



**“Standing at the Edge”**  
January 2022 Opening Panel

\*\*\*

As we look ahead to a new year, it is our intention at Mind & Life Europe to offer a robust and meaningful framework for reflecting on some of the most pressing issues of our time. By now, many of us are well versed in the major issues that are currently garnering the world’s attention: whether it is the Covid pandemic, the ongoing climate crisis, the epidemic of loneliness and other mental health challenges, or the persistent social, economic, and political inequalities that affect billions of people on a daily basis. This has led us to imagine an overarching theme that might articulate the work that we do at MLE, based in the contemplative sciences and the enactive approach, with the broader context in which we are currently living—a theme that could be unfolded in a variety of ways, using a multitude of disciplinary lenses, throughout the course of the year. The notion of “standing at the edge,” which has been central both to the Mind & Life Europe community and to the work of Roshi Joan Halifax, seems a fertile one for exploring how to bring about human (and other) flourishing. In the “edge states” that many of us encounter in our daily lives, we may wonder how to stand—productively, expansively—at the edge, without falling into an abyss of despair or an attachment to outcome.

What’s more, if we disrupt the mainstream idea that current global challenges, such as the pandemic and climate change, have placed us in a uniquely “edgy” state as humans, and instead acknowledge that we are *always, already* operating on the edge—on some horizon of disintegration and becoming—then we might be able to think differently about our current “dilemmas”. In fact, we might be able to think of this moment in history as one moment on a vast continuum—not special in and of itself—carrying as much potential for despair and disintegration as for wise hope and generative activity. This might relieve us of some of the drama that our media-driven world has fed us over the last few months and thus allow us to think more creatively and productively about how we want to be in the world, vis-a-vis ourselves, others, and the environment.

This panel, then, is intended to be exploratory, rather than conclusive. It is meant to raise questions, which we can sit with and *enact* throughout the remaining months of the year. It is meant to bring further nuance to commonplace questions through the “rubbing” that occurs between different disciplinary approaches. It is also intended to reconnect us with some sense of wise hope and, just as importantly, wise action. As Rilke famously wrote in his *Letters to a Young Poet*: “Don’t search for the answers, which could not be given to you, because then you would not be able to live them. And the point is to live everything. Live the questions now.” We hope, in 2022, to be able to lean into and *live* the questions that “standing at the edge” asks of us as human beings.



Questions to consider as groundwork for the panel:

- Standing at the edge...of what? Do we tend to hear the positive qualities of standing at the edge (boldness, curiosity, openness, leaning into the unknown...) or the so-called negative qualities (precarity, high risk, despair, lack of clarity...)?
- What is an edge state? How do we embody such a state? What place does the ineffable have in such a state?
- Do edge states exist along a spectrum? Is “standing at the edge” tantamount to being on a particular horizon? If we think about edge states in relation to “horizons,” how do we understand the latter term? As perspectives? Possibilities? Moveable frontiers? What do the phenomenological (cf. Husserl, Merleau-Ponty, etc.) and hermeneutical (cf. Gadamer, Ricoeur, etc.) traditions have to tell us about the fruitfulness of “horizons” in this context?
- What can science, especially neuroscience and cognitive science, add to our understanding of edge states, in either their positive or negative valence? What about the science of attention specifically, as it relates to our capacity to “stand at the edge” and evaluate the complexity of our situation? What effects do our unseen cognitive biases have on our ability to see clearly while “standing at the edge”?
- How does “standing at the edge” inform our relationship to hope, and particularly the “wise hope” that is open, active, and robust (cf. Gabriel Marcel’s distinction between the two types of hope)? How do we enact this hope in a world that is increasingly volatile and uncertain?
- How does “standing at the edge” translate into generative action? If we think of the “edge effect” in permaculture, where two adjacent ecosystems overlap and provide maximal fecundity, is there an equivalent in human societies? What do we still have to learn from the non-human world that our conceptual minds might yet be unable to formulate?
- Finally, how can the work that we do at MLE—standing at the edge of different disciplines and different ways of cultivating the human mind—inform our more concrete contributions to the world at large?