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INTRODUCTION

The main objective behind this thesis is to increase awareness of the unknown and often

unrecognized importance of kaji kito, generally translated as “ritual prayer”, within Nichiren

Shu, a sect of Japanese Buddhism founded during the Kamakura period (1185-1333) by a

Buddhist monk by the name of Nichiren (1222-1282). In most western scholarship the term is

recognized in correlation with Shugendo, a type of ascetic practice incorporating elements of

Buddhism and Shinto, an indigenous practice of worshipping kami (“spiritual deities”). As a

result, the majority of the sources and the understanding behind the incorporation of kaji kito

within specific traditions of Japanese Buddhism remain only in Japanese, written by Japanese

scholars. However, there are limitations to also using Japanese sources due to the hidden nature

of the kaji kito practice and training, most of which is verbally transmitted directly from master

to disciple. Even with such limitations, the hope is that this thesis will provide a better

understanding of the notion of prayer and its often times forgotten significance within Nichiren

Shu Buddhism.

My motive for choosing this topic comes from my own religious upbringing as a

daughter of a Nichiren Shu Buddhist minister. Ever since I was young, I have been provided

ample opportunities to observe particular Buddhist traditions both at my temple and within my

household. Having my father and mother to teach me about the importance of these traditions

and particular practices of laypeople helped me to naturally adapt to these customs that were

often not only very Buddhist, but sometimes very Japanese in thought and practice. It was not

until I gained more exposure to the religious diversity so prevalent in the United States, that I

began to further understand and recognize the uniqueness of my family’s practices and wanted to

learn more. However, having been born and raised in the United States, there are certain

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constraints to the level of understanding that I can gain about specific practices that can only be

done in Japan.

My specific interest in kaji kito comes from my childhood memories of my own father’s

participation in aragyo, a type of ascetic training undergone by some priests belonging to the

Nichiren Shu sect. I recall my father participating in the practice in occasion of “special” events

within the family, such as the birth of my younger brother. The four-month absence of my father

was always a very questionable time for me, especially because I wanted to know what my father

was doing, but no one could give me the straight answers that I wanted. The only memories that I

have include my mother praying for my father’s health because the severity of the ascetic

practice has led to hospitalization and deaths of some practitioners. Writing this Honors Thesis

has given an opportunity to answer lingering questions I had regarding kaji kito and aragyo as

well as the opportunity to understand why undergoing this training was so important for my

father and consequentially for my family.

The first part of this thesis will begin by explaining the historical and religious roots of

kaji kito. While sources indicate that both Shingon and Tendai Buddhism, two Japanese Buddhist

traditions that precede Nichiren’s time, directly influenced Nichiren Shu’s kaji kito, we can trace

those roots further back to outside of Japan. Therefore, there is a need to understand kaji kito that

far precedes its initial incorporation into Nichiren Shu Buddhism or even Japanese Buddhism as

a whole, and therefore from its origins in Esoteric Buddhism (Japanese. mikkyo), which began in

India and progressed into several of its surrounding countries. The discussion will also entail the

development of Esoteric Buddhism in Tibet and China during the time that the prevalence of

Buddhism was on the brink of its disappearance as a whole in India. Although the term kaji kito

or “ritual prayer” will not be used in this section, the specific characteristics of kaji kito seen