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Eric M. Greene’s simultaneous publication of two groundbreaking companion books in the Kuroda Institute’s Studies and Classics in East Asian Buddhism series is nothing less than a monumental achievement.[1] For almost forty years, these two series, in association with the University of Hawai‘i Press, have produced some of the finest English-language scholarship on premodern East Asian Buddhism, including several landmark volumes devoted specifically to the topics of Chan, Zen, and meditation.[2] Greene’s *Chan Before Chan* and *The Secrets of Buddhist Meditation* stand among the very best of these and indeed among the foremost Western studies of early medieval Chinese Buddhism more broadly. These books greatly advance our understanding of Buddhist meditation traditions during this formative period, before the rise of the so-called Meditation school (Chan zong 禪宗) in the Tang (618-907), Five Dynasties and Ten Kingdoms (circa 902-79), and Song (960-1279) periods. Greene’s studies also offer the most comprehensive accounts yet available of the broader historical, social, literary, doctrinal, and ritual contexts within which chan 禪 meditation practices, masters, and written texts first arose. Greene delimits his studies to Chinese-language sources that articulate the notion of chan specifically. This term he translates throughout as “meditation,” from the Latin meditatio, first used to render zen by sixteenth-century Jesuit missionaries in Japan. But here “meditation” is expressly shorn of the modernist, scientistic, and Orientalist connotations accured over the centuries since, as it reverts to encapsulate, in Greene’s expert retelling, the distinctive tones of chan practice in primarily fifth- to seventh-century Chinese Buddhist writings.

The main sources for Greene’s studies include Buddhist canonical scriptures and treatises, monastic hagiographies, miracle tales, bibliographies and lexicographies, official historiographies, Dunhuang manuscripts, stone inscriptions, and other genres of text. But the most important materials examined here are a unique series of texts that were translated, compiled, or composed in China at the beginning of the fifth century, on the basis of both Indic and Chinese sources, and collected into a discrete Chinese Buddhist canonical genre called “meditation scriptures” (*chanjing 禪經*). Some of the
earliest Chinese Buddhist translations (for example, by An Shigao 安世高 [fl. 148-68]) used the character chan to transcribe the Indic word dhyāna (absorption, trance, meditation, etc.), and chanjing first appeared as a separate Buddhist genre in the writings of Dao’an 道安 (312-85). But it was not until the early fifth century that this genre became codified to correspond with one of three newly delineated domains of Buddhist expertise: “Dharma masters” (fashi 法師), who recited, translated, or explained Buddhist texts; “vinaya masters” (lüshi 律師), who studied and disseminated newly translated monastic regulations; and “meditation masters” (chanshi 禪師), who practiced and taught the kinds of chan articulated in these early “meditation scriptures.” These chanjing have long been dismissed by modern scholars as incoherent, underdeveloped, or too Indian or Hīnayāna to suit Chinese tastes, and thus regarded as something of a dead end in the history of Buddhist practice. But for several centuries these texts were celebrated and circulated in China as authoritative guides to Buddhist meditation. They were cited widely as canonical proof-texts in the writings of many eminent Chinese Buddhist exegetes and meditation masters, including especially the erudite and prolific Tiantai Zhiyi 天台智顗 (538-97). Greene’s studies thus aim to elevate these fifth-century chanjing to their rightful place in the modern Western canon of premodern Chinese and Buddhist writings on meditation.

What did Buddhist meditation mean according to these fifth-century chanjing? Perhaps most strikingly, chan initially had little to do with practices of mental stilling or doctrines of dhyāna, “just sitting,” “non-thinking,” or other rhetorics of non-dual awakening, as later Chan school proponents and modern scholars would have it. “Rather than describing concrete methods for calming the mind and gaining knowledge of abstruse Buddhist truths,” Greene explains, early chan texts focused on presenting “an unrelenting slideshow of elaborate and often enigmatic visions,” which meditators were instructed to cultivate successively and respond to accordingly (Chan Before Chan, p. 8). Some methods of early chan visualization were well known from other contemporary sources, like the Contemplation Scriptures (guanjing 觀經). Chan similarly involved both “contemplating” (guan) preexisting objects, like buddhas, the breath, or bodily anatomies, and “imagining” (xiang 想) more fantastical scenes, like singing gandharvas (heavenly musicians) issuing monks from their pores. But early chan scriptures also emphasized another kind of vision that was said to provide concrete confirmation of otherwise abstract meditative achievements—for example, samādhis (concentrations), dhyānas, or arhatship—or else of unseen hindrances to progress in meditative practice: that is, unwholesome karma. These visions were different than contemplations or intentional visualizations because they lacked “phenomenological continuity with the practices that produce[d] them” (Chan Before Chan, p. 86). They emerged spontaneously and unexpectedly, like dreamscapes or deathbed visions, as when scenes of variegated oceans appeared while contemplating skeletons. This dissociative quality led such visions to be taken as “signs” (xiang 想) of hidden spiritual conditions and thus success or failure of prescribed chan practices. These visions were sometimes called jingjie 境界—the “cognitive objects” encountered during meditation that signaled its progress—which Greene thus translates as “confirmatory visions” (Chan Before Chan, esp. pp. 77-79). If one experienced the proper confirmatory visions, they would then be ready for the next stage of development. But if visions arose that signaled karmic hindrances, these would need ritual remediation through public expressions of repentance (chanhui 懺悔), the success of which was then verified by ensuing meditative visions. Pre-Chan chan required regular cycles of ritual contrition to accompany its progressive visualizations and confirmatory visions.

In their vivid depictions of meditative visions, early chan scriptures claimed to articulate what were nominally private experiences of Buddhist meditation. But these experiences were not just inner
cognitive or sensory states that individual meditators purportedly obtained and enjoyed. Instead, \textit{chan} visions were concrete events that meditators needed to report for evaluation, in particular because these visions were often impossible to decipher without special expertise. This was the expertise of the vaunted “\textit{chan} master” (\textit{chanshi}), whose primary task in early \textit{chan} scriptures was less to teach specific meditation techniques than to interpret the signs of their achievement. As a result, Greene approaches pre-Chan \textit{chan} as largely “a matter of sign reading,” with disciples and masters exchanging visionary reports and judgments and mutually authorizing their respective claims to attainment (\textit{Chan Before Chan}, p. 16). To account for these social dimensions of early Buddhist meditation, Greene employs the notion of “semiotic ideology” developed by anthropologist Webb Keane. Following Keane, in the tradition of Charles Sanders Peirce, Greene treats \textit{chan} visions as “semiotic” in their communicative functions of signifying otherwise unknown karmic conditions or meditative attainments. Some visions were “icons” or “indexes” of the states that they signified, in sharing morphological or causal and spatiotemporal relationships. But most \textit{chan} confirmatory visions were “symbolic” in the Peircean sense that their connections to referents were seemingly arbitrary and established by social convention alone. By “ideology” Keane and Greene seek not to unveil “false consciousness” but simply to indicate “people’s own, self-reflexive understandings about their communicative practices.” “Semiotic ideology,” then, “points to the forms, practices, and spaces in which the people who use signs think and argue with each other about how those signs work” (\textit{Chan Before Chan}, p. 15). Therefore, the overarching aim of \textit{Chan Before Chan} is to reconstruct this “semiotic ideology of Buddhist meditative experience,” which in Greene’s analysis “made it possible for meditation and its fruits to exist within a social world” of early medieval China (\textit{Chan Before Chan}, pp. 16, 250).

In \textit{The Secrets of Buddhist Meditation}, Greene offers complete, thoroughly annotated translations of two of the most important fifth-century apocryphal \textit{chanjing}: the \textit{Scripture on the Secret Essential Methods of Chan} (\textit{Chan mi yao fa jing} 禪秘要法經, aka \textit{Chan Essentials}) and what was originally its appendix, the \textit{Secret Methods for Curing Chan Sickness} (\textit{Zhi chan bing mi yao fa} 治禪病祕要法, aka \textit{Methods for Curing}). \textit{The Secrets of Buddhist Meditation} also includes four substantial introductory chapters that further develop Greene’s main arguments about the social and ritual embeddedness of \textit{chan} (absent discussion of “semiotics”). These chapters focus on explaining and contextualizing \textit{Chan Essentials} and \textit{Methods for Curing} for readers unfamiliar with \textit{Chan Before Chan}, but they also offer different narrative angles of analysis and develop unique arguments about \textit{chanjing} in fifth-century China. The two books almost never overlap directly, although there is some thematic repetition. They cross-reference one another appropriately, they can be read in either order, and each also stands perfectly well on its own.

\textit{The Secrets of Buddhist Meditation} is best suited to readers interested in the meditation scriptures themselves and in exploring the narratives developed by early medieval Buddhists about \textit{chan} visionary practices, experiences, and meanings. But this book also does an excellent job of siting these texts within larger Buddhist historical, doctrinal, and practical frameworks. \textit{Chan Before Chan} offers equally exhaustive analyses of specific primary sources, but it more typically sets its sights on larger tableaus of medieval Chinese Buddhism, its practical soteriologies and ideologies of spiritual attainment. In both books, Greene sets the most exacting standards of academic rigor, comprehensiveness, precision, and clarity. He is thoroughly conversant with an impressive body of Chinese-, Japanese-, and Western-language scholarship on Buddhist meditation and other traditions across premodern South, Central, and East Asia. Greene’s cross-readings of materials from these

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disparate traditions are meticulous, his skills in interpreting and translating premodern Chinese writings are impeccable, and his thematic investigations of them are penetrating. Both Chan Before Chan and The Secrets of Buddhist Meditation also present a raft of detailed information and further fine-grained arguments about the developments of specific teachings and practices of chan. Both books should be considered required reading for scholars and students of Buddhist studies and Chinese religions. Below, I offer more detailed overviews and assessments of each. Chan Before Chan impresses and convinces in all respects, except maybe concerning “semiotics.” The Secrets of Buddhist Meditation is a masterwork of technical translation and explanatory apparatus that perhaps wants only in broader accessibility.

In chapter 1 of Chan Before Chan, “Meditation Practice, Meditation Masters, and Meditation Texts,” Greene constructs a compelling case that a “discernible social ‘field’ of meditation” first emerged in China at the beginning of the fifth century (p. 17). For centuries prior, Chinese Buddhists had access to translated Indic texts that described practices and goals of meditation (that is, chan), and several pre-400 Chinese monks were memorialized as having perfected meditation through the use of these texts. But in the eyes of several prominent early adepts like Dao’an and Sengrui (352-421/439), proper instructions for Buddhist meditation required Western masters to convey them directly. Over the early decades of the fifth century, then, with the arrival of prolific Indian and Central Asian missionaries renowned especially for their expertise in meditation—men such as Kumārajīva, Buddhabhadara, Dharmapiya, and Dharmamitra—“chan went from being a mythic practice linked to saints from far away or long ago, and only read about in books or known through legend, to something with a real existence in China, something that Chinese Buddhists could hope to accomplish, and under whose guise living people and their activities were named, classified, and valued” (p. 28).

This was the classification of “meditation master,” or chanshi, which was first coined in the early fifth century to designate these and other foreign monks who taught chan and transmitted its literature. Prior to this time, monks regarded as “chan practitioners” (xichan 习禪) were prototypical Chinese hermits, sitting alone in mountain caves, few and far between. Indian or Central Asian monks were then known only as translators or miracle workers, even those like An Shigao or Dharmakṣema who transmitted Indic meditation manuals. The emergence of the chanshi as foreign monk coincided with expanding sociopolitical regard for chan expertise in general. While pre-400 chan was reportedly a solitary practice, by the fifth century, Buddhists could gain status, authority, and patronage through their claimed or imputed mastery of meditation. Aspiring Chinese adepts could only gain such mastery through discipleship under foreign chanshi, at least at first, although this title would soon apply to Chinese monastics as well. Thus the idea of chan lineage first arose during this era, as exemplified most famously in Lushan Huiyuan’s (334-416) transmission genealogy prefacing The Chan Scripture of Dharmatrāta (Damoduoluo chan jing 达摩多罗禅经). This period also saw the advent of new communal spaces for meditation practice: chan cloisters (chanyuan 禪院), chan quarters (chanfang 禪房), chan wards (chanfang 禪坊), chan halls (chantang 禪堂), and so on. And the new “chan scriptures” likewise emerged amid this historical shift, when the practice of meditation went from having “essentially no official place ... in personal or institutional memory” to being “a recognized subdiscipline of Buddhism with certified teachers, dedicated spaces, and authoritative practices” (p. 55).

Within this burgeoning “social field” of meditation, Greene argues, a unique and novel “semitic
ideology of meditative experience” came to predominate, including widespread teachings, practices, and institutions predicated on the importance of chan visionary experiences and understandings of these experiences as signs of meditators’ progress or lack thereof, of the ranges of potential meanings for these visions-as-signs, and of who had the authority to declare their (in)significance. This ideology is the topic of chapter 2, “Confirmatory Visions and the Semiotics of Meditative Experience,” which focuses in particular on four important fifth-century meditation scriptures. These scriptures served to provide “the necessary interpretive tools” to meet increasingly pressing Buddhist concerns about “how claims to (or reports of) private meditative experiences could or could not be taken as signs that a given individual had achieved a significant, canonically sanctioned attainment” (p. 64). The texts examined here include Zuo chan sanmei jing (aka Meditation Scripture), translated by Kumārajīva et al.; Damoduoluo chan jing (aka Chan Scripture of Dharmatrāta), translated by Buddhabhadra et al.; Wu men chan jing yao yong fa (aka Five Gates), attributed to Dharmamitra; and the apocryphal Chan Essentials.

Greene argues that although these texts often treated meditative visions phenomenologically—foregrounding elaborate depictions of nominally private, individual experiences—within their social contexts these visions functioned communicatively, as “semiotic forms” (p. 63). Kumārajiva’s Meditation Scripture and the Chan Scripture of Dharmatrāta, for example, expressly declared that spontaneous visions were “signs” of meditative attainments. Chan Essentials included detailed meditation instructions but “ultimately subordinate[d]” them “to the same semiotic question” of how to read their visions as signs (p. 85). And the Five Gates depicted meditation students reporting their visions to masters for confirmation of meaning and further instruction, a process that shows how chan visions “were supposed to be deployed as evidence of meditative progress within a social context” (pp. 77-78). Greene asserts in Peircean terms that these “confirmatory visions” were “indexes” because they shared causal and spatiotemporal connections with the attainments they signified. Concrete chan visions arose as direct results of emergent psychophysical conditions like samādhi, dhyāna, or arhatship, but were still distinct from them, like material bodies that both resulted from and signified unseen karmic roots. Nevertheless, in Greene’s analysis, many of these chan visions were “symbolic” in the Peircean sense that their relationships to referents were established by convention (rather than causality) and were “self-consciously obscure,” as when visions of glowing bones ideally signified dhyāna (p. 92). This symbolic nature of visions also lent to their purported “divinatory character,” according to Greene (p. 81). Their apparent randomness vis-à-vis the practices that produced them removed the element of willful manipulation, so they could be deemed legitimate signs of sanctity by the proper Buddhist authorities, that is, chanshi. This version of the chan master as diviner of visions, termed here a “moral-hermeneutical adept” (p. 102),[3] as well as new ways of visually representing meditative achievements—as in murals on the walls of Toyok caves 20 and 42 (near Turfan) that may depict chan visions—were among the many “affordances” offered by this early chan semiotic ideology of meditative experience (p. 100).

The visions described in early chan texts not only signaled attainment of normative fruits of meditative practice but also offered insight into the karmic trajectories of meditators who experienced them. In the fifth-century chanjing as well as the writings of Buddhist masters who followed them, one of the main functions of meditation was to produce visions that would indicate the presence or absence of karmic obstacles to spiritual development. Chapter 3, “Visions of Karma,” thus examines chan as a novel practice of reading visions as signs of karmic roots and of ritual effects
upon practitioners’ karmic status and capacity for meditation. Buddhist authors have long regarded purity with regard to ethical precepts (śīla) as a necessary precondition for developing wisdom (prajñā) and skill in meditation (samādhi). In pre-Tang chan and Tiantai, according to Greene, this interdependence between śīla and samādhi became semiotic: because meditation depended on purity, the visions experienced in meditation were signs of purity. Tiantai Buddhism has long been known for systematically combining doctrines and practices of seated meditation and ritual repentance to remove bad karma, but here we see how this seemingly characteristic approach was in fact widespread across Chinese Buddhist traditions from the fifth to eighth centuries and is clearly evident in early chan.

One of few extant Buddhist meditation texts composed in China before the seventh century was Zhiyi’s first major treatise on chan, Elucidation of the Sequential Approach to the Perfection of Chan (Shi chan boluomi ci di fa men 釋禪波羅密次第法門). Here Zhiyi wrote of “confirming roots of good and evil” through calming meditation, during which one would experience either visions of objects associated with past karmic actions (so-called retributions [bao]) or identical mental states to those attending said actions (termed “habits” [xi]) (pp. 115-16). Mental states arising in meditation as psychic habits thus signaled their origins iconically, according to Greene (following Peirce)—in being like unto them—while visions as karmic retributions did so symbolically and thus required interpretation through consultation with an experienced master. Zhiyi agreed with the Chan Essentials and other early chanjing that these visions were triggered spontaneously during meditation; that karmic obstacles did not prevent one from attaining states of deep concentration, nor experiences of meditative visions, but were themselves revealed through meditation in the form of inauspicious visions; and that the nature or content of these visions did not follow directly from the specific techniques of mental cultivation that produced them. Therefore, Greene argues that Zhiyi’s account of meditation was based most directly on these fifth-century chan scriptures.

In early Indian Buddhist manuals, ritual purification of transgressions was usually only a preliminary step to meditation practice. In the Chan Essentials and other pre-Chan chan writings, the need for such purification through rituals of repentance continued throughout the meditator’s development. In producing visions that were deemed significant as symbols of an individual’s karmic lot, early chan functioned similarly to “other forms of prophetic visionary experience” like dreams and deathbed visions (p. 141). Dreams in China were often thought to convey veritable information about a person’s past, present, or future, and according to Zhiyi and the Ākāśagharba Contemplation Scripture, among others, dreams were also states during which confirmatory visions of spiritual progress or hindrance might occur.[4] Likewise, and in accordance with broader Buddhist notions of the karmic impact of the moment of death, deathbed visions were understood to symbolically communicate one’s karmic status in much the same way as early chan visions. And just as visions in chan provided important information (through expert interpretation) about the necessary next steps of practice—be they repentance rites or other techniques of calming and contemplation—deathbed visions were likewise considered both revelatory and diagnostic, indicating the karmic/psychic state of the dying person and thus the necessary ritual steps to ensure their favorable rebirth.

While fifth-century chanjing often claimed that repentance rituals were essential components of meditation curricula, few of these texts actually provided any details about how to perform such rituals or what exactly they were intended to accomplish. Chapter 4, “Repentance,” focuses on one that did: the “Method for Curing Violations of the Precepts” (“Zhi fan jie fa” 治犯戒法) in the Secret
Methods for Curing Chan Sickness. This and other such texts explained how to ameliorate karmic or psychic problems, as signaled through chan visions, by employing a family of ritual practices known as chanhui. As Greene explains, medieval Chinese Buddhists commonly understood repentance “as the core of what Buddhist practices were ultimately about,” including monastic renunciation, asceticism, and pre-Chan chan (p. 204). Rooted in long-standing Chinese, Daoist, and Buddhist ideas about “the power of public declarations of guilt and remorse to elicit remission” from public, divine, and/or karmic retribution, chanhui had “such deep and powerful resonance” in medieval Chinese Buddhism that the “highest normative practices such as meditation were brought within its orbit” (pp. 191-92). As a result, chan as inner mental cultivation cannot be separated from the broader social and ritual contexts of chanhui.[5]

Chanhui was a Buddhist neologism devised to translate different Indic terms that generally denoted ritual practices like worship, offerings, prostrations, and pleas for mercy performed with the express intent of securing remission from deserved punishments. Greene argues that Buddhist chanhui was not necessarily a form of “confession,” as sometimes assumed, since it did not reveal specific hidden sins and it often served to atone for general conditions of sinfulness shared by all (p. 163). Such was the same with fifth-century Lingbao 靈寳 Daoist texts that adopted the term chanhui to denote practices of pleading for mercy, often on behalf of significant others, for all possible sins committed. Indeed, chanhui could be performed as well for remission of punishment due to family members, friends, teachers, or even all sentient beings. While this fact may indicate influence from “Chinese legal ideas concerning familial rather than individual responsibility,” Greene also cites Indian Buddhist examples of communal absolution through repentance rituals (pp. 190-91). Chanhui did differ from its Indic antecedents, however, in introducing the semantic component of remorse. Sometimes used interchangeably with the pre-Buddhist term huiguo 悔過, meaning “to show regret for wrongdoing,” chanhui also drew on ancient Chinese conventions of publicly demonstrating sincere “self-blame” (zize 自責) in order to gain clemency (p. 167). Developed as such on both Indian Buddhist and Chinese models, chanhui as “repentance” was an eminently social and ritual act as much as inner feeling of guilt, in Greene’s analysis, especially in its illocutionary modes where verbal utterance of the word itself was crucial to its ritual performance.

In the case at hand, the “Method for Curing Violations of the Precepts” represented new genres of repentance rites devised in part to address concerns expressed in new vinaya texts about how to repair broken precepts. Chanhui rituals appeared throughout such texts as prescribed daily monastic liturgies, among other descriptions, and they also became important practices on “abstinence” (zhai 齋) days observed by both monastics and laity (p. 162). But more than furnishing means for penitent monks and nuns to regain monastic status—even, unusually, after the gravest (pārājika) of transgressions—and purifying unwholesome karma like Mahāyāna repentance rites in the Golden Light Sutra and elsewhere, chanhui in the “Method for Curing” also promised to advance the practice of chan. As a result, chanhui provided “remedial benefit across the three domains of karma, community, and meditation,” according to Greene, eliminating threats of painful rebirth, reinstating pure monastic status, and helping one resume chan progress (pp. 180-81). Similar ranges of claimed efficacy for repentance rites, including removal of obstacles to meditation, also appeared in other circa fifth-century ritual compendia like the Great Vaipulya Dhāraṇī Scripture (Da fang deng tuoluoni jing 大方等陀羅尼經) and Divine Spells of the Seven Buddhas and Eight Bodhisattvas (Qi fo ba pusa suo shuo da tuoluoni shen zhou jing 奇佛八菩薩所说大陀羅尼神咒經). And Zhiyi’s threefold typology of repentance rituals in his Elucidation of the Sequential Approach to the Perfection of Chan similarly distinguished between
vinaya repentance methods to purify precept violations, contemplations of emptiness to eliminate karmic obstructions, and repentance methods to help elicit propitious chan visions.

In the final chapter, “From chan to Chan,” Greene shows how this widespread semiotic ideology of Buddhist meditative experience and attainment was gradually overturned (though not eliminated) in favor of new norms especially concerning the nature and function of meditative visions. According to proponents of the newly emergent Chan school in the early eighth century, among others, visionary experiences that arose during practices of seated calming and concentration were nothing but false, deceptive hallucinations; they were never signs of consequential meditative attainment. In this new understanding, such visions should be ignored as workings of deluded minds and eventually subsumed into emptiness, the goal of all chan practice: “a sudden absence of any cognitive object at all” or state of abiding “equanimous nonduality” (p. 214). Greene discusses examples of this shift in important early Chan treatises like those by Daoxin 道信 (580-651) and Hongren 弘忍 (600-74) and several other eighth-century anonymous compositions: the Record of the Dharma Jewel through the Generations (Li dai fa bao ji 達法寶記); the Treatise on the Master Bodhidharma of India (Tianzhu guo Putidamo chan shi lun 天竺國菩提達摩禪師論); the Treatise on Severing Cognition (Jue guan lun 絕觀論); the Essential Formulas for Sudden Awakening (Dun wu... yao jue 頓悟...要決); and a unique version of the Chan Essentials that was inscribed on the walls of cave 59 at the Wofoyuan 臥佛院 (Grove of the Reclining Buddha) grotto complex in Sichuan. In their focus on repudiating chan visions, according to Greene, these sources show that the Chan school “did not promote new techniques of meditation,” compared with earlier chan scriptures, “so much as it argued for a new way of understanding the relationship between meditative experience and meditative attainment.” That is to say, Chan “proposed a new semiotic ideology” of meditation (p. 206).

One instructive example of this dynamic is Daoxin’s Essential Techniques for Calming the Mind (Ru dao an xin yao fang bian fa men 入道安心要方便法門), extant in the early eighth-century Chan history Records of the Masters and Disciples of the Lankāvatāra (Lengqie shi zi ji 楞伽師資記), which included detailed instructions for meditations called “one-practice samādhi” (yi xing sanmei 一行三昧) and “guarding the one without moving” (shou yi bu yi 守一不移). The first of these was well known from the writings of Zhiyi as a method of “bringing to mind the buddha” (nianfo 念佛), the success of which would be signaled by visions of buddhas. But in Daoxin’s version of this samādhi, doctrines of emptiness instead dictated the “phenomenology of meditative experience” that would signify its achievement: complete absence of any concrete visions or signs (p. 214). Similarly, Daoxin’s practice of “guarding the one” also followed Zhiyi, but where Zhiyi claimed that progress would be confirmed by meditative visions (jingjie), for Daoxin these “strange objects” were dissolved into emptiness until the adept harbored “no more hankering after objects of mind” (pp. 217-18).[6] Such was the case with Hongren’s Treatise on the Essentials of Cultivating the Mind (Xiu xin yao lun 修心要論), which expounded on the method of “sun contemplation” (riguan 日觀) from the fifth-century Amitāyus Contemplation Scripture (Guan Wuliangshou fo jing 觀無量壽佛經). While the original scripture and its commentary by eminent “Pure Land” exegete Shandao 善導 (613-81)—also a “chan master” in his time—both articulated practices of producing and interpreting visions, Hongren deemed these visions meaningless. The true goal of contemplation for Hongren was instead to eliminate deluded views of self.

In claiming that meditation on external cognitive objects (jingjie) was a “Hīnayāna” method of “incorrect contemplation” (xieguan 邪觀), Chan texts like the Treatise of the Master Bodhidharma of India, and the others noted above, removed any “semiotic potential” of visions experienced in chan
(pp. 226-27). But, according to Greene, it was not only Chan school proponents who argued against the legibility, desirability, and necessity of visions-as-signs. Other sources as well attest a general “nonsectarian suspicion of meditative visions” growing at this time, and the new semiotic ideology of the early Chan school “was more broadly in the air in the early eighth century” (pp. 237-38). Why was this? The short answer Greene proposes is Tang Emperor Xuanzong’s 唐玄宗 (r. 712-56) increasingly restrictive approach to Buddhist institutions, as indicated by his serial edicts expanding imperial oversight of monks and nuns deemed lacking in discipline. In fact, one of Xuanzong’s edicts specifically excoriated monks who claimed prophetic powers through mastery of meditation, and another rejected chan expertise as a replacement for scripture memorization in required monastic exams. Against this backdrop, one can perhaps discern a certain expedient logic to the newfound distaste for visions among Chan and other eighth-century Buddhist authors.

Lastly, the epilogue of Chan Before Chan presents a fascinating tenth-century Dunhuang document that includes records of the meditative visions, and lack of visions, reported by several local nuns. These records and what look like rankings written next to them—“inferior” (xia []), “middle-grade” (zhong []), and “superior” (shang []) (p. 256)—appear to evidence the kinds of master-disciple chan encounters depicted as far back as the fifth-century Five Gates, with students describing their visions to teachers who then assessed their meanings. In Greene’s view, this document thus demonstrates the continuing existence, long after the rise of Chan, of the early chan semiotic ideology of meditative experience.

As indicated at the outset of this review, the arguments large and small advanced throughout Chan Before Chan are all expertly constructed, precisely and abundantly documented, and impeccably reasoned. Greene’s consistently learned and meticulous analyses of chan writings, personages, doctrines, and practices, as well as their historical developments within larger social, ritual, and political contexts and vis-à-vis cognate and disparate Buddhist meditation traditions, Indic and Chinese, all lend compelling support to the broader and perhaps more startling vistas of early Chinese Buddhism that Greene presents. Buddhist meditation before Chan was a kind of social sign reading, focused on eliciting and interpreting visions. Early chan masters were like fortune-tellers, divining visions to see karmic/dharmic lots. Chan meditation served the same aims as rituals for repentance of sins. These and other intriguing synoptic claims, perhaps surprising only from later Chan or modernist Buddhist perspectives, are rendered wholly convincing in Greene’s account. The only lingering questions, to my mind at least, concern the degree to which chan visions and Chan interpretations thereof are best understood as “semiotic,” and whether or to what extent medieval Chinese Buddhists themselves understood visionary experiences in this way.

For one, Greene’s analyses of chan visions as semiotic markers, as symbols or indexes, presuppose dichotomies that are admittedly often blurred and largely heuristic but at times appear untenable or belied by sources examined. Such dichotomies include chan experience versus chan achievement, prescribed versus (“spontaneous”) confirmatory visions, and visions/signs as concrete representations of/versus otherwise intangible and unobservable but nonetheless immanent attainments. In support of this last distinction, Greene sometimes argues that visions were not valued or sought in and of themselves. The true goals of practice were instead abstract meditative or karmic states, which were distinct from and symbolized by visions: referents to their signs. Confirmatory visions did not directly cause dhyāna or erase sins; focused visualizations or repentance rituals did. Visions were merely concurrent epiphenomena. But at several points in Greene’s analysis, it appears
that meditative visions were desired objects themselves, with their own unique kinds of power and cachet, apart from or in addition to the attainments they signified. For example, some Buddhist deathbed rituals were devised specifically to incite particular visions within dying minds by performatively enacting the contents of those visions. Such visions would thus seem more salvific than semiotic. Elsewhere, Greene contends, the “meditation practice for which chanhui made one fit was itself a means of obtaining visions that could indicate a need for further chanhui” (p. 159, emphasis added). Here more than stand-ins for something else, it would seem, visions themselves were necessary preconditions. And in the “Method for Curing Violations of the Precepts,” monks reportedly broke precepts and were absolved of transgression by falsely and truly reporting attainment of “proper confirmatory visions” in meditation (p. 170). In these and other cases, Daoxin’s abovementioned polemical concern with earlier chan practitioners “hankering after objects of mind” would seem to ring true.

Not only did visions sometimes appear as objects of desire, but they also seemingly had some determinative power in affecting their referent attainments. In at least one case, Greene declares the agency of visions expressly, as when “inauspicious meditative visions [were] not just signs of the need for repentance but the very vehicles of repentance” (p. 203). One thus wonders, in texts like Chan Essentials, whether samādhi and karmic purity were merely signaled by meditative visions or also enabled by them. When Nandi asked the Buddha how one could “extinguish the signs of their sins,” did this indicate that removing signs also removed sins (p. 130)? That signs somehow were sins?[7] If the answer is both, surely this does not impugn the Peircean semiotic approach, which permits of causal signs as “indexes.” Indeed, as noted above, Greene specifies that the Chan Essentials took its visions as indexes to attainments, as well as “symbols” thereof, since these supposedly had direct causal as well as representational relationships. And of course index, symbol, and icon were not necessarily different kinds of signs but also different aspects of or approaches to signs. Nevertheless, the very conceptual effort to distinguish signs, whatever aspects thereof, from objects to which they referred would seem confounded in some instances that Greene examines, which perhaps not unlike Nandi’s sin-signs rendered chan experiences and achievements ultimately indistinguishable.

Consider the “reconfigured” or “new semiotic ideology” (for example, pp. 243, 248) of the emergent Tang Chan school, which advocated different ways of understanding the relationships between meditative experiences and attainments and chan practices and goals. When Greene describes Daoxin’s “one-practice samādhi” as providing “a new statement about the kind of experience that [was] to be taken as evidence of meditative attainment,” it is questionable whether Daoxin advocated a new “semiotic ideology” or instead opposed the very notion that chan was “semiotic,” that meditative experiences signified meditative attainments (p. 215). For Daoxin the goal of practice was emptiness, the experience of which confirmed the goal. Experience and attainment were non-dual, indivisible into signs and referents. Similarly, Greene explains how Hongren rejected “the entire notion that the content of concrete meditative experiences can or should be interpreted” as signs; the Treatise of the Chan Master Bodhidharma divested meditative jingjie (here “cognitive objects”) of any “semiotic potential”; and the Treatise on Severing Cognition discounted symbolic values of visions (pp. 225, 227). In such examples it remains unclear whether Chan thus “proposed a new semiotic ideology of meditative experience” or “stripped” meditative experience entirely of its “potential for communicative power” (p. 248).

Similar questions attend the distinction posited between pre-Chan chan visions that practitioners
tried to achieve and those that arose spontaneously and unexpectedly—in other words, cultivated visualizations versus Greene’s “confirmatory visions.” The premise is eminently sensible that while meditators intentionally developed one visual image, another different, unforeseen vision appeared instead, which meditators thus deemed a sign of achievement. But it is also hard to imagine how these ostensibly spontaneous visions-as-signs would not themselves have become objects of willful cultivation after having been crystalized in chan scriptures and elsewhere. Greene stresses that such texts did not prescribe specific confirmatory visions, which, although illustrated in lavish detail, were not “anything the practitioner should try to visualize, imagine, or otherwise bring to mind.” These elaborate accounts were instead “description[s]” of visions recognized as signifying meditative achievement elsewhere (p. 89). But what if the supposedly unplanned vision of the six-headed dragon-as-sign from Chan Essentials, for example, did happen to appear in the mind of the meditator who studied this text? Would he have been surprised? Would he have expected it? And would it have had the same “confirmatory” power for him as it reportedly did for the meditator who experienced it “unexpectedly” within the text? Greene does note cases in which “something that an earlier tradition had considered to be a confirmatory vision [was] ... later incorporated into a set of prescribed practices” for other traditions (pp. 87-88; cf. p. 171). And, in fact, the Chan Essentials assigned its own “confirmatory visions” as objects of intentional contemplation (for example, The Secrets of Buddhist Meditation, p. 156). One thus wonders whether chanjing visions-as-signs were ever actually unanticipated or uncultivated as they claimed or appeared—if they ever really emerged ex nihilo—or whether they rather stood on turtles all the way down.

A related question is whether Greene approaches chan/Chan visions as semiotic because chan/Chan authors did so, in particular by labeling them xiang or jingjie or something else, or whether he regards chan/Chan meditative experiences as semiotic no matter how they were described or used. While Greene does aim to show how medieval Chinese Buddhists themselves understood Buddhist meditation, he also excludes from investigation “emic theories concerning how transcendent realities can or cannot be represented” (p. 16n28). This book is not a study of Buddhist semiotics; Fabio Rambelli has done that well and is duly cited, but one might still have hoped for some discussion (more than p. 68n33) of the key term xiang as something like a Peircean “sign,” among its many emic meanings, and especially in relation to the notion of jingjie as “confirmatory vision.”[8] Such discussion may have helped clarify the relationships between Greene’s “semiotic” approach to chan and Chan and their respective “ideologies” of meditative or visionary experience. However, none of this is to say that chan xiang or jingjie were not symbolic, that early chan did not revolve around reading visions as signs of attainment or hindrance, nor that Tang Chan did not decry this symbolic understanding of meditative visions. The point is simply that visions were more and less than signs as well, for chan and Chan respectively. And whether or to what degree chan practice was thereby “semiotic,” and according to whom, Chan Before Chan vividly demonstrates in instructive and engrossing detail how meditative visions were socially accepted, expected, and widespread means by which Buddhist monastics in medieval China (cl)aimed to know and show their karmic/dharmic qualities.

Chapter 1 of The Secrets of Buddhist Meditation, “Meditation and Meditation Literature in Early Medieval Chinese Buddhism,” situates Chan Essentials and Methods for Curing within the early fifth-century “chan boom,” as among the earliest substantial Chinese Buddhist writings on the topic (p. 5). Accordant with contemporary Indic meditation manuals but demonstrably composed in China, Chan Essentials and Methods for Curing offer “windows onto the Indian traditions of Buddhist meditation
that were taught by the Indian and Central Asian chan masters who plied their trade in fifth-century China” (p. 6). In their focus on meditative visions especially, Chan Essentials and Methods for Curing differed from other classical Indian meditation texts, such as the Visuddhimagga, Yogācārabhūmi, or Bhāvanākramas, which described their practices and goals in doctrinal and psychological terms. Chanjing thus appear to some as more akin to Pure Land or Tantra than Chan writings, but these distinctions were meaningless for pre-Tang Chinese Buddhists. In fifth-century Chinese Buddhism, chan meditation meant visualization and ritual, which meant encountering buddhas. Only later were these families of practice segregated into discrete “schools.” While chanjing accorded with guanjing in seeking meetings with concrete buddhas, for example, neither genre distinguished these buddhas’ salvific “other power” (that is, Pure Land) from the “self-power” of meditation (Chan) (p. 15).

Chapter 2, “Buddhist Meditation according to the Chan Essentials and Methods for Curing,” provides an overview of the structure and contents of Chan Essentials and Methods for Curing, their accounts of what meditation was, how it took place, how it was deemed successful or not, how to fix problems associated with it, and what its ultimate goals were. Here Greene argues that Chan Essentials and Methods for Curing differed from classic Indian accounts by “objectifying meditative attainment” in the form of concrete visions (p. 43). Lengthy accounts of these visions comprise the bulk of Chan Essentials especially, which is an Āgama/Nikāya-style collection of four separate sutras, each with standard narrative frames applied to what were originally independent meditation instructions. These instructions follow a basic sequence of six stages: initial techniques of “meditative imagination” (xiang), visions resulting from initial techniques, problems indicated by resultant visions, different meditations or repentance rituals prescribed, results of new practices indicated by further visions, and formal naming of these results as particular stages of attainment (p. 26). Methods for Curing comprises two separate sutras. Curing meditation-induced “sickness” (bing) is the topic of the first, which is much longer than the second, about dispelling “demons” (guimei) that harass meditators (p. 24). Methods for Curing also describes repentance rituals prescribed in Chan Essentials.

Chapter 3, “Ritual Repentance, Buddha Bodies, and Somatic Soteriology,” offers a succinct yet detailed account of repentance rites in Buddhist meditation, how early chan resulted in tangible encounters with buddhas, and how it aimed to transform both minds and bodies. Chan Essentials and Methods for Curing provide among the earliest examples of Buddhist meditative-ritual programs that included regular rounds of repentance and contemplation. Chan Essentials and Methods for Curing were unusual in asserting that through these practices one would experience concrete visions of “true buddhas” (zhenfo), which were refined bodily forms of Śākyamuni or other past buddhas. Different from Mahāyāna sutras, such as the influential Pratyutpanna-samādhi (Banzhou sanmei jing), which claimed that meditation produced encounters with presently living buddhas, Chan Essentials denied the reality of such buddhas and instead called their “mind-produced encounters ... mere hallucinations” to be “transcended” in favor of the “true buddhas” that appeared during chan (pp. 54-55). Chan Essentials and Methods for Curing were also unusual in employing technical Chinese medical vocabulary to link “distinctly bodily disturbances” with specific objects of meditation (p. 61). These ailments were reportedly cured by medicines and foods but also especially through different meditation objects devised specifically to counter those that had caused disturbance—as when meditating on fire overheated bodily “fire channels” (huomai), which caused headaches and red eye, which were cured by meditating on “a beryl vase filled with multicolored water” (pp. 62, 281). And just as bodily illnesses could thus be side effects of meditation gone wrong, Greene argues, spiritual achievements through meditation could also be considered “side effects” of methods whose

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“more immediate aim” was bodily healing (p. 71). Otherwise, according to Greene, *Chan Essentials* and *Methods for Curing* evince incipient theories about the material foundations and physiological mechanisms of otherwise mental and spiritual conditions.

Chapter 4, “Textual Histories and the Making of Chinese Meditation Scriptures,” provides critical textual analyses of *Chan Essentials* and *Methods for Curing* as fifth-century Chinese Buddhist apocrypha. Greene contends that *Chan Essentials* and *Methods for Curing* were originally contained within a single text called the Scripture on the Secrets of Chan and the Healing of Illness (*Chan yao mi mi zhi bing jing* 禪要秘密治病經) in an early sixth-century biography of Buddhist layman Juqu Jingsheng 沮渠京聲, to whom *Methods for Curing* was later ascribed. Greene shows how *Chan Essentials* and *Methods for Curing* were likely compiled in China from various preexisting Chinese texts like the Five Gates (which themselves were apparently based in part on Indian sources), edited and expanded by unknown authors, and given “the imprimatur of the sutra form” in order to authorize them (p. 83). The end result was, in Greene’s considered estimation, a product of and for Chinese Buddhist elites interested in new scriptures that both suited local proclivities and situated them firmly within Indian Buddhist canonical frameworks.

The translations of *Chan Essentials* and *Methods for Curing* in part 2 of *The Secrets of Buddhist Meditation* are based on all available xylographic, epigraphic, and manuscript versions of these texts, at least a dozen in total, all thoroughly described and sourced, including some that Greene went to great lengths to access. The translations include text-critical notations to indicate where Greene followed a variant from one or more of these editions, relative to Taishō base texts. He also provides Taishō pages and frames (a, b, or c) throughout the main body of the translations. These are liberally divided into numbered sections, which follow both internal textual divisions (such as sutras, section or method titles, and meditation progressions) and Greene’s own topical subdivisions. These additional bracketed headings, several per page on average, are very helpful in parsing the various contemplations, confirmatory visions, and methods of curing and repentance that populate these texts. Greene also underlines translated sections of *Chan Essentials* that were excerpted at Wofoyuan, which makes them somewhat harder to read here. Both translations include footnotes in abundance (883 total), rather than endnotes, which typically discuss meanings of specific phrases, words, or names, areas where the Chinese texts are unclear and textual variants incorporated. Some footnotes also offer detailed explanation and contextualization of otherwise uncanny meditative visions, as with the “Whirlpool-Burner mountain of the Avīci hell,” which Greene likens to Chinese legends about an ocean-evaporating rock (p. 283n170). Traditional Chinese characters are included in footnotes and the main body of the text, appropriately, where considerations of clarity and interpretation dictate. One might have also hoped for complete variorum editions of the Chinese base texts, to read together with the English translations, perhaps interspersed paragraph by paragraph. But then one might have gotten greedy. See instead cbeta.org, as did Greene.

The translations themselves are clear, sensible, and accurate, hewing close to the Chinese with precise and fluid English. The original texts are inherently difficult to understand, often laconic and repelte with strange phrasing, unusual Indian Buddhist names, and technical terms. Greene adopts the best practice of translating Indic words that were translated into Chinese (for example, “Good Fortune” for Shancai 善財 for Sudhana, p. 262), while transcribing into Romanized Sanskrit words that were transliterated into Chinese (for example, “samādhi” rather than “concentration” for *sanmei* 三昧). Generally, this practice results in English translations that best approximate for modern Western
readers the encounter between Chinese Buddhist texts and their premodern Chinese audiences, for whom translations and transcriptions had analogously naturalizing or foreignizing effects. But Chan Essentials and Methods for Curing were made for elite monks (and perhaps nuns), while The Secrets of Buddhist Meditation aims at somewhat broader audiences, so Greene offers additional and helpful explanations of potentially confusing Buddhist terminology, with bracket inserts and footnotes and in some cases by transl(iter)ating for clarity and fluency more than strict fidelity to the Chinese.

There are four appendices to the translations. The first lists important pre-Tang citations of Chan Essentials and Methods for Curing. The second describes internal textual evidence for the authorship and dating of Chan Essentials and Methods for Curing. Appendix 3 is the most substantial, examining the various formats, titles, and lengths in which Chan Essentials and Methods for Curing circulated from roughly the fifth to tenth centuries, before the advent of printed Chinese Buddhist canons. The last appendix discusses the sources available to the compiler(s) of Chan Essentials and Methods for Curing about their main protagonists, Mahākauṣṭhilananda, Nandi, Panthaka, Agnidatta, Upanandi, and Lekuṇḍika.

On the whole, The Secrets of Buddhist Meditation is a decidedly technical production, as befits a complex primary text. Greene’s rendition reads like an elegant mathematical solution, all terms defined properly, all analytic steps articulated logically and documented precisely, all connections drawn and work demonstrated, to be properly assessed and further advanced by specialists. Exemplary in all these respects, this book is more suited to scholars or graduate students than general readers or undergraduates, who may find its technical apparatus somewhat overwhelming. As a work of professional scholarship, The Secrets of Buddhist Meditation amply illustrates Greene’s contention that “Classics” in East Asian Buddhism are no less important than its secondary “Studies,” and are perhaps even more influential to the long-term development of the field. This is despite the fact that recent decades have seen translation work eclipsed by scholarly monographs in perceived academic and professional value. For not only are translations like The Secrets of Buddhist Meditation enormous scholarly projects in themselves, but they also provide essential new “deposits” into the otherwise “sedimented terrain” of available Buddhist primary source materials. Translations and studies of primary texts are the foundations of second-order analysis, allowing the possibility of “future, as-yet-unimaginable forms of inquiry” (p. xiii). The Western canon of Buddhist meditation texts has remained limited to traditions with greatest Western appeal, especially modernist iterations of vipassanā or Zen. Here in The Secrets of Buddhist Meditation, Greene offers richly fertile new primary deposits that will no doubt reshape the terrain of Buddhist meditation studies for years to come.

Notes

[1]. I would like to thank James Benn and Nia Young for their helpful suggestions on an earlier draft of this review.


[3]. A similar interpretation may befit the Indian Buddhist patriarchs who successively transmitted the Dharma in the fifth-sixth-century lineage history Fu fazang yinyuan zhuan 付法藏因緣傳. In some cases, as when Nāgārjuna succeeded Vīra, Dharma heirs were discovered rather than cultivated. Vīra’s Buddhist mastery consisted less in his skills as a teacher than in his ability to assess the capacities of others. As Greene notes, in some sources this was also the case with Zhiyi’s master Huisi 慧思 (515-68), a purported descendent of this lineage. See Stuart H. Young, Conceiving the Indian Buddhist Patriarchs in China (Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, 2015), 128-30.

[4]. For more on dreams, their interpretations and “affordances” in early medieval China, including their functions as signs of fates and other things, see Robert Ford Campany, The Chinese Dreamscape: 300 BCE–800 CE (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2020).


[6]. In addition to the sources on Daoxin’s writings that Greene cites, see also the recent study and translation by Sam van Schaik in The Spirit of Zen (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2018), esp. 150-80.

[7]. Cf. The Secrets of Buddhist Meditation, p. 171n287, for brief consideration of these “sin-signs” (zuixiang 罪相).

[8]. See, for example, Charles A. Muller, ed., Digital Dictionary of Buddhism, s.v. “[],” http://www.buddhism-dict.net/cgi-bin/xpr-ddb.pl?q=%E7%9B%88. This essential online Buddhist dictionary is the most glaring omission from Greene’s otherwise comprehensive bibliographies in both Chan Before Chan and The Secrets of Buddhist Meditation.


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