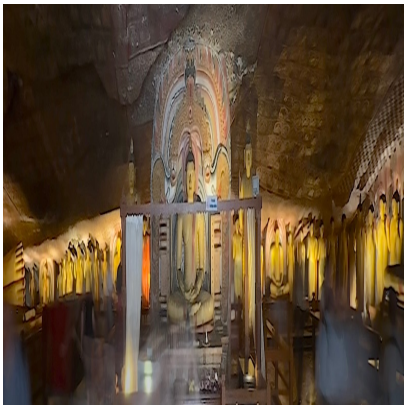


A place to meditate

Description

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I returned recently from two and a half weeks in Sri Lanka, where the copious images of the Buddha are not confined to temples but permeate the everyday visual field â?? roadside shrines, hilltop monuments, domestic altars, hotel gardens, municipal roundabouts. Amongst their roles in the landscape, statues of the Buddha serve as exemplars of a meditative disposition, but also as focal objects on which to meditate. It seems that meditation here is not simply a private performance but has a place in public spectacle.

One encounters the Buddha in multiple postures. I since discovered that each displays a distinct disposition: seated in dhyÄ•na mudrÄ• â?? concentrated inward absorption; reclining â?? serene release at the threshold of death; standing â?? alert composure; teaching gestures â?? meditation externalised as discourse.

Iâ??m reprising my post of 7 December 2013 In meditative mood (#173) in which I attempted to align meditative practices with theories about objects in nature as sources of â??soft fascination,â?• and ideas about the crucial role of *attention* in the cognitive field. After I uploaded the post and provided information about my recent travels, ChatGPT suggested that the iconographic system of Buddha statuary outlined above â??operates almost as a typology of attentional states.â?•

These quietly poised images are ubiquitous in Sri Lanka, altering and animating the settings in which they are placed â?? rock caves, forest clearings, elevated terraces, water gardens, memorial sites.





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ChatGPT reminded me that the meditative figure is rarely isolated from its environment of stone, vegetation, humidity, filtered light â?? all participate.

> This resonates with the earlier discussion of â??soft fascination,â?• but here the relation feels older and less instrumentalised. The environment is not curated to restore cognitive performance; it is staged as cosmological theatre.

â??Cosmological theatreâ?• invokes thoughts of display, imagination and storytelling. This AI exchange introduced a concept new to me of *distributed meditation*: â??Meditation is distributed across sculpture, topography, climate, and pilgrims movement.â?• I would perhaps translate that to: meditation becomes a practice that draws on focal objects in place, landscape, climate and movement. The AI provided a nice formulation that removes meditative practice from self-centring: â??One walks into meditation

rather than initiating it internally.â?•

I should say that I had already primed this exchange with the post from 2013, and the AI had subsequently posited an â??update.â?• So the AI is armed with my own thinking on the subject.

Any visitor to the country would be impressed with the profusion of Buddhas. ChatGPT highlighted the effect of repetition: â??Seeing hundreds of Buddha images over a short period produces a cumulative cognitive impression â?? a kind of *attentional entrainment*.â?• The AI launched readily into a further series of aphorisms â?? quotable and thought-provoking statements served well by a meditative disposition, standing alone and without elaboration.

> The half-closed eyes, lowered gaze, relaxed shoulders â?? these postural cues operate pedagogically. They model an attentional disposition without instruction. In this sense the statues function as *behavioural diagrams*. They do not depict meditation; they rehearse it in the viewer.

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At some later date it would be interesting to explore how objects might function in learning (pedagogy) as *behavioural diagrams*, and the difference here between *depicting* and *rehearsing*.

[That said, over many such conversations I have grown respectfully cautious about the seductions of semantics, the generative power of loosely related terms that mirror relationships in the training corpus and seem to fit the current context â?? with no guarantee that they make sense. See post Architecture in multidimensional feature space.]

Tourism and the meditative gaze

Such meditative places in Sri Lanka and other locales are flooded with devotees and tourists, myself amongst them. Many of these sites are entangled with tourism infrastructures â?? à¤?à¤¿à¤?à¤? booths, interpretive signage, camera platforms, crowd control measures.



The AI reminded me that we visitors with limited attention photograph the meditating figure of the Buddha while inhabiting a distinctly *non-meditative* attentional mode: framing, posting, moving on. The statues attempt to invoke stillness, but the viewer communicates restlessness: â??Meditation becomes spectacle â?? something seen rather than practised.â?•

My AI guide also offered some positive reflections, informed by digital media, apps, social networking, data clouds, etc.

> And yet, occasionally, the visual field exerts its own slowing effect. One lingers despite oneself. Returning home, the Buddha images persist â?? now as phone photos, cloud archives, algorithmically resurfaced â??memories.â?• The meditative icon enters the same circulatory system as restaurant meals and airport lounges.

My 2013 post proposed meditation as a condition uniting diverse practices â?? music, conversation, phenomenology, gaming. ChatGPT suggested that the Sri Lankan encounter adds: *Meditation as image ecology*: â??a cultural field in which attentional states are stabilised, rehearsed, and transmitted through material form, spatial arrangement, and ritual repetition.â?•

I conclude with an audio of the 2013 post followed by this post in 2026. [Read by my cloned voice. For â??mediateâ?• read â??meditate.â?•]

Note

- Featured image is the interior of the **Dambulla Cave Temple**, also known as the Golden Temple of Dambulla, in central Sri Lanka. Images in the main text are (1) reclining Buddha statue at the **Isurumuniya Vihara** (temple) in Anuradhapura, (2) **Peraliya Buddha Statue** (Tsunami Honganji

Viharaya) in Hikkaduwa, and (3) **Temple of the Sacred Tooth Relic**, also known as the Sri Dalada Maligawa, in Kandy. All pictures are by the author.

Category

1. Artificial Intelligence
2. Podcast

Tags

1. Buddha
2. meditation
3. Sri Lanka
4. tourism

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