TWO VOICES FROM THE FIELD OF PRACTICE: MEDIEVAL AND MODERN PROPONENTS OF THE BENEFICIAL WORK OF NATURAL PRINCIPLES

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ABSTRACT

In one of his poems, the Dilun 地論 (Stages Treatise) master Lingyu 靈裕 (518-605) extolled the effects of repentance practice. In this poem, the efficacy of the work done by both the practitioner and the evoked buddha is described in terms of mental-physical processes based on natural principles. I compare this example from the Chinese Mahāyāna repertoire with a paper and a talk given by the contemporary philosopher of science Michel Bitbol. Bitbol makes an elegant case for anti-metaphysical consonance between traditional Buddhist methods of establishing "emptiness" and those of quantum physics and "neurophenomenology." Yet his argument for congruence in method underscores the difficulty of establishing common ground between the "physics" or principles of efficacy that are claimed as supports in traditional and modern paradigms. I probe this difficulty in my comparison of Lingyu's and Bitbol's prescriptions for practice based on natural principles. On the one hand, this may seem like comparing apples and oranges - it goes without saying that medieval and modern forms of naturalization are incommensurable. However, my aim is not to compare different versions of reality, but rather to compare different modes of claiming performative coherence between efficacy of practice and the way reality works. In each case, efficacy is claimed through appeal to authoritative procedures as well as subjective testimony. Each paradigm is equally dependent for its value on perceptions of coherence or consistency of effect. Though the respective naturalizing principles are not compatible, each mode may claim performative coherence.

KEYWORDS

Buddhist Practice, Dilun, Madhyamaka, Lingyu, Bitbol