

## To Hell and Back - A Dangerous Memoir

David Feinstein

Samuel Bercholz, *A Guided Tour of Hell: A Graphic Memoir*.  
Shambhala Publications, Boulder (CO), 2016. 160 pp.

Samuel Bercholz, who founded Shambhala Publications and served as its editor-in-chief for 35 years, is a highly respected Buddhist scholar and meditation teacher. His *Guided Tour of Hell* is a scouting report about the realm Hamlet could not pierce, “the undiscovered country from whose bourn no traveler returns.” Near-death experiences - hundreds of thousand have been reported, often after cardiac arrests - arguably provide a glimpse into that hitherto undiscovered country. *A Guided Tour of Hell* is one such portrayal. I believe it to be sincere, painstakingly written, and presented with class and dignity. Meanwhile, the author’s accomplishments are not only extensive, they are admirable, having literally brought volumes and volumes of sacred wisdom into the culture after founding Shambhala Publications. His path has also been enviable, having intensively studied with or edited the works of some of the world’s most prominent spiritual teachers.

So why are you about to read a brutal review? It is because I believe the book is dangerous. To be clear, I’m not advocating for a rosy view of the afterlife, though most of the near-death experiences that have been reported are unexpected, unscripted, and overwhelmingly positive. These stories bring comfort, offering support for a worldview that death - despite the struggle and suffering that are part of life - brings a direct

encounter with forces of immeasurable good and compassion, a heartening perspective about all of creation, and a reunion with those we have loved. However, not all dispatches from the other side are so reassuring. Hell-like accounts not only exist, they have probably been under-reported, with some estimates being that they comprise up to 20 percent of near-death experiences. Having found solace in the heaven-like versions, I have wondered how to integrate the distressing accounts.

The most famous classic rendition of a journey through the landscapes of hell is, of course, Dante's *Inferno*, from his *Divine Comedy*. Like Dante, Bercholz was also ushered by a wise guide, and the text of both accounts is illustrated with powerful images. Where Dante's work is an allegorical poem, however, Bercholz offers a memoir, a report of a vivid inner journey that at the time seemed abundantly real. Unlike Dante, who is guided by a mortal, the ancient Roman poet Virgil, Bercholz' guide is the "Buddha of Hell," which first appeared as a "genderless body of light," providing comfort, commentary, and compassion. Where the *Inferno* was completed in 1320 within a medieval Christian framework, Bercholz 2016 piece draws its implications from Buddhist teachings. Both authors have a highly personal message for anyone who will listen. Dante's is about morality and salvation; Bercholz' is ultimately about consciousness and liberation.

Upon learning that one with the stature and background of Bercholz returned from the other side with a harrowing story, it felt like required reading. It seemed it would shed light on one of the most fundamental questions for humans, a question sometimes attributed to Einstein: "Is God kind?" Is the universe ultimately safe? Is there are a higher, benevolent purpose for our suffering? How could a world where all who live must feed on the lives of others be the product of a compassionate designer? Yet out of the swamps, our earliest ancestors ultimately evolved to produce the wonders of science, the beauty of art, and the creations of Mozart and Shakespeare.

If we are likely to face more – and more terrible – suffering on the other side, Einstein’s hope for a universe that is ultimately “kind” are dashed. The prospects are worse than those offered by a purely materialistic worldview where death is the ultimate *end* of life, where purpose and meaning are the illusions of a brain chemistry that creates the ephemeral experience of consciousness. Nihilistic materialism becomes the more comforting worldview, and if you can’t buy it – that death is the end of all forms of consciousness – there would be much to fear in the hereafter.

Bercholz’ book addresses these high stakes questions. He provides a vivid account of a tour through hell, guided by a “luminous presence . . . imbued with kindness.” The territory is, nonetheless, terrifying, and his visit to it is characterized as involving “almost inconceivable agony and suffering.” The landscape itself is eerie: “screams were heard everywhere . . . I was overwhelmed by the sheer numbers.” And it is not only the profoundly evil who wind up suffering these horrific punishments. There may be some sense of justice in reading, as we do in this account, that suicide bombers and other mass killers are trapped in these realms, experiencing the agony of those they have murdered, among other diabolically creative torments. But committing egregious acts is not the only path into this hell. One victim was “a modern man educated in science” who “was convinced that human life was simply a collection of chemical and electrical responses.” His comeupance was to be “entrenched in the hot hells for what in earthly times would be hundreds of thousands or even millions of years.” Others had simply lived tortured lives, such as a woman who “turned to drugs and alcohol to soothe and numb herself,” and in the drug-infested world she inhabited, was brutally murdered: “The inner battle that was in her mind at the moment of death was her nonstop ticket to the hell realm.”

The prospects of becoming trapped in Bercholz’ vision of hell seem eerily open to all. While framed as a cautionary tale, “certainly not meant to frighten anyone,” those of us whose lives are not as saintly as the universe might require may not receive his account with such equanimity. The vision we are provided is quite palpable in both the

narrative and in Pema Namdol Thaye's artistic rendition of Bercholz' journey. This specificity is, in my estimation, where the project jumped onto a perilous track. While providing appropriate disclaimers about the experience being outside the realms of ordinary time and space, the account itself is vivid and concrete. Hell is portrayed as having two terrifying realms, the "hot hells" and the "cold hells," with an entry point where the two intersect.

My objection to the book's approach is not in reporting a treacherous near-death experience. It is in using Bercholz' authority while overstating the case, as will be analyzed below. The result leads to a vision that can induce unnecessary fear and even have a "post-hypnotic" suggestive effect when a person is in a vulnerable state. Set and setting are precursors for any altered state of consciousness. Christians often see Christ when having a near-death experience and Buddhists often see the Buddha. This is not to say that traveling outside the body can't open one to realms that are profound and that expand our understanding of reality. But along with providing an account of that "reality" comes a certain responsibility, particularly when delivered in graphic verbal and visual detail by one of moral and intellectual authority, which Bercholz has duly earned.

So what of the "reality" portrayed in *A Guided Tour of Hell*? On first reading, I was more terrified by the scouting report than capable of receiving the lessons the author intended, which are essentially the tenets of Buddhism, the framework from which Bercholz interprets his experience. But then I remembered from the book's introduction what was happening to Bercholz' body while he was experiencing the "hot hells" and the "cold hells" he encountered on the other side. Days before his near-death experience, he returned from sextuple coronary bypass surgery, at age 60, into a waking hell. He recalls, "Panic overpowers me and I'm being suffocated [by 'a tube pushed deep into my throat and neck down to my lungs'] and want to scream out but can't." In the following days "my personal pain is quite intense" and at one point he passes out from a severe blood infection. He wakes "with a start, my body burning like

a wooden stove . . . with no relief” even after having been placed “in a bed of ice.” His “blood pressure plunges to nothing” and he realizes “that I am dying.” This is the state of his body when his consciousness “descends into the depths of earth and space simultaneously,” the start of his tour of the hot and cold hells.

The state of the body influences the state of the mind. Upon encountering Marley’s ghost, Ebenezer Scrooge argues: “You may be an undigested bit of beef, a blot of mustard, a crumb of cheese, a fragment of underdone potato.” Altered states of consciousness are particularly responsive to intrusive bodily sensations. Bercholz’ account starts to lose its “what’s-on-the-other-side” veracity when the parallels between his bodily state and his vision are considered. While the argument could be made that the spirit has left the body during near-death experiences and is no longer dependent on the brain, some research suggests that brain activity increases dramatically after the heart stops, even with no oxygen flowing to the brain. This is the period during which near-death experiences occur. And even if the state of the body is independent of near-death experiences, the brain is very involved in their recollection and interpretation. Beyond that, imagination and fear can combine to mercilessly elaborate upon any unpleasant sensations, amplifying them from unpleasant to excruciating. Consider Bercholz’ renditions of the hot hell and the cold hell, respectively:

Hot Hell (recall that his body was “burning like a wooden stove... with no relief”): “Intensely seething with unbearable heat... the skin burns, but it does not burn away; it remains to be burned again and again. The pain of burning... continues for centuries upon centuries, yet one never gets used to it.” Those caught in this furnace “experienced that their flesh burned, their bones melted, and their blood curdled and turned into steam. The sensations were excruciating... But there was no relief. No passing out. No death. Just baking. Frying. Boiling.” “The utter distress and despair is monumental.” Not only were flames and unbearable heat everywhere, other tortures were found in the various realms of the hot hells. In one, the sense of smell “was heightened ten-thousandfold and the taste buds one-hundred-thousandfold,”

immeasurably intensifying their experiences. “They were always on the verge of drowning and wanted to cry for help, but their mouths were always full of excrement – and regardless, there was no help to be had” (recall Bercholz’ post-surgery sense of being suffocated and wanting to scream out but being unable).

Cold Hell (his body had also been placed in a “bed of ice”): In contrast to the *hot hells* are the *cold hells*, “lonely places of stark desolation” where

“perception shrinks into transfixion on the agonizing sores and blisters that appear when their naked skin cracks open due to the intensely cold winds. As each wound gathers the sole attention of the sufferer, it reproduces itself, creating a claustrophobia of recurring pain that jumps from one blister to the next, so that the blisters reproduce exponentially. This horror repeats itself in apparent perpetuity.”

My intent is not to challenge the validity of Bercholz’ report. I believe he has gone to great lengths to portray his near-death journey in a manner that gives the reader as close an approximation as he is able. I am, in fact, writing this only secondarily as a review of his book. Primarily, I am trying to expunge the images the book has put into my mind. If my consciousness one day moves into whatever realms succeed life on this planet, I do not want to carry and be drawn toward fearful images that may have been more a product of Bercholz’ tortured body than whatever nature has in store. While Bercholz’ sober reflections on his near-death experience constitute a story he would of course feel a need to tell, the book would serve its purpose far better were the author to have reflected on the parallels between his bodily state and his near-death experience and proceeded from there. As it is presented, and given the author’s authority, it generates in the reader a mindset that pulls one toward the very furnace Bercholz describes.

### Biographical note

David Feinstein, Ph.D., a clinical psychologist, is co-author of *Rituals for Living and Dying* (Harpercollins 1990) and *The Energies of Love* (TarcherPerigee 2016). <https://www.innersource.net>.