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 breathing

气
Putonghua pronunciation: qi4
Cantonese pronunciation: hei3
Meanings: air, gas, energy, qi

气 = air/gas: 空气 (kong1 qi4 = air), 氧气 (yang3 qi4 = nourishing -gas = oxygen). 气息 (qi4 xi1 = air-exhaled-air) = breath. However, 生气 (sheng1 qi4 = grow-air/gas) means getting angry.

In Chinese medicine, 气 (English Qi) means flow of energy/matter/message: 元气 (yuan2 qi4 = primary-energy), 湿气 (shi1 qi4 = wet-qi = un-dispersed/indisposed moisture symptom), 热气 (ri4 qi4 = hot-qi = un-dispensed/indisposed heat symptom). Healthy people 神完气足 (shen2 wan2 qi4 zu2 = spirit-complete-breath/energy-full = are robust/energetic).

Chinese 气功 (qi4 gong1 = breath-control-kungfu = English Qigong) practitioners 運气 (yun4 qi4 = move/summon/muster energy), 養气 (yang3 qi4 = nourish/cultivate-energy). Singers use 丹田之气 (dan1 tian2 zhi1 qi4 = public-region~’s~breath = deep breath from below diaphragm).

by Diana Yue