

QUESTION: *I have just begun meditation practice, and I'm doing it on my own, since there is no local Vipassana community that I know of in my area. I am using the Internet to practice-forty-five minutes in the morning and forty-five minutes in the evening-using an audio file on the method taught by Mahasi Sayadaw.*

I am facing some questions and some obstacles. First, I am a smoker. Clearly I realize it would be beneficial to the practice to quit, but is it essential? Second, when sitting for forty-five minutes, I become very sore. Am I right to ignore this, so long as it is not unendurable? Finally, I have read that community is beneficial - if not essential-to practice. As there is no sangha in my area, is the practice moot?

NARAYAN LIEBENSON GRADY: Nowadays, being a smoker is considered a sin and personal failing; often we condemn not just smoking but smokers themselves even though, in my opinion, the reality of smoking is no worse than some other unhealthy habits.

Like any compulsion, smoking bears investigation. Since smoking endangers your health, and the health of those around you, it would be wise action to quit. But health concerns aside, being a smoker has no bearing on liberation.

You say you are getting very sore when sitting for forty-five minutes. It's possible that you are simply in a phase of adjustment. When you first start, it's a bit like doing pushups. You may find that as you continue meditating, your body and mind will adjust to this new posture and your muscles will ache less. It is important to note whether the soreness continues beyond the sitting. If it doesn't, it's OK to continue with the sitting.

Sometimes our fear of discomfort is worse than the actual sensations of discomfort. However, if you are just gritting your teeth and trying to make it through to the end of a sitting session, you may want to inquire into your motivation. You may be pushing yourself unwisely, trying too hard to get something out of the practice. It would be wiser to practice with the intention of relaxing, accepting, and discovering how things are.

Also, if you push too hard you run the risk of quitting your practice at some point, whereas if you practice in a slow and steady way, you will be able to reap the fruit from practice your whole life. Remember, the aim of practice is to cultivate wisdom and equanimity, not endurance.

As for community what you have read is true: taking refuge in the sangha of like-minded fellow practitioners is invaluable. It is one of the triple gems of Buddhist practice. However, we mustn't be shortsighted in our definition of community. Just because there isn't anyone in your particular geographical area doesn't mean that there aren't countless beings all over the world who are practicing at this very moment. When you sit, try to remember that although you can't see us, many people are sitting with you.