

Character Builder 您好嗎？

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 the tastes

Putonghua pronunciation: *ku* 3

Meanings: bitter taste, unhappiness, hardship, misery, suffering

苦 = bitter taste/feel: 苦茶 (*ku cha* 32 = bitter-tea = bitter herbal medicine), 苦瓜 (*ku gua* 31 = bitter-gourd, a common vegetable). Manual labor is 辛苦 (*xin ku* 13 = hot-taste~bitter-taste = hard/stressful/exhausting). Punished students 吃苦頭 (*chi ku tou* 132 = eat-bitter~head = get it the hard way), can only 苦笑 (*ku xiao* 34 = bitter~smile/laugh = smile/laugh dryly/sadly).

Nobody likes 苦惱 (*ku nao* 23 = frustrations/worries), 苦難 (*ku nan* 34 = hardship~calamities = sufferings), 痛苦 (*tong ku* 43 = pain-suffering = agony/pain).

Buddhists summarize life and quest as 苦 (*ku* 3 = pain/suffering), 集 (*ji* 2 = accumulated pain/suffering), 滅 (*mie* 4 = extinguishing pain/suffering and reincarnation), 道 (*dao* 4 = road/way = wisdom/method to achieve such extinction).