REQUEST FOR PROPOSALS

Mind & Life Europe is seeking applications for the Mind & Life Francisco J. Varela Awards for Contemplative Sciences Research (Varela Awards). The Varela Awards are an integral component of Mind & Life’s 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 of up to €17,500 are awarded annually to early-career scientists and scholars who have attended the European Mind & Life Summer Research Institute.

The Varela Awards fund rigorous examinations of contemplative techniques with the ultimate goal of providing greater insight into contemplative practices and their application for reducing human suffering and promoting flourishing. Mind & Life views the Varela Awards as an essential feature of its overall strategy of building an interdisciplinary understanding of the mind and human behavior. 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 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 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 emphasized 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- 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.

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 rigor in the applicant’s field of expertise. Preference will be given to interdisciplinary studies, thus actively encouraging research collaboration of researchers with contemplative scholars/practitioners.

AWARD INFORMATION
Grants of up to €17,500 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

To be eligible for a Varela Award, the applicant must have attended the European Mind & Life Europe Summer Research Institute. This grant is intended as a career development award, and is open to graduate students and post-doctoral fellows currently affiliated with a research institution, and junior faculty up to their third year of university appointment.

Proposed research should be completed within a 2-year period; annual progress reports 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.
Varela award funds may not be used for PI (or Co-I) salary/indirect costs or institutional overhead. To apply, please submit the following materials by October 29, 2018 using your personal Converia account:

- Completed application form: includes research proposal and budget—please download here
- Project Summary/Abstract (250 words maximum)
- Applicant’s and study team members’ abbreviated CVs or NIH-style biosketches (limit 4 pages each)
- Two letters of recommendation, which can be emailed separately or submitted with the online application. Letters should speak to the ability of the applicant 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.

Awardees will be announced in January 2019.

For more details, please www.mindandlife-europe.org/our-work/varela-awards/ or visit our Frequently Asked Questions or email varelaawards@mindandlife-europe.org with specific questions.