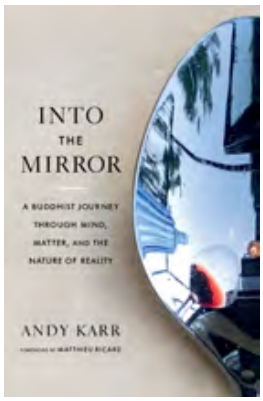

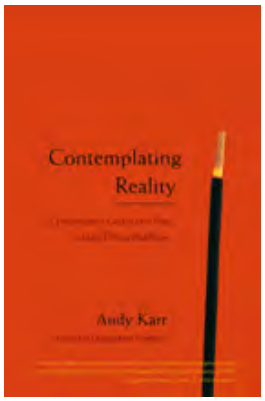

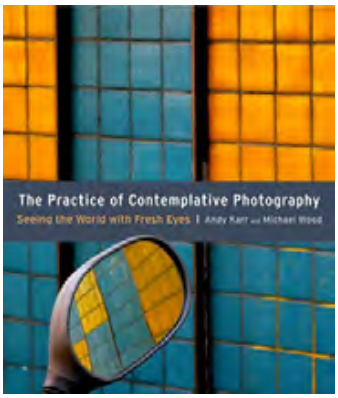

Through the Lens of Dharma: Illusion, Perception, and Clarity

By Andy Karr

Andy Karr has practiced and studied the dharma for over fifty years under the guidance of such great masters as Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche and Khenpo Tsültrim Gyamtso Rinpoche. He is the author of Into the Mirror: A Buddhist Journey through Mind, Matter, and the Nature of Reality and Contemplating Reality. He is also the coauthor of The Practice of Contemplative Photography: Seeing the World with Fresh Eyes. Benny Liow was able to interview Andy about his book Into the Mirror where he provided some very interesting and thought provoking ideas about illusion and reality.

Benny: Into the Mirror presents a powerful exploration of illusion and reality. What inspired you to write this book, and what was the central question you were trying to answer through it?

Andy: Questions of illusion are central to all the Buddhist teachings. It is delusion that keeps us circling in samsara. Ego is an illusion. A solid unchanging reality is an illusion. The Mahayana teachings offer powerful methods for overcoming delusion, but there are aspects of the modern world that are hard to address with traditional methods. In particular, the pervasive influence of materialism is something that the dharma never had to deal with before now.

I wrote Into the Mirror to confront the illusion of materialism. Over the course of the twentieth century, materialism became the dominant cultural ideology. It is so pervasive that we don't even notice that it is an ideology, not basic truth. Materialism runs directly counter to the fundamental Buddhist insight that the mind is the source of all misery and happiness. Buddhism teaches that by working with the mind, suffering can be transformed into liberation. There is no other way to find lasting freedom. Again and again, I have seen practitioners experience profound insights into selflessness and shunyata, only to fall back into "scientific" thinking about what is real. Materialistic thinking isn't scientific, even though many scientists believe it is. It's metaphysical. I felt that by addressing materialism head-on, with both contemporary western insights and traditional Mahayana teachings, I could encourage people to engage in an exploration of this very large obstacle to realization.

The Buddha often spoke about "seeing things as they really are." How do you interpret this teaching in the context of modern life, where perception is so heavily influenced by conditioning, media, and personal narratives?

Mahayanists, neuroscientists and many contemporary philosophers, all agree that our experience is constructed. It is made out of a combination of raw sense data, our cultural backgrounds and our personal memories. Reality is not something "out there" that is independent of our experience. We are usually unaware of these constructive processes, and compulsively react to whatever appears in our minds. This reactivity is a product of what we call karma.

Seeing things as they are means that we can recognize the actual nature of the phenomena that appear to us: recognize the sensory experiences; recognize the way mind projects and superimposes various feelings, opinions and narratives on these experiences; recognize the space around all this mental activity. When we do this, we're not swept away by the compulsiveness of karmic chain reactions. We have some freedom to act skillfully based on things as they really are.

In your view, what are the primary illusions or mistaken beliefs most people carry about reality — and how do these illusions impact our daily suffering or dissatisfaction?

No doubt the primary illusions that we continually experience are that "I am" a singular, independent, lasting thing, and that "my world" is a stable reality, independent of my experience of it. This duality of self and other continually produces hopes and fears, expectations and disappointments. We are continually struggling to arrange our world in ways that will bring us peace and joy, not seeing that it is this phantom struggle that produces continual dissatisfaction.

Of course we need to arrange circumstances in beneficial ways. We need to put food on the table for ourselves and those around us. At the same time, we need to see through all the rumination and emotionality that is driving us. These insights will make us much more effective in accomplishing what we set out to do, and will loosen the grip of self-centeredness that binds us.

Do we need to engage in intensive meditation practice to begin seeing through these illusions, or are there other contemplative tools or everyday practices that help loosen the grip of delusion?

Yes!

We do need to meditate. It's not so much the intensity of the meditation practice that is needed. It's persistence. It is naive to think we could, or should, imitate the great yogi Milarepa, meditating for years on end in caves in the Himalayas. He lived in eleventh-century Tibet. We live in a completely different world. We need to take practical steps in our own life-situations. If you can only practice meditation for five or ten minutes a day—do that. Do that every day. There's never going to be a day where you can't find a few minutes to rest your mind and look at its nature. That in itself will create an excellent habit of introspection.

When you have more time to practice, that's great. Practice more. If you can attend meditation programs or solitary retreats, so much the better. But the main thing is to regularly look inward at your mind. Otherwise, you will waste your life chasing after outer objects.

There are plenty of contemplative tools that you can use in daily life to enhance your practice, but the main point is to regularly take time out from constantly doing, to settle and look inward.

You often use photography as a metaphor and contemplative tool in your work. How can the act of looking — with a camera or otherwise — become a gateway to insight into the nature of mind and reality?

Years ago, I had the good fortune to encounter a man named Michael Wood who taught contemplative photography as a way of working with the mind. At the time we met, I was also studying the Buddhist psychology of perception. Contemplative photography practice helped make the Buddhist models of perception tangible and experiential. In very simple terms, both contemplative photography and Buddhist psychology point

out the way we automatically and subliminally superimpose conceptions on what we see. For example, when you are watching a movie, what you see is light reflected from a screen. What you conceive of is people, places and events. When you read an email, you see patterns of black pixels on a white screen. What you conceive of is letters, words and meanings, a vague sense of someone who sent that email, and perhaps a feeling that you need to react to what you've read.

To take good photographs you need to distinguish what you see from what you are thinking, since the camera will only make images of what can be seen. When you lose track of perception, you can't make accurate images of what you see. You end up taking snapshots.

Likewise, when situations in your life demand accuracy, such as dealing with interpersonal conflicts or important opportunities, you need to relate to what you directly perceive, not to narratives you superimpose on that.

In fact, all our life situations benefit from accurate perception.

You describe phenomena as like illusions — not non-existent, but also not as solid and real as they appear. How can we live with this understanding in a healthy, grounded way, without becoming nihilistic or disconnected?

There are two aspects to illusions: seeing what is not there and not seeing what is there. Seeing a mirage, for example, consists of seeing water where there is none. But it also involves not seeing the hot sand, or the road, that is the source of the reflection.

Mirages, and the like, are examples for the inner illusions that drive samsara. We take our thoughts, projections and emotions to be real, immutable things. We don't recognize them for what they are. Sometimes these mental phenomena can be useful maps that help us plan our journeys and arrive at our chosen destinations. Sometimes they are maps that are heavily distorted by our hopes and fears. In either case, they are maps and not the terrain. These maps are what appear in our minds.

You need to distinguish the map from the terrain. If your eyes are glued to the map, you won't be able to see the road. You won't be able to judge if the map is accurate or not. You also won't skillfully navigate the terrain. As the saying goes, "You need to get out of your head." That's a good metaphor.

Nihilism is an illusion, a really bad map. It's the belief that nothing matters. Taking that concept seriously will invariably lead to driving off the road. If you take it really seriously, it will lead to driving off a cliff.

How has your own understanding of reality evolved over the years through your study and practice of Buddhism — and what teachings or moments were most pivotal in that evolution?

This is a tough question to answer. I really don't like to talk about my experience too much. I think my previous answers give a pretty good feeling for my understanding of reality now, and I started from a very conventional understanding. What's more important than just my understanding is how much this has changed the way I live and relate to other people. I hope it has made me kinder and more skillful. You'd have to ask the people around me to find out if that is true.

As for the second part of the question, wow! There are so many teachings that have been pivotal for me. I guess I'd have to say that the key ones have been: time spent with my main teachers, Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche and Khenpo Tsültrim Gyamtso Rinpoche; time in solitary and group retreats; studying the various stages of the path; all the research that goes into writing books and teaching.
All of these have been incredibly important, but probably the most pivotal moment was something that happened many years ago. I realized that despite my intense commitment to the Buddhist path, my practice was hit and miss. I would sit at programs, or on retreat, but weeks would go by where I didn't meditate at all. Seeing this, I made the commitment to practice for at least ten minutes a day, come hell or high water, for the rest of my life. Developing the habit of getting onto the cushion every day makes working with my mind both ordinary and extraordinary. Instead of feeling it's a burden, practice has become something I look forward to.

If a reader new to Buddhism picks up Into the Mirror, what would you most hope they take away from it — not just intellectually, but experientially?

I hope that people who read Into the Mirror—both people new to Buddhism and old practitioners—come away feeling that the profound truths of Buddhism make sense to them, that they are accessible, that they can be explored and experienced personally. I hope they will see that Mahayana Buddhism is not a bunch of highfalutin theories and idealistic practices, but rather a practical path to liberation, that they could actually travel.

Often people are put off by the monumental quality of profound truth. Either they can't relate to it, or they put it on a pedestal and don't know how to engage with the living quality of the teachings. I want people to see that these teachings are at the level of the kitchen sink, that they talk about our daily experience, and how we can transform dissatisfaction into freedom.

Most of all, I hope that people come away from Into the Mirror interested in learning more and exploring further. That would be wonderful!
EH

In Tune with the Buddha's Dhamma - A Journey of Music, Mindfulness, and Mentorship

By Khoo Nee Wern

Nee Wern is a Dhamma enthusiast who takes joy in learning and practising the Buddha's teachings. He has a special love for the suttas and is often moved by how directly the Buddha's voice speaks to life as it is. He finds strength and inspiration through his association with the Buddha and the great Dhamma teachers who illuminate the path. Benny Liow, who has known Nee Wern since his university days and then at the Buddhist Gen Fellowship, interviewed him about his journey of music, mindfulness and mentorship, especially for the youths of Malaysia.

Benny: You wear many hats — a Dharma speaker, music composer, and co-founder of i.gemz. What inspired you to combine your love for music with sharing the Dharma?

Nee Wern: My journey began when I was a teenager, about 30 years ago, when I first got involved in Buddhist youth activities. Around that time, I was also happily jamming with school friends, discovering how music could express things I couldn't quite articulate.

Encountering the Buddha's teachings struck a deep chord in me — not just intellectually, but emotionally.