

KUANG-MING WU

RESPONSE TO ROBERT MAGLIOLA'S REVIEW  
ARTICLE ON MY VIEW OF MADHYAMIKA  
BUDDHISM<sup>1</sup>

I am overwhelmed with profound gratitude for Dr. Robert Magliola's gracious and critical review of my understanding of Buddhism interspersed in the last of my trilogy. I have learned much from his marvelous erudition in Madhyamikan (and Yogacarin) Buddhism, both in India and China. The following words, in three sections, express my appreciation for his thoughts.

A. THREE CAUTIONS

First, in gratitude to Magliola's mighty flexing of Buddhist-deconstructive muscles, I offer three cautions.

(1) My understanding of Buddhism, which is apparently *different* from Magliola's, does not announce my "dismissive" "depreciation" and "disparaging" "accusation" of Buddhism. To claim so amounts to claiming that anyone who seems to disagree with Magliola is colossally wrong. Such a sanguine combative dichotomy does not quite address the complex reality of understanding. We must be cautious on matters we consider as if "nearing a deep abyss, treading thin ice."<sup>2</sup> Specifically, we can never be too self-effacing on Buddhism as we *approach* it with awe and trepidation, with ultimate circumspection as if to encircle the cosmic black hole, "flying without wings, to know with no-knowledge."<sup>3</sup>

(2) Here is my understanding of Buddhism. However much we enrich and complicate Buddhism, its core remains Nirvana, a serenely poised "emptiness" with all its limitless, unfathomable, and inscrutable implications, precious as the wintry dawn buried under snow. It is the clean and ever-refreshing "Enlightenment" throughout Nature, inside us and out, never a simple hypostatic not-being as Magliola seems to take my words to be claiming.

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Although Theravada Buddhism appears in his note, Magliola explains Buddhism exclusively in terms of its Madhyamikan version that later thrived in China. The sentiment, “Nirvana is Samsara,” runs through such Buddhism and all its Chinese versions, as Magliola so magnificently explicated—“the mundane is . . . inseparable from *nirvana* (Magliola).” This proclamation means not that Nirvana is as fully entitative as Samsara, but that, on the contrary and crucially, Nirvana-emptiness permeates richly and thoroughly the whole Samsara world. This is the whole point at stake in the Buddhist Enlightenment. Lose sight of this trite yet all-important point, and we lose Buddhism.

In fact, given Magliola’s insistence on *bodhi* as life’s “non”s—non-craving-abiding-grasping-etc.—and on entities, causality, and even Four Noble Truths as “ultimately empty” (*sunvatam*), I have difficulty seeing how he and I disagree at all. To his careful delineation of Madhyamikan appreciation of pain, things, and the world, I only add that they are precious solely as “means conducive to (Magliola),” “*prajñapti* ‘privileged clue’ to (Chi-tsang),” and “ladders to (Wu)”<sup>4</sup> “awakening” to “what really goes on (Magliola).” “What really goes” is “not real (Chi-tsang),” Nirvanically empty everywhere. This awakening is of course Enlightenment. As long as Magliola acknowledges my appreciation of Zen, a bosom friend to Madhyamikan Buddhism, I do not see how we disagree anywhere at all.

(3) Although faithful to its core described above, my compact expositions on Buddhism are all too meager. This is because Buddhism is not my major concern; how dare I? I wish Magliola had attended instead to my major concerns other than Buddhism.

## B. OVERALL OUTLOOK

To go beyond my petty cautions, with appropriate qualifications of what Nagarjuna, Chi-tsang, and Magliola say, we may describe our cultural situation as follows.

Buddhism offers Nirvanic Enlightenment, cosmic, existential, and ontological. Deconstructionism functions as self-recursive inconsistency in the life-growth of intellect, quite intimate with Nagarjuna’s tetralemmatic *prasingika*.<sup>5</sup> Metaphor repeats transversals among ideas and sentiments, back and forth. From this perspective, we see<sup>6</sup> how things in varied senses nonchalantly vanish in still small silences that mutually echo to co-arise-and-disappear in Buddhism; self- recursively re-emerge to re-co-cross in deconstructionism; and historically reenact to hail and welcome one another in metaphoring. In fact, all this is crystallized in Magliola’s “Buddhist Christianity,” not as

facile mix (as many Buddhist Christians are) but as non-congenial and non-attached meeting, having deconstructive prangiskan "nothing" in common.

### C. WORLD CULTURES GREETING

What can we say to all this? As Buddhism originated in India and deconstructionism in the West, so metaphor thrives in China. Thanks to Magliola, here is an initiation of non-harmonious encounters among three world cultures, each delightfully greeting the other.

As Nagarjuna said, "Those who are disunited should be united, without asking whether they are friends" (stanza 148b). I quote him to conclude my response to Magliola as Magliola did to conclude his review that is in turn a response to my understanding of Buddhism. Our cultural encounters, non-attached, keep going.

Grateful smiles remain.

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### ENDNOTES

1. Robert Magliola, "Nagarjuna and Chi-tsang on the Value of 'This World': A Reply to Kuang-Ming Wu's Critique of Indian and Chinese Madhyamika Buddhism," *Journal of Chinese Philosophy* 31, no. 4 (December, 2004): 505-16.
2. *Lunyu* 8/3. I am quoting slightly out of context, of course, but not wholly irrelevantly.
3. *Zhuangzi* 4/31-12. Again, I am quoting out of context, though not wholly irrelevantly.
4. Magliola says "ladder" implies its kicking away after use but Chi-tsang keeps it, as it were. Being not a Wittgenstein, I would say we keep the ladder just in case we need it again. "The practitioner stays with the 'ladder,' but it is no ladder-to-be-climbed in any teleological sense. Non-attachment is to scramble up and down the ladder at will," and so "the fourth level supreme truth does not depart from the other three levels, so it is not 'transcendent.' The 'non-difference' represents the fluidity of the 'to-and-fro' between the 'truths' and among the 'levels' of the first deployment, so the 'non-difference' is not 'unitary' in any monist sense (Magliola)." I say that all this takes place because the enlightened one is non-attached, world-transcendent, not because the ladder (and) the world is more entitative than Nirvanically empty. I do not know what non-attachment to the world means unless it is world-transcendent, worldly empty, to be free *within* the world. I lament our quibble here.
5. As Magliola explicated, Chi-tsang essentially repeats Nagarjuna's hermeneutic tactics.
6. Is this "seeing" an enlightenment of a sort evoked by Magliola-Wu's conversation?

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