

Information about Meditation Centers and other important places in Sri Lanka for visiting Western Buddhist lay practitioners.

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Introduction

In Sri Lanka there are many meditation centers and monasteries, but only some of these are suitable for western Buddhists who are new to Sri Lanka and do not intend to stay long time. The following information is particularly intended for them. The centers have been arranged according to the districts that they are located in.

A much more extensive paper has been written for Western bhikkhus, those who aspire to become bhikkhus, and those who are very serious about their practice and are intending to stay a longer period of time. It is called *Information about Meditation Centers, Forest Monasteries, and other important places in Sri Lanka for Western bhikkhus and experienced lay practitioners*. If one would like to visit a forest monastery during one's stay in Sri Lanka then that paper will provide one with more useful information.

The forthcoming book *Sacred Island* by Venerable S. Dhammika—to be published by the BPS—gives exhaustive information regarding ancient monasteries and other sacred sites and pilgrimage places in Sri Lanka.

The best places for those who are new to Sri Lanka and wish to do a short retreat are the ones given under the Colombo District and Kandy District headings, i.e., Kanduboda Vipassana Meditation Centre, Sumanthiphala Meditation Centre, Nilambe Meditation Centre, Pāramitā International Meditation Centre, and Dhammakūṭa Vipassana Meditation Centre. Both males and females are welcome to stay in these places.

Most lay meditation centers charge a small amount of money for the lodgings and food. In monastic meditation centers like Kanduboda there are no charges, but a donation is appreciated.

If one is going to stay in a meditation centre, then it is important to bring all basic personal requisites, such as towels, bed-sheets, soap, mosquito repellent, vitamins, medicines, etc., as they are probably not available in the centre.

It is important to respect the local customs and etiquette. Sri Lankan culture tends to be quite traditional, although in the big towns rapid westernization takes place. Usually it is expected that laypeople who stay in Buddhist monasteries or meditation centers wear white clothes and stay aloof from members of the other sex. When visiting a monastery for the first time it is best to ask a Sinhalese friend to accompany one to give advice with regards the customs and appropriate behaviour.

The area where the meditation centre is located gives a good indication about its climate. In the South-western low-country the climate is tropical, i.e., hot and humid, especially in March-April. The Eastern low country has a dry season between May and October. The South West (roughly between Mātara, Colombo, and Ratnapura) is the so-called "wet-zone" where two monsoons a year take place (May-June, November-December). The so-called "dry-zone" (This is an quite an exaggeration as it can rain very heavily here too at times.) is in the East, North, and South. This area starts about 15 kms north of Mātale, at the eastern and southern edges of the of the hill country (such as the eastern slopes of the Knuckles range), and east of Balangoda and Tangalle . Only one main monsoon (November-December) takes place here. The deep South (the coastal area between Ambalantota and Pānama) and the far North (Northern coast & Jaffna peninsula) are the driest areas in S.L. The upcountry is the hill- and mountain-area in the center of Sri Lanka (roughly between Mātale, Kāgalla, Badulla, Haputale, and Balangoda). Here the climate is temperate and it can get cool at night. For westerners it is generally a more agreeable climate than the low-country. In the south-west up-country areas such as the Sinharāja rainforest and the Śri Pada Wilderness areas it rains a lot, sometimes so much that it can be impossible to dry one's clothes for days after washing.

The food is generally everywhere the same all the time in Sinhalese areas, fairly plain and simple. It can be quite spicy compared to Western food. In the cities the food can be more nutritious while in poor rural areas the food can be quite innutritious. Many people in Sri Lanka don't eat meat or fish. In many meditation centers and monasteries one gets no meat or fish. In some monasteries and meditation centers small amounts of fish can be served (meat or eggs are hardly ever given), but if one is a vegetarian one can easily refuse without offending anyone. It might be a good idea to take a vitamin supplement if one finds that the food is not nutritious enough.

Medical care and hygiene are generally not of the same standards as they are in the West, but the doctors usually do their best to help one and there are quite a few doctors and dentists who have trained and worked in the West. The monastery or meditation centre one is staying in can help if one needs medicines or medical care. The best hospitals are the Apollo and Navaloka private hospitals in Colombo. The medical care and facilities are very good in these places, but the prices are accordingly. The same doctors who work in the private hospitals also work in government hospitals, but the equipment and facilities in government hospitals are of lesser standards. The treatment in government hospitals is free for Sri Lankan citizens, but foreigners have to pay a bit.

There are some good dentists, some trained in the West, in Sri Lanka who can do the same work as dentists in the West but at a much cheaper price.

Unlike some other tropical countries, Sri Lanka is not a hotbed of diseases because the government healthcare system is fairly good. However, in some areas, especially in and around Colombo, there can be small epidemics of dengue fever and, to a lesser degree, Japanese encephalitis. In some South-western coastal areas there is a very small risk of contracting the filarial parasite that causes elephantiasis. In remote rural areas North, Northeast, and East of the country there is some malaria, which is also spread by mosquitoes. All three diseases are spread by mosquitoes. It is therefore always good to protect oneself against mosquito bites by using mosquito nets and repellents. Note that the

malaria mosquito tends to bite early in the evening, while the dengue fever mosquito bites during the daytime in shady places. The drinking water is generally of good quality in Sri Lanka, nevertheless it is always safer to drink boiled water.

It is advisable to use a mosquito-net while sleeping in forest and rural areas so as to keep away snakes and other dangerous creatures such as scorpions, centipedes, and mosquitoes. This being said, the risk of getting involved in a grave traffic accident while walking on the street or going in a bus in Sri Lanka is much higher than being bitten or attacked by some dangerous creature.

Sri Lanka is a great place to practice patience, simplicity, renunciation, and humility. Conditions in meditation centers and monasteries can be very simple and uncomfortable for those used to the luxuries and comforts of the west. Meditation centers and monasteries are not rich in Sri Lanka and only few centers will have a car.

Public transport is cheap in Sri Lanka, but one needs to be prepared to spend three or four times or more the amount of time getting to a place in Sri Lanka than it would take in the West. Most roads are small, badly maintained, and sometimes congested. The traffic can be very chaotic and dangerous. It is definitely not advisable to drive oneself in Sri Lanka. One can rent a minibus or car with a driver for about rs. 3000-4000,- a day (including petrol). The hotel one stays in can help one to find a car with a driver. Make sure to ask for a driver who does not drink or smoke. Drivers are likely to try to bring one to tourist shops in "spice-gardens", etc, from which they will get a commission if you buy anything. The same applies for people or threewheeler drivers offering to bring you to a hotels: the hotel will charge you more as they will have to pay a commission to the person bringing you. Threewheelers are a convenient mode of transport for shorter distances and in towns they can be much quicker than cars. The price for three-wheelers is about rs. 40 a km, but a higher price will generally be charged to Westerners. Make sure to settle the price before getting into the threewheeler. If the driver brings you to a hotel that you already have decided upon, make sure that he does not ask a commission to the owner for which you have to pay.

Like elsewhere in Asia, loudspeakers can possibly be quite a disturbance in Sri Lanka. There are only a few places which completely escape the sound of the chanting blasted from the loudspeakers of village-temples on Buddhist sacred days. It might therefore be advisable to bring earplugs.

Sri Lanka used to be a British colony and there are many Sinhalese people who can speak English well, especially in Colombo and other big towns. In remote country-side areas, however, it can be more difficult to find English speakers. Nevertheless, in almost every village there will be an English teacher in the village school who will be keen to practice his English and can help with translating if necessary. In the bigger meditation-centers and monasteries there usually is someone who can speak English.

The greatest concentrations of meditation-centers and monasteries are in the Western and Central parts of the country, esp. in Colombo and Kandy districts.

Western Buddhists are usually treated with respect and wonder by Sinhalese as westerners are not Buddhist out of cultural reasons, but out of a sincere desire to practice the Dhamma. Most Sinhalese are Buddhists, but they are Buddhist because they are born so and often not really out of conviction. Most Buddhists in Sri Lanka and other countries in Asia practice their religion in the same way as, for example, most Anglicans would do in England. Most will only visit the monastery a few times a year to offer food to the monks and dedicate the merit to their dead father or mother and perform some rituals. Not many laypeople meditate, even the practice of most of the more serious Buddhists consists mainly in observing the precepts, chanting sacred chants, visiting the monastery on Poya days, and other devotional practices. However, there are many seriously practicing Buddhist meditators in Sri Lanka and their number is increasing.

Occasionally, it can happen that one is treated less hospitable. Some Sinhalese people have negative perceptions about Westerners due to nationalistic feeling, etc. Sri Lanka was colonized by European nations for more than 300 years and during that time Sinhalese were not always treated well. Western liberal customs can also be shocking for Sinhalese. It can also happen that Westerners, being from a highly organized society, become critical about things. Even though Sinhalese themselves can be very critical about the situation in Sri Lanka, one has to be quite tactful in giving criticism. Sinhalese, like most Asians, are afraid of being blamed, and one has to be quite tactful and indirect when pointing out a mistake. What can also happen is that Westerners are misperceived as arrogant racists. Sinhalese people are very open and inquisitive. When meeting someone on the street, the first thing one will be asked is where one is going to, etc. Soon one can naturally develop a reserved attitude which can be misperceived as arrogance, nevertheless, it is important to remain respectful and polite.

In general one can, and needs to be, more independent in Sri Lanka. If one is not looking for a guru and is more of an individualist, rather than a group-oriented person, and then Sri Lanka can be a great place. Sinhalese culture, being part of the Indian cultural sphere, allows more individualism than the conformist and hierarchical Thai culture, which is part of the Chinese cultural sphere. Sinhalese leave space to others and there is not such a strong and close teacher-pupil relationship tradition in Sri Lanka as in Thailand. Nevertheless, there are monks, nuns, and lay practitioners who can give useful instructions and help one along the way.

The transliteration of Sinhala characters has been added when it was known and considered useful. This makes it easier to pronounce the place name and make oneself understood to the local people.

In printed roman script maps and street-name boards, etc, the *v* will usually be printed as *w*, *ā* and *ā̄* as *e*, *ā̄* as *ee*. Long vowels will be given as short vowels (e.g. *ā* as *a*).

The character *æ* is pronounced as the English *e* in *end* or *a* in *cat*, *–* is pronounced long drawn like the *a* in *taxi* spoken by a New Yorker, *a* as the *a* in *another*, *ā* as the *a* in *art*, *i* as the *i* in *ink*, *ā̄* as the *ee* in *eel*, the *u* as the *u* in *put*, the *ū* as the *u* in *prudent*, *e* as the *a* in *age* (but before a conjunct consonant as in *end* and thus the same as *æ*), and *o* as the *o* in *own* (but before a conjunct consonant as in *orange*). The *v/w* is pronounced mid-way between the English *v* and

w. The *w* has been used in this work. For more information on the correct pronunciation of Sinhala, see W.S. Karunatilake's *An Introduction to Spoken Sinhala*, p. ix ff, and the Guide to Pronunciation in *The Forest Monks of Sri Lanka* by Michael Carrithers.

The information of this paper is as comprehensive as possible but things can change quickly.

Please send any suggestions with regards this paper to:

Bhikkhu Nyanatusita
Forest Hermitage
Udawattakele
PO Box 61
Kandy

Colombo

The capital of Sri Lanka. Like most big towns in Asia, it is a hot, humid, noisy, and polluted place.

Lanka Vipassana Meditation Centre. 108 Wijerāma Mawatha, Colombo 7. Tel. 011-2694-100.

Situated in Colombo's diplomatic quarter. The present abbot is Ven. Ariyavaṃsāṅkāra. Ven. Abhaya, an English speaking Sinhalese /Australian monk, who became a monk under Ajahn Brahmavamso is teaching here. The place is well supported, and fairly tidy and clean. It is fairly quiet here for Colombo standards. Women stay in a separate wing. There are no official courses, but there is group-meditation. There is no charge for the lodgings and food, but donations are welcome.

Pagoda Meditation Centre. 49/2, 1st Cross Street, Pagoda Road, Nugegoda. Tel: 011-2812397. Website: <http://groups.msn.com/PagodaMeditationCentre>

A new centre started by Ven. Olanda Ānanda, a well-known senior Dutch monk who speaks fluently Sinhala and has been teaching meditation for a long time in Sri Lanka and abroad. There is no accommodation to stay yet, but visitors are welcome. Retreats are planned. Situated in a quiet area in a suburb of Colombo.

Buddhist Cultural Center (BCC), 125 Anderson Road, Nedimala, Dehiwala. Tel : +94 11 2734256 ; 2726234 ; 2728468. Fax: +94 11 2736737. E-mail : bcc@sri.lanka.net

Director: Ven. Vimalajothi. Comprehensive selection of Buddhist Books. There is a branch-bookshop at the junction of Baudhaloka Mawatha and Sarana Road in the All Ceylon Buddhist Congress compound, and 2 smaller centers, one in Kelaniya, and another near Lake House alongside the Cetiya opposite the Hilton.

Affiliated to this place is a meditation centre in Horana outside Colombo: Dekandūwala Meditation Centre. See under Colombo District below.

International Buddhist Research and Information Center (IBRIC) or Nārada Center, 380/9, Sarana Road, Colombo 00700. Tel 689388. e-mail bic@col7.metta.lk

The centre of Prof. Bhikkhu Dhammavīhāri's and Ven. Denmark Mettavihāri. On the ground floor there is a Buddhist book shop with a wide selection of books. The energetic Venerable Mettavihāri, when he is there, can give information to Westerners who like to stay long term or who'd like to become monks. Situated 200 m. off Baudhaloka Mawatha, opposite the back-entrance of the BMICH. Close to Lankā Vipassana Center.

Vishva Niketan International Peace Centre. 72/30 Rawatawatte Road, Moratuwa. Tel/Fax: (94-1)655653 E-mail: vishvaniketan@mail.ewisl.net.

Affiliated to the Sarvodaya, a social self-help movement. There are meditation programs for males and females of all religions. There are also anti-stress programs for businesses and other organisations, etc. Situated in a suburb of Colombo.

Colombo District.

Mostly flatland with some small hills, rubber estates and paddyfields. A hot and humid climate.

Siyane Vipassana Meditation Centre or Kanduboda Vipassana Meditation Centre. Kanduboda, Delgoḍa. Tel. 011-2445518; 011-2570306. E-mail: bhavanam@sltnet.lk.

A meditation centre and monastery with a long tradition of offering meditation instruction to Westerners. Meditation is taught according to the Burmese Mahāsi tradition. The abbot and teacher at the moment is Ven. Piyaratana thera. Women have a separate area to stay in. There are a few large buildings with rooms and some separate huts. It is close to a small road and surrounded by coconut plantations and a few village houses. Warm and humid climate.

The daily schedule and discipline is more relaxed than in the Mahāsi centers in Burma. More individual meditation than group meditation. There is no charge for the lodgings and food, but donations are welcome.

The centre is approximately 20 km. east of Colombo. From the CTB Bus Station at Olcott Mawatha, Pettah, take the 224 bus which stops outside the monastery; also the 207 bus from Gampaha goes there. Some of the buses to Kirindiwella are passing near Kanduboda, but they are infrequent.

Sumantiphāla Bhāvanā Madhyasthānaya Hibatgala Rd, Kanduboda, Delgoḍa. Tel: 011-2402805.

A new meditation centre has been opened in 2003 on the land right next to Kanduboda. Lay people, both men and women, can build kuṭis (huts) and have access to them for life. Thirty kuṭis have been built already.

The abbot and teacher of the new centre is Ven. Pemasiri, a popular and experienced teacher in the Mahāsi tradition. He is helpful and friendly to foreigners. Before, he used to stay in Kanduboda VMC and then in Lanka Vipassana Centre. Besides the Mahāsi method he also teaches other traditional methods of meditation. The place is mainly for laypeople, but monks do visit and stay here too. The female yogis and nuns have their own separate areas. The facilities are nice and spacious. There is no charge for the lodgings and food, but donations are welcome.

The directions are the same as for Kanduboda Vipassana Meditation Centre.

Dhamma Training Centre. (Dekanduwala Meditation Centre) Kahatapitiya–Kananwila, Horana. (Tel : 344–286334.)

Inquiries and bookings should be made through Ven. Vimalajoti at the Buddhist Cultural Center; see Colombo above. The place is nicely situated on a hill-top. Both small houses (kuṭis) and rooms are available for lay meditators. Good facilities, nice meditation hall, quiet, nice views. Westerners are welcome to stay here, but there might be no instruction. One can stay for two weeks. Since 2003 there has been a program going on here in which young Sinhalese men between 18 and 35 can temporarily take ordination. It is about 20 km south-east of Colombo. There is no charge for the lodgings and food, but donations are appreciated.

Take the 120 bus route from Colombo. It is close to the Vidyaratana Pirivena. If traveling from Homagama, Padukka or Horana: Get down at the Govipola junction.

Kandy

The ancient capital of the hill country. A fairly large and crowded provincial town with the temple of the tooth-relic and the two headquarters of the Siam Nikāya. There are some forests left on the hills and mountains. Temperate climate, cool at night.

Lewella Meditation Centre, 160 Dharmashoka Mawatha, Kandy 20000, Tel. 081-4921814.

A meditation centre in a suburb of Kandy (1,5 km away from the centre of town) connected with Nilambe. A place which is mainly for lay-men, both Westerners and Sinhalese, although monks do visit. There is a house with a few rooms near a road and 4 small huts (kuṭis) in the shrubby forest on the slope above the house near the eastern edge of the Udawattekele. Group-meditation in the evening. Yoga-classes are taught by Mahesh. Relaxed atmosphere. This place is in a town-area and can therefore be a bit noisy. There is a 400,-- a day charge for lodgings and food. No females can stay here.

Burmese Resthouse. D.S. Senanayaka Maw. Near Trinity College.

A Burmese vihāra on a major and noisy street right in the centre of Kandy. One or two Burmese monks are residing here. Laypeople, both male and female, can get a room against a small payment and the place is popular with western backpackers.

Buddhist Publication Society (BPS), PO Box 61, 54 Sangharaja Mawatha, Kandy. Tel: 081-2237283. <http://www.bps.lk>

The B.P.S., founded by Ven. Ñāṇaponika, has a bookshop with a large assortment of Buddhist books. There is also a reasonable reference library. One can get some information about retreats, etc, near Kandy.

Forest Hermitage & Senanāyaka Ārāma. Udawattakele, PO Box 61, Kandy. Tel: 0815671653.

Connected to the BPS is the Forest Hermitage in the Udawattakele Forest Reserve on the hill in the centre of Kandy. It was established by Venerable Nyanatiloka thera and Nyanaponika thera in the early 1950's. Laypeople visiting the Forest Hermitage need not pay the fee for the Udawattakele sanctuary, however, the Forest Officers might ask for a note from the resident monk to show that one has visited the Hermitage. Adjoining the Forest Hermitage is the Senanāyakārama Hermitage where serious western laypeople can stay. If one wishes to visit then it is recommended to write or telephone beforehand to the resident bhikkhu, Ven. Ñāṇatusita.

Kandy District

Hills and mountains covered with tea plantations and forests. The higher one goes in the mountains the cooler it gets, especially at night. In December–January one might need warm clothes early in the morning. The rainy seasons are October–November and May.

Nilambē Meditation Centre, Nilambē, Galaha. (Mr. Upul Gamage: 0777-804555.)
<http://www.nilambe.org/>

The major lay meditation centre in Sri Lanka for western travellers and backpackers. Many westerners, both male and female, stay here, but there are also some Sinhalese meditators. There is a 400/- a day charge for lodgings and food. Although there is a relaxed and friendly atmosphere, there is a strong daily schedule and little talking. Situated in an abandoned tea-estate on top of a mountain-range above Perādeniya. Very quiet area. Cool climate, beautiful views. Godwin Samararatne, the respected and internationally known meditation teacher, was long connected to this place and passed away in early 2000. The resident teacher for Sinhalese meditators is Mr. Upul Gamage. Other teachers also come occasionally. There is no resident teacher for westerners at the moment, but the Englishman Dennis Candy helps westerners.

About 20 km south of Kandy. From Kandy take a bus to Galaha and get off 17 km after Perādeniya at the Nilambē Bungalow junction (conductors know the place). From there it is a steep 40 min. walk through tea plantations. Follow the white arrows.

Pāramitā International Buddhist Centre. No. 07 Balumgala, Kadugannāva, Tel/Fax. 081-2570732 (office).

A fairly new meditation centre situated on the mountain above the point where the road from Kandy to Colombo starts going down the mountains (where the old road goes through the rock); 20 km west of Kandy. A comfortable place especially built for westerners who like good facilities and food (and can afford to pay for it). Various teachers come for visits and sometimes formal retreats are held, but normally the emphasis is on practising and studying by oneself. There is a good library. The Malaysian ex-monk Visuddhacāra, now called Visu, is sometimes teaching retreats here with his wife. There is noise from the Kandy–Colombo road and railway line, which are located just below the center. There is a charge for lodgings and food.

Dhammakūṭa Vipassana Meditation Centre. Mowbray, Galaha Road, Hindagala, Perādeniya. Tel.: 081-2234649/081-2385774-5/070-800057. Email: dhamma@sltnet.lk
Website: www.lanka.com/dhamma/dhammakuta

A meditation centre where 10-day Vipassana Meditation courses are given in the tradition of Sayagi U Ba Khin, as taught by S.N. Goenka. In an abandoned tea estate on a mountain slope. Beautiful views, cool. Only courses, for both males and female. One can not stay long term here. It is best to book well in advance as the courses are often booked out. About 5 km from Perādeniya towards the south. Take a Galaha bus from Kandy. One can not visit here without an appointment. There are no fixed charges for the courses, but donations are welcome.

A new center has been opened closer to Colombo, near Avissavella. See <http://www.dhamma.org/cntrasia.htm>