

The SZBA was initially proposed at the last Tokubetsu sesshin in America in 1995. The thought was to form an American association in relation to the Japanese Sotoshu but autonomous. At the time of its initial formation in 1996, the SZBA consisted of Maezumi-roshi and Suzuki-roshi lineages. The founding Board members were Tenshin Reb Anderson, Chozen Bays, Tetsugen Glassman, Keido Les Kaye, Jakusho Kwong, Daido Looi, Genpo Merzel, and Sojun Mel Weitsman. Generating interest in the organization was difficult.

After a dormant period during which Sojun Mel Weitsman held the organization, a new Board was empowered in 2001 and started meeting regularly in 2002. Keido Les Kaye continued on the Board and was joined by Eido Carney, Zoketsu Norman Fischer, Misha Merrill, Myogen Stucky, and Jisho Warner. This group revised the By-laws and moved forward to publish a roster of members, create a website and hold a National Conference.

Around 50 attendees came to the first National Conference that took place in 2004, and ten lineages were represented. Some of these lineages passed through teachers who were pivotal in establishing Soto Zen in America by teaching and leading Sanghas on American soil such as Tozen Akiyama, Kobun Chino, Dainin Katagiri, Jiyu Kennett, Taizan Maezumi, and Shunryu Suzuki, and some passed through teachers who remained in Japan yet were also important in establishing Soto Zen in America in both small and large ways, including Daito Noda, Tetsumei Niho, Gudo Nishijima, and Butsugen Joshin. It was an inspiring conference, working committees were formed, and a new Board was established. The Dharma Heritage Ceremony was performed for the first time at this conference ([click here to learn about the Dharma Heritage Ceremony](#)).

In 2005, the SZBA sponsored its first training event for associate members. The ten day training focusing on morning service was taught by Dai-En Bennage and held at Mt Equity, Jihoji, in Pennsylvania.

The second National Conference was held at Mt Tremper Zen Mountain Monastery in 2006. The conference felt valuable and there was a sense of something building. A number of new working committees were formed.

In 2007, the SZBA held its first National Ango at Jikoji Zen Temple in Los Gatos, California. There were four guiding teachers for the angou, each staying for one week: Dai-en Bennage, Eko Little, Sojun Weitsman, and Jisho Warner. The power of this offering was in the opportunity for ordained priests to practice together with a group of peers. Giving associate members a chance to practice intensely with multiple teachers effectively brings together the different strengths of the SZBA membership. With the forms as a background and cultural root, the varied tapestry of Soto Zen in North America was a significant teaching in and of itself. The theme of the angou was “What is Soto Zen” and the text used throughout the month was Dogen’s Gakudoyojinshu.

Also in 2007, the first edition of the priest training document was completed, “Guidelines for the Formation of Soto Zen Priests in the West,” which had been in the making for over 3 years. The document discusses the essential characteristics and skills of trained priests and presents guidelines for their development. It is hoped that it will provide a platform for teachers and students in working out their path of priest training and will complement individual training programs that are forming or already in place.

The third National Conference was held in 2008 at the San Francisco Zen Center, where about 60 full members met, and Green Gulch Farm Zen Center, where for the first time, 30 associate members gathered. The associate members joined the full members for the Saturday program. There were two keynote speakers: Kojun Gil Fronsdal and Professor Robert Scharf.

Today

The SZBA continues to develop ways to strengthen the presence of Soto Zen in America, nurture relationship to the tradition of Soto Zen and cultivate connections within and across Soto lineages represented in the West, insuring a strong and coherent presence for the ongoing offering of Soto Zen. Among other things, the SZBA sponsors and runs a biennial National Conference; maintains a database of members and ethics statements; maintains this website; and facilitates peer support, communication and sharing of resources among members.