

When I started practice, I was very interested in koans. I asked Nancy about them. She said, brusquely “Don’t concern yourself with koans. Your life is the koan”. At the time, I can’t say I found this an entirely satisfactory answer.

In Rinzai, koans are used as a teaching device to prod the student towards a different experience of reality. “Koan” originally meant something like an official pronouncement by the Emperor, something universal and unchallengeable.

Of the two characters which make up ‘koan’. ‘ko’ means universal and ‘an’ means wood or desk; so, something written down which has universal application.

Dogen uses a different character for ‘an’, which means something like ‘pushing with the hand’

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[to heal]; so for him, Koan is both the universal and the personal, emptiness and form, and this is how he sees zazen too. So Nancy was right.

She wasn't frightened of death, but she was frightened of her heart stopping beating. In her last moments she chanted the Heart Sutra over and over, fainter and fainter.

Her heart has never stopped beating.