

The old frontierman.

In the northern frontier of ancient China, there lived a man who was particularly skilled in raising horses. People knew of him and called him Sai Ong - meaning "Old Frontierman."

One day, for some unknown reason, one of his horse got loose and ran off into the Hu territory beyond the Great Wall. The Hu tribes were hostile toward the Chinese, so everyone assumed the horse were as good as lost.

Horses were very valuable to the people living at the frontier, so they regarded this loss as a great financial setback. They visited Sai Ong to express their sympathies, but Sai Ong's elderly father surprised them by remaining calm and unaffected. Much to their puzzlement, the old man asked: "Who says this cannot be some sort of blessing?"

Months later, the horse returned to the stable with a companion - a fine steed of the Hu breed. It was as if Sai Ong's wealth suddenly doubled. Everyone came by to marvel at the new horse and to congratulate him, but again his elderly father showed no great emotions. He said: "Who says this cannot be some sort of misfortune?"

Sai Ong's son enjoyed riding and took the new horse out for a ride. An accident occurred, causing him to fall badly and break a leg. Again sympathetic people came to console the family, and again they saw that his elderly father remained as calm as ever. Just like before, he told them: "Who says this cannot be some sort of blessing?"

One year later, the Hu people amassed and crossed the border into China. All the able-bodied young men were summoned into the army to take up arms in defense. Fierce battles ensued, resulting in heavy casualties. Among the inhabitants of the northern frontier, nine out of ten men died.

Sai Ong's son did not go into battle due to his broken leg. Because of this, he was spared that terrible fate, and his family survived the war intact.

Thus, blessings may turn out to be misfortunes, and misfortunes blessings. They change from one to the other endlessly; the workings of destiny has a truly fathomless depth.

The above is a faithful rendition of the Chinese story, taken directly from the ancient Huainanzi text. It is one of the classics that form the fabric of Chinese culture. The Chinese people know the story well, and have coined a phrase to summarize it: "Sai Ong loses horse. Who knows if it isn't a blessing?"

The phrase is especially applicable when you encounter a situation that seems completely against you. When you feel sad, frustrated, discouraged or hopeless, this phrase reminds you that things may not be as they first appear.

The sages teach that everything happens for a reason. Temporary defeats and disappointments all contain the golden kernel of a lesson custom-made for you. Just as you must lower yourself in order to jump higher, learning the lesson in a spirit of humility will give you the extra energy you need to fly over the next hurdle. And when you look at it this way... who says that the negative stuff cannot be some sort of good news in disguise?

The Tao is all about balance, so the other side of the teaching is just as valid and valuable. We can see how we need not dwell on depression and discouragement to the point where they rob us of the ability to act. The flip side of the coin is just as true. That is, when we encounter something that appears to be an advantage, we need not let ourselves get carried away with ecstatic excitement, to the point where we become blind to the seed of adversity hiding inside the advancement.

Every dark cloud has a silver lining - conversely, the silver lining frames a dark cloud. Or as chapter 58 of Tao Te Ching expresses it:

Misfortune is what fortune depends upon
Fortune is where misfortune hides beneath

Yin contains yang; yang contains yin. Every failure harbors the hidden seed of future success; every triumph contains the covert cause of future defeat. Thus, Sai Ong's father isn't mortified by bad news - but neither is he over-elated by what others consider good news.

It all comes down to the path of moderation. Without moderation, life is like a roller coaster ride. It may be thrilling at first, but the non-stop peaks and valleys soon wear you out and make it impossible for you to have peace of mind. One moment you are high on victory; the next you crash and burn.

With moderation, life gets closer to the graceful and effortless 'wu wei' ideal. You still experience joy and sorrow, but not the debilitating intensities of extreme emotions. You partake fully in both celebration and grieving, but never overdo either one to excess. Instead of non-stop peaks and valleys, life becomes a series of gentle rolling hills. The extreme ups and downs become the exceptions, not the rule.

This does not mean we become wooden or devoid of strong emotions. Nor does it mean that life becomes diluted in some way. The lesson does not teach bland acceptance of whatever life offers, nor is it an excuse to avoid taking action.

What it does mean is that we no longer cling to emotions. The practice of emotional detachment allows us to observe life much more clearly, so that when blessing turns to misfortune or vice versa, it does not take us by surprise. We are ready to react with clarity, and we recognize the transformation as part of the complex workings of the Tao - nothing more and nothing less.

Ultimately, this story teaches us that things simply happen in life. They are not good or bad - they just are. They all serve the greater purpose of providing life lessons, but if we are too quick to judge them as good or bad based on initial impression, we run the risk of losing sight of the real lessons.

So next time something "bad" happens to you and makes you feel sad and upset, remember:

Sai Ong loses horse. Who knows if it isn't a blessing?

About the Author

David Lee

Source: <http://www.tntarticles.com>