RETHINKING THE FOUNDATIONS
A Review of Eric M. Greene's *Chan Before Chan* and *The Secrets of Buddhist Meditation*

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Eric M. Greene. *The Secrets of Buddhist Meditation: Visionary Meditation Texts from Early Medieval China.* University of Hawai'i, 2021. Pp. 384. Paperback $20.00; Hardback $72.00. (9780824893897 & 9780824884444)

Eric M. Greene's companion volumes, *Chan Before Chan: Meditation, Repentance, and Visionary Experience in Chinese Buddhism* and *The Secrets of Buddhist Meditation: Visionary Meditation Texts from Early Medieval China*, constitute a fundamental methodological and historiographical intervention in the study of early Chinese Buddhism. Together, these works demand a reevaluation of entrenched paradigms that frame early Chinese Buddhist practices as embryonic antecedents to the later Chan (Zen) school. Greene disrupts this linear framing through a dialectic of interpretation and translation: *Chan Before Chan* provides a historically situated critique of teleological narratives, and *The Secrets of Buddhist Meditation* makes available in annotated translation two essential fifth-century apocryphal scriptures—*Chan Essentials* (*Chán mì yào fǎ jīng*, 禪祕要法經) and *Methods for Curing Meditation Sickness* (*Zhì chán bìng mì yào fǎ*, 治禪病祕要法)—substantiating the historical and ritual complexity of his interpretive project.

The central premise Greene pursues in *Chan Before Chan* is that early Chinese Buddhist practices—particularly repentance rituals (懺悔), visionary experiences, and seated meditation (坐禪)—were never merely preparatory or underdeveloped precursors to Chan orthopraxy. Rather, they embodied cultural formations regulated by their own soteriological, social, and semiotic logics. The impulse to read them otherwise, Greene contends, flows not from the sources but from the retrospective imposition of sectarian narratives regulated by modernity and Chan apologetics. He is decisive: "The *Chan Essentials* portrays meditative progress not as a linear path effectuated by meditation alone, but as a reciprocal process in which meditation provokes visions that sometimes indicate a need for repentance" (*Chan Before Chan*, 129). His account refuses "progress narratives," which re-present spiritual development in unilinear terms, in favor of a polyvalent

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matrix of practice within which meditation, vision, and ritual repentance comprise an interdependent triad.

This theoretical framework finds literary corroboration in *The Secrets of Buddhist Meditation*, where Greene offers annotated versions of two Chinese apocryphal texts. These texts, Greene argues, have been relegated to the margins of the canonical imagination, not due to unimportance but by virtue of the historiographical concretion of modern scholarship. As Greene explains, "The fifth-century Chinese texts I introduce and translate in this volume have never been seen by any modern scholar as part of the canon from which we should form our understanding of the character and history of Buddhist meditation" (*The Secrets of Buddhist Meditation*, xiii). Their marginalization bears symptomatic witness to further epistemological biases within the constitution of the Buddhist canon, whereby textual authority comes to be retroactively conferred on writings consonant to a narrowly circumscribed tradition of "pure" meditation.

Together, the two volumes articulate a double imperative: to recover the historical texture of early Chinese Buddhist practice and to expose the conceptual apparatuses that have obfuscated that texture. Greene reclaims *Chan* (禪) not as an embryonic placeholder for the mature Chan school but as a historically situated term with a semantic field encompassing a range of activities, from visionary engagement with buddha bodies to ritualized confession and community-sanctioned instruction. This polyvalence is emphasized through his philological attention to meditation as an embodied and relational act. Meditation, in Greene's rendering, is neither private nor universal; it is always mediated through vision, voice, ritual, and hierarchical validation.

What makes Greene's intervention trenchant is his willingness to treat neglected or apocryphal sources as epistemologically generative rather than exegetically subordinate. The *Chan Essentials* and *Methods for Curing* are not auxiliary materials; they are the loci through which Greene reconstructs the ritual economy of early Chinese meditation. The texts outline postural techniques, karmic visions, and somatic experiences, all of which require validation through master-disciple relationships. These details make visible a semiotic order in which spiritual progress is codified through public performance, cosmological realignment, and institutional authority.

This introduction functions not merely as an expository preamble but as a methodological fulcrum. Greene's volumes reconfigure the study of Chinese Buddhism by asserting that historical analysis must be both intertextual and reflexively aware of its own epistemic inheritances. The following sections elaborate on this intervention through a close reading of Greene's historiographical challenges, structural arguments, and textual hermeneutics.

SITUATING THE INTERVENTION: HISTORIOGRAPHY, TELEOLOGY, AND THE FIELD

The historiographical intervention in *Chan Before Chan* targets a dominant narrative logic in Chinese Buddhist Studies: The teleological assumption that early practices—repentance rituals, visionary experience, and eclectic contemplative exercises—mattered chiefly because they foreshadowed the Chan school. This model, inherited from sectarian hagiography and mid-twentieth-century Euro-American scholarship, frames early Buddhist developments as primitive antecedents to a mature Chan formation. Greene deconstructs this paradigm, which appears as a historiographical construct and not a reflection on the sources.

Teleology in the field owes much to figures like Hu Shih and D. T. Suzuki, who celebrated Chan as a revolutionary simplification of Buddhist practice. Greene, by contrast, argues that fifth-century Chinese Buddhism already possessed coherent ritual economies whose erasure from modern historiography reflects not actual religious development but the modernist sensibilities of its interpreters. In Greene's explanation, repentance, vision, and meditation formed a tightly interlocked triadic complex—not evolutionary stages but mutually reinforcing ritual domains. What constituted contemplative legitimacy was embedded not in private psychological experience but in communal recognition, karmic semiotics, and cosmological framing.

Greene correlates his intervention with a revisionist lineage in the field. John McRae's *Seeing Through Zen* and Robert Buswell's *Formation of Ch'an Ideology* exposed how the "grand genealogical narrative" of Chan was constructed retrospectively.[1] Greene adopts their critical posture but shifts the register of analysis away from institutional polemics toward a ritual-semiotic approach. Rather than "correct" the linear historiography by proposing an alternative lineage, he dissolves the lineage construct altogether to present instead a model of religious formation grounded in ritual labor, social performance, and visionary diagnostics.

His approach is informed by "semiotic ideology," a concept developed in anthropological theory by Webb Keane and others, describing how different cultures construct what signs mean, how they work, and who is authorized to interpret them.[2] Greene's key insight is that Buddhist practices such as vision and confession were semiotically regulated: Their meaning was not intrinsic but produced through ritual performance and institutional authority. In one persuasive instance from the *Chan Essentials*, Greene cites a passage: "If a monk or nun has consumed the medicine of ambrosial consecration [of meditation], this must not be wantonly spoken of to anyone apart from his or her wise guiding teacher" (*The Secrets of Buddhist Meditation*, 244). Meaning is thus not located in the vision itself but in its adjudication within a hierarchical ritual context.

Greene applies this framework to undermine the standard category of "meditation" as a transhistorical, universal technique. He shows that what was referred to as "Chan" in fifth-century China encompassed confession rituals, visionary encounters, karmic remediation, and healing ceremonies. These were not marginal practices but constituted the liturgical infrastructure of meditative life. In the *Methods for Curing Meditation Sickness*, practitioners are instructed to perform rituals to resolve symptoms ranging from bodily pain and hallucinations to demonic interference. Greene notes that "a monk or nun should then recite the opening passage of the monastic rules. A layperson should recite the three refuges, the five precepts, or the eight precepts. This demon will then crawl away," underscoring that meditative experience was inseparable from its ritual context (*The Secrets of Buddhist Meditation*, 296).

This re-theorization has broad implications. It matches Greene's work with the ritual and material turns in Religious Studies, where embodiment, locality, and institutional practice take precedence over text-centric or purely doctrinal models. By using apocryphal texts like the *Chan Essentials* and *Methods for Curing Meditation Sickness*, Greene contests the canon's composition and its attendant epistemologies. These sources—long treated as extracanonical or folkloric—are shown to be vital to comprehend how Buddhist authority and practice were actually constituted on the ground.

Importantly, Greene does not present these texts as merely supplementary. They are, rather, the primary evidence through which early Buddhist ritual economies can be reconstructed. In their

prescriptions for posture, visualization, confession, and karmic realignment, they offer an account of meditation not as introspective psychology but as a matrix of social, somatic, and cosmological labor. The absence of these texts in earlier scholarship, Greene argues, is not accidental but symptomatic of a broader methodological bias toward doctrinal purity and institutional coherence.

In sum, Greene reconstructs foundational categories in the study of Chinese Buddhism. His analysis positions early Chinese religiosity not as a precursor to later Chan but as a fully developed matrix of ritualized meaning-making. Vision, karma, and authority were co-constitutive; meditation was a communal act of negotiation and interpretation. Greene's historiographical precision compels Buddhist Studies to rethink not only what counts as "real" Buddhism but which interpretive frames render it legible.

STRUCTURE AND ARGUMENT OF THE TWO BOOKS

Chan Before Chan and *The Secrets of Buddhist Meditation* form a rigorously coordinated two-part project that redescribes early medieval Chinese Buddhism on its own terms, rather than accepting pre-Chan meditation as solely a precursor to the later Chan tradition. Instead of providing fragmented histories of doctrine or free-standing philosophical speculation, Greene's books place readers within the practical textures of ritual life, institutional politics, and visionary encounters. The two volumes function as a pair: *Chan Before Chan* builds the historiographic and interpretive framework, and *The Secrets of Buddhist Meditation* roots these observations within the translations of foundational texts long marginalized or inaccessible.

Chan Before Chan develops a lengthy argument in favor of treating meditation as a practice irrevocably entwined with ritual economies and social hierarchies. Greene begins with a description of how the meditation master, or *chanshi*, came into existence as a specific role within the fifth-century Chinese Buddhist firmament, shedding light on how the import of Indian meditative techniques led to fresh texts and institutional functions. He places Chan scriptures like the *Chan Essentials* at their height of ritual and doctrinal authority during the period of importation, the "Chan boom"—a period that was marked less by imported dogma than by active Chinese incorporation and reinterpretation of Indian meditation techniques within ritual frameworks. In place of meditation as a solitary spiritual exercise, Greene uncovers meditation as a juncture within a complex constellation of visionary encounters, karmic discernment, and ritual authority.

Greene then constructs his main narrative, where visionary experiences and not sudden flashes of insight were ritualized events that called for authoritative interpretation. The *Chan Essentials* and comparable texts posit visions as diagnostic tools able to disclose karmic obstacles, which call for ritual therapy such as repentance or a specialized ritual cure. Greene makes apparent how meditation was a controlled interface between practitioner and a cosmologically ordered universe abounding with buddhas, bodhisattvas, demons, and karmic portents. Such visions were not submitted to subjective judgment but demanded communal verification, encoding even the loneliest of religious experiences within religious authority's collective mechanisms.

This relational nature of meditation emerges into clearer focus with Greene's account of repentance rites. In contrast with explanations where they are preliminary ethical preparation, repentance emerges within Greene's account as a constituent part of meditative practice itself.

Confession and ritual purification serve not simply to cleanse moral transgressions but to secure practitioners' approach toward potentially dangerous visionary experience. Greene points out that meditation was itself a dangerous experience, causing bodily or psychical disruption known as "meditation sickness." In this respect, ritual economy reveals its practical dimension: Confession, ritual recitation, postural correction, and invocations of guardian deities function to secure the practitioner as well as community. Meditation within Greene's account shifts from a personal way of illumination to a social mediator of karmic energies, requiring uninterrupted interpretive effort and ritual correction.

While *Chan Before Chan* articulates these insights in historiographical and theoretical terms, *The Secrets of Buddhist Meditation* provides the textual and philological foundation that grounds Greene's arguments. This volume presents annotated translations of the *Chan Essentials* and the *Methods for Curing Meditation Sickness*, two fifth-century apocryphal scriptures that straddle the boundary between Indian meditative traditions and their Chinese adaptations. Greene makes a compelling case that although these texts were composed in China, they preserve significant traces of Central Asian meditation practices, including complex visionary schemas and ritual healing methods. In translating these texts, Greene exposes a side of Buddhist meditation often overshadowed by the doctrinal treatises that dominate the field: Meditation manuals not only prescribed techniques for posture and visualization but also offered elaborate protocols for managing the visions and bodily sensations that arose during practice.

The *Chan Essentials* stands as a seminal text of relevance, providing lengthy descriptions of meditation posture, control of breath, and visualization techniques. Its most remarkable contents, however, consist of a systematic categorization of visionary sightings, with ritualized reactions directed toward a variety of karmic visions from luminous buddhas down to demons. These visions function on one level as proof of spiritual advancement as well as warning signs of karmic harm, a tension Greene identifies as fundamental to early Chinese Buddhist ritual logic. The *Methods for Curing Meditation Sickness* enriches this framework with a catalog of somatic and psychic disorders resulting from meditation and with corresponding ritual and practical remedies. Taken as a pair, these two texts suggest a religious culture obsessively preoccupied with controlling the somatic as well as visionary aftermath of meditation, underscoring a practical side of Buddhism all too often hidden from view in philosophical descriptions.

What emerges at last from Greene's two books is a picture of early medieval Chinese Buddhism as a synthesis of ritual, vision, and meditation inseparably connected. By no means a precursor phase inevitably developing into the Chan school, this period exists as an independent sophisticated religious scene punctuated by semiotic density and ritual proficiency. Greene's meticulous reading of texts alongside his wider historiographical claims induces us to reappraise Buddhist scripture itself—as something less than a store of doctrinal truth and rather as an archive of ritual practices and communal cultures. *Chan Before Chan* formulates the theoretical stakes of such a reorientation, and *The Secrets of Buddhist Meditation* furnishes the key textual corpus that substantiate Greene's perceptions as documented fact. Together, the two books constitute a determinate intervention, one that will

induce scholars to synthesize ritual and visionary aspects into any competent account of Chinese Buddhist meditation and its role within the larger history of Buddhism.

MEDITATION REFRAMED: RELATIONAL PRACTICE, VISION, AND REPENTANCE

Meditation—previously known as the culmination of personal religious cultivation within Buddhism—is reversed in Greene's offerings. Rather than an individualized, self-referential practice yielding transcendental insight, meditation discloses itself as a center within a ritual assemblage, constructed from relational obligation, karmic calibrations, and hierarchic presentation (*Chan Before Chan*, 132). What modern classificatory systems would term a type of "contemplative practice" was, within early medieval Chinese culture, a ritually disciplined and socially inscribed performance.

The vision-orientated framework organizing this perception frustrates assumptions. Visions were not sudden episodes of inspiration nor subjective markers on a progressive line of illumination. Rather, they were trained results of complex ritual series, designed to produce legible signs that an initiated authority could then decipher. When not enclosed within this interpretive chain—where meaning was conferred by a transcendental authority—visions remained illegible, obscured, and susceptible to danger (*Chan Before Chan*, 97). The practitioner alone was not privileged to act on what was seen. Visions were not themselves disclosing; they only became so through authoritative discernment.

This judging occurred within a formalized cosmology, with hallucinations, visualizations, and dreams externalized as ritual data rather than psychologized. The visions were ranked, classed, and worked through formal schemes of classification. These systems indexed content as well as regulated the practitioner's karmic position. A sky spirit's vision may signal karmic purging; a disfigurement's vision, karmic blocking. But visions like these could never become self-diagnostically pertinent. To become meaningful, the visions had to undergo interpretive effort on the part of an authoritative master. This interpretive dependence was not subordinate to religious performance—it was constitutive (*Chan Before Chan*, 153). Vision did not provide knowledge; submitting what was visible into an interpretive cycle did. This is the reversal of epistemology at the heart of early Chinese Buddhist meditation: The practitioner is not an autonomous discoverer of insight but a ritual agent of a vision-verification economy.

Confession, or repentance, was this economy's enablement (*Chan Before Chan*, 132). Not merely an ethical preparation or liturgical ritual, confession was the way karmic obstacles were removed and the ritual space cleansed. By confession, the practitioner was qualified for communication with visions. It was also by confession that a practitioner could be cleansed of unintended meditation side effects. One must not exaggerate this inversion: Meditation was not itself the healing event—it was the potentially destructive one; confession was the precondition for healing and protection. Confession revealed the body and mind to the karmic field. It revealed the practitioner, not to human actors, but to ritual ones that would condone or predict visionary discourse. This "visibility" was never a certainty, however. It had to be ritualistically created by purification, recitation, and behavioral subservience. The karmic sensorium was stimulated by behavior and monitored by visions and dreams.

Meditation, in this system, was not an autonomous practice but one mode of a cosmological circuit. It was outlined by ritual sequences and was kept in place by hierarchies of interpretive authority. When it went wrong—when pain gripped the body, confusion crept into the mind, or demons appeared—the fault was with ritual preparation, rather than with meditation technique (*The Secrets of Buddhist Meditation*, 46–47). Meditation sicknesses were categorized with the rigor of a disease compendium, their remedies ritually determined: postural adjustment, confession, invoking of specific deities, or withdrawal under supervision. These religious technologies existed within karmic logic. Meditation was inseparable from this ritual and cosmological framework. There was no "pure" meditative practice independent of karmic causality. To meditate was to engage in a high-stakes karmic bargaining, wherein each visionary event, somatic symptom, or mood response was an omen to decipher and resolve.

This type of model calls for a radical rethinking of what meditation is. It relinquishes separation of interior thought and outer rite. It does away with the assumed separation of spiritual and therapeutic ends. But of chief importance is that it redescribes the practitioner as a body-in-ritual that is built on confession, visualization, and an oversight that confers meanings and diagnoses illnesses. Meditation was not a culmination but a condition; it was a way of resolving karmic entanglements, deciphering visions, and making religious life legible. This was not a system of individual realization, as we think of it; this was a system of ritual maintenance and karmic perceptibility within a cosmos thick with meaning, threat, and intercession.

LIMITS AND IMPLICATIONS: DOCTRINAL BACKGROUND AND THE CANONICAL HORIZON

Greene's work is a challenge to our conventional perspective on early Chinese Buddhist meditation because it places central focus on ritual performance, visionary experience, and karmic purificatory cleansing. But this strength of his ritual-practice framework of interpretation has a steep price: inconsistent selective engagement with systems of doctrine. His account largely bypasses Yogācāra, Madhyamaka, and Tiantai, even as these feature prominently in structuring cosmological and epistemological assumptions on which the very practices under investigation depend. This lacuna constrains possibilities of interpretation and confines broad potential of sources under examination, particularly where vision and karmic causalities intersect with Buddhist ontology.

If repentance is merely administered as a karmic ritual procedure, metaphysical depth granted by traditions of doctrine is lost. Tiantai, for instance, considers confession as not only morally cleansing but as the ritual articulation of nonduality. The doctrine of "three thousand realms in a single thought-moment" means that repentance would perhaps actualize cosmic interpenetration between form and formless worlds. Greene's argument can gain from articulating ritual conducts as the performance of doctrine—no longer just procedural phases but revolutionary disclosures of absolute truth as well as the indivisibility of saṃsāra and nirvāṇa.

Similarly, visionary experience is under-theorized without a doctrine. These rich descriptions of heavenly visions and karmic sufferings that Greene consults remain at a ritual-causal level. Yogācāra would detail them as projections of storehouse consciousness, whereas Madhyamaka would acknowledge them as illusive constructions equally functional and deceptive. These

philosophical positions would not challenge Greene's findings but would enormously broaden their prospects of interpretation and theoretical effectiveness, including enabling the articulation of models of how illusion sustains efficacy within ritual soteriology.

This is not a criticism of Greene. His choice of supporting bottom-up ritual analysis allows him to recover neglected aspects of Buddhist ritual—but this strategy has a limit. For example, Greene regards dream-visions of karmic retribution as ritual outcomes, but Tiantai would regard them as both karmic revelations and epistemological errors—reflections of false discrimination (*Chan Before Chan*, 153). The syncretic implication of doctrine would not invalidate his ritual explanation but add to its compass, permitting simultaneous readings of vision as karmic sign and ontological distortion.

In addition, Greene's emphasis on text contests canonical assumptions. In favoring apocryphal manuals over classical sutras or Chan encounter dialogues, he redescribes the canon as an archive of ritual as opposed to a storehouse of doctrine (*The Secrets of Buddhist Meditation*, 6–7). This subverts Chan hierarchical histories and shows how authority was determined by need of use as opposed to lineage or discursive preeminence alone. The implications of this canon formation go a very long way: Previously peripheral texts come to the forefront of recreating early medieval Buddhists' own framing of religious meaning.

Greene's approach leaves room for future synthesis. Comparative scholarship can examine how Tibetan preliminaries (*ngöndro*) or Japanese repentance rites instantiate a relational paradigm of vision similar to that which Greene develops. By combining his ritual focus with a study of doctrine, researchers will have the capability to examine how Buddhist communities ritualized metaphysical realities through textually mediated ritual effort and ritualized embodiment. Such an approach would even allow one to transition into contemporary ritual contexts, clarifying how themes of doctrine persist under transformed historic configurations.

Rather than rejecting doctrine, Greene repositions it. His focus on enactment necessitates from scholars' scrutiny not of what Buddhists believed but of how belief was enacted, constructed, pictured, and ritually perceived. The concern isn't whether philosophy lies beneath practice, but how practice discloses philosophy in action.

CONCLUSION

Eric M. Greene's companion volumes, *Chan Before Chan* and *The Secrets of Buddhist Meditation*, are paradigm-shifting interventions within early Chinese Buddhist scholarship that reframe scholarly attention toward the religious practice of ritual along with its embodied and visionary aspects. In combination, these volumes eradicate entrenched teleological accounts long accustomed to viewing early Chinese meditation as a preliminary stage toward the mature Chan school. Instead, Greene discloses an energetic religious culture within which meditation, visionary encounters, and repentance ritual function as mutually entwined practices, each inscribed within an advanced semiotic and social matrix. His finely grained examination discloses early Chinese Buddhists as engaged within an advanced ritual economy of considerable nuance, featuring meticulous protocols, communal supervision, and karmic negotiation.

Of key relevance is Greene's interaction with apocryphal texts such as the *Chan Essentials* and *Methods for Curing Meditation Sickness*. Rather than treating these as marginal curiosities, he positions them as fundamental sources, central to a reconstruction of early Chinese Buddhist

practitioners' lived experiences. In doing so, Greene interrogates narrowly definitional explanations of a canon and unearths historiographic biases responsible for excluding ritual manuals as desired sources on the level of histories of institutions and doctrinal treatises. His scholarship requires a definition of Buddhism as involving attention not merely to philosophical thought but also to practical, ritualized activity by which religious meaning was constructed, authenticated, and preserved.

What emerges from Greene's analysis is a picture of meditation as an intensely relational and performative activity. Visions will not occur as a flash of intuition but as ritualized occurrences calling for interpretation and communal legitimation. Confession will not be a peripheral rite of initiation but an indispensable condition of viable and efficient visionary experience. Each component—posture, visualization, repentance, and karmic rebalancing—constitutes part of a holistic complex wherein lines between body, ritual space, and cosmos blur.

Greene's volumes induce a radical reinterpretation of early Chinese Buddhist meditation as a complex ritual choreography of vision and power. His thorough scholarship makes these forgotten practices and texts rightful and central subjects of Buddhist history once again, providing a more richly detailed account of early medieval Chinese Buddhists' religious lives.

NOTES

[1] John R. McRae, *Seeing Through Zen: Encounter, Transformation, and Genealogy in Chinese Chan Buddhism* (University of California Press, 2003), https://doi.org/10.1525/9780520937079. And Robert E. Buswell, *The Formation of Ch'an Ideology in China and Korea: The Vajrasamādhi-Sūtra, a Buddhist Apocryphon* (Princeton University Press, 1989).
[2] Webb Keane, "Language and Religion," in *A Companion to Linguistic Anthropology*, ed. Alessandro Duranti (Blackwell, 2004), https://doi.org/10.1002/9780470996522.ch19.