

**Title:** Revisiting Jacob's Ladder: Addiction, Hell and You

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## Abstract

This article describes some of the hellish experiences that can be encountered during the dying process when one's consciousness continues to struggle and hold on to life. The movie, *Jacobs Ladder*, is used as a metaphor in describing some of the freighting accounts found along the ladder of human consciousness. The way we live our life is the way in which we live our death. Any unprocessed psychological material manifests intensely at the moment of death. Old wounds, fears, addictions and desires are magnified the moment consciousness exits the body and become our personal Hell realm; lost and bewildered. The invitation is to surrender our attachments to life in each moment and cooperate with the dying process from a place of open Beingness. What keeps consciousness stuck in a Hell realm is the desire to be free from it. The invitation is to surrender our stance against Hell and accept it as it is. When accepted, it can transform into the vast luminous nature of who and what we are, releasing ourselves from the duality of existence and into Eternal Being. The author provides a segment of his own transformative experiences through a Hellish environment after his dying wife's post-op surgery and provides a case study of what it is like to be stuck in one's own Hell realm.

**About the Author:** Brian Theriault MEd., C.C.C. completed his master's degree in counselling psychology and embraces a nondual-transpersonal approach in his clinical work counselling clients. Brian was introduced to nonduality through Gary Tzu and has done personal work with him for several years. He has worked as a therapist in a number of counselling environments, including addiction and mental health agencies, and has co-facilitated nondual groups with Gary in Lethbridge, Alberta, Canada. He is also an associate editor for *Paradoxica: The Journal of Nondual Psychology* ([www.paradoxica.ca](http://www.paradoxica.ca)) and has several published articles illustrating the transforming power of nondual psychotherapy. He utilizes the work of nondual psychologists Gary Tzu and A.H. Almaas, and the profound Zen and mystical teachings of Osho and Lao Tzu.

*The only thing that burns in Hell is the part of you that won't let go of life, your memories, your attachments. They burn them all away. But they're not punishing you... They're freeing your soul. So, if you're frightened of dying and... and you're holding on, you'll see devils tearing your life away. But if you've made your peace, then the devils are really angels, freeing you from the earth.*

Luis, *Jacob's Ladder* (movie)

An intense movie, *Jacob's Ladder* describes non-ordinary states of consciousness and hellish experiences at the moment of death. The Biblical story of the prophet Jacob and his visionary dream of ascending a ladder stretching towards Heaven becomes a metaphor for transforming human consciousness at the moment of death. In the movie, Jacob (played by Tim Robbins) suffers a fatal wound during the Vietnam War, and we see doctors frantically working to save his life. The movie quickly shifts to what appears to be Jacob's life during the post-war era. Here, we see him attempting to reconcile the trauma of being wounded in the war, while also dealing with the loss of his young son, difficult relationships, and unresolved fears and desires. The death of his son is the most difficult experience for Jacob to work through, and when he reaches a place of acceptance, we see Jacob climbing a staircase towards a brightly lit room, presumably Heaven (Truth). The movie is filled with nightmarish visions and images and distortions in time and space as Jacob's consciousness struggles to find peace and resolution. The final scene circles back to the scene where the doctors are working on Jacob and finally declaring him dead. The movie ends with one of the doctors commenting on the strange smile spread across Jacob's face. In order to find peace, Jacob had to work through his personal demons and unresolved life experiences. His Hell was of his own making.

At some point in the course of our own spiritual transformations, we have to go beyond the conventional view of Hell as being separate from our current existence. We must take responsibility and recognize that we are the architects of our own demise. Hell is a self-created realm, designed and built out of our belief in self-separateness and division. The more we engage in self-serving acts and self-indulgences, the more we furnish a personalized Hellish environment. Hell is a self-reflected conditioned state of mind rooted in our unaddressed fears and desires, attachments and confusions.

Our state of mind now determines the next moment. Any incomplete moments we carry in our being, all the accumulated addictions and unconscious impulses running wild at the depths of our soul, the whole karmic load of self-centeredness that we carry—all will eventually come screaming to the surface of our awareness, seeking our attention the moment the body and mind are dropped. Adi Da (1991) put it quite succinctly:

When you die and the body drops off, mind makes you. After death, you live in the world of mind as you have created it while alive. The after-death states have been called “bardos,” or “planes.” Really, all such concepts are simply descriptions of how the mind operates dissociated from physical embodiment. You will spontaneously, through no will of your own, enter into realms of mind after death that correspond to your state of mind —not just your thinking mind but your subconscious and unconscious mind, the whole force of your tendency toward objects and conditional states. ... They are hells, purgatories, dark passages. They seem to go on for vast periods of time, even until they exhaust themselves and you pass out of them as you pass from one dream to the next. (Adi Da, pp. 147-148)

The mind can buffer our unprocessed psychological material only for so long before we have to face it. After death, we no longer have the psychological and physical means of keeping such repressed material at bay. We will be magnetically pulled to face and process it until released. We will be pulled this way and that based upon our fears and desires.

As depicted in Dante’s *Inferno* and the *Tibetan Book of the Dead*, anything that we have not processed in our lives and which we have left repressed in our unconsciousness will become our personal torment. Buddhist cosmology describes multiple levels of Hell including boiling cauldrons, frozen landscapes and torturous devices. These are not necessarily precise descriptions of what to expect but metaphors for a particular range of experiences that can be found after death. Even human existence is considered an after-life experience and can represent a Hell realm for many individuals.

Not too long ago, while at the hospital with my wife who was undergoing brain surgery, I found myself in my own Hell realm. Not only did I witness other beings experiencing and struggling with their own nightmares, I also found myself having to address some of my own.

The moment I walked through the doors of the recovery room to visit my wife, who had just finished major brain surgery, I was immediately transported into a post-operative Hell realm. The room was full of chaos and madness. A large, oval room, with no windows and fourteen beds, it was filled with patients who had just finished major surgery. One patient was screaming gibberish and flailing about like a wounded animal. He appeared to be stuck in an animalistic existence, defecating himself and screaming nonsense. On the other side of the room, an elderly woman was moaning about not wanting to die. She wept and wept with family and friends by her side, reaching for life and seemingly unable to let go. The desire for life was so strong. Another individual was in a fit of anger, yelling at the nurses and demanding that they tend to his every need. He seemed to be raging against existence. There were various other patients who appeared to be locked in catatonic states, who looked strangely like earthbound

apparitions, just on the threshold of life and death. They seemed frozen in a state of non-response and unable or unwilling to participate in their own recovery.

A tidal wave of chaotic energy hit and plunged me into states of shock and confusion. As I arrived at my wife's bedside, I noticed myself quickly contracting and tensing up, wanting to shield Nadine from all of the perceived intensity and chaos in the room. Suddenly, the young woman beside Nadine flat-lined, and the nurses and doctors rushed to bring her back to life. My contractions increased, unknowingly feeding my own fear and terror. I would not realize this until early next morning, but the more defensive I became toward the experience, the more I plunged into a difficult and terrifying state. My initial state of contraction kick-started my own trip down the highway to Hell. I became divided and separate from everything and everyone in the room. In many ways, like the elderly woman weeping that she did not want to die, I too was grasping at life, attempting to hold on and defend against existence. I saw the place as terrible. As Nadine slept, I spent the rest of the day in and out of a state of confusion, trying to ground and make sense of my experience.

Later that evening, as I slept, I was plagued with horrible nightmares and terrifying imagery. I was chased by demonic figures that jumped and hid, surrounded and tried to capture me. I ran and ran down a long hallway, opening one door after another, only to find myself back in the same black hallway, being chased by the same visions. I was still holding onto the desire for life and looking for a better outcome. I failed to realize how I had set myself up the previous day when I contracted around the chaos in the post-op recovery room. What made my experience hellish was my desire to escape it. This was key. My projected desire to protect and shield Nadine from the chaos, which carried on throughout the day, made the whole experience terrifying. I wanted things to be different. The energy and desire for escape fueled the demonic chase presented in my dreams. The moment I adopted a defensive posture in the recovery room, I simultaneously created a perceived threat. All it took was the smallest of contractions in my being. I was shocked in my discovery.

Whenever and wherever your mind is caught in miseries and pain, recognize at once that there is some foolishness on your part in interpreting the manifest Brahman. You believe unavoidable are avoidables; your miseries begin from the very point of the belief. You hope that that which is destined to happen may not happen, and at this point your worries begin; anguish and unease are created. No, what is to happen will happen. There is no escape from it, nothing else can happen. When you accept this mantra, when you accept this arrangement of the manifest Brahman totally, everything within you will become calm and quiet. Then there is nothing to worry you. (Osho, 1994, pp. 131-132)

I spent a part of the morning contemplating my situation. I took some time to meditate and relax the mental activity I was engaged in, and it started to dawn

on me just how I was creating my own misery. I traced its origin to the moment I walked into the post-op recovery room. I could see myself solidify around the experiences taking place in the room. I felt hardened, but in seeing this, the experience released itself. The moment I did not run from my experience, the contractions started to disappear and lose their energetic charge. I experienced a felt sense of purging the accumulated energy that I had unwittingly stored in my being the previous day. Hell burns itself up the moment we realize there is no escape. It was a paradoxical and experientially felt insight.

Although tired and exhausted, I felt my heart expand, and I experienced a lightness in my being. I met with Nadine early that morning, and together we sat with open hearts and receiving presence. The same level of chaos was present, but I did not see it as a problem anymore. Instead, I felt a deeper level of compassion that allowed me to meet and receive the experiences in an undefended way. The mind would attempt to contract around a particular experience, but I would simply not engage, and it quickly disappeared. The moment I followed a train of thought, I could feel the developing contraction. I could be with Nadine and the energy in the room in a more undivided way. These insights were gifts, and they became integral to my being now and in the last months my wife and I had together. My new insights on ways of being in a hellish environment were something I wanted to share with the people I work with in my counseling practice.

I had the opportunity to work with an older gentleman, Steve, who had been battling an Internet and video pornography addiction for many years. He was a highly respected member of his community who had succumbed to his pornography addiction, and it was wreaking havoc on his life. Although he was experiencing some success in freeing himself from the shackles of addiction, he found himself easily relapsing when under stress. His marriage was beginning to fall apart and his business suffered.

Steve had worked hard to try and overcome his addiction, but late one night he decided enough was enough, and he sadly took his own life. I was so devastated to hear of his passing. There was neither prior history of suicidal thoughts nor any indication that he was in this particular state of mind. It would take me many months to process his loss and review the work we had engaged in together.

Several weeks after his death, his wife, Linda, scheduled a counseling session with me, wanting to explore some unusual experiences she had been having since his passing. When we met, Linda seemed anxious and upset. I expected that we would engage in some form of grief work, but what she shared with me became a journey into her deceased husband's Hell realm. She described that since his death she would see him wandering around in the house, visibly angry and upset. She would even see him late at night sitting on the couch in the living room frustrated and agitated, looking for the TV remote

control yet never being able to find it. While alive, this was his pattern of acting out, where late at night, while Linda was asleep, he would secretly engage in his addictive behavior and order pay-per-view movies. She wept, feeling lost and confused, and even began questioning her own sanity.

Steve's situation reminded me of the Buddhist Hell realm of the Hungry Ghost, which is now a well-known metaphor used today to describe unresolved cravings and addictions. Alive or dead, individuals locked in this state are depicted as demon-like creatures tormented by unfilled desires and fixations and demanding the impossibility that they be fulfilled. Their desires are fuelled by their past karmic conditionings. They wander like fiends, lifeless and hell-bent on feeding their cravings. Some hungry ghosts find that they can eat, but no food is available; others are trapped in large halls with rows of buffet tables full of food, but they have pinhole mouths and cannot swallow. A ghost can spend a large amount of time in this realm until the mind either exhausts itself or wisdom is achieved.

Linda and I spent several sessions together normalizing her experiences and helping her late husband's consciousness move on through communication and meditative techniques. I recalled my own hellish experiences at the hospital, and I invited her to resist escaping her situation or doubting her experiences. Her experiences challenged her rational mind, so we worked on discarding mental conclusions about what she was witnessing and trusting her experiences and perceptions. I also encouraged her to communicate these insights, in a way that felt right for her, to her husband's consciousness. Also, I encouraged Linda to communicate with Steve and tell him that he had died and that he was actively engaging in his addictive patterns in an attempt to find release. He was invited to surrender to his dilemma totally, not to fight it or to follow through on chasing his desire. It was a means of inviting Steve to see desire as simply energy that he did not need to actively chase. By allowing desire to race through our consciousness without grabbing it, the possibility of release and freedom can be found. As Steve was familiar with these concepts from our previous work together, I felt this would be beneficial.

Eventually, Linda did report that the experiences had stopped, but it was never quite clear whether Steve was released from his addiction. None-the-less, it was clear that lust and desire had become his Hell realm. All we can do is surrender and accept where it is that we happen to find ourselves. Death is not necessarily a release from our pain and desire. Everything is accounted for and is due to our own making.

Whatever we are attracted to in the moment becomes our reality. If we remain fixated on the images, thoughts and experiences that flash before us upon death, we whirl in the stream of fear and desire. We are seemingly at the mercy of our own fixations. Letting go of and relaxing our mental fixations while alive, and being accustomed to the spacious Emptiness from which they arise,

frees us from the limits that can enclose us when we exit the body. This work can be done now. We can feel into what is driving our sense of self and personality. We can glean from where in our being we are operating, through reflection and open-ended inquiry. There is a possibility to be clear in our beings and hone in on what we need to work on by asking ourselves some pointed questions: What am I still attached to in this moment? Am I carrying any pain? How is it that I'm creating my own Hell now? What are my fears? What are my desires?

We surrender to what is revealed and trust in its own natural unfolding process. If we do not allow our consciousness to be swept away by the mind, we start uncovering the deeper, spacious Presence of who we are. We begin anchoring ourselves here, in spaceless Awareness, where we can effortlessly observe the mechanics of our mental functioning. The desire for self-identity and the fear of anything that challenges our position becomes our personal nightmare. As our wisdom grows, we start to peel away layer upon layer of mind and arrive at an ever-increasing understanding; I am prior to the body and mind, so where is the question of bondage and the need for escape? The more we want to escape our situation, our addictions, our impulses and unconsciousness, the more we feed and give them life. This also includes the desire to escape through ascension towards Truth or Heavenly experience. The desire for Union or God itself facilitates the makings of a nightmare where we are endlessly in pursuit of something that exists only in the mind. It is simply thought chasing thought.

We cannot bypass any of this, and we have to be clear in our beings. We ascend and descend the ladder of consciousness—mental, emotional, physical, and spiritual—clearing out any fixations and confusions that continue to dominate us and leave us feeling separate and estranged from life. We have to be honest with ourselves and investigate where it is that we are still caught, where in our beings we are still practicing self-separation. We are undoing the knots of our own confusion from this space of interconnected Awareness. The mind no longer dominates our attention and energy. If we embrace the wisdom of no escape and accept our situation without resorting to the usual strategies of the mind, experiences can transform themselves. When we stop giving our experiences energy through fear and desire, fear and desire begin to collapse on their own. What was once believed to be so frightening or so lustful thins out and disappears. The illusion collapses, and we return to our natural effortless state of Being.

Abiding as Truth, there is no separation; we are the pain, we are the madness, we are the confusion and the Hellish experiences. Seeing that there is no cure for any of this, and that there never needed to be one in the first place, is the freedom and peace that is always already available.



## References

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