

Shōgatsu

The New Year: *Shōgatsu*, or the beginning of a new year, is the most important holiday in Japan, and a number of old traditions are still widely observed during this time. Originally, the word *shōgatsu* meant a religious ritual, which was performed to welcome the New Year's deity called *Shōgatsu-sama*, or *Toshigami-sama*. *Shōgatsu-sama* was believed to be a deity who came out from a high mountain where he lived and brought happiness to the human beings. In order to welcome him on the New Year's Day, people started preparing for the New Year, traditionally on December 13th, the day to officially start the preparations for the New Year. In the old days, everyone became a year older on the New Year, which was another element to be celebrated with the New Year's feast. Today, *shōgatsu* is considered a vacation time rather than a ritualistic holiday. Since offices and schools are closed during *shōgatsu*, *an increasing number of people spend this holiday season by travelling abroad and/or returning to their hometowns.*

Gantan

The New Year's Day: *Gantan* is another name for the New Year's Day, which is January 1st. In 1947, it was designated as a national holiday. The phrase *akemashite omedetou gozaimasu* is a typical greeting exchanged during *shōgatsu* when meeting someone. The word *omedetou* is usually used when offering one's congratulations to others. It is believed that this particular word came from a folk belief that the New Year's deity The New Year: *Shōgatsu-sama* brings happiness to people which is certainly worth congratulating.

Hatsumoude

The New Year's Visit to Shrines: During the *sanganichi* (the first three days of the New Year), many Japanese people visit nearby shrines. ~ People visiting the shrines pay respects to the gods and pray for the new year to be a blessed one with good health for the family, prosperity of business, and so on. The following steps/manners are to be observed when paying respects to the god of a shrine: throw some money as an offering, ring the bell, clap your hands three times, and bow once.

※ Would you please look into the words such as *Zouni* (the New Year's special soup that is served with rice cakes, vegetables, fish, etc.), *Toso* (the New Year's special sake), and/or *Osechi* (the New Year's special and formal dishes) that consist of the Japanese *Shōgatsu* celebrations.

Source: Kurachi, Masako & McDowell, John. (1998). *Japanese Customs, Traditions, & Annual Events*. Tokyo, Japan: Natsume Co.