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 self-improvement

致
Putonghua pronunciation: zhi4
Cantonese pronunciation: ji3
Meaning: send, reach, deliver, give, devote, cause, extent


致 also means cause/extent. 致命 (zhi4 ming4 = cause-death = fatal) disease spreads, 致使 (zhi4 shi3 = causes-makes) people scared, but 不致於 (bu4 zhi4 = not-to-the-extent-of) panic. Soprano’s 精致 (jing1 zhi4 = delicate-extent = fine) interpretation elevates aria’s beauty to 極致 (ji2 zhi4 = ultimate-level).

Businessmen study 致富之道 (zhi4 fu4 zhi1 dao4 = become-rich’=s-way = way to amass fortune). Confucian sage 致力 (zhi4 li4 = devotes-efforts to) promote self-learning: 格物 (ge2 wu4 = contend-matter = applying reason/analysis to things) is basis of 致知 (zhi4 zhi1 = attaining-knowledge).

by Diana Yue