



Series: *Chushin Gishi Komei Kurabe*, 1848 “Uramatsu Takanao falling backwards into a frozen pond while being attacked by Koshio Denshiro with a spear”
 Utagawa Kuniyoshi (1798-1861)

part of the ritual preparation for the New Year. In Japan a great deal of time is usually spent cleaning up houses, shops and offices. This part of year is also valued as the time to finish old business, return things you may have borrowed and settle debts. Because of this attitude, it is also a good time to put any troubles of last year behind you. School children clean the floors of their classrooms, often making a game of pushing a towel across the floor while students of the martial arts take this opportunity to buy fresh training gear and repair anything that is worn. In the recent past, *O Soji* had a more common religious meaning. The purification cleaning, known as *Susu Harai*, is a rite to prepare yourself for a visit from *Toshigami*, God of the incoming year and good fortune. To understand the Japanese New Year, it is important to know that the celebration in Japan centers around the belief that at the end of the year *Toshigami* visits every house, bringing blessings to them. After *O Soji* is completed, very near the end of the year, *Kadomatsu*, New Year's decorations made up of pine tree branches, are put up at the gates of the houses. *Shimekazari*, sacred straw bundles, are hung above the front door and *Kagami Mochi*, a tier of two rice cakes shaped like round mirrors, are offered on the household altar or in the alcove of the main room.

I hope that you will consider making a contribution weather you plan to test this year or not. We all benefit from this intimate contact with *Soke Yamada* and his presence makes us all stronger practitioners.



Year of the Rat

This year marks the beginning of another cycle of the animal portion of the Asian zodiac. The twelve characters of this system are animals, each with specific traits. In addition to the animals there are five pairs of modifiers that also cycle each year. A new year is designated with an element such as **Wood, Fire, Earth, Metal, Water** and also oscillates between *Yang and Yin*. This creates a sequence of ten that occur in pairs (Yang-Wood, Yin-Wood, Yang-Fire...). After a period of **sixty years** all of the combinations have been visited and the cycle begins again. The last major cycle began in 1984 (*Yang-Wood, Rat / Kinoe-ne*). That makes the current year;

Events Schedule

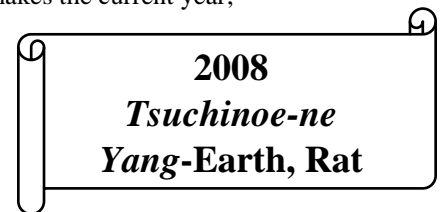
2008	
January 12	<i>Kagami Biraki</i> 6:00 PM Magee Dojo
January 14	<i>Senbon Suburi</i> 6:30 PM Stone Ave. Dojo
February 23, 24	<i>Matsuri Festival</i> Phoenix, AZ
February 28, 29	<i>Florida Tai Kai</i>
March 1 (USFBD)	Palm Bay, FL
March 7, 8	<i>Mizu Hi Tai Kai</i> Sheraton Four Points, Tucson
March 10	<i>Sekiguchi Testing</i> Stone Ave. Dojo, Tucson
August	<i>West Coast Tai Kai</i> Costa Mesa, CA



Soke's Visit

Plans are in place for *Soke Yamada* to visit Arizona in **March of 2008**. His purpose will be to observe the progress of students practicing his art in the United States as well as to conduct rank testing in Tucson, Arizona. In concert with these events we are preparing to host a *Tai Kai* on March 7th and 8th in honor of our teacher and to demonstrate our continued enthusiasm and dedication for *Iai*.

Once again, we will be collecting contributions to help defray the cost of *Soke's* visit. As we all recognize, it is much less expensive for him to visit the United States, than it is for each of us to fly to Japan for training and testing. We are also grateful that he is so generous with his time, that he would spend almost three weeks in the United States.



2008
Tsuchinoe-ne
Yang-Earth, Rat

Next year the zodiac animal will advance to (Oxen / *Ushi*) and the next combination of element and male/female (*Tsuchinoto-ushi / Yin-Earth, Oxen*).

Most Asian societies consider a person who has completed a full sixty year cycle to be very fortunate. *Kanreki* (“Cycle of the Calendar”) is also celebrated with a party where the guest of honor may wear red to signify a “rebirth” in the cycle of living. For many this year is also a time of reflection on

O Soji, Yamakawa

Members of the *Yamakawa Dojo* gathered at Dr. Gettings' *Dojo* for the annual “Big Cleaning” on **December 22**. *O Soji* is

the accomplishments of the first cycle and a time to make plans for the life to come.

Ne Waza Seminar

The members of *Yamakawa Dojo* were invited to an evening seminar in “Ground Techniques” with two noted experts from the *Judo* community. **Sensei Harold Sharp** is a respected *Judo* teacher and author of several classic books on the subject, the first in 1956. Mr. Sharp also served as one of the personal bodyguards to the Emperor during the turbulent reconstruction years after WWII. **Sensei Toshikazu Okada** is known as one of the *Kodokan*’s top *Ne Waza* experts and was a direct student of *Tsunetane Oda* also of the *Kodokan*. Together, they have generously conducted several seminars in the United States during Mr. *Okada*’s visit.



The seminar was organized by **Sensei Ken Wintin** on behalf of the local *Judo* community. We will all remember the look of sheer joy on Mr. *Okada*’s face as he demonstrated some of his favorite techniques on the volunteers. Likewise, Mr. Sharp gleefully demonstrated his signature “sleeve climbing grip” that has startled many confident *Judoka* in the past. During the farewell ceremony we all received a DVD with footage of the techniques that were covered. **Sensei Okada** emphasized that the techniques are not difficult to learn but that they require constant practice to master. We are grateful to our teachers for arranging this opportunity.

“Japanese Swords”

The availability of quality swords for the practice of *Iai* has been increasing for quite some time. Part of the improvement is due to the large volume of swords that have been produced in China in the last ten years.

While many of their first attempts were poor approximations of Japanese blades, there are now some very fine examples being produced with quality materials and proper proportions. Despite the fact that some “**Sword Like Objects**” (SLO’s) are still being sold on the casual market, a few manufacturers have built a reputation of quality. In the mean time, several makers have responded to criticism about shape, finish, temper and fittings over the years and now produce quite serviceable swords for the martial arts community. Another improvement has been a closer approximation of a well wrapped *Tsuka*. In the past it was common to see swords wrapped in nylon or fuzzy cotton *Ito*. Today this is much less likely. There are many more manufacturers that now at least know more about what a Japanese sword should look like.

The advent of widespread internet commerce has also improved the availability of training equipment. The global market now makes it possible to get custom length swords without paying custom prices. The other great benefit of the web is that the word travels quickly about treasures and duds. Online reviews and forums have helped to make the entire sword community more critical consumers of well constructed swords.

Of course, part of the definition of a *Nihonto*, is a sword that is constructed in Japan. There continue to be sword smiths in Japan that forge swords in the traditional way and specialist craftsmen of Japan that make *Saya*, *Tsuka*, *Habaki* and *Tsuba*. It is important to note that the sword collecting community around the world actually has the greatest impact on keeping the Japanese forges lit. They pursue the smith forged antique blades and *Gendaito*, modern swords made after 1877 (*Meiji 9*), as works of art and historical artifacts, and are willing to pay the high prices that keep a traditional sword smith busy.

Kagami Biraki

Once again the members of *Yamakawa Dojo* are invited to an evening of good fellowship and a celebration of the New Year. The gathering is at the Magee Dojo and Dr. Gettings’ house on **Saturday, January 12th at 6:00 PM**. **Kagami Biraki** is the traditional beginning of a new training year for martial artists. It is a time to rededicate yourself to this and other pursuits that you value highly.

It is also time to make sure that you have a clean uniform for the coming year. It is time to shim that loose *saya* and finally put some more glue or lacquer on that fraying *Ito*.

Last year we all brought a special snack or beverage to share and the party was a great success. At the end of the evening we had a taste of *Mochi* either from the display pieces or in the form of green tea and *Mochi* ice cream balls.



Solo Practice

To anyone who has been involved with the Japanese sword arts more than a few weeks, the myth that *Iai* is a solo activity has already been dispelled. That is why it is valuable to be a part of an organization with so many interesting and talented individuals. Apart from the fact that it is just more fun to practice with other people, there are many skills and nuances that just **cannot be learned in a vacuum**. Real Japanese swordsmanship is an oral tradition that reaches back in time to the age of the *Samurai*. When we speak of “lineages” of a particular style, we are really saying that the techniques and insight of how to apply them have been transmitted from person to person in an unbroken chain. One of the highest compliments in this regard is for it to be said that your *Waza* looks like that of your teacher.

This idea also underscores the importance of participating in the group training events and opportunities that are available each year. Seminars, demonstrations and *Tai Kai* are tremendous learning experiences that should not be missed.

