I am a professor in the Department of Mathematics and Statistics at the University of Massachusetts Amherst. The five years that have passed since my last Harvard Class Report changed my life.

In February 2000, in the midst of a successful career, I was struck by headaches. Debilitating, incapacitating, chronic headaches. Flaring up without warning in the middle of my face, they had the potential to end my successful career. The pain was so intense that eyeglasses became impossible to wear. The pressure of even the most lightweight pair caused agonizing pain to radiate through my forehead and nose. I suffered from the pain, and I suffered even more from my outrage over the pain. What did I do to deserve this? With one exception, all the doctors I consulted ranged from being clueless to disastrous.

Desperate, unable to find relief from medication, in 2003 I turned to Buddhist meditation. Starting as a practical technique for dealing with the headaches, meditation has blossomed into an all-encompassing approach to my entire life. It has taught me to relax. It has taught me not to react. It has taught me to see. Although the headaches have not disappeared, my daily meditation has considerably reduced their intensity and frequency. What has disappeared is the suffering from the pain. No more self-pity. No more anger. Just acceptance and insight.

The headache pain, once my brutal enemy, has become my best teacher. Through meditation, it has influenced every aspect of my life. What the pain has taught me is the subject of a recently completed book entitled Blinding Pain, Simple Truth: How Buddhist Meditation Can Change Your Life. I am now trying to publish it. The book describes how Buddhist teachings and daily meditation can empower readers to heal the suffering caused by physical and emotional pain. My goal in writing it is to inspire readers to reexamine their experiences with suffering and pain and eventually to embrace their lives with equanimity, gratitude, and joy.
My suffering in the aftermath of the headache attack of 2000 was compounded by not talking about it and by trudging through my daily routine as if everything were fine when in fact I was seething with anger and frustration inside. After the healing through meditation, I began to talk about my experiences, both for catharsis and in order to help other people become aware of the suffering in their lives and heal that suffering. That is why I wrote the book. That is why I wrote this report in the way I did.

Besides Buddhist meditation, the love and support of my wife Alison helped me survive the headache attack. Alison and I met in 1963, dated while I was at Harvard, were married in 1969, and now, four decades, two children, and two grandchildren later, are still going strong. Alison continues to teach first grade in the nearby town of Leverett.

Both of our children, Melissa and Michael, live in New York City with their families. Melissa married Kenneth Glassman in 2000, and they are the parents of our beloved grandchildren, Noah and Lilah. Melissa is a pediatrician on the staff of Columbia Presbyterian Medical Center, and Ken is a Senior Managing Director at Sandell Asset Management. Our son Michael married Lauren Popper in 2006. Lauren, who graduated from Harvard Law School in 2007, is an Assistant Attorney General in the Public Integrity Bureau of the Office of the New York State Attorney General. Michael, a recent graduate from Harvard Business School, is a Senior Associate at GreenOrder, an environmental consulting firm. Our children both met their spouses at Yale University when they were undergraduates there.

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My experience with meditation has also reinvigorated my relationship to mathematics, which, prior to the headaches, had often struck me as being too narrow, too focused, too disconnected from my emotional life. I now cherish mathematics as a spiritual undertaking. When I am confused, mathematics, like meditation, allows me to see clearly. This clarity is one of its greatest gifts, which I try to convey in both my teaching and research.

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The book describes how Buddhist teachings and daily meditation can empower readers to heal the suffering caused by physical and emotional pain. As the book shows, Buddhist teachings also provide a new lens for reading the Bible, yielding fresh insights into fundamental questions of birth and death, ego and enlightenment, sickness and health — insights that speak to the spiritual seeker in surprisingly relevant ways. My goal in writing the book is to inspire readers to reexamine their experiences with suffering and pain and eventually to embrace their lives with equanimity, gratitude, and joy.

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Here is the profile sent to me from the Harvard Class Report Office. It contains the personal narrative.


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