

Emerging Into Light

By Rev. Master Seikai

One of my favorite songs in the bluegrass genre was written by Merle Travis, a native of Muhlenberg County, Kentucky, an area famous for its coal mines. Travis wrote a number of powerful, poignant songs about coal mining, including *Dark as a Dungeon*, which begins with the following verse:

*Come listen young fellers, so young and so fine,
And seek not your fortune in the dark, dreary mines.
It will form as a habit, and seep into your soul,
'Til the stream of your blood runs as black as the coal.*

That a young person would feel compelled to seek out their fortune is an aspect of human nature that really isn't something Buddhism addresses in particular; rather, Buddhism addresses how we go about things, what our motivations are in pursuing this or that object in life, and ultimately whether we cause harm to other beings or to ourselves in the process. In this day and age, getting a young feller to sit down and listen to the wisdom of an older man is also not something which our society, as a whole, supports. We worship youth, energy, beauty and, to a large extent, recklessness in our culture. We live in a consumer-oriented culture which puts high value on having lots of experiences, the more extreme the better.

I wouldn't recommend going to work in a coal mine, but the economic reality of living in some parts of America might dictate that coal mining is just about the only way for a young man to earn a living. Meanwhile, however, the third and fourth lines of the verse quoted above are what interest me: *It will form as a habit and seep into your soul; til the stream of your blood runs as black as the coal.* We can easily substitute the word *thoughts* in place of the word coal, and think about this song from a spiritual perspective, and consider the long term results of seeking ones fortune, not through the amassing of a pile of coal, but through the amassing of stuff.

It is a powerful metaphor. When a person's time and energy are consumed with what Buddhism refers to as "I, me, and mine", the stream of his thoughts gets darker and darker. If a person has tunnel vision in their pursuit of an objective, they will inevitably cause harm to other people who seem to stand in the way of their getting what they want. Combine an objective, which might be as simple as just earning a living, with an ideal, and you have real trouble on your hands.

After practicing meditation for a period of time, people often have the experience of seeing clearly, for the first time, the stream of their thoughts. Dark thinking is simply thought that has grasping and aversion embedded in it. We want so many things, and in order to acquire things we have to push

away other things that seem to stand in the way of getting what we want. It's a conundrum. Buddhism points out to us that the only way out is to just sit still, plunk in the middle of your grasping and aversion, and just accept what is there, in the stream of your thoughts. Thus we embark on a purification process, a process not unlike water filtration; water is passed through a membrane of some sort, which catches larger particle sizes and removes them from the stream of the water.

It takes effort and energy to do this. It is a completely different sort of effort from the normal effort of ambition to achieve things, or the effort to earn money and amass things. Merle Travis's coal mining song continues:

*There's many a man I've known in my day,
Who lived just to labor his whole life away.
Like a fiend with his dope, or a drunkard his wine,
A man will have lust for the lure of the mine.*

The song was written about 60 or 70 years ago, and now we wouldn't probably speak of "dope fiends" and "drunkards", but we have substance abuse on a level that people two generations ago probably wouldn't have imagined possible. As with the first verse, what I see here is a powerful observation: a man will labor his whole life away on account of lust for some passion or objective. The deep futility of it comes across in the song in a way that usually escapes our awareness in ordinary daily life.

People who have struggled with substance abuse know how futile that way of life is, how enslaved to a substance a human being can become. Similarly, one who meditates deeply can see how futile dark thinking is, and how enslaved to it most people are. Getting ahead, wanting everyone to act in certain ways, being better, and achieving fame or even just a pedestrian level of the amassing of stuff is the stuff of dark thinking. A man or woman will have lust for the lure of any number of external things, and spend the energy of his or her life in pursuit of them; those who awaken to this state of affairs learn to spend their energy extracting themselves from such futility, and invest time and energy in bringing the cycle to a close.

To do so is to radically change the habit energy of your life. The accumulated energy of habit, one aspect of the Law of Karma, is what creates suffering for living beings, human beings in particular. The habit energy of expending energy in pursuit of objects of desire results in frustration, which accumulates into anger—and anger is the hallmark of the human realm, the thing which gets us into the most trouble. To bring the habit energy of anger to a stop, we have to carefully investigate the stream of our own thoughts, learn to recognize our desires and ideals, and then learn to drop them. To drop them is to find liberation from suffering.

I have often spoken with people who meditate, and realize the nature of their thinking—that it is dark, has desire and anger embedded in it—but still have great difficulty in letting go of the desire, and especially the anger. In my own experience there are two things that helped me greatly with uprooting anger out of my mind. The first was to become really tired of it, and recognize that, in and of

itself, anger IS suffering. There is nothing pleasurable in it. The second was to really want to let go of it; this is the positive use of desire. To desire freedom from suffering is the beginning of the process of giving it up. Later on we might have to look carefully at even that desire, and decide that even that desire has to be let go of, but for now, just to really want to give up anger is important. Then you have motivation on your side, and the universe always responds positively to that kind of motivation. We get given hundreds of little opportunities to witness the arising of anger within ourselves and let go of it. Praying that it may be converted has always been effective in my experience.

Anger energy is just that: energy. If we can look at it in an impersonal way, that it is simply energy which we and other people have brought into existence as a result of our confused outlook on life—the ignorance of our basic wholeness and goodness, ignorance that we are full and complete and do not need anything external added to us in order to make us whole—and now, having awakened to a more enlightened view of our lives and the meaning of our existence, we can let go of the anger energy. This is like emerging from the darkness of the coal mine. It is a joyful experience, it is incredible; one can almost not imagine the foolhardiness of willingly slaving away in the coal mine of ignorance for so long.

There is one final verse to Travis's song, which goes as follows:

I hope when I die and the ages shall roll,

My body may blacken and turn into coal.

And as I look from the door of my heavenly home,

I'll pity the miner digging my bones.

I love the fact that there is compassion embedded in this outlook; that one might look down from a heaven realm and pity suffering beings. Again, it is a powerful image, and it subtly invokes the passage of an immensely long period of time—the time it would take for bones to be compressed by an overburden of earth, and heat and pressure, to turn them into coal. I am moved to tears when I hear this song, so full of poignant images as it is (Travis was also a masterful guitar picker). Meanwhile, in the here and now, we can emerge into the light of day from the coal mine of our own suffering and mistaken views. But we have to realize that it won't happen by some kind of magic: we have to want it to happen, and throw the energy of our lives into it. It definitely won't be easy.

To complete the stream of thought that has gone into this essay, I will add the chorus of *Dark as a Dungeon*, which goes as follows:

Where it's dark as a dungeon, and damp as the dew;

Where the danger is doubled, and the pleasures are few;

Where the rain never falls and the sun never shines;

Where it's dark as a dungeon, deep down in the mines.

Sing the chorus after each of the three verses, and you have the song. I don't want to paint a bleak picture. The chorus is a pretty good metaphor for a life mired in substance abuse, or some other terrible addiction. It doesn't hurt to be reminded of what that's like from time to time, for most people. The Buddha's message, however, is that there is an alternative to slavery in the coal mine of suffering, and that we have it within our capacity as human beings to extract ourselves from it. To accomplish this we have to follow people who are enlightened to the truth of life in the human realm, and really long to go where they have gone. We have to give up our own foolish ideas of how to achieve happiness, and focus instead on the real work of training ourselves, no matter what is going on either around us with others or inside our own noisy brains. That is to emerge from darkness into the light of day, the truth of the way things are.