The basic unit of the Chinese language is the zi (字, i.e. a Chinese word. Each zi has a written form (called a character, made up of strokes), a sound (made up of consonant and vowel) and a meaning (or multiple meanings). When we speak or write Chinese, we string zi together to form terms, phrases and sentences.

In Putonghua (the spoken form of Modern Standard Chinese) each zi is pronounced in one of four tones:

1st tone: 1 = diacritical mark — pitch: 5 to 5, highest prolonged

2nd tone: 2 = diacritical mark / pitch: 3 to 5, middle to high

3rd tone: 3 = diacritical mark U pitch: 2 to 1 to 4, low to lowest to high

4th tone: 4 = diacritical mark \ pitch: 5 to 1, highest to lowest

To pronounce each zi below, follow its pinyin and the given tone number. Light-sound words, which have no definite pitch, carry no diacritical mark and are marked by 0.

This week: Words about the tastes

苦
Putonghua pronunciation: ku 3
Meanings: bitter taste, unhappiness, hardship, misery, suffering

苦 = bitter taste/feel: 苦茶 (ku cha 32 = bitter-tea = bitter herbal medicine), 苦瓜 (ku gua 31 = bitter-gourd, a common vegetable). Manual labor is 辛苦 (xin ku 13 = hot-taste-bitter-taste = hard/stressful/exhausting). Punished students 吃苦頭 (chi ku tou 132 = eat-bitter-head = get it the hard way), can only 苦笑 (ku xiao 34 = bitter-smile/laugh = smile/laugh dryly/sadly).

Nobody likes 苦惱 (ku nao 23 = frustrations/worries), 苦難 (ku nan 34 = hardship-calamities = sufferings), 痛苦 (tong ku 43 = pain-suffering = agony/pain).

Buddhists summarize life and quest as 苦 (ku 3 = pain/suffering), 集 (ji 2 = accumulated pain/suffering), 灭 (mie 4 = extinguishing pain/suffering and reincarnation), 道 (dao 4 = road/way = wisdom/method to achieve such extinction).

by Diana Yue