

Why I am a Buddhist Monk

How a young Norwegian engineer became
a renunciant

Ajahn Brahmāli

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Wherever I go, I am often asked, “Why are you a Buddhist monk?” It’s an interesting question. I used to think I knew the answer, but the more I contemplate it, the more I realise how uncertain and complex it actually is.

The purpose of exploring this question is not to tell my biography, which would probably send most readers to sleep! Instead, I want to explore how we make such decisions in life, how we move towards the teachings of the Buddha, and to try to understand this from the point of view of the Dhamma itself. My point of departure is my own experience, but I aim to draw some general conclusions about these matters. In the process, I want to discuss our attitude towards the Dhamma, how to reflect on it, and how to gain faith and confidence in these teachings. These issues are relevant to anyone interested in spiritual teachings.

Whatever our relationship to Buddhism, anyone who is reading this does so because they have some degree of interest or confidence in the Dhamma. Where does that confidence come from? Where did my own interest and confidence in the Dhamma come from?

Some years ago, I used to say the reason I became a Buddhist monk is that Buddhism is the best. It's the answer to the meaning of life! How can you waste your life with something else if you have discovered its very meaning?

But when I thought about it a bit more, I realised that this answer was far too simplistic and idealistic. Things are never that straightforward. It is only now, after being a monk for almost 25 years, that I can say that I truly do believe that these teachings are the answer to the meaning of life. The Dhamma is the answer to our deepest yearnings for fulfilment and completion. It all comes together in the teachings of the Buddha. Now I really do think, "What else would I want to do with my life?" But that's now, after 25 years! If I'm going to be honest with myself, it wasn't like that when I started out. Sometimes, we project the present into the past; we think that the way things are now is the way they were then. But actually, they weren't like that at all. So I started to think a bit more deeply about how it all started out.

When I was still an engineering student in Norway, over 30 years ago, I wanted to travel to Asia. I don't know exactly why, but for some reason it seemed like a good idea. There was something inside me that said Asia had something to contribute to my life. As an engineering student, I had the opportunity to take part in an exchange program which involved working in Japan for five weeks during the

university summer holidays. So I travelled to Japan, still not knowing exactly why. Maybe it was because I thought it would be cool to travel halfway around the world. That's a common enough reason for people to travel. However, there seemed to be a deeper desire at play as well.

It was in Japan that I read my first book on Buddhism. It was one of those missionary books, the kind you find on the bedside table in your hotel room. Usually it's the Bible, but this was Japan, so there was a Buddhist book instead. The book included some of the fundamental teachings of Buddhism, such as the Four Noble Truths and the Noble Eightfold Path. Somehow these teachings seemed familiar to me; they interested me somehow.

It's quite strange, really, to think back and realise that I gained my initial interest in Buddhism in a hotel in Japan. It shows you that the idea of putting religious books on the night table in hotel rooms actually works! At least, it did in my case. If I hadn't read that book, I might not be a monk today. So even a missionary style book can be effective.

At the same time, the Buddhist teachings did not grab me as strongly as one would perhaps have expected. Much of the book was concerned with supernormal phenomena and myths, a lot of it way over-the-top. In retrospect, I realise that if we want to present the Buddhist teachings in a way that really grabs people, it should be realistic and simple,

not flowery and supernatural. It should focus on the basic teachings of the Buddha—on suffering, how to overcome it, and how to find real happiness in the world. It should explain meditation, basic ethics, and why they are important. It should describe the universally valid aspects of Buddhism. Supernormal phenomena are not universal human experiences and most modern people are not able to relate to them. The same is true of mythology and legends, most of which are bound to time and place, to specific cultures. But everyone, regardless of culture or background, can relate to the basic psychological teachings of Buddhism, because they speak to universal aspects of human experience. Reading that missionary book taught me something about how to present the Buddha's teachings, something I have carried with me to the present day. In any case, despite its shortcomings, that book was an eye-opener for me.

Whilst in Japan I travelled to Kyoto, the old capital. I went to some of the ancient monasteries there and found I was attracted to them. For some reason, I thought Buddhist monasteries were special, no doubt in part because they were ornate and beautiful, set amongst magnificent Japanese gardens. Later I went to another ancient capital of Japan, Nara, which is even older than Kyoto. In addition to the architecture, I remember its enormous Buddha statues. But I was particularly drawn to the monasteries. Strangely,

this attraction was probably greater than the attraction to the teachings that I had read about in that book at the hotel. When you go to a monastery, you sense the atmosphere; it's an emotional experience rather than an intellectual one. Feelings tend to resonate with us more deeply than the intellectual propositions. We are driven by feelings, much more than we are driven by the intellect. Intellectual concepts are often useful only in-so-far as they match what feels right to us. I think this is an important point about how we relate to the Dhamma: it has to feel right, and only then does it become powerful.

Later, when I returned to my university in Norway, one of my best friends had a book on breath meditation, which he suggested I read. So, I had just been to Japan, been inspired by Buddhism, and the next thing I know my best friend gives me a book on breathing meditation! Whatever the reason for this remarkable sequence of events, I did read the book, tried out the technique, and had some good results. Having good results in meditation was far more important for my spiritual commitment than the intellectual ideas I got from that book or even the attraction I had to those monasteries. It had a big impact on how I thought about life.

Later on, when I continued my studies in London, I was deeply discontent, studying something I didn't enjoy. Yet

when I had previously meditated, I was so happy, so at peace. When I compared the two, something awakened inside of me. I realised I needed to radically change my lifestyle. Could it be, I thought, that I should even become a Buddhist monk?

Thinking back, this shows me that experience is what really matters in Buddhism. Experience is primary. This relates back to the idea that humans are driven by feelings. We feel the world, and when things feel right, we get a greater sense of meaning. And so it is with Buddhism. It was meditation experiences that ultimately drew me close to Buddhism, and they were one of the main reasons I became a Buddhist monk.

So why is all this interesting? To explain, I'll draw on one of the famous discourses given by the Buddha, a sutta usually known as the *Kālāma Sutta* (AN3.65). This discourse is often referred to these days because it fits with our modern outlook, with how we tend to view the world. In it, the Buddha explains how we should approach spiritual teachings in a way that is beneficial for ourselves. He shows how we should relate the Buddhist teachings to our own experience rather than use our intellect, which is similar to what happened to me, more or less by accident.

The *Kālāma Sutta* describes a meeting between the Buddha and a people known as the *Kālāmas*. Imagine, if you will, a

map of India: you have the northeast of India and the enormous River Ganges. The area around the central part of the Ganges is essentially where the Buddha taught for 45 years after his awakening. In the suttas, the Buddha is often seen wandering around this area, walking from village to village, from town to town, meeting different kinds of people. They're normally interested in spiritual teachings, including the Buddha's. When the Buddha comes to the town of the Kālāmas, he stays in the woods on the outskirts of the town. When the Kālāmas hear about the arrival of the Buddha, they think, "Wow, a fully awakened person—an *arahant*—has arrived at our village. It's good to see such awakened people!"

This interest in spiritual matters is one of the attractive features of Indian culture, both in ancient times and in the present day. India has a very strong spiritual tradition, where people are generally interested in spiritual teachings, and by extension also the *sadhus*, "the holy people", who meditate and practise a spiritual path. It's almost tangible when you travel in India. And it isn't confined to Hinduism, but includes most religious traditions, also Buddhism. I have heard of Buddhist monks going for alms in random villages and usually getting food, even in the poorest places. This is because the villagers recognise a Buddhist monk as a holy person, someone worthy of alms, someone committed to the spiritual life. For this reason alone, it can

be quite special to travel in India. It is a fascinating country, in many ways quite different from what we are used to in the Western world. India has a spiritual dimension that we rarely see in the West.

So, the Buddha came to the forest near the Kālāmas, and they said, “Oh, this Arahant, this holy person, has come to us. It’s good to see such people.” So off they went—almost the whole village, it seems—to meet the Buddha. They sat down and asked the Buddha a question. You see, it was not just the Buddha giving lectures, but people asking questions. Dialogue was an important part of how the Buddhist teachings were disseminated in ancient times.

The Kālāmas told the Buddha that all these holy people, all these sadhus, of different religions came to visit their village. Some of them taught one doctrine, but there were others who taught the exact opposite. The teachings were contradictory, and the teachers denigrated each other. The Kālāmas complained to the Buddha, “We are confused and in doubt about which of these ascetics speak the truth and which speak falsehood.” The Buddha replied, “It is right for you to be perplexed, Kālāmas, right for you to be in doubt. You are having doubt about a doubtful matter.”

This is something I love about this particular sutta—to doubt is okay. One of the many things that is unique about the Buddha’s teachings is that doubting is perfectly

acceptable. Not only is it acceptable, it is encouraged. If something is doubtful, we *should* have doubt. If we remember the difference between doubt on the one hand and knowledge on the other, we realise that there are a number of Buddhist teachings that we may have faith and confidence in, but that we do not know for sure. For instance, deep meditation experiences, profound insights, kamma and rebirth, and awakening—these are things that most Buddhists have confidence in but don't actually know. So long as you have confidence, but not firsthand knowledge, there will always be a degree of doubt. Remember that.

When you remember that, it lessens the conflicts you have with others. It's a given that people will sometimes challenge you. They might say, "If you believe in rebirth, you are a superstitious fool!" And you say, "Yeah, maybe I am a superstitious fool." Have you ever said that? It may not be easy to say, but maybe you are! Understanding the limits of your own knowledge means you will have fewer conflicts and less problems with others. When you are more open-minded and relaxed about things, you don't become so defensive, because there's nothing really to defend. You think, "Yeah, okay, let's see what happens. I'll keep investigating." Don't get me wrong—I am not recommending that you give up your confidence in rebirth; this is a critical part of the Buddha's teachings. The point is

not to allow other people to persuade you all the time. In fact, you know that other people's understanding is usually just as limited as yours, sometimes even more limited. It's just that understanding the difference between confidence and knowledge has a number of benefits. So this is the first thing the Buddha says in the Kālāma Sutta—being perplexed and having doubt is okay. It's worth noting again that this is something that differentiates the Buddha's teachings from so many other teachings in the world.

Next the Buddha told the Kālāmas not to accept a teaching just because it's a tradition handed down from the past, or because there is a lineage of teachers, or because of testimony, or because there is a collection of scriptures. He says much more—I will come back to that later—but let's just stop there for a moment.

So we shouldn't accept something simply because it is an existing religious teaching. This is noteworthy because it is obviously relevant to us in the present day. With religion, you are sometimes told, "Here are the scriptures, the word of God. Believe it!" Yet here the Buddha is saying that this is not good enough. You can't believe scriptures simply because they are scriptures. That is true of the Bible, the Koran, and indeed any religious teaching, including Buddhism itself. So, if I tell you, "Here are the Middle Length Sayings of the Buddha; believe them," then please don't just accept them blindly. If you do, you are just

accepting an ancient tradition. Or if you simply believe what I say, you are merely relying on my testimony. That is the wrong approach. Instead of blindly believing, we need a different approach. I will come to that shortly.

But before I do, I want to look briefly at the authenticity of the Buddhist teachings. We are often presented with Buddhist teachings—I've just been referring to the Kālāma Sutta—but how do we know they are authentic? How do we know it comes from this person called the Buddha? How do we know that the Buddha had anything worthwhile to say? Was he really awakened? What does awakening even mean? All of these things may seem very uncertain. So, are these texts authentic? I have actually studied this in quite a bit of detail and even co-written a little book, *The Authenticity of the Early Buddhist Texts*, with my close friend Bhante Sujato.

When we study the suttas, it is fruitful to compare their content with the other knowledge we have of ancient India, such as political and social development. We then start to see that these scriptures point to a certain time period, about the 5th century BCE, and towards a certain place, a relatively small area in the central Ganges plain. The language used in the suttas also fits with that period and that place. The philosophical ideas that evolved there prior to Buddhism—found in the Vedas of the Brahmanical

religion—later developed into a number of philosophical schools, such as Advaita Vedanta, and the Buddhist ideas fit neatly in between.

Then there is the history of India with all its wars and changing political landscape. Quite a bit is known about Indian history from various sources. The information found in the most reliable sources generally fits nicely with the historical information in the suttas, fixing the time of the Buddha in the overall chronology. The geographical area is well described in the suttas, including names of towns and villages, and archaeologists have rediscovered much of this. The texts also discuss the material culture of the time, which has also been partly confirmed by archaeologists.

All these various lines of evidence converge on the northeast of India, specifically the central Ganges plain, about 2400-2500 years ago. There is nothing in the suttas that stands out as contradicting this picture. Further, the suttas say that these discourses were spoken by one man, who we now know as the Buddha. If everything converges on one particular time and place, then it seems quite plausible that these teachings are in fact the historically authentic teachings of the Buddha. In fact, it makes good sense that a set of closely related and coherent ideas stemming from a specific time and place should have originated with one specific person. This historical

dimension to the teachings is reassuring, because we can know with a high degree of certainty that they are authentic.

So if we accept that the suttas do seem to come from a specific person, who was he? Did he have anything useful to say? Was he actually enlightened? Dealing with the authenticity of this spiritual dimension is more difficult than evaluating the historical context. One way to approach these questions is to carefully read the suttas and get a feeling for who the Buddha was. This way, we get to know the Buddha and understand his teachings through his own words: how he practised, the way he taught, how his speech and actions have integrity. As we read the suttas, we start to get the feeling that there is a spiritual genius behind them, someone extraordinary. Certainly, this is what I found when I started reading the suttas. The person who spoke these words was able to utter a large canon of profound teachings with precision and eloquence. He described a spiritual path unlike any other in the world. We gradually start to sense that there was an exceptional mind—an exceptional spiritual awakening—behind the words. When we look at the Buddha's teachings in this way, we start to gain confidence. Eventually, you become quite convinced that the suttas convey the authentic word of someone very special.

In the meantime, while you are still uncertain or confused like the Kālāmas, you should not take your stand on these teachings just because they belong to an ancient tradition or because they are found in scriptures. That is the first thing we should not rely on, according to the Kālāma Sutta.

Another thing not to take your stand on is logic: “Don’t rely on logic, don’t rely on inference, don’t go by reasoned contemplation, don’t go by the acceptance of a view after consideration.” These are the four kinds of logic the Buddha said to avoid. This is kind of mind-boggling. When I first read this, I remember thinking, “What is the Buddha talking about?” Our entire life depends on being reasonable, on being logical; in almost everything we do we rely on logic. If this is the case, why does the Buddha ask us to put it aside? Once you think about it, you start to realise that there is something very profound in what the Buddha was talking about.

The basic problem is that our ideas are not usually moored to objective truth. Instead, our ideas are conditioned and often based on delusion. To give you an example, one of the interesting developments in the Buddhist world in recent decades—in Sri Lanka in particular but also in places like Western Australia—is the ordination of *bhikkhunīs*, fully ordained female monastics. It’s a wonderful contribution to the Buddhist world that we are getting full female monastics, a remarkable thing that will strengthen

Buddhism in the long run. But in the present context what is interesting is that there are so many arguments about it: “Can female monastics be fully ordained?” “Is it legal according to the Buddhist texts?” And you see long and equally persuasive arguments on both sides, all based on logic and inference. If you read the pro-*bhikkhuni* arguments, they seem foolproof—they must be right! And then you read the arguments against the ordination of *bhikkhunis*, and they seem just as strong, just as foolproof. And then you read the counter-arguments to both, and again they seem persuasive. That’s when you start to understand the limits of reasoning and logic. You realise that logic works in the service of our pre-existing ideas and ways of looking at the world, which then helps us to justify our existing outlook. Logic is not neutral, but depends on where we start from, on how we feel about the world. Conditioned ideas come first, and then the logic comes *afterwards*. This is why logic is often deceptive.

There is another even more profound reason why logic cannot be trusted. Logic always comes with a set of assumptions and either fails or succeeds because of those assumptions. If we build up our logical edifice on the wrong assumptions, the whole thing is going to be wrong. Buddhism is ultimately about profound insights into the nature of the mind, in particular non-self. Because the vast majority of people wrongly assume a self, our logic is going

to be built on that assumption and we will never be able to go beyond it. We are trapped in a certain perception and so any logical conclusions we arrive at, based on that wrong perception, will also be wrong. This is why the Buddha suggests pulling back and forgetting about logic for a while. Yes, we use logic because we need it in our daily lives, but in spiritual matters—at least initially—we need to be more careful. We pull back from logic and then see what happens; we use another way of evaluating before coming to conclusions.

The last thing the Buddha said in this part of the Kālāma Sutta is, “Don’t go by the appearance of competence, or rely on the idea that this ascetic is our respected teacher.” Knowledge, charisma, or being respected are not necessarily signs of deep wisdom. And just because someone is your teacher does not mean you must always follow them or believe them. None of this is good enough, because our teacher might be wrong. Further, a teacher is usually part of a lineage, which in turn forms a tradition. These are two things the Buddha told us earlier not to rely on.

On what, then, can we take a stand? If we can’t take a stand on tradition or logic, if we can’t take a stand on ancient scriptures or teachers, what is left? This is where it gets interesting. The Buddha told the Kālāmas that instead of taking a stand on those things, they should take a stand on

what they know for themselves to be true. Isn't that remarkable? The Buddha said we should rely upon our own knowledge and judgement, not on all those other things we usually value. This is another thing that makes Buddhism so different from other religions.

To elucidate this point, the Buddha asked the Kālāmas, "If a person is greedy, does that lead to their benefit or harm?" The Kālāmas replied, "If someone is greedy, it leads to their harm." The Buddha then explains that people driven by greed often do immoral things, such as killing, stealing, committing sexual misconduct, and lying. These are some of the consequences of greed. The Buddha asked the Kālāmas if these consequences are good or bad. They answered that of course they are bad. He then asked the same about anger, and the Kālāmas replied that anger, too, led to harm. Why? Because when people are angry, they often act immorally. And the same is true of delusion or confusion. All these mental qualities are worthy of blame and criticism; they all lead to bad consequences and suffering.

Then the Buddha asked the Kālāmas about the opposite qualities: what is it like, if instead of being greedy, people are generous? If instead of anger, they have loving kindness? And if instead of being deluded, they cultivate wisdom? What happens then? The Buddha asked if these

qualities were beneficial. The Kālāmas replied that yes, generosity, loving kindness, and wisdom are all beneficial. These things are blameless, praiseworthy and they lead to happiness. How did the Kālāmas know all this straightaway, when they were previously so perplexed by various doctrines? For the same reason that we ourselves know something: because it accords with our experience of the world.

We know from our own experience of life that when we are generous, kind, or wise, we feel good about ourselves. It leads to our own benefit and also to the benefit of others. We also know that the opposite is true. If we act from desire, anger, or delusion, we tend to feel bad about ourselves. So the Buddha is telling us to seek the truth through our own experience of life. Our own experience is the final thing to take a stand upon.

This is especially so when you are a beginner, when you come to a spiritual teaching for the first time. You have to look at your own experience and trust your own judgment to be able to see the difference between good and bad teachings. If you do that properly, you will know that you are on the right track. Of course, you also have to be humble, to understand your own limitations. In the final analysis, however, you have to come back to what you know is true and only then will you be able to make the right decisions.

An important point here is that whilst the Buddha advised the Kālāmas not merely to accept tradition, scriptures, logic, or teachers, and instead to rely on their own experience, it turns out that the Kālāmas' experience fitted very well with the Buddha's own teachings. Greed is going to be detrimental to you, and so are anger and delusion. These ideas are some of the Buddha's fundamental teachings. The Buddha was showing them that the Dhamma matches with how they experience the world. He did not ask the Kālāmas to accept his doctrine immediately, but told them to rely on their own experience to see if it made sense. This is very skillful, because if a doctrine really does reflect your experience in the world, then of course you should have some degree of confidence and faith in that teaching.

Once you have that basic confirmation that these teachings work and function according to reality, you should go back to the scriptural collection where those teachings are found. You now have good grounds for placing some confidence and faith in them. You also have better grounds for applying logic, listening to the teachers, and using all the other things the Buddha initially asked us to set aside. This is the right approach. This is how you gradually build up on the spiritual path. It is a mistake and counterproductive to throw out tradition, teachers, and logic altogether.

Now that we have sorted out our ethical conduct—understanding what is beneficial and unbeneficial—the next stage of our spiritual practice is developing the mind through meditation. When our meditation practice gets deeper, mindfulness starts to kick in. And as we develop this path, our meditation becomes more powerful. We are beginning to wake up. We start to feel good. This is one of the extraordinary things about meditation as the Buddha teaches it in the suttas; it is all about feeling good, about peace and happiness. We have meditation terms like gladness (*pāmuḍḍa*), joy (*pīti*), tranquility (*passaddhi*), and bliss (*sukha*). These are all terms that describe positive mental qualities of various degrees and kinds. Once our meditation gets to the point where those qualities start to arise, we gain even more confidence in these teachings, because we can see an even clearer parallel between what is described in the suttas and what we are experiencing. Not only that, but we see that this teaching is really worthwhile. We begin to sense that we are approaching the very meaning of life. We feel that we are touching something profound. This gives a massive boost to our confidence in the teachings.

This is how the Buddha brought the Kālāmas around, by showing them how to evaluate spiritual doctrines. This is the right approach, especially for people who are fairly new to the Buddha's teachings. We gradually build up confidence in the path. Experience and scriptures go hand-

in-hand, but in the final analysis our experiences are the most important.

That's a long detour. So how does this relate to my own life and why I became a Buddhist monk? As I mentioned before, the thing that made a big difference in my life was my experience of meditation. It was only through the practice of meditation that the Buddha's teachings became truly meaningful to me. I then wanted to read more suttas, and as I read them, I started to feel that they were extraordinarily powerful. That's when everything started to come together.

An interesting point about this is that all sorts of people can have profound experiences in meditation. You don't have to be a Buddhist—you can be a Christian, you can be a Muslim, you can be an atheist, you can be whatever. The point is that these are universal things that are always available and can be experienced by anyone. Yet, somehow, I was drawn to Buddhism. Why did I move towards Buddhism even though it might be possible to do something similar as a Christian or an atheist? Christianity had mystics in the past, as did Hinduism and Islam. I am not suggesting these religions are all the same, but clearly they have some deep features in common. Why then was I attracted to Buddhism?

When I started to think back on my early life, one of the things I recalled was a fantasy I had as a 12-year old of living in a hut in the forest by myself. Isn't that intriguing? So far as I know it's not common for 12-year-olds to have such fantasies. I wondered where on earth it came from. The only explanation I could think of is that I must have been a Buddhist monk in a past life. This might also explain the attraction I felt towards those monasteries in Japan. No doubt there are other possible explanations, but this seemed like the best candidate to me. I must admit, I do feel quite confident that I was a monastic in a past life. I don't know when or where, I don't know what gender, but I'm quite sure I was a Buddhist monastic somewhere.

If this is indeed the case, the consequences are quite interesting. It means that rather than freely choosing to become a Buddhist monk, I was just following a habit from the past. It's not that I was special or smart or particularly wise; instead I was just carrying on, doing the same that I had in the past. This takes away so much of the ego. It takes so much of the "me" out of the picture. It stops me from thinking that I am special or unusual for becoming a monk in this life. Instead, we are all just following ancient predispositions.

When I realised that I was probably just following a habit from long ago, it made me a bit worried. If I am just following a habit, how do I know Buddhism is right? If I

am just doing this because of conditioning—a bit like a robot—do I really know what I am doing? Have I even studied these teachings properly? It makes you a bit scared. For this reason, it becomes even more important to read these teachings properly, to investigate them thoroughly, to find out whether they are really worthwhile following. You don't want to be a stupid robot just acting on old habits. So I read the teachings even more diligently. I learned Pali, the language of the suttas, and I even began teaching Pali to other monks. I read the suttas very thoroughly to find out whether they are as interesting and profound as they are said to be. And I had this strong feeling, which grew over time, of being in the presence of something powerful, something extraordinary.

So, I was probably just following habits from past lives. I always feel a bit sheepish saying that, because people expect that you became a monk because of some sort of insight or wisdom: “Yes, in my great wisdom I recognised straightaway that these teachings were special, and I then became a monk,” or some other fantasy of the ego.

When I recognised that I was probably a monastic in a past life, it had other interesting consequences. To start with, I do not know if I was a monk or a nun; maybe I was a nun. Moreover, I would have been a monastic somewhere in Asia, because Buddhism barely existed in the West until

very recently. I could suddenly see myself as belonging to a different culture, being part of a different ethnic group, even having a different gender. Extrapolating from this, I started to realise that the whole world was buried somewhere inside of me, that it was part of my experience and who I was. When you see yourself like that, it takes away so many of the interpersonal barriers that we perceive between ourselves and people we think of as different, whatever it is that we regard as setting us apart. Feeling part of other cultures, part of other ethnicities, even part of the opposite gender, is an effective way of recognising our shared human experience. If I reject someone because I perceive them as different from me, it is as if I am rejecting part of myself, because it is all there inside of me. And it's madness to reject yourself. The only sensible thing is to embrace all people, regardless of our superficial differences.

But let's come back to the main point of this little essay. The most interesting result of contemplating why I became a monk was realising how little of our lives is determined by us. What matters most is not how we steer our lives, but our conditioning from the past, a past often deeply buried in lives that are no longer accessible to us. We are acting out our ancient habits, like a program written long ago but being played out again and again. In fact, this is nothing other than the process of moving on in *samsara*, that seemingly endless cycle of birth and death.

Most of the time we are blind to this process, but occasionally we get a glimpse of what is really going on. When we get such glimpses, we start to understand the big picture of why we live the way we do and how we came to be who we are. Seeing this can be quite disconcerting, because it starts to look like we are caught in a trap, a trap created by habits and conditioning.

Seeing the real reason why you became a Buddhist monk, you would be forgiven for thinking that that too was a trap. Instead, you follow the advice given by the Buddha to the Kālāmas. You compare the Buddha's teachings with your own experience of life. On that basis you gain a degree of confidence in the Buddha's words. You then look at the teachings in greater detail and combine that with further practice. Gradually you start to see that these teachings are actually the escape from the trap. All this running around, getting nowhere, until eventually you come across the marvelous teachings of the Buddha. There is no need to look any further. The word of the Buddha contains the answer to the very meaning of life.

That's why I am a Buddhist monk.