

Life As It Is

“There Is No Enemy”

Episode #34 with George Mumford

August 21, 2024



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George Mumford: Performance is how to be in a moment and embracing the moment as it is. Even though you train for it, it's unknown. It's the ability to be comfortable being uncomfortable, being comfortable not knowing, being comfortable dealing with anxiety because it's the other side of freedom. There's an ability to create this equanimity or this eye of the hurricane where we can just notice things, and when we make a mistake, we say, “Oh, when I did that, that didn't work. Change it, try it differently. What do I need to learn in practice?” So it really is about this adventure of living in the moment, this adventure of realizing that we're wired to be able to figure stuff out, but sometimes we figure it out by doing rather than by thinking our way into it.

James Shaheen: Hello, I'm James Shaheen, and this is *Life As It Is*. I'm here with my co-host Sharon Salzberg, and you just heard George Mumford. George is a mindfulness teacher and coach who has taught meditation in a wide variety of settings, from the US prison system to the NBA. Recently, he has been teaching a lot about *mudita*, or sympathetic joy, particularly in the context of highly competitive environments. In our conversation with George, we talk about how his history of addiction and recovery brought him to Buddhism, the importance of beginner's mind in the process of recovery, how prayer can move us beyond the illusion of separateness, and how cultivating joy can help counter jealousy and envy. Plus, George leads us in a guided meditation. So here's our conversation with George Mumford.

James Shaheen: So I'm here with George Mumford and my co-host Sharon Salzberg. Hi, George. Hi, Sharon. It's great to be with you both.

George Mumford: Hi, James. Hi, Sharon.

Sharon Salzberg: Hi.

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James Shaheen: So George, we're here today to talk about mudita, or sympathetic joy, but I'd first like to ask about your own story. To start, can you tell us a bit about your background? What was it that brought you to Buddhism?

George Mumford: Yes. So today is my fortieth year of sobriety.

James Shaheen: Ah, congratulations.

George Mumford: And that's what brought me to Buddhism because when I got clean, I discovered I had chronic pain. Besides the recovery, I had chronic pain in the form of migraine headaches and back pain, especially as the stress increased. As you might imagine, when you get in recovery and you're dealing with life on life's terms for the first time, there's a tremendous amount of stress.

I was a part of a HMO, this is going back to 1993, in Cambridge, Massachusetts, Harvard Medical, and so they had a program running on managing stress. It was run by Joan Borysenko, and at that time she was one of the three psychoneuroimmunologists in the world. They had this experiment that I was part of that wanted to help people deal with their stress by lifestyle change and taking more of what I would call self-regulation or self-responsibility.

That was the first time I heard that the mind and body were connected, and this idea of mind-body medicine was just coming out at that time. One of the ways to do that is to learn how to meditate. The way I've learned to do the mind-body modalities like yoga and tai chi and actually just getting back into your body, if you will. So that's how I got into it, and one thing led to another. So I got into it, and then she suggested that I go to a place called IMS and do a retreat. And so I went there, and that's when I really started practicing in Buddhist centers. And then from there, obviously one of the teachers was Larry Rosenberg, and then I discovered Cambridge Insight Meditation Center. I actually ended up living there for six years. So that's how I got into it.

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James Shaheen: So, in your most recent book, *Unlocked*, you write that growing up, you turned to drugs and alcohol as an escape from your own stifled interior. Can you say more about this? How were you distancing yourself from your true nature, as you say?

George Mumford: When I was young, I was very sensitive. When I would explain or try to share with people, I was told that I was too sensitive and I needed to just be quiet and just deal with it, so it wasn't really safe for me. Plus I grew up in a house one of thirteen, and the rule was to be seen, not heard. Now, as you might know, a lot of times there's a lot of communication that's nonverbal. So it's not necessarily someone saying something to you. Sometimes it's a look. Sometimes it's just knowing what the rules of engagement are, which is actually a part of emotional intelligence, social awareness, and understanding. I've been doing a lot of research on how to read people and to read cues and whatnot, and the cues I read had to do with being quiet and being stealthy, just not being seen or heard.

James Shaheen: So you say that drugs gave you a way of getting beyond the bounds of your own ego, and you felt like you were seeking your true self. How was that?

George Mumford: Well, it released the inhibitions I had, and the self-consciousness, the self-centered fear that I had, and it just allowed me, for some reason, I felt like I could talk, and I felt more empowered. It's all about feelings really. At that age, at that stage, I don't think I was that intellectually interested in trying to understand things. I was more interested in feeling, feeling safe, feeling good, feeling pleasure, feeling OK. I think it was really more about that than anything else. And so whatever gave me the feeling of well-being was something I was seeking. And of course that shows up for most of us human beings as seeking pleasure and wanting unending pleasure, wanting to feel good, wanting the pleasantness. Of course, this is how the nervous system is programmed. It approaches what is pleasant; it avoids what's unpleasant; and if it's neither pleasant or unpleasant, it spaces out unless there's some equanimity or some interest there. Other than that, we spend a lot of time in anxiety or boredom.

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James Shaheen: Carl Jung made a statement to Bill Wilson, the founder of AA, about an alcoholic he met with, and it was this: “His craving for alcohol was the equivalent, on a low level, of the spiritual thirst of our being for wholeness.” Does that resonate with you?

George Mumford: Yes, most definitely. Anything that alters your consciousness. Actually, I remember studying years ago with this gentleman, he wrote a book, I don't remember the name of the book. But basically his premise was that we seek to alter consciousness, and that usually shows up as extremes. We're really focused on the extremes of things. The things that are subtle or not as extreme, we tend to not notice.

Sharon Salzberg: So congratulations again on forty years. That's amazing. It's beautiful. And you describe addiction as a creeping thing, where you think you have it under control until you don't. I wonder if you might say some more about that.

George Mumford: Yes. So it's interesting because I think it ties into the grief process. When you're grieving, according to Elisabeth Kübler-Ross, she talks about the five stages of grief. One of them obviously is bargaining, denial, anger, depression, and acceptance. And I think when you think about having a substance abuse issue or having addiction, the denial is built into it. And I can remember going back forty years ago, one of the favorite sayings that I heard all the time was “Denial is not a river in Egypt.” And it's interesting because when you're in denial, how can you really receive the truth? How can you really accept you have a problem? So it's a creeping thing.

Actually, I saw it with my dad because he was an alcoholic and he drank a lot and he drank for a lot of years, but I remember he always drank on the weekend mostly, and then it creeps in and now he's getting drunk on the weekdays and anytime he can, and then I remember one day he didn't have a drink and I saw him going through a withdrawal a little bit. And so I had been

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watching him drink for decades, and at some point it creeps up to you. All of a sudden, you don't know you have a problem until you have a problem.

It's gradual, and it's sneaky because for me, for some of us, we drink quietly, and you don't notice the fact that you have to drink more than you used to and that you start being less particular about what you want to drink. So you might have a certain drink, but at some point anything will do. And so it's like walking in the mist. You don't realize that you're walking into the mist until you get to a saturation point where you can feel how wet you are. And so substance abuse is like that. Addiction is like that because it gives you the illusion that, and of course, with the denial and the bargaining, “Oh God, if I can just have this one more drink, I'll promise I'll never drink again,” or something to that effect. And so it really is about this idea where it just sneaks up on you and your body gets used to it. That's the thing: We can get used to anything. And so as we take more in, you need more. And that's why I said it's a subtle thing and it's a creeping thing because it creeps up on you, and all of a sudden you get smacked in the face.

Sharon Salzberg: You also write that your descent into addiction was an essential part of your path to where you are today. Can you say more about that?

George Mumford: Yes. The other day I was just listening to Ram Dass, and he was talking about all his experiments when he was at Harvard and how there's something about drugs that kind of blows your mind and opens you up. For me, that was definitely true because I feel like I was tripping, and my mind got to the point where I was doing the opposite of what it was supposed to do. So one of the things, I'll be a little bit graphic if you don't mind. You start off just doing little things, like I started off just maybe drinking alcohol and I wouldn't smoke marijuana because I didn't want it to stop my growth. And, so you start sniffing, then you start skin popping, then you start mainlining, and then you start mixing it with other things. And so I used to like to mix heroin with cocaine. Normally when you do cocaine, it lifts you up, and when you

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do heroin, it brings you down. And I got to the point where it was affecting me the opposite way. Everybody's different, but it was really weird when I think about how crazy it is.

But at the same time, now that I've been clean for forty years, I realized that it's a much better high if you do it naturally, and it lasts longer. There's something about the chemicals inside of us, especially when I'm in the joy of discovery and when I'm in that beginner's mind, where I'm seeing things in new and fresh ways, and when I'm seeing life as a journey, when I'm pushing myself, and when I overcome an obstacle or solve a riddle or whatever, all of these chemicals are naturally released. And so I learned a lot more about the whole thing and how using some of the illegal drugs and whatnot, or abusing them, actually prevented my natural high process from being natural and being more accessible to me just by challenging myself or going beyond what I think is possible or being open to not knowing. Having that beginner's mind is so huge. I can't express this enough. As a matter of fact, novelty is a flow trigger. It actually helps us get in the flow.

James Shaheen: George, you quote Suzuki Roshi, who wrote, “Hell is not punishment; it’s training.” How does this resonate with your experience of addiction and recovery?

George Mumford: The only way out is always through. That was Robert Frost. I was working with a female volleyball team in California, and I was trying to coach them a little bit and talk to them about performance. What they were communicating to me was, “George, we want a softer, easier way. We don't want to do this thing. It's too hard. It's too challenging.” Marvin Gaye talks about this idea in one of his songs, “It makes you want to holler and throw up both your hands.” Well, it made me want to holler and throw up both my hands. So instead of doing that, I said, “No struggle, no swag.” I said, “I got swag. I earned that. These are swag moments.” And of course, no pressure, no diamonds. Pressure is a privilege. And I think it was Nietzsche who talked about what he wished for his good friends and relatives was that they encountered difficulty and they encountered struggle. Hans Selye, the gentleman that came up with the whole idea of stress, said that when we get confronted with a crisis or crises, it's an opportunity for our

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latent abilities to express themselves. So it's part of the evolutionary process, I believe. And so when we can embrace the difficulty and the challenges, that they actually help us actually move beyond that. Of course, Viktor Frankl, in his book, *Man's Search for Meaning*, said that when we find meaning in suffering, it ceases to be suffering. So that's another way of saying that everything that happens is happening because of the conditions of what's going on for what is happening to be happening and not happening, and the main thing I can do is choose to react where there's no space between stimulus and response or create space so I can choose my response. I can choose my attitude. I can choose how I'm being, how I'm seeing. And that's where the ultimate freedom comes from is saying, “OK, this is what I got. I have an addiction, so I can curse myself or I can bless myself and embrace it and say, ‘There's an opportunity here. There's something for me to get here. I'm in a growth mindset, and I can see that life is suffering, but there's a way I can relate to the suffering and ways where I can have peace.’”

James Shaheen: Well, speaking of how one responds to a situation, you say that you couldn't think your way into proper behavior, so instead you behaved your way into proper thinking. Can you say more about that?

George Mumford: Yes. So my best thinking always got me into trouble. So when I got into recovery, and you have to realize that forty years ago, it looked very different than it does now. And so there were smoky rooms. Everybody was smoking and drinking coffee. They just basically said to me take the cotton out of your ears, put it in your mouth, and sit up front and act like you don't know anything. What they were really espousing was beginner's mind and realizing that my thinking is based on my experience, and my experience is not all inclusive.

I would say my thinking is thinking. I'm thinking a certain way because I'm at a different consciousness level or whatever. So for me to be able to behave my way into something so now I could understand it. So the way I look at it, if you think about what is called nondeclarative or implicit learning, and we know this from science that we learn more when we learn unconsciously, when we're not trying to learn, when we're just paying attention and we're just

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observing things uncritically, that we actually learn more because there's a pattern detection. I learned how to ride a bike, and I couldn't think my way into learning how to ride a bike—I had to ride the bike. And once I rode the bike, then I could talk about it. So you have to behave your way in proper thinking, because the thinking is getting in the way because I have ideas about things and whatnot, so for me I had to just start with a blank slate and act like I didn't know anything, which was really beginner's mind, being mindful and just trying things and seeing if they work before I judge them.

And so when they said, “If you don't drink, you won't get drunk. If you don't take a drug, you won't get high,” whoa, that's profound. But there's no thinking involved there. It's just a really simple instruction. But usually when somebody, well, I'll speak for myself. Back then, when you said “Do this,” I'm going to say, Well, how does that work? I don't think that'll work. I've tried that before. It doesn't work.” And then now you're talking, and I forget the Zen teacher's name, but he said, “If you open your mouth, you're wrong.” So there's something about silence and just coming out of the silence. I talk about the eye of the hurricane. When we can be still, there's a knowing, there's an intuition that we get connected with when we're not in the words and we're not trying to figure it out, because I'm pretty sure this is what the Buddha had in mind when he talked about the eight worldly conditions of praise and blame and all of those. Those are all thinking activities. But when you drop in, the idea is not to be in the head. The idea was to be in the sensation of it or the energy of it.

Even now, I don't know about you folks, but things are changing so fast. When I go to one drugstore, they tell me this is how I have to pay, and I go to another place, they want me to pay with my palm or my eyes or whatever. And to me, it seems like things are changing so fast that the only way I can keep up with it is to go in like I don't know and just be quiet and just allow myself to be.

There's something about just figuring things out. If people say, “How'd you do that?,” I say, “I have no idea, but I wasn't doing it. I got out of the way.” If I think about it, then I get lost. That's

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the way it is when I drive. It's like my sense of direction is not the greatest. When I try to figure things out, I get lost. But if I just allow things to express themselves, there's a rhythm. There's a flow. And that's what I teach in performance is how to be in a moment and embrace the moment as it is. Even though you train for it, it's unknown. And so it's the ability to be comfortable being uncomfortable, being comfortable not knowing, being comfortable dealing with anxiety because it's the other side of freedom. There's an ability to create this equanimity or this eye of the hurricane where we can just notice things, and when we make a mistake, we just say, “Oh, when I did that, that didn't work. OK. Change it. Try it differently. What do I need to learn in practice?” So it really is about this adventure of living in the moment, this adventure of realizing that we're wired to be able to figure stuff out, but sometimes we figure it out by doing rather than by thinking our way into it.

So that was my long-winded way of saying you can see a lot just by observing, as Yogi Berra would say. And so we have to observe what happens. And I think David Bohm, the physicist, when he talked about things, he talked about trying something and seeing where it leads you and trying things out, but being stuck in the head, that's not being mindful because now we're projecting or embellishing the raw data instead of letting the raw data speak to us in its own language.

And so wisdom begins in wonder, or this idea of what T. S. Eliot talked about is to be exploring life in a way and encountering things we encounter every day but to see it as if we've seen it for the first time in new and fresh ways. And this is what happened to me. When I left the detox, I saw my street for the first time. I saw my house for the first time, because I was seeing it with this sense of not knowing coming from that silence, coming from that place of not knowing and being open to what was happening. Does that make any sense?

Sharon Salzberg: Mmhmm. Well, one part of your recovery process was prayer, which somehow feels linked to this sense of wonder, and you say that your first meditative experience

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was doing the Serenity Prayer. So could you say more about the power of prayer, how it can move us beyond the illusion of separateness?

George Mumford: Yeah, I was doing a little TM, I guess, or mantra, or it could have been one of the abodes, it could have been loving-kindness or compassion practice or mudita. But to me, it was really, as I recited it, I dropped into this silence, I dropped into this ease, and the obsession was removed. So that was my first meditative experience that I'm aware of and that I'm conscious of. I'm sure I had more, but I wasn't conscious about it. I couldn't declare it, if that makes any sense. But doing a serenity prayer, there's something about that when I did it that it just changed my consciousness, and then I didn't have compulsion. The obsession to use was removed.

James Shaheen: George, eventually you ended up teaching meditation in a wide variety of settings, from the US prison system to the NBA, and a particular turning point in your life was working with the Chicago Bulls. If I remember correctly, that was during their peak. So how did this come about?

George Mumford: Well, it came about as I moved through my life and as I started evolving and changing and seeking to understand things. I was working as a financial analyst in a tech firm, and I think I was about to move into the meditation center in Cambridge. There were very few meditators then, so I had a half-an-hour meeting with my teacher, Larry Rosenberg, every week. So one day I went in and had a meeting with him, and he says, “Hey man, what's going on?” And I said, “What do you mean?” He says, “You look happy.” And I said, “I took a mental health day off from work.” He said, “You should make a habit of it.” And so I ended up moving into the meditation center, and I quit my job, and I spent two years just meditating and doing other stuff. At that time, I ended up connecting with Jon Kabat-Zinn, or Johnny, as we like to call him, and Larry wanted me to learn Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction. He thought it might be something that I could do and learn, and so I got into that, and then I ended up opening up with Jon the Center for Mindfulness Inner-City Clinic. And so I was doing the Inner-City Clinic, and I

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was going into prisons teaching meditation and yoga. At this time, Jon was going to Omega and doing these sessions for clinicians, like social workers and whatnot at Omega, and he was talking to Phil Jackson, who was doing a program called Beyond Basketball at the same time, and they got to talking and Phil said he wanted somebody to come in and help the team deal with the stress of success because they had just won three NBA championships in a row in 1991, 1992, and 1993. And so they got to talking about me, and then Jon started sharing with him the work I was doing but also that I had roomed with Dr. J and I had been around the pro game and that I had similar backgrounds as some of the players. And so Phil and I had a conversation, and then I was invited into the training camp that October. And of course, when I got there, they were in full-blown crisis because Michael Jordan had resigned. So that's how I got into it, and then the rest is history. But to me, it's interesting because I would say now, the only thing I knew is I wanted to serve and I wanted to help, but I had no idea what I was doing.

James Shaheen: So you've taught highly competitive athletes who are at the top of their game, yet you say that in the world of pure performance, there is no enemy. This may seem counterintuitive in such a highly competitive sport. So what did you mean by this?

George Mumford: Yes. Well, this goes back to a kendo master Bokuden who actually called it the School of No Sword. Ueshiba, the developer of aikido, said the same thing. There's no enemy. You're competing against your previous best self. So it's all about you controlling yourself. And so you're not competing against someone out there; you're competing against your previous best self. So pure performance is to do the thing for the activity in and of itself for no reason. You're not compelled by fear or desire. You're just expressing yourself honestly. And you know that what you love, you make it grow. At least that's Erich Fromm in his book, *The Art of Loving*. He talks about the idea that when you love something, you make it grow. And so this idea of pure performance, it's just performance. In Zen, Suzuki Roshi talked about when you do something, you should not leave a trace. You just do it in and of itself. Being in the moment and expressing yourself honestly is the intention. So it's not a result, it's not anything other than doing

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the thing in and of itself. There's an intrinsic value of expressing yourself and bringing your wholehearted attention to what you're doing. And of course we know that to be flow, but it's really about not being compelled by fear or desire but just doing it for the activity in and of itself.

Sharon Salzberg: Yeah, recently you've been teaching a lot about *mudita*, or sympathetic joy, which relates to this notion of no enemy. So how would you define *mudita*, and how did you become interested in it as a practice?

George Mumford: That's one of the sublime abodes, and I've been practicing it for years. The idea is there's a lot of jealousy and envy and negative emotions, and I felt like, well, that's an opportunity, especially working in sports. The thing I like about sports is there's a beginning, middle, and end, and everybody watches it, and so it's pretty clear. But most of our lives are not like that. We're running marathons. It keeps going on, but we don't stop periodically and reflect on it. And so for me, what I discovered was we needed to balance the negative emotions, for one thing, and a lot of that is fear and anxiety, especially since COVID. But the main thing was that we need to get beyond this illusion of separateness. And the way you do that is, and I think this guy, his name was Dr. David Hawkins, he wrote a book called *Power Versus Force*. He said that all experiences are of equal value, and so this idea of realizing that it's easy for me to cheer for people I like or for my home team, but there's way more opportunity if I cheer for everybody, and I'll be in a state of ease and joy by realizing that what is happening is happening because the conditions are right. The person put in the effort and they're getting results, and so why not celebrate that? Even though I don't like someone or they're not my home team, why not celebrate for them? Because that keeps me in a great state of joy. And so if you can look at it selfishly, and I like to talk about this idea of being selfish to be selfless. So by me having more joy and cultivating my own joy, then that's going to be expressed in my words, thoughts, and deeds, or what we call right speech, right action, right livelihood, and then it's going to have a rippling effect because I know emotions to be contagious. And of course, at some point, I remember listening to Krishnamurti talking about this idea of freedom now or never, and I just say, “Joy

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now or never.” So be joyful, to be in joy. I'm interested in joy. And so one way to have more joy is to have a mudita practice. There's not a lot of literature out there, or there wasn't, as I was evolving in this process, about how you create joy. There's not a lot of instruction on that. And so I felt the need to bring that more to the fore and say, “Let's practice joy.” And you can practice joy just by whenever somebody accomplishes something or achieves something, we can celebrate them, even if we don't like them, even if we don't know them, because to me, most of the media is really focused on controversy. Who's doing worse than I am?

I grew up Southern Baptist. It's not the gospel. The gospel is good news. So even though there's the different religious practices or doctrines or whatnot, they're all really talking about this idea of doing good. As the Buddha talked about, do good, avoid evil, purify the mind and heart.

It's something about cultivating a positive mindset, and we know this, it's called the broaden-and-build theory. When you get your mind state positive, your cognitive functioning, your ability to tolerate discomfort, your ability to see clearly, your ability to think and have an open mind and have access to your creativity is really enhanced, and so anything that cultivates a positive mindset or cultivates us in a mood that allows us or moves us naturally towards goodwill, that's moving toward I and the other are one. And you see it every once in a while. When we had the Marathon Bombing here, where I live in Boston, you have people running towards the explosion, not away. Every once in a while we get beyond this illusion of separateness. So I don't talk about *anatta*. I talk about the illusion of separateness because *anatta* is just one of those phrases I can't think my way into, but I could behave my way into this idea of I and the other one, or this illusion of separateness. Every once in a while we get beyond that. And even in football, one of the most competitive sports is football. And this past season, there was a young man that made a tackle. He played for Buffalo, and I think they were playing Cincinnati. I don't remember the opposing team, but as he tackled him, he had a heart attack, and he fell back down and everybody went over to help this guy. They suspended play. And there

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was a moment where we got beyond this illusion of separateness, and then we were there. There was a natural movement of the heart.

Sharon Salzberg: I often think we live in a time where we're taught to feel better about ourselves by putting other people down, and I remember years ago watching the Winter Olympics, and these two people got up and danced on ice. As soon as they were done, the announcer, not even drawing breath, barked out, “Lacks artistry.” And I thought, “My God, these people just danced on ice. Give them a moment.” But we're not trained to be that way. So talking about mudita, as you have, as an inner wellspring of joy that could be available to us under all circumstances, it's really interesting to look at how we can tap into that wellspring that is actually there underneath the conditioning.

George Mumford: Yes, and I think it's actually like an undiscovered country. It's like a place that needs to be explored even more and understand it. That's why it was one of the tenets that I learned from my recovery is if you want to learn something, teach it. And so when I started teaching mudita, I started learning more about it and having more access to it.

James Shaheen: George, one of the things that really kills joy or works against that cultivation of the heart is jealousy or envy, especially in highly competitive environments that you've worked in. So how can we do to help us work with envy in healthy ways? Because that comes up all the time. People get stumped by that all the time.

George Mumford: Well, let me talk about the Chicago Bulls because we were talking about them. There's a documentary called *The Last Dance*, and in *The Last Dance*, it's interesting. They talk about the Bulls playing against the Detroit Pistons and the Detroit Pistons just beating the crap out of them. Dennis Rodman was on the Detroit Pistons, and I believe both Michael and Scottie have scars from interacting with him. Fast forward to 1996 and he becomes their teammate. But they were smart enough to realize that, OK, that was then, this is now. And then we had other guys on that team, like B. J. Armstrong, that used to play for us. And he was just

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really hating on us, because that's the tendency. And so if you realize that who's your enemy today is going to be your friend tomorrow, or your teammate who's on the opposite team is going to be your friend tomorrow, and what do you do when you play against your brother, your literal brother, or your best friend? And so you have to figure out the idea that how can we compete without losing our humanity? How can we compete where we don't make the other a thing instead of a whole person with a mind, body, heart, and soul? How do we realize that you compete, but then after you compete, this is what the Olympics is really about. It's amazing that we're in the Olympics. That was the intention of the Olympics was to compete in ways where we could get out the aggression, but it was to bring the best out of each of us. How can I bring the best out of you and you bring the best out of me? And so that's the intention. So we have to go back to what the intention was, how to compete in the right way, for the right reason, without losing our soul or our spirit by looking down at my peers in our community? I've learned that growing up, but I think the more I can do that, and it's interesting because I see some of the players that I've worked with over the years, and sometimes you can see them when the other person gets knocked down, they help them up. So you can see it just naturally flows through when you start opening your heart and realizing that I and the other one, or that we are all in this together, and that we have to help each other. And so we have to have these kinds of conversations, I would call these championship conversations. A champion isn't someone that just wins a championship. A champion is somebody who can actually walk away and say, "I gave everything I had," and that's a champion: to honestly express yourself and to be more focused on authenticity than achievement. And I know this sounds hokey, but I've been doing this, and it works. I mean, it's really powerful when we can have our heart in it.

Sharon Salzberg: You also describe the phenomenon of awfulizing, which is a great term, or seeing things through the lens of fear and doom. Can you say more about this tendency? How can mudita counter it?

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George Mumford: Yes. So the idea is that the autonomic nervous system has what we used to call the accelerator and the brake, the fight, flight, or freeze. When we're in survival mode, there's no space between stimulus and response.

If you're right-handed, it's not one hundred percent left brain, but the left brain dominates the conversation. And so when we can be still and know, then the other side, the rest and the digest is what we used to call it, or the growth mode, it can be accessible to us, but when we're in survival mode, this gentleman by the name of Bruce Lipton wrote a book called *Biology of Belief*, and he said on a cellular level, a cell is either in survival mode or growth mode. It can't be in both. And so when we're in survival mode, nine out of ten thoughts are going to be negative because it's all predicated on where's the danger. It's the reptilian brain, and it's looking for danger. And so by that conditioning, nine out of ten thoughts are going to be negative, so you're focusing on what's wrong, and when you're in that fight, flight, or freeze, you're on your heels, so there's no space. You're a reptile, so either fight, fighting, or freezing, or pausing and trying to figure things out or pausing and playing dead so you can get away.

So it's this idea of realizing that we have this nervous system and we can train ourselves to be more in the rest and digest. This woman wrote a book about positivity, and she said that we want to get the ratio of three to one, three positive thoughts to one negative thought. But believe it or not, to compete at a high level as an elite level, it's got to be somewhere around five or six to one. That's the broaden-and-build theory I talked about, that we have to train ourselves, but we have to first observe that I'm in survival mode. And if I'm in survival mode, I can't be in growth mode.

So the first thing I had to do is notice I'm in survival mode and get out of it. And then once I get into growth mode, then we're into something. So this ties in with my recovery because one of the things that I've been tied to is this idea of improving conscious contact with God or a higher power as we understand them, praying for knowledge of their will and the power to carry that out. But on a level of consciousness, what it's really saying is as I increase my level of

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consciousness, as Dr. Hawkins talked about, he talked about an attractive field. At a certain level of consciousness, certain choices are available to me. So it's another way of saying that I'm creating more space for me to be creative and how I respond to things.

As Viktor Frankl says, in that space between stimulus and responses, we have the freedom and the power to choose. So when we can have more consciousness or when we can slow things down, then we have this ability to reflect on something before we do it. And this is so important that the Buddha taught his son this. That was one of the first things he taught him. He said, “You have to reflect on it. If I do this and if it's going to hurt me, it's not to be done. If it's going to hurt the other, it's not to be done.” There's this idea that true understanding comes from reflecting on experience. And so once again, when we reflect on what worked, what didn't work, what was wholesome, what's not wholesome, that's all about right view. Right view is about seeing things clearly, what's wholesome, what's unwholesome. So when you see things wholesomely, you have right view and your intentions are wholesome, then your speech, your action, and your work and everything else is going to be wholesome. It's so simple but profound, this idea of knowing what works and what doesn't work. So this idea of an examined life is really important, and an unexamined life, they say, is not worth living.

So that's what we need to do, not just in sports, but just how am I living? What thoughts am I entertaining? So I talk about this idea of self-awareness and then self-regulation. We can regulate our thoughts, feelings, and behaviors. We can even regulate how we interpret things. So why is that so important? Well, the research says that ninety percent of our long-term happiness is predicated on how the nervous system and the brain interprets experience. Not ten percent, ninety percent. And so there's an added value to knowing the truth because the truth will make you free. Seeing things as they are and being able to understand it. It's not what happens to me; it's my reaction or my response. And this is what Victor Frankl talked about with unavoidable suffering. It ceases to be suffering when you find meaning in it, or when you just say, “OK, that's

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suffering, but I don't need to add anguish to it. If I embrace it, then what's the lesson?" Then let it go and move on.

James Shaheen: So, George, we've been talking about the benefits of mudita, or sympathetic joy, but how do we actually cultivate it in our daily lives?

George Mumford: That's interesting. Anytime somebody does something good or has an achievement, just celebrate for them: “May you be happy. And may you have more of that.” If somebody has a birthday, “May you have many happy returns,” or whatever. So you have to practice it. Some of the practice isn't so much like sitting in silence, although you can do that as well. The Dalai Lama says that compassion can be really helpful if you want to get out of the negative emotions and into the positive ones. And so we know the four abodes of loving-kindness practice, compassion practice, mudita practice, equanimity, being able to see things of equal value or giving full attention to what's pleasant and unpleasant, not just picking and choosing. So it's really a way of just cultivating positive mind states. But I would say that there are lots of opportunity to practice, especially during the Olympics, because a team loses, and usually it's our team or somebody we like, or we like the way they look, or how they feel, or they seem to be nice, and you root for them, and you can root for them, but whoever wins, they win, so can you be happy for them?

This is a practice where you don't have to go anywhere to practice it. It's right in your face. It's right there. When you see somebody and you see yourself saying, “Oh, I don't like so and so, or, they irritate me,” of course, with the political climate, you have a lot of opportunities to do that. There's a myriad of ways to do it. But I think the main thing is to appreciate, I like to call it catching yourself doing something right, or catching someone else doing something right. Shawn Achor wrote a book called *The Happiness Advantage*. That's a happiness research habit. For two minutes, you write somebody a nice note and tell them how much you care for them or whatever. Cultivating happiness is really helpful. Gratitude is helpful. So all of these things are interacting. Because when you're in a positive mindset, it's probably easier for you to root for

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somebody you don't like or somebody who you don't think deserves something. You understand what I'm saying? But it's an open question. So those are some ideas, but I'm pretty sure people can do it in other ways. But I think getting that right view is really, really important and doing right effort, which is changing the mind into a wholesome mind state.

James Shaheen: I've also heard you talk about responding positively to challenging situations, and you say that one of the most important lessons you faced in recovery was learning to pray for people who annoyed you. Could you say more about this practice?

George Mumford: Yes. That was one of my first spiritual practices, because at the time I had some people that were really, really challenging for me. And I was told that I should pray for them. And when the woman suggested that to me, part of me wanted to say, “Man, I ought to smack you for telling me that. I don't want to do it.” I felt like, “How dare you. They should be praying for me!” But once again, that was my thinking, and so I had to let go of that and just do it. And what I found was I couldn't believe how much the person changed. I had not had one conversation with them, but here's the thing that's really important that we need to get. Self-talk is happening all the time with inner dialogue. And if you just think of a challenging relationship you have, you can have a conversation with that person and they're not even there. That conversation you're having is creating the possibility of you doing exactly what you're thinking because your self-talk is a reflection of mind. And so if we change that, because you don't just think about them, you can visualize it, you can feel it. Once again, the brain doesn't know the difference between what it experiences and what it imagines. And so when we go through that, we go through all of the sensations. You can visualize it, you can feel it, you can taste it. And that's how much we get into it, but we can switch that and have a conversation where you're speaking to each other and actually what you want is happening and you're programming yourself, you're creating neural nets by focusing on what you want and focusing on what you want to create, only entertaining wholesome thoughts, thinking about them in wholesome ways, and you will see that person will change. So when I'm praying for them, I'm actually changing

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my relationship to them, even though they don't know it. As I change and I see them differently, it totally changes everything. I was told that loving-kindness is like seeing a young child that's lost. How would you relate to them? If you see them as somebody who is in recovery or somebody who is in suffering and you have an opportunity to relate to them, you can get them out of their suffering, or you see them as their buddhanature, their Christ consciousness, divine spark. That's how I relate to people. I see a lot of masterpieces. I see a lot of buddhanature. So I'm relating to that buddhanature. I'm not relating to the persona. I'm relating to the person who's worthy of love and compassion. Does that make sense?

James Shaheen: Yeah, that makes sense. It used to be that everybody annoyed me until somebody finally said to me, “Maybe you're the annoying person.”

George Mumford: Well, yes. So can I share a quote? I talk about Neville Goddard all the time. And he's written a lot of books like *The Power of Awareness* and stuff like that. And there's a quote on the inside of the jacket of his book. He said, “Leave the mirror alone and change your face.”

James Shaheen: That's a good one,

Sharon Salzberg: James, I thought you were going to say, “Everybody annoyed me, and then someone suggested I do a retreat in loving-kindness.”

James Shaheen: Oh, that did happen to me too. In fact, Sharon did say that to me once in response to my incessant complaints, and it worked. It worked.

George Mumford: So Sharon, you remember the window wars?

Sharon Salzberg: Oh, I do.

George Mumford: I used to get upset with Larry, especially in Cambridge, because we had some interesting characters that came through there. You would close the window because it was

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cold, and somebody else would open it, or you would have your own seat, and somebody would take your cushion and sit in your seat. And I was going in with all of this, “They did this and they did that,” and Larry would always point me back to myself and say, “OK, so you're making a choice here. What about you? I'm not interested in them. I'm interested in you.” That was a hard lesson to hear because I wasn't trying to hear it. I mean, once again, it was my thinking that got in the way. Because I respected my teachers, I did what they told me to do, even though I didn't want to do it. It took me decades to figure that out, but they were seeds that were planted.

If everybody annoys you, it's because you meet what you mirror. If you don't like what you're seeing, change it. That's what the practice has been teaching me all along. It's about me beginning with myself, not to end with myself, but it's about me, how I'm relating to it and how I have these attachments that are causing me to suffer, really, and that are causing conflict.

Sharon Salzberg: So I have one last question, which is very connected to what you were just saying, which is you say that freedom is a state of mind, and liberation means that even in really difficult circumstances, we know we have a choice about how we respond.

George Mumford: Yes. That's what Viktor Frankl calls the ultimate freedom. We can choose our reaction. And it's interesting. I have an interesting story. It goes back not forty years ago. It was early in my recovery. I was really close with my uncles, but this one uncle, he lived in Detroit and his wife died and he moved to Boston and he had cancer. When he first moved back, he used to say, “How come you don't come by and hang out?” because he'd be smoking weed and stuff, and I said, “Well, I'm in recovery, I don't do that anymore. I don't drink, smoke, whatever,” but I'd go by and see him. And when he died, he decided he was going to die without taking medication because he wanted to be clear. So I think I had some impact on him from that. It was like, wow, you just don't know. Even when I'm doing my thing and I'm being selfish, I'm being selfless as well, because I've had a couple of people who stopped drinking because they said, “Man, you changed when you start drinking. So maybe I had to try that.”

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So we don't know. When we can be good, when we can be kind, it has an impact. We have no idea how it's going to impact people, but just a smile to somebody or an act of kindness can actually maybe prevent somebody from taking their life or from doing something very life changing that's negative.

James Shaheen: George Mumford, thanks so much. It's been a pleasure. For our readers, George's last book is *Unlocked: Embrace Your Greatness, Find the Flow, Discover Success*. So, thanks again, George. We like to close these podcasts with a short guided meditation, so I'll hand it over to you.

George Mumford: Yes. Hopefully people are not driving and they're in a stationary place. And the idea is to become aware of the fact that you're sitting if you're sitting and just lightly close your eyes and we want to do the belly breathing. So as you breathe in, your belly's expanding. And as we breathe in, and the belly expands, and we breathe through the nose, we don't have to do any esoteric breathing, just breathing in and out through the nose, breathing in, experiencing the entire body, so you can feel the felt sense of sitting as you breathe in, all the way down to your toes, and bottoms of your feet, out to your fingers and thumbs, all the way up to your head and your ears. The body is encased in skin, so just imagining that's expanding and contracting as you breathe in and breathe out. So you're breathing in the area of awareness of the entire body, but it's really more about the felt sense of sitting and breathing and knowing it. So breathing in, experiencing the entire body. And once again, the thought gets us there, but then dropping down below the concept of a body so that you're actually with the bare sensations of sitting and breathing. And so we'll do this for a few cycles of breathing and experiencing the entire body.

So, I'd like to think about it as taking a pebble and dropping it into a lake. So I would call it stopping and dropping. And as the pebble is moving down towards the lake bottom, there's a natural calming. And then once the pebble gets to the lake bottom, there's a resting of being held by the lake bottom. And so if you visualize that and being that pebble, we're just resting, being supported by the lake bottom. And so the idea is to observe things as they come so we're aware,

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we're alert, but we're not reacting or judging. We're not pushing. Things have a way of pulling things towards us. And so if a school of fish or fish happens to go by, we just observe the fish without judging, just noticing, holding our center, being supported, resting, dropping, stopping, calming, resting. And the resting allows us to not only heal but to renew, recover. It also gives us access to this place where there's a creativity and a wisdom that expresses itself. All we're doing is just sitting and breathing and knowing, distinguishing between the in-breath and the out-breath, but feeling the felt sense of sitting. And when our mind gets lost in thoughts or images, just by thinking about the body, attention goes there. And then it's just a matter of dropping down below the concept of a body. So we actually have the felt sense of the body. That's what we're feeling as we breathe in and breathe out. So we'll take a few more cycles of just breathing in and breathing out with that image. If that works, if it's helpful, and if not, then you can drop it. This idea of just sitting and breathing and knowing it. Breathing in, experiencing the entire body. Breathing out, experiencing the entire body while sitting. So we're sitting and breathing and knowing. Knowing has to do with feeling it and being here now and experiencing what it feels like to be sitting and breathing in, what it feels like to be sitting and breathing out.

So we'll take a few more cycles of just breathing in and experiencing the body, and breathing out and experiencing the body. And when you're ready, just breathing in and experiencing the body while sitting. And as you breathe out, just letting go of the body, letting go of the breath. And just opening your eyes. So as Sharon would say, we have arrived.

James Shaheen: Thank you. That was great.

George Mumford: Yes.

James Shaheen: OK, well, George, thanks for your time. I know you're busy, so we really appreciate it.

George Mumford: Thank you for inviting me. This was a lot of fun.

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Sharon Salzberg: It was great to see you. This was wonderful.

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