Important information for Vipassana meditators travelling to the UK

Thank you for making the journey to meditate in Dhamma Padhnāna. This guide explains what you need to arrange before you travel and how to answer questions at the UK border simply and truthfully. Please read it all the way through, even if you have visited the UK many times before – the section on what to say at the border applies to everyone, whether or not you need a visa.

> **Before you travel – four things to do**
>
> 1. Check whether you need an **ETA** or a **visa** (see section 1).
> 2. Apply in good time and select **"Tourism"** as the purpose of your visit (sections 2 and 3).
> 3. Read **"What to say at the border"** (section 4) and keep your confirmation email and return ticket within easy reach when you travel.
> 4. Fill in the **"To Whom It May Concern" letter** at the end of this document with your name and the dates of your stay, and **print it** (section 5).

1. Do you need an ETA or a visa?

Almost all visitors to the UK now need permission before they travel. The only exceptions are British and Irish citizens, people who already hold a valid UK visa or other UK immigration permission, and those with the right of abode in the UK.

Which one you need depends on your nationality:

- **ETA (Electronic Travel Authorisation)** – if you are from an EU country, the USA, Australia, Canada, Japan and around 80 other countries. See the full list here: gov.uk/guidance/check-when-you-can-get-an-electronic-travel-authorisation-eta
- **Standard Visitor Visa** – if your nationality is not on the ETA list.

If you are unsure, use the official checker: gov.uk/check-uk-visa

2. Entering with an ETA

An ETA at the moment costs **£20** and is valid for two years, or until your passport expires. It allows multiple trips to the UK of up to six months each. It is linked to your passport, so if you get a new passport you will need a new ETA.

How to apply – it is quick and usually approved within minutes, but the Home Office recommends applying at least three working days before you travel:

1. Download the official **"UK ETA" app** from Google Play or the Apple App Store, or
2. The UK government website: gov.uk/eta

Please apply only through these official channels. Other websites imitate government services and charge much more for the same thing.

Purpose of visit: when asked what you are coming to do, select **"Tourism"**. The immigration definitions of "study" and "work" do not apply to sitting or serving at a Vipassana meditation centre – see section 4 for why.

3. Entering with a Standard Visitor Visa

A Standard Visitor Visa for up to six months at the moment costs **£135**. Apply well in advance, as you will need to attend a visa application centre to give your biometrics, and processing times vary by country. Start here: gov.uk/standard-visitor

Purpose of visit: select **"Tourism"**. In your application, describe your trip as attending a meditation retreat at a centre run by a registered UK charity.

Supporting documents: attach the completed "To Whom It May Concern" letter that you find under this link; To whom it may concern.pdf, together with your confirmation email from the centre and evidence of your return travel. If you would like a signed copy of the letter, please contact the centre's registration office in good time.

General information on UK entry requirements: gov.uk/uk-border-control/before-you-leave-for-the-uk

In case you have been refused a Visa to enter the UK

Obtain the full refusal notice and reapply, addressing each stated reason. A stronger application should include an employer letter confirming approved leave, bank statements showing stable income, evidence of family and property ties in the country, travel history, and a short cover letter explaining Vipassana, your old-student history, and the exact course dates. There is no waiting period to reapply. The refusal will stay on your immigration record, so you'll need stronger evidence now. It'll be advisable to address this problem, or you get refused again potentially.

4. What to say at the border

This section is the most important part of this document and applies to **everyone** – including travellers who do not need a visa, and including those travelling by Eurostar, where UK border checks take place **before you board** in Paris, Brussels, Amsterdam or Rotterdam.

> **When asked "Why are you coming to the UK?", say:**
>
> "I am attending a meditation retreat at Dhamma Dipa / Dhamma Padhāna in Herefordshire."
>
> **Please do not use the words**
>
> **"volunteer", "volunteering", "help", "work", "serve", "server", "student" or "course".**
>
> Keep your answer short. Do not explain, justify or add detail unless you are asked. If you are asked further questions, show your printed letter, your confirmation email and your return ticket.

Why this matters

Within our centres we naturally use the words "student", "server", "course" and "volunteer". Border officers, however, hear these words in their everyday immigration sense – "study" and "work" – and they are trained to look for exactly those things.

Describing your trip as attending a meditation retreat is not only simpler – it is also the most accurate description in immigration terms. Meditation is a mental exercise, a spiritual pursuit undertaken for self-development and well-being, and for immigration purposes it is a leisure activity. At Vipassana centres, students and servers are all meditators practising the same technique, simply following different daily timetables. Serving is an integral part of the practice: the meditator is primarily serving themselves, using service

to develop good qualities and strengthen their own practice while living by the centre's rules, timetable and discipline.

If you are questioned further

- Stay calm and friendly. Officers are doing their job, and short, consistent answers are far more convincing than long explanations.
- Hand over your printed "To Whom It May Concern" letter. It explains what the centre is and why you are a genuine visitor.
- Have your confirmation email and return ticket ready to show.
- If asked about payment, food or accommodation, you can say simply that the retreat is offered free of charge to all participants and that the centre is run by a UK charity on a donation basis. Do not describe meals or accommodation as something you receive in return for anything.
- If you feel the conversation is going in the wrong direction, you may politely ask to speak with a supervisor and show them the letter.

5. "To Whom It May concern" letter – fill it in, print it, carry it

You find the "To Whom It May Concern" letter under this link: To whom it may concern.pdf. The letter is a statement from the Vipassana Trust explaining what our centres are and why participants enter the UK as visitors.

Everyone with a visa application should complete it and carry a printed copy. In case of an ETA we recommend you complete and bring the letter with you.

It is useful in three situations:

- as a supporting document with a visa application,
- as background information with an ETA application, if asked, and
- to show a border officer if you are questioned.

Before you travel, fill in your **name, date of birth, address, the centre you are visiting and the dates of your stay**, exactly as they appear in your passport and confirmation email. A letter with missing details is much less convincing than a complete one.

We hope this information will prove helpful to you. In case you encounter any difficulties at the border, please let the centre know via info@padhāna.dhamma.org so that we can improve the information.