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"Cultivate" means to put into practice. "Merit" means effective work. "Establish" means to set up. "Virtue" means moral excellence. Only by putting effective work into practice can one establish true virtue.

In sum: sparing no effort or hardship to seek survival and welfare for society and humankind — this is called cultivating merit, and its result is the establishment of virtue.

There are two dimensions of merit: inner and outer.

Inner merit is rectifying one's own heart and cultivating one's person, restraining the self and returning to propriety. In every word and deed, one dares not harbor even a trace of selfish desire.

Outer merit is pioneering and planting seeds, establishing vessels of salvation, sparing neither energy nor material resources, sacrificing everything, humbling oneself and deferring to others, and planning on behalf of Dao.

If inner merit is lacking, the root source remains impure. If outer merit is deficient, one's virtue and conduct cannot be complete.

Therefore the Shrimala Sutra says: "When evil is exhausted, that is called merit; when goodness is fulfilled, that is called virtue."

The Sixth Patriarch said: "Inward humility of heart is merit; outward conduct according to propriety is virtue." And: "When one's original nature establishes the myriad dharmas, that is merit; when the mind-substance is free from discriminating thought, that is virtue." And: "Not departing from one's original nature is merit; responding to circumstances without defilement is virtue." And: "Seeing one's true nature is merit; equanimity is virtue."

Equanimity means that all sentient beings in the universe return to one body, without any distinction.

The Buddhist precepts say: "Every word must be uttered with care, for speech carries merit." From this we can see that whether our words, deeds, and thoughts are deviant or upright is a matter of the utmost consequence.

The Buddhist precepts also say: "Be clear and lucid — do not let yourself fall into confusion. Guard your thoughts as you would guard a city under siege. Be wakeful and alert — do not let yourself become scattered. Guarding the heart-mind must be stricter than guarding the body." And the proverb says: "Guard your thoughts as you would guard against a plague."

From this we can see that cultivating merit and virtue depends on the advancement of outer merit, but even more on the inner merit of vigilance in solitude.

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