


Mediating Suffering: Buddhist Detachment and Tantric Responsibility in Michael Ondaatje's *Anil's Ghost*

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**Justin M. Hewitson,**

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**Abstract:** In "Mediating Suffering: Buddhist Detachment and Tantric Responsibility in Michael Ondaatje's *Anil's Ghost*," Justin Hewitson argues that the global mediation of suffering following human rights abuses creates the offender-victim binary. The way in which moral judgments drive urgent peacemaking is seldom connected to long-term victimhood narratives. This psychology can exacerbate cyclical patterns of anger, exploitation, and violence by deferring responsibility. Ondaatje's controversial novel, *Anil's Ghost*, which reflects these charged accusations, refuses to settle blame on any side of the Sri Lankan conflict; instead, it offers the troubling recognition that offenders, victims, and mediators are all causal agents. Hewitson explores the text's Buddhist and Hindu merging of detachment and responsibility as its characters, Anil, Palapina, and Ananda adopt empirical and intuitive therapies in response to the Buddha's Four Noble Truths of suffering. It is argued that Ananda's *samādhī*-like vision at the novel's conclusion projects a middle way between traumatic anger and loss via detached empathy.

## Justin M. HEWITSON

### Mediating Suffering: Buddhist Detachment and Tantric Responsibility in Michael Ondaatje's *Anil's Ghost*

For a few centuries before the Common Era, Eastern and Western therapies of detachment and responsibility intersected: the Greek Stoics embraced *ataraxia* (mental equanimity) and *apatheia* (control of the passions) to eliminate suffering and attain Plato's good life. Somewhat earlier, India's Gautama Buddha taught that attachment to duality caused suffering. The Buddha's Four Noble Truths paralleled ancient Vedic and Tantric theories that life's pleasures and pains were not random occurrences but inherited reactions. For India's contemplative traditions, the causal principle of *karma* did not encourage fatalistic inaction but a radical responsibility for the unrequited mental impressions (*samskāra*) of previous actions (unreferenced Sanskrit and Mandarin translations are the author's). Meditators realized that investing in the passions and fixating on relative truths intensified suffering. Their pragmatic cure was selfless action, mental equanimity, and responsibility combined with meditative praxes that merged subject and object. With training, practitioners could acquire the correct discrimination (*viveka*) needed to transcend relative truths and attain non-dual spiritual bliss (*ānanda*) in *samādhi* states. Over the last century, India's psycho-spiritual approaches to peace have (re)entered the West as millions of non-Indians embraced meditation. Nevertheless, juridical and humanitarian attempts at creating lasting peace after violence overlook how training in Indian detachment and responsibility could facilitate individual long-term recovery. Instead, global mediation of human rights abuses preserves the divisive offender-victim binary, while the mass media's reification of free speech incentivizes a narrative of non-responsibility. Institutional commissions and cultural productions that aspire to objectivity in the face of atrocity also face immense pressure to pass moral judgement. The preceding factors combined with victims' real experiences of loss and helplessness invoke within the binary destructive patterns of traumatic anger and depression.

Michael Ondaatje's provocative 2000 postcolonial novel, *Anil's Ghost*, offers a nuanced account of these issues using war-torn Sri Lanka as a backdrop to explore how violence is confronted and victimhood overcome. His syncretic approach puts Western empiricism and Buddhist intuitive unity under tension while examining the roots of individual and collective suffering. Drawing on Ondaatje's insights and Indian philosophy, I will argue that mediation solely predicated on separating offenders (causes) and victims (effects) catalyzes psychological oppositions—the evil versus the innocent—that defer the radical responsibility and nonattachment needed for self-cure. Given that people rarely view their harmful actions as immoral, instead justifying all responses in relation to external events, victimhood mentality potentially reinforces destructive behavioral patterns well into the future. These charged concerns (with their unwarranted connotation of victim blaming) pose ethical challenges to peacework rarely addressed by social commentators.

As a fictional representation of the bloody conflict between the majority Sinhala Buddhist government and the minority Hindu Tamils, *Anil's Ghost* tracks the expatriate Anil Tiserra's forensic investigation into human rights abuses. She attempts to identify the skeleton of a victim, nicknamed Sailor, presumably murdered by the Sri Lankan government. Anil, the historian Palapina, and the artist Ananda Udugama—whose wife's disappearance and probable murder three years earlier have turned him into a suicidal alcoholic—move between empirical and intuitional epistemes. *Anil's Ghost* indirectly allegorizes the "Buddha's Four Noble Truths": the existence, cause, cessation, and path beyond suffering (Laumakis 45). In his culminating paragraph, Ondaatje indicates a middle path between detachment and responsibility for the tormented Ananda, whose Sanskrit name means spiritual bliss (*ānanda*). It was also the name of the Buddha's chief attendant, as well as Ananda Coomaraswamy, the influential Sri Lankan Tamil philosopher that Palapina references. Ondaatje acknowledges Coomaraswamy's description of the Buddhist "eye ceremonies" that connect Hinduism and Buddhism was "invaluable" to his research for *Anil's Ghost* (Ondaatje 310). Ananda's paradoxical name is resolved in the oft-cited closing paragraph when he completes the ceremony and experiences a transcendence akin to *samādhi*. Standing high above the ground on a ladder, Ananda's world is restored to sweetness by a "concerned" touch from the earth (307). David Babcock's masterful deconstruction of the linguistic embodiments of experience in the "public sphere" suggests that the scene offers "alternative temporalities" via a non-universal "surrogate gaze" that shares the natural world with human violence (66-77). My reading of the Indian approaches to individual suffering shows that Ananda's intuitions about the specific causes of violence and his longing for peace coalesce in the quasi-merging of his consciousness with that of the

Buddha statue—a transformative objective common to Buddhist and Tantric meditative praxes. This integration of touch and detachment—the immanent and transcendent—is a nonlinguistic therapy.

Ondaatje's detached representations of violence and references to Sri Lanka's Buddhist and Hindu practices involve his deliberately muted "interest in Eastern religions" (Von Memerty 7); he remarks that he did "backflips" to avoid representing any side of the Sri Lankan conflict (Scanlan 302-3). Critics have noticed his nuanced and complicated approach to ethics while questioning the novel's apolitical stance. Others have explored the work's subtle political theses (see Derrickson 131; Staels 978)—Ondaatje's interests suggests he was aware that the Buddha's first spiritual community (*sangha*) was not fundamentally political (Inayatullah 69). References to Sri Lankan politics and Buddhism permeate *Anil's Ghost* (see Goldman 4), yet Ondaatje sidesteps the "pride of place" granted to Buddhism by the 1972 constitution (Gombrich 23). Much has been made of Palapina's study of the "hidden histories, intentionally lost that altered the perspective and knowledge of the earliest times." His interlinear discoveries of banned "illegal" stories are less revelations than invitations to question how historiographies distort facts to support violence (Ondaatje 105). Although critics have compared Western and Buddhist articulations of political truths and how suffering is witnessed or presented (see Von Memerty 65 and Marinkova 108), Ondaatje's subtle inclusion of Buddhist/Hindu therapies has not been addressed from a comparative Indological perspective.

Ondaatje does not privilege the exposure of collective histories as catharsis. Rather, he examines suffering as it is experienced, psychologically. Thus, every revelation about a collective agent of violence is countered—the government, the Tamil Tigers, the insurgents—leaving nobody (or everybody) to blame. Anil's attempts at "taking sides" are constantly undermined by reminders that people are being killed everywhere; "bodies" come in from "bombing[s] somewhere in the city" (*Anil's* 290). Instead of satisfying our desire to know who causes harm, *Anil's Ghost* focuses on the why.

Before exploring the novel's layered Indian approaches to suffering, it is critical to understand how Western mediation—Anil's methodology—establishes victimhood via language and the offender-victim binary. By raising these intrinsically oppositional processes without projecting Western resolutions, Ondaatje compels readers to confront assumptions about how peace is realized. Here, I limit victims to primary or secondary survivors of atrocity; mediators are restricted to peace workers and interlocutors who invoke collective moral or punitive judgments through exposure. I briefly examine how free speech reveals facts that do not reduce suffering. Atom Egoyan suggests that the "unreliability of language and representation" (mis)informs our "media hungry" cultural belief in the panacea of free speech (903). Frequently, agendas can shape the forensic language of mediation to create new injustices.

The foregoing discussion informs this essay's second half that examines Ondaatje's Indian ethics while seeking to avoid what Sam Knowles calls the simplistic emphasis of commentators on "religion in the novel" (435). Ondaatje does not elevate Buddhist religiosity by vilifying Western Enlightenment ideals — the latter interpretation, according to Lena Khor, undermines studies of *Anil's Ghost* (*Rights Discourse* 177). Rather, Ondaatje navigates oppositions by injecting Hindu-Buddhist ethics, exemplified by Ananda's detached gaze which "stare[s] past it all" as bodies are uncovered in the fields around him. Ananda's detachment is not inaction: his work on the Buddha statue protects his fellow villagers, and Ondaatje suggests that "Buddhism and its values" (as therapy) should be separated from its distortion by Sinhala Buddhists in Sri Lanka's killing fields (300-2). As Indian karma is unavoidable, adopting detached responsibility gives value to suffering instead of denying personal accountability. Sri Lanka's Theravāda Pāli Canon presents the Buddha's Second Noble Truth "all beings manifest "according to the consequences of their deeds" (Horner 303). Given Yoga-Tantra and Buddhism share a common origin, I incorporate Prabhāt Ranjan Sarkar's (Shrii Shrii Anandamurti) exegesis of *saṃskāra* in relation to Tantric ethics. Sarkar is India's most influential contemporary Tantric Guru (Hewitson 168), a "seminal thinker" whose Neo-Humanism fosters "a new awareness" of humanity's "interconnection with the universe" and the natural world (Bussey 707-8). *Anil's Ghost* has Palapina and Ananda experience this interconnection through discipline and suffering when the former treats his niece and the latter rebuilds his destroyed world.

The offender-victim dyad, introduced by Von Henting in 1948, first informed Victimology's deconstruction of blame in connection with common deviant crime (Levy 175-6). I use the offender-victim *binary* to represent an interdependent opposition generated by the human rights narratives that expose "extraordinary international crimes" (Drumbl xii). The hyphen is causal; offenders create victims, and the latter must articulate their trauma before receiving formal mediation. Critically, Shoham and Paul Knepper state in their *International Handbook of Victimology* that "suffering" or "norm" violations do not determine victimhood—witnesses should ratify victim status before survivors can pursue the "rights and obligations" of this identity. Today, recognizing victim depends on objective (largely

Western) media and judicial institutions whose reliance on the intrinsic subjectivity of free speech provokes moral judgments as mediators attempt to satisfy the victims' overwhelming desire to know who issued and carried out orders (Mullins 5). Questions of justice aside, Freud's influential "talking cure" reinforces the West's prioritization of verbal catharsis to treat collective and individual trauma (Meyer, Moore, and Viljoen 545). The subjective value accorded affective speech is complicated by the inevitable (un)conscious distortions of senders and receivers whose objectives do not always coincide. Moreover, regional approaches, such as the African or Asian, may prefer "spiritually-oriented" therapies, including dancing, meditation, and shamanist intervention to linguistic performance (545-6). These non-discursive paradigms rarely appear in mediatory strategies that rely on appeals to moral outrage for quick intervention.

*Anil's Ghost* reinforces that understanding and overcoming suffering is an unpredictable, non-lingual event: nobody "could ever give meaning" to reports on "violence" without "the distance of time." Anil's belief that empirical answers create "meaning [which] allowed a person a door to escape grief and fear" is shaken by her observation that people "slammed and stained by violence lost the power of language and logic" gave up "emotion" as a "last protection for the self" (Ondaatje 55-6). Despite the failure of language to fully encapsulate traumatic events, mediators often feel compelled to expedite their and (by proxy) the media's reports which then spark global outrage, shaping the futures of offenders and victims.

Ideally, exposing harms serves judicial and therapeutic objectives, but in practice, finding common ground is immensely challenging. Desmond Tutu argues truth can never be "fully revealed" by outside reports ("Truth" 4). J. M. Coetzee also claims "the language of the law" is remarkably inept at handling those complex "emotional states" whose psychological impact clouds reason post trauma (28). Intense psychological suffering exceeds articulation. For example, in *Anil's Ghost*, Palapina's twelve-year-old niece, Lakma, witnesses the murder of her parents, driving her "verbal" and "motor abilities into infancy." Put in a government ward for children whose parents died in the war, she retreats into an "adult sullenness of spirit." Palapina realizes that the institution is useless and raises her in the forests where her "fury and rejection of the world" gives way to a naked wildness of spirit tempered by their mutual love (104-5).

Few would disagree that acts of violence that destroy lives and endanger future peace demand immediate responses. Nevertheless, the interpretive routines that support peacekeeping actions warrant scrutiny—William Coté and Roger Simpson say "truth" is often the "first casualty of war" followed by survivors' "privacy." Although audiences complain about media "exploitation of suffering," they consume the work of reporters and photographers, themselves emotionally assailed by "the sights and sounds" of suffering (2-3). Furthermore, widespread humanitarian work paralleled the rise of mass media whose reports are considered factual, hence truthful, despite a lack of context. News about atrocities also depends on coerced free speech in cultures unfamiliar with the concept. Offenders and victims are often neighbors, coworkers, or childhood friends within social hierarchies that prevent open expression. If trauma hinders objective reporting, aid workers are likely worse off. Michael Stuart and Peter Hodgkinson note that "rescuers and helpers" in disasters are the "hidden victims" who suffer from physical, cognitive, emotional, and behavioral changes (53). There is no simple answer to preventing the loss of critical psychological and ethical balance required to assist victims in the present and the future. Anil observes, for instance, that male doctors needed to "dress themselves in coldness to handle chaos" while women could "remain calm" as their instinct to guide their children and families through difficulties prepared them for empathetic responsibility (Ondaatje 137). Unfortunately, our drive to speedily address trauma promotes decision-making by mediators who never experience the long-term psychophysical effects of these decisions on their subjects.

Gamini, the doctor in the novel, describes the standard Western approach thus: "The American or the Englishman gets on a plane and leaves. That's it. The camera leaves with him." And so the "war, to all purposes, is over." The belief that exposing evil will allow truth to prevail is about as much "reality" as the "West" can tolerate before it is time to "Go home. Write a book. Hit the circuit" (Ondaatje 285-6). Expatriate mediators who do not understand the socio-linguistic environments they work in often see instances of victimization as "contained events," yet the effects radiate into the lives of "many more people" crossing spatiotemporal boundaries (Condry 219). If eliminating long-term suffering is the ultimate objective of humanitarian work and economic aid, it is disturbing that international orchestrators do not keep or rely on long-term aid workers to deconstruct the ramifications of their decisions. Sarah Holt notes that by 2002 a cease-fire was negotiated in Sri Lanka. The "consensus" from international mediators was to experiment with prioritizing "economic recovery, led by the international financial institutions" to respond to the violence. "The result of this peace process was the bloodiest

episode in Sri Lanka's twenty-six year war" (Holt 136). Evidently, if widely unacknowledged, considerable time is needed to understand how narratives co-created by the media and outside forces shape the material and psychological worlds of people ignorant of the political agendas that follow bullets and money.

Media outlets package reports to create advertising revenues (nothing attracts viewership like violence), open new markets, and procure cheaper labor for their multinational sponsors. The particularities of naked suffering, portrayed in stereophonic high definition, also exploits viewer belief that free speech will create some amorphous justice. What has not been sufficiently examined is why peace remains an eidolon despite these convictions, yet neither can we deny the need to step in, sometimes violently so, to stop immediate offenses. As armed response has become the universal approach, conflicts recycle in new forms. The West has striven to define justice and who should mete it out, yet for those directly affected, judicial objectivity is tainted by understandable anger. Mark A. Drumbl points out that a quarter of victims surveyed stated that the major "purpose of taking action against offenders" was "revenge" (43). International arbitrators are discomfited by this perspective; fulfilling it would impact the "dignity of those who inflict punishment." Therefore, retribution now manifests as the global "condemnation and outrage" of audiences (61). Here, free speech is invested with an emotive (dare I say fluid) truth that instantiates polarization. The relatively unregulated internet, as the primary news medium for billions, gives unprecedented scope for destructive agendas disguised as secular and religious truths. Audiences are frequently unaware of how the particularities of violence and suffering are canted—something Ondaatje addresses when Anil's facile certainty that "information could be clarified and acted upon" is undermined by her realization that evidence is publicized with "diversions and subtexts" (54-5).

Sam Knowles, quoting Susan Sontag, says the "shame" and "shock in looking at the close-up of a real horror" precedes moral outrage (433). Although exposure satisfies judicial and psychoanalytic taxonomies, J.M. Coetzee claims free speech can invoke "moral indignation" and its "sister emotion" of "anger-revenge." The latter is above "moral judgment" because punishment is the "basis" of "moral judgment itself." I add that the deluge of real-world violence-as-performance media bites invoke "ethical" rationales to "anger" and judgment which "stifles" the "questioning and self-questioning" needed to disinhabit the "ethical fragility" of traumatic anger in victims and their audiences (Coetzee 29). Free speech that supports healing is desirable, but when the act is elevated above its content, violence often follows. *Anil's Ghost* does not make suffering the product or experience of the few, neither does it render suffering knowable, therefore historical and manageable, through one-directional mediation. Ondaatje's hermeneutic, for that is what it is, compels precisely the kind of self-questioning Coetzee requires. The novel sets aside blame, and in so doing becomes a symbolic "*makamkruka*." Sarath, the local anthropologist, a former student of Palapina, assigned to help Anil explains a *makamkruka* is a devil who "sees things more truly by turning everything upside down" (Ondaatje 165).

The novel's dispassion that has so vexed critics appears in several descriptions of violence: "The King . . . cut their heads off . . . All because of a couple of heads" (Ondaatje 87). Characters experience violence in detached vignettes: Anil attacks her lover with a knife, yet instead of a shocking emotional scene, Ondaatje highlights aesthetic details: "She swung the small knife . . . in a sure arc and stabbed it into the arm. Ahhh. All the emphasis on the h's. She could almost see the letters coming out of him in the darkness . . . (100-1). This clinical emphasis resists sensationalism. For instance, the trauma doctor, Gamini, reflects that the "only reasonable constant was that there would be more bodies tomorrow," listing "post-stabbings, post-landmines. Orthopedic trauma, punctured lungs, spinal cord injuries" without humanizing the damage (120). No sense can be made of the violence itself: Palapina, sitting beside Anil and Sailor's skull, reflects that beyond "the surrounding ocean of trees . . . were the wars of terror, the gunmen in love with the sound of the shells, where the main purposes of war had become war" (98). Anil's (or the readers) moral obligation to choose a side is further undermined by reminders that each side was responsible:

The terrorism of the separatist guerrilla groups, who were fighting for a homeland in the north. The insurrection of the insurgents in the south, against the government. The counterterrorism of the special forces against both of them . . . It was Hundred Years' War . . . sponsored by gun- and drug-runners. It became evident that political enemies were secretly joined in financial arms deals. *'The reason for war was war.* (43)

Ondaatje sees global forces at work in Sri Lankan violence, although the international community that interprets (or benefits from) the acts rarely experiences the destructive inheritance of victimhood. Ian Wilkinson and Arthur Kleinman argue it fosters "vengeance" and "vicious cycles of violence" that destroy the "lives of those unable to master histories of trauma" (7).

*Anil's Ghost* offers no promise of monolithic rehabilitation through Western Enlightenment ideals or Eastern religiosity. Ondaatje's author's note says the conflict ended in the early nineties, but "the war in Sri Lanka continues in a different form." Perhaps because the psychic residue of historical events catalyzes fear and traumatic anger. Anil's conversation with her professor about the amygdala reveals the causal nature of these emotions. The amygdala is the seat of "fearful memories" and perhaps "anger too, but it specializes in fear. It is pure emotion." These fears could be "inherited," or about the future, or, as Anil adds, dream "fantasies" projected onto the body. The teacher counters, "Sometimes dreams are not the result of fantasy but old habits we do not know we have." Anil's next question correlates with the Indian concept that fear—itsself a cause of suffering—can be self-created: "So it is something created and made by us, by our own histories, is that right?" Thereafter, during autopsies Anil would always "look for the amygdala, this nerve bundle which houses fear—so it governs everything. How we behave and make decisions." The novel's next lines reinforce the relationship between fear and histories when Sarath insists she stop recording before admitting, "*I wanted to find one law to cover all of living. I found fear . . .*" (Ondaatje 134-5). Fear becomes a peculiar admixture of the present invaded by the past and imaginary futures. It provokes flight, inaction, or defensive anger that negates reason.

Both Tantric and Buddhist philosophy argue fear causes suffering. Sarkar quoting Śiva, Tantra's first avatar, states "*krodha eva mahān shatruh*": anger is humanity's greatest enemy. When one's "inner feelings" and "innate tendencies" are harmed, it generates powerful mental vibrations that repress rationality (*Namah* 139-40). This segues into destructive patterns that hinder the concentration and stability required to transcend attachments. Here, I offer a comparative gloss of Theravāda and Hindu Tantric approaches to curing *dukkha* (suffering) for those unfamiliar with the traditions.

Attachment to psycho-physical causalities are the basis of all suffering. The Pāli commentaries view "living independently and not holding on to anything in the world" as prerequisites to Buddhist meditations that dissolve the illusion of a permanent ipseity (*ātman*) (Gethin 142). Likewise, Tantrics use detachment or *vaerāgya* (Sarkar "Cognitive") from quotidian desires to dissolve egological mind through psychic withdrawal, also known as *pratyahāra* (*Yoga Sādhana* 21; also see Hewitson 171). Once practitioners attain unbroken single-pointed concentration on their transcendent object of meditation they enter a penultimate meditative trance called *savikalpa samādhi*. In this state, the meditator becomes aware of a universal interconnectedness that reinforces their sense of existential responsibility. Ananda's experience at the end of the novel parallels that of meditators who move towards these realizations, which are impossible without the correct discrimination (*viveka*) generated by mental equipoise.

Buddhist and Tantric responses to personal suffering refute true victimhood because the "cause and effect" central to Buddhism's "Four Noble Truths" and Tantric *saṃskāra* make personal responsibility inescapable (Santina 30; see Kang 74). Arthur Avalon's first Western description of karma in the Tantra tradition remains relevant: "*Karma* [sic] is action, its cause, and effect. There is no uncaused action, nor action without effect. The past, the present, and the future are linked together as one whole" (cxxxviii). Suffering is equated with unfairness as changes in spatiotemporal identities obscure its origins. The most discomfiting aspect of karma is recognizing that a murdered infant and a teenager dying of cancer are the result of previous actions and that all negative experiences have the potential to restore psychospiritual balance. As radical as this responsibility may seem, more than two billion people accept that karma leads to reincarnation hence suffering. For example, the Chinese render reincarnation as *lúnhuí* which literally means "wheel return." Similarly, Buddhism and Tantra use the iconic wheel of truth/life, the *dharmacakra* to symbolize this cosmology. The wheel signifies, amongst other things, the cycles of illusion (*maya*), and in *Anil's Ghost* it first appears in the miners' folksong: "Blessed be the life wheel on the mine's pit head / Blessed be the chain attached to the life wheel . . ." (Ondaatje, Preface to *Anil's Ghost*). The Life Wheel is also the penultimate chapter when Anil's recovery of Sailor's confiscated skeleton exposes the government's violence, yet instead of mitigating suffering it generates new trauma for the novel's characters.

Ondaatje inscribes a narrow path between the need for answers and the results of this attachment. Even as Anil attempts to identify "untruthful" (55), her love of "songs of anger and judgment," (70) after hammering through "a floor . . . to reach the truth," raises new dangers (66). The chapter starts with Anil calmly identifying Sailor as a local miner killed by government forces to hostile government officials with until her professionalism breaks: "I think you murdered hundreds of us" (269-72). Anil is allowed to leave but not before being stripped of her evidence and, as the ellipses allude, raped: "I can't walk: I was . . . in there . . ." (282). She also misunderstands Sarath's attempt to protect her during the proceedings by undermining her research. Anil initially blames Sarath but later discovers that he was murdered for getting Sailor's skeleton back to her. Thereafter, she feels compelled to listen

repeatedly to the recordings of her testimony and Sarath's questions. Here, Ondaatje evokes the cycle of suffering: "Anil made the tape roll back on the rewind . . . listening to his voice again. Listening to everything again" (284). Her forensic efforts expose the facts, yet justice is not realized nor suffering decreased. Anil's judgment becomes the cause of suffering—the Buddha's second Noble Truth. Ondaatje does not console the reader with any future judicial value of Anil's fact-finding, yet her work illuminates connections that shape new narratives for some of the novel's characters.

As Sri Lanka's foremost archaeologist, and the erstwhile driving "force of a pragmatic Sinhala movement" (Ondaatje 72), Palapina's epigraphic work merges the empirical (Anil's obsession) and intuitive. Palapina's "exhaustive research" is supported by his contextual knowledge of ancient Sri Lankan cultures. His fame is balanced by an extreme asceticism that does not protect his academic reputation after his "interpretations of rock graffiti" explaining Sri Lankan politics in the sixth century are seen as eisegesis by Sri Lankan scholars. He also discovers "the one dancing Ganesh, possibly the island's first carved Ganesh, in the midst of humans in a frieze at Mihintale." As Mihintale is purportedly the site of the Buddha's first preaching in Sri Lanka, the presence of the Hindu elephant God Ganesh indicates that the minority Tamils were not invaders who arrived after the Sinhalese Buddhists and that Sinhala Buddhism was, historically, closely allied with, or borrowed from, Hinduism. Palapina does not defend his interpretation and retreats with Lakma to an ancient "forest monastery" whose sixth century inhabitants refused "any religious decoration" except for a single elaborately carved slab used as a "urinal stone." (81-4). Although almost blind, Palapina's long immersion in human and natural history reveals "patterns" that "linked hands, they "allowed walking across water" and "leap[s] from treetop to treetop." For Palapina, the "truth" of things only "guessed at" intuitively coalesced until "the unprovable truth emerged" (83).

The text's nod to Tamil claims of oppression does not excuse their actions: while Anil and Sarath debate the merits of investigating the government, Gamini lists a horrifying array of "hideous mutilations" caused by the people "setting off bombs" that the "Western press calls freedom fighters . . . . And you [Anil] want to investigate the *government*?" Encapsulating the senselessness of the violence, and Ondaatje's detachment, Sarath asks him if he has read the reports about the atrocities inflicted on "innocent Tamils" in the south, while Anil says she will never forget the "letters from parents" whose children were killed in the conflict. Ondaatje has Gamini articulate the failures of their disciplines: "We don't know what to do about it. We just throw ourselves into it. Just no more high horses, please." The passage closes with Gamini falling asleep beside Anil as a tuneless refrain from the song "*Sleep come free me*" echoes in her mind: not the freedom of some empirical truth, but silence (Ondaatje 133). The facts of this conflict, like many others, where the "main purpose of war had become war" offer no solution for those caught in its crossfire (98).

Palapina sets the stage for Ananda's quasi-*samādhi* experience by explaining the "Nētra Mangala" ritual to Anil; the Sanskrit *netra* means eyes and *mangala* is an auspicious ceremony conducted at dawn. The participants received "goods and land" from the King which Anil believes were "rewards" for doing what was right. Palapina repudiates her belief, saying that there is no evidence anyone knew what was right: "They still did not know what truth was. We have never had the truth. Not even with your work on bones." Anil's counter that identifying bones will "set" people "free" (presaging the passage above) is also denied: "Most of the time in our world, truth is just opinion" (Ondaatje 101-2). Here, a third of the way in, the novel relativizes truth while laying for Ananda an intuitive, albeit incomplete route to the Buddha's Fourth Noble Truth—a way beyond suffering. Palapina explains that without the eyes painted on the Buddha at five "in the morning," when he "attained enlightenment," there is not merely "blindness, there is nothing. There is no existence." The eyes imbue the statue with sacralized "sight and truth and presence" (99). He suggests that Anil ask Ananda to help her solve the mystery of Sailor's identity. However, Ananda's integration of the immanent and transcendent vis-à-vis intuitive responsibility and detachment offers the only form of substantial relief from suffering for the novel's protagonists.

Anil is initially unaware of Ananda's personal tragedy and asks him to reconstruct Sailor's skull; the work induces fits of rage, making his alcoholism worse (Ondaatje 168). Only after Ananda completes a forensically unrecognizable but oddly "peaceful" face—a (sub)conscious wish that his wife found peace in her death—do Sarath and Anil learn that Ananda's wife was murdered. Moreover, Ananda's fellow villagers regularly found the heads of their relatives, who were accused of sympathizing with the insurgents, "stuck on poles" (184). Anil's grief for his loss is witnessed by the uncomprehending Ananda who is lifted by his empathetic touch "in a way she could recollect no one ever having touched her" since her mother (187). This scene is interpolated by an earlier time when Anil and Sarath visit an ancient forest monastery in Arankale where a single monk would sweep "the path for two hours each morning,"



cleaning away "a thousand leaves" that would fall again a few hours later. The narrator's comment that "to walk the sand path was itself an act of meditation" is one of only two references to the practice. The broom clearing the leaves symbolizes meditation's power to cleanse thoughts. Both characters offer polyvalent responses to Buddhism in this environment: Sarath, who remains mostly silent, says, "*Those who cannot love* make places like this. One needs to be in a stage beyond passion." In contrast, Anil reflects that perhaps Arankale was made "more beautiful . . . without humans in the structure they had designed when they were no longer in the currents of love" (emphasis added, 189-90). Alluding to the folly of clinging to relative, therefore impermanent truths, Sarath adds, "those who are powerful desire what weighs them to the ground. Historical honor, measured ownership, their sure truths," but "Asanga the Wise and his followers lived for decades in solitude, the world unaware of them" (190).

There are also strong connections to reincarnation and karma in this interlude. Wandering further into the site, Anil is reminded by a trailing dog of the Tibetan belief that "monks who had not meditated properly became dogs in the next life." This allusion to the peculiarities of karmic responsibility and reincarnation is reinforced by a narrative jump to an earlier time when Sarath explains that Palapina moved through "archaeological sites as if they were his own historical homes from past lives." The intersection of the empirical and intuitive reveal for the almost blind archaeologist "the story [he] had not seen before" by "eliminat[ing] the borders and categories, to find everything in one landscape" (Ondaatje 191).

Ondaatje returns to Ananda's story arc at the point in which Anil discovers Ananda stabbing himself in the throat. Sarath explains there is nothing unique in the attempt; Ananda is simply one of many whose grief drives them to try to "kill themselves" (196)—reminding us that since 1995, Sri Lanka "has one of the highest suicide rates in the world" (Gombrich 25). Thus, Ananda represents the extremes of victimhood: self-destruction or annihilation of external threats. Ondaatje's final chapter "Distance" presents Ananda with an indirect experience of detachment reminiscent of the Buddha's middle way that does not presage a return of his faith. He intuits that only by holding tightly to his artistic discipline (as a creator) can he prevent his decline into one of those "demons" and "spectres of retaliation" that cause all "the wars around" (304). The text's ethical silence, its trajectory beyond relative truths, and its unwillingness to bow to the offender-victim binary climaxes with Ananda perched one hundred and twenty feet up a ladder, just below the "pure sad" visage of the Buddha statue he has reconstructed in a field where murdered bodies are dumped daily. Ananda's intuitive apatheia channelizes his traumatic anger into discipline and empathy which becomes a nonlinguistic therapy.

Coomaraswamy, Ondaatje's aforementioned source, notes that historically the painter's assistant "repeated mantras" during the painting of the eyes. He states that Hinduism, not Theravāda Buddhism, informs the ceremony: the former would not have historically acknowledged that a statue could connect the devotee to a (nonexistent) "unseen God." As such, the ritual is likely the product of an often-denied milieu in which "Buddhism and Hinduism" were essentially "two aspects of one faith" (Coomaraswamy 71-3). In fact, meditators from both traditions still practice single-pointed visualizations to merge ipseity with images of Śiva or the Buddha prior to *samādhi*, and Ondaatje's omniscient description of Ananda's experience is suggestive of realizations attained during *samādhi* states. The implied presence of the mantras chanted during the Netra Mangala ritual, which Palapina recites earlier, links Buddhist and Tantric concepts of karma and detachment: "May thou become possessed of the fruits of deeds—may there be an increase on earth and length of days—Hail, eyes!" (Ondaatje 99). Ananda's intense concentration and physical exhaustion set up the conditions for his transcendent vision as the Sanskrit mantras promise "freedom from hindrances" (Coomaraswamy 73). Thus, for a brief moment, Ananda's consciousness and that of the newly awakened Buddha combine:

And now with human sight he was seeing all the fibres of natural history around him. He could witness the smallest approach of a bird, every flick of its wing, or a hundred-mile storm coming down off the mountains near Gonagola and skirting the plains . . . . There was a girl moving in the forest. The rain miles away . . . grasses being burned, bamboo, the smell of petrol and grenade. The crack of noise as a layer of rock on his arm exfoliated in heat. The face open-eyed in the great rainstorms of May and June . . . .The great yearning of weather above the earth. (Ondaatje 307)

Ondaatje does not privilege the "seduction" (307) of this transcendence; rather, the concern of Ananda's nephew (re)instates the Buddha's ethic of compassion—directly countering the asceticism of Buddhists who, earlier in the novel, Sarath says "cannot love" (189). Ananda's detachment and responsibility converge in this "sweet touch from the world" (307). *Anil's Ghost* mediates suffering, presaging a middle path between the cycles of victimization and offense—empathy reveals a way for Ananda, and perhaps all survivors, to emerge from traumatic anger and devastating loss. Sarkar states

every being must practice empathy: "Bear in mind that you have a duty towards—indeed, you owe a debt to—every creature of this Universe, but towards you, no one has any duty; from others, nothing is due" ("Ananda"). Realizing this ideal in the face of violence and extreme suffering remains an undeniable challenge. Though humanity continues to relativize and divide, turning communities into warring individuals, a unifying psychology is possible. Ondaatje's overture towards this is to question the paradigms that separate us from those we punish and rehabilitate.

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