

A documentary
by Franz Reichle



Ethics Identity Experience

Conversations between Francisco Varela, other leading scientists, and His Holiness the Dalai Lama open up new ways of knowing and building bridges between the Western-scientific and the Tibetan-Buddhist ways of thinking.

SYNOPSIS

«How does the brain work, can you tell me? Is the mind the same as the brain? And why not?» Ever since their first lunch together at a conference in Alpbach, Austria, in 1983, the Dalai Lama sought out neuroscientist Francisco J. Varela during breaks in their schedules to ask him question after question on consciousness and the brain. Shortly afterwards in Paris, He invited Varela for a talk and they were talking so deeply that His assistants had to almost forcefully pull the Dalai Lama away from their table so as to get to the French National Assembly in time. «This is not working», the Dalai Lama concluded, so He said «come with me to India, so we can speak without being disturbed.» Francisco Varela suggested bringing a couple of scientist colleagues, so that the talks would have a broader reach. This was the birth of the «Mind and Life» Dialogues that started in 1987 and continue today. Until his death in 2001, Francisco Varela was crucial to these Dialogues, choosing their topics and the contributors for each one. The organisation and administration was taken care of by Adam Engle, and Barry Hershey financed the endeavour.

There is a spirit of departure clearly visible in the old recordings of the conference as well as in the ones I shot myself. The exchanges between Buddhist scholars and Western scientists quickly shows the limits of scientific discourse when it comes to topics such as identity, consciousness, happiness, and so forth. The enlightened scientists have to take many blows when they are presented with precise and extensive research to the aforementioned on these topics by the Buddhist scholars. On the other hand, the Buddhist scholars profit from the highly developed Western scientific methods.

We witness gripping attempts at intercultural dialogue, between cultures whose ways of thinking and perceiving and whose philosophies are oceans apart. Is there a possibility of creating a common ground between the different cultures? What is the role of language in the attempt?

At the Dialogue held in 1990, for example, there was an issue with how to translate the Western concept of «guilt». The Dalai Lama needed extensive explanations to understand what is meant by that concept. The Tibetan language has terms for «regret» and «remorse», but nothing highly charged as «guilt», the basis for our low self-esteem and self-hatred. The Dalai Lama found this concept peculiar and queried the scientists about it. Were all Westerners subject to mental illnesses? What was the basis for this self-hatred? And were people like this more violent? All the scientists present had faced low self-esteem one way or the other, it is one of the most common feelings in Europe and the US. A gripping discussion comparing the Christian and Buddhist cultures was the result of the examination of this single word.

Experiments in uncharted territory, like these early Dialogues, are adventures. Many come to nothing, but a few grow to be much more than was ever expected at the start, causing us to reflect about our way of thinking, about the scope and limits of science and about how we live our lives. Thus this film is no meant to provide answers, but to inspire the audience to create an inner dialogue in order to find their own answers.

ON THE HISTORY OF THE FILM

The documentary 'Mind & Life' is, additionally to 'Monte Grande' (part 1) and 'Francisco Cisco Pancho' (part 3) the second and final realized part of the Francisco-Varela-Trilogy.

This three-part-project, which concerns itself with the question «What is life?» developed directly from my work on the film 'The Knowledge of Healing'.

When I looked closely at health and illness from a tibetan-medical and buddhist-philosophical point of view I discovered new dimensions of what life could be, and where it might make sense to look even more closely. I was interested in the connection and interaction between mind and body through consciousness, spirituality, identity and dying.

While researching, I decided on four scientists from four different continents as my protagonists. They all knew each other, they were all leaders in their respective research subjects, and they all dealt with the research of life in very different areas - an Italian chemist, a Chinese philosopher, an American science historian and a Chilean neurobiologist. Then, something unexpected happened, which would prove to strengthen the project fundamentally and made me realize the film with only one protagonist: Francisco Varela, Chilean, neurobiologist, consciousness-researcher, one of my four protagonists and the last one I started working with, got ill in the fall of 2000.

Months previously, we had agreed to meet in February in a remote village in the north of Chile, in the middle of the Andes: Monte Grande. His family had gathered there to be with Francisco one last time, nobody knew how long he would still be alive.

I got to know the family and was surprised by their simple, kind and open manner. Intense and deep conversations followed, I took everything in.



They told me the story of the village, of their family, the work, their personal relationships, and of the coup d'état, the left- and right-wing members of their family and most of all about how everybody treated the others with acceptance and respect. Francisco was on the political left and wanted to create a modern, socialist Chile under Allende's rule.

The day before I was due to leave Monte Grande, Francisco was feeling less weak, thanks to an herbal mix given to him by a neighbour, so I was called to him from where I was shooting outside. I was told not to ask any questions, however. Of course I had many urgent questions for this man: the unique thinker and co-founder of new hypotheses which would engage our thinking far into the 21st century and have a deep and substantial effect on science. Francisco was lying on a chair on his porch and ready for a talk. I asked him to respond to a single question, which he allowed with a gracious smile: «Francisco, what is so special about Monte Grande and what does this place mean to you?» He started with Monte Grande, telling me about his childhood and youth, the discoveries he had made. He told me the story of his life, as if leaving me a legacy. Again and again, he came back to Monte Grande, and after about one tape, he finished talking, telling me again about Monte Grande.

After Francisco Varela's death, I was able to close many gaps in his narration through conversations with friends, colleagues and family members. Amy Cohen Varela, his last wife, literary critic and psychoanalyst, was especially vital, as she had co-authored many of his projects and publications and accompanied Francisco for a long time.

As there were so many recordings, extremely rich in content, it soon became clear to me that this needed to become not one film, but three, complementing each other. The trilogy would consist of 'Monte Grande', 'Mind & Life' and 'Francisco Cisco Pancho'.



In the 1980's, Francisco Varela was one of the founders of Mind & Life, a group of scientists who exchange ideas and thoughts biannually with H.H. the 14th Dalai Lama. They seek to bring together Western scientific research with Buddhist teachings, to enrich both and get new impulses on both sides. In May 2001, Varela was asked to present his most recent research in Wisconsin, US, in the presence of the Dalai Lama. This research was an important part of his scientific and personal development. Due to the sudden decline in his health he was unable to be there personally and died six days later in his Parisian apartment.

The film 'Mind & Life' is based on the conference that started in 1983 in Alpbach, Austria, on the fringes of an international forum on consciousness. With the participation of more Buddhist scholars and other scientists, this expanded to become a larger event with large audiences.



Mind & Life - a documentary by Franz Reichle

The week-long Mind and Life Dialogues themselves began in 1987 in Dharamsala, at the home of the Dalai Lama. They have all been recorded on tape.

Some Dialogues have been published as books, for example 'Gentle Bridges' (M&L 1987), 'Healing Emotions' (M&L 1990), 'Sleeping, Dreaming and Dying' (M&L 1992) and 'Altruism, Ethics, Compassion' (M&L 1995).

I recorded two of the later Dialogues in Madison WI (2001) and Dharamsala (2002) myself, partly for the film 'Monte Grande'. On the fringes of the conferences, I was able to interview H.H. the Dalai Lama, His two translators Thubten Jinpa and Allan Wallace, as well as several scientists and Buddhist scholars like Jon Kabat-Zinn, Steven Chu, Tsoknyi Rinpoche, Ngari Rinpoche (the youngest brother of the Dalai Lama), Mathieu Ricard and others.

This enormous archive of hundreds of hours of material is the basis of the film 'Mind & Life'.

It deals with topics that have always been concerns of science, society, politics and culture, as well as of individuals thinking about their lives; but these



concerns are particularly prominent today in the 21st century with the emergence of new scientific debates and research areas: guilt, identity, intercultural dialogue, spirituality, death and dying.

The film will provide insight into the «soul» of the original «Mind & Life» Dialogues, but will also incorporate more delicate topics of conversation.

Primarily, the film wants to encourage the viewer to ask questions, not to just celebrate scientific breakthroughs. Thus, the film will try to shine a light on the actual and deepest goal of the «Mind & Life» Dialogues: to contribute to a responsible society.

CV FRANZ REICHLE - DIRECTING

1949 born in Switzerland

Graphics diploma at Schule für Gestaltung Zürich. (1968–73) / 1974 Award Best Swiss Poster

Film diploma at Hochschule für bildende Künste Hamburg. (1974–81) / Film lecturer in Zurich. (1981–84)

Stay in Burjatia, Eastern Siberia (1989–96). Reports for newspapers (NZZ and Tages-Anzeiger) and for Swiss National TV.

Professor of Film at Zurich University of Arts ZHDK (1996-2012).

Ayurveda practitioner with diploma, since 2009 in both Elba Island and Zurich.

Filmography (trailers on www.franzreichle.ch):

- 2016 MIND & LIFE Doc, various historical videomaterial, 80 min. plus 120 min. of 'extras'.
Finishing in summer 2016. As DVD (2) of the trilogy «Francisco Varela».
Dialogues between Francisco Varela, other Western scientists and H.H. XIV Dalai Lama.
Production, Script, Directing: Franz Reichle / Editing: Juliette Forster
- 2011 FRANCISCO CISCO PANCHO Doc-anthology, DVD, 40 min. plus 150 min. of 'extras'.
As DVD (3) of the trilogy «Francisco Varela».
Autobiography of Francisco Varela. 'Love, Present, Death.'
Production, Script, Directing, Editing: Franz Reichle
- 2004 MONTE GRANDE - WHAT IS LIFE? Doc, DV and 35mm, 80 min. / on DVD with 120 min of 'extras'
As DVD (1) of the trilogy «Francisco Varela»
Francisco Varela, H.H. Dalai Lama et al. 'Autopoiesis, ethics, embodiment, spirituality, death'.
Production, Script, Directing, Editing: Franz Reichle / Public Award Film Festival Rhodes 2005.
- 1997 THE KNOWLEDGE OF HEALING Doc, 16mm > 35mm, 90 min. / on DVD with
Use and the healing power of Traditional Tibetan Medicine / With Dr. Choedrak + H.H. Dalai Lama.
Script, Directing, Co-Editing: Franz Reichle / Award BAK and Zurich Film Award.
Editor of the accompanying paperback «Das Wissen vom Heilen», AT Verlag.
- 1992 TRAUMZEIT Doc 16mm + Video, 87 min.
The downfall of a shaman tribe in Eastern Siberia.
Production, Directing, Photography, Sound: Franz Reichle / Editing: Loredana Cristelli
- 1990 LYNX Doc, 16mm + Video, 82 min.
Problems of the civilized world with the wild, demonstrated with the example of the lynx.
Prod., Directing, Photogr., Sound, Editing: F. Reichle / Award BAK and Zurich Film Award
- 1986 AUGENBLICK Experimental, 16mm, b/w and colour, 78 min
The story of two people who lose each other and find again each other in a different way.
Production, Directing, Co-Editing: F. Reichle / Award BAK (Swiss Federal Office of Culture)
- 1978 ROSEMARIE, SUSANNE, RUTH, doc, 16 mm, colour, 77 min
Three 16 years old girls in the traditional dominated Canton Appenzell in Switzerland.
Production, Directing, Script, Editing: F. Reichle / Award BAK (Swiss Federal Office of Culture)