

In the Courtyard of Master Joshu's temple was a cypress tree. One day, a monk asked Joshu "Does the cypress tree have Buddha nature?"

Joshu replied, "It does"

The monk asked, "When does it acquire Buddha nature?"

Joshu said, " When the sky falls to the ground"

The inclination is to interpret his answer as something like this:

Buddha nature isn't an attribute that can be acquired by individual things, or people. It is a mythopoetic way of describing the dynamic wholeness of all being.

So, it's not that you, or anyone else, has Buddha nature. Rather, you and everything else are Buddha nature. In Joshu's answer, "sky" means emptiness, so what Joshu is pointing to is different from an abstract understanding (and hence separation) of form and emptiness. Rather, it is the real experience of both, interwoven in the fabric of full dynamic functioning, or dependent origination, or Buddha nature.

But I think an interpretation like this falls into a classic zen error. We purport to debunk and leave the house of Buddhist theory, but actually never leave, remaining within a weird zen shaped annexe, perhaps called "concrete reality", perhaps called something else.

We can't understand practice through theory, but we can understand and explain theory through practice. But without theory, we would never start practice. But it's not a catch 22, it's a spiral.

In the exchange, when is the "When"?

When we practice. In your actual experience, when you are sitting, isn't it as if your face, your head, your torso are hanging in space? And isn't it as if your pelvis, your legs, your feet are part of the great ground? And isn't this the sky falling to the ground? The ground falling to the sky?