

Dattatreya – The Eternal Guru

by

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Dattatreya occupies a singular place in Hindu tradition, revered as the archetypal Guru, a figure who stands outside lineage, institution, and sect. His form embodies the triune form of **Brahma** the creator, **Vishnu** the sustainer, and **Shiva** the dissolver. In him, the central impulses of Hindu thought meet not as doctrine, but as lived synthesis.

The story begins with **Anasuya**, the devoted wife of the sage **Atri**, celebrated for her chastity, ascetic discipline, and spiritual power. Her virtue was widely known and admired, and it drew the attention of the divine consorts **Saraswati**, **Lakshmi**, and **Parvati**. Moved by curiosity and unease, they resolved to test the limits of Anasuya's attainment and dispatched their husbands, Brahma, Vishnu, and Shiva, to her hermitage.

The three gods arrived disguised as wandering mendicants and asked Anasuya for alms. Their request, however, came with a condition meant to unsettle her. They would accept her offering only if she served it to them unclothed. This audacious demand was a veiled assault on her chastity, intended to test her inner fortitude.

Anasuya did not recoil, nor did she submit. Drawing upon her spiritual power, she transformed the three gods into infants. She then fed them her own breast milk, fulfilling their request without compromising her modesty. When Atri returned to the hermitage, he immediately recognised the divine nature of the children. The gods resumed their true forms and, awed by Anasuya's attainment, offered her a boon.

Anasuya and Atri, who had long desired offspring, asked that the triune divinity itself be born to them as a single child. Thus came into being **Dattatreya**, a

synthesis of Brahma, Vishnu, and Shiva. His name reflects this origin. Datta means given, while Atreya marks him as the son of Atri.

Dattatreya is revered as a Guru and a Yogi. He is depicted with three heads and six arms, representing the integrated powers of the trinity. He is always accompanied by four dogs and a cow. The dogs symbolise the four Vedas, sources of knowledge that remain steadfast and loyal. The cow symbolises nourishment and sustenance.

He is also known as a *digambara*, one clothed by the sky. This nakedness signifies the highest renunciation, the relinquishment of ego, and a state of complete detachment from worldly possessions, including even clothing. It embodies freedom from material and social constraints.

Across centuries, **Dattatreya** has stood apart from spiritual conformity. He belongs to no single school and submits to no dogma. In him are joined devotion, knowledge, and renunciation, different expressions of the same insight. This is why he appears repeatedly in Hindu tradition as the Guru of gurus, claimed by many yet owned by none.

This understanding helps explain **Dattatreya**'s resonance beyond Hindu tradition. The name **Datta** surfaces briefly in **T. S. Eliot**'s *The Waste Land*, where the poet reaches toward Upanishadic wisdom while confronting the spiritual exhaustion of the modern West.

Just as **Dattatreya** transcends the conventional paths of devotion, knowledge, and renunciation, Eliot's call for Datta invites the broken soul to surrender to a higher purpose, to give of itself in order to restore balance.

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