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 conversion to Buddhism

剃 (radical 刀 = 刀 dao1, broad-bladed knife/sword) = using 剃刀 (ti4 dao1 = shaving-knife) or razor. 鬍 (xü1, face-hair/ moustache), 鬢 (hu2, beard), 髢 (ti3 mao2 = body-hair) need 剃 (ti4, shaving). 剃鬚水 (ti4 xü1 shui3 = shave-moustache-water) = after-shave.

Buddhist 出家人 (chu1 jia1 ren2 = out/leave-family-person = monk/nun) 剃度 (ti4 du4 = shave-conversion = is tonsured), 落髮 (luo4 fa3, = fall/drop-hair = cuts/shaves away hair), 剃光頭 (ti4 guang1 tou2 = shave-shiny/bald-head = keep bald head), parts with 三千煩惱絲 (san1 qian1 fan2 nao3 sil = three-thousand-worries-anger-silk-strands = hair, symbol of human desires/woes).

Cantonese expression 剃眼眉 (Putonghua ti4 yan3 mei2 = Cantonese tai3 ngaan5 mei4 = shave-eye-brows) means slighting/humiliating someone publicly, without giving face.

by Diana Yue