"I was a chain smoker"

by Syed Bux

Who says you can’t give up smoking? It’s supposed to be easier to overcome alcoholism and even narcotic drugs addiction than to give up confirmed smoking. But nobody can tell me this—because I did give up smoking, 18 years back, after being a chain smoker for almost 40 years.

Tobacco should rightly be classed with dangerous drugs. It contains nicotine, a lethal drug. A pin dipped in pure nicotine can kill a dog within seconds. It keeps stealing on you unawares. Yet smoking has been viewed for over a century as something of a status symbol. Offering a cigarette was seen as instrumental in breaking the ice or as a prelude to pleasant talk.

I was introduced to smoking in my early teens by a childhood friend as a mark of freedom and self-assertion. After the first two or three disastrous experiences, I was on the road to becoming a regular smoker. Until I had graduated from high school, I was compelled to smoke surreptitiously in respect for social taboos. But once I joined the University college in a distant city and lived in a boys’ hostel, there was no restraint on smoking. I could smoke boldly and openly to my heart’s content.

Soon I became a heavy and regular and at last a chain smoker, puffing away and burning ever-increasing amounts of money, heedless of the anger and remonstrance of my parents. In all this time, I never for a moment thought of giving up smoking. Why give up? It looked so natural, like breathing. I had seen many of my friends giving up smoking dozens of times. Some took to sucking peppermint lozenges when they felt an urge to smoke; some used to chew cardamom and aniseed while others resorted to chewing ‘pan.’ All of them returned soon enough to that tawny weed, tobacco.

However, in my case, there were two short breaks of a few days each time: once in 1932, when I had fallen head-over-heels in love with a girl just out of high school. She very strongly insisted that I cut down on my smoking. “Not another puff if you really love me; and you shall not buy or smoke another cigarette after now.” I had to throw away the cigarette I was smoking.

True to my word, I stopped smoking; but I felt completely lost and depressed. I seemed to have lost all interest in life. Within a couple of days, my love must have regretted what she had done to me. With a smile, one evening, she suddenly produced a packet of very costly scented cigarettes and said, “I can’t bear to see you quietly withering away and looking so crestfallen and woebegone.” In no time at all, I was my old jolly self again, puffing away like a chimney.

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The second interruption came five years later. I had found a very special friend in Naseer, the son of a rich landlord and silk merchant of my home town. He made me give up smoking. But he too relented in two or three days time and released me from my promise. This time my chain smoking continued up to the end of 1969.

I strongly believe in the marvellous powers of the human brain and the human will. During the 1960s, I used to hold heated discussions on this and related topics with a friend in Karachi. One evening we discussed ingrained habits and particularly smoking. As usual, our discussion soon drifted to other matters. But a germ of an idea had started to tickle my brain and fire up my feelings. I decided to give up smoking once and for all, more as a test of will power than the desire to get rid of a bad habit. This time there was no outside influence; no compulsion other than my own determination to do it.

A few days later, when the craving got too strong, I bought a packet of good cigarettes and caught hold of a friend who was only a casual smoker. I made him sit before me and smoke as many cigarettes as he could at a time. He agreed only when he was assured that it was merely as a test of my endurance and will power. Having mustered the strength to watch him smoke, and having enjoyed the familiar aroma in the atmosphere, I felt a sudden easing of the urge to smoke myself.

From then on, the urge gradually died down until at last, I began to dislike tobacco smoke. So, you see, I gave up smoking JUST LIKE THAT, after being a chain smoker for so long. Every one of you can do it if only you can summon the will to do so. As Socrates said: “Nothing is stronger than human determination.”