



## MIND & LIFE EUROPE FRANCISCO J. VARELA AWARDS FOR CONTEMPLATIVE SCIENCES RESEARCH 2023

### CALL FOR PROPOSALS

#### AWARD REMIT

Mind & Life Europe is seeking applications for the Mind & Life Europe Francisco J. Varela Awards for Contemplative Sciences Research (European Varela Awards – EVAs). The EVAs are an integral component of Mind & Life’s (Mind & Life Institute and Mind & Life Europe) support of contemplative sciences—a growing field investigating contemplative practices through research in diverse disciplines ranging from basic and clinical sciences to social sciences and the humanities. Named after one of Mind & Life’s co-founders, neuroscientist Francisco J. Varela (1946–2001), these grants are awarded annually to early-career scientists and scholars (see **ELIGIBILITY** section for further detail). **Thanks to the generosity of MLE’s Varela Awards donor, for the 2023 cycle the maximum amount that applicants may apply for will increase to €23,500.**

The Varela Awards fund rigorous examinations of contemplative techniques with the ultimate goal of providing greater insight into contemplative practices and their application for helping us to understand mind and life, and reducing human suffering and promoting flourishing. Mind & Life views the Varela Awards as an essential feature of its overall strategy for building an interdisciplinary understanding of the mind and human behaviour. These awards are a key vehicle for increasing the number of exemplary scientists, scholars and clinicians involved in contemplative sciences.

Much has been learned already through empirical investigations of the effects of contemplative practices and techniques on emotion regulation, attention, working memory, and associated neural plasticity. Furthermore, contemplative practices are being increasingly used in secular settings, including mental health, education and the workplace. However, much remains to be understood regarding the relationship between different elements of contemplative interventions and their desired outcomes, differences in outcomes across populations and contexts, relative beneficial effects of contemplative practices when presented within a wider spiritual framework vs. secular setting, as well as ethical issues surrounding the implementation of such interventions in different contexts. Moreover, the intrinsic embodied nature of contemplative practices calls for experiential categories, typologies, and language that could extend the terminology of cognitive science beyond such useful but limiting terms as attention and working memory. In all of these areas, contributions from the humanities and social sciences are invaluable in providing conceptual and contextual grounding to advance the study of

contemplative practices and their theoretical underpinnings.

Francisco J. Varela believed that contemplative training offers us novel methods for investigating human experience. He particularly emphasised the importance of an embodied, phenomenological perspective in gaining insight into the nature of the human mind. In his vision, contemplative training not only provides a new domain for scientific study, but more importantly offers theoretical and methodological resources for advancing scientific models of emotion, cognition, and consciousness. Varela proposed one such methodological framework known as *neurophenomenology*. As an empirical paradigm, neurophenomenology combines data derived from first-, second- and third-person methods in the framework of mutual constraints and enriched explanatory scope, and could be implemented in a number of ways, for example:

- Using subjective reports from the trained observers (e.g., experienced meditators) or interviewed participants to refine the experimental categories and/or reduce the ‘noise’ in third-person data;
- Using trained observers (e.g., experienced meditators) to shift between and sustain different experiential modes for more robust third-person measurement.

### **TYPES OF PROJECTS ENCOURAGED**

Given the importance of neurophenomenology as an empirical paradigm to Varela’s vision of developing Contemplative Sciences, the research proposals combining first- (and/or second)- with third-person methods are particularly encouraged. Further developments of first-person methods uniquely suited to the study of contemplative practices and associated experiential states are also much needed. Strong proposals will meet the highest standards of rigour in the applicant’s field of expertise. Preference will be given to interdisciplinary projects.

### **ELIGIBILITY**

To be eligible for the European Varela Award, the applicant **must** have attended Mind & Life Europe’s [European Summer Research Institute \(ESRI\)](#) within the last five years, or participated in at least one [Mind & Life Europe Retreat](#).

The EVA is intended as a career development award, and is open to:

- graduate (PhD) students (ideally within their 1<sup>st</sup> or 2<sup>nd</sup> year of registration if full-time);
- post-doctoral researchers/fellows on fixed-term contracts with at least 2 years of contract remaining at the time of the application. (Please note that if your contract is due to expire prior to the proposed timeline for completion of the EVA project, if awarded, you will need to provide a confirmation from your supervisor/line manager that your contract will be extended or there will be other funding available to support your salary/living costs for the duration of the award);
- junior faculty (i.e. lecturers) up to the fifth year (inclusive) of university appointment.

### **AWARD INFORMATION**

Grants of up to €23,500 are awarded annually through a competitive application and selection process. Applications are reviewed and selected based on the following criteria:

- Significance to the field
- Methodological approach/design and feasibility
- Innovation/novelty

- Quality of the applicant, likelihood of success and future contribution to the field
- Strength of academic/research environment.

### **AWARD CONDITIONS**

Proposed research should be completed within a 2-year period; an annual progress report and a final report are required for awardees to remain in good standing. It is expected that the completion of proposed research will result in a peer-reviewed publication (scientific journal article) or book/book chapter, as well as a scholarly presentation at a professional conference. The EVA funds **may not be used** for PI (or Co-I) salary/indirect costs or institutional overheads.

### **APPLICATION PROCESS**

To apply, please submit the following materials via the online application form by **midnight CET on 27<sup>th</sup> November 2023**:

- Completed application form, which can be found on [the MLE website](#), including project summary/abstract, research proposal, and budget;
- Abbreviated CV or NIH-style biosketch (limit each to 4 pages maximum) for the Principle Investigator (PI) and co-Investigator(s) (if relevant) (no need to send the CVs for collaborators/consultants);
- Two letters of recommendation for the PI: letters should speak to the ability of the PI to perform the proposed research and his/her potential to develop a fruitful program of research and contribute to the growing field of contemplative sciences. Please note that if your doctoral dissertation supervisor/advisor is providing a reference for you, they **CANNOT** be named as a collaborator on the application due to the conflict of interest.

Awardees will be announced **in early March 2024**.

For more details, please visit <https://www.mindandlife-europe.org/eva/> and our [Frequently Asked Questions towards the bottom of the page](#), or email [varelaawards@mindandlife-europe.org](mailto:varelaawards@mindandlife-europe.org) with specific queries.