

Dear Zhao Jia,

It was a joy to receive and read your letter. Your account of living with your uncle's family and your thoughtful consideration for your uncle and aunt really touched me. I also came from a humble background. While my mother is illiterate, my father received only an elementary education. When I was young, my parents had very little income, so we lived from hand to mouth. I still remember when things were difficult, we ate only porridge with some sugar for breakfast and rice with salt for lunch. At that time, I did not consider it a hardship; instead, I felt fortunate to have even some food to eat. In my childhood, in addition to schoolwork, I had to take care of my younger brother and help with household chores such as cooking, doing laundry, cleaning, and mending clothes. On the weekends, I had to do some odd jobs to help my parents earn a little more income. These conditions, I believe, have made me who I am today. As Confucius said, "When I was young, my family was poor; therefore, I acquired my ability in many common matters [that proved to be very useful in life]." After I grew up, I realized that poverty had benefited me in many ways. First, I am willing and able to do many things. Second, I am content with different conditions; I do not complain about poor living conditions. Third, I do not have much desire for material things. Fourth, I am considerate of people who are disadvantaged in society and feel empathetic to their suffering. Having disclosed some things about my life to you, I hope that besides working hard in your own studies, you can keep a sense of gratitude for your environment and the people around you. Let us thank adversity for forging us and thank all the people who treat us nicely as well as those who are mean to us. All things in the world, good and bad, may be seen as beneficial conditions that test and nurture us. Therefore, we should cherish all the opportunities that come to us.

In your letter, you mentioned that in the future, when you are successful, you will give back to society and help others. This is a very nice thought. However, let's take some time to contemplate the meaning of "success." Success is not equal to wealth, fame, or high social status. Leading a joyful and carefree life, having no worries or stress within you, and getting along with others may be just some examples of being successful. You might still be too young to fully understand the meaning of success, upon which, nonetheless, you can use your whole life to ponder again and again. Success, for me, is not how we should chase after it. Rather, it depends on whether we contemplate and reflect upon its various meanings carefully so as to better ourselves.

As a Buddhist nun, I am not supposed to have income. Yet, I am now studying in a graduate program, and my university provides me with a stipend. Thus, I am able to save some money to

help those in need. Helping others is something we should do depending on the opportunities given to us in life. Also, we can choose to help others now, rather than waiting until the future. At home, you can help with chores. In school, you can care about your classmates. In the street, you can pick up litter to protect the environment. In your village, when meeting people, you can greet them with smiles. These are simple, easy ways we can express our concern and gratitude towards others and to society as a whole. In addition to being down-to-earth, industrious, and grateful as you said in your letter, I believe it is also important to have a soft, compassionate heart. I would like to share with you the following tenets:

“To our elders be respectful.

To our juniors be kind.

With all humanity be harmonious.

In all endeavors be true.”

May you be happy every day!

Sincerely from the bottom of my heart

Shuman Chen

Feb. 28, 2012