

MEMBERSHIP

THE CHINESE FARMER



About this activity

A well-known parable that illustrates the philosophy of Taoism

- ▶ **Language level:** A2/B1
- ▶ **Main task:** Writing a chain of events
- ▶ **Topics:** Parables; philosophy and life advice
- ▶ **Language focus:** Reacting to good or bad news

This activity makes use of an ancient Chinese folk tale. I suggest that you tell students the story yourself and then show them a YouTube video in which it is told by Alan Watts.

Note: For all materials and discussion, go to the corresponding page in the Resources section:

<https://membership.lessonstream.com/resources/the-chinese-farmer/>



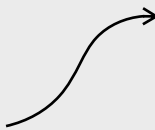
The story

The story in this lesson plan is a traditional Chinese parable about a farmer who loses his horse but refuses to accept it as a misfortune. The story illustrates the philosophy of accepting the natural flow of life without quickly labelling events as either good or bad – an idea which is central to Taoism. On Wikipedia, the story is referred to as ‘The old man lost his horse’. In other situations, it is known as ‘The story of the Chinese farmer’.

On YouTube, there is an illustrated version of the story as told by Alan Watts. It comes from an audio recording of a lecture that he gave sometime in the 1960s or 1970s. Alan Watts was an English writer renowned for popularising Zen Buddhism and Taoism for a Western audience.

Activity outline

1. In preparation for this activity, write the following word match puzzle on the board or screen:

<p>Once upon The horse ran That evening, the neighbours Trying to tame The conscription officers were They rejected</p>		<p>one of the wild horses a time his son came round away looking for people to join the army</p>
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2. When students get to class, ask them to solve the puzzle and write the six phrases in their notebooks. They can use monolingual English dictionaries for this purpose.

3. Go over the answers with students and, if necessary, clarify the meanings of any new words and phrases.

- **Once upon a time** (= a common way to start a story)
- The horse **ran away** (= it escaped)
- That evening, the neighbours **came round** (= they visited)
- Trying **to tame** one of the wild horses (= trying to control it)
- The **conscription** officers were looking for people to join the army (conscription = when you have to join the army, especially to fight in a war)
- They **rejected** his son (= they decided not to choose him)

4. Tell students that the six phrases are from a story. Put students into pairs and give them a couple of minutes to predict what happens. It is very possible that some students will already be familiar with the story. In that case, they can attempt to retell it using the six phrases.

Note: The six phrases are in the same order that they appear in the story. In the LessonStream Story Course, this is what is called a 'story pathway'.

5. Tell students the story of the Chinese farmer. You will find the story text on the next page. Read it slowly and clearly.

Note: Each time you come to one of the words or phrases **in bold** (see next page) you can point to the corresponding phrase on the board or screen.

Once upon a time there was a Chinese farmer who lost his horse – it **ran away**
 And that evening, all the neighbours **came round** and said, “that’s terrible”
 And the farmer said, “Maybe”

The next day the horse came back and brought seven wild horses with it
 And all the neighbours came round and said, “that’s great”
 And the farmer said, “Maybe”

The next day, the farmer's son was trying **to tame** one of the wild horses
 And while riding it, he fell off and broke his leg
 And all the neighbours came round in the evening and said, “that’s awful”
 And the farmer said, “Maybe”



The next day, some **conscription** officers came round looking for people to join the army
 And they **rejected** his son because of his broken leg
 And all the neighbours came round that evening and said, “that’s fantastic”
 And the farmer said, “Maybe”

6. Ask students if they have any questions about the story and offer to tell it a second time if necessary.

7. Put students into pairs and ask them to do the following:

- Take it in turn to retell the story using the story pathway (i.e. the six phrases).
- Decide what the story means and what we can learn from it, and then write down their answers.

8. Let students share their ideas, and provide language feedback when necessary.

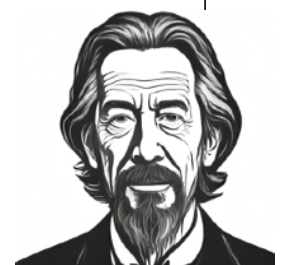
9. Show students the video of Alan Watts telling the story. At the end of the story, Watts explains the moral (i.e. what we can learn from it). Some of the language he uses may be challenging for your students, but by this stage, they should be able to get the message.

Watts’ words:

The whole process of nature is an integrated process of immense complexity
 And it is really impossible to tell whether anything that happens in it is good or bad
 Because you never know what will be the consequences of a misfortune
 Or you never know what will be the consequences of good fortune

Watts’ words paraphrased:

Life is very complex – lots of things happen
 And it is really impossible to know if something that happens is good or bad
 Because you never know what its consequences will be
 Something that seems bad can have good consequences
 And something that seems good can have bad consequences



10. On the board or screen, draw a figure and ask students to give it a name.



11. Tell students the character has recently experienced some misfortune in their life – in other words, they've had some bad luck. Ask students to suggest what happened and write their ideas on the board. Some examples:

- He had an accident and broke his leg.
- He lost his home because of a flood.
- His football team was relegated.
- He failed an important exam.
- He didn't play the lottery the week his numbers were picked.
- He lost his job.
- His partner left him.
- His car was stolen.

12. Now ask students to choose one of these situations and create a chain of bad and good consequences. The chain should start with the initial misfortune and this should give rise to good fortune, followed by another misfortune, and so on. You can give students an example to get them started and then have a competition to see which group can create the longest chain.

- His car is stolen.
- He has to start walking to work every day and he gets much fitter and loses a lot of weight.
- Unfortunately, his wife preferred him the way he was and she leaves him for another man.
- Single for the first time in years, he reconnects with himself and starts to regain his confidence.
- Unfortunately, the confidence turns into cockiness and all his friends stop inviting him out.
- By not going out, he saves a lot of money and learns to cook at home.
- But one night while cooking, he starts a fire in his kitchen, etc.

Variation

The story provides a context and opportunity to work with phrases for responding to good or bad news. Elicit and/or provide students with a repertoire of these

Later, when students read out their chain of bad and good consequences, they can do so in the first person. Listeners can then respond appropriately.

Bad news

I'm sorry for your loss.
That's absolutely awful.
I'm so sorry to hear that.

Good news

I'm so happy for you.
This is fantastic news.
That's great to hear.

Language note: There are at least two English idioms that connect to the ideas in the story:

☁️ *Every cloud has a silver lining:* The idea that in everything bad, there is a little bit of good.

😬 *A blessing in disguise:* This refers to something that happens to you which, at first seems bad, but later turns out to be good.