

Women's Wisdom in Soft Martial Arts

Philosophy and Teaching: Raising the Benchmark

Dr. Adina Riposan-Taylor

Satya Sattva, <http://www.satyasattva.com/>
<http://www.satyasattva.com/adinas-articles/>

August 1st, 2026

Introduction

Tai Chi and Qigong are centuries-old practices of the body and mind, originated as forms of ancient Martial Arts in China. Although, as physical exercise, they generally involve sequences of slow gentle movements, specific walking patterns, and standing postures (being also called the Soft Martial Arts), there is also an array of forms of more vigorous exercise, such as dynamic revitalizing Qigong forms and Tai Chi forms of combat or self-defence. All forms of practice, however, always involve mental focus and controlled breathing, coordinating the breath with the movement pattern in a sort of 'meditation in motion', and therefore, over the years, they have become more oriented towards health and wellbeing. While the gentle practice of Tai Chi and Qigong (TCQ) doesn't leave you breathless, the key components of fitness are nevertheless addressed, including flexibility, balance, muscle strength, and some degree of aerobic conditioning— making them suited to be well considered in the category of sports.

It is noteworthy to mention that teaching Tai Chi and Qigong requires both physical discipline and mind discipline, TCQ being at the intersection of philosophy, wellness, and competitive sports. Furthermore, a woman's wisdom in integrating and teaching such disciplines is often overlooked, in all its aspects of intelligence, empathy, motivation, dedication, and commitment— which are nevertheless in line with a woman's specific inherent challenges and achievements in her daily life. More awareness needs to be raised regarding women's capabilities in promoting the TCQ practices in our contemporary society, as well as women's Taoist wisdom from a historical perspective.

Let's take a look into the past, for a moment, and thoroughly observe the female heritage of excellence and dedication in preserving these priceless teachings. As presented by Thomas Cleary's celebrated book and historical translation *"Immortal Sisters. Secret Teachings of Taoist Women"*, the life stories of some distinguished female Taoist adepts from the 3rd-12th centuries are revered for their remarkable legacy in transmitting the teachings of the Tao — *"outstanding women of knowledge enshrined in this most ancient of scientific traditions, illustrating the inner process by which they cultivated their unusual wisdom and power."*[1] Traditionally, the Huang-Lao Teaching was the name often given to Taoism, coming from the names of Huang Di (the 'Yellow Emperor') and Lao-tzu (the 'Old Master'), two major male figures in the Taoism lore and very well known in the West. For all that, according to Cleary's historical records,

“Less well publicized is the fact that both of these men are represented in Taoist lore as having had female teachers.”[1] Furthermore, as history unfolded, women were regarded to have “a particular talent for these teachings,” able “to attain the essence of Taoism even under the rigorous conditions of patriarchal society.”[1]

In the present days, women’s wisdom in Soft Martial Arts is featured in countless occasions of exemplary teaching and practice performance, as bringing wisdom into the mind and body exercise surely and considerably requires a woman’s touch. As the Tai Chi and Qigong practices have reached into the West and have gained more and more adepts over the years, showing a growing body of knowledge and training systems being currently implemented world widely, so did the women’s talent and dedication— connecting the East and the West together and contributing to raising the benchmarks of this valuable practice and training.

Women’s Role in TCQ’s Adoption by the Western World

For the past half a century, an array of schools of Tai Chi and Qigong have become well established in the Western world, and some of them have gradually expanded— establishing multiple branches in a wide range of countries, on several continents. For example, schools of significance such as Yang’s Martial Arts Association (YMAA) [2,3], the Institute of Integral Qigong and Tai Chi (IIQTC) [4,5], and the Universal Tao [6,7] have succeeded to attract a large number of practitioners and consequently have grounded multiple teaching locations over the years, while developing valuable teacher training programs providing international certification. In the USA, although there is no national standard for the trainers’ certification, there are several recognised Tai Chi and Qigong organisations that offer professional teacher training and certification — with different levels of certification for instructors and various criteria for progression across the levels — and their professionally trained instructors carry on the TCQ traditions and training methods further. Meanwhile, the TCQ disciplines have earned appreciation and acknowledgement from major health authorities, to only mention the Harvard Medical School [8] and the National Institute of Health (NIH) in the USA [9].

Every year, a significant number of graduates of these certification programs are women who are able to extend the legacy of Soft Martial Arts into the contemporary Western world, demonstrating their capacity to perform and instruct a vast array of practices, often excelling in the complex gamut of teaching methodologies. Their motivation to pursue their teaching practice is immediate and remarkable— despite the lasting barriers many of them still encounter in the acceptance of women as teachers of these traditional or contemporary martial arts and mind-body integration practices.

More recently, an impressive initiative has made its mark on the international field of Qigong practice. The Immortal Sisters Conference [10] was born from the desire to bring together world-renowned female Qigong teachers and women of all ages and Qigong levels of experience to share their knowledge and teachings of the Tao— the Taoist physical, educational and spiritual cultivation. Every year, women practitioners and instructors who have devoted their

lives to studying, practicing, and teaching Qigong gather to perform and advocate for a rapidly expanding community of Qigong female enthusiasts. As an acknowledgement and to honour the unique female heritage of humanitarianism and spiritual mastery of the Taoist women of the past, they proudly took the name of their initiative from Thomas Cleary's *"Immortal Sisters"* iconic book.[1] Moreover, The Immortal Sisters of the Tao's (TIS) Foundation was established with a mission *"to present female teachers of Tai Chi, Qigong, and Taoist meditation and to provide financial support to women who want to further their education and training in these arts,"* supporting serious and committed women to have easier access to professional teacher certification and training programs.[11] This mission is particularly admirable considering how many interested and inspired women likely face insurmountable obstacles, and find prioritizing attendance at training programs and commitment to the required daily practice quite challenging, as it comes in addition to their already overwhelming work, financial, and family commitments.

Teaching Qigong and Tai Chi to Children and Adolescents: Challenges in Raising the Benchmark

A new priority acknowledged within the international integrative health and wellness arena is promoting Qigong and Tai Chi practices for children— with lasting positive outcomes from early childhood and across the lifespan. In the USA, a special invitation has been recently launched to experienced contributors to present their views and insights from their TCQ teaching practice to children and youth at *"The Science of Tai Chi & Qigong as Whole Person Health Conference"*, organised by Osher Center for Integrative Health at the Harvard Medical School, Boston, USA, in spring 2026.[12] It has been largely acknowledged that, in the Western world, teaching TCQ to children is still particularly challenging and it can be often unsuccessful; therefore, there is a high necessity to improve the standard or the level of quality of the teaching methods in the current societal circumstances and given the modern youth requirements, so that to progress the practice benchmarks towards well defined programs with predictable successful outcomes.

As an invited speaker and TCQ experienced trainer at the conference, the author of this paper has contributed rigorous insights from over ten years of dedicated work on the theme of *"Real Life Implementations of Qigong & Tai Chi Programs for Children, Adapted for Different Age Groups, Student Profiles and Special Needs."*[13,14] Her contributions draw upon a combination of TCQ teaching experience, long-time tutoring and mentoring of children and adolescents, as well as comprehensive knowledge and observations in multidisciplinary research.[15] The main point of Dr. Riposan-Taylor's work was that it was of crucial importance to design adapted TCQ teaching programs for circumstances when students had particular requirements, special needs, or their age required a different approach, as different methods could have different outcomes in different populations. In that regard, she has thoroughly worked on adapting a series of TCQ teaching methods, which she has tested in real-world contexts and showed positive outcomes by self-report and observational results. Particularly, the adaptations

addressed school age students of different age groups enrolled in after-school classes; neurodivergent students within the autism spectrum seen at specialized pediatric clinics; and youth living in marginalized neighborhoods and concentrated poverty in the city attending a volunteers-based youth mentoring sanctuary. For many of these children and teenagers, Qigong and Tai Chi — as not only a new type of physical activity program, but also as a contemplative discipline and mind-body integration practice — have proven effective in enabling coping mechanisms, improving mindfulness, balance, self-acceptance, decreasing stress and anxiety, and supporting children to take a self-management approach to their physical exercise, health and wellbeing. Nevertheless, getting children interested and engaged in such complex exercise routines and maintaining their focus and attention span for establishing a long term grounded practice and TCQ-based lifestyle, with lasting positive outcomes, has always been exceptionally difficult, especially in specific contexts in real-world education and community settings.

After-school programs

When teaching school age students, especially in the after-school context, at the end of a stressful and tense day at school, correct relaxation with enhancing parasympathetic activity is a very important stage in preparation for conscious contemplative physical movement and mindful sequences of movements. Often, children struggle with settling in the practice or maintaining balance during a Tai Chi and Qigong flow. This obstacle can be easily overcome by teaching them to enable inner self-regulation, to educate their awareness of the feedback and feed-forward loops in their innate internal self-regulation system, of the heart-brain connection, to increase their capacity to bring them in harmony. Additionally, the mind and emotional state of the students need to be observed by the teacher, as a prerequisite, and some level of empathy is required. If the students are in states of excitement, fear, nervousness, intense anxiety, excessive thinking (after stressful events like school exams, that increase Beta and High Beta brainwave activity in the brain), relaxation and activities that may increase Alpha brainwaves are likely to be worth introducing (e.g., Qigong meditation, calming breathing exercises, and a free-style Tai Chi walk). Oppositely, when they are in states of depression and lethargy, activities that may increase Beta frequencies should be introduced (e.g., dynamic breathing exercises, revitalizing Qigong warming-up practice, enjoyable animal frolics Qigong forms, and even progressing the practice towards dynamic health Qigong).

Programs for Neurodivergent youth

As the typical profile of Neurodivergent students is more of the fight-or-flight type (more of sympathetic activation), the lower parasympathetic activation leads to less relaxation and regulation response throughout the day, when they are faced with unpredictable stressors. Inherently, these children experience stress, anxiety, irritability, withdrawal, sensory sensitivities and dysregulation, sleep problems, fatigue, low energy, chronic pain and pain-related distress (usually related to headaches, migraines, musculoskeletal issues, gastrointestinal pain)—and, sometimes, multiple overlapping challenges. It is often the case that higher levels of social

exclusion and peer rejection also lead to chronic stress, which further lead to more isolation and withdrawal. These cumulated struggles make engagement in social activities and hobbies, including sports, more stressful. Therefore, the overall TCQ adaptive physical exercises of mind-body integration and the array of mind strategies that increase parasympathetic function (integral part of Qigong and Tai Chi), should be oriented towards improving the student's functioning in various areas of life, with sleep regulation being of particular importance; a significant focus should also be on reducing stress, anxiety and depression.

As part of the initial practice, an individual relaxation strategy that actually proves to help balance the student's nervous system, at the individual level, should be taught and made into a routine self-discipline exercise and a coping tool that can help the child reach self-regulation even in the face of unpredictable stressors, in their daily life. When a student often experiences pain such as migraines and headaches, focusing on the relaxation strategies that helped them feel more regulated in the moment has the potential to make a noticeable difference over time. Gentle slow movement sequences, in flowing, balancing motion, progressive muscle relaxation, breath awareness and control methods, and TCQ-specific mind attitudes are proven to help.

The Neurodivergent children therefore require an individualized approach to teaching. For example, in circumstances of sensory sensitivity (when the child is either hyper- or hypo-responsive to sensory inputs, such as lights or loud noises), which often contributes to an imbalance of the nervous system, sensory supports and appropriate environmental adjustments are necessary for the place and the surroundings of the practice session. As these children perceive sensory inputs as being more uncomfortable (even threatening, or harmful) than Neurotypical people may experience in the same environment, a trainer may become confused with the student's possible unresponsiveness to the instructions, or to their unexpected overreacting, or an unexplainable panic reaction. Moreover, a coordinated moving practice, that requires precise coordination of the body segments movements and breath, may be particularly difficult to a Neurodivergent student with some level of sensory integration dysfunction, who experience significant challenges processing information from all different sensory inputs—while their brain is not easily coping with integrating them and maintaining balance.

The pediatric psychologist experts' advice in teaching Neurodivergent students is to *"start low and go slow"*, then gradually increase the practice over the span of several weeks, while trying to find a *"balance between when you push and when you accommodate"* for these kids, which is a very complex process.[16] A child who is already struggling with issues such as being sensorially overwhelmed, or experiencing pain, or learning to cope with an executive dysfunction, could not be expected to excel overnight. Additionally, negative interpretations that the child couldn't do something or they were non-compliant, or not willing to participate, should be avoided. Sometimes, it is necessary to just move forward more gradually, or to find different coping approaches that could really help.[17] Teaching stress-management and distress-tolerance techniques is highly advisable, as *"stress is one of the most common triggers of many types of headaches"*, together with anxiety and sleep disorders.[16] Some students *"may be better suited to low-impact exercises"* when facing persisting long term migraines.[18] Furthermore, keeping

calm while teaching is a considerably suited advice, at all times if possible. It is tricky and challenging for the trainer, the same as for the parent, to not go into distress during the training sessions; however, maintaining patience, empathy, and mindful presence to what the child feels or may experience, in their own particular way, can be of substantial benefit to all the students.

Programs at youth mentoring ‘sanctuaries’

Within a mentorship program for homeschooled children and after-school students, the author had the opportunity to volunteer Qigong classes at a community Sanctuary established for supporting children and teenagers living in marginalized neighborhoods (considered at-risk due to life circumstances) through positive mentoring and enrichment activities, ‘safe haven’ and academic remediation; some of the children mentored at the sanctuary had reached the juvenile justice once or multiple times and were in need of recovery or rehabilitation.[19] In this particular context, the TCQ practice program Dr. Riposan-Taylor designed and adapted was mainly aimed at increasing children’s ability to inhibit unwanted memories and intrusive thoughts, the feeling of separateness and bias, as well as reducing catastrophizing tendencies, while enabling internal self-regulation, improving psychological balance and self-acceptance— necessary for establishing long-term physical, emotional, and role functioning. Several weeks of practice during the school time and further into the summer break have successfully introduced, at the Sanctuary, an array of traditional TCQ techniques of physical exercise and mind-body connection that gained their interest. Moreover, starting the daily practice with a contemplative intervention of ‘training the awareness of the heart’ — which, by bringing awareness to the sino-atrial node (the heart’s natural pacemaker), has the potential to increase parasympathetic modulation and improve the practitioners’ heart rate variability and heart-mind coherence — was a key component to the success of every practice session. This contemplative method, implemented as regular training, showed significant benefits in setting the grounds for a balanced and mindful TCQ exercise. Additionally, teaching students accessible ways to achieve their heart-mind coherence on their own, in the long term, may allow the cultivation of virtuous, prosocial qualities and behaviours, while cultivating wholesome qualities like empathy, compassion, forgiveness— essential for crossing the socio-psychological barriers to positive integration within communities, and youth flourishing.

Conclusion. Reflecting on Women’s Wisdom and Motivation

There is a relationship between wisdom and intelligence, and between motivation and intelligence, both concepts of wisdom and motivation being regarded as ‘allied constructs’ of intelligence, according to the Cambridge Handbook of Intelligence. Wisdom, on one hand, is far more than just intelligence; people manifesting wisdom become sources of guidance in finding purpose and living a good life— through comprehensive and profound knowledge and understanding of the human nature and human existence, certain personality facets “*such as openness to experience and empathy with others [...]*” and ethical facets “*such as a concern for*

a greater good that is strong enough to overrule more egoistical or self-enhancing goals”. [20] Motivation, on the other hand, is described as *“the vehicle through which intellectual skills are successfully acquired, expressed, and built upon”* [21]; from this perspective, the gradual ways in which motivation affects intelligence, favourably or unfavourably, start with setting the initial goals of acquiring and displaying certain skills, continue with tenaciously pursuing those goals (through study and training of abilities), advance to attaining intellectual performance and may actually lead to accomplishment over time.

We can see how, in teaching disciplines like Tai Chi and Qigong that require physical discipline and mind discipline alike, cultivating mind and body integration and conscious lifestyle, the concepts of intelligence, wisdom, and motivation are meaningful. The contribution of serious, mindful TCQ women practitioners has always had the potential to be significant to the accomplishment of such training goals.

On a larger scale, there are numerous historical and contemporary accounts of a woman's perspective and approach that made a difference in performing in sports and in teaching complex physical exercise, while capitalizing on values that are inherent to women's embodied realities. Ultimately, whether highlighting personal narratives and contributions of women in sports, presenting their lived experiences and featuring stories of courage and determination, succeed to make a shift, to break stereotypes, whether they lead towards raising the benchmarks, continue to impact society and influence generations, the time and history will be able to tell.

Works Cited

1. Cleary, Thomas (transl). *“Immortal Sisters. Secret Teachings of Taoist Women”*. Taoism/Women's Studies. North Atlantic Books. Berkeley, California, 1996.
2. Yang's Martial Arts Association (YMAA) (online), <https://ymaainternational.com/about/>, <https://ymaaschool.com/learn/>
3. Wing-Ming, Yang. *“The Root of Chinese Qigong - Secrets for Health, Longevity, and Enlightenment”*. YMAA Publication Center, 1997.
4. The Institute of Integral Qigong and Tai Chi (IIQTC) (online), <http://www.instituteofintegralqigongandtaichi.org/>
5. Jahnke, Roger. *“The Healer Within: Using Traditional Chinese Techniques To Release Your Body's Own Medicine, Movement, Massage, Meditation, Breathing”*. HarperSanFrancisco - A Division of HarperCollins Publishers, 1998.
6. Universal Tao (online), <https://www.mantak-chia-media.com/mantak-chia/universal-healing-tao/>, <https://www.universaltaoinstructors.com/>
7. Chia, Mantak, Juan Li. *“The Inner Structure of Tai Chi: Mastering the Classic Forms of Tai Chi Chi Kung”*. Destiny Books, 2005.

8. Wayne, Peter M., Mark L. Fuerst. *"Harvard Medical School Guide to Tai Chi"*. Shambala Publications, 2013.
9. *"Tai Chi: What You Need To Know"*. National Institute of Health (NIH) (online), 2022, <https://www.nccih.nih.gov/health/tai-chi-what-you-need-to-know>
10. Immortal Sisters Conference (online), <https://www.immortalsistersconference.com/>
11. The Immortal Sisters of the Tao's (TIS) Foundation (online), <https://www.immortalsistersconference.com/thefoundation>
12. The Science of Tai Chi & Qigong as Whole Person Health Conference, Osher Center for Integrative Health, Harvard Medical School, Boston, USA, April 29-May 1, 2026, <https://www.osherscienceoftcq.org/#>
13. Riposan-Taylor, Adina. *"Real Life Implementations of Qigong & Tai Chi Programs for Children, Adapted for Different Age Groups, Student Profiles and Special Needs"*. The Science of Tai Chi & Qigong as Whole Person Health Conference, Osher Center for Integrative Health, Harvard Medical School, Boston, USA, April 29-May 1, 2026, <https://www.osherscienceoftcq.org/agenda>
14. Riposan-Taylor, Adina. *"Real Life Implementations of Qigong & Tai Chi Programs for Children, Adapted for Different Age Groups, Student Profiles and Special Needs"*.
Adina's Articles and Publications: #Self-Development Publications. Satya Sattva Studio (online) <http://www.satyasattva.com/adinas-articles/#self-development-publications>
http://www.satyasattva.com/wp-content/uploads/2026/05/DrAdinaRiposanTaylor_Real-Life-Implementations-of-Qigong-and-TaiChi-Programs-for-Children_Presentation2026.pdf
15. Satya Sattva Studio (online), <http://www.satyasattva.com/>, <http://www.satyasattva.com/styles-and-forms/>
16. Wilson, Anna and Gloria Han, *"Why Chronic Pain is So Common Among Neurodivergent Youth"*. ADDitude ADHD Experts Webinar Series, Video & Podcast #577, September 9, 2025.
17. Cheyette, Sarah, *"Migraines and ADHD: The Overlooked Connection to Headaches"*. ADDitude Magazine, May 12, 2025.
18. Barber, M., A. Pace. *"Exercise and migraine prevention: a review of the literature."* Current Pain and Headache Reports, 24(8), 2020. 39.
19. Sanctuary on 8th Street (online), <http://sanctuaryon8th.org/history-vision-and-mission/>
20. Glück, Judith. *"Intelligence and Wisdom."* The Cambridge Handbook of Intelligence. Ed. Robert J. Sternberg. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020. 1140–1158. Print. Cambridge Handbooks in Psychology.
21. Carr, Priyanka B., and Carol S. Dweck. *"Intelligence and Motivation."* The Cambridge Handbook of Intelligence. Ed. Robert J. Sternberg. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020. 1061–1086. Print. Cambridge Handbooks in Psychology.