The sermon of the **Avadhūta Dattātreya** with a special reference to his twenty-four gurus is spread over three chapters in the *Skandha XI*, viz. in the chapters 7, 8 & 9 -- constituting the first three chapters of the *Uddhava-gītā*.

**Origin of the Datta cult:**

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(1) The **Vedas**:

*Dattātreya* represents the concept of Trinity or *Trīmūrti* consisting of the three gods Brahmā, Viṣṇu and Maheśa into a single godhead. Hence he is usually pictured as having three heads and six hands holding *śaṅkha, cakra, dāmaru, triśūla, akṣamālā* and *kamanḍalu* -- the typical emblems of these three deities (1).

The *RV* has references which could have inspired the development of this idea of *Trīmūrti*, such as (2):

i) the division of gods into three classes as terrestrial, aerial and celestial;

ii) fire, wind and sun forming an important triad of gods;

iii) the gods being thirty-three in number (3);

iv) the triple character of *Agni* (4), and so on.

(2) The **Brāhmaṇas** state that there are only three gods in reality (5).

(3) **Yāska** divides different deities as also the forms of the same deity into three orders of terrestrial, aerial and celestial (6).

(4) The **Upaniṣads** --

In the **Upaniṣads** also we do find --

i) the three functions of creation, preservation and destruction attributed to the Absolute (7);
ii) Brahmā, Viṣṇu and Rudra being the forms (tanavah) of the Absolute and corresponding to its threefold aspects of rajas, tamas and sattva (8).

(5) The MBh refers to these three functions of the Trimūrti (9 A & B). Some scholars like Hopkins and Fausboll do not find trace of this concept of Trimūrti as a part of the epic belief, whereas some other scholars are of the opinion that the Harivamsa and other books of the epic seem to have known this concept (10).

(6) However, these triple functions are attributed to a particular god only in the age of the Purāṇas. This concept of “Ekā mūrtīrayo devāh” of the Mārkandeya Purāṇa was firmly established by this time and stories were invented about each form. This Purāṇa and the Viṣṇu Purāṇa mainly give anecdotes about Dattātreya and his birth (12).

Various philosophical interpretations of this concept are presented by scholars, but they hardly fall within the realm of our subject (13).

Though the principal ancient Upaniṣads (such as Chāṇ. Up., Br.Up. and others) do not have any reference to Dattātreya, the later Upaniṣads (like the Jābālopaniṣad and others) note this name alongwith many Upaniṣadic personalities that are highly respected as Paramahaṁsas, such as Śvetaketu, Ṛbhū, Jaḍabhārata and Āruṇi. Four different lists are available in this connection -- in the Jābālopaniṣad, the Nāradaparivrājakopaniṣad, the Yājñavalkyopaniṣad and the Bhikṣu-Upaniṣad - wherein Dattātreya is mentioned. The Śāndilyopaniṣad (iii) explains the name Dattātreya as an epithet of the Absolute born as a son to Atri and Anasūyā. The dhyāna portion of this Upaniṣad (iii) contains twenty-four epithets which remind us of the twenty-four gurus of Dattātreya (14).
The ŚBP refers to Dattātreya at the following places —

(1) While discussing the Līlāvatāras at I.3.11, it is said that the sixth avatāra of the Lord is that of Dattātreya — the offspring of the sage Atri by Anasūya, who instructed Alarka, Prahlāda and others in the knowledge of the Ātman (Ānvikṣikī).

(2) The ŚBP gives the origin of the name Dattātreya during the exposition of the avatāras at II.7.4. as — "Being pleased with the sage Atri who prayed to God for an offspring the Lord said to him, 'I have offered myself (dattah) as your son'. Hence, He incarnated as Dattātreya by the dust of whose feet Yadu, the king of the Hāhayas and others, purified their bodies and attained to both worldly enjoyments and spiritual bliss.

(3) The life of an avadhūta is described at VII.1. It is said here that an ascetic may appear to others as being without any distinguishing marks except for the spiritual aura manifest, possessing wisdom but looking like a child or one intoxicated, and full of inspiration but appearing to be dumb (15). This is the ideal of the Paramahāṁsa (16). The ŚBP narrates the "old story" (itiḥsānam purātanam) (17) in the form of a conversation between Prahlāda and Dattātreya who followed the mode of the life of the python (ājagarī vr̥tti) (18).

His Teachings :

The teachings of the Avadhūta occurring at the above places can be given briefly as follows :

(1) Trṣnā or desire is the force that drives and entangles one in the transmigratory cycle and various embodiments (19).
(2) The human body - the culmination of this cycle, is the gateway to liberation (20).

(3) Though the mode of the householder's way of life has activity, as the instrument to secure happiness, one suffers only misery through it (21-A).

(4) Therefore, Dattātreya has accepted withdrawal as the way of life (21-B); it helps one to manifest the real nature of the Ātman, namely, bliss (22-A).

(5) The worldly enjoyments are transient and are the projections of the mind (22-B).

(6) Man forgets his real nature, viz. the blissful Ātman, and therefore moves through these transmigratory cycles (23) like a man running after mirage when water is nearby (24).

(7) These people enjoy the results of their past actions and engage themselves in new actions that become binding in future (25).

(8) Sufferings of man are threefold --

i) Ādhyātmika, i.e. caused by his own body and mind,

ii) Ādhibhautika, i.e. caused by the external natural forces and

iii) Ādidaivika, i.e. caused by the extra-human agencies (26).

(9) One must, therefore, renounce sprha or desire. The honey-bee (madhukara) has taught Dattātreya the lesson of virāga or renunciation, whereas the python (mahāsarpa) has exemplified paritosa or contentment, for likewise Dattātreya with his strength undiminished, is satisfied with food that chance brings (27). In other words, he has learnt the most significant lesson of life -- of taking life as it comes. Thus, he contentedly accepts any amount and type of food given at any time, any variety of cloth. He sleeps wherever there is a place, moves in any possible manner, and prays for the spiritual upliftment of all without praising or criticizing anyone (28).
(10) As a conclusion, Dattātreya elucidates to Prahlāda the way of merging in the Ultimate Truth - gradually by dissolving the perception into the mental mode, then into the manas, ahaṅkāra and so on. Thus, being without any desire or expression of will, does one retreats in one's own self. This is the mode of the Avadhūta's way of life in brief. It is different from the conduct generally recognized in the world.

(11) Lastly, the sermon of the Avadhūta occurs at a great length at the ŚBP XI. 7-9.

The Lord lays the foundation for the sermon of the Avadhūta in the beginning of the sixth chapter. He says that the tattvavicakṣaṇa persons or those endowed with the capacity to probe into the truth of things, elevate themselves from the evils of normal instinctive life by their discriminative power (30). Through this power a person can use the faculties of observation and inference whereby he can be his own guru and achieve the ultimate good (śreyah) (31). Then the Lord relates the ancient anecdote (itiḥāsam purātunam) in the form of the conversation between the Avadhūta (or Dattātreya) and the king Yadu to support his views (32).

Yadu - the eldest son of Yayāti, retired to the forest with disgust for the world when his youngest brother Puru received throne on his exchange of his youth with his father's old age. Here, he saw Dattātreya - happy and self-satisfied even in the absence of any material possession. King Yadu recognized the blaze of the highest spiritual power in the Avadhūta. He was also struck by the Avadhūta's lack of desire for any activity or thing, his aimless wanderings similar to those of a lunatic, a senseless man or one possessed, being absolutely companionless (33) and yet being a gabhiradhiḥ (34). Yadu prostrated himself at the feet of the Avadhūta with utter humility with a request to enlighten him about the reason behind his state of constant and absolute bliss (35).

Now follows the dialogue within the dialogue the revelation of Dattātreya's secret of bliss acquired by him through a minute observation of Nature and society and a constant reflection upon the same. The Avadhūta comes directly to the exposition of his acquisition of knowledge to become free from desires, bondages and wander at will (36).
The 24 gurus of Dattātreya :-

The Avadhūta tells Yadu that he had learnt his spiritual lessons from the ways and characteristics of twenty-four gurus such as the earth, the sky, a courtesan, etc. (37) which he relates as follows (38) -

(1) Earth (prthivi) - taught him the quality of steadfastness i.e., not swerving from his chosen path when attacked by beings overpowered by their instincts (39).

(2) Wind or air (vāyu) - represented for him the quality of remaining unaffected by circumstances and sense-objects, though being surrounded by them; for, air retains its own quality despite the fact that it carries smell (40).

(3) Sky (ākāśa) - stood for the qualities of pervasiveness and remaining unaffected by things to the Avadhūta who ever experienced the reality of the Atman (41).

(4) Water (āpah) - The Avadhūta looked upon the pure, holy, “naturally loving” & sweet waters of the Gaṅga as his guru, for they sanctify men merely by sight, contact and praise (42).

(5) Fire (Agni) -- taught the Avadhūta the qualities of remaining pure, unpolluted, of possessing inviolable greatness, consuming everything (43) and indicating the omnipresence of the Lord that is manifested in different forms (44).

(6) Moon (candramā) - showed the Avadhūta that the changes inflicted on the body by Time in no way affect the Atman (45).

(7) Sun (ravi) - guides the realized sage to come in contact with the sense-objects for the benefit of the others (46).

(8) Dove (kapotah) - The Avadhūta narrates the story of the dove who got himself entangled in a fowler’s net following his wife and the young ones out of intense love for them (47). It taught him that extreme attachment was the result of uncontrolled senses and a restless mind (48).
(9) Python (*ajagaraḥ*) - With full mental alertness and vigilance about the attainment of the ultimate aim and lack of physical activity, the *Avadhūta* learnt to lie quietly like a python and accept things as well as food as and when chance provided them (49).

(10) Ocean (*sindhuḥ, arṇavaḥ, sāgarah*) - Observing the ocean keeping within its boundaries irrespective of various conditions, the *Avadhūta* learnt to remain still, calm, deep, profound, unfathomable, inviolable, boundless and unperturbed (50).

(11) Moth (*pataṅgaḥ*) - The sight of the end of a moth when attracted by fire taught *Dattātreya* to control his senses and develop the discriminative vision (51).

(12) Honey-bee (*madhukṛt, madhukaraḥ*) - The *Avadhūta* imbibed the *madhukāri vṛtti* in a threefold manner:
   a) by collecting alms just enough to maintain the body,
   b) by seeking the essential teachings from the scriptures, and
   c) by not accumulating things (52).

(13) Elephant (*gajah, kamha*) - Even the slightest attachment to women was shunned by *Dattātreya* as it proves to be binding one to the material world (53).

(14) Honey-gatherer (*madhūḥ*) - The honey collected by the honey-bee and taken away by the honey-gatherer taught the *Avadhūta* not to cultivate a desire to collect and accumulate wealth (54).

(15) Deer (*hariṇāḥ*) - *Grāmya-gītas* or inclination to listen to sensuous (i.e., related to the senses) music entraps one to the pleasures of the sense-objects like the deer. This should be totally avoided by a sage. The *Avadhūta* refers to the incident of the sage *Ṛṣyaśṛṅga* to support his view (55).

(16) Fish (*ṁinaḥ*) - The sight of the fish being caught in the baited hook of the angler made the *Avadhūta* aware of the utmost significance of winning over the palate - the most powerful sense-organ, in order to gain control over the other sense-organs (56).
(17) Piṅgalā - the courtesan - The Avadhūta related Piṅgalā’s realization of dispassion towards the world, futility of the material pleasures and the grace of the Lord to uplift men, which led her to give up a desire for lovers. This, he said, taught him the lesson of renunciation (57).

(18) An Osprey (kuraraḥ) - The incident of an osprey giving up meat to save itself from the prey birds made the Avadhūta aware of the abstinence from the senses and their objects of enjoyment to attain total peace (58).

(19) A child (bālāḥ, arbhakaḥ) - A child’s freedom from anxiety and sporting joy upheld the ideal of going beyond the three guṇas of Prakṛti to obtain pure joy for the Avadhūta (59).

(20) A maiden (kumārī) - The incident of the maiden removing her bangles to avoid noise while husking paddy taught the Avadhūta to avoid companionship as the best means to realize the spiritual truth (60).

(21) An arrow-smith (iṣukāraḥ, sarakṛt) - Absolute concentration of the arrow-smith while making the arrow-head prompted the Avadhūta to imbibe this quality and learn to concentrate on the Supreme Being through complete absorption in dhyāna (61).

(22) A snake (sarphaḥ) - The qualities of solitariness, vigilance, having temporary residence and reservation in speech was adopted by the Avadhūta from the snake (62).

(23) A spider (ūrṇanābhaḥ) - The well-known illustration of the spider taught the Avadhūta that the Lord was the origin and the resting place of the world (63).

(24) A worm (kiñṭaḥ) - The lesson of the constant contemplation on the Ātman to gain Self-consciousness was given by the worm turning into a wasp due to the latter’s constant presence near it (64).
It is strange that the Bhāgavatākāra gives the list of twenty-four gurus and yet, after relating the lesson taught by the first guru - prthivī, he refers to two elements of the earth - the mountain, and the tree - as imparting the teaching of striving unselfishly for the others (65).

Now, after telling Yadu about his twenty-four gurus and the qualities he learnt from them for the development of spirituality, the Avadhūta says that he had something more to learn from his body too (66). It is as follows:

(a) Dispassion (viraktih) towards the world arises through repeated cycles of birth and death that are full of misery (67). The cycles continue through the attachment of the senses with their organs (68), and the bondage of karma (69).

(b) Discrimination (vivekaḥ) referring to the awareness about the distinction between the body and the Ātman; this is to be developed and practiced through the body as an instrument (70).

(c) Human body - the apex of God's creation, is attained after several births and hence, is a rare blessing of the Almighty. Moreover, niḥśreyasa or the Ultimate Bliss Good can also be attained only through the human body (71).

Thereafter, Dattātreya says that as the outcome of his reflections he became devoid of attachments of all types as well as the sense of "I". Consequently, he roamed around in the world at will (72).

**Purpose of having several gurus**: 

Towards the end of the exposition, Dattātreya answers an unasked question: "What is the purpose of having more than one guru?" He logically points out that as a single guru may not be able to establish his sīśya firmly in knowledge, an
aspirant may look upon one guru as supreme and yet have several upa-gurus or subsidiary teachers from whom he can learn various aspects of the spiritual doctrine. This is permissible because the non-duality of Brahman is presented differently by the various Rṣis. Thus (i) explicit spiritual knowledge (ii) with proper discrimination and (iii) avoiding the misunderstanding of the scriptures, are ensured (73).

After giving this sermon, the Avadhūta went away as he had come, without any destination, and on the other hand, Yadu became completely free from all attachments and equanimous (samacittah) (74).

**Dattātreyā - an Incarnation:**

Earlier it is noted that Dattātreyā was raised to the status of the avatāra of Viṣṇu in the Purāṇas. He is included sometimes among the chief ten or twenty-four or thirty-nine avatāras therein, while a few works like the Harivaṁśa (75) consider him as a prādurbhāva. According to the SBP he is one of the avatāras of Viṣṇu (cf. Avatāravāda). The purpose behind this avatāra of Viṣṇu is the promulgation of the right knowledge.

**A comparison between the sermon of the Avadhūta and the BG:**

A comparative study of both these sermons highlights the difference between the personalities, fields of action, lives and goals of the avatāras of Viṣṇu as Dattātreyā and Kṛṣṇa. Dattātreyā was an avadhūta - a monk in the traditional sense of the term, living by imbibing the ājagārī and mādhu karī vṛttis. A total abstinence from the creations of māya, especially women, was extremely significant in this path. More significant is the concept of Dattātreyā's deviation from the tradition of having a single guru to guide the spiritual life of the ṣīṣya.
On the other hand, in the BG, Kṛṣṇa repeatedly emphasizes anāsakta karma, and He is the sole guru for Arjuna.

Inspite of these differences between the two sermons, there is a striking resemblance between them as follows:

(1) Striving for the good of the others with selflessness, like the trees and the mountains -

The concepts of lokasahgraha and being yajñāśīśāsin reflect this very idea. Hence Kṛṣṇa repeatedly emphasizes the necessity to perform Karma unattachedly for the sake of the society as was done by Janaka and others (76); the Lord Himself performs actions to maintain the cosmos (77), and helps the aspirants in self-purification (78).

(2) Remaining beyond the effects of the sense-organs though being physically connected with them -

The BG emphasizes that lack of control over the senses and an involved enjoyment of their objects are the worst enemies of a mumukṣu, as they give rise to kāma or desire and the consequent moha and bondage to the material world (79). Therefore, though steeped in the enjoyments of the sense, a self-controlled person is like a tortoise or kūrma who has withdrawn its limbs into its shell (80). Due to his equanimous attitude or samatva, he resides happily in his body - the township having nine gates (81). Moreover, the qualities of an ideal person of the BG harp upon this very point.

(3) Soul being unaffected by the qualities of the body -

The terms na lipyate frequently applied to the yogī indicate that his soul remains unaffected by the experiences of the empirical world (82). The BG explains this by the simile of the sky being unaffected by anything due to its subtle nature (83).
(4) Realization of the omnipresence of the soul and its identity with the ultimate principle -

Realization of the soul’s immortality and identity with Brahman and the resultant perception of the omnipresence of Brahman is repeatedly spoken by the BG. (84)

(5) The conquest of the palate -

Like the Avadhūta, Kṛṣṇa recognizes the terrific strength of the palate as the sense-object by referring to the forcefully curtailed enjoyments of the sense-objects as being nirāhāra. Kṛṣṇa says that though one abstains willingly from food, the interest, or rāga in it persists (85). One has to win over this powerful instinct by yukta-āhāra-vihāra (86).

(6) Solitariness -

While propounding the Dhyāna Yoga as a means to control the mind, the BG insists on practicing it in a solitary place (87).

(7) Desire leading to destruction -

The BG looks upon kāma to be one of the three gateways to Hell and thus total destruction (88).

(8) God as the origin and the end of the cosmos -

This knowledge and His omnipresence therein is firmly advocated by the BG (89).

Thus, we can conclude in brief that some of the principles laid down by BG are fully either adopted or explained in detail by the examples of the gurus in the episode of Dattātreya in the ŚBP.
Incidentally it may be noted that the dialogue between the *Avadhūta* and *Prahlāda* is found in the *MBh Šānti Parva* (90) where some of the precepts and principles narrated in the *ŚBP* are found to be identical. It is needless to assert that the *MBh* incident might have inspired the author of the *ŚBP* to elaborate it. The most striking point here is the addition of the concept of *bhakti* to the original story as found in the

**FOOTNOTES**

2. Origin and Development of *Dattātreya* Worship in India - by Dr. Hariprasad Shivaprasad Joshi. Published by the M.S. University of Baroda, Baroda, 1965.
3. RV. III.6.9; AV X.7.7. 4. RV. X.88.10; II.1.3.
5. TS. vi.6.8.2; Sat. Br. iv.5.4; TA. i.21.1. etc.
9. *MBh.* (a) *Vana Parva* 272.48, (b) *Anuśāsana Parva* 14.
10. See f.n. 2 11. See f.n. 2
12. See f.n. 1 13. See f.n. 2
Sri Datta-mahātya by Sri Vasudevananda Sarasvati Tembe Swami
Maharaja, 2nd ed., Pune, 1962. Published by Saraswati Grantha Prakashana
Mandal, Pune.

MBh. Harivamśa I.41.104.
BG. 3.13,24,29.
BG .3.34,40.
BG .5.13.
BG. 13.33.
BG .2.11 ff ; 13.29,31.
BG. 6.11.
BG. 6.6-12.

MBh. Śānti Parva 179.