

# Kagami Biraki

(*"Breaking out" one's new self ...*)

## The Japanese New Year Celebration

As we prepare to celebrate *Kagami Biraki*, it is important to understand the real meaning behind this deeply symbolic ritual. As with all such spiritual traditions, this meaning is truly universal, i.e. it applies to our experience as Westerners just as much as it does in the lives of the Japanese people.

The words themselves, "Kagami Biraki," signify the unveiling, or rather "breaking out," of the mirror (kagami - mirror, *biraki* - breaking out). The mirror, of course, stands for the reflection of our true nature, the real self. Our hope is that with each new year, the reflection will become truer to the original.

At the center of the Kagami Biraki celebration is *mochi tsuki* - preparing a heavy, dense cake out of sweet *mochi* rice, to be offered to the Creator. The rice used for this purpose is the "cream of the crop," expressing our recognition that we do not own our bounty and need to be willing to offer the best of it even before partaking in it ourselves. As we pound (*tsuki*) the rice, its vital energy is concentrated manifold in a flat cake. This preparation method is deeply symbolic of the kind of work we need to do on ourselves-our bodies, minds and spirits - distilling the essence of who we really are.

The *shomen* at the Kagami Biraki ceremony is appointed with the best of offerings, which are full of metaphorical meaning as well. There are four principal elements: a round *kagami* (mirror): a keg of sake, the *kagami mochi* centerpiece and a floral arrangement. The first three objects are different kinds of "mirrors" - glass, liquid (surface of the sake) and solid - representing respectively spirit, mind and body.

The *kagami mochi* set consists of several parts. At its core are two flat rice cakes stacked on top of each other, with the wider one at the bottom. They represent the *yin* and *yang* parts of the "mirror." (The "stack" itself is known as *kasane mochi*.) On top of the *kasane mochi* sits an orange. The Japanese word for the color orange - *dai dai* - has a homonym\* meaning "generations," which makes this fruit a symbol for the continuity of spiritual teachings as they are passed down from parents to children. (The orange should also have its stalk intact, with some green leaves, signifying the youthful energy needed to ensure a productive future). Inserted between the orange and the *kasane mochi* is a strip of *konbu*, or kelp. Again, the meaning of this element is carried by its homonym, *yorokobu*, signifying "happiness." The *kasane mochi* "stack" sits on top of two fern leaves that fan out in front and to the sides and are turned upside down to expose their reverse (*ura*) side. Ferns represent our link to the past (they are among the oldest of plants). The back of the fern leaf is lighter-colored than the front. This represents the principle of *ura shiro* - the need to keep our reverse side (the one we are sometimes reluctant to show) as pure as the one we like to present to others. The white sheet of paper (*noshigami*) at the base of the whole arrangement represents a "cloud in heaven" that carries us forward through this existence and elevates us to the next.

Finally, for the floral arrangement, we should ideally use plum-blossoms (or any other fruit tree blossoms), which remind us that gentleness is what gives birth to the "fruit of life." Actually, since plum blossoms are hard to find, we will substitute them for plums - an appropriate alternative, as they represent the Imperial Family of Japan. The vase should also contain pine branches (representing simplicity and strength) and bamboo stalks (which stand for resilience and flexibility).

Prior to the start of the Kagami Biraki ceremony, the round *kagami* mirror is kept veiled. When it is uncovered, its shape becomes a fitting symbol for our true nature, which is nothing but the entire harmonious Universe, without beginning or end.

\* A word that sounds the same as another word, but has a different meaning.

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