

LESSON NOTES

All About #9

Top 5 Important Dates in Japan

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GRAMMAR

The Focus of This Lesson is the Five Most Important Holidays in Japan

Japan has many different holidays that carry a lot of meaning and have years of tradition behind them. Here we'll introduce the top five most important holidays in Japan, going in reverse order starting with number five.

The fifth most important holiday in Japan is *Seijin no Hi*, or "**Coming-of-Age Day**." On this day, people who turn twenty during the current school year, which runs between April until the following March, celebrate their coming of age. In Japan, when people turn twenty, society legally recognizes them as an adult, and they are able to drink alcohol and vote. The festival was created as a Japanese national holiday in 1947 when it was set to January 15th. However, this holiday was moved to the second Monday in January in 1999 as a result of the "Happy Monday System," the Japanese government's decision to move more holidays to Monday to create a three-day weekend for those who normally have a five-day workweek.

On this day, local city halls and community centers hold small ceremonies in the morning. Government officials give speeches and hand out small gifts to the people in attendance who are turning twenty. It is customary for girls to wear *furisode kimono*, which are kimono that have sleeves much longer than those of regular *kimono*, and put their hair up in fancy hairstyles. Because the *furisode kimono* are very elaborate and hard to put on, many girls go to a beauty salon to get professional help with their *kimono* and hair. On this day, most men wear fancy suits, although you will sometimes see men wearing dark-colored *kimono*. Families with someone who is turning twenty will often cook and eat red bean rice, known as *sekihan*.

The fourth most important holiday (or in this case, group of holidays) in Japan is **Golden Week**. Golden Week refers to the period in late April and early May that contains many Japanese national holidays grouped closely together.

The first holiday of Golden Week falls on April 29th and is called *Shōwa no Hi* (昭和の日) "Showa Day," which was the birthday of the former emperor Showa. The second holiday is *Kenpō Kinenbi* (憲法記念日), or "Constitution Memorial Day," which is held on May 3rd. The new Japanese constitution went into effect in 1947 on this day. Next comes *Midori no Hi* (みどりの日), which is "Greenery Day" or "Nature Day" on May 4th, during which the Japanese celebrate nature. The last holiday during Golden Week is *Kodomo no Hi* (こどもの日), or "Children's Day," which falls on May 5th. On this day, parents pray for a happy and healthy life for their children.

Many Japanese people will take paid time off on the intervening workdays, but it is not uncommon for some companies to close down completely and give their employees the entire week (and sometimes more) off. During this time, many people take a vacation and travel around the country or go abroad. As a result, airports and train stations become very crowded, plane ticket fees increase dramatically, and accommodation reservations become very hard to get, even in advance.

The third most important holiday in Japan is **O-bon**. *O-bon* is a Buddhist event where people pray for the repose of their ancestors' souls and remember the deceased. If you

are familiar with Mexico's Day of the Dead festival, *O-bon* is quite similar. *O-bon* takes place from the 13th to the 16th of August (celebrated from July 13-15 in some areas). During this time, Japanese people return to ancestral family places, and visit and clean their ancestors' graves. The Japanese believe that during this time, the ancestors' spirits return to this world to visit their relatives.

Traditionally, the Japanese perform *o-bon* dances, known as *bon odori*, visit graves, and make food offerings at house altars and temples. *Bon odori* is the most common custom during *O-bon*. People wearing *yukata* (a light kimono worn in summer) go to the neighborhood *bon odori* and dance around a stage. When *O-bon* comes to an end, floating lanterns (known as *tōrō nagashi*) are put into rivers, lakes, and seas to guide the spirits back to their world.

The exact customs of *O-bon* vary widely from region to region throughout Japan. One of the most famous *O-bon* traditions takes place in Kyoto and is known as *Gozan no Okuribi* or *Daimonji no Okuribi*. On the night of August 16th, at the end of the festival, fires are lit on the five mountains that surround Kyoto to send the visiting spirits back to the netherworld. The Japanese light Chinese characters and Buddhist-related markings etched into the side of the mountains on fire in this amazing display that marks the end of *O-bon*.

The second most important holiday in Japan is **Ōmisoka**, which is New Year's Eve. This day is very symbolic in Japan as it is the last day of the year and the day before New Year's Day, the most important day of the year. **Ōmisoka** is usually accompanied by a big cleaning known as **Ōsōji** (大掃除), which literally means "big cleaning," and is comparable to the concept of "spring cleaning." Many Japanese people use this opportunity to clear out clutter from the old year and tidy up their homes and offices for the start of the new year.

For dinner on **Ōmisoka**, many people like to have a bowl of *toshikoshi soba* (New Year's Eve Soba, a type of Japanese noodle). This tradition comes from the association of the long noodles with the wish of "living a long, healthy life."

Another popular event that takes place on **Ōmisoka** is the television show *Kōhaku Uta Gassen*, the "Red vs. White Singing Contest," which airs on public television station NHK and starts at 7:30 PM and goes until 11:45 PM. Popular singers and groups split into two teams, with women making up the red team and men making up the white team. A panel of judges casts votes to decide which team performed better, and the judges declare one side the winner at the end of the broadcast.

The most important holiday in Japan is **O-shōgatsu** (お正月) or **Gantan** (元旦), which is New Year's Day. Many people spend time with their families, and people who work or live far from their families often go back to their hometown for New Year's.

The time around New Year's Day is a time for many "firsts." It's customary to visit a shrine or temple for *hatsu-mōde*, the first shrine/temple visit of the year, although many people go at some point during the first week of the new year instead of on New Year's Day. Some people even go up to the mountains or drive to the coast so they can see the first sunrise of the New Year, known as *hatsu-hinode*. The first dream you have once the New Year starts is referred to as *hatsu-yume*, whose contents are traditionally said to foretell the dreamer's luck in the ensuing year.

Many different types of special foods are eaten on New Year's Day or on the surrounding days. The most famous is known as *O-sechi*, a variety of traditional Japanese New Year cuisine that has been around since the Heian Period (794-1185). Many families prepare their own *o-sechi* at home, but many families also buy pre-made *o-sechi* from a supermarket or a department store. Each dish in *o-sechi* has its own special meaning. Here are some examples:

1. *kinton* (金団), "sweet potato and chestnut," symbolizes wealth.
2. *kazunoko* (数の子), "salted herring roe," symbolizes a wish to have more children in the New Year. *kazu* (数) means "number" and *ko* (子) means "child."
3. *kuromame* (黒豆), "sweet black beans," symbolize a wish for health in the New Year. *Mame*, which means "bean," also has the meaning of "diligence" and "health."
4. *datemaki* (伊達巻), "a sweet omelet mixed with fish paste or mashed shrimp," symbolizes a wish for many auspicious days.
5. *tai* (鯛), "sea bream," symbolizes an auspicious event.
6. *kobumaki* (こぶまき), "rolled kelp with fish," symbolizes joy.
7. *tazukuri* (田作り), "small, dried sardines cooked in soy sauce," symbolize an abundant harvest.

While not a part of *o-sechi*, the Japanese also eat *o-zōni* (お雑煮), a soup containing mochi rice cakes, around New Year's. In the eastern part of Japan, the soup of *o-zōni* is usually clear, and in the western part of Japan, *miso* soup is more common.

On New Year's Day, there is a custom of parents and relatives giving money to their children. The money they give is known as *o-toshidama*, and in most cases, they place it in special little envelopes called *o-toshidama bukuro*. Another custom is the act of sending New Year's greeting postcards known as *nengajō*. This tradition is similar to the act of giving Christmas cards in the West, although *nengajō* have no religious significance. The Japanese often decorate *nengajō* with the present year's Chinese zodiac sign. The Chinese zodiac has a cycle of twelve years, each of which is represented by an animal. The post office stocks all of the *nengajō* mailed in late December and delivers them all at once on January 1st. Unlike Christmas cards, which can be mailed early, *nengajō* shouldn't arrive before New Year's Day.