

Banff's Pilgrimage – Inviting the Sages

Reflections from two members of the Compassionate Service Society attending the Pilgrimage Inviting the Sages in Banff on August 17, 2024.

Reflection from the first member

According to the schedule, there will be two Guan Yin Mandalas, one in Taiwan in October 2024 and another in Anaheim, California, in April 2025, led by Master Hằng Trườg and organized by the Compassionate Service Society (CSS). To achieve the same successful outcomes as in the past, in addition to skillful leadership, there are also contributions of manpower, resources, and technical plus artistic support from disciples, Buddhists, and compassionate hearts willing to lend a hand in what needs to be done before, after and during the Dharma assemblies, especially for the Mandala night.

To bring about a successful outcome, beside the necessary conditions mentioned above, there are also spiritual preparations and months of dedicated practice with the aim to transfer the merits to the Dharma assemblies. Most importantly, before the Dharma assembly, there is always a pilgrimage to the sacred site of Banff to pray to Manjushri Bodhisattva for blessings and support towards the success of the event.

According to the disciples of Venerable Master Hsuan Hua, many decades ago, the Venerable Master, along with a few senior disciples, visited the province of Alberta in Canada. Along the way, the Venerable Master seemed to have a connection with the spiritual world. He later told his disciples, “Manjushri Bodhisattva has come to Canada. ‘Castle Mountain’ is the Bodhisattva’s bodhimanda. You should make a pilgrimage to this place in the future.”

The mountain is called Castle Mountain because its shape resembles a castle, and it is situated within Banff National Park in the province of Alberta, Canada. Although referred to as a “park,” it is actually a vast area, covering 2,564 square miles (6,641 km²), with many mountain ranges connected to each other. The scenery is majestic and serene, and each mountain has its unique shape.

Venerable Master Hsuan Hua said that Castle Mountain is the bodhimanda of Manjushri Bodhisattva. This bodhimanda is not something our ordinary eyes can see. Master Hằng Trườg and members of the Compassionate Service Society

(CSS) have previously come here as pilgrims and practiced the “three steps, one bow” many times.

On the morning of August 17, 2024, a group of 10 CSS members from the United States, along with 4 local members from Canada, met at the foot of Castle Mountain to prepare for the hike up the mountain to the sacred site of Manjushri Bodhisattva, where they would pay homage and pray for the Bodhisattva to bless the upcoming Dharma assemblies.

It was truly moving and heartwarming during this trip to Banff. The entire group of 14 people was very harmonious, cheerful, and supportive of one another. The most precious thing was that everyone opened their hearts to share life and spiritual experiences with complete sincerity, making this year’s pilgrimage to Banff both joyful and exciting. Because of this, the obstacles along the journey were resolved effortlessly. The spiritual friendship deepened in understanding and unity, and any physical and mental worries were healed and released.



CSS members get ready to pay homage to Manjushri Bodhisattva.



The CSS group from the US after the ceremony





US CSS group picture taken before leaving the sacred site and hike down the mountain

After the ceremony, the group took a photo at the sacred site. On behalf of our Master and all the members of the Compassionate Service Society (CSS), we arrived at the sacred site with reverence, offering our sincerity and fulfilling the spiritual mission entrusted to us. Afterward, our group descended the mountain and left the National Park on the same day.

With deep reverence, we express our gratitude to Manjushri Bodhisattva and the assembly of Bodhisattvas for blessing us and allowing us to successfully accomplish the sacred mission entrusted to us. We respectfully express our gratitude to our Master for giving us the opportunity to go on this pilgrimage and for continually blessing us so that we could complete this mission.

We are extremely grateful and appreciative of the compassion and kindness of Brother Long and Sister Phụng. They have continuously embodied the Bodhisattva's virtues, quietly supporting the annual pilgrimages to Banff, ensuring that everything, from meals to accommodations and airport transportation, are well taken care of.

Finally, we would like to express our thanks and appreciation to all the brothers and sisters who participated in the pilgrimage, for bringing each other vitality, joy, and healing during this year's pilgrimage.



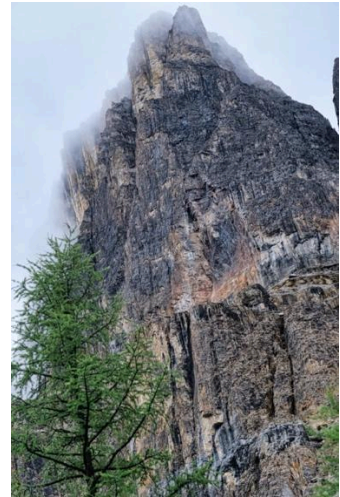
Reflection from the second member

We arrived in Calgary on August 16. The next morning, on the 17th, we woke up early to visit the sacred site, the Bodhimanda of Manjushri Bodhisattva:

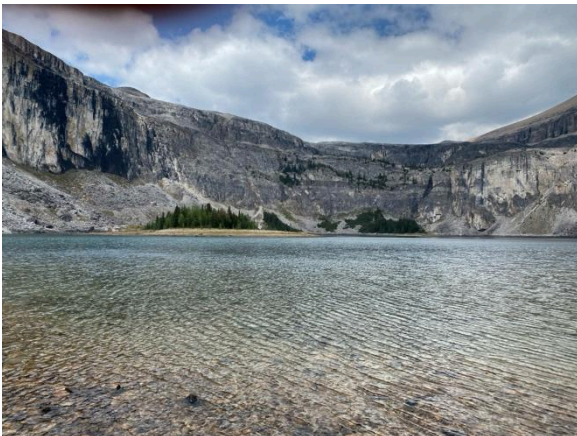
- At 5:30 a.m., we were already at the foot of the mountain, preparing everything necessary to begin the pilgrimage. After reciting the Great Compassion Mantra, we offered our sincere prayers, asking the Buddhas, Bodhisattvas, and Manjushri Bodhisattva to bless us for a successful Inviting the Sage journey. The location for the ceremony was Rockbound Lake, situated over 3,000 feet above sea level. The hiking trail from the base of the mountain to this lake is known to be over 5 miles long and quite challenging, but we remained steadfast.
- At 6:00 a.m., we began our journey. Strangely, in the middle of the hot August summer morning, a drizzle suddenly started. It did not last long. The gentle raindrops felt like they were washing away the dust from our bodies, as if cleansing the worries and mundane troubles from our minds. In the extraordinary silence, even though it was still dark and we couldn't clearly see the path nor the surroundings, walking on this unfamiliar trail in the dim light, I wondered what was driving me and my fellow travelers to keep moving forward?
Knowing it would take about 5 to 6 hours to reach the site for the ceremony and having heard that the path was difficult, with many long slopes and stretches filled with small tree roots and rocks, none of us in the group felt discouraged by the challenges. It was our faith in the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas, and our sincere desire to contribute to the success of the Dharma assembly, that gave strength to our feet as we boldly pressed on. The concern about the long journey turned into joy for the noble mission that we were determined to accomplish.
- From 7:00 to 8:00 a.m., the morning sunlight allowed us to see clearer the path. This section of the journey was full of slopes—sometimes winding, sometimes straight, with occasional forks in the road that would eventually merge back into one. We walked slowly and carefully, mindful in each step to avoid stumbling or slipping. As the day grew brighter, the surroundings became more visible, and the path continued upward, cutting through dense pine forests. Countless pine trees of varying sizes grew close together, shorter trees beside taller ones, intertwining to form a vast, deep green forest stretching for miles.

- From 9:00 to 10:00 a.m., this part of the journey included a few streams and small bridges. Some streams were very small, gently flowing across the path, and the soft, calm sound of the water washed away my worldly worries. Other streams flowed along the edge of the mountain, with a strong, rushing current, reminding me to let go of the delusions of the mundane mind. In this moment, surrounded by the stillness of the mountains and the serenity of the forest, listening to the sound of the flowing streams, I felt an extraordinary sense of tranquility.
- From 10:00 to 11:30 a.m., the path leading us closer to the prayer site was truly strange and mystical. The majestic rocky mountain ranges and the vast, overlapping pine forests created the scenery of a mysterious, otherworldly realm.

The color of the rocks here is ancient and sacred, unlike any other mountains I've seen. I saw sheer cliffs, straight and breathtaking in a mysterious way, yet majestic, like symbols of a heavenly wonder on Earth. In addition, clouds hovered over the mountainsides, creating a dynamic pull that seemed capable of lifting the veil of worldly illusion and allowing mortal eyes to glimpse a celestial realm. I felt as though I was being lifted out of my small, troubled self, sharing in the mystical and lofty purity of the sacred place.



After more than five hours of hiking, we arrived at Rockbound Lake, the designated location for the ceremony. This place is a flat, open area with a clear lake in the middle. The rocky cliffs served as a backdrop to the natural scenery, with boulders of various shapes and sizes resting silently at the foot of the mountains. The grass, trees, flowers, and even the paths around the lake all radiated a sense of solemnity and transcendence.



- From 11:30 a.m. to 12:30 p.m., with deep reverence and faith, we performed the ceremony and offered our prayers for the success of the upcoming Dharma assemblies. Although our mortal eyes could not see the physical forms of the Bodhisattvas, we all felt moments of profound tranquility, peace, and a sense of mental clarity and elevation. It was truly miraculous and wonderful! Could it be that the spiritual energy of Manjushri Bodhisattva and his assembly were present and bearing witness? The image of a towering tree on the high mountaintop, a particular boulder by the lakeside, a breeze sweeping across the surface of the lake, and a floating cloud drifting above us during our prayer ceremony—all seemed to reflect the sacredness of the moment.



- After completing the ceremony, from 12:30 to 1:00 p.m., we had a light lunch, took some commemorative photos, and explored the surroundings. By 1:00 p.m., we started our descent. Once again, it began to rain, with light drops falling just like when we had started our hike up the mountain. We happily welcomed the gentle raindrops falling on our clothes and bodies... Could this be the sweet dew helping to soothe the aches in our legs and ease the fatigue in our bodies? The path down the mountain was no less challenging, but instead of the silence and reflection we experienced on the way up, we walked side by side, sharing stories and thoughts about life and the Dharma. In the midst of laughter and conversation, we felt a sense of joy, openness, mutual understanding, and connection.
- At 6:00 p.m., everyone reached the foot of the mountain, after a five-hour hike. Our group, consisting of both younger and elderly members, was filled with joy and emotion. Regardless of age or health condition, everyone had successfully

made it to the sacred site on the mountaintop and descended without any difficulties. We got into the car to head home, feeling joyful and fulfilled, knowing we had completed the mission of this Inviting the Sages pilgrimage. It was truly an incredible experience.

We humbly and deeply express our gratitude to the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas, especially Manjushri Bodhisattva, for their blessings. They lifted each of our steps on the path up and down the mountain, ensuring our safety.

We also respectfully thank our Master for helping us believe in the incredible power of faith and sincerity.

