

# Dattatreya

by Danny Lowe

based on a talk at Treadwells bookshop given on 11 October, 2004

This talk is about the Hindu Deity and yogi figure, Dattatreya. I wanted to talk about him because he's an interesting and little known figure (at least in the West), who I find fascinating and well deserving of our attention. Also because I felt that talking about Dattatreya would provide many useful jumping off points for discussing some aspects of the tantric traditions, Indian religion and my own practice, which might provide some insight into what it means to be thinking about and practising Tantra in the UK in the 21st Century. Before moving onto him, I thought it might be useful to talk a little about why how these talks came about - basically, this series of talks have arisen out of the meetings of the London Tantra discussion group, which is a loose informal group that arisen from a mutual interest in Tantra - this interest usually but not exclusively sparked off by some involvement or contact with the old AMOOKOS network.

AMOOKOS was an East-West order that arose out of the contact between Mike Magee and a guy called "Dadaji". Dadaji was an Englishman who, after contact with Crowley in the thirties, had eventually gone to India in the early 1950s and taken up the sadhu lifestyle, this being the life of a homeless holy man. Dadaji received initiation into the *Adi-Natha sampradaya* (sampradaya is a Sanskrit word which means line of initiation - it implies a lineage of initiates, most lineages traces themselves back to various semi-legendary yogis) and he passed this onto Mike, who founded AMOOKOS in this country. We've been meeting fortnightly (more or less) now for more than three years to discuss different ideas arising from studying and practising Tantra. There's quote from the *Kulanarva Tantra* that serves as a kind of "statement of intent" for the group which is "*direct personal experience and good company are the two clear eyes of the seeker*" - so, firstly, one's own experience is what's important and as such this supersedes what you've read, or perhaps imagined or idealised about practices - and secondly, this quote emphasises that it's important and useful to have some kind of social context within which to share and discuss this experience and these ideas for all sorts of reasons - friendship, support, encouragement, someone to offer constructive criticism and new insights and to point out your blind spots - we learn best with other people around us, I think.

A practice we've used a lot is that of attempting small, ongoing meditations as a kind of "homework" and bringing our experiences back to the group for discussion, One of the main things this reinforces for me is how different everyone's experience is, even of the simplest practices, time and time again, our experience varies hugely - this brings home that in this work there's no one, right, definitive way. Everyone's experience will vary but everyone's experience is equally valuable - it cuts away the idea that there's one big authority to kowtow to and conform with. We're trying to get away from the idea that there's one central authorial voice and position that is correct, the notion that there's "one right way" to do things and practice, and also from the idea that knowledge is produced in isolation from other people. As I said, our best

learning experiences are often with others, and I think with something that should be a lived and experiential process like Tantra, this is essential. I think to really get to grips with something you've got to try and live it a bit. One way we've done this for instance is to work on collaborative documents with more than one interpretation of an exercise, the use of a group wiki etc.

This relates to this talk, and Dattatreya, in terms of the way in which he's been appropriated and interpreted by so many differing facets of Indian religion - what's now known as Hinduism. When I was researching this talk (my main source has been Antonio Rigopolous's excellent book *Dattatreya: The Immortal Guru, Yogin and Avatara*) I wondered if there was an area of Indian religion that Dattatreya wouldn't crop up in. Rigopolous actually refers to him as a "honeybee" yogin, as he seems to move around from sect to sect. So just as I believe there's no one right way for everyone, there's no one single unified definitive vision of Dattatreya. What I'm going to do here is present some of this history alongside my own experience, to attempt to present a picture that takes into account of some of this complexity.

## **Who is Dattatreya?**

I first encountered the figure of Dattatreya in a book called *Tantra Magick* which was a collection of AMOOKOS papers. In a sense, this whole talk is a spin off from that encounter. A brief meditation was given which introduced Dattatreya - he's a naked man, sitting in front of a sacrificial fire meditating, surrounded by four black dogs. He's got matted hair, a necklace of rudraksha beads and is smeared with ashes. The meditator is encouraged to identify with the figure of Dattatreya and offer up one's conditioning to the black dogs and the fire as a sacrifice. So firstly, what can we tell from this image? What could I glean from this with my cursory knowledge of Hinduism? Well, the matted hair and the lack of clothing indicate that he's rejected a lot of the niceties of society. This, and his meditative pose, point him out as a devotee of Shiva, who's often reported as meditating in cremation ground surrounded by all sorts of ghouls and goblins. The ashes obviously refer to the cremation ground and the fact someone would smear himself in them points to an unusual relationship with death, and given that death is such a taboo, an unusual relationship with society itself. In Hindu culture/ religiosity, death itself is often seen as polluting so we've got someone who has embraced polluting symbols. Doing some further reading, I discovered that in Dattatreya's iconography shows that he's often accompanied by a cow. I probably don't have to talk too much about the cow and it's sacredness in Indian - the source of milk, and dairy products, it's sacredness resting on it's role as great provider, often likened to a mother, with a huge taboo against the eating of beef. Just in the comparison of these two bytes of information, I think there's already an interesting contrast emerging - between the orthodox societal values of Indian society - commonly referred to as Vedic or Brahmanical - and antinomian, anti-society characteristics. This is something I'll be examining later.

## **Sadhus**

So, with the absence of clothing and the yogic pose, Dattatreya appears to be a part of a tradition (or to be more accurate, variety of traditions) that have been part of the Indian cultural and religious landscape for thousands of years, that of the ascetic or mendicant, the renouncer,

someone who to one degree or another has given up on society and its rewards for a spiritual search. I'm not going to talk very much about these traditions, as they've a long and complex history all of their own, I just wanted to situate Dattatreya within them. There are early descriptions of naked ascetics in the *Rg Veda* which has been dated back as far as 1500BC, a hymn here describes a group of naked long-haired sages undergoing ecstatic trances which sound very much like later descriptions of renunciators. The *Upanishads*, which date from roughly 600-300BC, make clear mention of ascetic traditions, so we know that they existed from at least this time, both on the fringes of Vedic society, and outside of it in the religions of Jainism and Buddhism.

Even if Dattatreya's origins can't actually be traced this far back, it's certainly part of his mythology and the set of ideas around him. Dadaji, for instance, places him back as far as 4000 years ago, with his nakedness a sign of his naturalness, a remnant of an earlier pagan age. I should also point out that the reasons behind renunciation are complex and varied, having nothing to do with Western notions of individualism, protest or dropping out, and they change and evolve as Indian society changes. Amongst this complexity, the thing I found fascinating is the notion that the withdrawal from social life for a hermetic or spiritual existence is socially sanctioned. Some authorities present renunciation as the final stage of one's life, once one has completed one's social duties and economic life. The *Manu Smirti* states that when one becomes old and grey and sees ones grandchildren, one should retreat into the forest to become a hermit - "constantly devoting himself to the recitation of the Veda, he should be friendly and mentally composed, he should always be a giver, not a taker and compassionate to all living beings".

One map I like, which points to the same socially sanctioned spirituality, but which doesn't wait till you're old and grey, can be found in the lore of the *Sri Yantra*, which is a yantra representing the Goddess Lalita - it is surrounded by four "oceans" which are the aims of life - dharma, artha, kama and moksha - these being social duty, the acquisition of wealth, sensual pleasure and spiritual fulfilment respectively. I like the idea that achievement in the world is balanced with other goals - there's no total turning away from the world in favour of spiritual - it simply exists as a balanced component of the overall picture. With his nakedness as a sign of "sainthood", his sadhu status, we can connect Dattatreya to that constellation of ideas. (I should add here that there's a huge time difference between the composition of the *Manu Smirti* and the texts of *Sri Vidya* - just because they refer to a similar idea, doesn't in any way mean they're talking about exactly the same thing. There are a multitude of different constructions of meaning around renunciation, asceticism and sainthood. In a religious context as wide, diverse and just plain old as India, nothing is ever straightforward).

## **The Guru and Initiation**

As well as being a renunciate, Dattatreya is also a guru figure, a spiritual teacher. He's a kind of archetype of the guru, the legendary founder of the Nathas, the Nathas being a grouping of various different yogic lineages, including that expressed through AMOOKOS. Although the word Guru has passed into English usage, it's still an alien concept to our culture and it's perhaps difficult to get our heads around. Two of the most common associations would be that of authority figure (i.e. the pope) or object of extreme devotion (such as various of the Eastern

gurus who're regarded as living incarnations of the gods by their disciples i.e. Sai Baba). Both of these associations are a bit unappealing to the more critical of us - perhaps rightly so, as there are numerous reported abuses of power and scandals involving spiritual teachers, their teachings only serving as a key to get into their disciples wallets or knickers.

However, I don't think these negatives are the solely the fault of the Guru institution in itself. While I would concede one can find a lot of thoughtless deification of gurus by both Eastern and Western disciples, a bit of digging will bring up another more critical perspective. If we go back to the *Kulanarva Tantra* again, we can find the following:

"Gurus as numerous as lamps in every house, but, O Goddess difficult to find is a guru who lights up everything like the sun. Gurus who rob their disciples of their wealth are numerous, but, O Goddess, it is difficult to find is a guru who takes away his devotees suffering."

In a more contemporary work about woman saints in India, *Women in Ochre Robes* by Meena Khandelwal, the process of shopping around for gurus is mentioned and likened to how one would shop for a car. So, still in contemporary India, a selective perspective is encouraged. And as part of this selection, one might opt to have more than one teacher. Most of the descriptions of lives of Indian sadhus I've read has them learning from a variety of teachers. This is perhaps part of the purpose of their wanderings - to absorb teaching from differing individuals. Dadaji for instance, had numerous gurus in a variety of different traditions including Taoism, Theodera and Mahayana Buddhism, picked up in circumnavigations all over South Asia.

Gurus are teacher figures, but this ties in for me with the idea of knowledge and the production of knowledge in a social context that I've already mentioned, the way you learn something bouncing it about a group gives a whole different perspective than that we'd reach on ones own. Guru is a kind of recognition of the shared and collective quality of our learning. This also relates to Indian social models for me - in contrast to the notions of the self in the West as very self-determined and individualistic, Indian ideas of self can be very much about where you are in society - in terms of caste, family. I think guru relationships have to be seen as part of this as well. Considering the whole subject of the production of knowledge and understanding, it seems vital to have some sort of context in which this is assisted. If Guru in it's broader sense, refers to understanding, and the realisation and application of knowledge (something I will address below), the process whereby Tantra becomes more than a collection of dry books and facts and become personal and experiential, living truths - then the group is one of its many faces.

I'll say a little about initiation traditions in Tantra. To look at these in the abstract, they can seem quite formal - such and such initiated by such and such, a very easy, traceable progression. A guru appoints a successor who has sole authority for his lineage and so on. However, in real life, the way things actually occur, there's never this neat progression - people fall out, die, fall prey to factionalism and argument. There's never this easily traceable lineage - so I think what's really important, what really matters is the quality of the living relationships between individuals. People get very hung up on who initiated who, and so on but a lot of the time this seems to me and obsession with outer forms rather than inner meaning. What really matters, the heart of the lineage, is the relationships which isn't something that will conform with the historians family

trees. This is part of the meaning of the word sampradaya to me - line of initiation. My own closest and most intense relationship within the lineage was with someone other than the person who formally initiated me. I see the lineage as reaching back from the connections I've had with people in it, these living relationships, reaching back through those I don't know, moving back through history, back into the realms of myth, with Dattatreya as archetypal source. As guru, Datta is a symbol of these differing kinds of relationships. He's a symbol of the external guru, and he is also a symbol for the inner guru, which I'll come to later.

## History

Before doing so, I'm going to look at his actual historical origins and history. My purpose in doing this is both to give you some backstory to Dattatreya and origins, to give you some information about his origins - some specifics with relation to Dattatreya, the variety of different ways he's used and appropriated between traditions, to give a more rounded picture.

I have to dip into the ocean of Indian mythology, which is a bit daunting - not just because there's so much of it, but because the fine lines between myth and history just aren't there.

Firstly I'm going to be quoting from one of the Puranas and these aren't just collections of myths - they are better thought of as collections of oral traditions which also contain are genealogies of both deities and kings, cosmologies, law codes and descriptions of rituals and pilgrimages. Also, these texts are distanced from our current understanding by extreme age, the differences in culture, the variety of interpretations that have accrued around them. A quote from Dadaji seems appropriate here:

Non Indians, and even Indians themselves, making an investigation into the spiritual life of this land, soon find they have stumbled onto the most complex and outwardly confusing pattern of thought which has existed at any place in the world, or at any time throughout history. It's scriptural texts are enormous, it's deities so numerous, it's teachers so diverse, and in a land of teeming millions everyone seems to belong to a separate sect of which they are the only member.

This has certainly been my feeling several times on looking at the sea of Indian myth and ritual. Dadaji reassuringly goes onto say that a "golden thread" underlies and unites all this material, which is perhaps a slight exaggeration on his part. I'm going to look at three texts, the first two more orthodox, the final one tied more into the yogic traditions that I'm interested in.

So where does Dattatreya first occur? There are a few references to him in the famous Hindu epic the Mahabharata. He doesn't just spring out of the blue - he's born as part of a family and a lineage. His mother is Anasuya and his father is Atri, who's been linked to early forms of the fire god Agni. To narrate every single reference to Atri or Datta would be beyond the scope of this talk. He has two brothers, Soma and Durvasas. The phrase "Datta" actually has the meaning of "given" or "granted" and one common etymology for Dattatreya's name is "he who was given" (Datta) to Atri (Atreya)- as Atri desired a son, and the gods were pleased with his penance and austerity, the god Vishnu gave himself up and was born to Anusuya. Another popular explanation is he has "given up" (Datta) the three - treya. "The three" here is a reference to the three gunas of Indian philosophy - rajas, sattavas and tamas - which is a tripartite schema for

classifying the physical world. This etymology implies Dattatreya is beyond these mundane categories.

## **The Markendeya Purana**

One of the earliest and most developed account is in the *Markendeya Purana* - possibly one of the oldest of the puranas, dated to the 7th century BCE (although there is some speculation that the stories contained within date to the 3-4 century). In Chapter 17, Dattatreya is introduced as a sage who to escape the attentions of his disciples and to free himself of all attachments is said to have plunged into the bottom of a lake. The Munis, his disciples (a bunch of naked forest dwelling sages) wait on the bank to worship him, but when he arises he is accompanied by a beautiful woman and is drinking liquor and playing a musical instrument, all three things which are breaches of orthodoxy and ritual taboo. Despite this, the Munis do not abandon him, but rather curiously interpret his behaviour as demonstrating his supreme dispassion and detachment. They worship him as he continues to perform austerities accompanied by his woman.

Chapter 18 also contains a tale which has a similar theme of immorality behind it. It tells of king Arjuna Kartavirya who resolves to rule worthily. He's advised by his courtier, Garga, to offer worship to Dattatreya and told the following tale. The gods have fought several battles with the demon Jambha but have been defeated - this is a very common theme in Indian myth, an upset of the cosmic equilibrium which the gods are unable to readdress, so they have to call on or create some kind of supernatural readdress - they are advised to approach Dattatreya, who is known for his perverted outer conduct - they find him "at sport" with a woman, while drinking wine and listening to music. He protests he is unable to help, as he is unable to subdue his sense. But the gods state that they recognise Dattatreya as actually "stainless", that is, these impure actions aren't touching his essence, that he's a God, and that the fallen woman is actually Lakshmi, mother of the world, and continue to beg his assistance. He asks them to bring the demons before him - so he can destroy them with his fiery gaze. The demons have actually penetrated his hermitage, where the Gods, utterly defeated, have taken refuge - seeing Dattatreya's wife, they fall prey to lust, seize her and carry her off. Because of this Dattatreya renders them powerless, and the Gods are now able to slaughter them.

In Chapter 19 King Arjuna offers worship to Dattatreya who again refuses to help him, pleading much the same reasons. Arjuna worships him by massaging his feet, making offerings of food, water, honey, perfume and garlands - and says to him "why dost thou beguile me, my lord, resorting to illusory desires? Sinless thou art and this brahman lady is the path of all existence". Dattatreya is thus pleased and states that whoever worships him will gain gratification, children and wealth especially if they worship with meat, strong drink and musical instruments. He grants King Arjuna a number of the boons he asks for - knowledge of the customs of others, to be irresistible in fights, the dexterity of 1000 arms, death only from a superior man and freedom from impoverishment for his people.

This Purana also goes on to give the story of Alarka which is used as a jumping off point for Dattatreya's exposition of yoga. Over several chapters he details the nature of Yoga, the results of yoga, suggestions for practice and gives information on the life of a yogi, and interestingly, the

natural phenomena and dreams with which the yogi is able to predict his own coming death.

Now, one way of reading these immoral actions is much in the way that the stories do - that it's possible to commit immoral actions and be free from the consequences of one's deeds is possibly through the practice of yoga. One can commit a sinful act if one is untouched by self-interest. That's one interpretation. However, I think there more going on in these stories than that. We can see the attempts to justify Dattatreya's behaviour in the name of his underlying purity, as a strategy, for explaining away the antinomian and blasphemous content of his myths. Rigopolous argues that the elements of the stories referring to sex and booze are tantric characterisations. Possibly the original or proto-Dattatreya would have been a yogin - perhaps a historical figure who became legendary whose myths are sanitised by later more devotional orientated and pollution conscious sects. I've already mentioned he's seen as an incarnation of Vishnu, but there's something of a collision of this identity with the whole idea of him as a yogi - as yogins are normally linked to Shiva. It's possibly that what we're seeing here, in the earliest of written records, is the manipulation of his identity with an older, more heterodox layer explained away, to tie in with something that fits ideas of ritual purity etc.

## **The Guru Caritra**

I'm going to skip forward quite a few centuries to get to one of the most significant Dattatreya texts in contemporary worship - the *Guru Caritra* (the Life of the Guru). This was written in the middle of the sixteenth century in Maharashtra. It's still a very popular text in this area. It's basically a dual hagiography about the life of two holy men, Sripada Shrivallabha and Nrshima Sarasvati. Both are regarded as avatars of Dattatreya - an avatara being a "descent form", kind of embodiment, a living incarnation of the deity. There's a doctrine that throughout the ages, Vishnu reincarnate so re-establish the dharma (dharma can be translated as "law" but also has the connotations of "social duty" i.e. the correct performance of Vedic rituals). In the Bhagvada Gita Vishnu is quoted as saying "For whenever the dharma languishes and adharma flourishes, I take on existence from aeon to aeon for the rescue of the good ... in order to re-establish the law". So an "avatara" is connected with the idea of periodic renewal. Even though Datta is regarded as an avatar of Vishnu, he's also regarded as a deity in his own right and there are lots of Gurus and saints who are regarded as his avatars, even outside of the sampradaya (line of initiation) that descends from Sripada and Nrshima that I'm describing here.

The text links Datta to the birth of each of these gurus. In the first story, Dattatreya visits the home of a pious Brahmin couple, Apalaraja and his wife Sumati, disguised as a beggar, and is served with such honour even though the couple are in the middle of a Vedic ceremony, that he reveals his true identity and grants them a boon. Sumati asks that she might become the mother of a son worthy of such a deity - and it is so, and Sripada is born.

The accounts of the lives of the two saints given in the Caritra contain a lot of similarities, such as being able to recite the Vedas from an early age, and renunciation of life to go pilgrimage, the refusal of marriage - announcing that they are already married to yoga, and the performance of various miracles and acts of healing. This is popularly explained by the fact of Nrshima being a reincarnation of Sripada. A story is narrated of a village widow, Ambika, who is on the point of suicide because her son is foolish and cannot support them through work. Sripada takes pity on

them and instructs them to undertake vows and continuously worship Siva - and as a result the foolish boy is transformed into a wise and learned man. Sripada promises Ambika that in her next life she would have a son like himself, foretelling his birth as Nrshima Sarasvati. Some of the stories given in this work, acts such as reviving the dead and feeding 3000 from a small pot reminded me of a certain famous healer from another tradition. These two figures came to be regarded as actually founders of the Dattatreya cult as a "religion" which was and is still very popular.

### **Dattatreya and Islam**

The Caritra is actually quite an orthodox text, which places a strong emphasis on Vedic religion and orthodox values. It emphasizes karma and dharma - ritual observance and duty - rather than the path of knowledge and yoga. This can be seen as largely due to the cultural context of the time, when the Maharashtra region was under Islamic rule, and had an encroachment of Sufi religion - so there's a traditionalist revival, as a counter movement. However, funnily enough, if we actually look at the tradition as it occurred and we look back at the gurus in the Dattatreya sampradaya, there's a conflicting trend going on, in that many of them are clearly Sufis or pirs. Why this confusion then? I believe this goes back to Datta's original antinomian nature as mentioned before. Outside of the Caritra, this orthodox text, Dattatreya had been adopted by groups such as the Nathas, who had connections with Islam, and was attractive to various other unorthodox groups - his appeal to fringe groups and orders such as the Nathas made it "natural" to a degree for him to cross over to Islam. So an orthodox move against Islam actually cuts counter to the popular mood of the time of the text's composition, which was one of cross-cultural synthesis.

We can see this in the accounts of the visions of Eknath, an important sixteenth century poet and religious thinker. An account is given of Eknath's darshana (vision) of Dattatreya, in the company of his guru, Janardan. He appears as a Muslim soldier on horseback, covered in weaponry and "speaking the language of the Muhammedans" - Eknath distrusts this vision, doesn't believe it can be his guru's God and is also worried about sharing food with a Muhammedan - object of pollution - therefore, he makes the vision disappear. However, later Dattatreya reappears as a Muslim faquir, accompanied by a woman and a dog. Eknath hangs back doubtful and while he eats, then Dattatreya invites him over and feeds him and blesses him - the woman turns out to be Lakshmi, and the dog is another Hindu saint. Dattatreya feeds Eknath and blesses him before disappearing. Eknath is an interesting figure actually - whose aim was to find practices and beliefs that unified Islam and Hinduism into a higher, mystical truth (ekavata). He was against conversion, regarding it as a product of ignorance, and was once summoned to Varanasi to appear before the Brahmin authorities, due to his translation of the a sacred text into the language of the sudras (the low castes). He's seen as one of the last great cultural synthesists, Hinduism and Islam seem to fall into a more oppositional relationship after his time.

One final note on Dattatreya and pollution regards the links with Islam. There are actually a number of Dattatreya temples in contemporary Maharashtra, where he's still a very popular God. These temples are renowned as healing centres, with the healing process is to call on the power of the God to rid oneself of the attention of malevolent spirits or bhutas/pretas, or black magic. Visits to Dattatreya's temple, and circumnavigation his shrine, is believed to initiate a healing



current in ones life and force the bhutas out. This is interesting as such contact with alleged demonic forces and possession phenomena is thought of as highly polluting - such work is normally left to Muslim healers or pirs, so Dattatreya's linkage to this tradition arises in part out of his Islamic heritage.

## **The Tripura Rahaysa**

One of the most important texts associated with the name of Dattatreya is the *Tripura Rahaysa*, which translates as the "Secrets of Tripura". This is an important text as it connects Dattatreya to the worship of the Goddess and the Shri Vidya, Tripura being another name for Lalita, the beautiful and beneficent Goddess of the Shri Vidya. One translation is that of the name Tripura is "the one of the three cities" and there are various stories of Her destroying the three cities of the demons, but the phrase is commonly broken down to "she who is beyond (pura) the three (tri). There are a number of trinities in Hinduism to which Tripura is as being held superior to - Brahman, Vishnu and Siva for instance, the three gunas etc. The text appears to have been composed between the eleventh and seventeenth centuries though its origins are largely unknown. It appears to have been isolated to Southern India until recent times. It's contemporary renown is largely due to the early twentieth century Tamil saint Ramana Maharsi. The text takes the form of a series of stories narrated by Dattatreya to his disciple Parasurama. Datta doesn't actually feature in the stories himself, but I'm going to give some extracts to give some of the flavour of this particular tradition linked to him. The charm of the text is that it actually uses a variety of different stories to get over its philosophical points, rather than abstract reasoning.

One of my favourite stories in the book is that of Hemalekha who narrates an elaborate tale about her handmaiden, to her husband Hemachuda. She tells how the handmaiden is led astray by one of her friends, is trapped in a bad marriage with contrary and disobedient sons, who take the handmaiden and her husband through a number of hallucinatory episodes, finally leading to her being trapped in a city and tortured, until Hemalekha encouraged her to escape. When pressed for an explanation by her disbelieving husband - who has no recollection of her handmaiden, let alone his wife's participation in elaborate escape attempts - she responds that her mother (who is pure consciousness) gave her a handmaiden that was her intellect, her wicked friend was ignorance (advidya), though she comes under the influence of her inconstancy which gives birth to delusion, and her other sons, the five senses. The city was the human body and constant association of the mind with passion and greed was the torture. The "escape" is an inward turning, back to meditative contemplation. The stories continually refer back to the source of the self - a part of us without qualities, the part that is the perceiver, which perhaps can't be thought and talked about the same reason we can't look into our own eyes but perhaps can be experienced. A metaphor that is repeatedly used throughout the text is that of the universe being the same as an object in a mirror - with consciousness as the light generating the reflection. This is a very abstract concept, so I should probably say what I've taken out of it, in practical terms - the stories suggest to me, to attempt to be aware of the root of ones consciousness and our own part in generating our perceptions and circumstances. In meditation, one might look backward for that sustaining part.

To return to the name Tripura as "she who is beyond the three" - as I said, there are many triads

in Hinduism but I think it's best to try and make this a living analogy - what's actually being referred to here is the three worlds of dreaming/deep sleep/awakening. Similarly the three worlds of head, heart and genitals, our intellectual/physical/emotional selves - what unifying factor could be said to run through all of this, to unify and underlie them? This is the point these stories are continually referring back to. There is a similar richness to be found in many of the other stories, which explore other facets of Advata non-dual philosophy, all emanating from this central point. Another of Dattatreya's guises then, is the expounder of these traditions.

## **My Own Experience**

Well, I seemed to have started talking about my experience again. As I mentioned earlier - I first encountered Dattatreya in the Amookos materials. To talk about my own experience a little I'm going to backtrack a little and detail a little of my history. I was going through a phase which many of us go through, that is reading every occult book I could get my hands on, and I just happened to pick up Tantra Magick. It was one of the first books I'd picked up which was very different from the Western tradition and Chaos Magic books which I'd read. I recall thinking "where's the gnosis? Where's the sigils?" However, despite this initial bafflement, two things about it really intrigued me. The first was a curriculum of exercises given for working with the senses - use your sight to notice differences in colour you'd normal disregard, noticing scents, listening to people closely, noting background noises that sort of thing - at the time I'd never seen anything quite like this. The second was that it emphasised that we in the West emphasis our intellects while holding our emotions and bodies in low regard. Recognising myself as quite a cerebral person, both of these suggestions really struck a chord with me.

I finally got around to trying this work a few years later - I'd been meditating on and off for a couple of years at this point but it was usually a separate half an hour or so before work that gave me a bit of calmness, but not much else. Meditation in the Amookos papers was presented as developing an awareness of ones internal dialogue, the internal dialogue being the conversations that one is continually having with yourself, and freeing yourself from this if possible. Using this material finally made the connection between meditation and my day to day life. Beginning to use my senses I went about my day to day activities provoked all kinds of insights, the most striking of which is how little I sensed, compared to what I'd previously thought. I liked to think of myself as quite aware, but I found I was frequently substituting words and thoughts or internal images for my experience - I notice how quickly I abstracted myself into an irrelevant and unconnected train of thought at any time, just walking down the road, and you'd be completely "off".. I found I was walking around half asleep most of the time, frequently lost in streams of association of thought triggered by quite random external events. To give an example of what I mean - one morning having breakfast, I ate the same sort of cereal as I'd eat on a camping holiday I'd been on when I was a kid. Before I knew it, I'd drifted off into a recollection of an argument I'd had with my uncle on this holiday, and I was replaying it with all the emotions I felt at the time activated - anger, a sense of injustice etc. This is a small perhaps silly example but I found my day filled with these fantasies and recollections. The intention underlying this work was to centre oneself in the present, to cultivate a state of awake-awareness, to reflect on what's occurring to you and act appropriately, rather than going off on some kind of half awake hair trigger. With awake-awareness we can determine whether a desire and action is a product of our conditioning and hangups or whether it's coming from some

deeper source. This is the thread I talked about which runs through the three worlds. We can also find this state of mind in the works of Gurdjieff, where he refers to it a state of mind called self-remembering which is absolutely essential to his system - "life is real only then, when "I am" ".In addition, this work lets you notice again some of the richness of experience available to us through our five senses. This is, in part, where Tantra's reputation for sex and sensuality comes from - from an attitude of enjoying the world.

The thing I liked about the Amookos work is that you're very much encouraged to use your senses and the day to world as your magickal sphere - it isn't a separate thing. The four quarters of your circle are the four twilights of the day - dawn, midday, dusk and midnight - and the four quarter guardians and goddess in the centre are your body the various yantras in your body and the five senses. In the various classificatory schemes of yoga - this work would be described as a "yoga of action" in that your using the fruits of your day to day activity as the subject of your meditations. To bring this back to Dattatreya, I've already cited him as an aspect of the external guru, there's also the idea of the internal guru. What is this? It's basically yourself - awake, aware and open to possibilities.

In the *Guru Gita*, Shiva says:

The absolute is nothing other than guru... the Vedas, shastras, puranas, historical accounts and other writings, science of mantra, yantra and so on, the shavia and shakta treatises and other various writings bring about in this world the downfall of those minds that are deluded. Those people are fools that engage in sacrificial rites without knowing the guru principle. The guru is not different from the conscious self. Therefore the wise should make an effort to seek him.

I think that's a very important point. The guru is not different to the conscious self. The awake and aware individual is his own guru, his or her own highest teacher. Any external guru should only be a prop or reminder of this. In the meditation I mentioned earlier one is encouraged to identify with Dattatreya - this is the reason why, as a reminder of your own awareness.

In this meditation one offers up ones' kleshas, or conditioning to Dattatreya's companions, the black dogs and the sacrificial fire in front of him. A klesha is a Sanskrit term meaning obstacles or knots or blockages. Some of you might be familiar with this meditation from a version presented [here](#) and the phrase klesha smashing seems to have passed into occult parlance. Reference is made in the Amookos work to five key obstacles - these being Ego, Ignorance, Attachment, Repulsion, Clinging to life. Ego - the false ideas and opinions we hold about our self, Ignorance - that which is slipping by our awareness , attachment - possessions, labels or self identifications that we cling to, Repulsion - that which we're scared by, and can't face. One of Shiva's name is aghora, which means, the "a" serving as a negation in front of the word "ghora" - horrible. The name thus means "nothing is horrible, there is no part of ourselves or the world we should not be able to face. Clinging to life - holding on, being unable to let go, refusal to accept the inevitable.

I don't necessarily see these as separate discrete phenomena, little problems to be resolved, one by one. They're more as a continuum. They're common points of blockage or points of tension and hangups in all of us which will return and disappear, rising and falling over the course of our

lives - perhaps depending on how awake, centred and balanced we are.

In my practice, what I would do is try and carry the awareness of the kleshas throughout the day and at any time something reared it's head, see if I could get through it or let it go, and I would offer it's memory in the form of visualisation to the black dogs in my meditation space. I have to say this practice is difficult - it's very challenging, and writing these talk reminded me of how much work I still have to do in this area. What you're trying to do is challenge the habits of thought which generate your customary limitations and self centeredness. I might find myself pissed off or annoyed at someone because they've done something I perceive as a challenge, a slight or a blow to my ego. I might be envious of their success and generating furious fantasies to compensate - while indulging in the related self-flagellation at my own perceived inadequacy. Practising awake-awareness sometimes, and it is only sometimes, lets me see these things as they are, just ideas and conversations with myself, linguistic phantoms that don't have much reality. Sometimes I can see these as just thoughts that are possessing me, say "wake up" and step right out of them, just like waking up from a bad dream. Not always, but sometimes. Moving out of these spaces and sets of thought can sometimes put you in a state of mind it's hard to describe - something open, more expansive and relaxed than my usual closed perspective. In a sense the kleshas are different little strategies with which we define ourselves, to delineate and defend a space. When you attack them, you give up this bit of territory you're defending - you're saying I'm more than that. This, and my other meditations, cause me to feel like I'm not only the territory defended, but also the ground on which the whole drama is playing out.

As well as recognising the kleshas, one might also chose to work in ways which attack them directly. We might work with the kleshas of attachment for instance by giving away a prized possession. As you prepare to do so, one might monitor the internal dialogue and feelings that this brings up - the desire to hold onto the object, the excuses one presents for not doing so, the rationalisations afterward that you can get another one etc.- and at moments you can just let all this go. I might chose to go and talk to a group of people I'd otherwise avoid - and contemplate my reasons for doing so - the thoughts, reactions and false judgements I've made of them beforehand.

A practice I've been trying lately is the generating of compassion, or boddhicitta, as it's referred to in the Tibetan tradition. It's perhaps a little taboo for a man in our culture even to talk about something "soft" like compassion. In the Tibetan Buddhist tradition, nying je or compassion is actually commensurate with consciousness itself, central to our functioning, if we are only open enough to allow it. I have found this an excellent (though, again, difficult) practice for challenging ones own self-centredness. For instance, I have noted the low level hostility I run as background "stay away from me" programming as an inhabitant of the big city, on the tube and in the streets. I've tried to open up a little, accepting those around me, dropping my ever so slight anger and pushiness. I have similarly tried to summon up the images, thoughts and feelings and people who've fucked me off, annoyed or offended me in some way, and tried to see the situation concerned from their perspective, to forgive if I can and acknowledge my own role in causing such situations. Surprising sensations can arise. One can feel a little voice inside that doesn't want to that will justify hanging on to the negative feelings, a little "war" begins internally before release. Both of these practises have brought on strong somatic sensations at various

times, a sensation of "opening" around my chest, rushes of energy and pleasure, even tears.

I briefly mentioned the sacrificial fire earlier - the fire into which the kleshas are offered. Fire is a huge symbol in tantra, occupying a whole complex of meanings. I assume that originally it was as a solely an external symbol, referring to the fire sacrifices which occupied so much of the Vedic religion. However, as these things do, it gradually began to take on other meanings. In the context of this Tantra, I think of fire as a symbol of consciousness. How is consciousness like fire? Well, it is bright and luminous nature, and is ever fluxing. It consumes and transforms all that flows into it, all thoughts, all impressions, indiscriminately. These flow back out again forming the basis of our actions, but, as I hope I have shown, the goal of the Amookos work is to try and cultivate awareness and control over this outward flow. As I said above, consciousness sometimes feels like an underlying "ground" and the kleshas tiny bits of territory we mark off in this open space. And also, something about flickering, all consuming nature of fire says something about the passage of life and time. All is consumed in the end, leaving only ashes - so perhaps it is best not to cling too hard to that which is only transient, rather enjoying things while they are here, then letting them go.

To close, some lines attributed to Dattatreya from the *Avadhoot Gita*:

With fuel and without fuel, I am always burning; With smoke and without smoke, I am always glowing; with flame and without flame, I am always shining; I am immortality in knowledge, I am equality in essence, I am like the sky. I burn the faggots of action and inaction; I burn the faggots of pleasure and pain; I burn the faggots of him who adores his body, I burn the faggots of him who ignores his body; I am immortality in knowledge, I am equality in essence, I am like the sky. I am fire that burns religion and irreligion, I am fire that burns merit and sin, I am fire that burns bondage and privilege, I am immortality in knowledge, I am equality in essence, I am like the sky.

## References

Most of the historical material above is taken from *Dattatreya: Immortal Guru, Yogin and Avatara* by Antonio Rigopoulos (SUNY)

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