.
- Durie, M. (1994). Whaiora: Māori health development. Oxford University Press.
- Fogg, B. J. (2019). Tiny habits: The small changes that change everything. Houghton Mifflin Harcourt.
- Gollwitzer, P. M. (1999). Implementation intentions: Strong effects of simple plans. *American Psychologist*, 54(7), 493–503.
- Neff, K. D. (2011). Self-compassion: The proven power of being kind to yourself. William Morrow.
- [Author]. (2024). Te Poutama o te Ora: Book 1 — Foundations of the nine-dimension framework. [Publisher].