

CULTIVATION IS CREATION

Chapter 5: Economics of Cultivation

Here's the thing they don't tell you about cultivation in all those ancient texts and flowery manuals: it's expensive. Really expensive. Sure, you can technically cultivate with nothing but your own spiritual energy and determination, but that's like trying to build a house with just your bare hands. Theoretically possible, practically stupid.

"Attention, Outer Disciples!" Senior Sister Liu's voice cut through the morning mist. "Today we will discuss the sect's contribution point system and resource allocation procedures."

Finally. After two weeks of basic training, we were getting to what Wei Lin called "the real foundation of cultivation."

System Update:

Resource Management Interface unlocked

New features available:

- *Resource tracking*
- *Efficiency calculations*
- *Exchange rate optimization*

Azure materialized in my inner world, now a cozy 3.5 cubic meters of space with basic energy circulation paths. "This should help you keep track of everything, Master!"

"Today you begin earning your keep," Senior Sister Liu continued. "Every outer disciple is expected to contribute to the sect while pursuing their cultivation. Tasks range from herb gathering and formation maintenance to assisting with sect security and running errands for inner disciples."

She gestured, and several disciples began distributing jade tablets similar to our identification tokens.

"These will track your contribution points. Think carefully about how you earn and spend them. They are the lifeblood of your cultivation journey."

New Interface: Contribution Point Management

Current Balance: 0

Available Tasks:

- *Herb Gathering (1-5 points per hour depending on rarity)*
- *Formation Maintenance (3 points per hour)*
- *Messenger Duties (2 points per task)*
- *Combat Practice Assistant (5 points per session)*

I examined my tablet as Senior Sister Liu explained the various ways to earn and spend points. The system's interface was helpfully organizing everything into neat categories with efficiency ratings.

"The most basic spiritual resources available to outer disciples are priced as follows," Senior Sister Liu continued. "Spirit Stones: 10 points each. Basic cultivation pills: 30 points. Spiritual herbs: varying prices based on grade and rarity. Access to special training areas: 20 points per hour."

Resource Analysis: Recommended initial focus:

- *Spirit Stones (essential for inner world development)*
- *Basic Energy Condensation Pills (optimize cultivation speed)*
- *Estimated points needed for optimal monthly progress: 500*

"That's... a lot of points," I thought to Azure.

"Indeed, Master. Most outer disciples struggle to earn 200-300 points per month while maintaining their cultivation schedule."

Wonderful. Because I didn't have enough to worry about already.

"Additionally," Senior Sister Liu said, "you may now purchase sect manuals and technique scrolls appropriate for your cultivation level. Basic techniques cost 50 points. More advanced methods will become available as you progress."

Wei Lin nudged me. "My family's techniques are much more reasonable," he whispered. "Only 40 points for beginners..."

"Still focusing on basics," I muttered back automatically.

After the explanation, we were given the afternoon to explore the various task options and begin earning points. I found myself in one of the sect's herb gardens, armed with a basic guide to spiritual plants and a small gathering basket.

"That's not Purple Heart Grass," an amused voice said as I reached for what I thought was my first contribution point opportunity.

I looked up to find a girl about my age watching me with poorly concealed mirth. Her outer disciple robes were stained with dirt and plant matter, suggesting she spent a lot of time in the gardens.

"It's... not?"

"That's common heart weed. Similar appearance, completely useless for cultivation. Purple Heart Grass has a faint spiritual glow and three-pointed leaves." She pointed to a nearby plant that, indeed, had a subtle purple luminescence. "I'm Lin Mei. Herb Garden Section Two supervisor."

"Ke Yin," I introduced myself. "Complete novice at herb gathering, as you've noticed."

She laughed. "Most new disciples are. They all want to start with combat training and profound techniques, but end up here when they realize how many points they need."

Plant Analysis activated

Scanning local flora...

Identifying valuable specimens...

Thank you, System. The garden suddenly lit up with helpful indicators showing which plants were worth gathering and their approximate point values.

"Mind if I work near you?" I asked Lin Mei. "I could use the guidance, and I'm happy to share credit for anything I find."

"Smooth," she said, grinning. "But sure. Always nice to have company that doesn't spend the whole time complaining about manual labor being beneath true cultivators."

We fell into a comfortable rhythm, with Lin Mei pointing out valuable herbs and explaining their properties while I used the System's highlighting to ensure I didn't miss any. By sunset, I had earned 25 contribution points and learned more about spiritual herbology than I had in two weeks of classes.

"Not bad for a first day," Lin Mei said as we turned in our gatherings. "You have good eyes for detail."

Credit assistance from automated plant detection system

"Thanks," I said, ignoring Azure's honest commentary. "Think I could make this a regular thing?"

"Supervisor's hours are fixed - same time every afternoon. Don't be late!" She waved and headed off toward the outer disciples' dining hall.

Social Link Established: Lin Mei

Relationship Level: Friendly Acquaintance

Potential Benefits: Improved herb gathering efficiency, reliable point income

"I don't need relationship stats for everyone I meet," I thought at Azure.

"The System analyzes all potentially significant connections," he replied primly. "Social capital is an important resource in sect politics."

Speaking of resources, I had another stop to make before dinner. The sect's supply hall was a massive building near the central plaza, its shelves stocked with everything a cultivator might need - assuming they had the points to pay for it.

"One Spirit Stone," I told the stern-faced elder managing the basic supplies section, handing over my jade tablet.

He waved his hand over it, deducting 10 points, and handed me a crystal about the size of my thumb. It pulsed with pure spiritual energy.

The author's tale has been misappropriated; report any instances of this story on Amazon.

Item Acquired: Low-Grade Spirit Stone

Quality: 35/100

Energy Content: 1000 units

Recommended Use: Inner World Enhancement

"Stand there gawking all day and you'll never afford the good stuff," a familiar voice commented.

I turned to find Wei Lin examining a display of meditation incense. "Let me guess - your family sells better spirit stones at a discount?"

"Naturally! But since you're still 'focusing on the basics,' I won't bother making the offer." He selected several sticks of incense and paid for them. "Though I have to wonder how basic you're really keeping things, given what I saw in the training yard yesterday."

Ah yes, my second run-in with Zhou Ming. The inner disciple had apparently decided I made an amusing practice dummy and had taken to "randomly" showing up during outdoor training sessions. The System's combat assistance helped me avoid the worst of it, but...

"Just trying to survive," I said with a shrug. "Speaking of which, don't suppose you know any good defensive techniques? For, uh, completely unrelated reasons?"

Wei Lin's eyes lit up. "As a matter of fact..."

"That I can afford with 15 contribution points," I added quickly.

His enthusiasm deflated. "Ah. In that case, no. Though if you're interested in a payment plan..."

"Still focusing on basics!"

He threw up his hands in mock frustration. "Your funeral. Again."

Back in my room that evening, I examined my new spirit stone while reviewing the day's lessons.

"Ready to begin enhancement procedures?" Azure asked, materializing in my inner world.

The space had developed nicely over the past weeks. Basic circulation paths created patterns of flowing light, and the energy collection array hummed quietly in the center. Still, there was plenty of room for improvement.

"What are my options?"

"Expanding your inner world would be the best thing to do right now," Azure advised. "A larger inner world means more room for future developments and faster spiritual energy absorption."

Made sense. "Let's do it."

Azure guided me through the process of breaking down the spirit stone and incorporating its energy into my inner world's structure. It was like watching a magical construction project - glowing lines of force extended from the central array, pushing against the void and gradually expanding the available space.

Enhancement in ProgressSpace Expansion Foundation forming...

Current Status: 27%

Estimated completion time: 3 hours

A knock at my door interrupted the process. I opened my eyes to find Lin Mei holding a small basket.

"Thought you might want these," she said, showing me a collection of minor spiritual herbs. "Leftovers from today's gathering. Not worth many points, but good for practice if you're working on spiritual sensitivity."

"Thanks! That's really helpful." I invited her in, noting how Azure immediately began analyzing the herbs' properties.

Spiritual Herb Analysis:

- *Minor Spirit Grass (Energy content: 5 units)*
- *Dawn Lotus Leaf (Energy content: 8 units)*
- *Cloudmist Flower (Energy content: 12 units)*

"Most new disciples focus too much on spirit stones," Lin Mei said, arranging the herbs on my desk. "They ignore these lesser materials because the energy content is low. But using them helps develop better control and efficiency."

She demonstrated by holding a piece of Spirit Grass and slowly drawing out its energy, making the blade glow faintly.

New Technique Observed: Fine Energy Extraction

Efficiency Rating: 87%

Learning opportunity detected

"Could you show me that again?" I asked, genuinely interested even without the System's prompting.

We spent the next hour practicing with the herbs, Lin Mei correcting my technique while I secretly relied on the System's analysis to optimize my energy extraction. By the time she left, I had gained what seemed to be another friend.

Social Link: Lin Mei

Relationship Level: Friend

Trust Level: 42%

Note: Subject shows teaching aptitude and genuine helpfulness.

Recommended for continued interaction.

"Thanks Azure, I figured out she's nice all on my own," I thought dryly.

The little spirit appeared in my inner world, looking slightly offended. "I'm merely providing quantifiable metrics for your reference!"

"Speaking of metrics, how's that space expansion coming along?"

Enhancement Progress: 73%

Notice: Processing additional energy from herb practice has accelerated development

Revised completion estimate: 1.5 hours

I spent the remaining time studying the sect's basic cultivation manual while occasionally checking my inner world's progress. The expansion was fascinating to watch - like seeing a universe slowly unfold from a single point.

Finally, Azure announced completion. My inner world had nearly doubled in size, now measuring roughly 6 cubic meters. The additional space immediately felt more stable, the energy circulation smoother.

The next day, Senior Sister Liu faced our class with the kind of serious expression that made everyone sit up straighter. Even I stopped fidgeting with my jade tablet.

"Today," she said, her voice carrying across the meditation hall, "we begin the true foundation of your cultivation journey - forming your Seed of Creation."

I caught Wei Lin's eye across the room, and he gave me a small nod. We'd heard about this - the moment when cultivators first touch their inner world. Honestly, I was both excited and nervous.

System Notice: Inner World Creation Protocol Initiated Beginning Seed Formation...

"Close your eyes," Senior Sister Liu instructed. "Find your spiritual core. Feel the energy gathering, forming the first spark of your personal domain."

I closed my eyes and tried to focus, though my mind kept wandering to all the stories I'd heard about inner worlds. Some cultivators created vast oceans, others endless mountains. One famous elder supposedly had an entire galaxy in his.

Then I felt it.

It was like discovering a new sense. In my mind's eye, I saw a tiny point of light, barely larger than a grain of rice, pulsing with a gentle blue glow. Azure appeared beside me in this strange mental space.

"That's your Seed of Creation," he explained quietly. "It's responding to your energy."

I watched, fascinated, as small motes of light began orbiting the seed. Each circle they made seemed to make the glow stronger, more stable. It was like watching a miniature solar system being born.

"Your Inner World will reflect your path," Senior Sister Liu's voice drifted through my consciousness. "It grows with you, becomes an expression of your understanding of the universe."

As I focused on the seed, the blue light steadied into something warm and constant. It felt... right, somehow. Like finding something I didn't know I was missing.

Seed of Creation Status

State: Stabilized

Size: Minimal

Potential: Unlimited

"Nice work," Azure said, and I could hear the smile in his voice. "From this point on, everything you learn, every step you take in cultivation, will help this seed grow."

I opened my eyes to find Senior Sister Liu moving between students, checking their progress. Some looked excited, others confused, and a few seemed almost in tears - whether from joy or frustration, I couldn't tell.

Wei Lin caught my attention and raised an eyebrow in question. I gave him a thumbs up. We'd compare notes later, but right now, I just wanted to sit with this new feeling. This tiny spark that would someday become my own piece of the universe.

Though I couldn't help wondering how long it would take to grow it into something impressive. Maybe Azure had some spreadsheets for that.

Ever since discovering my Seed of Creation, my days fell into a pattern more predictable than cafeteria lunch rotations. Mornings were dedicated to cultivation - honestly just me staring at my tiny blue seed-universe and trying to coax it into doing something impressive. Azure kept insisting that watching it wouldn't make it grow faster, but hey, a guy can hope.

"Your Inner World development is progressing at expected parameters," he'd say, while I swear that seed just sat there, twinkling smugly at me.

Afternoons meant herb gathering with Lin Mei, who somehow made identifying plants actually interesting. It beat combat practice, where Senior Brother Zhou seemed to think my face made an excellent target for "training exercises."

Then Wei Lin burst into my room one evening, practically vibrating with excitement. "Dragon's Heart Pills!" he announced, like he was selling the latest gaming console. "Thirty percent boost to cultivation speed! Practically giving them away at seventy points each!"

I didn't even look up from where I was failing to expand my cosmic seed. "Still focusing on basics."

"You and your basics," he groaned, claiming my spare meditation cushion. "The monthly evaluation's coming up, and word is they're raising the standards. Inner disciples want to thin the herd."

That got my attention faster than Azure's efficiency reports ever did. "Raising them how?"

"Too many outer disciples, not enough resources." He studied his nails with fake casualness. "Of course, those with proper preparation..."

"Let me guess - your family offers evaluation preparation services?"

"Special discount this week only!"

I threw a spirit grass stem at him. Some things never change.

But the next morning, Sister Liu confirmed everything. Those who couldn't keep up would be "reassigned to support duties" - basically cultivation career suicide.

Warning: Evaluation parameters updated Current cultivation speed insufficient for new requirements

Azure's warning flashed in my mind like a bad test grade. My seed was growing at 1.3x base speed. They wanted 2x. The options were simple: more spirit stones (200+ points), better techniques (150 points), or enhanced efficiency (180 points).

"Don't suppose we could skip it?" I asked Azure hopefully.

"That would result in automatic failure," he replied cheerfully. "Though I could calculate the odds of successfully faking a training accident..."

"No, we're doing this properly."

I spent that afternoon in the gardens, checking every bush like it might be hiding the secret to instant cultivation mastery. Lin Mei noticed, because of course she did.

"Worried about the evaluation?" She helped me spot some Sky Spirit Grass I'd missed in my panic.

"That obvious?"

"You've checked that bush three times." Her smile was sympathetic.

"Everyone's worried. But panicking won't help."

"Easy for you to say. You're the herb expert."

She rolled her eyes. "Yeah, because I spent months learning these plants instead of chasing flashy techniques. Slow and steady wins the race."

Sometimes the best answers are the boring ones. "Hey Lin Mei," I said slowly, "what do you know about using herbs to enhance cultivation?"

Her eyes lit up like I'd finally asked the right question. The next few hours changed everything I thought I knew about resource management. Turns out those "useless" minor herbs, combined properly, could work almost as well as the expensive stuff.

New Cultivation Method Unlocked: Herbal Energy Integration

Efficiency Rating: 89%

Cost Reduction: 65%

Maybe my little seed didn't need premium fuel to grow after all. It just needed the right gardener.