

A Brief Discussion on "Cultivating the Self"

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(minghui.org) In the semi-divine Chinese culture, improving one's character and morality, also called "cultivating the self," is the basis for managing a family, administering a government, and bringing peace to the entire world.

The Great Learning (Da Xue) is one of the Chinese scholarly classics. It only has about two thousand characters, yet, due to its important moral teachings, is revered as one of the four most essential books of Confucianism. *The Great Learning* was written about two thousand years ago. During the Song Dynasty (12th century), it became one of the required textbooks for all academic examinations. *The Great Learning* focuses on cultivating the self as a prerequisite to administering a government; the goal for an administrator cultivating the self was to rule the country wisely and bring peace to the world. It illustrates the relationship between improving oneself and administering a government.

The opening line of *The Great Learning* says, "What the Great Learning teaches is to illustrate illustrious virtue; to renovate the people; and to rest in the highest excellence." "To illustrate illustrious virtue" refers to promulgating the great virtues heaven bestowed upon men; "to renovate the people" means managing the people through compassion and kindness; "to rest in the highest excellence" sets the standard at the pure kind realm discussed in Confucianism.

The Great Learning further says, in order to promulgate great virtues, the country must be administered properly. To administer the country properly, one must be able to manage the family well. To manage the family well, one must cultivate oneself. From the emperor to ordinary citizens, everyone must start from cultivating the self. There is no exception.

Then how does one cultivate oneself? *The Great Learning* says, "Wishing to cultivate themselves, they first rectified their hearts. Wishing to rectify their hearts, they first sought to be sincere in their thoughts. Wishing to be sincere in their thoughts, they first extended to the utmost their knowledge. Such extension of knowledge lay in the investigation of things."

"To rectify their hearts" refers to constraining deviated emotions and desires. It is normal for human beings to feel anger, fear, happiness, and sadness. However, one should try to curb inappropriate emotions and desires.

"To be sincere in their thoughts" refers to being honest and self-disciplined, whether with others or alone, both in one's mind and actions.

"The investigation of things" and "extension of knowledge" are the foundation of the process. The "things" and "knowledge" refer to ethics and moral principles. In other words, one can only be truly sincere when he understands the moral standard; only then can he rectify his heart, and begin to cultivate himself.

"Cultivating themselves" is the goal of investigating things, extending knowledge, being sincere, and rectifying the heart. Only when one's character is perfected, which is the highest standard in *The Great Learning*, is a person able to manage their family, rule the country, and bring peace to the world.

What does cultivation of oneself include? In conversations with Count Lu Ai, Confucius listed fifteen points.

1. Calmness and patience.
2. Modesty and vigilance.
3. Respect and courtesy.
4. Loyalty and trust.
5. Faithfulness. "To not forget justice in the face of personal interest."
6. Uprightness and steadfastness. "Can be approached but not forced; can be killed but not humiliated."
7. Willingness to sacrificing one's life for justice. "Life with kindness and integrity despite a violent regime."
8. Appropriateness in clothes and behavior.
9. Speaking for the underprivileged.
10. Broad knowledge and trustworthy actions; sacrifice self-interests and cooperate well with others.
11. Seeking and promoting talents.
12. Treating friends with politeness.
13. Keeping a high moral standard.
14. Truthfulness with oneself and not changing opinions based on what the authorities says.
15. Valuing the virtue of one's friends. "Stay together because they have the same moral goals."
16. Treating everything with kindness.

Mencius summarized the character of a moral person as, "unable to be lewd or corrupted by money or power, not swayed because of poverty and harsh conditions, and not bent by power or force."

Besides having kindness, cultivating the self also includes doing things with appropriateness. Confucius taught his students, "Don't look, listen, speak, or take action unless it is appropriate." He required his students to act appropriately and courteously. The sincerity, trustworthiness, diligence, frugality, self-discipline, and kindness of ancient Chinese people were all closely related to their education in appropriateness and courteousness.