

Nei-yeh

Introduction

A long-overlooked text of classical times, the *Neiye* ("Inner Cultivation" or "Inner Development") is a text of some 1600 characters, written in rhymed prose, a form close to that of the *Daode jing*. It sometimes echoes that text and the *Zhuangzi*, but it lacks many of the concerns found in those works. Generally dated to 350-300 BCE, it is preserved in the *Guanzi* (ch. 49), along with two later, apparently derivative texts, *Xinshu, shang* and *xia* (ch. 36-37). The *Neiye* had extremely profound effects on Taoism and Chinese culture. It seems to have influenced (1) the form, and certain contents, of the *Daode jing*; (2) the self-cultivation beliefs and practices of many later Taoists (from the *Huainanzi* and *Taiping jing* to the 20th-century); and (3) certain fundamental concepts of traditional Chinese medicine. It may also have influenced Neo-Confucian ideals of self-cultivation, by way of Mencius' teachings on cultivating the heart/mind (*xin*) and building up *qi* (Mengzi 2A.2).

The *Neiye* seems to be the earliest extant text that explains and encourages self-cultivation through daily, practiced regulation of the forces of life. Those forces include **qi* ("life-energy" — the universal force that gives life to all things); and **jing* ("vital essence" — one's innate reservoir of *qi*). (There is no trace here of the much later Chinese concept that *jing* referred to reproductive fluids.) Like Mencius, the *Neiye* suggests that the *xin* was originally as it should be, but now needs rectification (*zheng*). The *xin* becomes agitated by excessive activity, which leads to dissipation of one's *jing*, resulting in confusion, sickness, and death. To preserve one's health and vitality, one must quieten (*jing*) one's *xin*. Then one can then attract and retain *qi*, and other vaguely interrelated forces, such as *shen* ("spirit" or "spiritual consciousness"), and *tao* (a vague term, apparently interchangeable with *shen* and *ch'i*). (Such concepts are explained more intelligibly in passages of the *Huainanzi*: see Roth 1991). In the *Neiye*, *shen* and *tao* are external realities, which one must learn to draw into oneself by purifying the body/mind/heart. Since such forces come and go, one must work daily to keep the body well-regulated (e.g., by dietary moderation and proper breathing). But, again like Mencius (and *Daode jing* 55), the *Neiye* warns against forceful efforts to control the *qi*: one cannot make it arrive or stay by an act of will, but only by purifying and realigning oneself. One's ability to achieve those ends is a matter of one's *te*, "inner power" (cognate with homonym *te*, "get/getting"). If one's *te* is sufficient, one will attract and retain *qi/shen/tao*. Here, *te* retains its general archaic sense of "a proper disposition toward the unseen forces of life," so it also carries moral overtones. (Mencius, for his part, taught building up one's *qi* by acts of "correctness," *yi*.) A person who does these things well is called a "sage" (*shengren*) — the term for the human ideal shared by the *Daode jing* and by Neo-Confucians like Zhu Xi. One finds nothing gender-specific about any of the *Neiye*'s concepts, and it is quite conceivable that women as well as men may have engaged in such practices.

To understand the place of the *Neiye*'s teachings among the currents of classical China, certain points warrant notice. First, the *Neiye* displays no interest in political matters: unlike the *Daode jing*, which offers lessons for rulers, the *Neiye* gives no such advice. The *shengren* is apparently not assumed either to have or to aspire to political authority. The text does argue that the "gentleman" (*junzi*) who has a well-governed *xin* will transform all around him (suggesting influence by a disciple of Confucius). But there is no mention of such Confucian ideals as *li* (proper ritual/social behavior) or *jen* ("benevolence"). Yet, nowhere does the *Neiye* ridicule Confucian ideals, as the *Daode jing* and *Zhuangzi* do. There is in fact little evidence that the contributors/redactors of the *Neiye* were even acquainted with the concerns of other now-wellknown classical "schools." There is no evidence of awareness of the teachings of the Mohists, the Legalists, or the *yin/yang* theorists. The *Neiye* does not share Confucius' and Mozi's belief in *Tian* ("Heaven") as an agency that had instituted the world's processes, wished certain courses to be followed, and sometimes acted in life's events. In addition, there is no trace in the *Neiye* of certain concerns of others whom we commonly class as "Taoist." For instance, there is no idealization of a simple society or a simple life (as in *Daode jing* 80 and other "Primitivist" passages of that text and *Zhuangzi*). There is also no trace of other ideas found in *Zhuangzi*: there is no critique of language (e.g., as engendering misconceptions of reality); no questioning the capacity of the human mind to comprehend reality; no attack on "conventional" views; and no argument that life is an unrelenting process of change. There is no trace of the assumption, found in both *Zhuangzi* and the *Daode jing*, that in antiquity people had lived in an ideal manner, and that later generations had somehow "lost the way." And there is no trace in the *Neiye* of several key

themes of the *Daode jing*: there is no advice for warriors, no exhortation to engage in "feminine" behaviors; no exhortation to practice *wuwei* ("non-action"); no altruistic moral teachings (e.g., that enlightened self-restraint ultimately benefits self and others alike); no concept of "the Dao" as mother, and no ruminations on "being" or "non-being." And there is no teaching that the ideal person is someone radically different from other members of society, someone with a truer knowledge of reality.

Like the *Daode jing*, the *Neiye* is devoid of proper names (personal or geographical, real or fictive), and refers to no specific events (legendary or historic). It was clearly composed to encourage the practice of a fairly specific model of bio-spiritual self-cultivation, which would bring the practitioner into accord with the full realities of life. The continuities of such practices in later Taoism (and segments of Confucianism) need more extensive study.

Text of the *Nei-yeh*

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One

1. The vital essence of all things:
2. It is this that brings them to life.
3. It generates the five grains below
4. And becomes the constellated stars above.
5. When flowing amid the heavens and the earth
6. We call it ghostly and numinous.
7. When stored within the chests of human beings,
8. We call them sages.

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Two

1. Therefore this vital energy is:
2. Bright! – as if ascending from the heavens;
3. Dark! – as if entering an abyss;
4. Vast! – as if dwelling in an ocean;
5. Lofty! – as if dwelling on a mountain peak.

6. Therefore this vital energy
7. Cannot be halted by force,
8. Yet can be secured by inner power [*Te*].
9. Cannot be summoned by speech,
10. Yet can be welcomed by awareness.
11. Reverently hold onto it and do not lose it:
12. This is called "developing inner power."
13. When inner power develops and wisdom emerges,
14. The myriad things will, to the last one, be grasped.

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Three

1. All the forms of the mind
2. Are naturally infused and filled with it [the vital essence],
3. Are naturally generated and developed [because of] it.
4. It is lost
5. Inevitably because of sorrow, happiness, joy, anger, desire, and profit-seeking.
6. If you are able to cast off sorrow, happiness, joy, anger, desire and profit-seeking,
7. Your mind will just revert to equanimity.
8. The true condition of the mind
9. Is that it finds calmness beneficial and, by it, attains repose.
10. Do not disturb it, do not disrupt it
11. And harmony will naturally develop.

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Four

1. Clear! as though right by your side.
2. Vague! as though it will not be attained.
3. Indescribable! as though beyond the limitless.
4. The test of this is not far off:
5. Daily we make use of its inner power.
6. The Way is what infuses the body,
7. Yet people are unable to fix it in place.
8. It goes forth but does not return,
9. It comes back but does not stay.
10. Silent! none can hear its sound.
11. Suddenly stopping! it abides within the mind.
12. Obscure! we do not see its form.
13. Surging forth! it arises with us.
14. We do not see its form,
15. We do not hear its sound,
16. Yet we can perceive an order to its accomplishments.
17. We call it "the Way."

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Five

1. The way has no fixed position;
2. It abides within the excellent mind.
3. When the mind is tranquil and the vital breath is regular,
4. The Way can thereby be halted.
5. That Way is not distant from us;
6. When people attain it they are sustained
7. That Way is not separated from us;
8. When people accord with it they are harmonious.
9. Therefore: Concentrated! as though you could be roped together with it.
10. Indiscernable! as though beyond all locations.
11. The true state of that Way:
12. How could it be conceived of and pronounced upon?
13. Cultivate your mind, make your thoughts tranquil,
14. And the Way can thereby be attained.

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Six

1. As for the way:
2. It is what the mouth cannot speak of,
3. The eyes cannot see,
4. And the ears cannot hear.
5. It is that with which we cultivate the mind and align the body.
6. When people lose it they die;
7. When people gain it they flourish.
8. When endeavours lose it they fail;
9. When they gain it they succeed.
10. The way never has a root or trunk,
11. It never has leaves or flowers.
12. The myriad things are generated by it;
13. The myriad things are completed by it.
14. We designate it "the Way."

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Seven

1. For the heavens, the ruling principle is to be aligned.

2. For the earth, the ruling principle is to be level.
3. For human beings the ruling principle is to be tranquil.
4. Spring, autumn, winter, and summer are the seasons of the heavens.
5. Mountains, hills, rivers, and valleys are the resources of the earth.
6. Pleasure and anger, accepting and rejecting are the devices of human beings.
7. Therefore, the sage:
8. Alters with the seasons but doesn't transform,
9. Shifts with things but doesn't change places with them.

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Eight

1. If you can be aligned and be tranquil,
2. Only then can you be stable.
3. With a stable mind at your core,
4. With the eyes and ears acute and clear,
5. And with the four limbs firm and fixed,
6. You can thereby make a lodging place for the vital essence.
7. The vital essence: it is the essence of the vital energy.
8. When the vital energy is guided, it [the vital essence] is generated,
9. But when it is generated, there is thought,
10. When there is thought, there is knowledge,
11. But when there is knowledge, then you must stop.
12. Whenever the forms of the mind have excessive knowledge,
13. You loose your vitality.

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Nine

1. Those who can transform even a single thing, call them "numinous";
2. Those who can alter even a single situation, call them "wise."
3. But to transform without expending vital energy; to alter without expending wisdom:
4. Only exemplary persons who hold fast to the One are able to do this.
5. Hold fast to the One; do not loose it,
6. And you will be able to master the myriad things.
7. Exemplary persons act upon things,
8. And are not acted upon by them,
9. Because they grasp the guiding principle of the One.

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Ten

1. With a well-ordered mind within you,
2. Well-ordered words issue forth from your mouth,
3. And well-ordered tasks are imposed on others.
4. Then all under heaven will be well-ordered.
5. "When one word is grasped,
6. All under the heavens will submit.
7. When one word is fixed,
8. All under heavens will listen."
9. It is this [word "Way"] to which the saying refers.

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Eleven

1. When your body is not aligned,
2. The inner power will not come.
3. When you are not tranquil within,
4. Your mind will not be ordered.

5. Align your body, assist the inner power,
6. Then it will gradually come on its own.

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Twelve

1. The numinous [mind]: no one knows its limit;
2. It intuitively knows the myriad things.
3. Hold it within you, do not let it waver.
4. To not disrupt your senses with external things,
5. To not disrupt your mind with your senses:
6. This is called "grasping it within you."

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Thirteen

1. There is a numinous [mind] naturally residing within;
2. One moment it goes, the next it comes,
3. And no one is able to conceive of it.
4. If you lose it you are inevitably disordered;
5. If you attain it you are inevitably well ordered.
6. Diligently clean out its lodging place
7. And its vital essence will naturally arrive.
8. Still your attempts to imagine and conceive of it.
9. Relax your efforts to reflect on and control it.
10. Be reverent and diligent
11. And its vital essence will naturally stabilize.
12. Grasp it and don't let go
13. Then the eyes and ears won't overflow
14. And the mind will have nothing else to seek.
15. When a properly aligned mind resides within you,
16. The myriad things will be seen in their proper perspective.

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Fourteen

1. The Way fills the entire world.
2. It is everywhere that people are,
3. But people are unable to understand this.
4. When you are released by this one word:
5. You reach up to the heavens above;
6. You stretch down to the earth below;
7. You pervade the nine inhabited regions.
8. What does it mean to be released by it?
9. The answer resides in the calmness of the mind.
10. When your mind is well ordered, your senses are well ordered.
11. When your mind is calm, your senses are calmed.
12. What makes them well ordered is the mind;
13. What makes them calm is the mind.
14. By means of the mind you store the mind:
15. Within the mind there is yet another mind.
16. That mind within the mind: it is an awareness that precedes words.
17. Only after there is awareness does it take shape;
18. Only after it takes shape is there a word.
19. Only after there is a word is it implemented;
20. Only after it is implemented is there order.
21. Without order, you will always be chaotic.
22. If chaotic, you die.

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Fifteen

1. For those who preserve and naturally generate vital essence
2. On the outside a calmness will flourish.
3. Stored inside, we take it to be the well spring.
4. Floodlike, it harmonizes and equalizes
5. And we take it to be the fount of the vital energy.
6. When the fount is not dried up,
7. The four limbs are firm.
8. When the spring is not drained,
9. Vital energy freely circulates through the nine apertures.
10. You can then exhaust the heavens and the earth
11. And spread over the four seas.
12. When you have no delusions within you,
13. Externally there will be no disasters.
14. Those who keep their minds unimpaired within,
15. Externally keep their bodies unimpaired,
16. Who do not encounter heavenly disasters
17. Or meet with harm at the hands of others,
18. Call them Sages.

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Sixteen

1. If people can be aligned and tranquil,
2. Their skin will be ample and smooth,
3. Their eyes and ears will be acute and clear,
4. Their muscles will be supple and their bones will be strong,
5. They will then be able to hold up the Great Circle [of the heavens]
6. And tread firmly over the Great Square [of the earth].
7. They will mirror things with great purity.
8. And they will perceive things with great clarity.
9. Reverently be aware [of the Way] and do not waver,
10. And you will daily renew your inner power,
11. Thoroughly understand all under the heavens,
12. And exhaust everything within the Four Directions.
13. To reverently bring forth the effulgence [of the Way]:
14. This is called "inward attainment."
15. If you do this but fail to return to it,
16. This will cause a wavering in your vitality.

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Seventeen

1. For all [to practice] this Way:
2. You must coil, you must contract,
3. You must uncoil, you must expand,
4. You must be firm, you must be regular [in this practice].
5. Hold fast to this excellent [practice]; do not let go of it.
6. Chase away the excessive; abandon the trivial.
7. And when you reach its ultimate limit
8. You will return to the Way and the inner power.

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Eighteen

1. When there is a mind that is unimpaired within you,
2. It cannot be hidden.
3. It will be known in your countenance,
4. And seen in your skin colour.
5. If with this good flow of vital energy you encounter others,
6. They will be kinder to you than your own brethren.

7. But if with a bad flow of vital energy you encounter others,
8. They will harm you with their weapons.
9. [This is because] the wordless pronouncement
10. Is more rapid than the drumming of thunder.
11. The perceptible form of the mind's vital energy
12. Is brighter than the sun and moon,
13. And more apparent than the concern of parents.
14. Rewards are not sufficient to encourage the good;
15. Punishments are not sufficient to discourage the bad.
16. Yet once this flow of vital energy is achieved,
17. All under heaven will submit.
18. And once the mind is made stable,
19. All under heaven will listen.

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Nineteen

1. By concentrating your vital breath as if numinous,
2. The myriad things will all be contained within you.
3. Can you concentrate? Can you unite with them?
4. Can you not resort to divining by tortoise or milfoil
5. Yet know bad and good fortune?
6. Can you stop? Can you cease?
7. Can you not seek it in others,
8. Yet attain it within yourself?
9. You think and think about it
10. And think still further about it.
11. You think, yet still cannot penetrate it.
12. While the ghostly and numinous will penetrate it,
13. It is not due to the power of the ghostly and numinous,
14. But to the utmost refinement of your essential vital breath.
15. When the four limbs are aligned
16. And the blood and vital breath are tranquil,
17. Unify your awareness, concentrate your mind,
18. Then your eyes and ears will not be overstimulated.
19. And even the far-off will seem close at hand.

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Twenty

1. Deep thinking generates knowledge.
2. Idleness and carelessness generate worry.
3. Cruelty and arrogance generate resentment.
4. Worry and grief generate illness.
5. When illness reaches a distressing degree, you die.
6. When you think about something and don't let go of it,
7. Internally you will be distressed, externally you will be weak.
8. Do not plan things out in advance
9. Or else your vitality will cede its dwelling.
10. In eating, it is best not to fill up;
11. In thinking, it is best not to overdo.
12. Limit these to the appropriate degree
13. And you will naturally reach it [vitality].

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Twenty-one

1. As for the life of all human beings:
2. The heavens bring forth their vital essence,
3. The earth brings forth their bodies.

4. These two combine to make a person.
5. When they are in harmony there is vitality;
6. When they are not in harmony there is no vitality.
7. If we examine the Way of harmonizing them,
8. Its essentials are not visible,
9. Its signs are not numerous.
10. Just let a balanced and aligned [breathing] fill your chest
11. And it will swirl and blend with your mind,
12. This confers longevity.
13. When joy and anger are not limited,
14. You should make a plan [to limit them].
15. Restrict the five sense-desires;
16. Cast away these dual misfortunes.
17. Be not joyous, be not angry,
18. Just let a balanced and aligned [breathing] fill your chest.

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Twenty-two

1. As for the vitality of all human beings:
2. It inevitably occurs because of balanced and aligned [breathing].
3. The reason for its loss
4. Is inevitably pleasure and anger, worry and anxiety.
5. Therefore, to bring your anger to a halt, there is nothing better than poetry;
6. To cast off worry there is nothing better than music;
7. To limit music there is nothing better than rites;
8. To hold onto the rites there is nothing better than reverence;
9. To hold onto reverence there is nothing better than tranquility.
10. When you are inwardly tranquil and outwardly reverent
11. You are able to return to your innate nature
12. And this nature will become greatly stable.

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Twenty-three

1. For all the Way of eating is that:
2. Overfilling yourself with food will impair your vital energy
3. And cause your body to deteriorate.
4. Overrestricting your consumption causes the bones to wither
5. And the blood to congeal.
6. The mean between overfilling and overrestricting:
7. This is called "harmonious completion."
8. It is where the vital essence lodges
9. And knowledge is generated.
10. When hunger and fullness lose their proper balance,
11. You make a plan to correct this.
12. When full, move quickly;
13. When hungry, neglect your thoughts;
14. When old, forget worry.
15. If when full you don't move quickly,
16. Vital energy will not circulate to your limbs.
17. If when hungry you don't neglect your thoughts of food,
18. When you finally eat you will not stop.
19. If when old you don't forget your worries,
20. The fount of your vital energy will rapidly drain out.

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Twenty-four

1. When you enlarge your mind and let go of it,
2. When you relax your vital breath and expand it,

3. When your body is calm and unmoving:
4. And you maintain the One and discard the myriad disturbances,
5. You will see profit and not be enticed by it,
6. You will see harm and not be frightened by it.
7. Relaxed and unwound, yet acutely sensitive,
8. In solitude you delight in your own person.
9. This is called "revolving the vital breath":
10. Your thoughts and deeds seem heavenly.

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Twenty-five

1. The vitality of all people
2. Inevitably comes from their peace of mind.
3. When anxious, you lose this guiding thread;
4. When angry, you lose this basic point.
5. When you are anxious or sad, pleased or angry,
6. The Way has no place to settle.
7. Love and desire: still them!
8. Folly and disturbance: correct them!
9. Do not push it! do not pull it!
10. Good fortune will naturally return to you,
11. And that Way will naturally come to you
12. So you can rely on and take counsel from it.
13. If you are tranquil then you will attain it;
14. If you are agitated then you will lose it.

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Twenty-six

1. That mysterious vital energy within the mind:
2. One moment it arrives, the next it departs.
3. So fine, there is nothing within it;
4. So vast, there is nothing outside it.
5. We lose it
6. Because of the harm caused by mental agitation.
7. When the mind can hold on to tranquility,
8. The Way will become naturally stabilized.
9. For people who have attained the Way
10. It permeates their pores and saturates their hair.
11. Within their chest, they remain unvanquished.
12. [Follow] this Way of restricting sense-desires
13. And the myriad things will not cause you harm.

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Introduction by [Russell Kirkland](#); translation by Harold Roth from *Original Tao* (see [Tao Books](#)).

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