

## Aikido master still teaching after 50 years

Sensei Phong spread martial art far – from Vietnam to Westminster  
By ERIN CARLYLE

Westminster - Sensei Dang Thong Phong lifts his arm with a graceful, fluid motion, and cradles a student's face in the bend of his elbow. Deftly, he pushes his forearm forward, sending the student – who stands a head-and-a-half taller than the teacher – to the floor with a sharp whack. The man rises quickly from the tatami, and begins to practice the aikido move that his sensei, or teacher, has just demonstrated.

The graceful dance begins again, as the students practice together under Dang's watchful gaze. Dang speaks little, correcting his students with smooth gestures rather than words.

At 5 feet tall, 73-year-old Sensei Dang Thong Phong's diminutive stature and humble demeanor belie the magnitude of his accomplishments. For 20 years, Dang has been quietly teaching aikido to students in Westminster. Forty years ago, the sensei founded the first aikido association in his native country, Vietnam. And according to the sensei, his brother, Dang Thong Tri, introduced the martial art to Vietnam ten years before that. His students will celebrate these anniversaries at a special ceremony in Westminster this weekend.

But even as he honors the past, Dang's heart strains to complete unfinished work: helping Vietnam's aikido organizations gain recognition from the world headquarters, the Zaidan Hojin Aikikai Foundation, based in Tokyo. Acknowledgement by Tokyo – the birthplace of aikido and the most prestigious aikido association in the world – would give Vietnamese practitioners international credibility. If aikido students were doctoral candidates, recognition by headquarters would be like attaining a doctorate from Harvard. Dang has traveled back to Vietnam seven times to help with this goal.

In 1967, when Vietnam was still divided, Dang traveled to Tokyo to study under Morihei Ueshiba, the founder of aikido. Ueshiba granted Dang a 3rd degree black belt, and something bigger – the mission of spreading aikido in Vietnam. Ueshiba even gave the Vietnamese aikido chapter a special name – Tenshinkai – meaning "the heart of heaven."

But when Vietnam was reunified in 1975, the communists banned all forms of martial arts. By 1986, when Dang fled to the United States, the Tokyo-based aikido group no longer recognized Vietnam as part of its association. Dang was heartbroken.



MASTERFUL: Sensei Dang Thong Phong is photographed at Westminster Aikikai where he teaches aikido.  
(photo by CHRISTINA HOUSE, FOR THE ORANGE COUNTY REGISTER)

## A life shaped byturmoil

Dang Thong Phong was born in 1935 in Thua Thien-Hue province. Because Dang's father opposed the French colonialists, the family was forced south, hiding for many years and finally settling in Saigon.

Dang, the 7th of nine children, could not attend school until 1950. Somehow, the small 15-year-old obtained a birth certificate stating that he was born in 1940 – five years after his actual birth date – and thus eligible to attend school.

"School was a privilege," Dang explained through an interpreter. Dang also studied judo and kung fu. His brother, Dang Thong Tri, left Vietnam to study in Paris. While there, he also learned aikido, and brought the art back with him when he returned to Asia in 1958.

Aikido is a non-competitive martial art derived from daito-ryu aikijujutsu, a style of jujutsu, or Japanese unarmed fighting techniques. Aikido involves using "ki," which Dang defines as an inner strength, to redirect the energy of an opponent so that no one is hurt.

"Aikido does not advocate confrontations," Dang explained. "But it does advocate being in harmony with your environment."

Dang's brother became well known in South Vietnam as a martial arts specialist. He taught aikido and judo and founded a national judo federation. In 1964, Dang's brother left Vietnam and Dang inherited his role.

He taught aikido and judo and studied taekwondo. After his trip to Japan and Ueshiba's commission, Dang's vision broadened.

Dang set up dojos, or schools, teaching his favorite martial art, aikido, to students and military personnel. During this time he also founded the Tenshinkai Aikido Federation. By 1975, Tenshinkai had 10,000 members.

But in April 1975, the communists took over. Dang had arranged, through contacts at the American Embassy, for his son and pregnant wife to fly to the U.S. The plan was for him to meet them later. But in the chaos, Dang was left behind.

Dang – and all members of the South Vietnamese army – was imprisoned by the new government. Dang was held for about 45 months, sometimes in a jail cell and sometimes working – clearing forests, building houses, picking rice.

Throughout this period, Dang could not practice aikido. In 1979, the government lifted its ban on martial arts. But Dang, once the country's leading aikido master, had no job and very little money.

"The martial arts world has taught me to be very patient," Dang said. "It has also helped me with a determined mind."

Dang tried to escape Vietnam 17 times – 15 by boat, two by land – without success. In May 1985, he succeeded, getting out in a refugee boat bound for Indonesia.

Dang landed in the U.S. in February 1986, reuniting with his family – including the 10-year-old son he'd never met.



Sensei Phong demonstrates an aikido sword technique in 1984 in Saigon. He is thrusting the sword; the other man is his student. No one is actually cut in this demonstration.

He said the time apart from his family had been presaged. At a Buddhist temple in Vietnam, a few weeks after his family had left for the United States, Dang participated in a ritual aimed at predicting the future. As part of the ritual, he picked up a slip of paper that read: "Ten years apart."



Sensei Phong is seated on right; his brother, Dang Thong Tri, is on the left. In the center is Shihan Masahilo Mikoto Nakazono, who taught aikido in Vietnam for two years, influencing Sensei Phong's training and style. This photo is from 1962.

### **A new life, and a mission from the past**

Dang moved his family to Orange County. He opened a dojo in Garden Grove in 1988. He worked days at a car buying referral service. At night, he taught aikido.

In 1991, Tokyo recognized Dang's Aikikai Dojo – which was moved to Westminster -- as part of its federation.

Though Dang has been teaching in Orange County for 20 years, he heart still turns toward Vietnam.

The Vietnamese aikido federation is still not recognized – as it was 40 years ago – by the world headquarters.

As Dang anticipates retirement, he feels the responsibility of spreading aikido throughout Vietnam, as Ueshiba commissioned him to do 40 years ago. At the same time, he hopes that the next

generation will carry on the work. In August, he'll travel to Vietnam, to help the aikido masters there re-establish the connection lost so long ago.

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On line: <http://www.ocregister.com/articles/dang-aikido-vietnam-2097868-years-martial>



**SKILLS:** Sensei Dang Thong Phong looks on as students perform exercises at Westminster Aikikai. (photo by CHRISTINA HOUSE, FOR THE ORANGE COUNTY REGISTER)



**TUMBLING:** Sensei Dang Thong Phong observes as students perform exercises during a class at his aikido school (photo by CHRISTINA HOUSE, FOR THE ORANGE COUNTY REGISTER)



WARMING UP: Sensei Phong Thong Dang, center, stretches with students during a class at Westminster Aikikai, his aikido school. (photo by CHRISTINA HOUSE, FOR THE ORANGE COUNTY REGISTER)



TEACHING: Sensei Dang Thong Phong instructs students during an adult aikido class in Westminster. (photo by CHRISTINA HOUSE, FOR THE ORANGE COUNTY REGISTER)



**PASSING ON WISDOM:** Sensei Dang Thong Phong watches as his students perform exercises during a class at Westminster Aikikai.  
(photo by CHRISTINA HOUSE, FOR THE ORANGE COUNTY REGISTER)



**STRETCHING OUT:** Children perform stretching exercises at Westminster Aikikai.  
(photo by CHRISTINA HOUSE, FOR THE ORANGE COUNTY REGISTER)



**CLASS IS IN SESSION:** Students practice aikido at Westminster Aikikai.  
(photo by CHRISTINA HOUSE, FOR THE ORANGE COUNTY REGISTER)



**WORKOUT:** Students perform aikido exercises while others watch during a class at Westminster Aikikai.  
(photo by CHRISTINA HOUSE, FOR THE ORANGE COUNTY REGISTER)



**LEARNING ENVIRONMENT:** Students follow instruction of a teacher while others wait their turn. (photo by CHRISTINA HOUSE, FOR THE ORANGE COUNTY REGISTER)



**FOLLOW THE LEADER:** Students Taylor Dinh, 8, Maggie Trinh, 8, and Hillary Le, 7, from left, follow a teacher's instruction during a class at Westminster Aikikai. (photo by CHRISTINA HOUSE, FOR THE ORANGE COUNTY REGISTER)



**PRACTICE MAKES PERFECT:** Annabelle Nguyen, 7, practices techniques during a class at Westminster Aikikai.

(photo by CHRISTINA HOUSE, FOR THE ORANGE COUNTY REGISTER)



**LEGENDARY:** Sensei Dang Thong Phong is photographed at Westminster Aikikai where he teaches aikido.

(photo by CHRISTINA HOUSE, FOR THE ORANGE COUNTY REGISTER)



Dang Thong Phong practices a form of boxing, as part of his Shaolin Kung Fu training, in Saigon in 1953



Dang Thong Phong practices Harai Goshi, a Judo technique, in Saigon in 1953.



A portrait of Dang Thong Phong taken in 1953, when he was 18.



Dang Thong Phong participates in an aikido demonstration at a graduation ceremony of Thu Duc Military Academy in 1972. The Academy, which lies in a suburb of Saigon, is Vietnam's equivalent to Westpoint



Dang Phong Thong in 1951 (kneeling with sword). Seated in white shorts is Master Vu Ba Oai; next to him on the left, wearing pants, is Dr. Nguyen Anh Tai. These men were in charge of Han Bai Duong Vietnamese Shaolin Kung Fu in Vietnam.



The first dojo that Sensei Phong opened in Garden Grove, in 1988. He closed it one month and 10 days after opening, because the landlord cancelled the lease.



Sensei Phong made his first trip back to Vietnam in 1993. He stands next to Shihan Masatake Fujita, who holds an 8th dan black belt in aikido and was general secretary of the Aikikai Hombu Dojo, world headquarters in Vietnam. The men visited Vietnam in order to help with the aikido there.



Sensei Phong performs an aikido demonstration in 1999 in Tokyo, put on by the Aikikai Hombu Dojo, the world headquarters of aikido. It was an honor to be included in the demonstration, according to Sensei Phong.