FCIA MODULE TWO:

Introduction to Tai Chi Chuan

I. What is Tai Chi Chuan*:*

1. Definition
2. Brief History
3. Tai Chi as a practice for personal development, martial training, and overall health and well-being.

II. Clarifying Our Goals

Having a clear sense of what our objectives are in the practice of Tai Chi and qigong keeps us moving forward and enjoying the learning process. You may wish to check in with yourself quarterly, or so, and see where you are with your goals and consider your approach to meeting them. Likewise, it is helpful to remind yourself before you practice what your intention is moving forward. Feel free to touch base with me for any suggestions for reaching specific goals in your Tai Chi / qigong training.

III. Learning the Tai Chi Bare Hand Forms

1. The heart of traditional Yang style Tai Chi training is the 108 movement Long Form. This barehand form is derived from an earlier Chen Family form. As its name implies, the Long Form is quite long and takes a fair amount of time to learn and master. Beginning in the 1950's with the 24 Movement Form, many different short forms have been created to provide easier entry points into the study of Tai Chi and later for competition purposes.

2. Prior to learning the traditional Long Form, we will learn basic body mechanics, a series of Tai Chi walking practices (see below), and then the *Five Section Short Form*, developed by Sam Masich. This short form is beautifully designed and offers some valuable attributes for new students as well as experienced practitioners wanting a simple, enjoyable form for shorter practice sessions. We'll begin the Five Section Form in our next module and this will be our primary study as we integrate the core movements and principles of Tai Chi.

IV. Introducing Stances

There are two basic stances in Tai Chi. Through these stances we come to better understand how our bodies are designed and how they function with coordination from top to bottom. The more we master these stances (in both stillness and movement) the easier it becomes to understand the movements and functions of Tai Chi. Likewise, greater mastery of stance leads to improved balance, leg strength, coordination, and more. Basic stance training includes:

1. Horse Stance (*ma bu*) – discussion of basic postural principles bottom to top.

2. Bow Stance (*gong bu*) – discussion of basic body mechanics in front and back weighted bow stance.

3. Basic bow stance weight shifting practiced as qigong with breathing and waist turning. Later we'll explore this further in the context of the Five Phases of Stance (*wu bu*).

V. Tai Chi Chuan Walking Forms

Tai Chi walking forms are simple line drills which repeat a given theme. These little forms are a kind of qigong practice and wonderful for training balance and basic coordination in preparation for more

complicated forms that follow. In the study of Tai Chi, we begin with the simplicity of sitting – posture, breathing, relaxing, etc. From there we move to standing, a slightly more complex study. From standing, we study the bow stance, weight shifting within the bow stance, and next, the walking drills. The beauty of this progression is that at any point a long the way, we can refer back to a simpler study to help understand a more complex movement.

1. Simple forward and backward walking with arms relaxed at the sides or in a rounded holding a ball position. This practice is an extension of the prior bow stance weight shifting practice (above).
2. Part the Horses Mane walking practice
3. Brush Knee walking practice
4. Repulse Like Monkey backwards walking
5. Cloud Hands side step walking practice
6. Fair Maiden Works the Shuttles corner walking practice (advancing)
7. Deflect Downward, Parry, and Punch walking practice (later introduce angles and backward versions)
8. Grasp Sparrow's Tail walking practice

VI. Good Tai Chi vs. Bad Tai Chi

Many years ago, a friend of mine wrote an article entitled *On Practicing Wrong*. It was a wonderful little piece discussing a concern that often comes up, especially with newer students, around self consciousness and the fear of doing "bad" Tai Chi. In brief, his position was that there was no such thing as bad Tai Chi (unless it was "no Tai Chi") because even errors in practice lead to progress if we are attentive and continually work to improve ourselves. Indeed, we actually require "mistakes" in the learning progress as points of contrast. Every movement becomes a stepping stone to greater mastery of the art form and, more importantly, of ourselves. And, of course, there really is no ceiling on how refined our movement, on all levels, may become.

To all this I would add that perhaps the only "bad Tai Chi" is movement that hurts. If we are practicing and notice pain, particularly joint pain, this is a call to adjust how we are moving. Nearly always, there is a structural adjustment that can be made and mastered that will make practice comfortable and satisfying. With greater mastery, we feel ever better during our practice and its benefits become even more profound. If you experience pain in any way, analyze your structure, the movement transitions, areas of held tension, stance width and length, and see what can change for your benefit. Also, feel free to bring up any such questions during or after class. There's always a way…

Recommended Reading

1. *Embrace Tiger, Return to Mountain* by Chungliang, Al Huang
2. *The Harvard Medical School Guide to Tai Chi*, Peter Wayne, PhD.
3. *The Big Book of Tai Chi*, B.K. Frantzis