

### **Awadhoot Dattatreya and his twenty four Gurus**

Awadhoot Dattatreya was the son of Rishi Atri. Due to a boon from Lord Vishnu, Rishi Atri and his wife Anusuya had three sons; Durvasa, Chandrama and Dattatreya. In course of history these three brothers have become famous as incarnations of Shiva, Brahma and Vishnu. Dattatreya was the eldest among them. Right from childhood, seeds of 'Gyan' (Knowledge of self) and 'Vairagya' (disattachment) had sprouted and with time they grew stronger. After the death of Rishi Atri, people placed Dattatreya on the throne and gave him the responsibility of running the kingdom. Although due to people's persuasion he accepted the role he couldn't continue there for long. Day by day the fire of vairagya burned brightly. Soon, he gave up the throne and started wandering the forests dressed like an 'Awadhoot'. Once in a while he would come in contact with people and quench their thirst for Gyan (knowledge of the self).

Once, a king, seeing him walk in a trance asked him, "O King! Due to which great person's grace do you experience this bliss? Which great soul is your guru?" In response to these questions Dattatreya replied, "One's soul in one's true Guru. Only after enlightenment does one experience Liberation and Bliss. O king, I have not made any particular person as my guru. I have learnt from different animals, different things and different places. Therefore I treat every source of my learning as my guru. Thus I have twenty four gurus in total and from each of them I have learnt a specific thing."

The king said, "Lord, could you please tell me who these twenty four gurus are and what you have learnt from each of them?" Seeing the king's eagerness Dattatreya said, "O king! Earth, water, fire, wind, sky, moon, sun, pigeon, python, ocean, kite, bee, honeybee, elephant, deer, fish, prostitute Pingala, eagle, child, young girl, snake, arrow-maker, silkworm and a Bhringi insect- these are my twenty four gurus.

From my first guru, the earth, I have learnt to forgive and be benevolent. Life forms constantly exploit the earth in so many ways but the earth bears all the atrocities quietly. The earth doesn't do anything for herself and continues to give man so many things. No one else can be compared to her in terms of benevolence and forgiveness. It is due to these qualities that the earth has been called mother and is adorned with other such adjectives. Having taught me this I consider mother earth as my guru.

My second guru is water. Water is extremely clean and sweet. These two qualities never leave the water. Qualities of cleanliness and sweetness is what water has taught me. The inherent tendency of the soul is purity and bliss. Therefore every person must be pure and in bliss, since the soul is every person's true nature. Hence, when one is in sync with the true nature then in this state placidness is inherent.

O king, other than its own stomach the fire has no other vessel (fire eats up anything and everything, it stores nothing). From fire I have learnt that except for the stomach I have no means of storing and hence there is no point in accumulating, even for the future. Therefore fire is my third guru.

O king, wind wanders continuously everywhere but it doesn't get associated with any object. The life force (pran-vayu) too flows inside the body and doesn't get associated with any object. Similarly I too keep wandering but never get attached to any object I come across. Having taught me this I consider air as my fourth guru.

O king, the vast, omnipresent sky has infinite stars, moons, suns, planets, clouds, air etc. These are always present but the sky never gets influenced by them. Similarly 'aatma' (soul) is present everywhere and at the same time remains disattached. It is not influenced by the mind or body. This is what I have learnt from the sky and hence it is my fifth guru.

O king, the circumference of the moon is always complete. At the time of the eclipse when the earth's shadow falls on it, it appears to grow bigger or smaller. Similarly aatma (soul) is also always complete, there is no increase or decrease in it. This knowledge that the soul is complete by itself is what I have learnt from the moon. Therefore it is my sixth guru.

O king, just like how the sun due to its energy attracts drops of water and then again gives it up in the form of rain, an enlightened person uses the senses and also renounces them. He doesn't get adulterated by them or controlled by them. This is what I have learnt from my seventh guru, the sun.

King, once a male and female pigeon's baby got trapped in a hunter's trap. The mother pigeon due to deep grief voluntarily gave up its life. Witnessing this, the male pigeon too, unable to bear the grief of his son and wife, jumps inside the hunter's trap. Seeing three trapped birds the hunter returns home feeling very happy. Seeing this I realized how worldly love results in such lethal sadness. It also became clear to me that it is this 'moha' that is the cause for the cycle of life and death. Therefore I reached the conclusion that it is best to renounce moha. This is what I learnt from the pigeon couple and they are my eighth guru.

O king, a python just stays at one place and by fate whichever animal comes close to it, the python makes it its food. It doesn't try to seek more than that or save up. I too feel content by the food that comes to me and don't try to store for the future. This is my learning from a python. Therefore he is my ninth guru.

Infinite rivers and streams merge in the sea but the sea doesn't lose its identity. Similarly an enlightened person comes into contact with thousands of objects but he doesn't stray from the true nature. This is my learning from my tenth guru, the sea.

O king, just like how a moth attracted by the form of the fire jumps into it and loses everything, attracted by the beauty of a woman a man too can fully engulf himself in her and lose everything. There is only one way to prevent this – to submerge the mind in the aatma (soul) at all times. This is what the moth has taught me and therefore he is my eleventh guru.

O king, just like how a bee goes from one flower to another collecting nectar, I too go from one household to another to seek alms to fill my stomach. I consider the bee that taught me this as my twelfth guru.

The honeybee puts in so much effort and stores honey but usually a man comes by and takes-away everything. Similarly man perseveres all his life, stores money and jewels but time comes and takes away his loved belongings. From this I concluded that there is great pain in storing and the teacher who taught me this, the honeybee, is my thirteenth guru.

An elephant when blinded by sexual desire gets excited seeing even a wooden-elephant and jumps into a deep well. After this he has to stay chained and lead a very restricted and harsh life. Similarly

man too in greed of sex gets overpowered by it and falls into deep traps of the world. Therefore renunciation of sexual desires is the best – this is my learning from my fourteenth guru.

Attracted by the sweet music of a hunter a deer loses its life. Similarly man too gets attracted by delightful objects and brings doom upon himself. Therefore it is best to stay away from such objects. The deer having taught me this is my fifteenth guru.

In greed of food, fish gets trapped in the fishing hook and loses its life. Similarly, man too in greed of taste gets lost in it and later has to bear a lot of difficulties. Giving up this greed brings peace and the fish that has given me this message is my sixteenth guru.

O king, in a town there lived a prostitute called Pingala. Once, in anticipation of a customer she spent the night with great restlessness. Half-way through the night when nobody had still come, she chided herself and said, “If I had the same extent of feverishness for seeking god that I have in anticipation of sensual pleasures, I would have felt so much more happier!. Realizing this she gave up her desire for money and sensual pleasures and slept peacefully. Renunciation of desires is what I learnt from her and so she is my seventeenth guru.

Once an eagle was flying with a piece of meat in its beak. Seeing the eagle, other birds attacked her and tried to snatch the meat. Frustrated by this the bird gave up and threw the meat away. Once it threw the meat away the other birds stopped to attack. Similarly as long as man continues to hold on to worldly things he continues to be harassed. As soon as he gives them up he experiences peace. This learning I got from the eagle and therefore it is my eighteenth guru.

A baby that feeds on mother’s milk is so relaxed and happy while drinking the milk. I too experience contentment and live happily with the food that I obtain as part of my learning journey. Having taught me this, a baby is my nineteenth guru.

O king I once went to a house in a village seeking (bhiksha) alms. Other than a young girl there was nobody at home. At that time she was pounding grains. During the act, due to the sound from the bangles reaching out she felt shy and removed the bangles one by one placing them on the side. Finally even with just two bangles in each hand there was still some sound and she further removed one from each hand. The sound then ceased. Seeing this I concluded that when living with many people arguments are bound to happen. Even if there are just two people arguments can occur over a variety of topics. Just like how the girl had to keep only one bangle to stop the sound an enlightened man lives in himself and renounces everything else. Living alone in oneself is what I learnt from the girl and she is my twentieth guru.

Snakes never make their own houses. They live in places made by others. Similarly I have also not built my own home. I live in temples made by others or mountains/ caves made by nature. Having taught me this, snakes are my twenty first guru.

O king, I once saw a person making arrows. He was so engrossed in it that he didn’t even realize when a king’s army passed by him. I learnt this single-point focus from him. Therefore he is my twenty second guru.

A silk worm secretes juice and winds it all around its own body. Gradually it dies in its own silk. Due to continuously secreting and winding the silk all around itself the worm gets so entangled that it is

unable to come out of it and eventually dies. Similarly man too gets so trapped by his own desires that he is unable to overcome them. Therefore other than renunciation of desires there is no way for man to save himself from getting terribly trapped. This, I have learnt from the silk-worm and therefore it is my twenty third guru.

The Bhringi insect, for its food, brings an insect and locks it up inside its house. The trapped insect constantly listens to the buzzing sound from the Bhringi, constantly thinks about the predator and finally becomes a Bhringi himself! He then becomes free from the fear of the Bhringi. Similarly I too constantly think (meditate) upon my self and become fearless. I don't get attached to my body. Due to this renunciation of body-moha that the Bhringi has taught me I consider it my twenty fourth guru.

O king, having thus learnt from twenty four gurus, I stay steady in my own self and experience bliss and Liberation. I wander the world relaxed, blissful, satisfied and in a state where there is no duality.

Hearing Dattatreya the king also learnt the crux of life and in course of time got free from attachments and became worthy of enlightenment. The scripture, 'Awadhoot Geeta' scripted by Awadhoot Dattatreya is a very famous and beneficial scripture. There may not be a single sage who doesn't respect it. Through this scripture the thirst of a true seeker can be quenched.

**Shankaranand**