

Idiom by Lon Yan

自討苦吃

zi4 tao3 ku3 chi1

If you disturb someone who is enjoying a meal for no good reason, you would likely get told off. Do it to an elephant, it will lash out, literally, with its trunk, which could get you killed.

A tourist recently tried to stroke an elephant while it was having dinner, and got “swiped like a fly,” reported an UK newspaper.

The impact sent the man “flying to the ground.” Fortunately, it seemed that he was just stunned, and soon got to his feet and walked off without suffering more than a bad case of humiliation in front of other tourists. The man can be said to have “自討苦吃” (*zi4 tao3 ku3 chi1*).

“自” (*zi4*) is “self,” “討” (*tao3*) “to demand,” “to ask for,” “to incur,” “苦” (*ku3*) “bitter,”

“painful,” “pains,” “suffering,” and “吃” (*chi1*) “to eat,” “to suffer,” “to sustain.” Literally, “自討苦吃” (*zi4 tao3 ku3 chi1*) is “self ask for pain and suffering.”

The idiom means “to look for trouble,” “to ask for trouble,” “to bring pain and suffering onto oneself,” “to put one’s finger into the fire.”

When you play with fire and get burned, you are “自討苦吃” (*zi4 tao3 ku3 chi1*).

When someone does something stupid and suffers because of it, it is also “自討苦吃” (*zi4 tao3 ku3 chi1*). And if you tell him you are “自討苦吃” (*zi4 tao3 ku3 chi1*) and gotten punched in the face, you have obviously “自討苦吃” (*zi4 tao3 ku3 chi1*).

Terms containing the character “討” (*tao3*) include:

討論 (*tao3 lun4*) – to discuss

討好 (*tao3 hao3*) – to ingratiate oneself; to please; to fawn on

討厭 (*tao3 yan4*) – to loathe; to dislike; disagreeable; repugnant

討飯 (*tao3 fan4*) – a beggar; to beg for food