



MIND & LIFE

## Mind & Life Podcast Transcript

### Randy Fernando - Humane Technology

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**Opening Quote – Randy Fernando (00:00:02):** *We have all these complex problems that we are facing, from climate change to inequity, not to mention nuclear weapons, bioengineering... there's a very, very long list of difficult problems that we have to solve. But to do that we need our attention. We need our sense making and choice making capacities. And so we cannot have technology that is undermining all of those functions. This is the big thing. The technology itself, even as a product, is no longer neutral. It's seeking to win your attention. And when consumers are using "free" products, that's because someone else is paying to change your behavior.*

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**Intro – Wendy Hasenkamp (00:00:45):** Welcome to Mind & Life. I'm Wendy Hasenkamp. My guest today is Randy Fernando. Randy is a co-founder of the Center for Humane Technology, a non-profit whose mission is to align technology with humanity's best interests. This is the group that was featured in the Emmy award-winning film, *The Social Dilemma*. Maybe you've seen it. If you haven't, I highly recommend it. It is a hard look behind the scenes of how social media really works. Randy also served for seven years as founding executive director at Mindful Schools, and prior to that, he held numerous roles at the tech company NVIDIA.

(00:01:26) Today's episode is all about our current technology landscape. It's a topic we haven't spent too much time on so far on the show, but I'm really glad we are today. Tech definitely has an increasingly large presence in most of our lives, and I think certainly those of us in the contemplative space often wonder how we can best engage with tech, or relate to it. So I'm really glad to have been able to chat with Randy about all this. And he brings a lot of expertise about mindfulness in this space as well. And as you'll hear, there are some common myths and misconceptions that I hope this episode can help clear up. The biggest one being the myth that technology is neutral.

(00:02:06): I chatted with Randy in September and we covered a lot more than I can actually summarize here, but I'll just mention a few of the main points. Randy first shares how the strands of Buddhism and technology have woven together throughout his life. And then we get right into the challenges we face with tech today. He distinguishes between different kinds of tech and shares how it's evolved and helps us understand what's called persuasive technology. That's the kind that tries to influence our decision making and impact our behavior. And he highlights some of the traps this technology can create and also provides what I found to be a really helpful explanation of a phenomenon called the "race to the bottom."

(00:02:50) Randy then takes on the commonly held idea that technology is neutral and it's just how you use it that determines whether it can be helpful or harmful. We discuss the role of incentives and mindsets and agendas in the tech space, and Randy shares an interesting view of technology through the Buddhist lens of dependent co-arising. Throughout our conversation, we talk a lot about the power of incentives behind tech. And he approaches this point from a number of different angles, which I think is really useful. For example, Randy unpacks what happens when the economic driver behind technology comes from advertising, and implications of the capitalist structure of competition in the marketplace.

(00:03:35) We also talk about tech through a training lens, and this gets us into a discussion of what's known as the attention economy. Here, Randy shares how tech is designed to co-opt our attention, and we talk about how tech not only trains our attention, but also our emotions and even our values. We consider how tech influences our sense of self. And Randy describes the customized and fractured realities that tech can—and has—created, with implications like echo chambers, divisive polarization and confusion about what's true.

(00:04:13) Importantly, we also spend a lot of time talking about how tech could be better, and ways to change the current incentive structure. Randy walks us through the core principles of humane technology, and we take some interesting tangents into building ethics into artificial intelligence and a clearer picture of the Buddhist concept of dukkha. Randy also touches on an interesting intersection between the contemplative space and the tech world, sharing thoughts about the pros and cons of using technology to deliver mindfulness programs.

(00:04:48) I definitely suggest checking out the show notes for this one. There are a lot of really important resources there. You can find a link to the movie, *The Social Dilemma*, and also information about some great offerings from the Center for Humane Technology, which are all freely available. This includes a link to their free course, which Randy describes in the episode, called Foundations of Humane Technology. And they're now offering live presentations of the material from that online course, which has been really popular. You can check that link to see when the next session will be. Another resource in the show notes is a link to the Center for Humane Technology's fantastic podcast, *Your Undivided Attention*. And for those of you who have young people in your lives, there's a toolkit specifically designed for youth, to help them understand how tech works and how we can take care in our relationship with it.

(00:05:42): As technology becomes more and more integrated into our daily lives, I think it's critical that we educate ourselves and think deeply about this space, what tech is doing to our minds, and how we can make it better. I love the way Randy's able to lay all this out so clearly yet still holding a lot of nuance and also with such insight about how mindfulness weaves into the picture. This is an episode I think can be broadly accessible even to folks who might not normally listen to a podcast about the mind or meditation. So please consider sharing this within your circles. I learned so much from this conversation. I hope you do too. It's my pleasure to share with you Randy Fernando.

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**Wendy Hasenkamp** (00:06:28): I'm so pleased to be joined today by Randy Fernando. Randy, welcome and thank you so much for being here.

**Randy Fernando** (00:06:35): Thank you so much for having me.

**Wendy Hasenkamp** (00:06:36): I always like to start with a little bit of background from the guest. So I'm curious how you got interested in contemplative practice and Buddhism, and then also the technology sector.

**Randy Fernando** (00:06:47): Sure. So I was born in Sri Lanka and I was born to a very Buddhist family, so that sort of answers some of it. I was very fortunate to be introduced to mindfulness and programming at roughly the same time—mindfulness primarily through my mother and programming primarily through my father. And so those threads have sort of interwoven in my life in surprising ways, in ways that I didn't expect, and I'm very grateful for both of them. But that's how it happened.

**Wendy Hasenkamp** (00:07:19): Wow. And then how did you get into the tech sector, and then what drove your interest in what's called humane technology?

**Randy Fernando** (00:07:27): So building on what I just mentioned, I started programming very young, and I loved the idea of putting pictures on the screen. This is what lit me up. And so I kind of followed that. And in the background I was sort of reading Buddhist books here and there, because they come to you when you're in Sri Lanka. And my family is very Buddhist and my parents are very knowledgeable about Buddhism, and a lot of relations also who would send books to read. So I was doing all that. But I was really following this path of computer graphics... Came to the United States to study computer science, and did a Master's in computer graphics, ended up at NVIDIA to do computer graphics—and was very fortunate because it's really fun and interesting. That's a field that's very interesting, and also became increasingly interesting as processing power was improving all the time.

(00:08:22): And then I did that for seven years, got to run a bunch of projects and write some books, and it was just a huge opportunity for me at NVIDIA. So after seven years I was looking for different ways to volunteer and just be more involved. Just going back to where I grew up, and thinking about how to be of service in other ways was very important to me. So I was looking around and then I came across a group that was teaching mindfulness in schools and I thought that was really cool. Of all the things that I had volunteered at, that seemed like the most... kind of addressing root causes, very systemic.

**Wendy Hasenkamp** (00:09:00): Yeah. This is the Mindful Schools program?

**Randy Fernando** (00:09:02): Yes. That program eventually became Mindful Schools. So after volunteering for two years alongside my Silicon Valley job, I felt that we would unlock a lot if I made the volunteer job my full-time job. So I made the jump. I moved from Santa Clara to Oakland, and ended up serving as executive director of Mindful Schools for seven years. And we were one of the first programs to provide high quality online mindfulness training to educators, at scale. And Mindful Schools has now shared mindfulness skills with tens of thousands of educators, and millions of children globally. And then in the course of that, I had met Tristan I think in 2015...

**Wendy Hasenkamp** (00:09:47): Tristan Harris?

**Randy Fernando** (00:09:48): Tristan Harris. Yes, that's right. And so I pinged him in 2017 and I was trying to find out what he was up to, and he was like, "Oh my gosh, I was just on 60 Minutes, and I could really use your help organizing. There's all this energy going on." And at the time I was trying to live a quieter life.... *[laughter]*

**Wendy Hasenkamp** (00:10:05): A mindful life...

**Randy Fernando** (00:10:06): Yeah. And I started doing the same thing that I had done with Mindful Schools, which is sort of volunteering, ramping up little by little. And the same realization that this could be something if I put my feet in and really help out, we could do something more. And that's what happened. And that then turned into, so now it's more than five years working with Tristan on this work. (00:10:31): And so it is interesting—this idea of humane technology has many, many parallels to mindfulness. It has this kind of spiritual aspect that draws people, because it's in some ways a proxy for doing the right thing or being good. There's kind of a goodness, a moral, ethical flavor to it that is very attractive to people. But there's the same dark side that mindfulness has in that context, where it's easy to take a definition... Something like that can be a container for many different types of definitions. And so you have to be very careful what you allow that to become. So in the mindfulness world, the problem is if it becomes just nice, kind, friendly, good. These words, they're not terrible, but they lack substance. And the original context of mindfulness from the Buddhist practice, you go back in the history, it has a very specific structure. There's specific foundations, and each of them—there's structure and detail in there. And also pulling it out from the eightfold path is another challenge. When you secularize it and bring it into society, in a society that's driven by certain capitalist mechanisms, you start to have problems. So, a similar thing with humane technology—same challenges, where there's a lot of potential to do the right thing, to do better, but also a lot of traps. And so one of the things we've tried to do is to define that concept as clearly as we can. So it's harder to greenwash, to take over and usurp for other means.

(00:12:17) So very briefly, one thing we've done is we built a course. It's called Foundations of Humane Technology. So the idea there is to kind of lay down some theory, some kind of conceptual basis. And so in the course, we cover a few things. One is this idea of, we call setting the stage. Just looking at where we're going. Where's technology taking us? But the rest of the course gets into these, what we call the principles of humane technology. So that's the idea of respecting human nature, minimizing harmful consequences, centering values, building shared understanding, respecting fairness and justice and providing conditions for that to be successful. And then thriving—really supporting the thriving of individuals, communities, and society as a whole and also the planet. So when you put those pieces together, we've tried to talk about them in a way that's rigorous enough that you can't easily pass the test if you're actually doing harm.

**Wendy Hasenkamp** (00:13:22): That's so fascinating, drawing those links between the problems that have happened in the mindfulness world, too, that I'm sure you had so much experience with from mindful schools and all that.

**Randy Fernando** (00:13:30): Yes.

**Wendy Hasenkamp** (00:13:31): So let's jump in to the current landscape of technology today. Can you share from your vantage point what it's looking like—positive and dangerous developments, what we might be expecting to come next, and how we should be thinking about all that?

**Randy Fernando** (00:13:49): In general, I think the positives of technology are really well known. There's hundreds of billions of dollars of marketing behind the positive side. And we know some of those. A lot of them are traps actually. And so I'll try to give a few principles from which to view the whole thing.

(00:14:09) One is I think technology is the great accelerator. It is the thing that allows us to progress so quickly. And in many cases, that was very good, for many decades, sixties, seventies, eighties, nineties

even. There was just a lot of good happening, and there's a reason why it wasn't as harmful. And that kind of comes back to a quote from the renowned sociobiologist, Dr. E.O. Wilson. He said, "The real problem of humanity is that we have paleolithic emotions, medieval institutions, and God-like technology." And I think that sums it up really well.

(00:14:51) And what changed between, let's say, the nineties and now is that our technology wasn't godlike. The semiconductor technology, it's the only thing we've ever built that actually increases in power, in ability, two times every 18 months. And this is Moore's law. And that has actually stood to be true for decades, which is remarkable. And so now let's say since the 1960s, we've got about a trillion times performance increase. There's nothing else we've ever built that comes anywhere near that. And for a long time, those things were fine. When the hard disc storage capacity went from four megabytes to eight megabytes, you're pretty happy. It's all good. When the CPU got faster and your word processors... you're not waiting as long for the word processor, it's fine.

(00:15:50) What starts to be a problem is when we have technologies that are now exceeding human limits. So there's two key things—the point where technology exceeds human capability, and also where it exceeds human vulnerability. So these two points I think are very dangerous. And both of them have now happened. So one is the point that we often talk about where technology takes our jobs and our creativity. And a lot of this is already happening. I'm sure many people have been following technologies like DALL-E, DALL-E 2, Google's Imagen, which allow you to generate synthetic imagery just by typing it in. And now you have AI that can do poetry and writing and art and music—and even programming, at a mid-competitive level. It's able to do that. It's able to solve math problems—English written, like prose math problems—and able to understand what they mean and how to solve them. So there's some real consequences for all of that with respect to, what do we do? What's our purpose?

(00:16:59) But there's this other point that's also very important that I think has caused a lot more problems that we are facing right now, that make it harder for us to solve the first set of problems, which is when technology exceeds... when it undermines our human vulnerabilities. When it uses our own human nature against us. And this is what's happened with a lot of the persuasive technologies. Persuasive technology, we use this term to mean the class of technology that interacts with the brain and tries to influence your thoughts and behavior. And already that definition kind of tells you why it's so dangerous, because it gets at the core of how we make sense of the world and how we make choices.

(00:17:47) And when we have our devices, the social media platforms in particular, but also just phones and a lot of the technology now that's with us all the time, or let's say far too often, and serves as the intermediary between our brain and the outside world, then you have a problem, right? Because when that has different incentives, when it doesn't have aligned incentives with your incentives, then it's trying to exploit you in different ways. And so this is very different from other technologies that we've had. The word processor... Microsoft Word was never trying to do something like that. It's a great example of, it just tries to help you produce the document, and that little Clippy guy would appear and be like, "Do you need help?" *[laughter]* And it's just so simple and so harmless in comparison with technology that influences how we think, how we make decisions, and how we interact with each other.

**Wendy Hasenkamp** (00:18:48): Do you feel like that kind of technology that you were just describing that has these different incentives, is that very much linked with social media? Because that's how I first would think of it. But maybe there's other domains where that's also happening.

**Randy Fernando** (00:19:03): This problem has shown up I think everywhere. It shows up in fast food, it shows up in pharmaceuticals, it shows up in fossil fuels, it shows up in technology—social media in particular because of this interaction with the mind, I think the exposure is very high. And for people who are concerned about mindfulness and attention and awareness, it starts to be very, very important. Matthew Brensilver and I had done an event at Spirit Rock a few times talking about technology as an existential risk, existential threat to mindfulness. And that can sound like an overstated title, but actually we really don't think it is, because it is directly competing for that same resource that we need-

**Wendy Hasenkamp** (00:19:51): Of attention.

**Randy Fernando** (00:19:52): ...yeah, of attention, that is precious. It's like the most precious thing for us. So I think speaking also to the parallel problems, there's this concept, we call it multipolar traps. The colloquial way of talking about it is the "race to the bottom." So what happens is—our economic systems, they have a certain set of rules, right? Capitalism has a set of rules. And the idea is, within those rules you play to win. That's how it's structured. And you earn money when you do that.

(00:20:27) Some competition can be okay I guess—even that is a very tricky topic—but I would say that the idea, at least the theory behind it, is that companies compete to serve the consumer. They compete to give a better product to the consumer, within a set of rules. And the rules are meant to make sure that while you are competing, you are not causing harms. Now the problem is, of course, everything that we do causes unintended consequences. And sometimes they're very intended.

(00:21:00) This is the problem—is when companies start to realize, "Aha, there's certain harms that the rules don't account for." But the companies don't have to pay for them. Who does have to pay for them are other people. So it's not on the company's balance sheet, it's on someone else's balance sheet. It's on society's balance sheet. And most of the time it ends up on people who have less power—normally people who are marginalized in one form or another, often related to wealth—and children and future children, people who haven't been born yet. That's where these costs go. And so when these competitions are running all the time and they're accelerated by technology, then you start to have really big problems. And this is how we've got into the situation we're in now, with massive inequality, and the threat of climate change. The climate crisis has accelerated so quickly because these systems are out of control and the harms, the pollution, was sent up into the atmosphere—the other balance sheet. And now we can't get it back. It's so hard to solve these problems once they're rolling.

(00:22:08) – *musical interlude* –

**Wendy Hasenkamp** (00:22:31): What you were just sharing is making me think of, in conversations or debates around tech, I've often heard this idea that the technology is neutral, but it's the way you use it that can be problematic. You kind of were just describing that there's incentives built in now, whereas they weren't before, that can really shape that away from a neutral situation. Can you unpack that a little bit?

**Randy Fernando** (00:22:55): Yes. I think there's actually a very helpful Buddhist concept here, which is dependent co-arising—the idea that everything is conditioned on other things. One thing causes another thing to happen, and sometimes it's required for sustaining that second thing. And when the first thing stops, the second thing stops. Or the first thing gives input to the second thing, and then the second thing gives input to a third thing. And so this is kind of our native view, that our mind, all of the components of our body, our consciousness, everything is conditioned. They're processes that aren't



fixed, they're not static. Neither is our technology, neither are the environments around it. And so when you start with this principle and you look at... just from the beginning and say look, you are born to your parents. There's genetic material that are part of those conditions. There are your family, your friends, your colleagues, your teachers. All of these things shape the ideas in our mind.

(00:23:58) And of course, and also other ideas that are in the surrounding cultural paradigm. So just the ways of thinking, the mindset. So ideas like, growth is good, we can own land. These are ideas that we have. They're not natural laws, they're just things we came up with. But all of these things are conditions that influence our mind. And now if you look at our mind, say we're a technologist, obviously those conditions influence the choices we make. They influence the goals we have for our companies or our products. They influence how we measure success, they influence the menus. This is kind of the key thing. This is how it shows up. You can't show every choice to everyone all the time. So you always make some choices. What comes first on the menu? What comes last? And what is not there at all? There's a lot of options that are never on the menu. And the menus are what determine most people's behavior. And when you're talking about products that present menus—ways to spend time and attention—to billions of people, this is where it matters a lot. And it's definitely not neutral. You can see all of these conditions coming together to influence...

(00:25:16) There's so many aspects to this. Another aspect is that when you put the technology out into society, society shapes the technology. The way it's used, these same paradigms affect how the technology is used. This is even more so when you have technologies that are driven by artificial intelligence, where there are learning algorithms that learn from data around them. So the algorithms' behavior actually changes based on the environment. So that's another form of conditions affecting the technology. So then the technology influences society. Society influences each individual, the minds change. And then those minds build more technology.

**Wendy Hasenkamp** (00:25:59): The new technology, right.

**Randy Fernando** (00:26:00): So you get this cycle. Another aspect of this is that this breed of technology, especially these persuasive technologies, are also conditioned by the economic incentives that are around them. This is the big thing. This is what has changed again going back to that quote, the E.O. Wilson quote. It's not just persuasive technologies, but fast food or anything else. These are all conditions, perverse incentives. And so the technology itself, even as a product, is no longer neutral. It's seeking. It's seeking to win your attention. It's seeking to modify your behavior—because that actually is the promise that the companies make to advertisers, which is where the money comes in, right?

**Wendy Hasenkamp** (00:26:48): Right. That seems to be the foundational problem—where the money comes from.

**Randy Fernando** (00:26:52): Exactly. I think this is just a general good practice in life, is just kind of be aware of where incentives are coming from. And when consumers are using "free products," that's because someone else is paying. And in this case, you are the product and the advertisers are paying. They're paying for the product. They're paying to change your behavior. And this is what's so tricky. So this leads to these kind of very misaligned incentives, and so technology that is actually very far from being neutral, because it has an agenda.

(00:27:27) Another really helpful thing which is related to this idea of conditions, and dependent co-arising, is the idea of using a training lens when we think about technology. In every interaction, we're

changing each other, obviously. And this is why parents care so much about who their kids' friends are, who their teachers are. Those are the inputs, those are the influences.

(00:27:53) And this is where the famous quote about our friends, our friends on the journey being the key aspect on the Buddhist path. It's really important who our friends are, who our teachers are, who we walk with. But now what's different is we have this technology, we have this phone that is kind of like this friend who's with you all the time—and for kids it's a remarkable amount of time. I saw, Common Sense Media does a study every year, they do this survey of screen time and what kids are doing. In 2021 for teens, boys were spending more than 10 hours of entertainment screen time per day. And girls, it was nine hours. So that includes social media, that includes watching videos, that includes gaming. But that is a remarkably large amount of time.

**Wendy Hasenkamp** (00:28:44): Kind of all day.

**Randy Fernando** (00:28:45): It's kind of all day. I was like, "Wait, when do they do anything else?" And I think part of that is the average is probably skewed from weekend screen time, which is probably even higher. So weekdays, it's probably a little bit lower.

**Wendy Hasenkamp** (00:28:57): And it was also COVID.

**Randy Fernando** (00:28:59): Yes. There was actually a huge jump from previous years. I think it was about 15% that it jumped up because of COVID. And so we have to think about the shaping process that technology has. It's not just when you use the tech, it's afterwards also. The effects of interactions are not just during the interactions, of course, they last further. And so when you have, in particular, technology, let's say TikTok as an example that was for a long time playing 15 second videos one after the other. If kids are watching 15 second videos, your attention span is being trained to be shorter and shorter and shorter. And different forms of this are happening to all of us. But our attention spans are getting very short. And that conditioning doesn't stop just when you stop using the product obviously. The next thing you try to do is a little harder, because your mind has been conditioned to these very short bursts.

(00:30:03) And I think this is a big factor that we have to keep in mind. So attention training is one big thing. So with mindfulness, we do all of this attention training. We try to sit, and sit for longer and longer times to cultivate our attention. But we do that for a relatively short amount of time each day, right? It'll be 15 minutes, 30 minutes, 45 minutes, maybe an hour for people who are really diligent and have created a lot of space to do that. But in contrast, we have these devices that are training us for many, many more hours each day. And you think about this challenge. We have mindfulness programs in schools, we have SEL programs—Social Emotional Learning, SEL programs—in schools where we're trying to teach kids the right things. But then we sort of hand their mind over to these devices for so many hours. It's a very unfair fight, and it's really hard. It's very easy to undo good conditioning that we're trying to implement through this process. So I think we have to be very, very careful about that.

**Wendy Hasenkamp** (00:31:08): Yeah. I'm thinking too, we were just talking about attentional training and shortening attention spans and all that. How about emotional training? How do these platforms leverage our emotional systems and things like that? Because that also feels like a huge part of how they work.



**Randy Fernando** (00:31:26): Absolutely. I was actually just going to add, one of the other big forms of training that's happening—before we jump to the exploitation part—is values, the shifting of values. So values are also conditioned, there's this constant process where we try to... Adults and kids, but especially kids who are still forming their values. Kids are very smart about learning from the environment around them. So let's say they look around, and they learn this idea of gravity, for example, intuitively very young, like age one or even under one. They start to figure out how gravity sort of works. And so there's an analogous social physics that they pick up. They just look around and they say, "Okay, gosh. This attention thing is really important." All kids know this from a very young age, right? Attention is important.

(00:32:17) And then they start to see who's getting attention. Once you're on these platforms, you start to see that it's measured by likes, comments, shares. Certain kinds of behavior get you more attention. And it's measurable. You can see numbers that correlate with this attention—the likes, comments, and shares. And so that I think has a profound effect on how we develop, on what our values are. And this is another thing that's so dangerous that goes far beyond the interaction with the products. A lot of times the tech companies, they tend to focus a lot on the interaction with the products, or the harm that's caused as a direct output of that. But they spend a lot less time thinking about this kind of thing, the conditioning aspect, of attention, of values.

(00:33:09) So then to your question about exploitation, yeah, this is the other thing. This is why in our course we talk about human nature, respecting human nature. Because we all have these cognitive biases—these are just built into us and they're mostly survival mechanisms. They're hardwired in a very deep way into our brain, and they've served a very good purpose for us. We have sort of stepped our evolutionary bounds with technology, with all the advancements, especially of the last few decades. And so some of the cognitive biases no longer serve us as well.

(00:33:46) So for example, we are drawn to food that has high energy—because when food was scarce, it makes a lot of sense to find those foods that have high energy density, so high in fat or high in sugar, that allow us to store energy for the future because maybe next week it won't be so easy to find food. But now, food is plentiful. And so fast food companies of course tap into this same physiological survival mechanism, but they give us more and more sugar. And you get into this race—so this is back to this idea of multipolar traps and race to the bottom—where, when one company finds this exploit, the other ones have to find it too. Because you can't compete. Suddenly everyone's buying that type of hamburger or that kind of ice cream, that kind of sundae. And so you have to do it too. And you have to find new ways to compete.

(00:34:43) And because the rule set doesn't factor that in, it doesn't stop that competition, until the rule set changes everyone is now competing in this bad way. So an analogy that happens in the social media world is when TikTok came in with these really short 15 second videos, everyone else was like, "Oh gosh, this really works well." Because before people can even figure out, "Wait, do I want to continue or not?" they're on the next video. And so their attention, there's no pause.

**Wendy Hasenkamp** (00:35:16): There's no consideration anymore.

**Randy Fernando** (00:35:18): No. We talk about this all the time. This idea that mindfulness gives you some space to pause and reflect. That space is gone. And so you just stay in, it's sort of like a trance. So then Instagram launches Reels, YouTube launches Shorts, and everyone is now in this competition to go for shorter and shorter pieces of attention. And that of course is very harmful to everyone.

(00:35:43) And the funny thing is actually a lot of people at the companies, they agree with this, they know this too. But because of the economic incentives—and you're talking about some of the biggest companies in the world, hundreds of billions of dollars of market cap—when they're caught in these races, it's very hard for anyone in the companies to do the right thing. Because the CEO is accountable to the board. The board is accountable to the shareholders. And the whole thing is built on the stock price going up, future growth, future possibilities.

(00:36:18) And so this is why you really have to bind the rules properly. And you have to bind the rules by doing things like raising awareness from consumers so consumer behavior changes. You have to pass laws. Those are the exact rules. You have to pass new laws—but legislators will only pass the laws if they feel like there's support behind them from the citizens. You can have litigation. There's penalties. Litigation puts penalties on the balance sheets back onto the companies. You can have insiders speaking out, so whistleblowers. You can have new inspiration for how to do technology right, so that consumers can see, "Oh, this is a more humane technology." So all these pieces, it's kind of complex, but just touching on that very lightly, because I think we should talk about how you bind these traps. That's the quick answer to that.

(00:37:12) – *musical interlude* –

**Wendy Hasenkamp** (00:37:32): I have a couple more thoughts about the way that technology shapes us, and also just intersecting with Buddhist philosophy and those ideas. I'm wondering how you think technology shapes our perception of self. Because the concept of self is such a huge thing in Buddhism, and realizing that there's some illusory capacity there. We don't have these kind of stable, fixed, independent selves. So I'm just wondering if you've thought about that in relation to technology, and what technology tells us about self.

**Randy Fernando** (00:38:00): So, one way to think of it is that we are stuck in this attention economy. Anyone who wants to share an idea, you have to win in the attention economy to get attention, in order to share the thing you want to share. And that's true at every level, whether it's professional or personal. And so what happens is everyone ends up in this kind of race, and it's kind of a race to be performative. It's a race to make sure you look good. It's a race... because you come back to this idea of likes, comments and shares and making sure your stuff is actually being seen, because we kind of feel sad when we put something out in the world and it's not seen, it's not acknowledged. And so everyone ends up in this race.

(00:38:44) So on Facebook, it's a race to share the family pictures of how things are going well. There's less incentive to share things that aren't going well. And a big part of that is because there's this idea that you should be having hundreds or thousands of friends. In a more intimate environment, we actually are more vulnerable. Say you were having people over for dinner. You would be much more vulnerable, and you'd share more about what's good and what's bad. But here it's like, because you're always performing in on this stage in front of so many people, you do end up reinforcing this idea of a certain kind of self. This happens a lot. And it happens on LinkedIn—everyone's sort of humble bragging, right, about their latest, "I'm so honored to be part of this thing." There's no other way to do it. Everyone sort gets caught. People don't talk that much about the adverse things that happen to them in their job, because there's also legal issues why you can't do that. So there's these little races that are happening everywhere.

(00:39:50) And so I think a lot of times people who've thought about this deeply just end up off of the platforms, because it's just almost impossible to do it the right way.

**Wendy Hasenkamp** (00:40:03): Right. Because you just get buried.

**Randy Fernando** (00:40:03): Exactly. Your stuff just doesn't get seen. And then it can actually be a little bit frustrating, where you look at it and you're just like, "Oh, I'm trying to do the right thing. But it's still like, no one's looking." One thing that is an interesting exercise is to look at, what was the intention behind the post? And if you include that as part of the post... Yeah, people don't do that much because if you did it for a while, you would stop posting, because mostly it's related to some kind of ego development. That's the truth. Right?

**Wendy Hasenkamp** (00:40:36): Interesting. Yeah.

**Randy Fernando** (00:40:38): And so it also comes back to what is skillful in terms of developing a small number of deeper relationships, versus a large number of light superficial relationships. And the former is a lot more satisfying and I think serves everyone better in life. So again, if that's the goal, you would do it differently. You don't have to get into the game at all.

**Wendy Hasenkamp** (00:41:01): Right, right. And I guess it certainly doesn't even approach the idea of an interdependent self, or something larger than our own... It just reinforces this individual, separate, siloed self.

**Randy Fernando** (00:41:15): Very much so. I think there's also—this brings up this aspect of shared understanding, and the fracturing of reality. So because the companies want to individualize, they want to individualize your reality because they want to customize ads, essentially. The more they can customize your reality, the more they can get to know you well, and the more they can connect you with advertisers who want to sell you something. And it's important to remember here that advertisers also includes things like political campaigns. So there, they're not selling you a shoe, they're not selling you a product. They're selling behavior, they're selling a vote, they're selling a choice. And all of this can be exploited by third parties and foreign countries. And we won't get into all of that, but there's a lot of implications.

(00:42:02) But this slicing of reality, you start to get a more and more individual siloing, instead of a more interdependent view where you're looking and saying, "Okay. Let me understand the views and conditions of others," which would be really helpful to reduce some of the polarization that we have. That is one example. And instead we end up in more tribal echo chambers.

(00:42:27) And actually there was a study by this group called More in Common, and they did this interesting study called the Perception Gap study—you can find out about it at perceptiongap.us. And what they found is that there was a 1.6 times larger perception gap for people who had shared political content on social media within the past year. Because it just ends up dividing you, because that's kind of how it works. That's how it's successful. And then you end up in this kind of polarized echo chamber reality, which I think is quite harmful for all of us.

(00:43:04) When in fact I think the wiser view is to say, "Okay. What are actually the conditions that cause someone to believe the way they do? They said something I really don't like. Why did they do that?" My wife is really good at this. And so actually, it's great to have that training where, when I get

frustrated with someone, she'll quickly move to the empathy for why it is that they might be doing that. And a lot of times there's reasons we don't know. And by the way, we do the same thing to other people. We do things that aren't the best choices—and we have an excuse for ourselves, but they don't know what that is. So a wiser kind of social media would lead us to understanding some of those conditions perhaps.

**Wendy Hasenkamp** ([00:43:49](#)): Yeah. You mentioned earlier something about how tech can interact with and maybe even corrupt our processes of sense making and decision making. Do you want to say any more about that, or give an example of how that can play out? Part of maybe what you were just talking about—polarization—feels relevant.

**Randy Fernando** ([00:44:07](#)): Yeah. I think this is one of the key concepts, so it's worth underlining again here. Because this is one of the areas where we're having the biggest problems from this generation of technology—persuasive technology—is the inability to figure out what's true and what's not true. In essence, if you look at democracy, the way it's structured, it's built on this idea that you would get information from the outside. You would integrate it in your head. You would sort of figure out, "Okay," you'd make sense of it in some way and say, "Okay, I know what's true. I know what's not true. I know what's important to me." And then you make choices based on that information. And one of those choices is voting. The idea of voting in a way that's in your best interest, and in your community's best interest, and in the country's best interest, and ideally the world's best interest. But now we have these abilities to manipulate, so micro-targeting causes... It gives a path for people to inject ideas into other people's heads.

**Wendy Hasenkamp** ([00:45:15](#)): Can you just unpack that idea of micro-targeting?

**Randy Fernando** ([00:45:18](#)): Of course. So the idea that as an advertiser, you can select specific, very, very narrow demographics—where you live, zip code, income level, political leanings, hobbies—everything, all kinds of things. And of course gender and age, which are two of the primary filters. You can send a specific message to a specific subset of people, and you are paying for them to click on that. So the behavior change is really what you're paying for. And the companies, they basically, they make this promise to advertisers that they can deliver that. That's the whole idea.

([00:45:56](#)) And so you can see how that can be used for good or bad. You can use that to sell a product like, at Mindful Schools we used it to say, "Okay. We have a mindfulness program if you want to learn and teach students." We did use it, not a lot. But as long as the ad is written in an accurate way and it's sort of truthful, it's not super harmful because getting people to click on that and jump out of what they were doing, and take a mindfulness program is probably not a bad thing. But if it's spewing some kind of vitriolic political message, that can be very harmful. So that's one avenue where sense making breaks down.

([00:46:37](#)) Another one is this idea of customization. So we talked about, as you get more and more customized content, you don't see all of the other stuff that's going on. And so as an example, if you look at CNN and you look at Fox News, they're often completely opposite in their coverage. And there are elements of truth in both of them. And if you really want to understand both sides of the picture in the United States, looking at both of them can be quite helpful. And then there's other sites like [allsides.com](#) that actually shows left and right and centrist content all at once, so you can get a picture of what's leaning where.

**Wendy Hasenkamp** ([00:47:19](#)): Interesting.

**Randy Fernando** ([00:47:20](#)): Another aspect that I think we should talk about is this idea of wise speech, and how does that translate into social media? So a lot of times the companies tend to talk about the idea of freedom of speech, which they love. They love the idea of free speech because it abdicates them from responsibility. And if you look from a Buddhist perspective, free speech is not the thing to go for. You actually don't want everyone to just say anything. There's actually a lot of times... you know, the Buddha was very silent, he didn't speak a whole lot. And I think there's something to take from that. There's wisdom there. So the idea that—imagine you could actually have a platform that says, "Okay. When you agree to join our platform, you agree to this idea of wise speech. And we're a private company, so we are not accountable... Freedom of speech is a different law that applies in a different way. If you sign on to this platform, we're going to do wise speech here." And I think that would be really interesting.

**Wendy Hasenkamp** ([00:48:23](#)): Yeah. Is that something that is being worked on? That sounds amazing.

**Randy Fernando** ([00:48:27](#)): It does. I mean, I think there are challenges there because it sort of assumes... For example, we say honest speech is very important. It's part of wise speech. But what does it mean? What's the truth? Who's deciding, right?

**Wendy Hasenkamp** ([00:48:42](#)): From whose perspective? Yeah.

**Randy Fernando** ([00:48:44](#)): Who's adjudicating what the truth is? I think that's part of the problem. And so it works in smaller communities. But when you start to get very large communities, you start to run into these other problems of, "Wait, what is gossip?" And harsh speech I think you can define a little bit more clearly. And actually this idea of divisive speech is actually, you can use these perception gaps to start to actually measure... There's ways to do that, where you could actually build something where you decrease perception gaps as the fundamental functioning of your platform. That could be very interesting. And I think you could draw a lot of inspiration from wise speech in that context.

([00:49:24](#)) – *musical interlude* –

**Wendy Hasenkamp** ([00:49:25](#)): Well, this is all so fascinating. You've spoken a little bit here and there about potential ways forward, or how we could do this better. Just wondering, from all of your work at the Center for Humane Technology, what would a better platform look like that is feasible? And is it even doable within this capitalist structure? Because we've talked a lot about those larger frames that kind of hold the incentives and all that. So how do you think about all that?

**Randy Fernando** ([00:50:18](#)): Yeah, this is a great question. I think we do have to start with the incentive structure that's out there. Because one of the challenges that exists even now for companies and people trying to build humane technology, is that it gets beaten out by technologies that are more extractive. Because it's really hard... Even if you have a great amount of mindfulness training, a lot of these technologies can still hijack you. And this happens, you can talk to a lot of very experienced teachers who will say that they have run into these problems with their devices, and they've taken sometimes quite drastic steps to get away from it, because it is so powerful. And similarly, when the economic incentives are set up wrong, it's just hard to win. So you have to take these steps that I talked about earlier—this idea of, consumers have to know what the right product is. And of course it's helpful... So, *The Social Dilemma*, which was a movie that was seen by over a hundred million people globally-

**Wendy Hasenkamp** ([00:51:22](#)): Fantastic film. I absolutely recommend it. We'll link to it in the show notes for sure.

**Randy Fernando** ([00:51:26](#)): Definitely. If you haven't seen it, it's worth seeing. But I think that the biggest thing that the film did is, it generated this kind of broad awareness where now it was possible for legislators to look good in fighting against this problem. If you are a parent at a PTA (Parent Teacher Association) and you are speaking out, in the US at least, half the PTA has probably seen the film. So it's a lot easier to speak out, because now you're not this kind of paranoid parent who's worried about social media. It's like, no, we're all worried about it. If you're a teen, it actually helped a lot of kids and younger adults speak about these issues, and to quit platforms. It just made it easier to do the right thing. Because now you're not the outcast, you're actually the smart one who's like, "Oh yeah, I see the thing that's going on with this thing, and I'm not going to be a sucker. Are you?" So, very powerful.

**Wendy Hasenkamp** ([00:52:19](#)): For me, I thought the biggest impact of that movie was just sharing that incentive structure behind it, and just laying it out so clearly. I think most of the public... I didn't really have the clear sense of that. And it definitely shifts your relationship and your perception of what these platforms are up to.

**Randy Fernando** ([00:52:36](#)): Yes.

**Wendy Hasenkamp** ([00:52:36](#)): So thank you for doing that work.

**Randy Fernando** ([00:52:39](#)): Oh, of course. We are very honored to be part of it. And so when you have those kinds of conditions, then you get litigation. So then you get... companies are worried about litigation, because litigation is one of the things that can bring in those external costs, back on their balance sheet. If they're harming kids, if they're harming democracy, how do you put a price on those things, is what's so hard. But in some cases, there's some really concrete and horrific harms that have happened, and those harms have a price. Sometimes the price feels infinite. If it's the loss of life, it's infinite. And you have to bring that in, and then that's one way of taming the conditions.

([00:53:22](#)) And then you have to show how it can be done right. So let's talk a little bit about that. This is why we built this course. A lot of our work is also trying to help people see—if we wanted to do it right, what would it look like? And so in the course we talk about those principles that I already mentioned—this idea of 1) respecting human nature, 2) minimizing harmful consequences, 3) centering values, 4) building shared understanding, 5) supporting fairness and justice, and 6) helping thriving to happen—all of these things. So I'll talk a little bit about each of them.

([00:53:58](#)) So respecting human nature. What that means is saying, "Okay, we have these cognitive biases. How can we use them to help us, instead of exploiting them to kind of hijack people?" So a good example is when we speak to someone else to solve a problem, in person. It's beautiful, right? We look at their eyes, we look at their expressions, we look at their inflection in their voice. We look at when they're nodding or not nodding. We have all these clues to help. If the conversation is going in a difficult direction, we're having a difficult conversation, and we can see these cues that the conversation isn't going well, we can take action on it. But a lot of times on platforms, we don't have this. We have these text conversations and they devolve, and then we're performing in front of hundreds or thousands of people. That is not a recipe for bringing out the best in us. So we want to build products that are



compatible with human nature, that respect the parts that can easily get hijacked. And we also build on the parts that are beautiful and brilliant in human nature.

(00:55:09) This idea of minimizing harmful consequences. It's like, we have to be very interested in the ways that we are causing harm outside of our domain, outside of the rule set. And of course, that means we can't be purely maximizing money, because it costs money to track down these harms and to fix them. So we share some different ways, different rubrics for finding and identifying these kinds of externalities, and how to bring them in. We talk about that. One example is the idea of what we call anti-KPIs. So in the tech world, we have these things called KPIs, key performance indicators. And generally that's something that you measure and when it goes up, things are going well. But the idea of an anti-KPI is something that when it goes up, things are going badly. So for example, you could be measuring session time—how long kids are spending on your platform. And if that goes up and up and up, that could be good; that could track really well with revenue. But if you're also tracking reports of addiction and that's going up, then you know that, okay, you're having a problem here. That's just a simple example.

(00:56:26) Centering values—we have to know what our values are, what we're centering. Because again, we talked about this idea of dependent co-arising and how everything is conditioned. And so our values are in there. I'm just recognizing that our values are baked in to the products we build, and being deliberate about which ones we're centering. We're not going to get it perfect, but we choose what we're centering and we choose to fight for those. And we make sure that our metrics aren't taking over our values, because we're clear on what the values are. That's kind of the short version of it.

**Wendy Hasenkamp** (00:57:01): Yeah. Can I ask a side question there?

**Randy Fernando** (00:57:03): Of course. Yeah.

**Wendy Hasenkamp** (00:57:03): Is there a way—I don't know too much about AI and the details of how they're built—but what is the space now of building ethics or values into these systems? How is that unfolding?

**Randy Fernando** (00:57:17): Yeah, it's very challenging. There's a lot of work going on in the field. And I think in the end, it comes down to... There's just a lot of pieces. There's the incentive structure as usual. There's the product, and the goals of the product and what values it's centering. And then there's also just technically, the objective function. What is the AI optimizing for? So you can make some choices about what it's optimizing for that could be more or less harmful. There's problems with the datasets that AI is trained on. That's a really big one, because a lot of times the datasets represent society as it is right now.

**Wendy Hasenkamp** (00:58:04): With all sorts of biases, right, built in?

**Randy Fernando** (00:58:05): Yes. With all sorts of biases. And all of those structures end up being reproduced by the training sets. If you train on that data, and you say you want to be kind of close to that when you generate your recommendations, well then you're going to come back right to the same stuff. And so there's problems there with gender, there's problems with race, there's problems of course with wealth and power concentration. All of those things just get reproduced again. Right? So we have to be really careful about that. And ultimately, what we've tried to do is to present these concepts in the

course that will help people, no matter what type of technology they're building. If they think about these things, they'll make better choices. So yeah, that's kind of the short answer to that question.

**Wendy Hasenkamp** (00:58:51): Yeah. Thank you. So you were going back through the different values. Yeah.

**Randy Fernando** (00:58:54): Yes. And then shared understanding. We talked about that. The idea of, we need to have the capacity to solve... We have all these complex problems that we are facing, from climate change, to inequity, to racism, sexism. All of these things are there, and we have to figure out how we're going to solve them. Not to mention nuclear weapons, bioengineering. There's a very, very long list of difficult problems that we have to solve. But to do that, we need our attention. We need our sense making and choice making capacities. And so we cannot have technology that is undermining all of those functions constantly, and being run on billions of people. So that's kind of the essence of that module. We kind of talk about how to prevent some of the fracturing, some of the hatred that comes up, the polarization. We need all those pieces to work. So we talk about that.

(00:59:51) Fairness and justice we talked about a little bit here. But also one of the things we do in that module is to help people talk about these issues in a way that can actually bring more people into the conversation. Because I think some of the conversations that take place, especially around race or gender, sometimes they can happen in a way that's not bringing everyone together. And it makes it hard for the people who need to change to actually change, and do the more right thing. So I think I'd definitely encourage people who are interested to look at that module.

(01:00:27) And the last thing is thriving, which I think is so important. So in the course, we framed it in a way... It's a little bit different from the Buddhist lens, because the Buddhist lens starts with dukkha. Just the idea of dukkha, and saying, what does that really mean? And then how do we address that?

**Wendy Hasenkamp** (01:00:46): Which is usually translated as suffering? Or how do you put that into English?

**Randy Fernando** (01:00:51): The Pali is a lot better *[laughter]*, because it encapsulates so much more. It's more talking about the nature of life than about suffering, right? It's just saying that sickness, old age, death, getting things we don't want, not getting things we do want—these are the nature of life. So it's really just saying, there's this thing that's the nature of life. It's called dukkha. That's the Pali word for it. And it's just one of these words with a long definition. It just holds a lot of things in it. And so I think it's... anyway, that's just a little bit of a digression, but that's how I would hold it.

**Wendy Hasenkamp** (01:01:31): Yeah. I heard it described as the "inherent unsatisfactoriness" of life. Does that sound like it-

**Randy Fernando** (01:01:38): Yeah.

**Wendy Hasenkamp** (01:01:39): Maybe better than suffering?

**Randy Fernando** (01:01:41): Yeah. There's a lot of ways to say it. But I think even that implies a sort of resistance. And so that's interesting, that it's like it's just saying, this is how it is. And not even seeing that as a...

**Wendy Hasenkamp** ([01:01:55](#)): As a problem.

**Randy Fernando** ([01:01:57](#)): Yeah, exactly. I think when we see it as a problem, the response—that's where the real suffering is. That's where the suffering is. So I think words have a lot to do with how we perceive all of this, and how we view this path of mindfulness and what it's actually about.

([01:02:17](#)) There's also an interesting point that the idea of translating dukkha as a negative English word can actually harm Buddhism. Because when people are trying to learn about it and, say you're talking to a friend and you sort of introduce with this word that has a negative connotation, it can alienate people very quickly. So unfortunately, I think sometimes there are people who would be more interested, who are getting lost quite early because of this problem we have translating this very special word, dukkha, from Pali.

([01:02:54](#)) So I think, so coming back to that and saying, "Okay, it's important for each of us to know what does thriving mean, or what does suffering mean? What does that mean to us? What does this word dukkha mean?" And so I think we try to talk about some of that—different forms of thriving. We present it of course in a way that's compatible for technologists to understand, because the entire course is built for technologists. Even though I encourage anyone to kind of check it out... If you see things that don't quite resonate, it's because it's really designed for technologists.

([01:03:32](#)) But misunderstanding thriving or the idea of, "What's the point?" leads to a lot of bad decisions everywhere. Whether it's in the values that you center, or how you build shared understanding, or how you exploit human nature—we're building all these things because there's some idea of, we want to help people to suffer less.

([01:03:55](#)) But you have to be clear on what that actually means, because there's all these traps—that lead to addiction, for example. Or one of the big traps in technology is the greed-aversion dance, or the hedonic treadmill. This idea that technology just takes us from one mental state to the other one, the polar opposite. Sometimes it takes us to wanting. "Oh my gosh, we got to have that thing." And then of course, the next year, "Last year's product sucks." It has to suck because you got to get the new one. And so this idea of being content doesn't work out that well for the cycle of constant growth and reporting to shareholders.

**Wendy Hasenkamp** ([01:04:36](#)): Right. Or with capitalism in general.

**Randy Fernando** ([01:04:37](#)): Yeah, it generally doesn't work out very well for capitalism. And so I think there's this inherent challenge. And so this is why I think ultimately there's a bigger conversation—which is definitely beyond the scope of what we're talking about now—which is, capitalism as a system, even with rules, this idea that we're just always competing is probably not the right thing. We have plentiful resources on this planet for the people that we have on the planet. But if we have a competitive mindset all the time, it's pretty hard to get to a reduced suffering state for many people at once. And instead, we're having wealth concentrating very narrowly on small numbers of people, and an increasing number of people who are left behind.

([01:05:30](#)) And this would be a very, very large number of people at this point, with the new technologies that are coming. Yuval Harari calls this group the "useless class." And all of us, almost all of us are going to be part of the useless class. Either you control the tech, or you're going to be part of the useless class. And that's a kind of depressing way to look at it. We don't have to have it be that way. But

if you objectively look at the trends, that's where things are trending—in a world where we also have the lowest infant mortality we've ever had. That's also true. We have more people out of poverty than ever, but also wider gaps than ever. So we have to be able to hold the nuance of that conversation, of saying... It's not like a doom saying thing, of course there's good things. But looking at the trends, we've got to really look out for some of them, they're going to be really harmful.

**Wendy Hasenkamp** (01:06:30): Yeah. It's also interesting, that idea of a useless class. It really emphasizes the way that, at least our current society is structured, that someone's value is totally bound up in their work. Right?

**Randy Fernando** (01:06:41): That's right. That's right.

**Wendy Hasenkamp** (01:06:41): If you're not employed or producing, you're useless.

**Randy Fernando** (01:06:45): Well, it's actually even... I'd say maybe even worse than that, which that it's bound in, how many people do you touch in a light way? Those are the richest people. The people like entertainers, performers, athletes, and of course business people, who do things that are affecting large numbers of people in a light way—that's how you make the largest amount of money in the way the current economy is set up. People who work very closely with people, intimately—social workers, teachers, people who look after children—those salaries don't match. And so there's something really perverse about that, that we are rewarding the superficial far above the deep and substantive.

(01:07:32) And so with respect to all of these trends, I think it's very important to share that we can't be naively techno-optimist about it, but we also can't be cynically techno-pessimist about it. The problems that we're talking about today are problems that affect large, massive numbers of people—billions of people on the platforms, but also billions of people who are off the platforms. Because for example, journalists, they get information from Twitter largely. Twitter is one of the favorite places to get information. But that then goes back into the mass media, like TV. So in effect, what happens on the platforms affects large numbers of people. Everybody. The policies that affect everybody are affected by these platforms. So when we're talking about this kind of broad reach and broad influence, we're probably going to need technology to help us reach those people, and undo some of this training process that we've all been in for now 15 years. Everyone who's been fortunate to be around technology has unfortunately been in this kind of training process, which has gone beyond social media, into our media and the culture.

(01:08:53) And so even if you fix everything magically today—right now, say you just fix everything, our minds... This is where, again that same principle comes back of saying, the conditioning is left over in your mind. And you have this problem where all of that has to be untrained, has to be retrained in a way, skillfully, wisely, even if you fix everything right now. And so we just have to be aware that we're going to need probably some forms of technology—technologies like mindfulness, right, being able to roll that out at scale, in a way that's also not usurped by the capitalist mechanisms... It's challenging. I think we have some big problems in front of us. But understanding them clearly and understanding the principles from which to proceed to solutions, is one of the best things we can do to equip us.

(01:09:48) – *musical interlude* –

**Wendy Hasenkamp** (01:10:13): I'm just thinking about... in thinking of ways that technology can help us, and maybe help shift mindsets, I'm wondering, given all your experience with Mindful Schools, and then

of course being in the tech space, and seeing the rise of apps and all of the ways that technology has been used to share mindfulness and meditation, pros and cons of that. So I'm just wondering how you feel about that space, and where it is today.

**Randy Fernando** (01:10:40): Yeah, it's a tricky one. I remember many years ago, it was probably like 2016, where mindfulness was a billion dollar business. I'm sure it's much, much more right now. I haven't looked. It has to be. But we've debated this a lot. A lot of us who are doing this kind of work have debated this a lot. Has it even been harmful? And I think overall, we generally come to the conclusion that it has been helpful. Introducing people to these concepts of mindfulness is a good thing, even in a very secularized capacity, if the secularized version actually covers the basic foundations of mindfulness, and covers the body and the mind, but also Vedanā, right? The idea of feeling tone, as it's sometimes translated. Another great Pali word, Vedanā. I think this sense of pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral—if you get good at catching that, gosh, that's a really useful skill. And so a form of mindfulness, secular mindfulness that covers those aspects, and has enough authentic framing from the original eightfold path, I think can still be really, really helpful.

(01:11:57) There are some traps where, in corporate environments or even in schools, where we were always worried that we don't want it to be enabling of a broken system to continue. Right?

**Wendy Hasenkamp** (01:12:08): Exactly.

**Randy Fernando** (01:12:09): So, "Oh it just helps reduce stress for teachers. It helps reduce stress for technologists," without addressing the fact that the whole system is broken. So there's pros and cons to that, because I think teachers could still use these skills. And we found that to be true, they find it very valuable. And a lot of times, when you advertise these programs, you say, "Look, we have this program," stress reduction is the keyword that will bring people in, because they resonate most with that. If you say it's something like, "It'll help you see the nature of life more clearly," you won't get a whole lot of people coming for that. *[laughter]*

(01:12:52) So I think the approach many people have taken is like, "Okay. Let's try to present this as skillfully as possible, in a secularized manner, but also teach them a little bit about the nature of this dukkha thing. What is that? Can we explain that a little bit as part of it?" And that's explained in such a secular way—the idea that we're going to get old, that we're going to get sick, that we don't always get what we want, and that how we respond to those circumstances matters, is very compatible with almost every religion. I can't imagine... I imagine there's something that's incompatible, but largely.

(01:13:31) And it also relates to this idea that many of the religions, at the end, they get back to this idea of acceptance. Acceptance—they all take you there. The major ones all take you there, through different mechanisms. Through mindfulness, through an understanding of karma, through one God, or multiple gods—there's an acceptance of circumstances. Not to say you're not going to try to change the future ones. It's not to say injustice is okay because it's happening to you now. But it's saying that right now the conditions are exactly what they are, and we have to accept them. And then we can say, "Okay, we can look at the circumstances, analyze them, and act more wisely in the future." And then we do that, and we get to a new set of circumstances that we have to accept at that moment, and then we have to... Right? So I think there's a lot of commonality that this path can offer for many people.

**Wendy Hasenkamp** ([01:14:32](#)): Well, this has been really so wonderful. I know we're coming to a close. Is there anything you want to share that we haven't touched on, or any take home messages for the audience?

**Randy Fernando** ([01:14:42](#)): No, I think we've covered everything really well. And I just wanted to mention, so this course I keep mentioning, it's called Foundations of Humane Technology, and you can check it out at [humanetech.com/course](http://humanetech.com/course). We also have a podcast called *Your Undivided Attention*, which you'll probably like if you like this podcast. Tristan and Aza, they cover all sorts of really complex topics—not just technology, but aspects of culture, of how the mind works, of economic systems, just every different thing, about how we use language to communicate, what goes wrong, and also how technology shows up on the global landscape. All these kinds of trends, really fascinating.

([01:15:25](#)) And the last thing I want to mention is, for those of you who have young adults in your life and who want to give them something to learn, we have what's called a youth toolkit. So at [humanetech.com/youth](http://humanetech.com/youth), there's a mini curriculum for youth. And so you can do that with your kids, you can share it with your kids' teacher at school. And it's a curriculum that walks kids through how persuasive technology works, how the attention economy makes money, how it hijacks you, and it gives them chances to imagine what humane technology would look like, from their perspective. So I think all that is pretty interesting.

**Wendy Hasenkamp** ([01:16:00](#)): Oh, that's fantastic. Yeah. We'll definitely link to all those resources in the show notes too. But thank you for providing them here.

**Randy Fernando** ([01:16:06](#)): Fantastic.

**Wendy Hasenkamp** ([01:16:06](#)): Well, Randy, thank you so much for this conversation.

**Randy Fernando** ([01:16:09](#)): Thank you, Wendy.

**Wendy Hasenkamp** ([01:16:10](#)): It's been really a pleasure and enriching, and thank you for all of your work. It's such an important space. Yeah, and thanks for taking the time today.

**Randy Fernando** ([01:16:18](#)): Thank you so much, Wendy. And thanks everyone for your time and attention. Take care.

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**Outro – Wendy Hasenkamp** ([01:16:27](#)): *This episode was edited and produced by me and Phil Walker. And music on the show is from Blue Dot Sessions and Universal. Show notes and resources for this and other episodes can be found at [podcast.mindandlife.org](http://podcast.mindandlife.org). If you enjoyed this episode, please rate and review us on Apple Podcasts, and share it with a friend. And if something in this conversation sparked insight for you, let us know. You can send an email or voice memo to [podcast@mindandlife.org](mailto:podcast@mindandlife.org).*

([01:16:57](#)) *Mind & Life is a production of the Mind & Life Institute. Visit us at [mindandlife.org](http://mindandlife.org) where you can learn more about how we bridge science and contemplative wisdom to foster insight and inspire action towards flourishing. If you value these conversations, please consider supporting the show. You can make a donation at [mindandlife.org](http://mindandlife.org), under Support. Any amount is so appreciated, and it really helps us create this show. Thank you for listening.*