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 natural harmony

合 (合 ji2, enclosed triangle + 口 kou3, mouth) = 吻合 (wen3 he2 = muzzle/mouth-close/fit = match/fit), 適合 (shi1 he2 = suit-fit). Wounds 痊合 (yū he2 = heals-closes/mends). Partners 合作 (he2 zuo2 = together-work = collaborate). Lovers 結合 (jie2 he2 = tie-knot-join = marry).

合情 (he2 qing2 = fit-feeling) = emotionally-understandable/approvable. 合理 (he2 li3 = fit-reason) = justifiable/reasonable. 合法 (he2 fa3 = fit-law) = legitimate/lawful.

Daoist meditates, 合眼 (he2 yan3 = closes-eyes), 合掌 (he2 zhang3 = presses-palms-together), spirit 與天地冥合 (yū3 tian1 di1 ming3 he2 = with-heaven-and-earth-mystically-unite = achieves mystical unity with universe/nature). Chinese philosophers seek 天人合一 (tian1 ren2 he2 yi1 = heaven-human-unite-one = to make heart/mind blend with universe/nature).

by Diana Yue