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 cancers

良

Putonghua pronunciation: liang2
Cantonese pronunciation: leung4
Meanings: good, benign

良 (radical 良 gen4, border/mountain) means good: 良好 (liang2 hao3 = good-congenial) environment, 純良 (chun2 liang2 = pure-good) personality. Students are graded as 優良常可劣 (you1 liang2 chang2 ke3 lie4 = very-good-good-ordinary-passable-poor). Ad says: 勿失良機 (wu4 shi1 liang2 ji1 = don't-lose/miss-good-chance!)

Moralists preach 良心 (liang2 xin1 = good-heart = 良知 liang2 zhi1 = goodness-known/understood = conscience). Old-fashioned term 良人 (liang2 ren2 = good-person) means husband. 從良 (cong2 liang2 = follow-good) describes ex-prostitute decently married.

腫瘤 (zhong3 liu2 = swollen-lump/growth/mass = tumors) can be 良性 (liang2 xing4 = good/kind-natured = benign) or 惡性 (e4 xing4 = bad/fierce-natured = malignant). Leg operation makes person 不良於行 (bu4 liang2 yu1 xing2 = not-good-at-walking = crippled).

by Diana Yue