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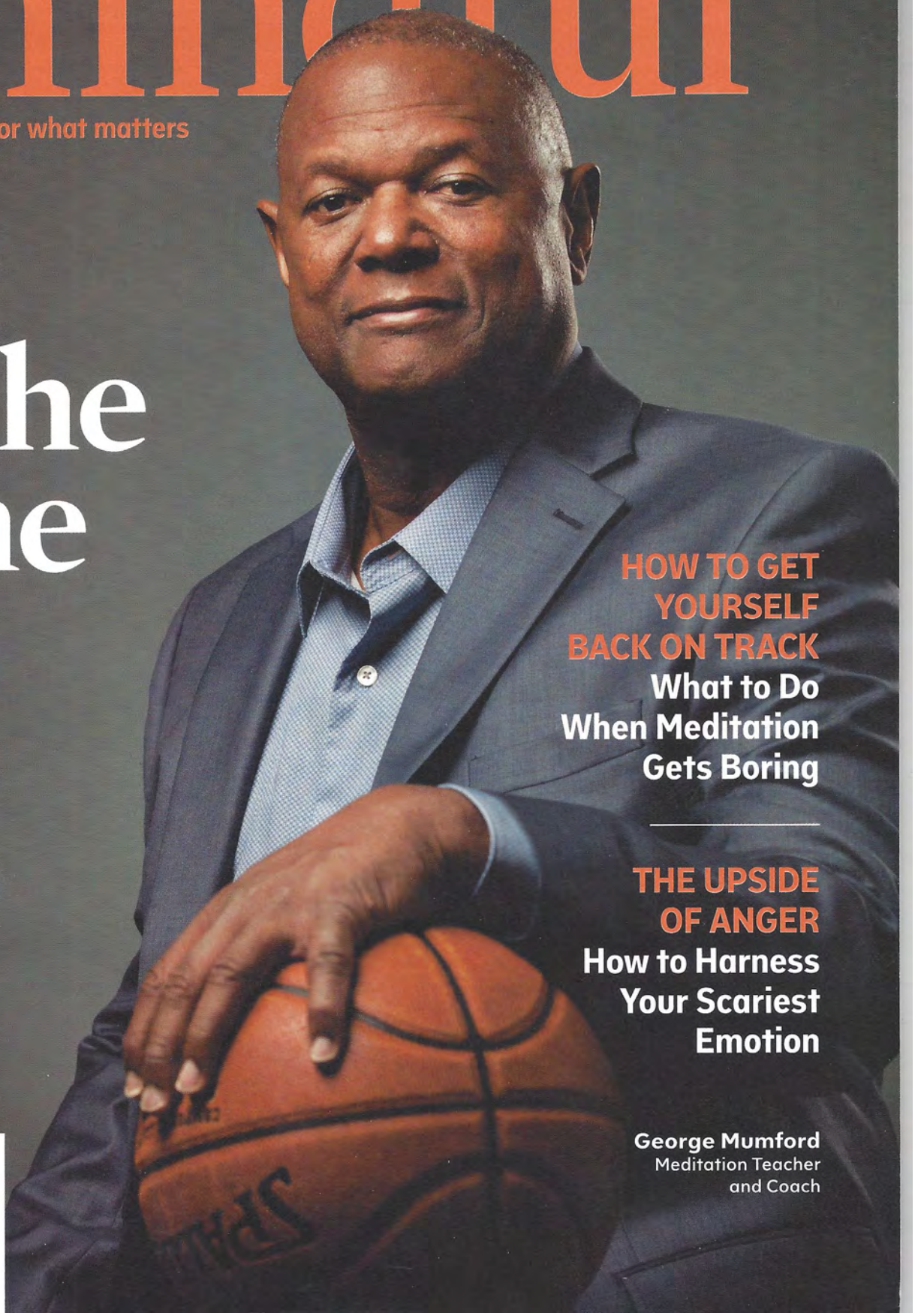
What to Do When Meditation Gets Boring

THE UPSIDE OF ANGER
How to Harness Your Scariest Emotion



George Mumford
Meditation Teacher and Coach

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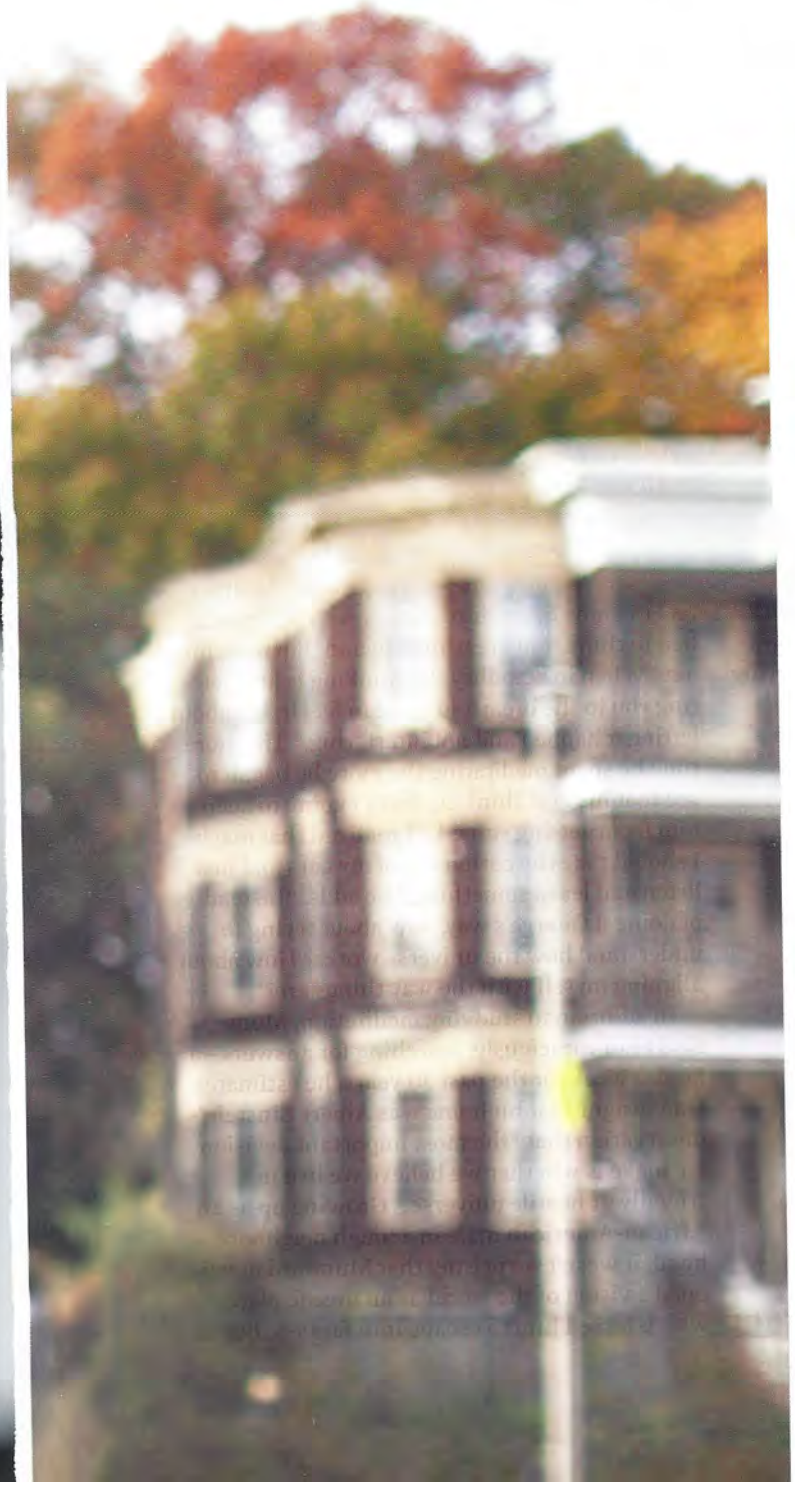


George Mumford has helped athletes, business owners, and prisoners alike navigate their thoughts and emotions, allowing them to perform at their peak. Let go of trying to make things happen, he says, and you can find "the masterpiece within."

By Hugh Delehanty
Photographs by Erik Jacobs

This wasn't exactly the kind of life-changing moment he had in mind.

George Mumford had just emerged from a detox center in Dorchester, Massachusetts, and it was the first time he could remember being sober for 21 days straight. George had been drinking pretty heavily since he was a teen and had gotten hooked on painkillers in college, which later morphed into a full-blown heroin addiction. For a long time, he'd been able to hide his habit and hold down his job as a financial analyst for a digital equipment manufacturer, but after his marriage fell apart, he turned to Alcoholics Anonymous and that inspired him to try to get clean.

As he walked down Morton Street that day toward the house in Mattapan where he was living, he had a surprising revelation. "This was the first time that I'd ever really seen my street," he recalls. "It was as if I had been living in fantasy my whole life."

The next morning George had a strong compulsion to use again. But instead of going out and trying to score some heroin, he went into the →

Previous page: George Mumford takes a long arcing outside shot on a court near Morton Street in Mattapan, MA, in the neighborhood where he lived when he was released from rehab. That was the life-altering moment that led him to meditation...and eventually to teaching mind-body awareness skills to athletes, business people, prisoners, and youth at risk, among others.

bathroom and recited the Serenity Prayer. He said it over and over until slowly the compulsion began to fade. "What I realized then was that if the George who went into detox came out at the other end, I was in deep trouble," he says. "Fortunately, the George who came out of detox was a different George."

Thus began what Mumford calls his "joyful journey of discovery" to figure out how not only to maintain sobriety, but also, as he puts it, "to live life on life's terms." That journey has taken him from grappling with his own demons to becoming the mindfulness coach for Michael Jordan, Kobe Bryant, and the championship-winning Chicago Bulls and Los Angeles Lakers, as well as writing a new book, *The Mindful Athlete: Secrets to Pure Performance*.

A quiet, unassuming man with a boyish smile and the calm, down-to-earth presence of a forest monk, Mumford, 64, would rather spend time musing about philosophy or the latest breakthroughs in neuroscience than promoting himself on the mindfulness circuit. He doesn't have a slick, tweetable formula to sell. But those who know him well—superstar athletes and meditation teachers alike—often refer to him as the "real deal," someone who not only understands the secrets of peak performance but also practices them in his own life.

Jordan credits Mumford for making him a better leader. Shaquille O'Neal has referred to him as the Lakers' "secret weapon." And Phil Jackson, who has worked with George for more than 20 years on the Bulls, the Lakers, and now the New York Knicks, praises him for pioneering a new approach to sports training that's "not just about sitting and breathing, but carrying mindfulness into action."

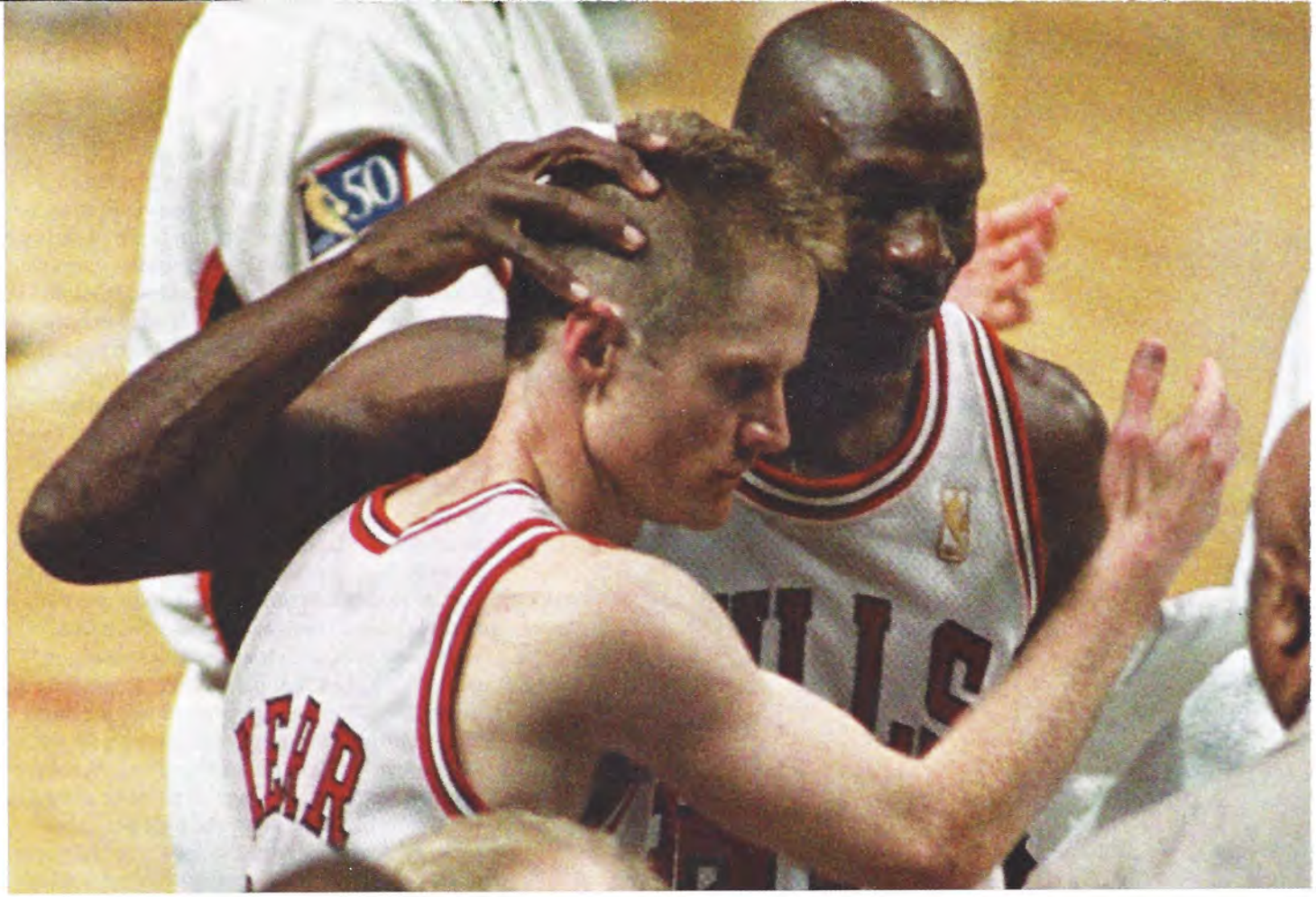
> "George really lives this stuff and...he makes people say 'I want that.' "
>
> Jon Kabat-Zinn, founder of Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction

Mumford's journey wasn't an easy ride. Shortly after he came back from detox, he went into withdrawal and started suffering from migraines and debilitating back pain. One of his doctors recommended a new stress management program run by mind-body expert Dr. Joan Borysenko, and he started experimenting with meditation. After a while, Borysenko urged him to attend a retreat at the Insight Meditation Society's center in Barre, Massachusetts, which was an unnerving experience. At first, he was put off by how unfriendly everyone was until it dawned on him that nobody was talking to him because it was a *silent* retreat. Then toward the end of the retreat the instructor asked everyone to describe their experience and George was flummoxed by the jargon they were using.

But he stuck with it because, in his words, his "ass was on fire" and he was hell-bent on reinventing his life. What he liked about meditation was that it gave him an outlet for his sensitive nature. As a kid, he'd often be sad for weeks if one of the neighboring families moved away or he encountered a wino who had passed out in the street. But he never knew what to do with those feelings. It was only when he got deep into meditation that he discovered he could use his sensitivity to hold difficult emotions in his heart with wisdom and understanding.

Meditation also allowed him to become more intimate with his mind. "When I was starting out, I had a tough time giving up the idea that I had to know everything," he says. "I thought I had to think 'I'm breathing' in and 'I'm breathing out.' When in actuality the thinking is just getting you to the breath so you can feel it. It's about letting it happen and not interfering." The more time he spent meditating the more he began to see that his best thinking wasn't going to keep him from getting stoned. "I realized that maybe I should take the cotton out of my ears and just listen and learn something," he adds. "Instead of doing it George's way, how about trying to understand how the universe works? How about aligning myself with the way things are?"

In addition to studying meditation, Mumford read voraciously, searching for answers—a book a week for the past 30 years, he estimates. One insight that hit home was Albert Einstein's observation that "the most important decision we make is whether we believe we live in a friendly or hostile universe." Growing up as an African-American male in a tough neighborhood, it wasn't surprising that Mumford developed a vision of the world as an unsafe place, which forced him to escape into fantasy. But as



PHOTOGRAPH © REUTERS

Michael Jordan (R) hugs teammate Steve Kerr after Kerr made the game-winning shot to beat the Utah Jazz and capture the Bulls' fifth NBA title in seven years, in 1997. Both students of George Mumford, they credit him with refining their inner game.

Jordan is now majority owner of the Charlotte Hornets, and is widely acclaimed as the greatest player in NBA history.

In his rookie season as an NBA head coach last year, Kerr led the Golden State Warriors to their first NBA championship in 30 years, in spectacular fashion. He encourages his players to exude joy, mindfulness, compassion, and competition.

his practice deepened, he discovered that if he became more compassionate and shifted the way he acted, he could create a sense of well-being and safety in himself and others.

Another thinker who had a profound impact on him was the philosopher Martin Buber, who wrote in *The Way of Man*, that a "divine spark" lives in every thing and being. But over time that spark becomes "encrusted in an isolating shell" and the only way to liberate it is by "hallowing" everything and making it holy. "For me, that's what it all comes down to," says Mumford. "Each person has a uniqueness, a divine spark, a masterpiece within. Our job in life is to find what that uniqueness is and share it with the world. It's like a chrysalis. You're a caterpillar and you have to go inside and struggle to get out. But the struggle gives you the strength to fly."

Mumford had to make some big changes in his life before he got to that point. He quit his job, earned a master's degree in counseling psychology at Cambridge College, and started teaching at the Cambridge Insight Meditation Center, where he lived for several years. While there, he met Jon Kabat-Zinn and did an internship at Kabat-Zinn's stress reduction program at the UMass medical center. Around 1991, Jon tapped George to head up a state-funded project to teach mindfulness to more than 5,000 prison inmates.

In the beginning, the job was unsettling. In fact, the first prison he visited felt so emotionally toxic it was four days and lots of meditation until he could get back some equilibrium. But George was buoyed by the inmates' enthusiastic response. At one meeting, he started talking about getting trapped in a fight-or-flight mindset and he could tell he'd hit upon a hot topic. "How's that shit working out for you?" he said, as the room burst into laughter. "They understood," he recalls, "that what I was saying was that insanity is doing the same thing over and over again and expecting different results. So if the shit ain't working, you've got to change something, and it's usually the mind."

Another breakthrough came when he was leading a group in meditation and the warden's voice came over PA system. This was the most hated man in the prison, and the inmates immediately started grumbling. So George turned it into a teachable moment. He told the group →

that the next time the intercom came on, he wanted them just to notice the sound and try not to interpret it in any way. What he was trying to do was get them to elongate the perception process so that they could take in more of what was happening. As psychologist Victor Frankl famously said, "between stimulus and response there is a space" and "in our response lies our growth and freedom."

Kabat-Zinn was impressed by what he saw. "George can basically talk to anybody and make sense of something that on the surface seems like much ado about nothing," he says. "You're going to get people to sit still and do nothing,

> "He opens the doors for players to have ah-ha moments."
>
> Phil Jackson, 11-time winner of the NBA championship as head coach of the Chicago Bulls and the Los Angeles Lakers, and current president of the New York Knicks

and that's going to benefit them? But George really lives this stuff, and people can feel it. He's so authentic. So totally George. He makes people feel better and say, 'I want that.'"

Madeline Klyne, a meditation teacher who worked on the project, was struck by the lighthearted way George punctured illusions. "He cracks people up and invites them to laugh at themselves," she says. "People can get pretty grim. But he used to say, 'Everyone is in prison.' The people in prison and the people out of prison. Everybody's suffering. So how do we get out of that?"

As it turned out, the prison project led Mumford to his dream job. In the summer of 1993, Kabat-Zinn was doing a workshop at the Omega Institute in Rhinebeck, New York, and mentioned the success George was having with inmates. It just so happened that Phil Jackson's then-wife, June, was in the audience and got Phil jazzed up about bringing George in to work with the Chicago Bulls.

When George arrived at training camp in October, the team was in a state of upheaval because its star, Michael Jordan, had just left the game to pursue his dream of playing baseball. Jackson, who'd studied Zen meditation, had dabbled in teaching meditation to the players as a way to help them deal with the absurd pressures of the basketball life. But George could bring the training to a deeper level. Not only that, he had played ball at UMass and been Hall of Famer Julius (Dr. J) Erving's roommate, which gave him instant cred with the players.

At first, the players made light of George's sessions. One day they arrived at practice wearing T-shirts showing a player dozing during meditation with a headline that read, "I've Been Mumfied." But, over time, Jackson noticed the team's focus and energy slowly improving. As forward Scottie Pippen told one reporter, "You don't know how to operate if you haven't been Mumfied."

Jackson describes Mumford as a "medium" who helps players connect with a deeper part of themselves. "George opens the doors for them to have these ah-ha moments," he says. "A lot of the guys in the NBA have been taught about emotional control, but they've never been taught about why thoughts arise and how not to get sucked into them. George helps them understand that they're not just their thoughts. They can get into that space where they're just watching their thoughts and allowing them to happen without acting on them."

In the years that followed, Mumford worked with the Bulls as they charged—mindfully, of course—to their second three-peat championship, including a record-setting 72-10 season in 1995-96. Then a few years later, he joined Jackson in LA to help motivate the Lakers to win a three-peat series of their own. Along the way he developed a series of principles that have guided his work ever since:

1. BE STILL AND KNOW

One of the first things Mumford talked about with the Bulls was the power of stillness, which he had learned practicing tai chi and other martial arts. "When the mind is still," he says, "you have an inner knowing when and how to strike. It's playing the game on a spiritual level. You may not know what you're going to do next, but in that moment you have the ability to see and act simultaneously without a hair's breadth in between."

Athletes often refer to this as being "in the zone," a state in which time is altered, everything is done effortlessly, and, as Mumford

Know Your Body, Know Yourself

By George Mumford

Nearly every athlete or successful individual I've worked with has had intention and a clear sense of purpose. Some of us say we don't know what our intention or purpose is, but often we simply haven't spent enough time listening to ourselves carefully and in silence. To help with that, it can be useful to try some Deep Listening: the practice of stopping and listening without judgment or advice. Sit down, rest your mind, and ask yourself in silence: What do I *really* want? What is my life for? If you go deep enough, intention will emerge.

With Deep Listening, you have an opportunity to honestly evaluate yourself. When you're reflecting on a habit or an action—such as an obstacle you perceive or something you think you've accomplished—take the time to ask yourself, "Am I deluded or is this really happening the way it seems to me?" Having listened to yourself, you're now in a better position to listen to others. Ask friends, teammates, coaches, teachers what they think about what you're perceiving. That's why they're there: to notice our blind spots. If we have people in our life who can point out to us what we're missing, then we can investigate further to see what's true. If we listen deeply, we can observe and investigate a habit or action without being identified with it and without pushing it away or pulling it in. We can just observe and ask, "What would happen if this is true?"

As athletes, we also need to take more time to listen to our bodies. If you have a pain in your body—whether it's tendonitis, a headache, or a cramp—don't struggle to get past it. Stop and listen to your body, surrender to being with what is. Ask yourself: "What is the lesson for me to learn here? Have I been overdoing it? Have I been going too hard or too long?"

Your body is like a circuit breaker. Injury is its way of protecting you and telling you to change something. Learn to listen and to trust that still, small voice inside, the voice of self-knowing. You may slow down in the short run, but it will keep you far healthier and more active in the long run.

And as you learn to practice listening deeply to yourself and to your body, you will find, as I said, that you can listen better to others, whether it's your boss, your partner, your child, or your teammate. When you really listen to a person without judging or interrupting, it may feel as though you're hearing them for the first time.

Adapted from *The Mindful Athlete: Secrets to Pure Performance*. © 2015 by George Mumford. Reprinted by permission of Parallax Press, Berkeley, CA.

PRACTICE

Ask yourself at least one challenging question each day. For example:

What makes me uncomfortable in my physical activity? Why? Where do my discomforts come from? How do they hold me back or move me forward?

What do I crave? What do I worry about?

Which emotion is most, and least, comfortable for me: Anger? Fear? Guilt? Anxiety?

Where does my stress live? Why is this particular stress inhabiting my body?

Take some time and listen to your body when you ask these questions. Don't just answer with your mind. If you listen to your body, it will answer you.

describes it, "there's no sense of I, me, or mine, no actor, nobody doing it." It doesn't happen that often, and, adds Mumford with a smile, "the best way to get into the zone is not to *try* to get into the zone." But elite athletes are more likely than others to enter this rarified state because they tend to see stress as a challenge, not a curse.

Complexity is important. To enter the zone, you need to have a high level of skill and be in a high state of arousal, but also have the presence of mind to be comfortable with being uncomfortable. A good example is Lakers' star Kobe Bryant, who's always pushing the limits of performance. "When Kobe is in a high state of arousal," says Mumford, "he knows that he's closer to being in the zone and keeps bringing the energy, while other players often withdraw to avoid being in discomfort." Once Mumford told Kobe before a game that the best way to score was not to try to score. So he started playing that way, giving the →

ball up whenever he could, and he ended scoring 16 points in the first quarter. "Because he wasn't trying to score," says Mumford, "he was letting the game come to him."

Mumford likens the zone to being in the eye of the hurricane, a phrase he started using after watching how calm Michael Jordan was in the midst of chaos. "It's about bearing witness to what's happening," says Mumford. "Just being there and settling back into a state of receptivity, allowing whatever you're observing to speak for itself and not interfering. We're always focusing on what's happened or what might happen and very seldom on what's happening right here in this place and time. But that's a muscle and you can train it."

2. FORGET YOURSELF, FIND YOURSELF

When asked what his secret formula is, Mumford responds slyly, "It's the same for everybody. Who are you and who do you want to be? Coach John Wooden used to say that poise is just being yourself. So whether you're playing or sitting on the bench, how can you be true to your values as a person?"

When Jordan returned to the Bulls in 1995, he faced a dilemma he'd never encountered before. Because the makeup of the team had changed while he was away, he didn't know many of the new players and was having difficulty leading them. After he got into an embarrassing fight during practice with guard Steve Kerr—the smallest guy on the team—he turned to Mumford to help him develop a new approach to leadership. George told him that he needed to meet his teammates where they were. "Even if they hold you in awe," Mumford advised, "you have to relate to each of them as a person because you're only going to be as strong as they are."

This was an important lesson for Jordan, who was famous for being a demanding taskmaster. "George made me evaluate everybody in a different way," he told me a few years ago. "Not everybody is Michael Jordan with the same kind of passion. So if I wanted to get the best out of somebody, I needed to know who he was and what I wanted him to be. Sometimes I'd get frustrated after a game because one of the guys wasn't playing the way I expected him to, and George talked me through it. He talked me off the ledge of anger and frustration."

In 1998, Al Skinner, coach of the Boston College Eagles, hired Mumford to help him rebuild his underperforming men's basketball team. →

Read and Win

Here's George Mumford's list of must-read books on peak performance.

FLOW
The Psychology of Optimal Experience
By Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi

This groundbreaking book provides insight into what's needed to get into flow, when time alters and you become so absorbed in whatever you're doing that nothing else matters. The key, in Mumford's view, is learning to be comfortable with being uncomfortable. "The best moments of our lives," writes Csikszentmihalyi, are "when a person's body or mind is stretched to the limits in a voluntary moment to achieve something difficult and worthwhile."

ZEN IN THE ART OF ARCHERY
By Eugen Herrigel

An enlightening, no-nonsense account by a German philosophy professor of his quest to learn zen archery in Japan after World War II. What he discovered is that the secret was letting go of his willful self. As Herrigel puts it, "The archer ceases to be conscious of himself as the one who is engaged in hitting the bull's-eye which confronts him. This state of unconscious is realized only when, completely empty and rid of the self, he becomes one with the perfecting of his technical skill."

THE INNER GAME OF TENNIS
By W. Timothy Gallwey

Gallwey, a former tennis instructor and meditation student, provides instruction on how to improve performance by getting out of your own way and letting your best game emerge. By focusing on expanding awareness, Gallwey says, you can diminish the dominance of your critical mind, or what he calls Self 1, and let your true potential, Self 2, do what it instinctively knows how to do.

SECOND WIND
The Memoirs of an Opinionated Man
By Bill Russell and Taylor Branch

A revealing book about a legendary basketball star's journey to master the inner game. One memorable moment is the story of how Russell learned visualization as a boy studying the paintings of Leonardo da Vinci and Michelangelo and then used that skill to invent a new way of blocking shots and playing defense. He also relates how he would sometimes silently cheer for his opponents to up their game so he could experience an intense "mystical" competition, one that transcends competing.

THE THREE LAWS OF PERFORMANCE
Rewriting the Future of Your Organization and Your Life
By Steve Zaffron and Dave Logan

What role does language play in bringing about change? Quite a lot, according to management consultants Zaffron and Logan, who've identified some basic laws that shape how individuals buy in to new ideas and coalesce into successful teams. The laws are: 1) how people perform correlates to how situations occur to them, 2) how situations occur arises in language, and 3) future-based language transforms how situations occur to people. If you change the way things occur to people with the subtle use of language, Zaffron and Logan contend, the group's actions will naturally shift.

THE FOUR AGREEMENTS
A Practical Guide to Personal Freedom
By Don Miguel Ruiz

A down-to-earth, surprisingly profound book by a shamanic teacher on the practical wisdom of his Toltec ancestors. The agreements are: 1) be impeccable with your word, 2) don't take anything personally, 3) don't make any assumptions, and 4) always do your best. Putting these tenets into practice, Ruiz demonstrates, requires taking a hard look at ourselves and unraveling the counter-productive agreements currently running our lives.

MIND AND BRAIN
A Critical Appraisal of Cognitive Neuroscience
By William R. Uttal

A critical look at the latest developments in neuroscience and recent attempts to align neural mechanisms with psychological processes. Especially interesting, says Mumford, is the research on how volitional effort can create neuro-pathways in the brain that can change behavior.

INTRODUCING NLP
Psychological Skills for Understanding and Influencing People
By Joseph O'Connor and John Seymour

This clearly written guide to neuro-linguistic programming provides some useful insights into how the mind works. One of the most valuable parts, according to Mumford, is the practical instruction on how to process verbal and non-verbal information more effectively and program yourself for excellence.

THE CAMBRIDGE HANDBOOK OF EXPERTISE AND EXPERT PERFORMANCE
Ed. by K. Andres Ericsson, Neil Charness, Paul J. Feltovich, and Robert R. Hoffman

An encyclopedia of peak performance by some of the world's leading experts on expertise. Filled with illuminating case studies, this sweeping overview explores in detail the innovative methods that the best and the brightest in a wide range of fields use to achieve success.

THE POWER OF AWARENESS
By Neville Goddard

An inspiring work by a former dancer-turned-metaphysician on how to create the life you want by harnessing the power of the imagination. As Mumford describes Goddard's approach, "Your imagination is everything. You create your reality by what you focus on. You become what you think."

A man of both action and words, Mumford takes time to engage deeply with a book. For the past thirty years, he has read a book a week, so that ideas and practices from varied sources continue to shape his understanding and his teaching.

> "George talked me off the ledge of anger and frustration."
>
> Michael Jordan, the highest points-per-game scorer in NBA history

Skinner wasn't sure what to expect, but he was moved by the way George worked. "He didn't force his teachings on anyone," he says. "The only way it works is if you're receptive. This isn't something you bring for a few days and then it's done. This is a slow process, but once you embrace it, it becomes part of you."

The Eagles finished 6-21 that first year, but Mumford found the work gratifying because the players had the gift of desperation and devoted themselves to learning. They made improvements the next season, but it wasn't until the start of the third season, when he overheard some of the players predicting that they were going to beat everybody at home by 20 points that he knew they had finally gelled into a team. Sometimes, Mumford says, "you have to forget yourself in order to find yourself. It's a paradox." When you focus not on *how* you're doing but *what* you're doing, he adds, you may not get your name in lights, but the result is far more valuable: being part of something greater than yourself.

For the record, the team went 27-5, winning every home game by an average of 22.5 points.

3. MINDFULNESS ALONE ISN'T ENOUGH

Not long ago, meditation teacher Sharon Salzberg did a forum with Mumford in New York City and asked him if he used the word "mindfulness" when talking with players. "Now I can," he said, referring to the movement's growing popularity. But when she asked him whether he ever mentioned "compassion," he replied, "No, that's too much." The phrase he preferred, he said, was "Don't be hating on yourself."

Many people think of mindfulness as a simple technique for enhancing performance. But Mumford has a much broader view. "Mindfulness alone isn't enough," he says. "It has to be supported by steadiness of mind, right effort, and wisdom. It's like putting together a jigsaw puzzle. You have to have all the pieces and then you can start fitting them together. That's how mindfulness works. It stitches everything together."

The key is a continuous balanced application of energy. "It's like tuning the string of a guitar," he says. "If you string it too tight or not tight enough, you won't get the right sound. Most people are trying too hard. There's too much tension. You cannot have good rhythm if your butthole is too tight."

One aspect of mindfulness that often gets overlooked is the importance of making smart ethical judgments. "You have to include the morality piece," says Mumford, "because doing right and living in harmony have an impact on your ability to be concentrated and mindful." That means developing the wisdom to know what's skillful and unskillful and being able to tell the difference between a conflicted mind and one that's seeing things clearly. "I don't think you can be a mindful athlete," he adds, "without being a mindful person."

Some critics argue that mindfulness and competition are antithetical. But, in Mumford's view, what's critical is the quality of intention. "If your intention is to dominate and humiliate, that's different from seeing how much you can take the game to another level," he says. "You're saying, 'It doesn't matter who I'm playing against, I just want to be better than I was yesterday.' The thing is there's no limit to how mindful you can be. As good as Michael Jordan was, there's always another level."

Which brings us back to George's journey. When he was younger, he says, "I had greed in my mind and my effort was geared toward trying to force things to happen. But then I realized that the game I was playing was pursuing excellence with grace and ease. Hoagie Carmichael said that slow motion gets you there faster. It's more about intending and allowing. I see my practice now as allowing things to happen rather than trying to make them happen. It's the ease of letting things speak to me and telling me what I need to do."

Then he grins and adds, "But don't listen to what George says. See if it's true. That's the thing. Whatever the teaching is, can you experience it yourself?" ●

Facing page: Steve Hailey, whom Mumford mentored as an athlete at Boston College, shares a relaxed moment with his old coach and friend.

Hugh Delehanty is a former editor for *Sports Illustrated*, *People*, *Utne Reader*, and *AARP The Magazine*, and co-author with NBA coach Phil Jackson of the bestseller *Eleven Rings*. He profiled coach Pete Carroll for *Mindful* in December 2014.