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 diet abstinence

Putonghua pronunciation: jie4
Cantonese pronunciation: gaai3
Meanings: guard/caution against, abstain from, rule of forbiddance


戒律 (jie4 lü4 = abstain/forbid-rule = rules/commandments) teach 戒驕 (jie4 jiao1 = abstain-pride = overcome haughtiness), 戒嗔 (jie4 chen1 = suppress-anger). 色戒 (se1 jie4 = color-abstinence) forbids sex/lust. 大開殺戒 (da4 kai1 sha1 jie4 = big-open/release-kill-rule) = go on a killing spree.

by Diana Yue