The Preparatory Fourfold Enlightenment Practice (shido kegyō) consists of four rituals performed in a series as preparation for the Dharma-transmission initiation. The word shido means literally “four crossings,” in the sense of “crossing over” beyond birth and death to enlightenment. The word kegyō means “added practice,” referring to preparatory ritual performed before a main practice. The four practices are the eighteenfold practice, the Kongō-kai Mandala practice, the Tai-zō Mandala practice, and the fire ritual. The order in which they are performed may vary from school to school.

The basic fourfold preparatory system and its contents were apparently established by Kūkai based on oral transmissions from Hui-kuo. That system prescribed a series of initiations to be given to a candidate priest over a period of years, culminating at the age of fifty or so, the age then considered most suitable for receiving the Dharma transmission. At that time, each of the four practices took some 250 days, and they were separated by other intensive periods of meditation. In Japan, the ritual was elaborated and the time shortened. The four practices performed today follow a format established around the thirteenth century, and take some 100 days in all to complete.

The fourfold practice on Kōya-san is performed by student priests in a special training institute. Other such institutes also exist, some for women. Compared to the initiation candidates in Kūkai’s time, students today tend to be younger, mostly in their early twenties. During their formal training on Kōya-san these student priests study siddham-style Sanskrit, sutra recitation (primarily of the Wisdom-Truth Sutra and Kannon Sutra), and a special form of chanted mantra called shōmyō. They attend lectures on doctrine and practice, and perform morning and evening rituals.

The major subject of doctrinal study is the Nijūgokan Sho (Twenty-Five Volumes of Writings), beginning with the Jikkan-jō (Ten Volumes of Texts), which consists of six works by Kūkai and Nagarjuna’s Treatise on Enlightened Mind. The remaining fifteen volumes comprise sections of the Dainichi-kyō (two alternate versions include different sections) and the Treatise on Mahayana.

During the time of the fourfold practice, which begins in September and ends in December, the student priests concentrate only on this ritual. The practice takes place in a special hall equipped with altars and implements for many candidates. The Dharma-transmission initiation is held in January, followed by further lectures and advanced study.

The fourfold practice involves considerable ritual preparation such as, for example, recitation of the Wisdom-Truth Sutra and repeated performance of certain “being-protecting techniques” (goshin-kō kegyō). During the time of the entire fourfold ritual, minor rituals meant to purify and strengthen the practitioner accompany day-to-day activities of eating, sleeping, rising, bathing, and so on. The preparatory homage practice (nathai kegyō) is a ritual involving repe-
tion over many days of full prostrations and esoteric confession preceding the four main practices.

The ritual of esoteric confession involves not confession of sins before another priest, but inner acknowledgment of one's limitations in mind and behavior. This is, therefore, considered another means to knowing the self as it truly is. The practitioner performs repeated prostrations, in each of which the entire body is cast down in reverence to the enlightened universe. Mikkyo does not consider sin as intrinsic to human nature, but views undue attachment to ideas of both good and evil as delusion. Since correct conduct is a necessary foundation for samadhi, however, the practitioner examines his own mind and behavior for preconceptions and limitations. Through such confession, the individual also acknowledges his indebtedness to society and the greater world.

A brief description of the course of the Eighteenfold Preparatory Practice is given below. It is followed by an even more abbreviated description of the Preparatory Fire Ritual (goma). The two intervening practices involve visualization of the mandalas and ritual union with their deities following a format similar to but considerably more complex than that of the eighteenfold ritual.

The hundreds of mudras, mantras, seed syllables, and visualizations employed throughout these rituals represent many levels of esoteric meaning both individually and in combination. Only a few of these meanings will be mentioned below. Offerings and ritual implements, too, have precise uses and meanings. The practitioner picks up each implement in a certain way, using prescribed mudra-like motions to manipulate it. Although certain basic sequences are repeated in different sections of the practice, and some of the same sequences are found in all the practices, the external, visible portion of ritual alone can be overwhelming in its richness and complexity.

During the time of the fourfold practice, the student priest performs each of the four major rituals over a period of about three weeks, three times daily, at 4 a.m., 10 a.m., and 2 p.m., each sitting lasting about two hours. In order to maintain the proper level of concentration throughout, the practitioner must ordinarily have considerable experience in meditation. Instruction by a qualified master is necessary.

**THE EIGHTEENFOLD PREPARATORY PRACTICE**

(For convenience, this ritual is divided into sections which, though traditional, are arbitrary and not necessarily marked in actual performance.)

The practitioner begins with ritual purification and contemplation of his oneness with Kongōsatta, who represents the enlightened Mikkyo practitioner. He then approaches the hall of meditation with hands forming a certain mudra, visualizing a fully opened eight-petalled lotus beneath his feet at every step. Before entering, he performs a ritual to awaken both the deity's active aspect and his own enlightened mind.

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Purification and Preparation of the Practitioner. The practitioner performs prostrations before the image of the deity, Dainichi Nyorai, while reciting a mantra of homage to all Buddhas. He next purifies the universal elements within his body, and then, using the “being-protecting technique” (goshin-hō), further prepares the already purified body and mind. The practitioner visualizes the union of self and Buddha and the essential purity of the activities of body, speech, and mind, employing mantra recitation with mudras formed at various concentration points. This section ends with the mudra and mantra of “donning the protective armor” (hikō-goshin) of great compassion.

Empowerment of Offerings and the Vow of Practice. Here the practitioner dedicates the merit of his practice to the benefit of all beings, entrusting the aid of all deities in completing the practice. Using the mudra and mantra of the wrathful deity Gundari Myō-ō, who subdues evil and delusion, he empowers (“does kaji with”) the offering water and with it symbolically washes away delusion.

Through a series of complicated manipulations of ritual implements, recitations of syllables, and visualizations, the practitioner transforms impurities into the essential purity. The other offerings undergo a similar process, followed by recitation of verses and prayers to all gods for protection. The practitioner recites the “five confessions,” expressing the vows of all Buddhas and bodhisattvas.

The practitioner performs mudras and mantras to awaken the enlightened mind and realize the equality of self and Buddha, and then recites the five great vows, summarizing this entire section of the ritual:

Living beings are numberless; I vow to liberate them all.
Merit is boundless; I vow to accumulate all.
The teachings are limitless; I vow to learn all.
The Buddhas are numberless; I vow to serve all.
Wisdom is peerless; I vow to realize the highest.

The merit of these vows is offered to the Buddhas and all beings, after which the verse of the mutual empowerment of the three universal powers is recited:

The power of my meritorious action,
The power of Buddha-kaji,
And the power of the universal Dharma Realm
Dwell in all-pervading mutual homage.

Establishing the Realm. This section of the ritual prepares a sacred space, an internal realm of practice to welcome the Buddha. With a series of mantras and mudras, the practitioner visualizes creation of the altar boundaries and a protective fence of vajra-flames surrounding the altar within the mind.
Creation of the Sublime Meditation Hall. The practitioner visualizes the essential place of meditation, which is also the universe. He begins by visualizing a Sanskrit syllable becoming a palace with the mind-altar at its center. Above this, another syllable changes into an eight-petalled lotus, above which is the seed syllable of Dainichi Nyorai. This becomes a pagoda composed of the five elemental shapes, the samaya form of the Tai-zō Dainichi Nyorai, which the practitioner then visualizes as transforming into Dainichi Nyorai in perfect human form, the source of all deities and of the universal mandala.

In order to relate the visualized essential deity to his own being, the practitioner performs a ritual of empowerment at seven points on his body and recites a mantra. Ritual offerings to welcome the Buddha are then created by visualization.

Invocation and Summons. The practitioner invites Dainichi Nyorai to come to the meditation hall, using mudras and mantras to send a precious cart to bring the deity and his retinue into the sacred space, where they are ritually welcomed.

Establishing Protections. The practitioner sets up barriers against disruptive influences, using the moving mudra of a fiery delusion-subduing deity and visualizing an impenetrable barrier of flame around the sacred space, an unbreakable vajra net over it.

Ritual Offerings. In this section the practitioner entreats the help and protection of the deity and his retinue by a series of offerings. The first offering is water, then lotus thrones for the central deity and retinue, and welcoming music made by reciting a seed syllable and ringing the bell. The practitioner then makes the “five offerings” using the ritual implements on the altar.

The practitioner recites verses glorifying the Buddha’s power and virtue and entreating aid, after which, using mudra and mantra, he visualizes an infinite offering to all deities throughout the universe. The verses of the three powers are recited again, uniting the merit of the offerings, of the Buddha, and of the universe.

Concentrated Invocation and Esoteric Union. The practitioner undergoes mutual empowerment with Dainichi Nyorai using a mantra invoking this supreme deity of the Kongō-kai Mandala and a mudra symbolizing the bodily union of self and Buddha, held at the breast to signify the moon disk of the true mind.

Next he performs empowerment using the rosary, which symbolizes the delusions of all beings. Delusions are visualized as being transformed instantly into wisdoms while reciting a mantra invoking union with the central deity 108 times using the circulation technique. The mantra is visualized emerging from the mouth of Dainichi Nyorai, entering the crown of the practitioner’s head,
circulating through his body, leaving from his mouth to enter the body of Dainichi, and so on, in an unbroken cycle.

The practitioner then repeats mutual empowerment with Dainichi Nyorai, and ends this section by performing the “diffused recitation,” a long series of mantras of the central deity and his major manifestations.

*Ending Offerings and Skillful Means.* The practitioner makes parting offerings in gratitude to the deities, beginning with the five offerings, ending with water. The bell is rung as parting music. The merit gained in the ritual is directed to all beings in all realms of existence, and the protective barriers surrounding the mind-altar are dissolved one by one, using the earlier mantras and the same mudras performed with a different movement. A single “petal” from the flower offerings is placed on the altar, and the deities are visualized boarding this petal and returning to their cosmic dwelling place.

The ritual ends by invoking protective energies. The practitioner recites a mantra of homage while performing prostrations, then leaves the meditation hall.

**THE PREPARATORY FIRE RITUAL**

The fire ritual (*goma*) is placed last in the fourfold practice to eliminate all obstructions to the Dharma-transmission initiation that follows. The *goma* is an adjunct ritual, ordinarily performed after a single-deity practice—in this case, the practice of Fudō. The fire ritual proper is made up of stages (*dan*) in which offerings are made to a particular deity or group of deities. While the simplest *goma* consists of only one stage, the offering to Ka-ten, god of fire, the *goma* of the fourfold practice has five stages. In the Shingon fire ritual the flames are the Buddha’s wisdom-fire, which transforms the fuel of ignorance and delusion into wisdom.

The practice of Fudō and the subsequent five stages of *goma* take place in one session at the fire ritual altar (*goma-dan*), a square wooden platform upon which rests a round hearth. The altar, the opening (“mouth”) of the hearth, and the hearth itself symbolize the equality of self and Buddha in body, speech, and mind, respectively. This altar holds many implements and offerings, all with particular symbolic meanings. As the offerings (sticks of wood, oil, grain, and other substances) are put into the flames within the hearth, the practitioner visualizes delusions entering the Buddha’s wisdom-flame, where they immediately reveal their essential nature as the fuel of wisdom.

The central deity of this fire ritual, Fudō Myō-ō (“Unmoving Illuminating King”) comes from the Wisdom-Holding Hall of the Tāizō Mandala, and is a manifestation of Dainichi Nyorai in the terrifying aspect that, dwelling in adamantine enlightenment, cuts through the most stubborn delusions. Since
Goma ceremony at Kôyasan.

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the Fudo ritual follows more or less the same format as the eighteenfold practice presented above, only the deity-visualization will be briefly described here:

After visualizing a pagoda symbolizing the universe, the practitioner employs several stages of syllable-transformations to visualize the anthropomorphic figure of Fudo, blue-black in color, surrounded by subsidiary deities. A looped cord in his left hand represents the skillful means that can bind the most ungovernable passions. Held upright in his right hand is the sword of the secret wisdom that cuts through delusion at the root. His wrathful qualities terrify and subdue all ego-obstructions, while his mantra expresses the liberating power of compassion. The practitioner fixes the deity within his body, in his mind, and on the altar before summoning the deity and retinue, after which he makes offerings, undergoes esoteric union, and so on.

On completion of the single-deity practice of Fudo, the practitioner begins the introductory ritual of the goma proper. The practitioner arranges the implements, performs homage to all Buddhas, burns incense, puts powdered incense on the hands, and so on, as in the eighteenfold practice described above. After rituals of mutual empowerment with Dainichi Nyorai and Fudo, he performs a visualization to unite the three secrets of Buddha, of practitioner, and of the goma hearth. The hearth’s body, speech, and mind are the altar, the mouth of the hearth, and the hearth itself, respectively.

By complex ritual involving many implements, the practitioner empowers the offering of mustard seed (symbolizing the light of wisdom that destroys obstructions), and uses it with a fire mantra to prevent any negative influences from approaching the place of meditation. Then, forming the mudra of Ka-ten at his heart, forehead, throat, and crown, the practitioner invokes this tutelary deity of all goma practice. Taking the offering implements from the side tables and arranging them on the altar, he is now ready to enter the first of the preparatory goma’s five stages, the ritual to Ka-ten.

The practitioner arranges sticks of offering wood on the vajra tray and places eleven sticks of fuel wood, one representing fundamental delusion and ten representing delusions of conduct and perception, in the hearth. The practitioner sets the fuel wood on fire, visualizing this as lighting the flame of enlightenment. The flame is fanned while reciting a mantra invoking light, and visualizing a seed-syllable symbolizing the element wind. Water is sprinkled into the flames, and the fuel is empowered by reciting a mantra and wielding the three-pronged vajra.

The practitioner visualizes the wisdom-flame as a syllable that changes into a triangular flame, which then becomes the figure of Ka-ten. White in color, with four arms, the body of Ka-ten is cosmic flame. Placing a “floral tassel” on the burning fuel, the practitioner visualizes above it a throne surmounted by a syllable that first transforms into a ritual vase and then into the figure of Ka-ten, forming the mudra of fearlessness, holding a rosary, a wand, and a vase in his several hands, his body filled with flame.
Performing the mudra and mantra of summons, the practitioner visualizes Ka-ten being drawn into the hearth, and recites verses of invocation and welcome. The offerings then begin:

First, ladling water onto the hearth, the practitioner visualizes it rinsing the mouth of Ka-ten. In this and all the following offerings, the practitioner first performs the appropriate mudra and mantra, followed by the mudra used in the visualization of the deity. After this he recites further verses of invocation and welcome.

A small amount of powdered incense is thrown into the hearth. This is visualized as entering Ka-ten’s mouth and filling his body and mind.

A mixture of oil (symbolizing delusions) and honey (wisdom) is offered with large and small ladies.

Offering sticks are placed in the hearth.

Ladles of rice, representing delusions in general, are tossed into the flames, first as an offering to the deity, then as a symbol of the internal process of overcoming delusion in the self.

Ladles of five grains symbolizing greed, anger, folly, arrogance, and doubt are next put into the flames. These are followed by separate offerings of “cut flowers,” pellet incense, and grain incense, representing the “three poisons” of greed, anger, and folly. Another offering of oil follows.

The practitioner performs the mudra and mantra of universal offering to transform the offerings into the universal dimension, and empowers them by reciting the verse of the three universal powers. The mouth of the hearth is rinsed again, and a “floral tassel” tossed into a corner of the hearth to serve as the vehicle of Ka-ten’s return to his essential realm. With the mudra and mantra of dispatching the deity, Ka-ten is visualized departing from the hearth. This completes the first stage.

Similar techniques are employed in the four following stages of the goma, comprising rituals to the following deities: Hannyô Bodhisattva (chief deity of the mandala section from which Fudô comes); Fudô; all deities; and outer protective gods.

**Shingon Initiation**

All sects of Buddhism in Japan have ceremonies of formal commitment (tokudo, “crossing over”) in which, after suitable preparation and study, a candidate enters the priesthood by cutting off his hair, receiving the precepts, and putting on a Buddhist’s priest’s vestment (kesa). The ritual of initiation, however, called kanjô in Japanese, is unique to the esoteric tradition. Of central importance to the continuation of the Mikkyo lineage, kanjô is treated in great detail in the Dainichi-kyô and other Mikkyo sutras and texts.

Kanjô literally means to sprinkle water on the crown of the head, deriving from an ancient Indian coronation ritual in which the head of a new king was
sprinkled with water brought from “the four seas,” signifying rule over his entire kingdom. In the general format common to most types of initiation, a master in the Dharma succession sprinkles water from five vessels, symbolizing the Five Wisdoms, on his disciple’s head.

The various initiations differ in content, form, and purpose. The Dainichi-kyō, for instance, lists three kinds and five levels of kanjō, while other texts give many more. Not all are still practiced today, and some are primarily for laymen. Higher initiations can be classified as of three kinds according to ritual format. The first is the formal initiation ceremony using a full array of ritual implements before a special mandala altar. The second, no longer in use today, was conducted using a minimum of offerings and implements when material circumstances did not allow the first type. The last, “initiation based on mind” (ishin kanjō), uses no form or ritual, and is considered the highest kind of initiation.

Initiations are also classified in levels called the Five Realms (goshu sanmaya), referring to the depth of consciousness to which they are directed. The first, hardly an initiation in the usual sense, involves simply becoming aware of the existence of the mandala, and is called “looking at a mandala from a distance,” as mentioned earlier in this chapter. This is a preritual kanjō signifying first contact with the esoteric teachings. Actual ritual contact with the esoteric teachings comes in the “bond-establishing” (kechi-en) initiation, in which the initiate is led before a mandala and casts a sprig of anise onto it to establish a Dharma-bond with a particular deity. This initiation is open to all laymen.

The third level, “mantra-receiving initiation” (jumyō kanjō), is for laymen who intend to devote themselves to Mikkyo. The candidate is led to a mandala, casts an anise sprig, and is given the mudra and mantra of his particular deity as the first step in formally becoming the disciple of a Mikkyo master. Also called “permission initiation” (koka kanjō) and “Dharma-learning initiation” (gakushō kanjō), it results in permission to study and practice the esoteric teachings.

The fourth level is the “transmission of the Dharma” (denpō kanjō), in which a Shingon priest enters the path that may lead to becoming a teacher. This and the preceding two initiations were taken by the Indian patriarchs to China, where Kūkai received them from his own master, Hui-kuo. Guided through prescribed practices intended to open channels of communication to the deepest levels of mind, the initiate receives not only secret mantras and mudras, but also the Dharma lineage (kechi-myaku) of the generations of Mikkyo masters. Candidates must therefore meet strict standards of personal dedication and character, and undergo preparation through study and meditation (including the rigorous Preparatory Fourfold Enlightenment Practice). Before receiving the Dharma-transmission initiation, candidates also receive the esoteric precepts (sanmaya kai).

The Dainichi-kyō lists the following as basic requirements for the candidate:
To be a fit vessel of the Dharma, first, be far removed from all impurities; second, have reasoned faith [shinge, faith based on one’s understanding of cause and effect]; third, be diligent and fearless; fourth, have deep faith [jinshin, faith beyond the limits of one’s own understanding]; and fifth, be concerned always for the benefit of others.  

The Dharma-transmission initiation has been strictly maintained by Shingon, and is performed according to the ritual format Hui-kuo employed in initiating Kūkai. The initiate thus receives a pagoda and vajra, symbols of universal enlightenment, with appreciation of the unbroken continuity of the esoteric lineage. This ritual also results in the initiate being given the title of ajari, meaning master. Despite the exalted title, however, this provides only the basis for further training, and higher ranks of ajari exist. Only a person suited by capacity, affinity, and learning eventually becomes a master qualified to conduct this initiation and thereby transmit the Dharma lineage.

The fifth level comprises advanced initiations reserved for those admitted to the Dharma lineage. The mind-to-mind initiation (sometimes called “forehead-to-forehead” initiation) that uses no ritual or paraphernalia belongs to this level. This is a direct, intuitive transmission of teachings, not limited to any particular time, place, or format, and is an intensely individual process based on the unique relationship between teacher and student.

One advanced form of ritual initiation, called the “initiation of scholarly practice” (gakushū kanjō), takes place only on Kōya-san for a strictly limited group of senior priests who have undergone decades of study. In ancient times this was a way of advanced scholarly teaching in which problems were posed based on esoteric texts which the initiates would then respond to in the form of a debate. The initiate would have to win the debate in order to receive the degree of Great Ajari. This initiation is still practiced on Kōya-san, but the debate aspect has become formalized today, since scholarly studies are largely pursued in Shingon universities.

The various types of initiation differ in many points, but in all cases every element is prescribed. For example, tradition dictates precise details of participants’ movements and positions throughout (including even how far to turn and in which directions, how far to step back and with which foot, and so on); the altar implements are placed on a laid-out mandala at specified locations and moved in specified ways during the course of the ritual. The number of candidates is limited to one, two, four, five, seven, eight, or ten under one master. Since initiation is counted among Mikkyo’s most important rituals, its details are for the most part kept secret. A brief picture of the Dharma transmission initiation is, however, given below. Most initiation rituals (except the first and the fifth type) follow this general pattern, employing the usual ritual techniques.

As Mikkyo practice uses the many bodily senses, the initiation ritual likewise
Painted floor mandala for Shingon initiation.
Painted floor mandala for Shingon initiation.
involves the tongue, eyes, nose, ears, and so on. Thus, before entering the closed initiation hall where the secret ritual takes place, the candidate rubs powdered incense on his hands to purify his entire body, and puts cloves in his mouth to cleanse the faculty of speech. His eyes are covered with a silken mask to cut him off from the outside world. Forming a mudra and holding a sprig of anise between his extended middle fingers, he recites mantras and meditates on the union in fundamental equality of his mind and the Buddha-mind. Stepping over an elephant-shaped incense burner, the candidate passes through a cloud of incense smoke and enters the initiation hall (kanjō dojō). Within, the participants alternate in chanting verses praising the Buddha’s virtue and power.

The ritual functions to make the candidate’s entire body-mind into a symbol of enlightenment transcending time and space, and the initiation hall itself is said to become the Iron Tower. Casting the anise sprig onto the mandala spread out on the initiation platform, the candidate establishes a Dharma-relationship with the central Buddha, Dainichi Nyorai. The mandalas used in this initiation are of the type (shiki mandara) made to be laid out flat on the altar platform, the altar implements placed on them. They are abbreviated forms of either the Tai-zō or Kongō-kai, showing only fifty-three deities, all depicted in symbolic samaya form, with Dainichi Nyorai portrayed as a pagoda above a vajra resting on a lotus.

The master uses a special wooden wand (sanjō) to sprinkle on the candidate’s head the water of the Five Wisdoms. The wand is made from a plum branch that grew toward the east, facing the sun, and its tip is carved into eight lobes. The water into which the wand is dipped is contained in five vessels, symbolizing the wisdoms. In sprinkling the water on the crown of the head, the master enacts Dainichi Nyorai’s transmission of truth to the initiate, who is seen as Kongōsatta.

In a state of mutual empowerment with Dainichi Nyorai, the master sprinkles the water while reciting a mantra of the Five Buddhas, the initiate performing the mudras and mantras of related bodhisattvas. In this way the essence of the esoteric teaching is expected to enter the initiate, opening channels to the source of enlightenment.

Included in the Dharma-transmission initiation is a mudra shaped like a pagoda, with sequences of movement representing the closed pagoda door opening. This mudra, associated with the Tai-zō Mandala, represents the pagoda that is the samaya form of Dainichi Nyorai, and harks back to the Iron Tower, symbol of the first communication of the esoteric teachings.

Holding a five-pronged vajra within his hands in a mudra, the master turns it in prescribed ways, reciting verses and mantras, and passes the vajra to the initiate, who receives it with the same mudra. This sequence also involves visualization of a pagoda above the vajra.

The master also gives the initiate a mudra shaped like an upright five-pronged vajra, associated with the Kongō-kai Mandala, that is the samaya form of
Kongōsatta. In receiving the vajra mudra, the initiate confirms his identity with Kongōsatta. The initiate then receives the oral transmission of the esoteric practices appropriate to the circumstances of the particular initiation.

It is said that initiation affects the most profound level of the body-mind being. The change that takes place in kanjō is thus in a different dimension than that which comes from conscious work on improving the self by accumulating merit. Where the latter is a gradual process of building from the bottom up, initiation is an intuitive experience coming from the top down. It is meant to cut through all stages and processes directly to the inmost self in a way that the esoteric tradition says can be known fully only through direct experience.