

LESSON TRANSCRIPT

Culture Class: Holidays in Japan S1

#1

New Year's Day

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Hello, and welcome to the Culture Class: Holidays in Japan Series at JapanesePod101.com. In this series, we're exploring the traditions behind Japanese holidays and observances. I'm Becky, and you're listening to Season 1, Lesson 1: "New Year's Day."

On New Year's Day, the whole world celebrates the start of the year. While the calendar marks only January 1st as a holiday, in Japan we celebrate the period from the 1st to the 3rd, known as 三が日 (Sanganichi). Some companies and stores close during this time, and a number of unique events and customs take place. When you meet someone for the first time in the new year, be sure to greet them with, "あけましておめでとうございます。(Akemashite omedetō gozaimasu!)" That's Japanese for "Happy New Year!"

Now, before we get into more detail, do you know the answer to this question: what do you call the morning of New Year's Day?

If you don't already know, you'll find out a bit later. Keep listening.

New Year's Day celebrations generally begin with the first sunrise of the year, with people worshipping at homes, the beach, and mountains. 雑煮(zōni) - "rice cakes boiled with vegetables" - and おせち(osechi) dishes - "festive New Year's food" — are eaten on New Year's Day. 雑煮 (zōni) is a soup containing rice cakes, the seasoning of which depends on the family and region. There's a saying that goes, "Just like a rice cake stretches, so shall one's lifespan." So, this soup is eaten with the hope for longevity. おせち(osechi) dishes are also eaten with the wish of having a happy and safe year. In order to seek blessings for the year, families and friends wear their finest clothes and visit a shrine.

In Japan, it's customary to send New Year's cards to friends or acquaintances who have helped you in the previous year. In the cards, we write greetings and hopes for the year, as well as information on how the person or family is getting along. A picture of an animal representing the zodiac sign for the new year is also included. In the past, people would either visit the homes of their acquaintances, or receive acquaintances as guests in their homes with the New Year's custom called お年始 (o-nenshi). This custom has been simplified gradually to the point where only greeting cards are exchanged.

Children receive お年玉 (o-toshidama), meaning "New Year's gifts" from their parents, grandparents, relatives, and parents' friends. The traditional gift is money. Since this only happens at New Year, children get very excited about it. お年玉 (o-toshidama) are placed into a paper envelope called an お年玉袋 (o-toshidama bukuro). The average amount given to an elementary school-aged child is around 3,000 to 5,000 yen. As they grow older, middle school-aged children receive around 5,000 yen, and those in high school receive around 10,000 yen.

Here's our fun fact for the day! Did you know that while people go to a shrine to pray during New Year's Day, some visit the shrine at midnight as time passes from the previous year to the New Year? This practice of making a midnight visit is called 二年参り (ninen-mairi).

Now it's time to answer our quiz question: what do you call the morning of New Year's Day?

The correct answer is 元旦 (gantān). Two characters form this word. The second character, 旦 (tan), is made up of the character for "sun," with a single horizontal line drawn under it. With these pictographs combined, the character represents the sun rising over the horizon. And taken together, the two characters 元旦 (gantān) represent the morning of January 1st.

Well listeners, how was this lesson?

Did you learn something new?

In your country, how do you celebrate the New Year?

Please leave us a comment telling us at JapanesePod101.com.

And we'll see you next time!