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 practice

恒 (heng2)
Cantonese pronunciation: hang4
Meanings: steady, constant, steadfast, long-lasting, persevering, permanent

恒 (heng2) = heart + long-enduring) describes person/thing’s steady condition/willpower. Country preserves 恆久 (heng2 jiu3 = steady-long = long-enduring) customs. Romeo promises 恆 (yong3 heng2 = forever-steady = eternal) love. 恆星 (heng2 xing1 = steady/fixed-star = stars) populate cosmos. Lab maintains 恆溫 (heng2 wen1 = constant-temperature). 恆齒 (heng2 ci3 = permanent teeth) last a life-time. 恆河 (Heng2 He2 = long-lasting-river) is Chinese name of India’s Ganges River. 家無恆產 (jia1 wu2 heng2 can3 = family/home-has-no-steady-assets) describes poor/threadbare existence.

Practice requires 恆心 (heng2 xin1 = steady/long-lasting-heart = perseverance), 耐性 (nai4 xing4 = wait/endure-nature = patience). Sage encourages hardworking youngster: 持之以恆 (chi2 zhi1 yi3 heng2 = hold-it-with-persistence = “Continue steadfastly, don’t give up!”

by Diana Yue