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## Sexuality and Zen Buddhism in Ikkyu Sojun's Poetry

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### Abstract

This study examined the portrayal of sex and Zen Buddhism in the poetry of Ikkyu Sojun. More specifically, it examined (1) how sex was depicted in his poems; (2) how Zen Buddhism and sex were connected in his poems, and (3) what other unorthodox ways were evident in the poems. To determine these, the paper employed the formalistic critical theory known as New Criticism and Textual Analysis. New Criticism accentuates the importance of close reading. The findings reveal that sex is depicted to be as natural as breathing, which means that it is a necessary component of life. It is portrayed to be fruitful because it bears a life, making a human being immortal. In addition, masturbation is natural, and a female's private part is something human beings can get lost in, the origin of all Buddhas. Sex is also portrayed to cause pain if a person becomes attached to it, but it also brings forth joy and gentleness of thoughts. As for other unorthodox ways reflected in the poems, findings reveal that Ikkyu is unafraid to break religious taboos and spiritual conventions. He unabashedly calls and proclaims himself to be "Crazy Cloud," "Blind Donkey," and "Master of Love." He is blatant in speaking openly about his love of sexual acts, having a lover, and mocking other Zen priests for failing to appreciate and understand the "truth" about sex. Lastly, he declares proudly that he is "tangled in red thread." The red thread is that which indicates humanness. Thus, by saying that he is tangled in it, he is declaring that he is tied to his bodily pleasures. He is proud of it because one cannot realize his buddha nature by not accepting his human nature. To understand human nature is to experience it.

**Keywords:** Sex; Zen Buddhism; Zen; meditation; love play; enlightenment; buddha nature; Philippines

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## **1. Introduction**

The fifteenth-century of Japan was one of the most turbulent periods in Japanese history. During this time, clashes among warlords for power, control, and territory expansion were rampant and violent. The instability which resulted from this ultimately led to the Onin War (1567-77), which destroyed Kyoto (the capital at that time) and the shogunate's power (or the Ashikaga's government). This further resulted to a century of warfare, plunging Japan into social chaos referred to in history as the Sengoku or "the Age of the Country at War" [1].

Before the destruction of the feudal system, the Ashikaga shogunate promoted Zen Buddhism, influencing the Japanese culture, and leaving it as its legacy. Zen highlights meditation and enlightenment through profound realization. It is the act of letting go of one's ego, restraining oneself, perceiving the nature of things, embracing simplicity, and merging with the universe [2,3]. It teaches the idea that all human beings have a Buddha-nature, the ability to achieve enlightenment. It is also said to be the face-to-face transmission of the dharma outside the sutras. Dharma refers to the teachings, and the sutras, in the Buddhist context, are the sacred texts or scriptures of the oral teachings of Buddha. It is intensely a simple practice without steps, stages, or frills; the master would instruct his disciple to sit upright in good posture and pay attention to his breathing until he is fully alert and present. This sense of being present, with illumination and intensity, is the essence of Zen [4]. Zen played an important role that at the height of the 15<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> centuries, Zen priests served as both diplomats and administrators, integrating their teachings with the lifestyle of Japanese culture [5].

Among the most famous figures in Zen Buddhism during the 15<sup>th</sup> century is Ikkyū Sōjun. He was a devout but eccentric monk who challenged the religious establishment of that time. He had a great impact on the infusion of Japanese art and literature with Zen attitudes and ideals [6]. as well as on Zen itself, often breaking religious taboos with his stance against celibacy [7]. He was born in 1394 in Kyoto and was believed to be the illegitimate son of Emperor Go-Komatsu. For fear that he would become a political weapon, he was separated from his mother at the age of six to be trained as a priest. He was a brilliant student, excelling in the composition of Chinese poetry. He also renounced all material wealth and comforts. One day, he was meditating in a boat on Lake Biwa when he heard the call of a crow and achieved enlightenment. He was among the few Zen priests who addressed the subject of sexuality from a religious context. Sexuality refers to human beings' sexual feelings, sexual thoughts, sexual attractions, sexual behaviors, sexual expressions, and sexual experiences [8,9]. Ikkyū argued that enlightenment was deepened by partaking in love and sex, including lovers, prostitutes, and monastic homosexuality [10].

Ikkyū regularly visited brothels [11], so much so that he preferred them over temples as places to mediate [12]. His poems are well-known for being eccentric and sexual. Other Zen priests view him as unseemly, even though he had a great number of followers. Even so, he took Zen Buddhism seriously and even openly went against those who criticized it. His erratic behavior, such as forgoing celibacy despite being a serious Zen master, and his poems, led the researcher to take on this study. The researcher focused on (1) how sex was depicted in his poems; (2) how Zen Buddhism and sex were connected in his poems; (3) and what other unorthodox ways were reflected and evident in his poems.

## **2. Materials and Methods**

This paper employed the formalistic critical theory known as New Criticism and Textual Analysis. New Criticism accentuates the importance of close reading. That is, examining a text without the use of external evidence to explain the work. It is the objective analysis of a literary text which is an independent and complete work of art. It stresses close attention to the internal characteristics of the text itself. Textual analysis, on the other hand, is a methodology that involves understanding language, symbols, and/or pictures present in texts to gain information regarding how people make sense of and communicate life and life experiences. Visual, written, or spoken messages provide cues to ways through which communication may be understood. These two methods of analysis would be used to determine (1) how sex was depicted in the 10 selected poems of the Zen master, Ikkyu Sojun, (2) how Zen Buddhism and sex were connected in the poems, and (3) what other unorthodox ways were evident in the poems. To clarify, this study was limited to only the selected 10 poems of Ikkyu Sojun.

The following materials are from John Steven's translation of Ikkyu's poems in his book "**Ikkyu, Wild Ways: Zen Poems of Ikkyū.**"

### ***2.1 The Dharma Master of Love***

My life has been devoted to love play;

I've no regrets about being tangled in red thread from head to foot,

Nor am I ashamed to have spent my days as a Crazy Cloud—

But I sure don't like this long, long bitter autumn of no good sex!

Follow the rule of celibacy blindly and you are no more than an ass;

Break it and you are only human.

The spirit of Zen is manifest in ways countless as the sands of the Ganges.

Every newborn is a fruit of the conjugal bond.

For how many eons have secret blossoms been budding and fading?

### ***2.2 To My Daughter***

Even among beauties she is a precious pearl;

A little princess in this sorry world.

She is the inevitable result of true love,

And a Zen master is no match for her!

Rinzai's disciples never got the Zen message,

But I, the Blind Donkey, know the truth:

Love play can make you immortal.

The autumn breeze of a single night of love is

better than a hundred thousand years of sterile sitting meditation.

Monks these days study hard in order to turn

A fine phrase and win fame as talented poets.

At Crazy Cloud's hut there is no such talent, but he serves up the taste of truth

As he boils rice in a wobbly old cauldron.

### ***2.3 My Beauty's Dark Place is a Fragrant Narcissus***

I am infatuated with the beautiful Mori from the celestial garden.

Lying on the pillows, tongue on her flower stamen,

My mouth fills with the pure perfume of the waters of her stream.

Twilight comes, then moonlight shadows, as we sing fresh songs of love.

By river or sea, in the mountains,

A man of the Way shuns fame and fortune.

Night after night, we two lovebirds snuggle on the meditation platform,

Lost in dalliance, intimate talk, and orgasmic bliss.

### ***2.4 A Man's Root***

Eight inches strong, it is my favorite thing;

If I'm alone at night, I embrace it fully—

A beautiful woman hasn't touched it for ages.

Within my fundoshi there is an entire universe!

### ***2.5 A Woman's Sex***

It has the original mouth but remains wordless;

It is surrounded by a magnificent mound of hair.

Sentient beings can get completely lost in it

But it is also the birthplace of all the Buddhas of the ten thousand worlds.

### ***2.6 The Stick of Zen***

Sexual love can be so painful when it is deep,

Making you forget even the best prose and poetry.

Yet now I experience a heretofore unknown natural joy,

The delightful sound of the wind soothing my thoughts.

### ***2.7 Self-Portrait***

The long sword flashes against heaven.

My skeleton exposed for all to see.

Me, I am praised as a general of Zen,

Tasting life and enjoying sex to the fullest!

### ***2.8 A Jonquil Flower***

The perfume from her narcissus causes my

bud to sprout, sealing our love pact.

The delicate fragrance of the flower of eros,

A waterborne nymph, she engulfs me in love play,  
Night after night, by the emerald sea, under the azure sky.

### **2.9 *Lady Mori's Gifted Touch***

My hand is no match for that of Mori.  
She is the unrivaled master of love play:  
When my jade stalk wilts, she can make it sprout!  
How we enjoy our intimate little circle.

### **2.10 *Under the Fragrant Eaves***

The bamboo thicket has a new set of sprouts.  
This old monk feels young again,  
My beauty is just thirty-six.  
A fresh breeze blows through the crumbling walls.

## **3. Results**

### **3.1 *Depiction of sex in the poems***

In the first poem, *The Dharma Master of Love*, Ikkyu reveals that he does not like time passing without having sex: "But I sure don't like this long, long bitter autumn of no-good sex!" This means that he sees sex as natural as breathing and as essential as water. To him, it is part of living: "Follow the rule of celibacy blindly and you are no more than an ass; Break it and you are only human." In other words, sex in the poems is depicted as a necessary component of life or of being a person; to be celibate is to break the nature of being a human. This is further supported by the line "every newborn is a fruit of the conjugal bond," which means that sex is portrayed to lead to something good and fruitful, such as the birth of another human being.

In the second poem, *To my Daughter*, sex is depicted to result to a product of true love: a daughter; "she is a precious pearl; a little princess..." Sex is also depicted to be a message other Zen masters did not understand; it can make a human being immortal, especially with the birth of another human being, and is better than a hundred thousand years of meditation without it. This means that sex is Ikkyu's meditation as opposed to others; it makes him contemplate and reflect. And to him, it is the message of truth.

Rinzai's disciples never got the Zen message,

But I, the Blind Donkey, know the truth:

Love play can make you immortal.

The autumn breeze of a single night of love is

better than a hundred thousand years of sterile sitting meditation.

In the third poem, sex is like a paradise and a platform for meditation. When they do it, it is as though they are in a celestial garden. In the fourth poem, masturbation is depicted to be natural for the Zen master: “Eight inches strong, it is my favorite thing; If I’m alone at night, I embrace it fully...”

In the fifth poem, *A Woman’s Sex*, a female’s private part is depicted to be that which even sensible human beings can get lost in, like wine and opium. However, the description is not at all derogatory or negative. Ikkyu praises a woman’s sex and acclaims it to be the origin of all Buddhas.

It is surrounded by a magnificent mound of hair.

Sentient beings can get completely lost in it

But it is also the birthplace of all the Buddhas...

In the sixth poem, sex is depicted to cause pain if a person becomes attached to it. That is, if a person grows fond of it, “sexual love can be so painful when it is deep.” In fact, love of it can become so painful that one forgets what he learned and the beauty of it: “making you forget even the best prose and poetry.” However, even if longing of it can be painful, it brings forth joy and gentleness to the thoughts: “yet now I experience...natural joy...wind soothing my thoughts.”

In the seventh poem, Ikkyu makes use of a phallus symbol to refer to his penis: “the long sword flashes against heaven...my skeleton exposed for all to see.” He referred to himself as a “general of Zen,” having indulged in sex, thus signifying that sex is a source of Zen. He also highlights again the naturalness of sex by writing the phrase “tasting life,” thus by enjoying sex, he is also tasting what life is all about.

In the eighth, ninth, and tenth poem, Ikkyu praises and adores his lover and her skills in lovemaking. He narrates how the smell of his lover causes his penis to harden (“the perfume from her narcissus causes my bud to sprout”), how her touch is incomparable to his acts of masturbation (“my hand is no match”), how she can awaken his “wilted” private part (“my jade stalk wilts, she can make it sprout”), and how she can make him feel young again (“the bamboo thicket has a new set of sprouts...a fresh breeze blows through the crumbling walls”). In these poems, Ikkyu openly describes sexual acts. Sex in his poems is depicted so openly and unabashedly, even with the use of other terminologies to hide or imply his meaning. He does not really make much of an effort to hide his meaning. To him, sex is to be enjoyed with a lover. Thus, sex is portrayed to be intimate, beautiful (“night after night, by the emerald sea, under the azure sky”), a “love pact” between lovers,

and something that can make an old man feel young again (“a fresh breeze blows through the crumbling walls”).

### **3.2 Connection of sex and Zen Buddhism in the poems**

In the first poem, *The Dharma Master of Love*, Ikkyu argues that the spirit of Zen or enlightenment is manifest in many ways, which means that sex is one these countless of ways and therefore another path to spiritual awakening: “the spirit of Zen is manifest in ways countless as the sands of the Ganges.” Sex and Zen are connected in a way that sex opens another path to achieving enlightenment and realization, and to break it was to go against the nature of Zen.

In the second poem, Ikkyu argues that sex is a way of meditation which is more effective than a hundred years of sitting, but that other Zen masters refuse to see it this way: “Rinzai’s disciples never got the Zen message, But I, the Blind Donkey, know the truth.”

In the third poem, sex is highlighted to be a platform of meditation and that which can cause a man to shun fame and fortune: “by river or sea, in the mountains, a man of the way shuns fame and fortune.” In the fourth poem, masturbation is common for the Zen master, which is unorthodox, but which Ikkyu claims to be an entire, different universe.

In the fifth poem, a woman’s private parts are the birthplace of all Buddhas, thus Ikkyu argues their naturalness and essentialness. In the sixth poem, sexual love is painful, which reminds one of the teachings of Buddha that sexual love is a cause of suffering, but Ikkyu refutes this by saying that sexual love allows one to “unknown natural joy,” like a “delightful sound of the wind soothing my thoughts.” In this poem, Ikkyu argues again of the naturalness of sex and how it can bring forth joy and gentleness and tenderness to the thoughts.

In this seventh poem, sex becomes a spring or source of Zen. Ikkyu calls and praises himself as a “general of Zen” because he is enjoying sex to the fullest, thereby tasting life.

In the eight, ninth, and tenth poem, sex is to be enjoyed with a lover (“how we enjoy our intimate little circle”). Zen highlights meditation and enlightenment through profound realization. It is the act of perceiving the nature of things, embracing simplicity, and merging with the universe. Thus, Ikkyu sees sex as the act of perceiving and accepting the nature of things, embracing being human, and merging with the universe. For him, sex is essential to being a Zen master, an idea which other Zen masters refuse to accept or even understand.

### **3.3 Other unorthodox ways in the poems**

Ikkyu is unafraid to break religious taboos and spiritual conventions. He unabashedly calls and proclaims himself to be “Crazy Cloud,” “Blind Donkey,” “General of Zen,” “Old Monk,” and “Master of Love.” No proper Zen master would deride, demean, and depreciate himself, especially if he has a number of followers. Throughout the poems, he also reveals unconventional attitude toward sex, especially allusions to masturbations, an act which is against the traditional Zen teaching by Buddha. He is blatant in speaking openly about his love of sexual acts despite being a Zen monk and Zen monks are supposed to shirk from worldly



pleasures. He also openly reveals in the poems about having a lover, which is against the teaching of Zen, especially celibacy.

Ikkyu indeed even mocked other Zen priests for failing to appreciate and understand the “truth” about sex, which he called “love play” in the poems, the joys of it, and its connection to the spirit of Zen.

Rinzai’s disciples never got the Zen message,

But I, the Blind Donkey, know the truth:

Love play can make you immortal...

Monks these days study hard in order to turn

A fine phrase and win fame as talented poets.

At Crazy Cloud’s hut there is no such talent, but he serves up the taste of truth

As he boils rice in a wobbly old cauldron.

Furthermore, in the poem *The Dharma Master of Love*, Ikkyu declares proudly that his life is dedicated to committing to love plays and that he has no regrets about being Crazy Cloud and being “tangled in red thread from head to foot.” The red thread in Buddhism is that which indicates humanness and karmic existence—the human body and the individual story. Buddhists break the red thread of humanity to leave the world, thus they avoid women, practice celibacy, and meditate. Thus, by saying that he has no regret being tangled in red thread from head to foot, Ikkyu is declaring how he is tied to his bodily pleasures and to his humanness, and it is something he is proud about because one cannot realize his buddha nature by not accepting his human nature. To understand human nature is to indulge in it.

Lastly, the poems are evidence that Ikkyu Sojun is a master in erotic poetry which is, in itself, unconventional and unorthodox for a Buddhist monk. The poems also reveal that he takes his beliefs to be the truth, especially the coexistence of Zen and sex, which to him is a joyful and necessary coexistence, a window to the celestial paradise. As a monk, he preached that sexual desire was an essential part of human nature, and to deny sexual desire was to go against the purpose of Zen, which is to discover one’s true nature.

#### **4. Conclusion**

In Ikkyu Sojun’s poetry, sex is depicted to be as natural as breathing. In other words, it is a necessary component of life and is part of living. It is also portrayed to be good and fruitful as it bears a life. It is a message of truth that other Zen masters did not or refuse to understand; it can make a human being immortal, especially with the birth of another human being, and is better than a hundred thousand years of meditation. It can make a person contemplate and reflect. That is, if one wants to realize the Buddha nature in him then he must accept and embrace his human nature. Sex is also depicted to be a paradise, “a celestial garden,” and a

platform for meditation. Masturbation is natural, and a female's private part is something human beings can get lost in, like wine and opium. It is the origin of all Buddhas. Sex is also portrayed to cause pain if a person becomes attached to it, but it also brings forth joy and gentleness of thoughts. Most importantly, sex is a source of Zen. By enjoying sex, one is also tasting life. Lastly, sex is to be enjoyed with a lover. It is intimate, beautiful, a "love pact" between lovers, and something that can make an old man feel young again.

When it comes to the connection between Zen and sex, the poems reveal that the spirit of Zen or enlightenment is manifest in many ways, which means that sex is one these countless of ways and therefore another path to spiritual awakening. In other words, sex and Zen are connected in a way that sex opens another path to achieving enlightenment and realization, and to break it was to go against the nature of Zen. Sex is also a way of meditation which is more effective than a hundred years of sitting; a platform which can cause a man to shun fame and fortune. Sexual love is also painful, which reminds one of the teachings of Buddha that sexual love is a cause of suffering, but Ikkyu refutes this by saying that sexual love allows one to "unknown natural joy," like a "delightful sound of the wind soothing my thoughts." Most importantly. Sex is the act of perceiving the nature of things, embracing simplicity, and merging with the universe. Thus, Ikkyu sees sex as the act of perceiving and accepting the nature of things, embracing being human, and merging with the universe. It is essential to being a Zen master.

As for other unorthodox ways reflected in the poems, findings reveal that Ikkyu is unafraid to break religious taboos and spiritual conventions. He unabashedly calls and proclaims himself to be "Crazy Cloud," "Blind Donkey," "General of Zen," "Old Monk," and "Master of Love." He is blatant in speaking openly about his love of sexual acts despite being a Zen monk, having a lover, which is against the teaching of Zen, and mocking other Zen priests for failing to appreciate and understand the "truth" about sex. Lastly, he declares proudly that he is "tangled in red thread from head to foot." The red thread in Buddhism is that which indicates humanness and karmic existence—the human body and the individual story. Buddhists break the red thread of humanity to leave the world, thus they avoid women, practice celibacy, and meditate. Thus, by saying that he has no regret being tangled in red thread from head to foot, Ikkyu is declaring how he is tied to his bodily pleasures and to his humanness, and it is something he is proud about because one cannot realize his buddha nature by not accepting his human nature. To understand human nature is to indulge in it.

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