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

閉 (Putonghua pronunciation: bi4
Cantonese pronunciation: bai3
Meanings: close, block)

閉 (men2, door enclosing 才 cai2, materials) = 關閉 (guan1 bi4 = close-closed). Flooded roads 封閉 (feng1 bi4 = sealed-closed = are closed). 閉幕禮 (bi4 mo4 li3 = close-curtains-ceremony) = closing ceremony.

Blood-vessels 閉塞 (bi4 sai1 = close-block = clog up). 閉經 (bi4 jing1 = close-meridian/menstruation) = women’s menopause.

閉路電視 (bi4 lu4 dian4 shi4 = close-path-electric-vision) = closed-circuit television. 閉口! (bi4 kou3 = close-mouth) = Shut up!

Bitterly wronged person yells 死不閉目 (si3 bu4 bi4 mu4 = die-no-close-eyes = My dead soul won’t rest in peace)! Hermit 閉門 謝客 (bi4 men2 xie4 ke4 = close-door-thank/refuse-visitor = decline visitors/invitations). Meditating monk 閉關 (bi4 guan1 = close-gates/pass = lives/prays in absolute seclusion).

by Diana Yue