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 beginning and end

Putonghua pronunciation: yün2
Cantonese pronunciation: yuen4
Meaning: round, spherical, fulfill, perfect, complete, completion

圆 (radical 亅 wei2, surround) means 圓形 (yün2 xing2 = round/circular/spherical-shaped): 圓臉 (yün2 lian3 = round-faced), 圓筒 (yün2 tong3 = round-cylinder), 同心圓 (tong2 xin1 yün2 = con-centric-circles). 圓桌武士 (yün2 zhuo1 wu3 shi4 = round-table-military-men) = Knights of the Round Table.

圆圈 (yün2 qüan1 = round-circle), 圆环 (yün2 huan2 = round/circular-ring) symbolize fulfilled/unending process/cycle, Dreamer 圆夢 (yün2 meng4 = fulfills-dream/ideal). 花好月圆 (hua1 hao3 yue4 yün2 = flowers-good-moon-round) symbolizes lovers’ bliss, Broken-up family 圆圆 (tuan2 yün2 = lump/ball-round = are re-united).

Sage aspires to 圓通 (yün2 tong1 = all-embracing-understanding/wisdom), 圓明 (yün2 ming2 = perfect-enlightenment). Monk entering nirvana says: “功德圆满!” (gong1 de2 yün2 man3 = efforts-virtue-perfected-fulfilled = “Moral mission completed!”)