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 senile dementia

忘 Putonghua pronunciation: wang4
Cantonese pronunciation: mong4
Meaning: forget, oblivious, give up

忘 (亡 wang2, die + 心 xin1, heart) means 忘記 (wang4 jī2 = forget-to-remember = forget), 忘掉 (wang4 dāo0 = forget—ed = forgotten). 過目不忘 (guó4 mu4 bu4 wang4 = pass-eyes-no-forget) describes people with photographic memory. 忘恩負義 (wang4 en1 fu4 yi4 = forget-favors-betray-kindness) describes ungrateful people.

Public servant 公爾忘私 (gōng1 ěr3 wang4 si1 = public/office-and-forget-private = puts duties before private life). Lottery-winner 忘形 (wang4 xīng2 = forgets-appearances = forgets all manners), yells like crazy.

Ex-husband cannot 忘懷 (wang4 huái2 = forget-heart/feelings for) ex-wife, Pianist 忘我 (wang4 wǒ3 = forget-self = is completely absorbed), plays non-stop. Patients having 失憶症 (shī1 yī1 zhēng4 = lose-memory-illness = dementia) 忘卻 (wang4 quē4 = forget-reject) everything.