

## O-Hagi Recipe

### Ingredients for 16 servings

- 1 cup regular rice
- 1 cup mochi rice
- 1 cup small azuki beans
- 2/3 cup sugar
- Pinch salt

Wash your mochi rice and let it soak in water for an hour. In the meantime, commence with the preparation of the azuki beans.

Begin by washing the azuki beans. Put the beans in a large enough pot for boiling. Pour water into the pot so that it would flood the beans by about 3/4 of an inch, and begin boiling with medium heat. Remember to remove the scum that forms on the surface of the boiling water. Add water as necessary and continue boiling with a medium temperature. When the beans become soft enough to be able to be mashed by one's fingers, reduce the temperature. Using a wooden turner or spatula, begin mashing the beans while turning them so they do not burn at the bottom of the pot. As the beans become pasty, mix in the sugar. Finally, throw a pinch of salt and mix. Allow the bean paste to cool. The paste may appear watery, but will harden and be of the right texture after it cools.

Cook the mochi rice with the same settings on your electric rice cooker just as you would regular rice, but with a tad bit less water. When the rice cooker has finished cooking, mash the mochi rice gently, about half-way and not thoroughly, making sure that the mochi rice grains are still visible, and are not a complete mush.

While the mochi rice is still hot, use your hands to form a few small rice balls and place them aside on a plate. This will be the filling of the o-hagi. Tear off a square sheet of saran wrap and lay it on your kitchen table. Then spread a thin layer of azuki paste on the saran wrap, forming something like a small pancake. Now, take a ball of rounded mochi rice and place it on the azuki paste. Using the saran wrap, enclose the rice with the azuki paste so that the rice is not visible, and mold it into a well-formed mochi. With this, your o-hagi is ready to be served.

Of course, the size of the rice cakes are to your discretion. But, it's best to stay away from making overly large ones that are difficult to eat.



## Higan as Observed in Japan

With the practice of the paramitas, Higan in Japan has incorporated the tradition of acknowledging one's ancestors and loved ones who have passed away. Although there are many ways of observing higan, many will go to their temples, gravesites of their loved ones, or sit in front of their family alters to offer their prayers in memory of their loved ones. Many will also prepare a unique offering of sweet azuki-bean rice cakes as an offering to be placed on the alters of their loved ones. These azuki-bean rice cakes are called *bota mochi* in spring and *o-hagi* during autumn.



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# Higan

彼岸





## Twice Per Year

The equinox occurs twice a year, once during spring and again in autumn, specifically the day in which night and day are equal in length. The exact day upon which the equinox lands varies from year to year, but the vernal or spring equinox basically occurs during March and the autumnal equinox during September. In Japan, we refer to the seven-day period—that is, the equinox, including the three days prior and following the equinox—as *higan*.

Higan (彼岸) is understood by most in Japan as a seven-day period that happens twice a year. As such, higan has taken on a secular meaning, gradually shedding its original significance. Whereas, higan is in fact deeply engrained within Buddhism. For Buddhists, this period is not just one characterized by days with almost equal portions of light and dark. Rather, it is a period in which we strive to consciously reflect upon ourselves and our deeds. Have our words hurt anyone around us? Are our actions serving ourselves more than others? How can we be productive for the sake of society? Are our decisions creating a world of strife rather than peace? Does our lifestyle encroach upon the liberty or happiness of others? Are we aware of how our actions may adversely affect our environment—the soil, air, plants, insects, fish, birds, and animals? In sum, the basic question from a Buddhist point of view is whether or not we are following the right path. Higan serves as an opportunity to consciously readress some of these basic questions so that we may perhaps reinitialize our thoughts and actions should we be veering off Buddha's path. In this sense, it is indeed a very important time of the year.

## Buddhism is About Practice

Higan then is a period of *shugyo* or practice. We are often unaware that we are ourselves the cause of many problems. Oftentimes, though we may not intend to slight anyone, our words and deeds can be construed in different ways depending on how and by whom it is received. Therefore, during the period of higan, we try to be extra careful that we do not disrupt things and create problems for others.

The Buddha's enlightenment can often be characterized as a state of being completely aware. For the Buddha, this may appear to be effortless and second nature. However, these attributes are ones that

even the Buddha has nurtured by practicing the right way of living, consciously over a very long period of time. Actually practicing the right path in overcoming mishaps that create confusion and poor judgment eventually lead to a life that is harmonious with our surroundings, and ultimately to peace for all. By theory, should we earnestly follow in the footsteps of the Buddha, there is no reason why we cannot eventually approach the Buddha's level of awareness.

## Buddha's Way

In any discipline, its practitioners are inclined to try and reach a certain objective. Exactly what that goal is and how it can be reached may vary in its scope and application. Nevertheless, there exists something to aim for. Buddhism is no different in this respect. Without debating the minor differences that we may each value, we as Buddhists are blessed with the metaphor of higan in helping us to visualize our advancement toward this goal.

Higan arrives from the Sanskrit word, *paramita*. A Chinese transliteration for this word was 到彼岸 “dao bi an”. In Japanese, these characters would be read “tou hi gan”. *tou* means to “go to” or to “arrive”. *hi* means “that” or “there”. *gan* is “bank” or “shore”. This metaphor asks us to imagine our present station to be associated with “this shore”, called *shigan* in Japanese.

“This shore” is one that is characterized by delusion and repeated suffering. Buddhism posits that there is another bank on the other side of the river or body of water. The other shore represents a goal to which we as Buddhists should aspire. It is characterized by understanding and assurance. This distant shore is called *higan*. Higan represents wisdom, liberty, and compassion. In our respective ways, we as Buddhists are all striving to reach the other shore, that is, to become like the Buddha. *Paramita*, then, involves crossing over from the shore of ignorance to the other shore of enlightenment. The word *paramita* has come to describe the basic components necessary to attain this.

## Six Paramitas

Although there may be many ways of grasping the concept of *paramita*, it is generally understood to be composed of six basic components. The six *paramitas* are as follows:

1. *fuse* means to offer one's self wholeheartedly and unconditionally, without any expectation of its return.
2. *jikai* is to follow and maintain the general precepts of the Buddha.
3. *nin-niku* suggests a resilience to persevere through hardship.
4. *syojin* refers to the necessity of conscientious effort in accomplishing one's goals.
5. *zenjo* points to qualities existent in meditation, calling upon one's concentration, adjoined by calmness and poise.
6. *chie* is the Buddha's wisdom, reinforced with its practical application.

Each of these six are complementary with each other. The awareness, application, and internalization of all six of these general practices is thought to be requisite to approach the completeness of the Buddha. Thus, the paramitas are also referred to as bodhisattva practices, or the necessary stepping stones upon one's way to becoming a Buddha. The most important thing to note is that these concepts must be put into practice. Without application, it is not Buddhism. Higan, then, is a time to reaffirm and sincerely practice the six paramitas.

