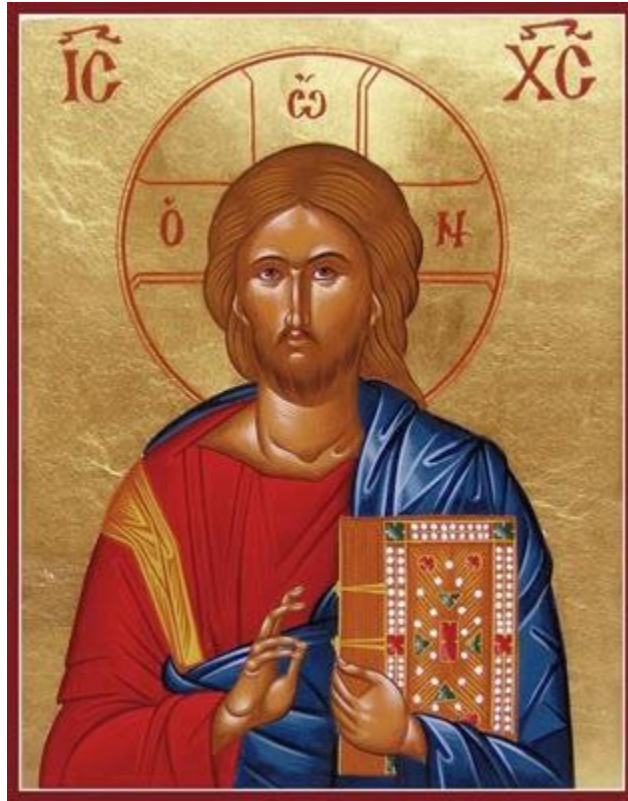


## Christ the Eternal Tao



### TRANSCRIPT

**Host:** Father Damascene, who, as I am sure you are all aware, is an Eastern Orthodox Christian monk, began his life as John Christensen, and was nominally introduced to Western Protestant Christianity as a child. By the time he began college, however, he believed that the highest spiritual reality was not a personal deity or God, but rather a transpersonal reality.

He considered himself a Buddhist, specifically, in the Zen tradition, and he had various experiences, which he writes, included darkness, infinite nothingness, existing outside of space and time, where everything is now, and time has no meaning. Despite these experiences, there was still something missing in the soul.

While in college at U.C. Santa Cruz, John Christensen met Eastern Orthodox Christian students and was invited by them to a lecture by an American priest and monk, who had also been a serious student of Eastern philosophy and Buddhism. It was through this lecture that Father Damascene met the man through whose influence his life would be radically altered.

This man was Father Seraphim Rose, spiritual seeker, Eastern Religious scholar, Orthodox monk and priest, and author of many books and articles on spirituality and Eastern Orthodox Christianity. It was through this meeting, his ongoing studies, and many pilgrimages to the monastery Father Seraphim founded in the secluded woods of Northern California, that John Christensen came to discover that truth was not just an abstract idea, sought and known by the mind, but something personal, even a person, sought and loved by the heart.

This discovery that truth *is* personal, not impersonal or abstract, was the conclusion that Father Seraphim also reached after extensive study of Taoism and Lao Tzu, under a genuine transmitter of the Tao's philosophy tradition, Ji Ming Shen. It was this thread of study that Father Damascene used as the basis of his book, *Christ the Eternal Tao*, which is the subject of our seminar series this weekend.

Now please, I would like to remind you of some etiquette. We do not applaud in the nave of an Orthodox Church. It is my pleasure to introduce to you our guest speaker, Father Damascene.

**Father Damascene:** In the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Thank you for that excellent introduction. I did not know you were going to be saying all those things about me. (laughter) It was all true, you got it all right. (laughter) Thank all of you for coming. Thank you, Father Wayne and Father Michael, for your invitation to be here. With the blessing of His Grace, Bishop Joseph, many pilgrims have been coming to our monastery from this parish for many years, and it is a great blessing for me to finally be here among you all, and also to welcome all the people who do not go to this parish, but have come as guests to hear this talk, and to take part in the seminar.

Tonight I will be talking about Christ the Eternal Tao, specifically about the ancient book of Chinese philosophy, *The Tao Te Ching*, of Lao Tzu, in the light of

Christian revelation, as found in its fullness in the Eastern Orthodox Church, and tomorrow I will be talking more about the teaching of the Eastern Orthodox Church and even more so about the practice. I will be talking about the Orthodox world view, the understanding of the purpose of man's life, our creation, our original state, our fall, our redemption and salvation by Christ, and our path to union with God, which has been opened to us by Christ, and specifically, I will be talking a lot about watchfulness and prayer on the path of that union to God. Tonight I will talk about it briefly, but tomorrow I will go into much more depth about it.

The talk tonight is based on the book that I wrote, *Christ the Eternal Tao*, which was first published in 1999. I wrote this book with two purposes in mind. First of all, it was meant to reach out to spiritual seekers in the West who were looking into Eastern religions, particularly westerners who have had some exposure to Christianity in the past, who have a longing for Christ, but have been put off by modern Western forms of Christianity, and who have been looking into Eastern religions to fill the void in their hearts, and provide answers to the ultimate questions of life. To such people, this book affirms that whatever truths they may have found in Eastern religions, find their fulfillment, their ultimate and final expression, in the revelation given by God to man in Jesus Christ, and specifically, in the Orthodox Church.

So this book is not a book of religious syncretism, rather it is a bridge book, a book intended to bring spiritual seekers of our times to a true understanding and experience of Christ in the Orthodox Church.

The second reason I wrote the book is to present the Orthodox faith to Chinese people through the eyes of their own ancient sage, Lao Tzu. The book is now being translated into Chinese, and parts of this translation have recently been posted on the internet. It is on the website [logostao.cn](http://logostao.cn). I chose to use the *Tao Te Ching* as a springboard to Orthodox Christianity because, in my opinion, it resonates with Christian revelation more fully than do other works of ancient Eastern philosophy and religion.

As I will attempt to show in this talk, Lao Tzu's understanding of the Tao is a foreshadowing of what would later be revealed of God through the revelation of

Jesus Christ. Incidentally, in this talk, I will not be treating the religious Taoism which developed several centuries after Lao Tzu in China. I will be limiting my discourse to what is commonly known as philosophical Taoism, and specifically, to the philosophy of Lao Tzu.

In choosing the *Tao Te Ching* as my bridge between Eastern philosophy and Orthodox Christianity, I was inspired not only by my own admiration and an appreciation for this intriguing work of ancient Chinese philosophy, but also, as was mentioned, by the life and work of my late spiritual father, Father Seraphim Rose. Father Seraphim was the person most instrumental in my own conversion to Orthodox Christianity 28 years ago, and was the co-founder of the St. Herman monastery, where I live.

As was mentioned, Father Seraphim was, himself, a convert to the Orthodox faith. Before his conversion, he was a fervent seeker of truth. His search for truth led him to ancient Chinese philosophy, where he found great profundity and, as he later said, "A noble idea of man." The Chinese classic he was drawn to most was the *Tao Te Ching*. He became a scholar of Chinese philosophy and mastered the ancient form of the Chinese language, with the primary aim of reading the *Tao Te Ching* in the original language.

He was fortunate to be guided in his studies by a traditional Chinese philosopher by the name of Ji Ming Shen. Before coming to the West, Ji Ming had studied under sages in China, as well as under some of the greatest Chinese thinkers of the 20th century.

A humble and virtuous man, Ji Ming was regarded by Father Seraphim as having a better understanding of Chinese philosophy, probably, than anyone else outside of China. Father Seraphim helped Ji Ming to translate the *Tao Te Ching* into English and Ji Ming opened to him the deeper meaning of its contents. Later, Ji Ming disappeared mysteriously, to the great sadness of Father Seraphim, who to the end of his days remembered him with the deepest admiration and gratitude.

Father Seraphim went on to become an Orthodox Christian monk and writer, and as many of you know, he is today one of the best-loved spiritual writers in the Orthodox countries of Russia, Ukraine, Greece, Romania, Bulgaria, Serbia, and

Georgia. In this talk, in addition to referring to Orthodox Christian sources, I will be drawing on Ji Ming Shen's analysis of the *Tao Te Ching*, which is to be found both in Ji Ming's articles, and in the notes that Father Seraphim took during his classes, which we have preserved in the monastery. Also, at times, I will be referring to Ji Ming's English translation of the *Tao Te Ching*.

In Ji Ming's transmission of the ancient Chinese tradition, one is struck by how closely this tradition resembles the ancient Greek tradition. In fact, Ji Ming taught that the early Chinese and Greek philosophers were basically alike in their view of the universe. "In the history of ancient China," Father Seraphim once said, "there are moments when it is absolutely incredible how the same things happened in Chinese life as happened in the West, even though there was no outward connection between the two civilizations. The first of the Greek philosophers, Thales, lived about the 6th century B.C., just about the time Confucius was in China and the Buddha was in India. It is as though there really was a spirit of the times."

One of the first Greek philosophers was Heraclitus. Heraclitus was born in the middle of the 6th century B.C. For the riddling character of his writings, he was surnamed The Obscure, even in antiquity. He based his philosophy on the logos, a Greek word which, itself, means "word," but which suggests measured, proportion, and pattern. According to one textbook of Greek philosophy, the logos of Heraclitus is the first principle of knowledge. Understanding of the world involves understanding of the structure or pattern of the world, a pattern concealed from the eyes of ordinary men.

The logos is also the first principle of existence, the unity of the world. This unity lies beneath the surface, for it is a unity of diverse and conflicting opposites, in whose strife the logos maintains a continual balance. The logos maintains the equilibrium of the universe at every moment.

But at the same time that Heraclitus lived in Greece, there lived in China the philosopher, Lao Tzu. Lao Tzu wrote of the same universal pattern or ordering principle that Heraclitus styled, the logos. "I do not know its name," Lao Tzu wrote, "but characterize it as the Way, or the Tao," the Tao being a symbol basic to Chinese thought as the logos was to ancient Greek thought.

For Lao Tzu, the way was precisely what its adopted name signified, in the ultimate sense of the word: The way, path, or pattern of heaven, the course that all things follow. The way is the uncreated cause of all things. It is the Way that creates, and it is the Way that nourishes, develops, cares for, shelters, comforts and protects the creation. These are Lao Tzu's own words: "Balancing the strife of opposites, by itself not contending."

As Ji Ming Shen taught Father Seraphim, this Tao of Lao Tzu is to be identified with the Logos of Heraclitus, and the other ancient Greek philosophers. Of the writings of Heraclitus, only a handful of fragments have come down to us, but from Lao Tzu we have a full 81 chapters of the <EM< p>< Te>

. Of all the ancient philosophers, one may say that Lao Tzu came the closest to finding the essence of reality and describing the Tao, or Logos. His *Tao Te Ching* represents the height of what a human being can know through intuition, through glimpsing the universal principle and pattern of creation.

Six centuries after Heraclitus and Lao Tzu, there lived on the Greek Island of Patmos, the holy apostle and evangelist, John the Theologian. While exiled in a cave on the island, John dictated to his disciple, Prochorus, what he had received from direct revelation from God, and thus spoke to the world words that it never thought to hear:

In the beginning was the Logos, the Logos was with God, and the Logos was God. The same was in the beginning with God. All things were made by Him, and without Him was not anything made that was made. In Him was life, and the life was the light of men. And the light shines in darkness, and the darkness comprehended it not. He was in the world, and the world was made by Him, and the world knew Him not. And the Logos became flesh and dwelt among us, and we beheld His glory.

This was that very Logos of which Heraclitus had said that the people always proved to be uncomprehending. This was the very Tao that Lao Tzu had said no one in the world was able to understand. It is not without reason that sensitive Chinese translators of St. John's gospel, knowing that Tao meant to the Chinese what Logos meant to the Greeks, have rendered the first sentence of the gospel to read, "In the beginning was the Tao, and the Tao was with God, and the Tao was God." And later, "And the Tao became flesh and dwelt among us."

When the apostle, John, wrote his gospel, he was no doubt aware of the common philosophical symbol in the Greek language of the Logos, but as can be clearly seen by comparison of that gospel with the riddles of Heraclitus, or the writings of other philosophers, when St. John spoke from revelation, he was not merely borrowing an old term, rather he was transforming it—bringing it into the light of the fullness of divine knowledge. When he spoke of the Logos, it was now no longer in riddles, as from one who had only glimpsed its traces in nature, for now the Logos, creator, sustainer, pattern, and ordering principle of nature, was made flesh and dwelt among us, for the only time in history.

And John, His disciple, had seen Him. He had beheld His glory, and heard the words which proceeded from His mouth, being offered the ultimate closeness to Him who had only been dimly seen before. He had even lain on His breast, and in the greatest of mysteries, had received Him into himself at the last supper. Thus, while Lao Tzu's *Tao Te Ching* represents the highest that a person can know through intuition, St. John's gospel represents the highest that a person can know through revelation, that is, through making God, Himself, known and experienced in the most tangible way possible.

Now let us look in more detail at the connection between the intuitive awareness of Lao Tzu and the revelation of Christ. I will attempt to do this chronologically. I will begin by discussing what the *Tao Te Ching* calls the primitive origin of man, and then I will speak about the philosophy of Lao Tzu, and then about Christ's revelation, and finally about the life of man in union with Christ, the incarnate Tao.

We will begin at the beginning. The holy fathers of the Orthodox Church say that man was created in a state of pristine simplicity—pure awareness. In the beginning, his thoughts and memories were not diversified and fragmented as they are today, but were simple and one-pointed. He knew no mental distraction. While being wiser than any human being today, he was in a state of innocence, like a child, and in this state he lived in deep personal communion with God, and in harmony with the rest of creation.

Being in such close communion with God, primordial man participated directly in God's grace, which he experienced as a divine and ineffable light dwelling within

his very being. Here I am referring to the Orthodox Christian understanding of Grace, as the uncreated energy or power of God, in which God, Himself, is fully present. The holy fathers of the Church say that we can never know God's essence, but we can know and experience God through His uncreated energy. Through God's uncreated energy, or grace, we can participate in the divine life of God, Himself.

So in the beginning man had this grace dwelling with him, united with his soul. He was created in grace, and he possessed it as his own personal strength or power, but through the wrong use of his free will, he fell from the state of grace. Before, he had had communion with God. He had acted in accordance with the Way, the Tao, in accordance with the divine Logos. His fall was a departure from the Way, and this departure resulted in a corruption of his nature. Now grace was foreign to his nature, and he no longer had it living within him. He became spiritually dead, and this spiritual death made him subject to physical death.

With man's departure from the Way, he lost the primal simplicity and became fragmented. His awareness was no longer single and one-pointed. As St. Macarius the Great wrote in the 4th century, "After his transgression, man's thoughts became base and material, and the simplicity and goodness of his mind were intertwined with evil, worldly concerns."

Also with his departure from the Way, man fell under the illusion of his self-sufficiency. Before, when he had lived in communion with God, he did not regard himself as self-sufficient. Living in harmony with the Way, he had acted spontaneously, without striving and without self-interest. When he stepped away from God, he fell to the lie that he could exist of himself. This is a lie, because without God willing him into existence, he would be nothing at all. Now man acted with calculation, no longer spontaneously, striving for the sake of personal gain, and pitting himself against others.

Man had been made to desire and to seek God, to rise ever higher toward God in the communion of love. But when he departed from the Way, he fell to love of himself, and to desire for created things. Since the desire for created things is against man's original nature, it leads to suffering. It can never bring true, complete, and lasting happiness.

Having laid the foundation by looking at the state of man before and after the fall, that is, his departure from the Way, let us turn to Lao Tzu, the ancient sage who taught the return to the Way. As I have mentioned, according to Chinese tradition, Lao Tzu lived in the 6th century B.C., about the time of Confucius. Both Lao Tzu and Confucius harkened back to a time when people were closer to heaven and to nature. For like most ancient cultures, the Chinese had preserved a memory of a time in dim antiquity, a golden age, when man had been in a pure state. Lao Tzu wrote, "Immeasurable, indeed, were the ancients. Subtle, mysterious, fathomless, impenetrating."

While Confucius poured over the classics in order to return to the time when man was closer to heaven, Lao Tzu took a very different route. In order to return to the state when man was nearer heaven, he took the path of direct intuition. Lao Tzu sought to return not merely to the primal period of Chinese history, for that was comparatively late in the history of mankind, dating, as we know, from the Bible to the time after the global flood. Ultimately, he was harkening back to the state in which man was first created, before he first departed from the Way. "The primitive origin," he wrote, "here, indeed, is the clue to the Way."

According to Ji Ming Shen's interpretation, this primitive origin was the primitive origin of man. Lao Tzu knew that in his primitive origin, man was in a state of pure, one-pointed consciousness of direct apprehension of reality. He called this the pristine simplicity, the uncarved block, the return to the babe. There are indications in the *Tao Te Ching* as to how Lao Tzu endeavored to return to this state. In one place, for example, he says to block the passages, shut the doors, that is, the passages and doors of the senses, and to attain utmost emptiness, observe true quiet, meaning to allow one's spiritual awareness, or higher mind, to rise about the multiple deliberations, images and concepts in one's head.

Lao Tzu, in rising above compulsive thinking and desire for created things, was able to glimpse the common nature of all humanity. No longer did he feel the need to assert his individuality, or to strive against others for rights and privileges. Thus, while keeping an awareness of himself as an immortal spirit, he sought to be selfless. This can be seen from several passages of the *Tao Te Ching*. Lao Tzu wrote, "The sage has no fixed will. He regards the peoples' will as his own. He who takes upon himself the humiliation, or the dirt, of the people, is fit

to be the master of the people. The man of the highest virtue is like water, which dwells in lowly places. In his dwelling he is like the earth, below everyone. In giving, he is human-hearted. His heart is immeasurable.”

From what we read in the *Tao Te Ching* it is clear that Lao Tzu was, to some extent, able to return to the state of the uncarved block in which man had lived before his departure from the Tao. Through the cultivation of objective awareness, Lao Tzu attained to intuitive perception somewhat like that of primordial man. “Use your light,” he said, “to return to the light of insight”—that is, using the natural light of the human spirit, or the human mind, that is, the highest faculty of the soul, in Greek, the nous— return to unified consciousness, or direct apprehension of reality.

By realizing the human nature common to all, Lao Tzu rose to intuitive knowledge of the divine. Having intuited the presence of the original ordering principle behind all creation, he also realized the inner principles of created things, the ideas of things which must exist prior to the things themselves. “He who apprehends the mother,” he wrote, “thereby knows the sons.”

Ji Ming Shen explains further. He writes, “Order is natural, and necessarily requires a directing principle, for it is unimaginable that order is produced by the ordered individuals themselves. If there were no directing principle, how could there be proportion, symmetry, and the adaptation of one thing to another? There must, therefore, be an organizing power which orders, as for example, in the seasons. The principle of seasons, from which the seasons proceed in an orderly and never-failing fashion, must exist before the seasons, themselves. The ultimate principle is, therefore, of prime importance,” and it is this that Lao Tzu calls the Tao.

According to Chinese Taoist philosophy, “The Tao, or the One, is prior to all things, and from the Tao, or One, all things derive their order. We may say, therefore, that the Tao, or the One, produces all things.” That is the end of a quote from Ji Ming Shen.

The realization of this creator principle was, of course, not new with Lao Tzu. Chinese sages before him, as well as the philosophers of Greece and other cultures, had spoken of the same first cause. None of these philosophers,

however, had actually described it in human terms, as well as did Lao Tzu in the *Tao Te Ching*. The greatest achievement of this man who so valued non-achievement, was that he came closer than any sage before him, to defining the indefinable Tao, without the aid of special revelation.

Lao Tzu did not know, nor could he have attained purely through intuition, the state of intimate personal union with the Tao that primordial man had enjoyed when he had been filled with the uncreated energy or grace. However, Lao Tzu did partake of and experience this energy or grace acting on him from the outside. I believe that what he called "Te", in those places where he employed it to speak of the uncreated power of the Tao, corresponds to the English word grace. By the way, the title of the *Tao Te Ching* includes the first two words, Tao, Te, and then the last word is Ching, which means book. So the title of the book means, the book of the Tao and the Te.

So as I said, the word Te, I believe, in many places in the *Tao Te Ching*, where it speaks of the power of the Tao, corresponds with the English word, grace. Lao Tzu wrote, "All things arise from Tao, they are nourished by Te, thus the ten thousand things all respect Tao and honor Te. Respect of Tao and honor of Te are not demanded, but they are in the nature of things. Deep and far-reaching is mysterious Te. It leads all things to return, until they come back to the great harmony." "Te," says Ji Ming Shen, "is the realizing principle, and principle of manifestation of the Tao. The essence of the Tao cannot be directly known by man, but the Tao can be experienced through the manifestation of its power, or Te."

Ji Ming's teaching concerning Te is in keeping with that of other Chinese commentators on the *Tao Te Ching*. The 13th century writer, Wu Cheng, commenting on chapter 51 of the *Tao Te Cheng*, asserts that Te is divine and uncreated, as is the Tao, itself. The Tao and Te are mentioned at the beginning of the chapter. He wrote, "But only the Tao is mentioned later. This is because Te is also the Tao."

Classical scholar, Yen Ling Fung writes, "Te is the manifestation of the Way. The Tao is what Te contains." In the Orthodox Christian tradition, we say the same thing about the grace or uncreated energy of God. "Uncreated energy," writes the

Orthodox theologian, Vladimir Lasky, “is the manifestation of the essence of God, in which everything that exists partakes, thus making God known. This energy is inseparable from God’s essence, in which He goes forth from Himself, manifests, communicates and gives Himself. As for the manifestation, itself, it is eternal, for it is the glory of God.”

So both the essence and the energy of God are God. There is no separation in God, it is just, as Vladimir Lasky says elsewhere in his book, *Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church*, “The energy of God is the mode of existence of God, in which he communicates Himself.” Again, this is the same as the Chinese conception of Te.

As St. Seraphim of Sarov affirms, “God’s seekers who lived before Christ knew what is meant to cultivate grace or divine energy in themselves. “They had,” he says, “a clear and rational comprehension of how our Lord, God, the Holy Spirit, acts in man, and by means of what inner and outer feelings one can be sure that this is really the action of the Lord, God, the Holy Spirit, and not a delusion of the enemy.” Here he is speaking about people before the coming of Christ, and we see this is in Lao Tzu.

This understanding of the cultivation of grace is found in several places of the *Tao Te Ching*. Here, according to the *Tao Te Ching*, we have translated Te as grace. Lao Tzu wrote, “Cultivate grace in your own person, and grace becomes real. He who follows the Way is at one with the Way. He who cultivates grace is at one with grace. When you become the valley of the world, eternal grace will never depart. Such is the return to the babe.”

Many times in the *Tao Te Ching* Lao Tzu speaks of nothingness, or emptiness, in Chinese, wu, in connection with the Tao. Modern Western interpreters, and some Chinese, as well, have made the mistake of thereby assuming that the Tao is to be equated with nothingness, or non-being. As Ji Ming Shen makes clear, however, this interpretation is far from the real meaning of nothingness in Lao Tzu. For although the Tao is infinite and indefinable, it remains in the realm of existence with particular things. We may say the Tao, of the metaphysical One, is the infinite and all-embracing principle. However, despite the fact that we cannot give it a definite, particular name, the all-embracing principle does exist, and therefore, is not the meaning of nothingness.

Ji Ming Shen observes that while nothingness is not the Tao, it is in the nature or essence of the Tao. He writes, "The nature of being is said to be nothingness because being is absolutely complete, in need of nothing, conscious of no wants." This is why the principle of nothingness in the philosophy of Lao Tzu is nameless. "The real meaning of nothingness, or non-being," Ji Ming Shen says, "is based on spontaneity. Spontaneity is the nature of being. The full development of spontaneity results in forgetfulness. Forgetfulness results in a feeling of nothingness."

In other words, because the Tao is self-existent, self-sufficient, and conscious of no wants, it can create, give and sustain life, and at the same time, seek nothing of its own. As Ji Ming Shen says, the Tao forgets itself and its own existence, being totally spontaneous and selfless. In chapter 34 of the *Tao Te Ching* we read, "The great Tao follows everywhere. All things depend on it for life. None is refused. When its work is accomplished, it does not take possession. It clothes and feeds all things, yet does not claim them as its own. Ever without desire, it may be named small. Yet when all things return to it, even though it claims no leadership, it may be named great." Lao Tzu saw the selflessness, self-forgetfulness and spontaneity of primordial man as an image and a reflection of the creator Tao, itself. In this sense, as in others, man had been made in the image of God.

Lao Tzu, then, had arrived at a profound affirmation concerning absolute being. It is selflessness. From this realization alone, however, he could not fully realize another primary fact about the Tao—the fact that the Tao is a person. As stated earlier, Lao Tzu did not experience the personal union with the Tao that man had known before the primordial departure from the Way. However, he did approach the realization of the ultimate divine personhood of the Tao, for as he observed the Tao at work in nature, he saw actions that were benevolent, like those of a person. He wrote, "All things arise from Tao, by the power of Tao, that is, Te. They are nourished, developed, cared for, sheltered, comforted, grown and protected."

Elsewhere, Lao Tzu wrote of the Tao's benevolence. "The Tao of heaven is to benefit, not to harm. He also said that the Tao, while not being a respecter of persons, that is, paying no attention to distinctions of race, class, creed, wealth,

etc., aligns itself to those who are good. The Tao of heaven makes no distinctions of persons. It always helps the virtuous.”

Lao Tzu had gone far on the path of return to the Way, the path to the state of man before the departure from the Way, but much more was needed to return man to what he had lost, and beyond this, to take man to where he had originally been meant to go. What was needed could not be accomplished by a mere man. It had to be accomplished by the creator, Himself. The Tao of the ancient Chinese, the Logos of the ancient Greeks, had to accomplish it, and He would do this by coming to earth as man.

And so He appeared, He to whom the world owed its creation. The Tao, or Logos, now, in a way, surpassing nature, took flesh in Jesus Christ. Christ even referred to himself as the Way, or the Tao. “I am the Way,” he said, “and the Truth and the Life.” Christ’s coming announces the beginning of a fresh period in the history of mankind. With the coming of Christ, all was changed.

The new revelation affected the destiny of the whole cosmos. In taking flesh, Christ, the incarnate Tao, united human energy with divine energy in one person. Divine energy did not act upon him as it had upon Lao Tzu. Rather, this was Christ’s own energy, the uncreated power, Te, of the Tao. It was by this Te, the same that Lao Tzu had said nourished all creation, that Christ performed His miracles. The gospels record that the whole multitude sought to touch him for power—in Greek, dynamis, which, as I said, corresponds with the Chinese Te—for power went out of Him and healed them all. When a woman touched Him and was instantly healed, Christ, Himself, said, “Somebody has touched me, for I perceive that power has gone out of me.”

The people around Christ could not see this energy. On the mountain of Tabor, however, Christ opened the spiritual eyes of his apostles to let them see it, and they beheld it as light. As the scriptures say, “And he was transfigured before them. His face shone like the sun, and His garments became as white as the light.”

When the Tao became flesh in Christ, He embodied in His divine/human person, what Lao Tzu had said of the Tao. He came in selflessness, in humility. “The Tao,” wrote Lao Tzu, “is like water, which greatly benefits all things, but does not compete with them, dwelling in lowly places that all disdain.” Likewise, when

Christ came, He came in utter meekness and poverty, with nowhere to lay His head. He had no authority, neither in the state, nor even in the temple, founded on revelation from on high. He did not fight those who spurned him. He made himself of no reputation, as the scripture says, and took upon himself the form of a servant, submitting finally to scourging and execution. As the creator and true master of all that exists, He had no need of force, no need to display the power to punish opposition.

Christ said of Himself, "The kings of the gentiles exercise lordship over them, but I am among you as He who serves." Likewise, Lao Tzu had written of the Tao before His coming in the flesh, "The great Tao clothes and feeds all things, yet does not claim them as its own. All things return to it, yet it claims no leadership over them." Christ said, "Learn of me, for I am meek and lowly in heart." Likewise, Lao Tzu had said of the Tao, "The Tao does not show greatness and it is therefore truly great. It does not contend, and yet it overcomes." "For the Son of Man," said Christ of Himself, "is not come to destroy men's lives, but to save them."

Unlike the ancient Hebrews, Lao Tzu did not live in expectation of a Messiah, a savior, and yet, as Father Seraphim Rose believed, Lao Tzu would have followed Christ if he had seen Him, for he would have recognized in Him the humble, selfless Tao, which he had intuited in purity of mind.

Having taken human form, the Tao, or Logos, made the personhood of God far more tangible than it had ever been known before. In so doing, he had also brought the meaning of human personhood into sharper focus than had previously been known. He gave a personal dimension to Lao Tzu's nothingness. In the scriptures, this personal dimension of self-emptying is called perfect love, love for everyone equally.

Lao Tzu understood that a person who asserts himself as an individual, far from becoming a full person, becomes impoverished. It is only in renouncing his possessiveness, giving himself freely and ceasing to exist for himself, that is, being reduced to nothingness, that the person finds full expression in the one human nature common to all. In giving up his own advantage, he expands infinitely. Of such a person, Lao Tzu said, as I quoted earlier, "His heart is immeasurable."

The touchstone of this perfect love is love for one's enemies. When the Tao became flesh, He brought out the full meaning of Lao Tzu's precept, "Requite injury with kindness." Christ said the same thing that Lao Tzu had said, but he spoke in terms of love. "Love your enemies," Christ said, "do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, and pray for those who spitefully use you."

During His life on earth, Christ's selflessness, or nothingness, was seen, first of all, in His total self-renunciation before His heavenly father. He renounced His will in order to accomplish the will of the Father, by being obedient to Him. Speaking of Christ's obedience to the Father, we must be careful to not view it in only human terms. For as we know from revelation, the Logos, who incarnated in Christ, is the only begotten Son of God, of one essence with the Father and the Holy Spirit.

As Winnie Merloski writes, "For Christ, the renunciation of His own will was not a choice or an act, but is, so to speak, the very being of the persons of the Trinity, who have only one will proper to their common nature. Also, Christ's human will was in perfect harmony with His divine will, since the two wills were united inseparably in one person. Therefore, to employ the term Ji Ming Shen used to describe the Tao, we might say that Christ's renunciation of His will was spontaneous. "Self-emptying," says Winnie Merloski, "is the very mode of existence of the divine person who was sent into the world, the person in whom was accomplished the common will of the Trinity, whose source is the Father. Christ saying, 'My Father is greater than I,' expresses this renunciation of His own will. The outpouring, self-emptying of Himself, only produces the greater manifestation of the deity of the Son to all who are able to recognize greatness in abasement, wealth in being robbed, liberty in obedience."

The very fact that Christ was sent into the world by the Father, shows His obedience to Him. When He emptied Himself into His own creation by taking on human flesh subject to death, and doing His father's will throughout His earthly life, He endured mockery, opposition and persecution at every turn. This culminated in the ultimate self-emptying of undergoing the most humiliating and painful death known at the time—being scourged, stripped naked, and crucified in public view.

The Apostle Paul sums up the whole act of Christ's self-emptying. "He emptied Himself, taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men, and being found in appearance as a man, He humbled Himself, and became obedient unto death, even the death of the cross."

If Lao Tzu had known that the Tao, which he said dwells in lowly places that all disdain, would one day take the form of a man, he could have conceived of no greater self-emptying, no greater lowliness, no greater nothingness, than the incarnate Tao being nailed to a cross and dying in a body that would rise again.

Father Seraphim Rose once wrote that nothingness, in the meaning that Lao-Tzu gives it, is the point of convergence, or axis, of the universe. This recalls Lao Tzu's words in the *Tao Te Ching*, "Thirty spokes join in a single hub. It is the center hole that is the space where there is nothing, that makes the wheel useful." If nothingness, or self-emptying, is the axis of the universe, then the cross of Christ, the greatest sign of man of the self-emptying of God, now becomes that axis. Christ stands at the axis, and there in the space where there is nothing, we find not an impersonal void, but the personal heart of the selfless, self-forgetting God.

Now, having looked at what Christ revealed of the Tao, let us look more closely at what He has made possible for those who follow Him. Christ was the fulfillment of what Lao-Tzu had been pointing to. Through Christ's coming, man not only achieves the one-pointed awareness and the cultivation of Te that Lao Tzu valued so much, but now in a way unknown before, man's immortal spirit can become wholly filled with grace, or Te. To such an extent that man becomes deified by participation in the uncreated energy of God. With Christ, man not only returns to the primordial state which Lao Tzu sought, now he rises beyond even this, in the mystical union with a personal God, that was originally intended for man. Finally, through Christ, the way to heaven becomes open to man, and man experiences what Lao Tzu called the Tao of heaven, in all the fullness of His being.

By coming in the flesh and dying on the cross, the Tao of heaven took on Himself the sentence of physical death that man had brought upon himself with the fall, at his departure from the Way. And yet, the Tao, having never in the slightest departed from the Way, for how could the Way depart from Himself, was wholly

undeserving of the sentence. And being the author of life, he could not be held by death. Thus, in dying as a man, and the rising from the dead, the incarnate Tao abolished the sentence of a spiritual and bodily death that had lain on human nature, offering man freedom from all the consequences of his primordial departure from the Way.

Through Christ, our union with the Tao, or Logos, can begin in this life, only to continue forever in the life to come. During his time on earth, Christ spoke of special means by which he would affect this union—Holy Baptism, which Christ called being born of water and the Spirit, Holy Confession, which Christ spoke of when He said that His disciples would have the power to bind and loose sins, and Holy Communion, which He spoke of as eating His body and drinking His blood.

From the moment one enters into these Holy Mysteries, into the sacramental life of the church, divine energy or grace no longer acts on one from the outside in, as it did upon Lao Tzu and other righteous people before the coming of Christ. Now it works from the inside out. This was the experience of Christ's disciples, and it became the common inheritance of all followers of the incarnate Son of God.

What the early followers of Christ discovered was that the grace of the Holy Spirit was like a seed which had been implanted in their souls at baptism. Moreover, they found that they could nurture this seed through regular partaking of Holy Mysteries, repentance, self-denial, to the practice of the virtues and good deeds done in Christ's name, and through watchfulness and prayer.

Before concluding this talk on the *Tao Te Ching* in the light of Christian revelation, I would like to say a few words about the last of these means of nurturing, or cultivating, divine grace—watchfulness and prayer. Tomorrow, I will speak about these in more depth.

In the *Tao Te Ching*, as in Orthodox Christianity, the foundation of spiritual life is watchfulness, or tension over thoughts, a state of inner vigilance and sobriety. Lao Tzu well knew this virtue. Speaking of the ancients who followed the Tao, Lao Tzu called them, "Watchful, like men crossing a winter stream—alert, like men aware of danger."

When the Tao became flesh in Jesus Christ, He spoke much concerning watchfulness. To impress upon the people the need for watchfulness, He told parables about it, such as the story of the five wise virgins who trimmed and guarded their lamps, or the tale of the unwise steward who failed to keep watch while his master was away.

Being in a state of watchfulness, Lao Tzu communed with the Tao through intuitive knowing in his higher mind, or nous. He did not speak to, or invoke the Tao, for as we have seen, the mystery of the Tao as a personal absolute, was not fully revealed to him. Now, with the coming of the Tao in the flesh, our communion with Him becomes a person-to-person connection centered in the heart. We call this prayer.

Nevertheless, even with the intimately personal communion with the Tao that has been made possible for all peoples through Christ, the basis for that communion remains the same as it was for Lao Tzu, since prayer has its foundation in watchfulness. When the Tao became man, He did not only tell us to pray, instead he said, "Watch and pray, that you enter not into temptation. The spirit surely is ready, but the flesh is weak." First watch, He tells us, then pray while watching.

Prayer cannot be pure if the mind is actively engaged in following thoughts. For prayer to be pure, it must arise from a pure spirit, or nous, and this can only occur when one first stands watch, and this rises above thoughts and images. That is why Christ said, "Watch and pray." Prayer and watchfulness are inseparably bound together. As St. Ignatius Brianchaninov writes, "The essential, indispensable property of prayer is attention. Without attention, there is no prayer."

The Tao is spirit. In Jesus Christ, that spirit enters into flesh. So, too, with the inward life of his followers, who before His coming, followers of the Tao, like Lao Tzu, cultivated open, objective awareness. After His coming, that spiritual awareness takes flesh, as it were, in the form of prayer, bringing it to a new dimension. The difference between Lao Tzu and those who followed Christ after His coming, is that the latter bring into Lao Tzu's state of observant mind, a personal communion with the Tao, usually through direct invocation. Lao Tzu

said that he did not know the name of the Tao. Now we do know it, and so we invoke it, Lord Jesus Christ, all the while remembering that in order to pray it truly, we must pray it in the spirit, and so we must first do what Lao Tzu did—be watchful.

In conclusion, let us look at the final end of man, the way to which has been opened by Christ. This end is deification. In the Orthodox Christian tradition, deification can never be an absorption into the divine essence. Divine absorption is impersonal, while true deification is a personal communion with God, face-to-face, a communion of love. Man does not become God by nature or in essence, as Christ was and is. Rather, he becomes one with God through His energy, His grace.

The deification that Christ offers us begins in this life with our entrance into the Holy Mysteries of the Church. In the Church we are called toward an ever-closer union with God, a progress that is to continue forever in the Kingdom of Heaven. “Indeed,” said St. Simeon, the New Theologian, a saint of the 10<sup>th</sup> century, “over the ages, the progress will be endless, for an end of this growing toward the end without nothing, would be nothing but a grasping at the ungraspable. On the contrary, to be filled with Him, and to be glorified in His light, will cause unfathomable progress.”

In His last talk with his disciples before His crucifixion, Christ told them, “In my father’s house are many dwelling places. If it were not so, I would have told you. I go to prepare a place for you, and if I go to prepare a place for you, I will come again and receive you to Myself, that where I am, there you may be also, and where I go, you know, and the way, you know.” When Christ said this, his disciple, Thomas, asked Him, “Lord, we do not know where you are going, and how can we know the way?” Christ replied, “I am the way.” And thus, the Way of heaven, as he had been called by Lao Tzu, became the way to heaven.

That which the ancient Greeks called the Logos, and the ancient Chinese called the Tao, came to earth to open heaven to us. He became man so that we could forever dwell in Him, and He in us. He became man so that we could experience, throughout eternity, a full participation in Him through His uncreated energy. The final end of man is eternal union with God through Jesus Christ, the only

begotten Son of the unoriginate Father, the Way and Word of God, who became man for our sake. Amen.

**Host:** Before we start the questions, I would like to encourage everybody—Father Damascene just unloaded a lot on everybody (laughter), so I would encourage you to not allow embarrassment to impede you from asking questions. For those of you who are not Christians, Taoism as understood by Lao Tzu, is the most noble and subtle of philosophies. Father Damascene unfolded that for us. I personally know Father Damascene, I know he will be able to really break that down for you.

For those of you who are not Orthodox, this is a prime time for you to ask questions, and especially in this context, because this shows our greater understanding of God's creation and the unification that Christ came to bring to all mankind.

Now, for you Orthodox, don't allow you being Orthodox to keep you from asking questions, because this talk that Father Damascene just gave us, I believe, is one of the key principals to what brought so many of us to the faith, and the fact that it reveals the greater revelation of Jesus Christ and the unification and dominance in [respect to the idea?] that He brought to this planet for our salvation. So, with that, I would remind you, one question per guest, and please do not be afraid to come and ask questions.

**Questioner #1:** The *Tao Te Ching* says that the Tao is not understandable, and that anyone that understands the Tao, doesn't really understand the Tao. I wonder if you could speak to that, especially in the light of the role of natural revelation, as opposed to special revelation?

**Father Damascene:** We also say in the Orthodox Church that the essence of God, that is, God Himself, the nature of God, is not understandable, is not knowable. So in that sense, we would agree with that statement of Lao Tzu, but we also say that we can know God through His energies, the mode of existence of God in which He communicates Himself to us, and that He communicated Himself as tangibly as possible in the incarnation of Jesus Christ, the Son of Man.

So, although the essence of God is not knowable, we can become partakers of the divine nature [...] through Jesus Christ, and we can know as much about God as we can know, as much about the Tao as we can know, through the revelation of Jesus Christ. And we can, not only know, but participate, in God's life.

So the Orthodox Christian life, the life in Christ, is a life of participating in God's life, having God dwell within us, and knowing God experientially. But still, we have a distinction which the early fathers made, and even my patron saint, St. John Damascene made this distinction, and it was fleshed out more fully by St. Gregory Palamas, the distinction between God's essence and energies. St. Gregory said that we cannot know God's essence, but we can experience Him through His energies.

**Questioner #2:** Father Damascene, earlier you mentioned that Lao Tzu said that the Tao helps those that are virtuous. The Greeks, to my understanding, had a struggle with what virtue was. I was wondering if you could clarify his understanding of virtue.

**Father Damascene:** Lao Tzu's understanding of virtue was basically what he described in the *Tao Te Ching*. He gave very clear images of a sage—the sage was the wise person. He also gave teachings to rulers, leaders of people, how to behave. Virtuous, in Lao Tzu's understanding, would be a person who was selfless, who did not think of himself, who cared about others, who gave up his own will for the sake of those around him, who did not pit himself against others, who did not have possessiveness, ambition. "His heart is immeasurable," Lao Tzu said.

[...]

**Father Damascene:** By the way, in this sense, Lao Tzu's teaching was more like Christ's teaching than Confucius' teaching was, because Confucius was once asked, "If somebody does something bad to us, should we repay that with kindness?" Confucius said, "No because if you do that, then how are you going to repay the virtuous?" That's a very practical point of view, but Lao Tzu, I think, came closer to understanding the nature of the Tao, the nature of the Logos, of Christ, and because of this, he was able to come to this higher teaching, which is to basically repay evil with good. So that would be a key to your question about

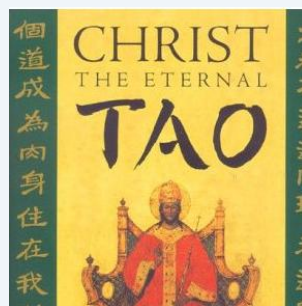
what Lao Tzu would regard as virtue.

**Questioner #3:** The term, the Tao, is referred to as “the” and it seems to me like he was trying to describe maybe a state of being or something rather than a thing, so if you could clarify that for me—what he was trying to get to. Do you understand my question?

**Father Damascene:** Yes, I understand. Of course, in Chinese, we do not have articles like “the” and “a,” but we do in Greek, we talk about the Logos, the Word, so Christ is called the Word of God, the Wisdom of God, so these are just words to describe the ultimate, the absolute. Perhaps there are some places when you read the *Tao Te Ching* that you might think he is referring to a way of being, but there are some places where he definitely talks about a kind of creator, not a creator as we know it in the Judeo-Christian revelation of creation *ex nihilo*.

I do not know if he fully taught that doctrine, because there is one place where Lao Tzu said, “All things arise from Tao.” Not quite the same as created and creating. But as Ji Ming Shen said, we could say that the Tao produces all things. So for Lao Tzu, the Tao existed prior to all things and all things came from Him, and all things were ordered by Him, or It. Lao Tzu might say It, but we would say Him, because we have a fuller understanding of God.

As I said, Lao Tzu did not fully understand God, or the Tao, as a person, but he described the Tao in ways that showed that he saw that the Tao had qualities like that of a person. The Tao was benevolent. The Tao only gave, never took. He cares for, shelters, nourishes, protects all things, but never seeks anything for Himself. So, as Ji Ming Shen said, the Tao of Lao Tzu is in the realm of being. The Tao is a being, the Tao is not just nothingness. The Tao has a quality of nothingness, the quality of nothingness, meaning spontaneity or selflessness, forgetting Himself.



# Christ the Eternal Tao

November 2009

Learn how Eastern Orthodox Christian spirituality provides seekers of our day clear guidance on acquiring stillness, overcoming the passions, dealing with thoughts, and cultivating the virtues, as well as precise teachings on spiritual \*deception, all of which\* guides seekers more safely and surely on the path to communion with God (Tao – Chinese). In the profound mystical and contemplative tradition of the Christian East, seekers are able to go well beyond the realizations in Eastern religions. A long – awaited answer for those who, having turned away from modern Western religiosity, are drawn to the freshness, directness and simplicity of Lao Tzu and eastern philosophies, and at the same time are strangely, inexplicably drawn back to the all-compelling reality of Jesus Christ.

The Speaker:

Hieromonk Damascene (Christensen) is an Eastern Orthodox priest, monk and spiritual child of ascetic and spiritual struggler Bl. Father Seraphim Rose, of St Herman of Alaska Monastery, Platina, California. Fr Damascene is the author of Fr Seraphim Rose: His Life And Works and Christ The Eternal Tao, as well as numerous articles on Eastern Orthodox faith, doctrine and spirituality.