

On Sunday, October 4, 2020, Ancient Dragon Zen Gate held our first outdoor all-day sitting at the Harms Woods forest preserve, located just outside Chicago. Priests Eishin Nancy Easton and Gyoshin Laurel Ross co-led this event, which included seventeen participants who joined together for a day of physically-distanced zazen, services, and an extended meditative walk along a hiking trail by the Chicago River. Seven of our participants were completing their first all-day sitting with Ancient Dragon, and several had only known us as an online sangha, as they joined us after the onset of the pandemic. This sesshin provided a welcome opportunity to practice together in person, after seven months of meeting exclusively online. Eishin gave the Dharma talk, focusing on Case 4 from the Book of Serenity: “The World Honored One Points to the Ground,” and this led to a lively afternoon discussion about how we can build a sanctuary and support each other as a sangha. Gyoshin led a 90-minute, two-mile silent nature walk, and provided information about our natural setting prior to the event so that participants could understand more about the ecological and sociological history of the land. The upbeat, appreciative feeling of this sesshin was further enhanced by the beautiful, though unseasonably chilly, fall weather we experienced throughout the day.

Our sesshin took place in an open-air, roofed picnic pavilion, using several key safety measures. First, the chosen pavilion was measured and mapped prior to the event, so that zabutons could be staggered in such a way that each person had a six-foot air radius, and no participants faced each other. Masks were worn during chanting, and any time participants were not seated on their cushions. Hand sanitizer and wipes were provided, and participants were responsible for bringing their own lunch, water, and snacks. Two participants were assigned the job of Fire Keeper, and they kept a hearty fire going all day using the wood we brought, which allowed everyone to warm themselves by the fire as needed. We also brought equipment to establish an internet connection so that our Zoom sangha could join us online for the regular public zazen period and Dharma talk, just as they would on a normal Sunday in our physical zendo. Everyone attending expressed appreciation for this event, and we look forward to resuming these outdoor settings in the spring!