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

Gesture 拜 means cupping hands, raising then lowering lower arms towards someone to show respect. Junior 拜見 (bai4 jian4 = show-respect-see = pays courtesy visit to) senior. Good friends 結拜 (jie2 bai4 = knot-show-respect = swear oath, become sworn brothers).

Materialists 拜金 (bai4 jin1 = worship-gold = are money-minded). 拜火 教 (bai4 huo3 jiao4 = worship-fire-teaching/religion) = Zoroastrianism. 拜祖先 (bai4 zu3 xian1 = show-respect-ancestor-previous = ancestor worship), 拜年 (bai4 nian2 = show-respect-year = visiting relatives/friends at Chinese New Year time) are traditional Chinese customs.

Buddhists 拜佛 (bai4 fo2 = worship-Buddha), say “阿彌陀佛!” (a1 mi2 tuo2 fo2 = “Amitabha”-transliterated, Buddha’s name) much like Christians say “阿門!” (a1 men2 = “Amen”-transliterated), meaning “Bless you!”

by Diana Yue