

## 24 Guru of Dattatreya



- 1) PRITHVI (mother earth)
- 2) VAYU (wind)
- 3) AKASHA (space - sky)
- 4) JAL (water)
- 5) AGNI (fire)
- 6) CHANDRA (moon)
- 7) SURYA (sun)
- 8) KAPOT (pigeon)
- 9) AJGAR (python)
- 10) SINDU (ocean)
- 11) PATANGA (bugs)
- 12) BHRAMAR (black bee)
- 13) MADHUKSHIKA (honey-gatherer)
- 14) GAJ (elephant)
- 15) MRIG (deer)
- 16) MIN (fish)
- 17) PINGALA (a courtesan)
- 18) KURARAPAKSHI (a bird of prey)
- 19) BALAK (children)
- 20) KUMARI (virgin)
- 21) SHARAKRIT (arrow maker)
- 22) SANF (snake)
- 23) MAKADI (spider)
- 24) BHRINGI (a species of wasp)

In the Uddhava Gita, a song embedded in the Bhagavata Purana (11.7-9), Dattatreya tells King Yadu about his 24 unusual gurus:

### 1. The Earth

The Earth is disrespectfully trodden on by all creatures but bears them all without complaint. So from Her, I learned to accept all of life's pleasures and pains with forbearance.

### 2. The Wind

Wind is of two types, Prana refers to the internal life forces and Vayu refers to the external movement of air. Prana is in all bodies but takes on the shape and form of the particular body it is in. Vayu passes everywhere but does not remain in one place. So from Prana and Vayu I learned to avoid attachment to any place but to adapt to wherever I might find myself.

### 3. Akasha

Akasha is one and all-pervading. From it I learnt that Brahman is one and all-pervading.

### 4. Water

Water purifies and sanctifies. From it I learnt to be a source of purity and sanctity.

### 5. Fire

Fire burns things leaving only their essence. From it I learnt that a yogi should see in beings not all the false opposites like rich-poor, old-young, high-low, but only the Atma which is the essence.

### 6. Moon

The one and same moon appears to go through changes, waxing, waning etc. From Him I learnt that the one atman only appears to go through changes such as birth and death.

### 7. Sun

The Sun through most of the year draws up moisture but during the monsoon the weather cycle results in all that moisture being released as rain. Thus all the living this are nourished. So from Him I learned to gather up all the energy normally dissipated in the body due to *avidya* (ignorance) and expend it in *tapas* (austerity) which lead to *jñana* (knowledge).

## 8. A pigeon

The *Kapot* is a kind of bird like a pigeon. It only has one mate which it pairs with for life. Once in a forest there was a *Kapot* who built a nest together with a female of the species. For years they lived together, laughing and having fun in each other's company. The female *Kapot* laid eggs that hatched into babies who were their parents pride and joy. Once, when the pair was out to find food for their children, a hunter came by and snared the chirping young ones in his net. The parents returned at that moment and seeing the fate of her offspring, the mother rushed towards them only to be caught herself. Seeing this father bird began to reflect: "I had the perfect life with all material comforts and a loving family. Now it is all gone so what is the point of living?" Despondent and unaware, he didn't notice the hunter coming after him until it was too late and he too was caught. From this I learned that although pleasure is found in this world, it is transient and ends in pain. So it is better to renounce it.

## 9. A python

The python is a big snake that is rather lazy. Instead of hunting for prey it just lies there and waits for prey to come to it. From it I learned not to seek to feed ones appetite but to accept whatever comes ones way.

## 10. The ocean

From close up the ocean is roiling with waves but from a larger perspective it is perfectly still. Furthermore though all the rivers of the world empty into the ocean it never becomes full. From it I learned that the vrittis of the mind (modification of the mind) and the agitations of the outside world though seemingly violent and unceasing become nothing but stillness in Brahman.

## 11. An insect

A moth or other insect is irresistibly drawn towards light even when as in the case of a fire it will destroy itself. From it I learned that the foolish seeker after desires will become a slave to them even to the point of self-destruction.

## 12. A black bee

A bee flits from flower to flower to collect its essence as food and the flower is not harmed by it. From it I learned that a sannyasi should not trouble a particular patron by depending on him even though it is the *grihastha dharma* (householder duty) to provide *bhiksha* (alms) to sannyasis but go from house to house to lessen the burden.

## 13. A honey-gatherer

Honey comes from another smaller species of bee. Like the bumblebee it collects nectar from flowers for its food but unlike the former, it stores it up as honey in

its hive. There it becomes a target for theft by bears and other animals, farmers etc. From it I learned that one should not store up food and wealth but only keep enough to stay alive for the moment.

#### 14. An elephant

The elephant is a mighty beast; very hard to capture but it has one weakness. In the rutting season the smell of a female elephant will drive it wild and it will rush headlong to the source of that smell. A skillful hunter can use that to trap it. From this I learnt that even those who are mostly unswayed by desire can be laid low if they have some lingering vice. So desire must be uprooted completely.

#### 15. A deer

A deer is also hard to catch because it can run so swiftly. But the beguiling sound of a flute mesmerizes it into inactivity where a hunter can trap it. From this I learnt that a yogi must stay away from music and other things that exist only to beguile the senses lest he become ensnared in samsara. (Bhajans and other types of devotional or meditative music are ok though because they have the opposite effect.)

#### 16. A fish

A fish is protected from hunters by living in the deep water. But clever humans attach bait to fishing lines. The fish gets caught on the hook in the very mouth that greedily relished the taste of the bait. From it He learned that one should only take food which is sattvika and avoid that which is only cooked in order to excite the palate.

[Some of these examples show the dangers of relying on the senses. The moth met its doom due to sight; the elephant due to smell; the deer due to sound; and the fish due to taste. A wise man controls all the senses.]

#### 17. Pingala the courtesan

In Videha there lived a courtesan named Pingala. Each night she would dress in her finest most alluring clothes and ornaments and stand in the doorway of her home enticing passing men to come and spend the night with her for money and pleasure. One night many men passed by on the street and she watched them thinking "oh this one is rich" and "oh that one is handsome" but nobody came to her. As the hours wore on she became more and more depressed and anxious. Eventually she gave up waiting for a lover altogether. And then she had an illumination. She realized she did not need the attention of others for happiness and sadness occurs within. From then on she decided to live a disciplined and moral life. And that is the lesson I learned from her.

### 18. A bird of prey

A small bird of prey found some carrion and rushed away with it, constantly in fear that it would be taken away. Sure enough, a group of larger birds of prey who had no meat of their own came and stole it away from him. Unexpectedly the small bird of prey felt relief that he no longer had to worry about protecting the carrion. From this I learned that possessions only make one fearful of their loss and it is better to renounce them all.

### 19. A baby

A baby has no sense of respect or offense. It may laugh or cry or sleep or wake but these are all fleeting states which are forgotten as they pass. From this I learned that emotions are transient and, like a baby, a yogi should just let them pass over him and be forgotten.

### 20. A young woman

A girl was of marriageable age and the parents of a suitor were to come and visit her. But they arrived unexpectedly when the girl's own parents were away. So she welcomed them herself and quickly went into the kitchen to prepare something for them to eat. As she was grinding the flour, the many bangles on her wrists began clashing. The girl stopped, thinking "By hearing this sound, the guests will know I am preparing food myself" [and therefore that the family is poor.] So she removed all but two of the bangles and began grinding flour again. Still their sound could be heard. So she took one more off and was able to complete her task in quiet. From her I learned that wherever there are lots of people there will be unnecessary talk and gossip. Even with only two there will be the same.

It is better to be by oneself and take a vow of silence.

### 21. An arrow-maker

A certain arrow-maker supplied his weapons for the army of a king. He prided himself on his work and once was so engrossed in it that when the king came by he failed to see him let alone salute him. From him I learned that a yogi should meditate with complete one-pointed focus like the tip of an arrow. Only such *dhyana* (meditation) leads to the supreme goal.

### 22. A snake

A snake lives a solitary life, it does not remain in one place, it is silent in movement, it does not build any kind of residence but finds shelter in whatever cave or hole etc. is available. From it, I learned the code of conduct of a muni. To live alone, wander from place to place, not to engage with other people but pass silently, and to find shelter in any place.

### 23. A spider

A spider secretes raw material from its body and then swallows it again to create silk threads which it uses to create elaborate webs. From it I learned that Brahman expands the material universe from itself and as Ishvara creates, maintains, and destroys it from His own Maya.

### 24. Bhringi (a species of wasp)

There are some species of wasp that can actually trap small insects such as aphids and use them as sort of farm animals or even a place to lay their eggs. One such insect was trapped in this manner and out of fear began serving the wasp gradually identifying more and more with it until eventually it began to think it was a wasp! From it I learned that feelings such as fear or love or lust for power can alter our self-identity but knowledge of the true nature of the self only shines when such feelings are given up.

Thus Bhagavan Dattatreya, the Yogeshwar and Avadhuta related his 24 gurus.

Then he added that there is a 25th.

### 25. The Atma.

Dattatreya said: "All these Gurus who bestowed their knowledge upon me were not external, but only aspects of my own Self so it this Self, this Atman which is not different than Brahman, immortal and pervading all which is the true form of the Guru."

At that King Yadu fell at his feet. Accepting the king's salutations, Dattatreya blessed him and continued his wanderings.