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

Putonghua pronunciation: yīl, yào1
Cantonese pronunciation: yat1
Meaning: one, first, single, all, everything, united, equal, absolute

一, one stroke, means one/single/all: 一人 (yīl rén2 = a/person), 第一 (dì4 yīl = number-one = first). Scholar 無一不知 (wù2 yīl bu4 zhī1 = not-one-not-know = knows everything). This column teaches 一日一字 (yīl rì4 yīl zi4 = one-day-one-word = a word a day).

Bride-and-groom vow 一生專一 (yīl shēng1 zhuan1 yīl = whole-life-concentrated-on-one = lifelong fidelity). In meditation, heart/mind and universe/nature 合而為一 (hé2 er2 wèi2 yīl = blend-and-become-one). Christians worship 唯一 (wéi2 yīl = the only-one) God.

Buddhists say: 一花一世界, 一葉一如來 (yīl huā1 yīl shì1 jíè4, yīl yè4 yīl ru2 lāi2 = one-flower-one-world, one-leaf-one-Buddha = A flower is/contains a world/cosmo, a leaf is/contains Buddha’s presence/wisdom).

by Diana Yue