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 narcissism

憐 (radical ↑ = 心
Putonghua pronunciation: lian 2
Cantonese pronunciation: lin 4
Meanings: pity, care for

憐 = admiring/loving/pitying/caring/protective/tender feeling. 可憐 (ke3 lian2 = can-pity) means pitiable. Charity-workers 慐愛 (lian2 ai4 = pity-love) orphans. Alms-givers 慐憐 (lian2 min3 = pity-sympathize-with) beggars. Maestro 慐才 (treasures-talent), helps young prodigy join academy.

Similar ailments/problems make people 同病相憐 (tong2 bing4 xiang1 lian2 = same-illness-mutual-pity = pity/care-for each other).

Many nymphs/women 慐惜 (lian2 xi1 = loved-treasured) and wooed 美少年 (mei3 shao4 nian2 = lovely-few-years = handsome lad) Narcissus, but he only 顧影自憐 (gu4 ying3 zi4 lian2 = look-at-reflection-self-admire = admired his own reflection in the lake), died of 憂鬱 (you1 yu4 = sad-dense = melancholy/melancholia), became a narcissus (Chinese name 水仙花 shui3 xian1 hua1 = water-fairy-flower). 真可憐 (zhen1 ke3 lian2 = Really/How-pitiable/sad)

by Diana Yue