

Neiye Inner Cultivation

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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-well-known 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.

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SEE ALSO: ?? Meditation, Qi, Jing, Shen

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