

## **Without Words**

It was 1980 in Oakland, Ca. I was serving a third term as an “uchi deshi” in the Oakland Aikido Institute. Hoa Nguyen-Newens had joined the dojo some two years before. He was young, perhaps 22, but with an impressive Aikido record of some 12 years, including 8 under Sugano sensei in Australia.

In those days in Oakland, I was aware of the “stopping Nage” practice that is still common in some Aikido schools and to my shame I practiced enthusiastically. It’s a practice in which Uke stops Nage in the middle of a technique, mostly but not exclusively when Uke is senior to Nage in rank or time served. The purpose of the stoppage is to correct serious flaws in the way Nage performs the technique (according to Uke) and, usually, verbal instructions are used. In those days I noticed Hoa did not practice this.

One day, I noticed something new (to me, I noticed it for the first time). At the end of class, Hoa, as was customary and still is in most schools I know, bowed to a beginner and invited him to some additional after-class training. As I watched, they started practicing together some technique that was taught in the class that had just ended. They practiced smoothly and silently, without stoppages or verbal noise. I thought I noticed that Hoa was paying special attention to some parts of the practice. The same parts, both as an Uke and as a Nage. I assumed those were places where he wanted to help his partner change something. He never stopped or said a word. In about 3 minutes something that seemed like a miracle to me happened. The way Hoa’s partner was practicing the technique changed dramatically. It seemed to me that he did “correct” the flaws Hoa was aiming at. I’m not sure he was aware of the change in his practice.

After that day, I amused myself often by watching Hoa’s silent ways of teaching.