

When giving gifts or sending presents, it is customary in Japan to accord special care not only to the contents but to the way a gift is wrapped and the wrapping itself. So, when a Japanese gives someone a present, they may feel taken aback if the recipient tears the package apart without thought for the wrapping, even when they know the person does not mean to be rude. In Japan the polite way to open a present, especially in the presence of the giver, is to undo it carefully, without tearing the paper, and some people neatly fold the paper, saving it for reuse.

“Wrapping” things is more than a convenience in Japan. It is something to which people give special thought and care. Let us consider the meaning of wrapping in Japanese culture, looking at how it is a part of daily life.

### Tsutsumu

Wrapping (*tsutsumu* 包む) or tying/binding (*musubu* 結ぶ) things has special meaning in the context of Japanese ritual and belief, signifying not only enveloping something with a

covering but demarcating it as special and sacred. The significance of *tsutsumu* can be explained as an act that marks offerings as pure and clean and separates them from dirt or defilement. It is said, moreover, that *tsutsumu* derives from the word *tsutsushimu* 慎む, which means to be discreet and restrained, and to show respect.

*Tsutsumu*, or wrapping things, is done not only to keep them clean and protect them from harm, but also to express the giver’s heartfelt respect for the person they are presented to; *tsutsumu* signifies the spirit of giving not only some material thing but feeling from the heart.

### Gift-giving

Although the many very specific ways once used for wrapping things are not as widely known today as in the past, the spirit of those traditions is still prized. Even young people are particular about the color and type of ribbons and paper used to wrap birthday or anniversary presents and bouquets or flowers sent to others. Often the wrapping is done very simply with a minimum of paper and tape, making the gift easy to unwrap. It is sometimes said that Japanese gifts are over-wrapped, with various inner layers and very complicated folds, but people do prize and reuse good paper in which they have received gifts.

The main occasions of gift-giving in Japan are what are known as “seasonal greetings,” the chief of which are *chūgen* 中元 and *seibo* 歳暮 gifts. *Chūgen* gifts are given in the hot months of summer, mainly July, while *seibo* are winter, year-end presents. Both kinds are sent in order to express gratitude for kindness, help, or consideration the giver has benefited from over the preceding months. It is customary to give such gifts mainly to persons of higher standing, such as one’s employer or boss, or the *nakōdo* 仲人 or formal “go-between” presiding over one’s marriage. Once it was common to carry such presents directly to the person at their



A *seibo* 歳暮 gift

*Noshigami* のし紙 : Paper festoon for a formal gift. Features a *noshi*, originally a decoratively folded paper with a strip of dried abalone inside, an element symbolizing a happy occasion. A strip of yellow paper may be substituted for the abalone. Today, the *noshi* and *mizuhiki* string are often printed on the paper itself.

*Mizuhiki* 水引 : Decorative cord used to tie gift-wrapped articles and make ornaments. Red and white is commonly used for happy or auspicious occasions and other formal gifts; black and white is used for mourning and condolence gifts. Celebratory occasions require certain types of knots while funeral or sympathy gifts require others.

Name of person sending gift

Bottle of sake tied up in a silk *furoshiki* 風呂敷



Box wrapped in a *furoshiki*

home, but today the normal pattern is to have them delivered by a department store.

During the *chūgen* and *seibo* seasons, department stores and other shops cancel their usual holidays and hold sales of gifts especially designed for this purpose. While seasonal gift-giving is becoming less common among the younger generations, who tend to think of the practice as empty and old-fashioned, it is still vigorously continued throughout Japan.

For all gifts, including *chūgen* and *seibo*, there are many detailed rules and customs of wrapping, pertaining to the types and patterns of the paper, the direction of the paper's motif, ways of wrapping, use of traditional *mizuhiki* 水引 string or *noshi* のし, many of which have implications for the auspiciousness and message of the gift. When carrying a special gift to give to someone, moreover, sometimes it is first put in an attractively decorated box and then the box wrapped in a *furoshiki* 風呂敷 until it is presented directly to the person.

### Furoshiki

A *furoshiki* is a square of cloth used for wrapping up things, either for storage or carrying. *Furoshiki* come in various sizes, from about 70 centimeters square to larger ones 220 centimeters square (approx. 30 to 90 inches square).

The kanji used to write the word 風呂敷 evoke the urban lifestyle of the Edo period (1603-1867) when people made frequent use of the public bathhouses (*sentō* 銭湯) that were a fixture of every community. People would bundle their towel and washbasin in the *furoshiki* when setting out for the bath, and then use it to wrap up their clothing while in the bath, as well as a kind of bathmat: 風呂 *furo* ("bath") and 敷 *shiki* ("spread").

A *furoshiki* can be used, by simply tying the ends together, to wrap up things of almost any size and shape. Unlike a briefcase or bag, which has a predetermined form, it is ex-

remely handy and can be folded up after use and used to wrap or carry something else.

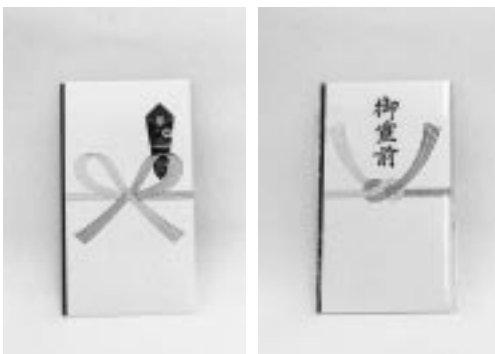
The simplicity and flexibility of the *furoshiki* wrapping cloth is similar to that of kimono. Kimono are made in such a way that they will neatly fit the body of the wearer by adjustment of length and breadth using sashes and cords. When taken off, however, a kimono folds up neatly into the simple shape of the original strips of cloth from which it was made.

Since the end of World War II, most people have opted to use modern-style bags, briefcases and satchels, so *furoshiki* are not seen as commonly as they once were, except at tradition-centered events such as weddings and funerals. *Furoshiki* today are made not only of silk and cotton, but synthetic fibers, and are printed with traditional as well as more modern designs.

### Gifts of Money

Gifts of cash continue to be common in Japan, but they must be presented in a wrapping, appropriate to the occasion. The type and decoration of the wrapping varies for wedding gifts (*shūgi* 祝儀), condolence gifts (*kōden* 香典) at funerals or wakes, or other purposes. Such gifts are a feature mainly of adult society, but children, too, often receive gifts of cash, especially in the form of *otoshidama* お年玉 or "New Year's presents" from their parents and relatives. Some children surrounded by generous grown-ups have the good fortune to receive quite large sums in the form of *otoshidama*. These children may buy toys or other coveted items with the money, but many thriftily put it away in savings accounts.

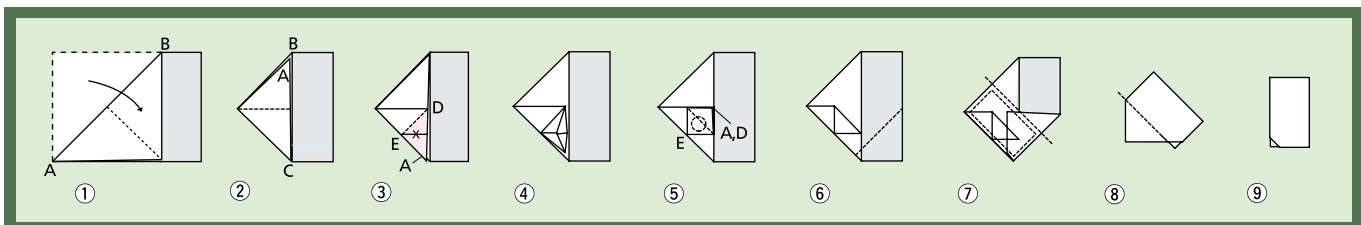
*Otoshidama* are also handed over in specially designed envelopes. The characters printed on the envelope in the photograph below are a simplified form of the decoration on the traditional wrapping, which would have been festooned with a *noshi* strip of folded paper. ♪



*Shūgi* 祝儀 envelope  
and *kōden* 香典 envelope



*Otoshidama* お年玉 envelopes



Way to fold paper for wrapping cash gifts for auspicious occasions (*shūgi tsutsumi*). This is useful when giving cash that includes coins.

- ② Align point A with point B. Then fold point A over to align with point C.
- ③-④ Open the upper flap of the small triangle (X) along the crease and fold by aligning point A with point D, forming a pocket.
- ⑤ After placing a coin in the pocket, close the pocket by folding over the corners marked A and D to point E.
- ⑥ Adjusting the length of the envelope to the size of currency enclosed, fold up bottom corner of envelope.
- ⑦ Close envelope by folding along long side and lapping corner over back.
- ⑧ These envelopes can also be used when presenting honorariums or other remunerations.