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 \ 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

佛
Putonghua pronunciation: fo2
Cantonese pronunciation: fat6
Meanings: Buddha

佛 (fo2) is short for 佛陀 (fo2 tuo2 = Buddha). “佛陀” and “Buddha” are transliterated from the same 梵文 (fan2 wen2 = Sanskrit-language) name.

释迦牟尼 (shi4 jia1 mou2 ni2 = Sakyamuni) was born in 印度 (yin4 du4 = “India”-transliterated) in 5th century BC. He 出家 (chu1 jia1 = exit-family = left his family/home), attained 正觉 (zheng4 jue2 = correct-awakening/enlightenment), 成佛 (cheng2 fo2 = become-Buddha = attained Buddhahood), founded 佛教 (fo2 jiao4 = Buddha-religion = Buddhism), entered 涅槃 (nie4 pan4 = Nirvana) upon death, was honored as 佛祖 (fo2 zu3 = Buddha-ancestor = the first Buddha).

Buddhists study 佛经 (fo2 jing1 = Buddhist scriptures/sutras), celebrate 佛诞 (fo2 dan4 = Buddha’s-birthday) every year.

by Diana Yue