

### Hogo – Respect to Four Saints (Namu means to acknowledge, praise)

- “*Namu Jinpen Daibosa.*” Jinpen Daibosatsu is the founder of the Shugendo sect of Buddhism.
- “*Namu Henjo Kongo.*” Henjo Kongo, or Kobo Daishi Kukai, is the founder of Shin-Gon Mikkyo, a school of the esoteric Buddhism.
- “*Namu Shobo Sonji.*” Shobo Sonji is the founder of the Daigo Temple in Japan and began the *Saito-Goma* service.
- “*Namu Gedatsu Kongo.*” Gedatsu Kongo is the founder of the Gedatsu Church.

### The Attitude and Purpose for Praying

The *Saito Goma* plaques are designed in the form of requests, such as “Family Protection,” “Traffic Safety” or “To Do Well in School.” However, the primary purpose of *Saito Goma* is not to make or grant requests. The purpose is to express appreciation for our blessings and cultivate our faith in the Supreme Spirit of the Universe and its love.

So, before you throw your “Family Protection” plaque into the fire, express appreciation that you have a family and that you are able to love your family. Before you throw your “Traffic Safety” plaque, express appreciation for your car, roads and its infrastructure and your given ability to drive. Before you throw your “To Do Well in School” plaque, express appreciation that you are able to attend school. Express appreciation for your educators.

Think of the plaques that you requested and what blessings they represent in your life. When you stand in front of the fire holding your plaques, bow your head and express appreciation for those blessings. If, instead, you use the *Saito Goma* service to make requests without expressing gratitude for what you already have, then the ceremony becomes fruitless.

After the service, continue expressing and developing your appreciation for the blessings in your life and you will enjoy greater peace and happiness.

### **The *Fudo* Guardian and the *Saito-Goma* Fire Ceremony**

The *Fudo* guardian, which is depicted in the stone statue on the Gedatsu *Goreichi* grounds, originates from Buddhism and represents the unshakable love and non-judgmental guidance that lead us to true happiness. *Fu* means “un” and *do* means “motion.” Thus, the word *Fudo* represents an immovable force.

Although *Fudo* has a threatening appearance, the symbolism of the stone statue reinforces the strength of the *Fudo* guardian, as well as its characteristics of fortitude and compassion. The figure displays fire to burn away evil tendencies within us and a sword to destroy illusions which cloud our minds. With its wide-open eye, *Fudo* admonishes willfulness and obstinacy; with its half-closed eye, it gently guides us to enlightenment.

*Fudo* is the principal object of the sacred *Saito Goma* Fire Ceremony, which is conducted at the annual Spring and Fall Festivals. The function of the ceremony is to evoke the power of *Fudo* for the salvation of unrested souls, for happiness in all aspects of our lives and for world peace.

### The Fire Ceremony – Step-by-Step

As part of the *Saito-Goma* fire ceremony, a series of prayers, gestures and actions are performed by the officiant.

At the beginning of the ceremony, the officiant acknowledges and thanks the *Fudo* guardian, then throws 12 sticks into the fire as an offering. The officiant asks *Fudo* to grant us wisdom and guidance during the ceremony and prays for world peace.

The officiant throws 12 more sticks – one by one – thanking the *Fudo* guardian specifically. Deep in prayer, the officiant “enters the fire” – or the wisdom of *Fudo* – with each stick that is thrown.

At the end of the ceremony, the officiant throws not 24 sticks (as thrown in the first part of the ceremony) but only 12 sticks, because his prayer now has fewer purposes. Instead of focusing on peace and requesting the *Fudo's* guidance, the officiant is thanking it for allowing us to have the *Saito-Goma* ceremony.

At another point in the ceremony, the officiant hits the stone tablets set before him with the wooden sticks. This is to express appreciation to fire and water. Fire represents the burning of worldly desires, illusions and conflicts, which are sources of negative karma. Through the practice of appreciation, we transcend the sources of negative karma in our lives. We pay respect to water because it represents a separation from judgmental thoughts. Water is without ego, because it has no fixed shape and follows the contour of the land. If water encounters an obstacle, it flows by it without creating conflict.

Although the officiant asks for the *Fudo's* guidance and wisdom, his focus is on thanking the guardian for allowing us to have the *Saito-Goma* ceremony. These prayers of appreciation begin weeks before the ceremony is held. The most important aspect of the *Saito-Goma* service is that we are starting and ending the ceremony by expressing appreciation.

### During the Service

*Fudo's* power is concentrated on fulfilling the prayers and supplications inscribed on the wood plaques that we offer to the fire. At the same time, the officiant harnesses the power of *Fudo* and channels this power to the people gathered at the ceremony. The effect of the fire eradicates their illusions and negative elements.

For Gedatsu members, the *Saito-Goma* ceremony holds a special spiritual significance. Beyond its practical purpose of fulfilling prayers and offering hope, the fire ceremony's ultimate goal is to express appreciation for the blessings we receive from the Universal Life Force. It is also to pray for man's happiness in all aspects of his life, for world peace and the salvation of unrested spirits.

Appreciation is the key. When you express sincere appreciation to *Fudo*, you spiritually enter the fire where *Fudo* presides, and you receive its wisdom and unconditional love in return.

### Our Chants

During the ceremony, we recite the Heart Sutra (*Hannya-Shingyo*) and chant four or five kinds of mantras and four kinds of *Hogo* (respect) to four saints. Mantra is the Sanskrit word for sacred utterances, which comes from Buddhist scriptures. It is called *Shin-Gon* in Japanese. A mantra (*shin-gon*) is a prayer that evokes the energy of the guardian spirit. So, we have specific mantras or *shin-gon* for different guardians. Because Buddha uttered those specific mantras, we recite them in their original Sanskrit sounds.

The Heart Sutra is the main part of our daily prayer. The essence of the sutra is that no being or thing can exist independently of other beings or things. All things are interconnected, and we are blessed through this interconnection.

### Mantras

After reciting the Heart Sutra, we continually invoke other guardian spirits and praise their virtues. Each of these guardians is enshrined on the *Goreichi* grounds.

All you need to do is believe in the sacred power of the mantra and just chant it. You don't need to think of its meaning. It is more important to stop your intellectual thoughts and achieve a state of selflessness--very similar to mediation. In this way, you can connect with the guardian at a deep level of your mind and heart.

- *Fudo-Shin-Gon*: "No Maku Sanmanda Basaradan Senda Makaroshada Sowataya Un Tarata Kan Man." Basically, we are saying: "Fudo, please destroy all mental illusions, remove all impediments and let our supplications be heard." In that way, the energy of the guardian is evoked, praised and asked for protection.
- *Bato-Shin-Gon*: "On Amirito Dohanba un Patta." *Bato-Kanon* guardian removes delusive attachments. It is the guardian spirit of traffic safety.
- *Jizo-Shin-Gon*: "On Kakakabi Sanmaiyei Sowaka." The *Jizo* guardian renders salvation to mankind in the six lower realms of existence.
- *Benzaiten-Shin-Gon*: "On Sora Soba Teiyei Sowaka." *Benzaiten* guardian is revered as the divine conservator of water and also a guardian of wisdom and wealth.