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 Buddha’s Birthday

苦
Putonghua pronunciation: ku3
Cantonese pronunciation: foo2
Meanings: hardship, bitterness, suffering

苦 is noun/adjective meaning flavor/experience/feeling. Learning kung-fu requires 苦練 (ku3 lian4 = hard/persistent-practice). Underdogs have to 吃苦頭 (chi1 ku3 tou2 = eat-hard/bitter-head = rough it, take shit). 先苦後甜 (xian1 ku3 hou4 tian2 = first-bitter-next/last-sweet) describes hard-earned success. Wounds cause 痛苦 (tong4 ku3 = pain-suffering). Wars cause 苦難 (ku3 nan4 = suffering-calamities). Mini-bonds’ 苦主 (ku2 zhu3 = suffering-master = victims) storm banks. Pessimist 苦笑 (ku3 xiao4 = bitter-smile/laugh = smiles depressively), says “Everything is 苦惱 (ku2 nao3 = suffering-vexation/worries).” Buddhists preach: “苦海無邊, 回頭是岸!” (ku2 hai3 wu2 bian1, hui2 tou2 shi4 an4 = suffering-sea-no-edge, return-head-is-shore = “There’s no end to life’s sufferings. Turn back, disengage yourself, and deliverance is straight ahead!”)

by Diana Yue