

BOOK REVIEW

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A Guided Tour of Hell: A Graphic Memoir by Samuel Bercholz, illustrated by Pema Namdol Thaye, Boulder, CO: Shambhala, 2016, 147 pp., \$24.95 hc, (ISBN-13 9781611801422); \$16.99 Kindle ed. e-book.

It might perhaps have been predicted, after an immersion of 35 years in the deeps of Eastern traditions, that if the American Buddhist founder of Shambhala Publications were to have a near-death experience (NDE), it would not be an ordinary one. And indeed, for Shambhala's founder, Samuel Bercholz, not only was his NDE atypical, but also his book about it breaks norms in both philosophical and publishing terms.

The NDE was actually a second one for Bercholz. The first came when he was in his 20s, not long after the beginnings of his Shambhala bookstore named for a legendary spiritual kingdom. He had just returned from his first extended buying trip through India and found himself with an unnamed illness. Soon hospitalized with a raging fever, he heard staff members talking about his dying. He saw a rush of bright light, and then, "I just followed the light into luminous space, my consciousness joyously making its way to a heavenly bliss."

That's it. Writing from his perspective in late middle age, Bercholz described the fever—which turned out to be typhus—but not the experience. It sounds ho-hum: "The dying person floats up, looks down upon the scene of their death, and then is drawn into the light" (p. 16).

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That is all he says about it. As anyone will recognize who has spent decades in intense spiritual study or hearing and reading NDE accounts, that is all that *needs* to be said: It was merely another NDE, or in Bercholz's words, another 'typical scenario.' The second NDE, though, would inspire him to construct an entire book.

By the time of the second NDE, decades had passed. Shambhala had grown from a few shelves in a popular Berkeley, California, bookstore to become a respected publishing house of works on Eastern spiritual traditions and Christian mysticism. Bercholz had made many more trips through India and other Buddhist countries, had studied for 17 years with the legendary Tibetan master Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche and later with Thinley Norbu Rinpoche, and remained a voracious reader on religion and Eastern traditions. He had become wealthy and almost lost it, married, fathered children, separated from his wife, and continued an active life in the Buddhist community. He said of his life, "These [changes] are further confirmations of the truth of impermanence—one of the three essential facts of existence as taught by the Buddha" (p. 17).

And then came what in Asian culture is referred to as an 'obstacle year.' For Bercholz, it began on a bakingly hot day as he was about to board a plane with a group of fellow Buddhists and their teacher. Instead of making that trip, he collapsed from a heart attack and headed for six-way bypass surgery. He awakened to find a thick tube controlling his breathing; his body was tethered by many smaller tubes, and his chest, which had been split open, was wired shut. He fought panic. It was the beginning of a painful recovery, in which he observed not only his own agony but the suffering of other patients and their family members. Suffering, he reminded readers, is another of Buddhism's three essential facts of existence.

After a time of gaining strength, there was talk of his going home, but he fell abruptly ill and fainted. As with the typhus, he awakened fevered, on a bed of ice. His blood pressure dropped to nothing, and he realized that he was dying. Writing about it, he described having no fear, no grasping, only a sense of peace. And then . . . without a body, without physical senses, his consciousness descended "into the depths of earth and space simultaneously," dropping into a world he described as "a mass of unspeakable pain" (p. 30).

It is beginning to dawn on me that I'm in the hell that Buddhism describes as one of the six realms of existence in samsara [the cycle of birth, suffering, and death]. What an unpleasant surprise to be here

. . .

Then a peaceful presence appears to me, a translucent, flaming being who radiates kindness, compassion, tranquility, and lucidity. Only afterward do I identify this appearance as the Buddha of Hell.

He informs me of where I am and that I am only a temporary visitor. He tells me that I am not damned to this place, but that I will be given a tour, guided by him.

You must understand that there was no Buddha speaking to me. There was no me. There was no up and no down. There was no space and no time. To communicate the ineffable, I have to use the language and imagery of our ordinary world because there is no other way.

I'm simultaneously relieved and embarrassed: relieved that I'm fortunate enough to be greeted by this being; embarrassed because it's obvious that I've made my way into the very heart of what people call hell. It never crossed my mind that I could wind up in such a place. (p. 25)

The Shift

At this point the book shifts gears.

Like most people who have had a distressing NDE, Bercholz did not speak of his experience for many years. But when he did, because of his unique position as a publisher, he was quickly urged to produce a book. Again, as a publisher, he was attentive not only to what he said but also to the manner in which he said it; he understood how much presentation matters. How, then, within the confines of a printed page or digital screen, to convey the *feel* and the *impact* of an indescribable experiential event?

His decision was to produce “not an ordinary book, but a kind of graphic novel that would impart through words and pictures an inkling of the ineffable.” The brilliantly talented artist Pema Namdol Thaye agreed to collaborate. Known as a master of traditional Tibetan arts—painter, sculptor, 3-D mandala specialist, and architect—he was also trained in comic book art.

A Guided Tour of Hell is not a straightforward, linear description of the phenomena Bercholz experienced. Rather, it is an interactive, interdimensional model involving a necessarily linear linguistic account (words) and three types of visuals: to accompany the introductory biographical material, black-and-white, comic-book-like line drawings; for the concluding section about Buddhist perspectives and teachings, more traditionally Tibetan black-and-white drawings of the Six Realms of the Wheel of Life; and, sandwiched between the drawing sections, the illustrator's interpretations of the kinds of events that might have occurred during Bercholz's experience, in an extensive series of paintings in color.

As Bercholz explained his intention: “To convey realities that occur outside of ordinary space and time I had to create a language that evokes rather than explains, which in many ways lacks precision and accuracy but which nonetheless *points*” (p. ix). The book’s “language,” then, includes not only words and artwork but also an imaginative structuring of characters, like those that might appear in a novel, to convey the essence of the experience rather than the exact details—not a literal account but seeking to convey the ineffable.

At great length, Bercholz described his NDE to his illustrator. Over the course of a year, Pema created the black-and-white drawings while consulting regularly with the author. Next, saturating himself in Bercholz’s narrative, Pema meditated and painted his interpretation of key points in the NDE. As Bercholz stressed, these images are *interpretive, not literal*; think of them as paintings, not photographs. “The images may not always reflect the *exact* details of my narrative; the artist’s response to my story springs from his own deep sources of creativity and inspiration” (p. viii).

The final step of the collaboration, in Bercholz’s words, “involved my contemplating the paintings—Pema’s interpretations of my speech—and then entering into a kind of imaginal dialogue with the images. From this arose a *written* language, complete with characters and hellscapes constructed from both memory and imagination” (p. ix). From this “seeing,” he says, “I created characters that personify some of the qualities of the myriad denizens of hell” (p. ix). For each ‘character’ Bercholz has created a personality, life history, and ways of thinking, feeling, and acting that might be considered to have resulted in the fictional individual’s presence in hell.

Does It Work?

Interpretation

Once its experiencer awakens, every NDE is a series of interpretations as first one hearer, then another, processes the story of the experience in terms of his or her individual background and understandings. The individual asks, “What was that?” and the words that answer are interpretation. For every hearer, there is another interpretation.

With this book, Bercholz has made his NDE *intentionally* interpretive. As with every NDE, Bercholz’s internal narrative of his experience constituted Interpretation #1. Telling the narrative to his illustrator became Interpretation #2—as the original experience cannot be exactly captured in words. Through his paintings, Pema processed that telling through his understandings to produce Interpretation #3,

upon which Bercholz then meditated profoundly to arrive deeply at an invisible Interpretation #4—which, now, transformed into tangible book forms by literary structure and material presentation, might be considered Interpretation #5.

Making this imaginative nature more obvious is that the black-and-white drawings make no attempt at being representative but are done in comic book style, obviously interpretive. I found it to be a fascinating juxtaposition.

The Characters and the Culture

Bercholz commented:

A couple of close friends who read the manuscript were initially puzzled by these character vignettes, feeling that their inclusion created a mixed genre—part personal experience, part fiction—that could be confusing, especially for Western readers. If Buddhist hell is the intensified projection of an individual's mental habit-energy, are these stories merely dramatizations of my own habit-energy, or are the characters actual beings who might have lived (or will live) as humans on earth? I acknowledge that the fictional characters may give rise to skepticism as well as confusion between my spontaneous visions and what I had already learned as a student of Buddhism. I beg the reader's indulgence for these ambiguities, which were inescapable if the story was not to become encumbered with commentary. (p. x)

My curiosity is intense about what, in reference to the character vignettes, might be thought confusing 'especially for Western readers.' These very characters, under different names, are the same as would be expected in any Western hell: Omar, the suicide bomber fueled by his anger at the injustices in his life and the world around him; heartless Mbaya Moja (the Evil One), whose pain was transformed into a passion for vengeance and power; Yao Moguai, ruthless mass murderer who vowed never to have pity or regret; Pak Minsu, financial wizard and inventor of artificial intelligence who created a dizzying fortune and a polluted megalopolis; Momo Drollo, whose homemaking genius was overcome by bilious envy and bitterness; Jacques Nil, a sophisticated uninterested in spiritual pursuits, now constantly irritated, even furious that his material existence has vanished. And there are Mikyo Suzuki, perfectionist wife for whom empathy and compassion are alien concepts; and Afanas Popov, genius scientist-politician so dedicated to his ideology that he produces its ultimate protection: a 'doomsday machine' that will obliterate all consciousness.

Whether the book's characters reached hell by way of karma or theological judgment, only the names sound exotic to Western ears; the details are all too tediously, agonizingly familiar.

As for the potential for the stories' being "merely dramatization of [the author's] own habit-energy" (p. ix), one possibility seems immediately obvious: Followers of the psychotherapeutic work of Stanislav Grof (1996/1975) will notice the remarkable similarities between the details of the hell (or hells) described in this guided tour and those of his third basic perinatal matrix (BPM III), including such specifics as claustrophobia, mouth-filling suffocation, titanic struggle, direct contact with feces, demonic encounters, and explosive episodes.

An experience of BPM III, in clinical context, may well be life-altering but is temporary. As Bercholz noted,

The good news is that even the worst hell contains the seed of freedom. Hell does not last forever . . . No hell is a totally forsaken experience, because within each kind of hell there is a Buddha—not a savior in the Western sense, but a manifestation of our innate wisdom—to awaken and guide us. (p 136)

Once again, readers are reminded that impermanence is one of the cardinal principles of existence.

The author's careful explication of Buddhist principles and traditions will, I expect, be eye-opening to many Western readers. I am more than happy, as a Christian, to read this account of the rationale behind the tradition that hell might be—either literally or metaphorically—something other than eternal, physical torment at the decree of a merciless God, as some traditions claim.

To conclude this review, I would like Bercholz to have the last word:

It is simply my hope that any insights. . . will help those who are experiencing hell on earth—and hell in their own minds—to find relief and liberation. . . I have little fear of King Death, for my faith assures me that his inevitable presence is the face of Truth. However, I do fear King Bullshit, the face of self-deception and cowardly denial. He is an insidious and evasive shadow, always concealing himself in one's blind spot. Fortunately, there are luminous beings of compassion and wisdom who dissolve his power into organic fertilizer, a soil from which blossoms of wakefulness will eventually unfold. (p. xi)

References

- Grof, S. (1996). *Realms of the human unconscious: Observations from LSD research*. London, England, UK: Souvenir Press. (original work published 1975)