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 resting

Putonghua pronunciation: huan3
Cantonese pronunciation: woon6
Meanings: slow-paced, slow down, relax, delay, postphone

緩 (radical 纖 = 絲 si1, silk/thread) means 緩慢 (huan3 man4 = slow-slow-paced). Runner doing 緩步跑 (huan3 bu4 pao3 = slow-steps-run = slow jog) pauses to 緩氣 (huan3 qi4 = slow-down-breath = ease his breath). After negotiations, tensions 緩和 (huan3 he2 = slow-harmony = are eased/relaxed).

事有緩急之分 (shi4 you3 huan3 jil zhi1 fen1 = affairs-have-non-urgent-urgent-'s-difference = actions can be prioritized according to their urgency). Non-urgent actions can 暫緩 (zan4 huan3 = temporarily-postpone = can wait).

Transitive verb 緩 means halt/delay: 緩刑 (huan3 xing2 = delay-torture/sentence = suspended sentence), 緩衝區 (huan3 chong1 qü1 = slow-down-clash-area = buffer zone). 緩兵之計 (huan3 bing1 zhi1 jil ji4 = slow-army-'s-tactic = stalling tactics) can delay oncoming threat/attack.

by Diana Yue