

# Nine Practices

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The **Nine Practices** (*jiǔxíng* 九行) are the earliest known Daoist precepts (*dàojiè* 道戒), that is, guidelines for a Daoist way of life. Derived from the *Dàodé jīng*, these nine Daoist principles are associated with the early **Tiānshī** 天師 (**Celestial Masters**) movement and probably date to around the early third century CE. They may be understood as classical and foundational Daoist commitments, principles, qualities, and values.

The Nine Practices relate to Daoist ethics, specifically *dé* and precept study and application. The character *dé* 德 (“inner power/virtue”) consists of *chì* 彳 (“step”) and *zhí* 直 (“direct”) above *xīn* 心 (“heart-mind”). The Dao manifesting as embodied human activity in the world, specifically as beneficial and transformational influence. The character *jiè* 戒 (“precept”) consists of *gē* 戈 (“spear”) and *gǒng* 井 (“joined hands”). From a Daoist perspective, precepts serve as protection, even moorings in the midst of turbulent seas. There is an “energetics of virtue,” including its talismanic power.

The Nine Practices are preserved in the *Lǎojūn jīnglǜ* 老君經律 (Scriptural Statutes of Lord Lao; DZ 786), which is probably a sixth-century Celestial Masters precept anthology. It consists of the following materials: (1) “*Dàodé zūnjīng jiè*” 道德尊經戒 (Precepts of the Venerable Scripture on the Dao and Inner Power; a.k.a. “Nine Practices”); (2) “*Dàodé zūnjīng xiǎng’ěr jiè*” 道德尊經想爾戒 (Precepts from the *Xiǎng’ěr* Commentary on the Venerable Scripture on the Dao and Inner Power; a.k.a. “27 Xiǎng’ěr Precepts”); and (3) “*Lǎojūn shuō yībǎi bāshí jiè*” 老君

說一百八十戒 (180 Precepts Revealed by Lord Lǎo; a.k.a. “180 Precepts”).

The Nine Practices are as follows:

- (1) Nonaction (*wúwéi* 無為)
- (2) Softness and weakness (*róuruò* 柔弱)
- (3) Guarding the feminine (*shǒuci* 行守)
- (4) Being nameless (*wúmíng* 無名)
- (5) Clarity and stillness (*qīngjìng* 清靜)
- (6) Being adept (*zhūshàn* 諸善)
- (7) Being desireless (*wúyù* 無欲)
- (8) Knowing how to stop and be content (*zhī zhǐzú* 知止足)
- (9) Yielding and withdrawing (*tuīràng* 推讓)

The Nine Practices derive from the anonymous fourth-second century BCE *Dàodé jīng* 道德經 (Scripture on the Dao and Inner Power). As a form of **Daoist scripture study** (*jīngxué* 經學), we may engage in contemplative reading by exploring the various appearances of the phrases. For example, Practice #6 connects to chapter 8, which contains what we refer to as the Seven Aptitudes (*qīshàn* 七善). Thus, one principle opens into seven additional dispositions.

The Nine Practices may be employed in a variety of ways. As mentioned, they may be used as a guide to reading, studying, and applying the *Dàodé jīng*. This central Daoist scripture may, in turn, be used to clarify and deepen our understanding of the Nine Practices. We also may engage them as **Daoist daily application** (*riyòng* 日用). One approach involves focusing on and applying each individual principle over a nine-day period. Another centers on situational awareness and exploration. By being attentive to the features and dynamics of a given circumstance, including the associated individuals and accompanying relationships, we may determine which principles are most relevant. This increases the likelihood of a positive outcome or resolution.

The Nine Practices, and Daoist precept study and application more generally, assist us in developing spiritual discernment and recognizing realized insight. *Stay together, learn the flowers, go light.*