

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 centres and monasteries, only some of these are suitable for Western Buddhist lay practitioners who do not intend to become monastics or stay long time in the country. The following information is particularly intended to western lay buddhists who are new to Sri Lanka and who wish to stay in a meditation centre in Sri Lanka for a limited period of time. The centres have been arranged according to districts. A separate paper, much more extensive, has been written for Western bhikkhus, those who aspire to become bhikkhus, or are very serious about their practise 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 serious lay practitioners. If one would like to visit a forest monastery during one's stay in Sri Lanka then this last paper will provide one with useful information.

The forthcoming book "Sacred Island" by Ven. S. Dhammika (to be published by the B.P.S.) gives exhaustive information regarding ancient monasteries and other sacred sites an pilgrimage places in Sri Lanka.

The best places for those who are new to Sri Lanka and wish to do a retreat are the ones given under the Colombo District and Kandy District headings, i.e., Kanduboda Vipassana Meditation Centre, Kanduboda New Meditation Centre, Nilambe Meditation Centre, Pāramitā International Meditation Centre, and Dhammakūṭa Vipassana Meditation Centre.

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

The place where the meditation centre is gives a good indication about its climate. In the south-west low-country the climate is tropical, i.e., hot and humid. 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-January). The so-called "dry-zone" (this is an exaggeration as it can rain heavily here too at times) is in the East, North, and South. Only one main monsoon (Nov-Dec) takes place there. 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, Badulla, Haputale, and Ratnapura). Here the climate

is temperate and it can get cool at night. It is generally a more agreeable climate than the low-country for westerners. In the south-west up-country areas such as the Singharāja rainforest and the Sri Pada Wilderness areas it rains the most, so much so that it can be impossible to dry one's clothes, etc., for days after washing.

The food is generally everywhere the same all the time in Singhalese 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 unnutritious. Many people in Sri Lanka don't eat meat or fish. In many meditation centres and monasteries one gets no meat or fish. In some monasteries and meditation centres small amounts of fish can be served (meat or eggs are hardly ever given), but one can easily refuse without offending anyone.

Medical care and hygiene are not of the same standards as they generally is 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 is supposed to be very good in these places, but it is priced 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 a lesser standard. The treatment in government hospitals is free for Sri Lankan citizens, but foreigners have to pay for the treatment. 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.

Sri Lanka is a great place for practising patience, simplicity, renunciation, and humility. Conditions in meditation centres and monasteries can be very simple and uncomfortable for those used to the luxuries and comforts of the west. Meditation centres and monasteries are not rich in Sri Lanka and only few places 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 congested. The traffic can be very chaotic and dangerous. It is not definitely 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 initially 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 from which they will get a commission if you buy anything. The same applies for hotels. Threewheelers are a convenient mode of transport for shorter distances and in towns they can be quicker than cars. The price for threewheelers is about rs. 20-25 a km, but a higher price will generally be charged to Westerners. Make sure to settle the price before getting into the threewheeler.

Loudspeakers can possibly be quite a disturbance in Sri Lanka, as in Asia in general. There are only a few places which completely escape the sound of the Paritta-chanting blasted from village-temples on Poya-days.

Sri Lanka used to be a British colony and there are many Singhalese people who can speak English well, especially in Colombo and other big towns, however, in remote country-side areas it can be more difficult to find English speakers. Nevertheless, in almost every village there will be (or is supposed to be) an English teacher in the village school who will be keen to practise his English and can help with translating if necessary. In the bigger meditation-centres and monasteries there usually are a few people who can speak English, but in the more remote and smaller places there might not be English speakers.

The greatest concentrations of meditation-centres and monasteries are in the Western and Central parts of the country, esp. in Colombo and Kandy districts. Due to the war there are very few active monasteries in the northern and eastern districts although there are ruins of ancient ones in many places. In the higher mountain areas there are also few monasteries as the Singhalese generally find it too cold up there.

Western Buddhists are usually treated with respect and wonder by Singhalese as westerners are not Buddhist out of cultural reasons, but out of a sincere desire to practice the Dhamma. Most Singhalese are Buddhists, but they are Buddhist because they are born so and 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 other rituals. Not many Singhales laypeople meditate, even the practice of most of the more serious Buddhists consists mostly in observing the precepts, chanting sacred chants, visiting the monastery on poya days, and other devotional practices.

In general one can, and needs to be, more independent in Sri Lanka. If one wishes to practice independently and is not looking for a big guru, then Sri Lanka can be a great place. The Singhalese, like Indians, are more individualistic than the Thais, and leave more space to others. There is not such a strong teacher-tradition in Sri Lanka as in Thailand and Burma, but there are monks, nuns, and laypractitioners 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.

The character *æ* is pronounced as the English *e* in *end* or *a* in *cat*, *ā* 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*, *ī* 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.

This paper is as comprehensive and exact as possible but things can change quickly.

Please send any suggestions with regards this list to:

Bhikkhu Nyanatusita
Forest Hermitage
Udawattakele
PO Box 61
Kandy

Colombo

The capital of Sri Lanka. In general: a hot, humid, noisy, polluted, and sensual place.

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

This is a branch of Kanduboda in Colombo's Diplomatic quarter. Ven. Pemasiri used to stay here, but moved to a new place next to Kanduboda in 2003 (see previous entry), his place was taken over by Ven. Ariyavaṃsalaṅkara. The place has had many long-term Western monastic- and lay-residents in Ven. Premasiri's time. Good support, tidy, 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 fairly area in a suburb of Colombo.

Buddhist Cultural Center, (= B.C.C), 125 Anderson Road, Nedimala, Dehiwala, Tel. 726234, 734256 Fax. 736737. 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 centres, 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) / Nārada Center, 380/9, Sarana Road, Colombo 00700 Tel 689388. e-mail bic@col7.metta.lk Prof. Bhikkhu Dhammavihari's and Ven. Mettavihari's place. On the ground floor there is a Buddhist book shop with a wide selection of books.

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 movement, they have programs for males and females of all religions.

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 or mupali@sltnet.lk

A meditation centre and monastery with a long tradition of offering meditation-instruction to Westerners. The main teacher and head monk is Ven. Upāli, who is very experienced in the Mahāsi tradition. Women have a separate area to stay in. There are a few large buildings with rooms and some kuṭis. It is close to a small road and surrounded by coconut plantations and a few village houses. The teaching is in the Mahāsi tradition. The daily schedule and discipline is more relaxed than in the Mahāsi centres 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 kms 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 this is not a good option, as they are infrequent). Kanduboda has more than 25 branches throughout the country. Most are of no significance for westerners.

Sumantiphāla BM. 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 can build kuṭis and have access to them for life. This might interest to those who may want to meditate but not become a monk. Thirty kuṭis have been built already. The head of the new centre is Ven. Pemasiri, a popular and experienced teacher in the Mahāsi tradition who is helpful and friendly to foreigners. He used to stay in Kanduboda VMC and then in Lanka Vipassana Centre. (See next entry.) 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 for limited periods. The female yogis and nuns have their own separate area.

The facilities are nice and spacious.

Dekandūwala M.C. Kananwila, Kahatapitiya, Horana. Inquiries and bookings should be made through Ven. Vimalajothi at the Buddhist Cultural Center; see Colombo above. The place is 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. It is about 20 km south-east of Colombo. There is probably a charge for the lodgings and food.

Kandy

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

Lewella Meditation Centre, 160 Dharmashoka Mawatha, Kandy 20000, Tel. 08-2225471. Fax 08-2225471. A meditation centre in a suburb of Kandy (1,5 km away from the centre of town) connected with Nilambe, mainly for lay-people, both Westerners and Singhalese. There is a house with a few rooms near a road and 4 kuṭis in the shrubby forest on the slope above the house near the eastern edge of the Udawattekele. Group-meditation in evening. Yoga-classes. 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.

Burmese Resthouse. D.S. Senanayaka Maw/Trincomalee Street. Near Trinity College. Burmese vihāra on a major and noisy street right in the center of Kandy. One or two Burmese monks are residing here. Laypeople can get a room against a small payment and the place is popular with western backpackers.

Buddhist Publication Society (B.P.S.), PO Box 61, 54 Sangharaja Mawatha, Kandy. Tel: 081-2237283. The B.P.S., founded by Ven. Ñāṇaponika, has a big bookshop with large assortment of Buddhist books. There is also a reasonable reference library upstairs.

Forest Hermitage, Udawattakele, c/o Buddhist Publication Society, PO Box 61, Kandy. Tel: 07777-65944. The Hermitage of Ven. Ñāṇatiloka, Ven. Ñāṇaponika, and Ven. Bodhi. Laypeople visiting the Forest Hermitage need not pay the fee for the Udawattakele sanctuary. It is a small place about 20 minutes walk from the entrance of the forest. 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 the cooler it gets.

Nilambe Meditation Centre, Galaha, Kandy. (Mr. Upul Gamage: 0777-804555.)

The major lay-meditation centre in Sri Lanka for western travellers. Many westerners, both male and female, come here, but there are also some Sinhalese. There is a 400/- a day charge for lodgings and food. There is a strong daily schedule and little talking. Situated in tea-estate-country on a mountain-range above Peradeniya. Quiet area. Cool, wet climate, beautiful views. Relaxed and friendly atmosphere. 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.

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

Pāramitā International Buddhist Centre. No. 07 Balumgala, Kadugannāwa, Tel/Fax.08-570732 (office). A recently built meditation centre on the hill above the point where the Kandy-Colombo road starts going down the mountains (where the old road goes through the rock); 20 km west of Kandy. There is a good library. A comfortable place especially built for westerners who like good facilities and food. Various teachers come for visits and sometimes retreats are held, but normally the emphasis is on practising and studying by oneself. Ven. Sīlananda is the resident teacher and main organizer. Some noise from Kandy-Colombo road. There is a charge for lodgings and food.

Dhammakūṭa Vipassana Meditation Centre. Mowbray, Galaha Road, Hindagala, Perādeniya. (Nr. Kandy) 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. On a mountain, beautiful views, cool. Only courses, no permanent residents. It is better to book well in advance as the courses are often booked out. About 5 km from Peradeniya 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.

Konāravatta Meditation Centre. Atanvala. South of Kaikawala/Rattota. Tel: 066-2233450. 30 km north-east of Kandy, 12 km from Mātale. New, scenic 16 acre place on the slopes of the Knuckles Range. Belonging to ex-Nyanasīha bhikkhu (Germany), now Peter. Laypeople can build their own meditation huts here. If Peter is not there then the caretaker is Chandrā.