

Looking in the Mirror of a Thangka

by Lopön Ellen Booth Church



Sacred 1000 Taras thangka – a visual mandala of compassion, in which each Tara carries an individual intention of a donor. It is located in the Tara Temple at Tara Mandala.

“When you look at a thangka, you are looking in a mirror.”

This simple yet profound statement points to the heart of Vajrayana deity practice.

At first, when we look at a thangka, we may see it as something outside ourselves—beautiful, sacred, even mysterious. A Buddha or dakini gazes back at us from another realm, adorned with color, symbol, and form.

Yet in Vajrayana, we are invited to look more deeply.

The thangka is not just an image to admire—it is a mirror of our own mind.

Each detail reflects an awakened quality that already lives within us: compassion, clarity, wisdom, fierce presence.

Through practice, we are invited to recognize these qualities—not as distant ideals, but as our own true nature.

Deity meditation gently shifts our perception. What once appeared “out there” begins to be felt “in here.” The boundary between observer and image softens.

And in that softening, something profound can occur.

We are no longer simply looking at the thangka.

We are looking into it...
and perhaps, beginning to recognize ourselves.

May we remember, each time we gaze upon a thangka, to look not only with our eyes—but into the mirror of our own awakened mind.

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