

A Historical Walk Around Kyoto

Photo by Masayoshi Masuda



Setsubun Festival in Yoshida Shrine

Setsubun (節分) originally means the day between two seasons. However, it usually now indicates the day before the spring season equivalent to a lunar New Year's Eve (around February 3). For *Setsubun*, in order to drive away evil spirits and bring happiness in the New Year, Japanese people customary scatter roasted soybeans at home, while shouting "Ogres out!" and "Fortune in." Also, we eat the number of the soybeans corresponding to their age plus one to ward off illness.

At this time, a lot of Setsubun festivals take place at temples and shrines throughout Japan. The biggest Setsubun festival in Kyoto is held at Yoshida Shrine on February 2–4. To visit this shrine on February 2–3 is highly recommended for enjoying the festival because there are many booths and food stands open and you may happen to meet ogres along the way. When you reach the main area halfway up the hill named Mt. Yoshida, you may wonder about a large bamboo-made cylindrical container. It is for breaking jinx. Used lucky charms from the previous year are handed to Shinto priests by visitors and placed in it. Later, they are burned out at 23:00 on February 3.

Highlight of Setsubun Festival

This photo shows one of the highlights of the festival. A musical play called *Tsuinashiki* (追儺式) is performed on the main area at 18:00 on February 2. It was introduced from China, and is the traditional ceremony which the Japanese bean-scattering custom comes from.

Ogres with worldly passions are created using three colors; yellow means *suffering*, blue (or green) is *sadness*, and red is *anger*. These three ogres frighten the audience, especially children. In the play, a white-hair servant in the middle of the photo suppresses the ogres, while wearing an ugly mask with four eyes. Following that, to cleanse one's evil ways, three people dressed in nobility costumes shoot reed arrows using peach-wood bows toward the ogres escaping.

The servant is often confused with a red ogre. Some ancient people viewed him as an ogre scaring people. Perhaps, this play represents various views for different ways of thinking.

Discovering the *Daigen-gu* —A visit to all Japanese shrines at once

Yoshida Shrine was established in 859 for protection of Kyoto as an ancient capital of Japan.

Then, *Saijousyo Daigen-gu* (齋場所 大元宮) was founded near the top of the hill. To visit the place for praying is considered to be the same as visiting all shrines around Japan because 3132 masters from Japanese shrines are enshrined. The existing building has an octagon-shaped roof. Since the foundation of *Daigen-gu*, where it is believed to contain and drive away evil spirits, Yoshida Shrine has been continuing the Setsubun Festival traditions for about 500 years.