



TRAVELLERS 'ADD ON' BUDDHIST MEDITATION RETREAT SRI LANKA

Sri Lanka is a vibrant country, rich in its diversity of culture, race, language and religion. The island has an abundance of natural resources, fauna and flora, mountains, rivers and beautiful beaches. It is located at the crossroads where East meets West and is regarded as the gateway to South Asia.

The hill country has gorgeous rolling hills and tea plantations. The entire island is teeming with bird life and exotics like elephants and leopards. The people are friendly, food delicious and costs low! A stunning island filled with beaches and wild life sanctuaries like the Elephant Orphanage, ancient cities, hills, beaches... and most of all - incredible beauty!



You cannot visit Sri Lanka without absorbing the gentle philosophy of Buddhism which is prevalent in every day life and an important part of the local culture. Sri Lanka's natural beauty and charm is utterly inspiring. This island is a paradise and if you are seeking a connection with nature or the spiritual you have found the right destination.



This is an ADD ON placement, which means you can add it on to your longer term project in Sri Lanka either at the beginning of your trip, in the middle, at the end, or whenever you choose. You can even decide to do it once you are already in Sri Lanka!

We do recommend however that you spend at least 3 days in Sri Lanka adjusting to the heat and recovering from jetlag before you embark upon the meditation retreat. After experiencing the meditation centre ourselves first hand we recommend a 1 week or 2 week add on placement at the centre, for a truly remarkable experience enjoying or discovering meditation.

THE BUDDHIST MEDITATION CENTRE

The meditation centre is situated in a town called Gampaha. This is about 1.5 hours north of Colombo and 50 minutes from the main volunteer house in Ja-Ela. The centre is separated into different areas, with lots of small cabana's splayed out in extremely peaceful surroundings which will assist you in setting your mind free.

The centre is in a beautiful setting in a very large area. It is very peaceful and relaxed, with sunny and shady parts and areas to sit and relax in. The cabana's or 'Kuti's' are extensively spread out and provide accommodation for the individual, without the usual gender separation of standard retreats. There

is a vacuous food hall in which you take your meals with males and females sitting at opposite ends of the building.

INSTRUCTION

When entering Vipassana Meditation Centre for the first time you really are not sure what to expect. This is understandable and many people will never have been to such a place before.

Firstly, you will be introduced to Sister Soma and from here everything will become a lot clearer and you can start to relax into what will be a truly different way of life. Sister Soma is Sri Lankan and speaks perfect English. She has a grace and a sense of serenity which is befitting a Yogini (female practitioner) of some 25 years! She quickly settles you into your room and takes you through the daily timetable. She is always with you at moments when you need help, be that in the dining room when you are unsure of what to do or if you are unsure as to how to even begin meditation. She is your guardian while you need her and your friend when you are feeling more at home! She is very aware that you will need to talk and ask questions and she is keen to do this, making sure that each day you speak a little less as this is a silent retreat.

Sister Soma will make sure that you get to visit the head monk on a regular basis and will translate his advice to you in a way that is easy to understand. During the evening, once meditation time is over she will provide not only words of wisdom verbally but also introduce you to books which explain Buddhism in a light and easy manner. She takes her lead from you - if you are keen to know more about Buddhism and meditation she will foster that interest as much, or as little as you require. Sister Soma is a true Buddhist in every sense of the word.

WHAT TO EXPECT

The centre is a drop in centre. It is polite to let them know to expect you, which our organiser will do for you. Once you are there however you are free to stay or leave as you wish. The other people in the retreat will be largely foreigners but there will also be a few local visitors from nearby towns who are studying Buddhism or simply feel the need for some faith and restoration. Dropping into a Buddhist retreat for a few weeks is not uncommon in Sri Lanka as meditation is highly regarded as a way to heal and replenish the soul. There is room for a total of about 40 visitors at one time.

The centre is silent and no talking is permitted between yourself and the other meditators but slow and gentle speech is allowed when you are with the monks. Body language communication must also be very subtle but is not recommended generally. It is better not to make eye contact and smile as the purpose of the retreat is for each person to focus inwardly. Communication in any form distracts from this. The silence is something that takes some getting used to. However it also comes as a tremendous relief as there is no polite chitchat required! Should you need to ask a question or make contact with someone you may do so subtly, with respect and you should whisper. Keep communication to a minimum. You may find however that some of the female monks and younger Sri Lankan girls will want to talk to you a little bit. Please use your discretion and observe the rules of the monastery by keeping contact to a minimum. Always follow their lead and do not initiate any communication yourself, unless you need to.

Many of the other people in the retreat may be there for anything between 2 weeks and 6 months. Your stay of 1 or 2 weeks will be relatively very brief. However, as a westerner with little or no experience of meditation previously, this will probably be long enough. During an initial exploration into meditation, a new sense of self-discipline must be acquired. To do very little all day long is difficult. If you want to stay longer than your allocated time, of course you can, and this can be arranged through the Sri Lankan staff at the time. However, it will depend how long you have left on your visa and the maximum stay in Sri Lanka as a volunteer is 3 months.

The first 2-3 days of a meditation retreat can be quite tricky. This is how long it takes to unwind and slow down from a life of deadlines, responsibilities, distractions, aggressive subliminal marketing, conflicts, rushing, traffic, communication, relationships, to-do lists and so on. For a long time you have been on fast forward in your life and suddenly there is relatively little to do. All you have to do now is be – exploring your inner feelings and emotions before setting your mind free!

You will probably go through a range of emotions and physical sensations during your first few days. Some initial boredom, urgency and frustration should be replaced by peace and relief quite soon. What you should notice, and take with you, is this: most things that you experience and feel should change, with each state being replaced with a new one. Boredom will give way to Euphoria; anger will be replaced by acceptance, fear to comfort, etc. All you have to do is just breathe, note how you feel and experience the feeling without fighting it. When the noise of the outside world is turned down and distractions are taken away from us, our awareness comes back to us and a meditation retreat enables us to journey inside and find a sense of calm, of balance.

The meditation gets easier as you go along but it should never be too much for you such as the support you are given and the way the retreat is more geared towards westerners and beginners. You will acclimatise to the pace, the silence and the routine after a few days. You will slow down to the rhythm around you! It is now that you start to hear the sounds of the jungle better, notice the wildlife in the trees above you, the way the insects move, the changing light of the forest. You begin to appreciate everything in a deeper way; the hot lemon afternoon tea, the sun on your back, a smile, breathing... you are not in a rush and your thoughts have slowed down also, they are less ferocious and demanding and sometimes, briefly, there are no thoughts. This is the time when inspiration can come, creativity, insights and understanding are able to arise when your mind is peaceful and you are completely relaxed.

CAUTION! A meditation retreat can be a very intense experience. You are very limited in how much you have contact and communication with others so you are really doing this alone. Anyone who has recently been through a traumatic experience may find the experience too much and it may not be helpful to you at this stage. We highly recommend that you consider this meditation retreat only if you feel that you are in sound and stable mind.



MEDITATION

It is very helpful to have some idea about meditation before you go. If you have had no formal experience we recommend you read some books in advance and try to do a little practise of your own. It can be frustrating and uncomfortable at first but you'll soon get used to it.

Mediation can be either walking or seated and can be done in your room or the outside areas. You will receive instruction in both of them. You are free to do mediation at any time of the day in addition to these given times in fact you will find that most yogis mediate at every opportunity! You can alternate between sitting meditation and walking meditation during these times. It is not encouraged to read or write unless the monk gives you relevant literature and their permission to read. Listening to music, painting or other pastimes are also strictly prohibited.

SITTING MEDITATION

Sit quietly in a comfortable position with your back straight, your head up and your chin tucked in a little. You want your spine from bottom to top to be as straight as possible. This may feel uncomfortable at first as we are so used to sitting with back support in the west and have not developed our muscles adequately. With practise however you will become used to sitting in this position. You can cross your legs or kneel or sit on a cushion or a ledge. The important thing is that you are comfortable and that your back is straight. Once you have found your position try to relax into it but stay alert and firm enough to keep the posture.

If you find yourself slouching sit up straight. If you find yourself in physical discomfort and experience pain anywhere in the body try and stay still and observe the pain with a sense of acceptance until it goes away. If it does not go away after some time or if you feel particularly uncomfortable you can adjust your position, but generally try to move as little as possible during a meditation session.

Close your eyes and take your attention to the breath. Try not to control your breathing, just to be aware of yourself breathing; just try to observe your body in its natural state of breathing. It helps to concentrate on a particular part of your body as you breathe such as the sensations in your nose as you breathe air in and as you release it. Or you can focus on the back of the throat where you can feel the air, or on your lower stomach expanding as you breathe in and decreasing as you breathe out.

This is all you have to do. Try to keep the attention on the breath. Sounds easy? Try it! The mind has a natural inclination to wander. This is fine. Each time you notice it happening however bring the attention straight back to the breath. This is step one in meditation, concentrating and directing the mind to one thing. It enables the rest of your mind to stop and it creates space in the mind, something that can lead to a wonderful sense of calm.

Alternatives methods of meditation can include observing simply the sounds around you. You might like to create a visualisation that is personal to you and creates calm, or you may like to meditate upon a mantra such as 'may all beings be happy'.

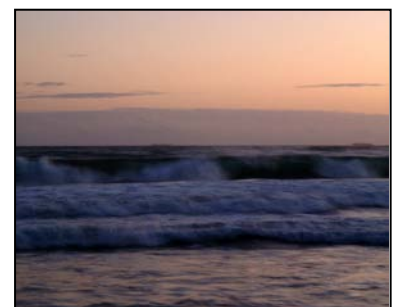
WALKING MEDITATION

Walking meditation is a nice contrast to sitting meditation and can break up the time. The principle is the same, to concentrate the mind on present physical sensations. Walk very slowly, and be mindful of each movement. Eyes open and looking ahead take your attention to your feet and the sensations as you place one foot down slowly roll from heel to toe and lift it off the ground placing the other foot down in front. Feel these sensations of walking and try to take all of your concentration into these sensations. Walk up and down a path for 30 minutes or as long as you feel you can continuously taking your attention back to the sensations created through walking. Other sensations that you are aware of such as the heat of the sun on parts of your body, the sounds of the jungle or the colour of a flower can also be meditated (intently focused) upon for variation.

More reading will help you in your understanding of meditation.

SCHEDULE

4.00am	Wake up
4.15	Pay homage
5.00	Porridge/ gruel called Conglee
5.15-6.00	Meditation
6.15	Breakfast
7.15-8.15	Meditation
8.15	Drink of King Coconut
8.30-9.30	Cleaning rooms and centre eg. sweeping
9.30-11.00	Bathing and washing of clothes
11.15	Lunch
12.30-1.30pm	Meditation
1.30	Drink of tea
2.00	Mediation advice usually by head monk



5.00-6.00	Cleaning outside areas
6.00	Pay homage
6.30	Evening drink
7.00-8.00	Meditation
10.00	Lights out

LUNCH

Lunch is served by several women and children. It is always rice and curry with lots of variety and endless portions. The food is mostly vegetarian, with some fish. There is warm water, and pudding of fruit, yogurt and something very sweet, which varies. Some people save their pudding snacks. This is wise as you do not get to eat again for the remainder of the day (unless you have taken some snacks)!

MONK TIME

After lunch is free time until 2pm. Then the monk comes and sits for anyone who wants to come and talk with him. He speaks English. This is the time to ask questions, get help, or discuss any problems that you are having. Anything at all can be discussed here. Someone is there everyday at 2pm. Sometimes the monk may give you a book to read on how to meditate. Otherwise he will answer any questions that you may have about your meditation.

You are encouraged not to write or read, unless advised by the monk or teacher. Sometimes there will also be guided meditation sessions by the head monk, when he is in town. These take place in English.

MEDITATION GUIDELINES/THE RULES

1. Yogis should observe as many precepts during their stay as they can.
2. Walking, sitting, standing and lying down should be carried out mindfully at all times.
3. Silence is golden.
4. Talking is a strong hindrance to meditation.
5. If you must talk, do it where it does not disturb others
6. Refrain from talking about your meditation to others.
7. Meals are taken in silence.
8. Yogis should not read unless asked to do so by their teachers.
9. Under garments should be hung to dry discreetly.
10. Do not keep sweets in your room as it attracts ants. Keep in a tight jar if necessary.
11. While staying here please help keep all areas neat and clean. Be mindful at all times so we can help each other progress. Please take attentive care of resources here.
12. Please sweep out your room and wash linen lent to you before you leave.
13. Please note that this centre is only for those who wish to follow a course of training in insight (vipassana) meditation. Under the method sponsored by the late Van. Mahasi Sayadaw II Sobhana Mahathera of Burma.

OBSERVE THE 10 PRECEPTS

1. Not to kill any living being.
2. Not to take what is not given.
3. Not to have sexual contact.
4. Not to tell lies; not to indulge in idle talk or gossip (wrong speech).
5. Not to take any drugs or alcohol.
6. Not to eat solid food after 12:30 noon until the next dawn – although beginners do not have to follow this strictly at first.
7. Not to dance, sing, listen to music
8. Not to wear garlands or apply scents, use makeup, cosmetics or jewellery.
9. Not to sleep on high and expensive beds.
10. Not to accept gold and silver (money)

JOURNAL EXTRACTS from the meditation centre, Lisa Oakden 2008

I have just got back from the meditation centre which was a fabulous experience.

The rooms are basic but clean and comfortable, and have in them special cushions for comfortable meditation. The cushions can be taken outside to meditate in the grounds. This is especially a good idea in the morning and evenings as the sun and the moon and the beginning and end of the day are beautiful. The fireflies are enchanting!

One of the main worries or concerns I had before I went was the food... do not fear! I can honestly say that I have never eaten so well! The quality and quantity of the food is quite amazing and I didn't feel hungry once during my week long stay. You will be fed very well indeed and if you do find that you are hungry for some reason Sister Soma will make sure that some biscuits and snacks can be found. Many people keep some food over from the lunchtime meal just in case hunger strikes in the night but I assure you, food is plentiful! One thing you can take to make you feel more at home is tea bags, coffee sachets (cappucino style) and you can have these instead of the drinks provided. Take care, if you wish to be a real yogi then milk cannot be drunk after 12 noon and that does include powered milk!

At the end of you stay you may wish to leave behind a small gift to say thank you. The yogis at the meditaion centre do not want a great deal but basic things such as pens, mosquito coils and spray, tissues, hand dispenser sized washing up liquid, washing powder sachets are far more useful to them than biscuits.

I spent 1 week at the centre and entered it a complete beginner. I could not meditate in anyway shape or form and the idea of being virtually silent for week caused much hilarity within my friendship group but 1 week on I can do both walking and seated meditation. Without a doubt the first few days are unusual as everything is new and the people around you seem to understand what they are doing while you are still trying to grasp hold of it all. But just live in the present and listen to the advice given to you. Yes it is hard work but you are there to learn a new skill and that takes practice and time... one thing you have a great deal of in the centre. I felt very well looked after and cared for throughout the whole stay! I am really pleased that I took this opportunity and I do feel different, much calmer and ready to face the next part of my journey.

THE NEXT STEP

If you would like to join us on one of our exciting projects then please fill in either an online application form at our website (www.travellersworldwide.com) or one that is attached to our brochure. Once you have booked and confirmed your place we will send you detailed pack information regarding your placement and country.

I do hope you join us and please do call or email if you have any questions at all about this or any of our other projects – 01903 502595 or email info@travellersworldwide.com

If you would like to know more about Travellers in general, or about any of our other projects we run in over 18 countries worldwide, please visit our website at www.travellersworldwide.com



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