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:

1. 1st tone: 1 = diacritical mark — pitch: 5 to 5, highest prolonged
2. 2nd tone: 2 = diacritical mark / pitch: 3 to 5, middle to high
3. 3rd tone: 3 = diacritical mark U pitch: 2 to 1 to 4, low to lowest to high
4. 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 Lent

Putonghua pronunciation: zhai1
Cantonese pronunciation: jaai1
Meaning: spiritual abstinence, fasting, abstain from meat, wine etc., vegetarian diet

齋 (radical 示 = shen2, god/spiritual) means 素 (su4, plain/vegetarian), opposite of 肴 (hun1, strong-flavoured/meat). 吃齋 (chi1 zhai1 = 吃素 chi1 su4 = eat-vegetarian) means eat 齋菜 (zhai1 cai4 = vegetarian-dishes). Religious devotes practice 齋戒沐浴 (zhai1 jie4 mu4 yu4 = fasting-abstinence-bathing-ablution).

Religious practice 守齋 (shou3 zhai1 = observe-abstinence) means 禁食 (jin4 shi2 = forbid-eat = abstinence from food, i.e. fasting). Muslims fast during 齋月 (zhai1 yue4 = fasting-month = Ramadan). Buddhists denounce killing of lives, advocate 吃長齋 (chi1 chang2 zhai1 = eat-long-vegetarian = always eat vegetarian).

Christians observe 大齋期 (da4 zhai1 qi1 = big-fasting-period = Lent), which lasts for approximately six weeks before 復活節 (fu2 huo2 jie2 = again-live-festival = Easter Day).

by Diana Yue