

When the Light of the East Meets the Wisdom of the West

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[Editorial note: We have tried to capture the spirit of this recorded dialogue which Kim and Danny led without any notes.]

DS: WHEN KIM AND I WERE TALKING ABOUT DOING THIS SESSION, WE DECIDED NOT to do a paper because we know there's a sense in which people enjoy papers but also that people have said that they would like more dialogue and more engagement. We thought we'd be quite nonconformist and take a big risk and try and do that. We've made proper use of technology so we've been able to e-mail each other about our thoughts and about our ideas. What we are going to do is to begin a dialogue between us that eventually we would like people to feel free to join in with.

We chose the title because we have a sense that the Light of the East, the eastern tradition, eastern spirituality, has actually uncovered, quite remarkably, some of the jewels in the western spiritual tradition and in the Wisdom of the West. But we also believe that the wisdom of the western tradition of spirituality and particularly contemplative spirituality, whether it is monastic or lay, has reflected very positively and very imaginatively on the Light of the East...that it really has been a two-way process. And that has been very fruitful, we feel, between the two traditions.

I want to begin the dialogue with Kim by reminding him that in my early twenties, in terms of my spiritual life, I felt totally disorientated. Having come through a very fundamentalist, authoritarian Catholic upbringing and begun to let it go, I was

completely disorientated, as you might imagine. If you come from that sort of background and upbringing and begin to let go of it, it really is very frightening. It was a very difficult time for me. However I began to find a sense of spiritual 'richedness' when I discovered Samye Ling, the Tibetan monastery on the Scottish borders near Eskdalemuir, a remarkable spiritual community with a real heart and a real soul.

I discovered Samye Ling from a reference in Merton's *Asian Journal* to the founder of the community. Merton, being Merton, had said "I think that when I come back from India I might go via Scotland and Wales and I'll see if I can visit that monastery in Scotland." So I sought it out because it just struck a chord. And that began to give me a sense of spiritual rootedness again and I seriously contemplated becoming a Buddhist. Yet I think what stopped me from becoming a Buddhist was Merton. It was that reference which Patrick Eastman mentioned...that if you are going to engage with another tradition or you are going to understand another tradition, actually you must get much more firmly rooted in your own tradition and understand it better. Something which His Holiness, the Dalai Lama, always says to anybody who wants to be a Buddhist, "Go and rediscover the jewels in your own tradition. Even if you are irritated by it or angry with it, see if you can find something deeper."

So I did that. But what I didn't lose was my deep love and affection for the Buddhist tradition and Buddhist practice. When I went to the conference at Winchester, and this is a metaphor for seeing, Kim was the only person I saw who was wearing monastic robes, as far as I can remember. That was very interesting. The first thing I thought I saw were the robes. And then I sat with him during a meal...and I began to see the monk. And then following that, I began to see who was behind the monk, who the person was. And that taught me something about the metaphor of seeing. Now Merton in a sense helped me not to become a Buddhist but [addressing Kim] I think Merton in a sense influenced you into Buddhist monasticism...

KW-M: That was something I think I spoke about at the first Merton conference. In early days when I first started to get into spirituality, Merton was a very important influence. The breakthrough for me really was through Buddhist meditation. That was the first time I

really got beneath the surface of religion. I happened to be working for a publisher who was in Edinburgh – my mother's publishing company – which had published a book called *Thomas Merton, Monk and Poet* which I think is quite hard to get hold of these days. I think I just recognised someone who came from a similar background, a slightly bohemian background, who had taken that journey into faith. So, as I was approaching Buddhist monasticism, I felt as though I had a companion there, someone who had gone down that road. There were so many parallels...the sense of Merton going from an extreme, hedonistic life, coming from a bohemian background, and then going into a very austere tradition. And of course, the tradition that I first came across, and it was pure chance, did happen to be one of the most austere forms of Buddhist monasticism around.

And I don't know what it is about me...but I think we were talking about this earlier...the idea of having to have a very powerful container for wild energy. There's a need for that. But what is behind that wild energy is actually spirituality...spiritual power...so I think that was a really strong connection that Danny and I made with each other when we first met. For both of us, in our own way, Merton had been a really important influence in our engagement with what became our spiritual home. And yet also, and I think that is what I really cherished about Merton, especially during the early days, but throughout my monastic life and also through the time since I've left, is that he gives you the ground from which to approach and go beyond your own tradition and almost challenges you to do that. That is something that we immediately saw in each other...we both had this connecting point across traditions partly through Merton's influence...

DS: Taking that further, one of the things that struck us in our dialogue before today was that Merton was very consistent and very gifted in 'seeing through'...seeing through the superficiality sometimes of structures, whether religious structures or secular structures, seeing through the superficiality of life as some people would regard it. And of course that again is a very rich aspect of the Buddhist tradition, not to be taken in by illusion, by what seems to be real, by what seems to be attractive. Also, in terms of practice, whether Buddhist or Christian, not to be taken in by thinking that

now that you're on a path of practice, that it's about being a good practitioner or the best practitioner. That's very important.

I believe that we both think that, in terms of our contemporary world now, there is an awful lot to see through and in fact that there are a lot of, particularly, young people out there who are passionately interested in and wishing to be engaged in a sense of 'the spiritual', of what it is to be spiritual. But in one sense, organised religion, organised, institutionalised religion is not speaking to that. And, in fact they see through it and that's a challenge...

KW-M: I think that a lot of the dialogue that we were having in connection with this was in relation to Merton's relationship with the establishment. Merton was a man who practised silence...but he wasn't quiet. He was not passive in terms of his relationship to what he saw as wrongs within the establishment, within the organisation. That was a very important influence for me because I was working within a very highly structured and orthodox form of Buddhism which had a very strong spiritual part to it but, at the same time, one of the things that enabled me to engage with it was the whole teaching on Convention.

The idea in Buddhism that there is both 'conditioned reality' and 'unconditioned reality' means that one can use forms quite skilfully. Merton is a very good example of that, someone who perfected his form and was a very good monk. He was a disciplined monk. He mastered the form and that is not a simple thing to do. It is not an easy thing to do. And he didn't make anything out of it. From that mastery sprung his freedom. But then from that perspective, the perspective of experiencing freedom within the confines of a form, as Danny was saying, you start to see through the corruption within a form very quickly and very easily. So how do you relate to that? This is something I am very conscious of as someone grateful for what I have received from Merton: how do I practise that now within my life in the situation and the organisation that I'm involved with now?

Going back to the Buddhist influence within Christianity, something really strikes me when I come to conferences. On the one hand there's a great delight in hearing refined and disciplined minds talking about theological traditions within Christianity. At the same time it I find it very alien to me as a Buddhist because Buddhism is

not based on belief. It doesn't depend upon a theological base to be developed before practice can be authentic. I think there was a reference earlier to one of Merton's comments when he first went into the monastery and talked in a disparaging way about the 'systems' within the oriental tradition saying that that was all that they amounted to. This is a very interesting area to explore because it can seem like that from the outside. In order to get your head around it, you have to understand the contemplative approach, the attitude needed in order to pick up those systems.

As far as the contemporary situation is concerned, how do we apply the teachings of Merton within our situation right now? Of course we need to understand the background and the history and the route that Merton followed but at the same time what does it actually all mean in practice now in our relationships with organisations, with society and with the social issues that are around us? I think that is, I suppose, the gauntlet that I would like to throw down to all of you. That's what makes this kind of conference so exciting. We feel that people are prepared to challenge existing structures in the way that Merton did.

DS: One of the areas we explored in relation to what Kim has just said is that what Buddhism has taught the western spiritual tradition is the importance of practice, daily practice, and how you take that daily practice into all the situations and people that you meet on a day-to-day basis. I was saying to Kim that when I was going through the interviews for the post that I'm taking up in September, I knew there was one person there who might make me feel uncomfortable, might even try and be intimidating. I said that it was my experience of Buddhist practice that allowed me to go into that situation and not be afraid. If I didn't get the job, I didn't get the job, but I was not going to be intimidated by that person. They were not going to make me feel afraid. And they did try to make me feel uncomfortable, they did try to do what I thought they might try to do.

We went on to say that if you take the practice seriously into your daily life, ultimately that's really what it's all about. The contemplative life can not be passive. Maybe what you're developing, and maybe we see this not only in the writings of Merton but of great writers within the Buddhist tradition, is that you begin to discover the arts of the

spiritual revolutionary. Maybe that's what our world needs...the art of the spiritual revolutionary who will hold secular values, or stereotypical values or the way asylum seekers or homeless people are treated, will hold those values to hostage and say there's something not quite right about these, that we have got to negotiate and get back to a rootedness and something much more centred on a sense of the other and compassion for the other... Perhaps this is the point to open discussion up for people to engage in with their own ideas and thoughts.

Patrick Woodhouse: Arising out of your last remarks, Danny, I'm really glad you said that. It's terribly easy to become too spiritual in all this business. Thomas Merton in his own kind of anarchistic way upends our spirituality, doesn't he, and brings us back to earth and makes us face the issues of our day. One of the things that I found disturbing when I was in India, if I can introduce a note of contention, didn't involve the Buddhist tradition. I spent some time in north India in an ashram and it was when meeting Hindu swamis, particularly one whom *Time* magazine had voted one of the ten holiest men in the world. He lived in a monastery beside the river Jumna beyond Beredu. He hadn't spoken for fourteen years, had taken a vow of silence. I've read some of his literature and we managed to get to him and sit in his presence. We were ushered in and allowed to ask just one question. A French woman sat beside him and she was his *amansuensis*. He could speak but he never did. And so this was a way of actually not engaging in dialogue because if you can't speak, you just do it through your *amansuensis*.

But anyway the thing that we tussled over with him was this great doctrine of the realisation of the Self which as I understand from my very simple knowledge, is a cardinal idea in Hindu spirituality; to realise the Self. This sounds very near to what Merton talked about... finding the True Self. And yet one of the things that struck me as I listened to him was the almost, it seemed to me, total lack of engagement with history. The whole Judaeo-Christian tradition of engaging with the historical forces that shape and distort our world, the whole prophetic tradition, there just didn't seem to anything of that at all. In your worst moments, you begin to think that contemplation is a huge escape from engagement. Now for Merton

that was never, ever, ever the case. I don't know enough about Bede Griffiths to know whether he had the same kind of prophetic thrust all the time... I'm not sure that he did. But the question I have, arising out of your last remarks, is how in one's practice one can keep alive the discernment that you're not becoming deluded in some kind of spiritual cul-de-sac but that you are constantly engaged with where people are hurting and suffering. Because it seems it can go either way...

DS: I think that you're absolutely right and I remember at the Good Heart, the three days with the Dalai Lama held by the Christian Meditation Movement, some very affluent young man in his mid-twenties who was used to quick fixes, being able to make quick decisions, almost asking the Dalai Lama for a quick fix, "I think all this is really a little bit... can you tell me how to do this, you know, like now!" The Dalai Lama first of all said, "Daily practice," and then said, "If on your spiritual path, it's good, it's joyful, it's wonderful, you're entirely happy... you are off it!" Because if you're really on the spiritual path, it's going to be about broken-ness, it's going to be about pain, it's going to be about suffering and it's going to be about always being willing to confront with that and to engage with it. I think you are absolutely right. Any contemplative tradition or spirituality which takes you away from that in some kind of superior sense of looking after other people but actually not engaging with their pain and their suffering is quite false. I still think that danger is really there and I think that you are absolutely right. It's not just there, in my view, within the Christian tradition. It can be in any tradition. Some way of coping is to just opt out but you actually think you're opting out in a very precious kind of a way.

Patrick Eastman: I was just going to respond about Bede Griffiths. I think that Bede saw the two-directional way in which things went. He worked a lot on the Advaitic tradition and its relationship to the Christian doctrine of the Trinity. In his writings and his reflections on that, of that sort of unitive experience and the oneness, he thought that it was not simply a vertical oneness as one God but that it brought about a oneness that, if it was authentic, had to be effected in or with relationship. Although I don't think he wrote as

significantly and as prophetically on social issues as Merton did, his writings certainly continue to do prophetic work of spiritual revolution not so much through the community and the ashram but in undermining and cutting against, in a prophetic way, much of the system of caste and all of those things that separate and divide and are alienating. In a different way, Bede certainly would be at one with Merton in the realisation that to realise one's self can only be a realisation of oneself in the Other. One of Bede's favourite passages from St John's Gospel is that the Father and I are one. He sees that as that 'all is one', yet there is diversity in that oneness and the work is to establish the oneness.

KW-M: Can I just make a short response to Patrick's statement... which is a very familiar one from westerners approaching the east. From the contemplative point of view we need to relate practice, whether eastern or western, to the situation in which we find ourselves as westerners. So, for myself, a lot of my own journey has been trying to understand what it means to practice as a Buddhist and as a westerner coming from a Christian background. How do I actually relate the Buddhist teachings on suffering, letting go suffering, the cause of suffering, the cessation of suffering, to the actual situations in which I'm involved, the kind of relationships that I have with the people around me, the people who are my community around me here and now. I think that is the contribution that eastern teachings can make to our western situation... an antidote to this feeling that we always have to be concerned about the people over there who are obviously suffering out there.

One of the things that my meditation teacher in England used to say was, to those of us who were struggling with the vocation and being in a community when there was so much obvious suffering going on around the world, "Well, look, there are lot of middle class people here who are coming to us, who are suffering and their suffering is equally intense. They have a kind of existential suffering that meditation can directly address." And I think that's the challenge as a Christian and as a Buddhist, at this time, in this place, in the kind of world that we exist in... can we actually feel, can we actually touch the suffering of those who are closest to us? That is the kind of realism that eastern influence can bring in here. Of course, when

you're in India, the social context is wholly different and so a wise man, a holy man, who emerges from that context has his own responsibility. This is hard to make a judgement on when you are coming from such a completely alien culture.

Donald Allchin: I was just thinking of the whole mysterious difference between the Christian way of thinking and speaking which involves the engagement with history as we understand it in the Judaeo-Christian tradition and in Christian scriptures, and also of course this fundamental way of thinking of God as Trinity. I was thinking specifically of Raymond Panikkar's book, which is about 30 years old now but which is a very fine book, called *The Trinity and the Experience of Man*. It's a very fascinating and very profound early contribution to Hindu-Christian dialogue. I've been thinking of it recently because there's a very fine essay on it by Rowan Williams in his book *On Christian Theology*. He has a fascinating essay there in which he discusses Panikkar's thoughts about the mystery of the Trinity in relationship to other religious traditions which are not specifically trinitarian. Surely in all religions we are concerned with seeing how to relate unity and distinction, unity and difference and this is one of the basic ways in which Christianity has found that and I am sure that in Hinduism and other great traditions it's done in different ways but maybe we are all involved in similar exploration.

What is always striking to someone like myself who is older is to observe how very easily and naturally and without any thought people who are fifty years younger than myself simply do all that. Just as people know how computers work almost without thinking, so they are actually involved in Christian-Buddhist dialogue or whatever it may be. This is certainly true of Christian people. How far it is true of Buddhist people let us say in a country like Japan, or of Hindus in other East Asian countries which have been more westernised at a technological level than India, I don't know. But it seems as though there is a kind of inner dialogue going on inside people all the time. I find that extraordinarily fascinating and also extraordinarily hopeful. What we are painfully trying to talk about is actually going on inside a lot of people as it is inside us.

Tony Pannett: Patrick touched on a very important point which comes up a lot when I'm in dialogue either in an official or in a simple friendly way with people that I meet. The business of the individual, the self and the other. How Christians view the self...the belief, the traditional teaching, that we shall be resurrected as an individual person at the last day. Which means "What do we mean we shall be resurrected? What central part of myself are we talking about?" Donald touched on the point too, I think – it is the whole business that we deal with – the one and the many. This is really the point.

PW: Being resurrected as an individual is not a Christian doctrine. Being resurrected in community [is] . . .

TP: Yes. As a person in community.

PW: Individual is a word that's not really in the Christian vocabulary.

DA: But unfortunately, it has been. You or I wouldn't like it to be. We come out of a particular tradition which has made a very strong distinction between person and individual. And I find that very important. But of course even a lot of Christians don't necessarily understand that distinction in the way in which, if you like, from Coleridge onward, we have. It relates clearly to the doctrine of the Trinity itself...

PE: I don't know how many people here are familiar with the transcriptions of papers and talks given at the Gethsemani Encounter in which many of these things were discussed. Donald said he didn't know how much some of these issues have become issues and how much influence the dialogue has had on others outside the Christian tradition. But in that [Encounter] we were able to hear Christian and Buddhist monks tackling the same question from their different points of view. It was very helpful and insightful and very provocative. But to come back to this meeting. Saccidananda¹ Ashram really began with Abhishiktananda²... And at Abhishiktananda's heart was the whole Advaitic experience of unity and oneness, but not a monotheism or anything monolithic.

It was unitive but still carried a diversity exemplified by the Trinity in Christianity. Indeed Bede's theological reflection came out of his own Advaitic experience which he was able to relate and articulate through his understanding and experience of the Christian view of a Trinitarian God. Work on that was the focus from which his views of Advaitic and Trinitarian experience conditioned the work that flowed from it. I don't think that Bede fully resolved the issue other than in himself, and particularly in the last three years of his life after his so-called stroke when he had that really profound experience. And so the work continues. As Kim was saying, this is an ongoing wrestling that is not comfortable and does not provide a nice, easy, neat answer in which we reckon we've got it all figured. You know there's pain, and you know we never really can be entirely satisfied.

DS: One of the things that struck me when people were talking was how we deal with concepts in the east and in the west. I remember at that gathering with the Dalai Lama and the Christian Meditation Movement, each day he commented on a gospel passage. He read the passage first and then commented. One day he read an account of the resurrection and you could see everybody say, 'What's he possibly going to say about this?' When he finished the account he just smiled and chuckled—as only he can chuckle. And he said, "Not a problem. Jesus fully enlightened." I think that sometimes in the East there is a facility to get to the heart of what is really a problem and what is really an opportunity.

One of things I was going to ask Kim was about one of the articles in the current issue of *The Merton Journal*. In it Patrick Barry who used to be abbot at Ampleforth asks why are there no monastic vocations today. I'm hoping that Kim may do something in reply to that — because Patrick Barry is talking specifically about Christian monasticism; I'm not entirely sure if it's the same — whether you've had the same question in Buddhist monasticism. I'm not even sure if you've had the same in [Christian] Orthodox monasticism either...

KW-M: We are talking about the western experience. Buddhism as everyone here knows is very popular in the west but is still at an early stage in terms of its monastic development. We've only had Buddhist monastic communities for twenty or thirty years or so, maybe a little

bit longer in the States. Our drop out rate is fairly heavy too. A large intake and a fairly large drop out rate seems kind of okay in the Buddhist tradition but I think that remains to be seen to a great extent. What is more revealing from the Christian point of view is the lack of vocations. I think this reflects on the way in which the structures of the Church have been so dominant and that is why I would advocate contemplative spiritual revolution. This is what the church needs in order for these structures to collapse and allow to come to light the more simple forms of monasticism which appeal to westerners who go into Buddhist monasticism. At the moment the picture young people who are keen to go into spirituality have of Christianity is of a church that is utterly conservative. They are very intimidated by that and put off by it.

There's a lovely monk whom some of you may know, Father Rowland Walls. He's been a monk now for many years and used to be a professor, I think in Manchester. He has a little skete just outside Edinburgh. I often come across people in bars and nightclubs who are in a terrible state and I just tell them about this monk, this 82 year old monk, who lives in an old miners' community hall in a miners' village outside Edinburgh with two other monks. I tell them about him and say "Look, let me just take you out to see this guy. He'll sort you out." And he does, in his own inimitable way. That is the kind of voice that really speaks to people with a genuine experience of spirituality rather than mere theory. That's why I find it kind of amusing just to hear the kind of nit-picking in a theoretical kind of dialogue rather than the actual experiential kind of dialogue which Merton had. That's what we need to be doing. We need to be talking about our experience of spirituality in order to engage people outside. They need it desperately.

Hospice Worker: I'm really picking up on Kim's point. I don't know how to put this but I work with people who are dying every day. That's my job. And I'm a spiritual wanderer, I suppose. I've looked at all sorts of stories and traditions. I've looked at the Tibetan traditions about dying and it's really a struggle how to bring that into practice because I think it's very valuable but it's actually how you do it. I try and do it but even with meditating and bringing oneself into the presence of somebody who is dying... I've been to San Francisco and

the hospice there where that is part of their practice with people who are dying. I'm not sure quite what I'm asking but it's like...it's like joining in with a community of...actually enabling me to do that because it's something that I need to do every day, I suppose. Maybe other people have experienced that as well...

DS: You're aware of the book from France by Marie de Hennezel, *Intimate Death*. It's certainly one of the best books I have read in the last three or four years.

HW: Hennezel relates the stories that we all come across every day of our lives.

DS: It's that whole concept of *Intimate Death*...of getting close and travelling with someone. There are some quite provocative perceptions in that book. For example, she says that people who come into the hospice with no explicit connection to a religious community or a faith community on the whole tend to engage with the dying process much more positively and creatively than people who do, which is a very interesting point. I think it's back to Kim's point about how you relate your experience in terms, if you do belong to a faith community, if it's real, if it's engaging with actually what Patrick was saying earlier, with the real problems of suffering and everything else. And maybe at the end of the day it's about being there and just letting go of whether you've got the answers because nobody's got the answers when people are there dying. It's just about being there in a sense. I think we need to reassure each other about that. That's quite difficult in a world where people don't have this kind of dialogue. That's maybe why revolutionary is the right word. We really do need to turn it all upside down.

Ian Thomson: When you were saying you needed some sort of communal support, of community as the basis of support, I'm not quite sure what you were getting at...

KW-M: That's what I heard you from what you were saying that...

IT: You needed some sort of open-ended community that's not geographically based...?

HW: That's partly what I'm saying. Because of the Tibetan traditions of death and dying, of actually visiting there and finding that it's not what I need. I have to put it like that. Because it is actually quite rigid and structured. One has to buy into a whole load of stuff in order to be there. That's my experience.

KW-M: I think that's what I heard you were saying...what is the kind of practice that can you do as a helper to be with people who are dying? From my point of view that is very much where I see the function of the monastic community. It is to create, to provide, to support, to provide a help to the helpers. Not necessarily to do the helping. Because a monastic contemplative is actually, as has been described many times by Merton, on the edge between life and death, actually going through that experience of dying to the self and to the ego as part of daily practice. That is, in a sense, the place where you have to be, in order to be with death and to trust in that process of dying. Really the monastics are the ones who are the professionals and that I think is something that is being rediscovered very powerfully in Buddhist monasticism in the west, finding that it is a resource for the community, not to be isolated from the community. If there is going to be a resurgence of Christian contemplative monasticism, I think that is maybe an example that they can pick up on, rather than that older tradition of monasticism secluded from the community.

HW: But it's an important form of networking. I'm aware of this. It's partly how to put this into practice. An interesting form of networking...of actually feeling the networks speaking. I'm aware now that I'm actually quite near the Buddhist monastery at Chithurst...

PE: Certainly in the United States there's a real breakdown in any sort of community atmosphere. For the most part you may know your next door neighbour peripherally but other than that you really don't know most of the people in your housing estate. And yet following the pattern of Alcoholics Anonymous, the *Tulsa World* newspaper serving a city of just about 350,000 people, each Sunday publishes a list of support groups. And there are two full pages of them. There are literally hundreds of support groups for just about

every possible thing that you could imagine from spiritual to whatever. I think that what you're asking for and what Ian is suggesting, reflects a longing. This is how *Monos* began. I came across so many Christians who were meditators and contemplatives, and spiritual revolutionaries, and who felt themselves isolated and had no one to talk to, no one who could understand the language of the things they were struggling with. So that in some sense through our journal we aim to give them at least some sense of support. And I think that what you're asking for is something along those lines. Monastic communities are one resource that are suitable for some...it depends on the monastic community a lot but certainly there is a real need anyway for that.

HW: This support, actually, is what we all need in some form or another...

TP: Well, many thanks to everyone for their contribution...to Danny, to Kim, to Patrick. It's been a very fruitful dialogue as far as I am concerned and I am sure for many others. And I hope it will continue beyond this room. Thank you all very much.

Notes and References

1. Saccidananda is a use of three Sanskrit words, 'pure being' (sat), 'consciousness' (cit) and 'bliss' (ananda). Abhishiktananda used these terms to express the Christian experience of the Holy Trinity in terms of Advaitic experience.
2. Abhishiktananda was the Indian name adopted by Henri le Saux. After nearly 20 years in a Breton Benedictine monastery, he came to India in 1947 to live the rest of his life as a sannayasi, first with Fr Jules Monchanin at their Saccidananda Ashram at Shantivanam, Tamilnadu (where Bede Griffiths subsequently settled) and later as a hermit at Tiruvanmalai, and amid the Himalayas. See also Patrick Eastman's essay above.