



**THE
MINDFUL
ATHLETE**

**SECRETS TO PURE
PERFORMANCE**

GEORGE MUMFORD

FOREWORD BY PHIL JACKSON

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CHAPTER 1

**ASS ON FIRE:
THE FIVE
SPIRITUAL
SUPERPOWERS**

CHAPTER 1

Pain brought me to mindfulness, not any desire to reach nirvana or pop out of any chrysalis. It was “unlearning” certain habits and thought patterns hard-wired in my brain and walking through my pain, rather than avoiding it, that ultimately put me on a joyful journey of self-discovery. I grew up

in Dorchester, Boston, in the fifties and sixties. Here's how the Urban Dictionary defines the place: "A ghetto in Boston where hood rats and thugs kill each other over basketball courts, street corners, and anything else they feel like. Most people know to steer clear of this area and let the ghetto rats cull themselves out of existence." Here's another definition of my hometown you'll read on that site: "When walking down Blue Hill, bring a Kevlar helmet and vest."

I did not live far from Blue Hill Avenue. You get the picture.

I was number ten in a family of thirteen children. I had seven older sisters, which means that I had eight mothers. These eight mothers took care of me when I got hurt, which was often, since I came into this world accident-prone: I was always hitting my head on oven doors, getting stepped on, and knocked around. If lightning was going to strike, it would strike me. I've come to realize that stress itself can create a vulnerability to being injury-prone; no doubt I grew up internalizing the stress of my family. That's how the mind-body connection works.

Of course, no one knew that back then. We just tried to get by—barely—living from paycheck to paycheck. Sometimes the electricity got turned off because we couldn't pay the bill. Other times we had no heat because we couldn't afford heating oil. There were even times when we couldn't go to school

because there wasn't enough money for bread or school lunches.

My parents did the best they could, all things considered. My mother was an elevator operator in a hotel. My father was a laborer on the New Haven Railroad by day and a barber by night. They both came from a line of Alabama sharecroppers who worked all year under the crack of a whip for twenty bucks. Alcoholism was one way they dealt with their pain, and my father carried on that lineage. He was raged on at the railroad, and he raged on us when he came home. No one was spared, not even the family dog.

Basically, you did not mess with my father or engage in acts of self-expression unless you wanted serious trouble. I will never forget the day my sister was getting married and I asked him to give me a quo vadis haircut. He was so outraged by what he thought was a radical request that he shaved me completely bald. I attended that wedding in a veil of humiliation and anger.

I learned early to keep my mouth shut. It has taken me decades to unlearn it.

When my dad wasn't railing on me for no good reason, the cops or others were doing so. I recall getting pulled over by the police while riding in the back seat of a friend's car. When I asked, "What's the violation, officer?" the police officer responded, "Who the fuck are you—Perry Mason?" I had to be silent or else I would have been beaten into submission.

*This, I believe,
is the great Western truth:
that each of us is a completely
unique creature and that,
if we are ever to give any gift
to the world, it will have
to come out of our own
experience and fulfillment
of our own potentialities,
not someone else's.³*

—JOSEPH CAMPBELL

Being African American I had two choices: speak up and get beat up (and often go to jail) or be quiet. Be very quiet. I chose the latter option, which became woven into my emotional blueprint: I did not speak up to my father, to cops, or even

to coaches. I learned to shut up and be, and I carried that oppression around like an albatross. Whatever emotional pain I experienced, I unconsciously buried in my body. No wonder pain became my constant companion.

Looking back now, maybe my dad thought that by literally trying to knock the spirit out of me, he was protecting me from the perils of free thinking. This was the United States of America in the midst of the sixties counterculture, after all. As fate would have it, Martin Luther King, Jr., used to preach in a church down the street from our house. His freedom marches and the civil rights movement were part of the social fabric of my youth. There was also the birth of rock and roll, the sexual revolution, feminism, peace protests, Vietnam, and the so-called dawning of the Age of Aquarius that lit the stage for the human potential movement. The Esalen Institute in California, and later the Omega Institute in New York, both still thriving today, were beacons of this movement, bookending the country as spiritual centers dedicated to personal transformation, well-being, and consciousness-raising.

Never in my wildest dreams would I have imagined that decades later I'd be teaching at the Omega Institute myself. In those days, nobody in Dorchester focused on consciousness-raising. That word wasn't even in our vocabulary. We focused

on survival. As the sixties unfolded in a whirlwind of experimentation and turmoil, I found my nirvana in basketball, music, and drugs.

OPEN YOUR FUNKY MIND

I had always played sports in the streets—dodgeball, stickball, baseball, football, and tag. Like millions of inner-city youth, I had NBA dreams from a young age. Sport was a salvation and a way out of the ghetto. I loved the Celtics, the Red Sox, the Lakers, Jerry West, and Elgin Baylor, among many others. They fed my dreams when, at four feet eleven inches tall, I went to middle school, dribbling with confidence and working on different shooting styles until I perfected a two-handed push shot. I suddenly shot up to five feet eleven inches in high school and my feet became a vortex of growing pains.

My injury-proneness was just about to escalate to new heights.

I used to play with ten-pound weights on each ankle until one day when I went up high to take a shot during a game and landed awkwardly, spraining both of them. From then on I played with both of my ankles taped up. My knees were stiff and ached constantly. In the spring of my junior year, something popped in my knee. Undaunted, I kept playing until my muscle atrophied, my leg became too weak to run or jump on,

and I tore a patellar tendon in my left knee.

I was injured so often in my youth that I was in crutches every year throughout high school, and I had such intense back pain that I had to sleep on a bed board. I kept my NBA dreams going, however, until their death knell came when my coach sent me to an orthopedic specialist and I got the coach in trouble when that specialist billed the high school for his services. My coach rarely put me in games again for fear I'd get hurt; instead, he urged me to become an accountant. One day, after not getting to play at all, I quit the team. I returned the next day, hoping basketball would provide a path to college and a way out. I ended up going to the University of Massachusetts on an academic scholarship, with pain as my mascot. But by then, I'd picked up a few vices along the way.

No one told me when I was growing up that I could alter my consciousness by going within. Even at church, no one helped me stay in touch with the spark of divinity once I left the pew. I had no real spiritual foundation, though I longed for spirit. I found it first in John Barleycorn—I was given my first taste of beer at about the same time I learned to walk. I liked that enough to move on to more sophisticated spirits, like my father's Seagram's 7 whiskey that I enjoyed in private. At an early age, I found God in getting high and leaving my body, floating into space, and taking off—anything that would get

me away from the experience of physical and emotional pain was welcome.

I floated further into space in my teens when a group of kids I'd met at a YMCA turned me on to heroin. We called it "skag" because it was inferior to white boys' heroin. We'd sniff it off the end of nail files and go on about our business. On heroin my pain lifted and my spirits soared even higher. I could suddenly speak out and be gregarious without fear. Jimi Hendrix had hit the charts in those days, and I could relate to having "purple haze all in my brain." Music, in fact, was another form of bliss that got me high, transporting me far away to some Shangri-la of the mind. I recall listening to groups like Funkadelic, whose psychedelic lyrics to "Free Your Mind and Your Ass Will Follow" spoke to a generation of spirit-seeking junkies: "Open up your funky mind and you can fly/Free your mind and your ass will follow/ The kingdom of heaven is within."

I had yet to find that kingdom of heaven within, but I'd certainly found my little helper.

There were a lot of ironies around my drug use back then. One of them was that during a hospital visit for chronic back pain, I was given Darvon, a powerful pain-killing narcotic. That one little pill packed with white crystalline powder not only relieved my pain, it got me an even more agreeable high than skag. Under the influence of Darvon, the kingdom of

heaven felt very near. I was even more outgoing and freer to speak out. It had taken a formal check-in with the medical establishment to tip the scales, but there I was: I had become a bonafide substance abuser.

I had no idea that in taking this path, I was robbing myself of the stress hardiness people develop naturally in life. And my descent into drug use didn't follow the traditional trajectory from smoking cigarettes, to smoking pot, and progressing onward. I avoided pot because I'd been told that it stunted your physical growth. I wanted every possibility to grow tall. So instead I went straight to heroin and stunted my emotional growth. Call that junkie wisdom.

DOUBLE LIFE

As my drug use became more routine, particularly after high school, I developed a very well-fortified internal firewall that kept two parts of my life separate: I was Joe College during the day, and a member of Kool and the Gang at night. Determined that the two should never meet, I also forged an uncanny ability to maintain a double life. That firewall would eventually become my Great Wall of Pain and that double life would be my undoing, but at the time I had no idea.

Sports remained a huge part of my life throughout college, when I had the good fortune of rooming at the University of

Massachusetts with Dr. J, aka Julius Erving. Dr. J was indisputably the Michael Jordan of his time and would eventually be inducted into the NBA Hall of Fame. But back then we were all just college kids with NBA dreams.

*We emerge into the light
not by denying our pain, but
by walking out through it.⁴*

—JOAN BORYSENKO

The first time I met Dr. J, he was playing basketball with dress shoes on. My first reaction to this sight was: Who is this wiry homey playing basketball and dunking on people in dress shoes? My second thought was: Wow, this dude can play. He had great control of his body, could dribble and pass like a guard, jump and rebound like a center, float in the air like a butterfly, and sting like a bee with quick and precise movements that finished in the basket. Everyone was in awe of his physical prowess and agility. He could maneuver in street shoes even while injured or under duress. He could dunk two balls at

once with his large hands and excellent hand-eye coordination.

Even when J had injured his ankle and could barely walk without limping, he played and dunked on people with grace and ease. Ditto the time he broke his big toe. He just went out anyhow, despite his pain, and played with focus and intention. This was a supreme example of self-efficacy (more on that later).

I didn't realize it at the time, but J was a natural born mindful athlete who played the "inner game" before the term was coined. He was always in flow and living fully in the present moment, responding and adapting to what was happening around him rather than reacting and fighting against it. He seemed to let situations speak to him; he observed and learned. He was always upbeat, supportive, encouraging, kind, and generous—important wholesome qualities for the mindful athlete to develop in order to flourish—yet he held others accountable without making them wrong. He never complained about going to practice, being in pain, or being depressed when he played badly or lost a game. He seemed happy to be alive.

I also don't remember anyone running set plays for J or featuring his talents. He was all about "we," not "me." He loved playing basketball and developing the craft, and didn't complain about other players *not* being able to dunk or run, or about not having other like-minded people on the team with

him. Dr. J was the only person of color on both the JV and varsity teams. I would have liked to stay by his side after college but eventually we parted ways. After his junior year, Dr. J went pro. I simply went professional.

WORKING FOR THE LIFE

On the advice of a coach, I put my passion for sports on the back burner and studied finance in college. I went through the motions and did what I needed in order to do okay at finance, but my heart and mind weren't in it. In my mind, I was still playing basketball.

By that time, my heroin use had really taken off: I'd gone from sniffing, to skin popping, to mainlining, and my firewall was stronger than ever. I ended up working as a financial analyst for a company that made sophisticated communications and guidance systems for space shuttles, cruise missiles, and nuclear-powered submarines. I had security clearance on my badge and track marks on my forearm. I always made sure to wear long sleeves.

I was married for two years and we were together for nine years. We met in the summer of 1969, got married in 1975, separated in 1977, and the divorce was final in 1978. The divorce was devastating to me and it was one more sign that my life was falling apart. But I kept up a front at work,

because being married gave me carte blanche to be late; it made me seem “normal.” There was a lot of shame associated with divorce at that time as well, never mind all my other shame-inducing behaviors. Though I managed finances at work, my personal house of finance was a mess. I spent money recklessly on drugs and eventually ruined my credit. I lost my car. To make sure that no one knew about it, I woke up at the crack of dawn, took public transportation to work, and got there early enough to leave by 4:00 p.m. so no one would see me get back on the bus—to my mother’s house. I’d get dope sick if I didn’t get high a couple times a day.

In fact, it was probably *because* I got high so often that I was able to maintain this crazy double life, pushing around my repressed emotional weight like Sisyphus with his boulder. Even when a needle broke off in my arm while I was getting high, I thought I was invincible. I didn’t even believe the doctors in the emergency room who told me that if I didn’t change my life, I would die. It wasn’t until 1984, when I was walking around with a high fever and a severe staph infection that landed me in the emergency room again, that I realized how close to death I was. But yet again, the doctor gave me painkillers when he released me from the hospital; this time, it was the narcotic Percocet. You’d think doctors would understand that giving narcotics to an addict is like

giving candy to a kid, but who was I to protest? I ended up selling the Percocet to buy more drugs.

The following month, on April 1, a friend who I hadn't seen in a long time popped into my life out of the blue. He'd been a longtime substance abuser like me but had gotten solidly clean and sober through the Twelve-Step AA program. That day he insisted I go to an AA meeting with him. I agreed on a whim, but found the meeting was no April Fools' Day joke.

*The only way out
is always through.⁵*

—ROBERT FROST

By then I was not only sick and tired of being sick and tired; I was more like the walking dead. A refrain in Janis Joplin's song "Me and Bobby McGee" perfectly described that moment: *Freedom's just another word for nothing left to lose.* That's where I was; I had nothing to lose because I'd already lost everything. In a strange, messed-up way, I was free—free to start over from scratch, free to let down my guard and ask for help, free to step out of my comfort zones and take risks in an effort

to reinvent myself—because the alternative was to die. The renowned spiritual teacher J. Krishnamurti said that freedom is now or never. I chose now.

THE WAY OUT IS THE WAY IN

I don't know why it often takes a crisis or a fastball from the universe knocking us off our feet for us to finally have our ass on fire enough to act. Maybe it's a flaw in the human condition, or maybe it's simply *part of* the human condition. In any case, the gift of desperation compels us to move forward. Without fire in our lives, we sometimes don't have the internal combustion necessary to change and take risks. We get too comfortable being comfortable—even if we're mired in the comfort of mediocrity or worse. We just don't move our ass. I'll get more into motivation later on.

During this time in my life, I slowly came to understand how having your ass on fire—or what I call AOF—not only moves us human beings into action, but compels us to seek our truths and act with conviction in life. This pertains as much to mindful athletes as it does to anyone else. I know this for a fact because I've lived it, and I've had the good fortune to help many other people live it over the years, both on and off the courts.

During that first AA meeting—and despite my initial

resistance—it was impossible to ignore the wisdom in those Twelve Steps. Step one was easy, in any case: 1. Admitting that I was powerless over alcohol and drugs, and that my life had become unmanageable as a result. Steps two, three, and four sounded pretty reasonable too: 2. Believing that a Power greater than myself could restore me to sanity (which I knew did not take me off the hook). 3. Making a decision to turn my life over to the care of God *as I understood Him* (or Her, or It), meaning that I did not have to subscribe to any organized religion or to a traditional God, and that I was free to believe in anything I wanted—the point was to believe. 4. Making a searching and fearless moral inventory of myself—a pretty big job, since I had quite a backlog of emotional inventory in my personal warehouse.

You have to begin somewhere. As Pema Chödrön puts it in her book *The Places That Scare You*, “Right here is a good place to start. Start where you are.”⁶ This is true in life and in sports: There might not ever be a “right” time to start. In fact, often what prevents people from moving forward is the daunting sense that they’ll never get where they intend to go, so why bother even starting? But as many of us know, taking small steps, consistently, in the right direction will eventually yield big results. This is one of the most simple and profound truths in life. You have to start taking baby steps, even though you

know you'll fall down. If you don't begin the process—and you don't fall down a lot—you'll never walk.

So I got out of my own macho way, let my guard down completely, and began my own process. I reached out for help and began to build a community of support around me: a therapist, various support groups, a free inpatient detox program where I could be anonymous. I knew that it would be much harder to recover if I was unemployed, so I did whatever it took to keep my job and my sanity intact. But without the veil of drink and drug masking my pain, it all came rushing back: the intense chronic lower back pain, the migraines, the craving for short-term relief that I'd appeased with substance abuse for years. There were days when it was so intensely difficult to stay sober that I had to step into the men's room at work, close a stall door, get on my knees, and recite the serenity prayer to myself: *God grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, the courage to change the things I can, and the wisdom to know the difference.* Even though I recited this prayer often, I never thought I'd really see the day when it would feel real to me and be more than just words I said to get through the hard stuff.

But somehow things started to shift. One day a psychotherapist referred me to a stress management program offered by my company's HMO. This was back when stress management was the term used for mindfulness. The program introduced

me to techniques for managing chronic pain that included meditation and yoga. It was a slow but powerful revelation. I learned to listen to my body. When my backaches occurred, I understood that it was a sign that I was under too much stress and needed to investigate my pain. I began to look for its cause, treat it gently, and adapt my behaviors to take care of it rather than hide it. In essence, I began to figure it out. When I felt a migraine coming on, I would lie down and do deep breathing, visualizing the oxygen moving through the regions where the tightness was, creating space in my head, and allowing the tightness to flow out with my out-breath. I learned how to be in the moment, slow things down, practice bare awareness, and listen to my body. Invariably, my body told me what it needed.

SITTING STILL

I had the good fortune of being in the right place at the right time and learning from some of the finest mavericks in the field: Joan Borysenko, Larry Rosenberg, Jon Kabat-Zinn, and Sharon Salzberg. Even so, the first time I tried to meditate, it would have been easier to bench-press fifty-pound weights than sit still. I went to my first sitting meditation retreat back in the day when it was not common for African Americans to meditate with predominantly white people in a small New

England town. When I was told to buy a cushion for meditating, I went out and bought an actual sofa cushion; that's how clueless I was.

Just sitting for any length of time was painful. I had no flexibility in my body and could not get comfortable no matter how hard I tried. (I didn't realize at the time that I was actually trying *too hard*—but more on that later as well.) My knees and ankles hurt. My back ached. I kept moving around from the cushion to a chair and back again, no doubt distracting the meditators around me. My body just didn't want to sit still. And then there was my mind, flitting around and wandering, fixating on sensations, anxieties, and cravings that came up. But the practice of mindfulness, as I'll address in these pages, slowly taught me how to work through this.

I began learning Insight Meditation and I started a daily mindfulness practice after completing a twenty-one-day detox program in 1984. I committed to a regular practice and, a few years later, I discovered the Cambridge Insight Meditation Center (CIMC), where I continued to practice.

By then I'd been clean for several years but I still had a double life going—a double life of an entirely different nature. My deep commitment to meditation and mindfulness was in stark contrast to my daily life as a financial analyst. The former filled me with a sense of purpose and joy, while the latter was

a dead, soul-crushing experience. I wanted to cut this cord and be truly free—but how? I had no alternative job, no backup plan, and little security. Still, I decided to focus more on *what* I wanted, versus *how* I was going to get it.

By coincidence, right around this time, in 1988, the mythologist and philosopher Joseph Campbell appeared in a six-part television documentary series called *The Power of Myth*. The series was based on interviews between Campbell and journalist Bill Moyers. The interviews were also published as a book with the same title. Filmed at George Lucas's Skywalker Ranch, the documentary was an exploration of Campbell's sweeping work chronicling how myths have shaped our culture and consciousness throughout the ages.

At one point during this widely watched documentary, Moyers asked Campbell if Campbell ever felt, in what seemed from the outside to be a charmed life, as if he was helped in his journey of self-discovery by “hidden hands.” Campbell replied, “All the time. It is miraculous. I even have a superstition that has grown on me as a result of invisible hands coming all the time—namely, that if you do follow your bliss you put yourself on a kind of track that has been there all the while, waiting for you, and the life that you ought to be living is the one you are living. When you can see that, you begin to meet people who are in your field of bliss, and they open doors to you. I say,

follow your bliss and don't be afraid, and doors will open where you didn't know they were going to be.”⁷

Joseph Campbell probably had no idea that those three words—“follow your bliss”—would so deeply resonate with viewers that they'd become an enduring cultural trope that still inspires people today to take leaps of faith. In fact, at that time my life was already affirming the words of Joseph Campbell; I'd already shifted my focus to my “field of bliss” and started meeting people who opened doors for me. And then one day instead of going to work, I took a mental health day and went to my weekly interview with Larry Rosenberg, who was my meditation teacher at the time. Larry took one look at me and said: “What's going on with you today? You look pretty happy.” He didn't miss a beat when I told him that I'd simply decided not to go to work. “You should make a habit of that,” he replied. So I did.

Shortly thereafter, I gave notice to my boss, packed up my things, and told my coworkers about my decision to leave. Nearly every one of them, all pretty miserable at the job, said to me in earnest, “I wish I could do that.” Of course, they *could* have done that; they could have shifted their focus to their own fields of bliss. Maybe their asses weren't on fire enough, or maybe they just didn't believe there was a way out. The author Anne Lamott once wrote about a sermon in which the pastor

said that if you put bees in a glass jar, they wouldn't fly out. Lamott wrote, "...they'll walk around on the glass floor, imprisoned by the glass surrounding them, when all they'd have to do is look up and they could fly away."

No one had specifically told me that all I had to do was look up, but in essence that's what I did. I finally opened up my funky mind in the right way and realized that I could fly. I took off and never looked back.

FULL CIRCLE

I'm not sure that I would have been able to make that leap of faith without having committed by then to a spiritual practice. In 1986 I went back to school and received a Master of Education in Counseling Psychology from Cambridge College in Cambridge, Massachusetts. For two years after that, I didn't work and lived off what little savings I'd accrued. I committed myself to reading almost every book I could find on the subjects of mindfulness, metaphysics, psychology, and philosophy. I was basically trying to figure out what I wanted to be when I grew up, while attending regular silent retreats, sittings, talks, and teachings at the Insight Meditation Society (IMS) in Barre, Massachusetts, and at the Cambridge Insight Meditation Center (CIMC).

With time I became a practice leader, responding to

requests at the Center for meditation instruction. By 1989 I was living at CIMC as a resident and I stayed on there for many years, participating in teacher training and doing my first Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction and Relaxation internship with Jon Kabat-Zinn. That parlayed into more work and study at the Stress Reduction and Relaxation Program (SRRP) at the University of Massachusetts Medical Center, where I became a program director and then a member of the Board of Directors of IMS, CIMC, and the Spirit Rock Meditation Center, an Insight Meditation practice center in Woodacre, California.

It was during this period, around 1991, that Jon Kabat-Zinn and I worked together to open up an inner-city satellite clinic in Worcester, Massachusetts. I later became a full-time staff member at SRRP (which later became the Center for Mindfulness) and the director of the prison project with Jon. Over the course of five years and in five different locations, we taught mindfulness to over five thousand inmates, as well as to a host of Department of Corrections administrators and officials.

For me, this was coming full circle. Many of these inmates came from the inner-city pressure cooker I knew so well. These guys were weaned on tension and anxiety. Through the practice of mindfulness, I helped them understand the operation of their minds and emotions, teaching them how

to calmly detach from outside provocations and habitual patterns of reaction. Of course I'm not suggesting that people can just meditate their way out of injustice or out of the bad karma they've created. But we *can* cultivate control of ourselves and choose with a clear mind how to respond appropriately and effectively in our lives with calmness and wisdom.

It was during this time working in the prison system that I was approached by Phil Jackson and was brought on board to teach mindfulness to the Chicago Bulls and to other athletes. Now Joseph Campbell's words really rang true: in having the courage to follow my bliss—not knowing *how* I was going to make it but believing deeply in *what* I wanted to achieve—I put myself “on a kind of track that had indeed been there all the while,” waiting for me. I stepped back into my original field of bliss: the arena of sports; only this time I came back to it with the consciousness of a mindful athlete and the knowledge that, as Michael Jordan suggested, “that Zen Buddhist stuff” really works. I also came to realize that you couldn't solve problems with the same consciousness that created them. It's only in changing your consciousness that you can solve problems and transform your game, whatever it is and wherever you're playing it.

In many ways, my own path is a reflection of Buddha's Four Noble Truths, which I'll talk more about later. For now,

suffice it to say that life brings suffering no matter who we are. But there is a path for all of us that leads out of this suffering and on to that joyful journey of self-discovery, no matter how painful our personal history might be.

THE FIVE SUPERPOWERS

The Five Superpowers are mindfulness, concentration, insight, right effort, and trust. These spiritual superpowers are interconnected and they work together. Buddhism sometimes calls the first three powers—mindfulness, concentration, and insight—the threefold training. Our unconscious mind contains the seeds of all these energies. You can cultivate these three energies throughout the day, in whatever activity you're engaged. Mindfulness, concentration, and insight contain each other. If you're very mindful, then you have concentration and insight in your mindfulness. Generating these energies is the heart of meditation practice. They help you live every moment of life deeply. They bring you joy and happiness and help you to handle your own suffering and the suffering in the people around you.

The fourth power, right effort or diligence, is the energy that makes us steadfast in our practice. Cognitive function improves when we have a positive state of mind. Bringing diligence to our practice of mindfulness is a great way to cultivate positive

mind-states. But when we practice sitting or walking meditation in a way that causes our body or mind to suffer, that isn't right effort because our effort isn't based on our understanding.

The last of the Five Powers is trust. It can also be seen as faith or confidence, but the way that I like to look at it is as courage. Having the courage to delve into the unknown and trust what is found there makes the practice of mindfulness and the other powers possible.

As my friend Sharon Salzberg puts it in her book *Lovingkindness*, "Completeness and unity constitute our most fundamental nature as living beings. That is true for all of us. No matter how wonderful or terrible our lives have been, no matter how many traumas and scars we may carry from the past, no matter what we have gone through or what we are suffering now, our intrinsic wholeness is always present, and we can recognize it."⁸

Being a mindful athlete involves living this truth for yourself, because there is no separating who you are on the court, field, or yoga mat from who you are in the world at large. That "intrinsic wholeness" serves you wherever you are and in whatever you're doing. Everything is connected.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

George Mumford has taught mindfulness and meditation since 1989, after he left his career as a financial planner and earned a Master's in counseling psychology. He worked at the University of Massachusetts Center for Mindfulness and directed a prison project that has taught mindfulness techniques to more than five thousand New England inmates.

While a student-athlete at the University of Massachusetts (where he roomed with Julius Erving), injuries forced Mumford out of basketball. The medications that relieved his pain also numbed him to the emptiness he felt without the game that had been his greatest passion—and led him to drugs. After getting clean and making meditation the center of his life, Mumford returned to the game he loves, teaching his revolutionary mindfulness techniques in the NBA.

When Michael Jordan left the Chicago Bulls to play baseball in 1993, the team was in crisis. Coach Phil Jackson, a long-time mindfulness practitioner, contacted Dr. Jon Kabat-Zinn to find someone who could teach mindfulness techniques to the struggling Bulls—someone who would have credibility and could speak the language of his players. Kabat-Zinn led Jackson to Mumford and their partnership began. George has worked with Phil Jackson and many of the NBA championship teams he coached.

He was also a part of the Boston College Eagles' legendary run from worst to first in the Big East alongside coach Al Skinner in 2001.

George Mumford teaches regularly at business and athletic conferences, nationally and internationally. He is currently part of Jackson's New York Knicks. He lives in Massachusetts.



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