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 Bodhisattva Guanyin

慈
Cantongese pronunciation: chi4
Meanings: kind, loving

Characters 慈, 愛 (ai4, love), 悲 (bei1, grief) all have radical 心 (xin1, heart/emotions). 仁慈 (ren2 ci2 = benevolent-kind), 慈祥 (ci2 xiang2 = kind-peaceful) describe person’s kind/loving expression/heart. Philanthropists support 慈善事業 (ci2 shan4 shi4 ye4 = kind-good-things-industry = charity work).

Parents split roles: 嚴父 (yan2 fu4 = strict-father), 慈母 (ci2 mu3 = loving-mother), but慈母多敗兒 (ci2 mu3 duo1 bai4 er2 = loving-mother-often-failed-son = indulgent mother usually breeds spoilt son).

Buddhists chant 大慈大悲觀世音菩薩 (da4 ci2 da4 bei1 guan1 shi4 yin1 pu2 sa3 = great-kind-great-grief-Guanyin-Pusa = “Oh Bodhisattva Guanyin of Mercy and Compassion”, begs her to 大發慈悲 (da4 fa1 ci2 bei1 = big-issue-kindness-grief = pour out mercy generously).

by Diana Yue