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

渡

Putonghua pronunciation: du4
Cantonese pronunciation: do6
Meanings: pass, cross, transport


Retiree 渡假 (du4 jia4 = pass-vacation = goes on vacation). Prisoner 渡日如年 (du4 ri4 ru2 nian2 = pass-day-resemble-year = passes each day with great difficulty). Old-maid 芳華虛度 (huang1 hua2 xü1 du4 = fragrance-glamour-empty-past = passes years/prime emptily).

Buddhism describes enlightenment as 到彼岸 (dao4 bi3 an4 = reaching-the-other/opposite-shore). Buddhists should 自渡 (zi4 du4 = self-transport = attain enlightenment by own effort), 渡人 (du4 ren2 = transport-people = bring others to enlightenment/redemption).

by Diana Yue