

# The Screwtape Sutras

*An atheist-Buddhist riff on the C.S. Lewis classic*

**Ben Freeland**

I have long had a love-hate relationship with C.S. Lewis. Like many children of the Anglophone world, Lewis was one of my first literary influences thanks to *The Chronicles of Narnia*, through which his punchy, athletic prose clearly made an early impression on me. From there I later progressed to his adult works, both fictional and essayistic, and while I didn't necessarily find myself agreeing with his conclusions, the clarity and focus of his writing and his uncanny grasp of the inner workings of the human mind always made for compelling reading.

That said, as a non-believing adult I increasingly found C.S. Lewis' Bible-thumping agenda hard to stomach or ignore. It's one thing to endure unlettered, intellectually confused arguments for the existence of God, but quite another to contend with the writings of a deeply intelligent man with supremely refined reasoning skills who nonetheless reliably arrives at (to my mind at least) completely wrongheaded conclusions about the nature of existence – the latter is obviously far more infuriating. *The Screwtape Letters*, Lewis' most fa-

mous fictional apologia, is particularly frustrating in this regard, because were it not for the obvious Christian agenda it would stand (and potentially still does) as one of the most brilliant treatises on the nature of human consciousness ever written by a westerner.

For those of you unfamiliar with C.S. Lewis' legendary novella, *The Screwtape Letters* consists of a series of correspondences written by Screwtape, a cantankerous old demon and one of Hell's most senior tempters, to his apparently not-too-bright nephew Wormwood, a rookie demon who has just been assigned to secure the damnation of a young man recently converted to Christianity. It's a short,

cracking read that manages to delve into just about every facet of the human psyche imaginable with unflinching clarity and dry wit. Refreshingly, the book dwells less than one might expect on the more clichéd Christian notions of sin (except when Screwtape is chiding Wormwood for doing so), preferring the mundane and imperceptible ways in which humans sabotage their own clear thinking and sense of well-being.

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*C.S. Lewis and the untamed lion within him. (Source: jakeweidmann.com)*

[Caution: literary spoilers ahead]

I first read *The Screwtape Letters* in my early twenties. I was an unbeliever then as I am now, but a very different kind of unbeliever – one who, like the young C.S. Lewis himself, thirsted for the consolations of religious faith. I tried to believe. I really tried. But I couldn't do it, and even the likes of Lewis and other erudite proponents of Christianity (and their counterparts from other faiths) couldn't seem to pierce the armour of my skepticism. I recently picked up the book again, but this time reading it from the point of view of a person 100 percent comfortable with his own atheism. At nearly age 40, I have yet to encounter an argument for the existence of the Judeo-Christian god (or any other deity) that didn't appear to have holes big enough to fly

an A380 Superjumbo through, and I have my doubts I ever will.

Having said this, however, I got a hell of a lot more out of my second reading of the book than I did from my first. As a youthful reader still grappling with his own religious uncertainties, my conundrum over the existence or non-existence of God (and the urgings of my Bible-believing friends who foisted the book on me) prevented me from reading it with a clear mind, and while it ultimately failed to “win me over” to Team Yahweh, it did succeed in leaving me more spiritually confused than ever. But with all that long out of my system now, I was finally able to give the story my undivided attention and recognize it for what it truly is: a brilliant analysis of the true nature of human consciousness of the sort generally associated with Buddhism and related spiritual traditions.

## Screwtape vs. Siddhārtha

Unlike many atheists, I am a firm believer in the importance of a rich spiritual life, and like my philosophical hero and longtime inspiration Sam Harris, I have increasingly sought this out through the practice of mindfulness meditation, a practice developed primarily through the various schools of Buddhism. There are clearly great truths to be known about one's own mind and possible states of consciousness seldom (if ever) experienced by human beings, as well as better and worse ways of stewarding the contents of one's own mind. This, in my opinion, is the great truth that

Buddhist sages and skilled meditators have been espousing for centuries. It is also, oddly enough, the great truth behind *The Screwtape Letters*, even if the metaphysics behind it are out to lunch.

Right from the get-go, the novella's eponymous protagonist posits himself as a sort of anti-Buddha. While the Buddha urged his followers to "concentrate on the present moment," Screwtape implores his nephew to inspire the exact opposite in his "patient":

*"Remember, [the patient] is not, like you, a pure spirit. Never having been a human (Oh that abominable advantage of the Enemy's!) you don't realize how enslaved they are to the pressure of the ordinary. I once had a patient, a sound atheist, who used to read in the British Museum. One day, as he sat reading, I saw a train of thought in his mind beginning to go the wrong way. The Enemy, of course, was at his elbow in a moment. Before I knew where I was I saw my twenty years' work beginning to tot-*

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*ter. If I had lost my head and begun to attempt a defence by argument I should have been undone. But I was not such a fool. I struck instantly at the part of the man which I had best under my control and suggested that it was just about time he had some lunch.*

*The Enemy presumably made the counter-suggestion (you know how one can never quite overhear What He says to them?) that this was more important than lunch. At least I think that must have been His line for when I said "Quite. In fact much too important to tackle it the end of a morning", the patient brightened up considerably; and by the*

*time I had added "Much better come back after lunch and go into it with a fresh mind", he was already half way to the door. Once he was in the street the battle was won. I showed him a newsboy shouting the midday paper, and a No. 73 bus going past, and before he reached the bottom of the steps I had got into him an unalterable conviction that, whatever odd ideas might come into a man's head when he was shut up alone with his books, a healthy dose of "real life" (by which he meant the bus and the newsboy) was enough to show him that all "that sort of thing" just couldn't be true. He knew he'd had a narrow escape and in later years was fond of talking about "that inarticulate sense for actuality which is our ultimate safeguard against the aberrations of mere logic". He is now safe in Our Father's house."*

This delightful passage in Letter #1 sets the tone for the remainder of the book, in which Wormwood clumsily (and ultimately unsuccessfully) works to drive his patient out of

mindfulness (i.e., faith) and into distraction by way of hunger, frustration, love, anger, despair, lust, excessive piety, vanity, or whatever else happens to be on hand at any given moment. As such, the devils in the story are essentially personifications of the forces that are perpetually bombarding human minds and driving us to think thoughts without being aware that we are thinking them. I have no doubt that any plausible universe governed by Judeo-Christian metaphysics would probably function this way, and with very similar results.

This is scary inasmuch as, were this imagining of the universe to be true, the Prince of Darkness would clearly have the upper hand at this point in history. *The Screwtape Letters* was published in 1942, a full half-century before the advent of the Internet and 60-plus years before the social media revolution, developments which would have vastly expanded Screwtape and Wormwood's temptational toolkit. We live in an era of nearly perpetual distraction, and it's rather a good thing the Biblical Hell almost certainly doesn't exist because I doubt even the most devout and serious Christians of this world are able to reliably keep hold of their faith amid the unceasing bombardment our conscious minds now endure thanks to our computers, smartphones, and virtual lives. And I haven't even mentioned Pokémon Go yet!

Thankfully, I think we can all take the saga of Screwtape and Wormwood, much like the famous anecdote of Zen master Gutei Osho and the severed finger *koan*, as a fictitious teaching point on the nature of consciousness and enlightenment while discarding the unfounded Judeo-Christian assertions about Heaven and Hell. Having realized this, I feel I'm finally free. Not free from the bounds of terrestrial distractions and dissatisfaction – I'm nowhere close to that


I do wonder, though, what would have happened if he'd spent his wartime years in Tibet or Thailand instead of amid the creature comforts of Oxford University.

– but free from the discomfort I once felt reading C.S. Lewis. I no longer feel the need to buy into his belief system to enjoy his writings, and indeed gain genuine wisdom from them.

I do wonder, though, what would have happened if he'd spent his wartime years in Tibet or Thailand instead of amid the creature comforts of Oxford University. Had he done so, *The Screwtape Letters* might have been a

very different book. •

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