

# A GUIDED TOUR of HELL

All paintings by Pema  
Namdol Thaye (Tibetan,  
b. 1967), 2013–2018, acrylic  
on canvas, lent by the artist.

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All quotations from  
Samuel Bercholz,  
*A Guided Tour of Hell: A Graphic  
Memoir* (Boulder, CO: Shambhala,  
2016).

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## 1/ **Descent**

Sam's consciousness expands "from tiny strings of light into a complete cosmos." Here Pema reveals the cosmos in three dimensions, as if its entirety were contained within a crystalline sphere. In the lower portion flames from the sulfurous hells glow and flicker. In the upper portion the Buddhist heavens arc toward a central axis; this luminous ray connects the sphere's zenith to its nadir, forming a kind of portal between regions of the cosmos. Visually *Descent* possesses an uncanny dynamism, a possible reference to the ceaseless force of karma—cause and effect—that mediates transitions between levels of the Buddhist cosmos, from heavens to hells. The painting's title ominously foreshadows the direction in which the journey is about to go.



## 2/ **Fusion of Elements**

Sam's physical elements dissolve as his awareness expands. In this painting Pema visualizes the roiling cacophony of sound and form that Tibetan texts say accompanies the initial stages of the death experience. The material elements thought to constitute the body melt into one another, starting from coarse earth and moving to the subtler water, fire, and finally air elements. Their dissolution creates a vortex through which Sam's consciousness will shortly tumble downward.



### 3/ **Gates of Hell**

Sam sees the gates of hell as a series of ever-shifting yet ever-concentric circles. They spiral into the axial vortex left by the elemental void. Gory flotsam of various sorts swirls in the roseate whirlpool of wheels. While such visions may seem distant from our ordinary experience, it is possible to experience viscerally the dynamic power of Pema's *Gates of Hell*. Simply fix your gaze at the center of the painting while maintaining awareness of the peripheral circles; when you detect movement, you have found the effect. But be forewarned: don't fall in, for the Borderland lies just beyond.



## 4/ **Borderland**

The gates of hell emerge at the Borderland. Here the hot-cold differential simulates a kind of landscape in otherwise purely mental space. At the top of the painting Sam gapes with understandable dismay as the hot and cold hells yawn before him.



## 5/ **Retribution**

Sam falls into the hot hells in which beings burn with mutual rage. Since each being's rage is self-created, it is perpetual, and any apparent end is merely a beginning for more self-defeating cycles of anger and retribution. All of this horror, however, is entirely mental, for this suffering "is a continuation of their own states of mind during life." Thus karma may be inexorable, but it is also mental—and in this paradox lies a path toward its improvement.



## 6/ **Inner Hell**

Sam sees suicide victims try in vain to expire. That is, they try to extinguish the experiential cycle of cause and effect, but “the wishful fantasy that all the pain would end upon death has now become the freakish reality that *there is no end of any kind*”—for in Buddhist thought the web of causality is without beginning or end. While Sam, in profile, looks on in awe at the left of the painting, Pema’s wraithlike beings are pulled magnetically into the mouth of hell, luminous fires glowing just behind its ominous glottis.



## 7/ **Voyage**

An idealistic political suicide destroyed himself to destroy his enemies. As a hell-being, however, he sees the cruel effects of his idealistic — but grossly misguided — actions rebound again and again, like a broken record. He is now confined with other idealistic suicides, who have all blown up one another so many times that their hell-body parts have become indistinguishable. In a cruel inversion of the liberating Buddhist tenet that all beings are essentially alike, the idealistic suicides suffer from the hellish illusion of being literally and physically intertwined with their own enemies.





## 8/ **Hell Sewer**

A cruel military dictator had a tragic childhood. While he was still young, the dictator's father had been unjustly killed. When he came of age, he took revenge. Gradually becoming inured to violence, the dictator in due course became the very thing he rebelled against, treating people in a terrible way. After death he experiences the putrid way he treated people in life through direct retribution: by feasting continually on ordure. In a peculiar cultural parallelism, precisely such punishment awaits certain unfortunates in the Egyptian afterlife manuals as well.



## 9/ **Demolition**

This hell-being was a computer genius who used his talents to build a technologically fueled utopia. His success blinded him to how his robotic engineering was polluting the planet; indeed an explosion of the very poison gas his activities created killed him. Now in hell he repeats his death event again and again, unaware of how all parts of the world are connected to all others—a realization that would free him. Pema's painting captures this engineer-in-hell at the precise moment that the shock wave from an explosion of karma carries him from one terminus of his vicious hell cycle to the next; the viewer can almost feel the impact.



## 10/ **Momo Drollo**

During her life this monstrous hell-being cultivated bitter and envious states of mind.

She complained continually about her lack of material wealth and sensory satisfaction, compensating through insatiable consumption.

Now in hell her body is composed of beings trying to escape from her. Their desire to escape is hardly a surprise, for this hell-being is made out of the enemies that her voracious hunger makes her consume. Such self-defeating behavior is a prime characteristic of hell experience, and Pema's work reveals the crescendo of pain and indignation that habitual ill will creates.



## 11/ **Janna Sophia**

Janna Sophia is no hell-being. Instead she is the personification of compassionate wisdom. The name Janna Sophia is Sam's clever cross-cultural combination of the Sanskrit term for mystic insight, *jnyana*, and the Greek term for wisdom, *sophia*. She is also the female counterpart to the Buddha of Hell, a kind of Beatrice to Sam's Dante. Ever present, her compassion pervades hell but often remains invisible and intangible to hell-beings, caught up as they are in their simultaneously private and mutual sufferings.



## 12/ **Inferno**

A former cosmopolitan sophisticate struggles in vain to find his body in a nonmaterial realm—again and again. The man at the bottom right of the painting had been a paragon of urbanity during his earthly life. A cultured materialist, he fully expected “nothing” when he died but instead found himself fully aware, even after his physical body had been duly cremated! His surprise was so great because of his conviction that human life is limited to gross matter and that existence was impossible without it.

Pema captures this hell-being’s anguish as it flares each time the materialist attempts, fist in the air, to grasp an objective foundation for his awareness. This, then, is the exhausting and interminable predicament of the nihilist in hell.



## 13/ **Portal**

A former god falls into the cold hells. During his earthly life the man had been a celebrated stonemason. He built a great temple to the Hindu sun god Surya; the people were so impressed with his miraculous artistic skills that they concluded he possessed the cosmic powers of the sun god himself—and was thus Surya incarnate. People then began to worship the mason *as* Surya. Their adulation elevated him to godhood and gave him eternal youth. In turn he promised similar benefits to his followers, but in truth he cared only about how their worship kept him young.

Pema's artwork depicts "Surya" falling from his divine station into a writhing mass of hell-beings; in the process the formerly unique sun god has now become indistinguishable from any other sufferer. His selfishness has made his selfhood irrelevant.



## 14/ **Desolation**

In life this woman was obsessed with status, possessions, and money. She overvalued social approval, “doing everything properly and abhorring any extremes of behavior.” Since she disdained anything that did not fit her worldview, this woman’s “whole life had been filled with looking away” from anything that disturbed her equilibrium.

Her death took this hell-being to a place where she might examine her own pains and imperfections—without any time limit. In Pema’s painting she watches in fascinated horror as an endlessly multiplying series of compensatory sores erupt on her body. All of this arose from falsely thinking of herself as separate from other people and the world at large.



## 15/ **Frost Giant**

An engineering genius built a doomsday machine to defend his home country. But international nuclear war broke out, and his home city was destroyed, along with his family. Deciding that there was nothing to live for, he detonated the weapon. He died, but “instead of nothingness, there was hell. The former engineer’s body was like a hologram filled with all the bodies of hell,” with “absolutely no separation between himself and these individuals. . . . In an ironic twist on his deluded fantasy that there could actually be Nothing, he became Everything—but it was everything in hell.”





## 16/ **Triptych**

A former visionary pharmacist now wanders hell's great ice city of Nova Urbanus. His endless walking aggravates his blisters. During his lifetime he had been a great physician with dreams of "finding a remedy for all suffering" through a drug that "could simply obliterate negative emotional states." But he overdosed and died. In hell his search for a panacea becomes interminable, for he is caught in a hell loop: he falls through apparently solid ice on the street down toward the icy spires of frozen skyscrapers, only to find himself back on the street, falling through slabs of ice again and again.



## 17/ **Vortex**

She hated the natural world, especially insects and vermin. While alive this woman had killed ants, roaches, and rats without compassion or discrimination. After her death, however, she found herself in a natural world in which insects ruled and natural forces opposed her at every turn. In seeking to slake her eternal thirst, she approached a shining lake, where a wave washed over her and pulled her under. But she found no relief for her thirst, only filth and negative emotions. In Pema's *Vortex*, this hell-being looks back in horror as she is about to be absorbed into that terrible lake, which contained everything she had abhorred or paid no attention to during life.



## 18/ **Passion**

Tension between desire and guilt split her awareness. In her youth her mind had been a battlefield as she was constantly torn between strict religious observance, on the one hand, and her biological desires, on the other. As she grew to adulthood, “passion won.” She turned toward “indulgence and escapism . . . to soothe and numb herself.” But the inner battle continued unabated, and at her death it became a “nonstop ticket to the hell realm.” Focus on the main figure’s eyes and experience how Pema’s painting conjures simultaneously a sense of her impending doom and a fall just begun.



## 19/ **Yearning**

He cultivated attitudes of romantic passion and attachment while alive. On earth his beloved's name had been Anna. Now in hell he hears her voice for the first time since he was alive. Drawn by the "golden promise of reuniting with the woman he had desired so fiercely," he followed Anna's voice to a tree, where she claims to be imprisoned. Our hell-being then climbs the tree but is cut to pieces by its razor-sharp leaves. When he reaches the top, he finds only a parrot with an iron beak who plucks out his heart and flies away. Such are the karmic results of a "relentless habitual craving to possess another" while on earth.



## 20/ **Transcend**

Sam's journey through the hells culminates as he enters the blazing flames of Janna Sophia. Her name is a combination of the Sanskrit term for mystic insight (*jnyana*) and the Greek term for wisdom (*sophia*). At the top left of the painting, Janna Sophia's now luminous form helps beings ascend from one realm to another. Here Pema's brush reveals ghostly bodies and faces of every sort melting in fire while still others emerge from ice below. Janna Sophia prepares all these beings for rebirth by releasing them from the habitual hellish conceptions they held in their minds.



## 21/ **Liberation**

Sam and thousands of others are released from hell. “It felt as if, through the mercy of Janna Sophia, endless possibilities lay before us to be free from addiction to the repetitive rounds of suffering that characterize samsara. Now released from hellish conceptions, we were reborn into a higher realm according to individual karma. Most of us entered human forms, while others ascended to the higher realms of gods and demigods. For me, it was the close of a brief guided journey; for them, deliverance from the worst of hells.”

In this painting Pema reveals vast, increasingly luminous rivers of beings flowing inexorably from the hells into the more positive conditions for which all are destined.



## 22/ **Six Realms**

In *Six Realms*, Pema Namdol Thaye represents the realms of samsara as a roiling mass of endless activity. This contrasts with the traditional representation of samsara, or the six realms of rebirth, as a flat, static wheel. Such flat representations of the “wheel of life” are the only paintings whose presence the Buddha mandated in his monasteries. Pema, on the other hand, has represented the six realms as a panoramic vision rather than a two-dimensional circle; left to right, these realms include those of the animals, demigods, gods, and hungry ghosts. The hell realms occupy the center of the painting.

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