



Inside out Practice

JAMES HICKLIN

THE PAJAMA ROOM

I recall the day that religion died for me. It was the day spirituality was born. I was 12 years old at the time, standing in The Pajama Room, contemplating life.

**On the day
I first
considered the
Four Noble
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on that day
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be fixed.**

The Pajama Room. That's what my sister called the disciplinary room at the rehab center. It got its name from the paper hospital clothes they made you wear, complete with matching blue booties.

So there I stood, with nothing to do but contemplate how much I hated life. I wasn't particularly introspective. There was simply nothing else to do. There were no personal effects in The Pajama Room. Identity was a luxury there, hard to find in the white metal walls, hospital tiled floors, and the gymnastics mat meant to function as a bed.

There was, however, a window. A picture-window size, quite large. Of course, it was reinforced with steel frames and security mesh that ran through the glass itself. (Can't have people breaking free from their misery, now can we?)

Looking out the window was like looking onto the landscape of my life. There was a little tree, fragile and lifeless, standing outside the window. It was wintertime, just after Christmas. The grass was dead, as though it was showing its sympathy for the dead tree by joining in the lifelessness. The sky was bleak, as though the sun would never shine again. I spent many hours looking out that window, wondering how I'd gotten there and where I'd go next, wondering if the security mesh of life would keep me from freedom.

There, in the midst of my brooding and anger, it happened. I should have seen it, but I didn't. Nor did I realize what had happened until long after the fact. While I sat, full of remorse in the Pajama Room, God died. Not the great-big-ol'-father-figure-in-the-sky God, though he was part of the equation; but God, anyone-or-anything-outside-of-myself that could fix me.

I had finally come to accept what everyone had been telling me for so long. I was broken. Not just a kid who acted "bad" every now and again. I was completely broken, worthless.

I guess I had thought about it long before that day. I just hadn't accepted it. Until then I'd always thought that someone would save me from myself. I had always thought some great, merciful angel would come into my life and make everything better. In the Pajama Room I stopped believing. I stopped believing in angels and demons, gods and goddesses. I stopped believing in any supernatural being that was going to bring me to salvation.

Don't get me wrong. It was not that I'd stopped believing in the existence of such things. I had quite a long history of churchification, occultism, and everything else in between. I'd pled to every kind of being I had read about in my short 12 years of life: "Please, please stop the suffering that is my life." No, I hadn't stopped believing in their existence. I just knew none of them were going to swoop in and fix me. Not then, not ever.

There in The Pajama Room I'd finally come to accept the fact that even if such beings existed,

they just didn't care. God was no savior, no matter what form he or she took. I smile now, recalling my eulogy to God.

When I got out of The Pajama Room, I returned to my room. I stood in the bathroom, clutching the disposable razor I'd convinced the orderly I needed for my three chin hairs. I pried the blade free of its plastic encasement. I placed it next to the pen I'd set on the sink. I removed my shirt

and stared down at my hairless chest. Without much thought, I picked up the razor and began to carve a Sign of David into my chest. The cuts weren't very deep; it was a disposable razor, after all. They were deep enough though, to bring a bright red bleeding star to my chest. I set the blade down and picked up the pen. I didn't know there was a difference between tattoo ink and disposable pen ink. I pried off the top of the pen and began smearing ink into my wound. I wanted

this star to remain on my chest, as a sign to the world that yes, I was broken, and would never again forget that, for me, all hope was lost. At twelve years of age, this act said all that.

Well, the star only lasted for a week or so. But I believe it saved my life. Had I not found the inner strength to make that mark of defiance, I might have given in to the overwhelming sadness and ended it all. I wanted to die back then and spent many hours trying to figure out how to do it painlessly. My mark, my stand against the suffering of life, somehow kept me going.



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Now in retrospect, what's more interesting to me, is what was born in me that day. As with all birth, it began with blood and ended with tears. Mine was a long delivery. The blood came when I was 12, the tears at 20, when sitting in my prison cell, finally convinced that what I had first believed all those years ago was true. Not only did everyone tell me I was broken, in my prison cell (in administrative segregation—solitary confinement—for disciplinary reasons) I had proven it. They were all correct. I was broken and there was no one to fix me, and no hope at all.

So why did I start this by saying that the day religion died in me, spirituality was born? Religion is a process of looking to the world outside of yourself for assistance. Religion is looking for the world around you to fix you. At the young age of 12, I gave up on that. I gave up on the idea that the world would ever fix me.

At that time I didn't think I could be fixed, so I can't say that spirituality was fully formed in me then, but the process was begun. The seed had been planted. On the day I first considered the Four Noble Truths, there in my administrative segregation cell—the pajama room of my current residence—on that day, I knew I could be fixed. I could do it myself. That's when spirituality was born in me.

Maybe that sounds egotistical. You don't know me, and don't know that in my mind I'm still broken. In my world, my mind, there are more things wrong than right. I made it that way. So not knowing these things, it could seem fair to cry foul. I am, in fact, a long way from being fixed. I have a mountain of shame which every now and then grows oppressively high. And just in case I ever forget "broken," just in case I might start to think I'm alright...I just have to look around, look at "where I live," and I remember how I got here. I can never take that back. It will never go away.

So, when I say I am the only one who can fix me, it isn't some grandiose idea of how well suited I am to the task. Lord knows, if this were an interview to decide who was most suited to the job, I'd be the last one I'd hire to fix me. Unfortunately, there's no one else who will do it. No one else who can do it.

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Which brings me to the point. It is often the case that we as American Buddhists come to Buddhism not as Buddhist, but as apostate Christians/Muslims/Jews/etc. We come to Buddhism saying, "Oh, right; no father-son-holy-ghost business." But what we really mean is "I like that Buddha-God fellow." What we mean is, "Well, I wanted to be fixed by one of the other Guys, but they didn't seem to be up for the job, so I'm going to try the new Guy on the block. Maybe he can do it." As a man with a mountain of problems, I can tell you, this new guy, the Buddha, can't fix your problems any more than the others could.

So, all this is true: I'm still broken and the Buddha can't fix me. Then why do I have such faith? Why do I trust in the words, in the teachings of a being I know can't do the one thing I want anyone, in this world or another, to do for me? Why do I trust a being who can't fix me, who can't make me whole?

The answer is simple. The Blessed One didn't say, "Come here and let me fix you." The Blessed One didn't say, "Trust in me and I will heal you." He didn't say, "Pray to the sky and all will be well." What the Blessed One did say was this: "The Way is not in the sky, the Way is in your heart." What he did say was, "Do not accept my words out of respect...." The Blessed One said, "Tathagatas teach in the world." What he said, and I'm paraphrasing here, is "Hey, get off your butt and fix yourself, 'cause no one else can do it for you."

So, I may be broken. I have a lot of baggage. I may spend the rest of my life in this prison. I have large closet so full of skeletons that I'll need more than one lifetime to deal with them. But I will do it, and I'll do it with a big Buddhist smile. Not because I'm especially righteous. Not because I'm so pure. Not because I'm particularly generous. Not because I'm exceptionally compassionate. But because I am a good Buddhist.

I'm a good Buddhist, not because I am these things, but because I aspire to be all of them, in body, speech and mind.

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