

# Sri Dattatreya's 24 Gurus: Learning from the World in Hindu Tradition

Martin Haigh, Oxford Brookes University, United Kingdom

## **Abstract**

*Sri Dattatreya, who Lord Krishna quotes in The Uddhava Gita, has been evoked as a guru for environmental education. Sri Dattatreya gained enlightenment by observing the world, which provided Him with 24 instructors. These taught Him the futility of mundane attachments, the benefits of contemplation and forbearance, and a path towards the spiritual self-realization of the Supreme. Sri Dattatreya, an incarnation of Lord Vishnu, features in several Puranas where His teachings involve direct challenges to the pretensions and prejudices of the learner. His core message is "never judge by surface appearances but always seek a deeper Truth": the Earth is sacred, an aspect of God, and a puzzle that challenges the spiritual self to awaken to its true nature.*

## **Résumé**

*Sri Dattatreya, cité par le dieu Krishna dans The Uddhava Gita, a été qualifié de gourou en éducation écologique. Sri Dattatreya s'est instruit en observant le monde, qui Lui a fourni vingt-quatre moniteurs. Ces derniers lui ont enseigné l'inutilité de s'attacher au monde terrestre, les avantages de méditer et de connaître le passé ancestral, et une voie vers l'auto-réalisation spirituelle de Dieu. Sri Dattatreya, une incarnation du dieu Vishnou, figure dans plusieurs puranas où Son enseignement pose des défis directs aux prétentions et aux préjugés de l'apprenant. Son message fondamental est de « ne jamais juger selon les premières apparences mais de toujours rechercher une Vérité plus profonde » : la Terre est sacrée, elle est une représentation de Dieu et un casse-tête qui remet en cause le moi spirituel afin d'éveiller sa vraie nature.*

**Keywords:** Lord Krishna; Dattatreya; Vaisnavism; environmentalism; environmental education; religion in environmental education; education for sustainable development

## Introduction

Modern concerns about environmental education for sustainable development present a challenge for the great world religions. Environmental degradation is largely a modern concern, but religious practitioners demand guidance about what to do that is grounded in ancient scriptural precedent, so raising questions that, formerly, no one ever thought to ask. This is as true for the

complex web of belief systems called “Hindu” as for more monolithic systems. “Environment” and “sustainability” are rising concerns in both traditional “Hindu” communities and their pioneering fringe of New Religious Movements, such as Swami Vivekananda’s Ramakrishna Mission and Srila Prabhupada’s International Society for Krishna Consciousness (Partridge, 2005).

Environmental education for sustainable development is, of course, a key concern of our modern age, where the human impact, spurred on by social traditions that stress “me-first” competition and the immediate gratification of desires, and that measure success in terms of material accumulation, threaten to destroy the welfare of all those yet to be born. The United Nations’ Decade of Education for Sustainable Development (2005-2014) exists as recognition that our present way of life is unsustainable, that attitudes must change, and that the world must find a way of living as if the future mattered (Haigh, 2005; Lovelock, 2006). Environmental education for sustainable development recognizes that the way ahead lies in environmental, not economic, responsibility, and it contains the argument that education for sustainable development and environmental education might achieve more when working together (McKeown & Hopkins, 2005).

This paper focuses on some environmental education for sustainable development resources within one world religion that might help foster the change in social attitudes needed to divert our world from a self-destructive course (Laszlo, 2002). It finds those resources in the Vaisnava and Vedic scriptures. These include the four books of the Veda (including the 108 Upanisads, that provide their philosophical conclusion); texts composed > 1,500 years BCE; the Mahabharata Epic; and the Puranas, compendiums of tradition, fable, and philosophy, often representing sectarian oral traditions, which were finally recorded in the millennium after 300 CE (Flood, 1996). Vaisnavism, one of the central threads in Hinduism, accepts Lord Vishnu, often as manifest as an avatar, or incarnations such as Lords Krishna and Rama, as the Supreme. It stands alongside Shaivism (Lord Shiva), the worship of the Goddess (Shaktism), and Advaitism (essentially atheistic traditions associated with the philosopher Sankara) as a principle facet of Hinduism (Flood, 1996). However, while this paper has a Vaisnava perspective, it builds from the work of a range of modern practitioners who have couched their teachings on environmental education for sustainable development in scriptural precedent (Dwivedi & Tiwari, 1987; Prime, 1992, 2002; Sharma, 2002).

Traditionally, a Vedic education is obtained from a guru, who is both instructor and role model or *acharya* (Sharma, 2002). By the 1980s, “Hindu” environmentalism had produced several modern heroes and the much-admired Chipko (Hug the Trees) movement, but it had not embraced its ancient scriptures (Haigh, 1988). Almost unique, in this period, was 1987’s *Environmental Crisis and Hindu Religion* by Canada-based Dwivedi and India-based Tiwari. This work contributed to a debate that followed publication of the celebrated essay of White (1967), which blamed environmental degradation

on aspects of the Judaeo-Christian tradition and praised some Eastern religions. Several commentators were less impressed by the environmental record of these Eastern religions in the lands where they were ascendant. Such criticisms spurred Dwivedi and Tiwari to expose and defend the deep scriptural roots of Hindu environmental concern; fully half of their book is given over to quotations that express reverence for nature. They support their thesis, “that religion has a special place and value in protecting the environment” (1987, p. 104), much as White did (nominating St. Francis for Christianity), by the nomination of a guru for Hindu environmentalism:

Let us resurrect Dattatreya as the patron saint of environment in India and the World ... and accept the patronage of Lord Dattatreya as the protector of the environment. This would help us develop an ethic of the environment relevant to present needs. (1987, p. 93)

The key text comes from that most important Vaisnava Purana, the Srimad Bhagavatam. In Canto 11, Sri Dattatreya explains that He gained enlightenment by observing the world around Him, where He found 24 gurus (Table 1). The story forms part of a larger canon of Puranic teachings where Sri Dattatreya demonstrates an educational method based on intellectual problem solving. From such roots, Sri Dattatreya emerges as a key figure in Hindu environmental education for sustainable development and worth attention by all of those who would teach environmental education in a multicultural context. Despite this, Sri Dattatreya is little known in the West. Hence, this paper tries to raise His profile among Western educators.

### Who is Sri Dattatreya?

From a Vaisnava perspective, Sri Dattatreya’s teachings come on the very highest authority. Lord Krishna, who many consider the Supreme personality of Godhead, personally narrates the story of Sri Dattatreya and His gurus (Srimad Bhagavatam 11, 7-9). This forms part of Lord Krishna’s final great teaching, *The Uddhava Gita*, considered second only to the *Bhagavadgita* in importance, and it raises the question of why Lord Krishna, who Vaisnavas regard as the ultimate source, soul, and substance of everything, should choose to quote from anyone at all? Nevertheless, since He does, these teachings and their author, Sri Dattatreya, merit deep attention.

In Maharashtra, Dattatreya worship is a major Hindu sect with millions of devotees (Joshi, 1965). Here, Sri Dattatreya is represented with three faces, six hands, and a single body. His icons combine the three great Gods of Hinduism—Brahma, Vishnu, and Shiva—as a single “triune” form (Gopinatha Rao, 1968). Each pair of hands carries two of the symbols of the three deities. Commonly, His central body is blue, representing Lord Krishna-Vishnu, while His further two faces represent, on the right, Lord Brahma and,

to the left, Lord Shiva (Keshavadas, 1982). At His heels run four hunting dogs, embodiments of the four Vedas, guardians of the absolute Truth. A garlanded cow, standing behind the Lord, represents the Earth. Occasionally, images of the 10 major Vishnu avatars are carved on the icon's margin (Gopinatha Rao, 1968).

In Maharashtra folk mythology, Sri Dattatreya is famously hard to find. Immortal, he travels the world in disguise, unrecognizable to any but his pure devotees, to whom he may grant enlightenment or material boons.

Academic researchers find Sri Dattatreya equally hard to pin down (Raeside, 1982). Rigopoulos (1998) subtitles his major study on Dattatreya, *The Immortal Guru, Yogin and Avatara*. He supposes Him to be an ancient deity, possibly pre-Vedic, and recognizes that Sri Dattatreya plays diverse roles in several religious traditions, mostly Hindu or at least Tantric, but also Jain and Islam (Rigopoulos, 1998). Several traditions identify Sri Dattatreya with Lord Shiva, which include the Tantric Natha sect, the Aghoris, and the New Religious Movement followers of both Sai Babas, who are regarded as Dattatreya avatars (Rigopoulos, 1998). However, most Upanisads and Puranas identify Sri Dattatreya with Lord Vishnu.

The *Srimad Bhagavatam* lists Sri Dattatreya sixth among 24 Vishnu incarnations, while some Puranas include Him among the 10 major avatars (e.g., Vayu Purana, Harivamsa; see also Rigopoulos, 1998). The Sandilyopanisad 1.6 conceives Sri Dattatreya as the partly divisible and partly indivisible form of the Supreme Lord Vishnu, who pervades all, who resides in the heart of all, who plays with His spiritual power, and who is compassionate to devotees. Similarly, this paper emphasizes Sri Dattatreya the Avatar, because its subject emerges from a text where He is identified as an incarnation of Lord Vishnu.

In general, Sri Dattatreya appears either to grant material desires to supplicants or to offer instruction (Darsanopanisad; Avadhuta Gita; Mahabharata Udyoga Parvan 36.1-21; Skanda Purana, Brahma Kanda 1.36.33-206; Srimad Bhagavatam 7.13.11-45). He is a mystic, the archetype of the Avadhuta Upanisad. An Avadhuta is one who has surpassed all worldly affairs, including the trappings of religion and social convention (Narada-Parivrajakopanisad 9.23). "Knowledge ... the true cause of final liberation is the most precious possession of the Avadhutas" (Mahanirvana Tantra 14.140). Despite this knowledge, despite being fully liberated from the material world, from compassion, Sri Dattatreya Avadhuta remains on the material plane to help those still bound by the cords of material existence free themselves. He awards His grace to all, irrespective of their social status. "Desiring only their welfare, I hope that they will agree to become one with the Supersoul" (Srimad Bhagavatam 7.13.42).

## The Teachings of Sri Dattatreya

Sri Dattatreya teaches that beneath the apparent multiplicities of the material world there is a single, underlying Unity. This Unity is a Universal Consciousness, “Brahman,” often characterized as “satcitananda,” which means “truth, consciousness, and bliss.” Sri Dattatreya teaches that within every living being there is a particle of this Supreme, which is presently deluded into thinking that it belongs to the material world, but which, once re-awakened to its true nature, may return to union with the Supreme. Thus, the Sandilyopanisad meditates upon “the eternal Lord of Lords, Dattatreya, who is intent on unravelling the illusion investing the spiritual soul (atman)” (Sandilyopanisad 3, 9-15). He is one of the great teachers of yoga. “Dattatreya ... intent on the welfare of all beings, the four-armed MahaVishnu, holds sway over yoga as its crowned king” (Darsanopanisad 1, 1-4). Sri Dattatreya teaches a spiritual aspirant to seek the Brahman within, and that while the world binds the spiritual soul to its material body, as in other traditions, it also contains instruction to help a spirit escape from its entrapment (Markandeya Purana 40, 15-41; Nasr, 1998; Bible Romans 1:20). The key to escape, to the realization of the Self within the self, is equipoise, perspective, and detachment, which emerge from the awareness that the material world is transient, that nothing is or can be owned, and that only Truth is eternal.

Sri Dattatreya’s teachings frequently lampoon material desires, sex, alcohol, power—indeed all material attachments. His advice is to build up spiritual wealth through simple living and high thoughts, hence He is called a champion of “dharma,” right behaviour. “Lord Vishnu ... incarnated as Lord Dattatreya, at a time when study of the scriptures, religious principles, and honesty were almost lost, and Dattatreya, forgiving and compassionate, the embodiment of transcendental knowledge, re-established the Vedic way of life” (Harivamsa-parva 41, 104-199).

Nearly all of these themes are embedded in Sri Dattatreya’s account of the 24 insights He discovered by observing life in the material world. However, chief among them is non-attachment and realization that the root of trouble in the world is the delusion of possession.

### Sri Dattatreya’s 24 Gurus of Nature

The conversion of self to Self awareness, “Self-realization,” is the goal of much Hindu tradition, much as the search for ecological Self-realization, which shares the same Vedic roots, is the goal of deep ecology (Haigh, 2006). Self-realization is achieved through processes that combine direct instruction from a guru with direct personal exploration (Sharma, 1993). The Vedas teach that the sacred is everywhere: in temples, images, and throughout nature (Warrier, 2006). Hence, Sri Dattatreya encourages the seeker to see the

world as both divine manifestation and guidance (Keshavadas, 1982).

In *The Uddhava Gita*, Lord Krishna tells how Avadhuta Dattatreya discovered 24 gurus by observing this world. His teachers were: the Earth, wind, sky, water, fire, the Moon, the Sun, some pigeons, a python, the ocean, a honeybee, a beekeeper, an elephant, a deer, a fish, a reformed prostitute, a small squirrel, a child, a hawk, a young housewife, an archer, a snake, a spider, and a wasp. Many of these also feature in Sri Dattatreya's other teachings. Table 1 explores the interpretations of these gurus by key modern spiritual leaders, including Prabhupada (1977), Keshavadas (1982), Sivananda (1999), Ambikananda (2000), a western follower of Sivananda, and the disciples of Sai Baba (Shirdibaba.org, 2003). It also engages the translations of the Ramakrishna Mission's Tapasyananda (1982), and UNESCO-sponsored Tagare and Shastri (1994). Finally, it tries to link Sri Dattatreya's 24 gurus of *The Uddhava Gita* to His less-well-known teachings.

<b>Sri Dattatreya's 24 Gurus</b>
<p>1. The Earth (SB 11.7.37-38) is steadfast in its duties and steady in its cycles. The Earth teaches forbearance, to remain undisturbed even while oppressed (Ambikananda, 2000). In general, it accepts the injuries done by humans and continues to provide crops, etc. to the best of its ability (Sivananda, 1999). "A sober person should understand that his/her aggressors are acting helplessly under the control of God, and thus should never be distracted from progress on his/her own path" (Prabhupada 1977, SB 11.7.37 – Translation). Hence, the Earth teaches "dharma," the value of steadfast perseverance on the path of duty, equipoise, and forgiveness (Keshavadas, 1982).</p>
<p>2. The Wind (SB 11.7.39-41) passes through the world like Truth, unchanged and unattached. Equally, like Truth, it has the capacity to disturb as it swirls about the objects of the material world. "When the wind blows in many directions at once, the atmosphere becomes agitated. Similarly, if the mind is constantly attracted and repelled by material objects ... it will be impossible to think of the Absolute Truth" (Prabhupada, 1977 - SB 11.7.40 – Purport). Hence, the wind teaches the value of freedom and of staying clear of worldly disturbances.</p>
<p>3. The Sky (SB 11.7.42-43) teaches that the Self, like the sky, has no boundaries and is beyond the reach of material nature (Tapasyananda, 1982). Sometimes, clouds cover the sky but the sky above is unaffected (Keshavadas, 1982). "When the mind is spotlessly clear like a cloudless blue sky, one can see the actual form of the Personality of Godhead" (Prabhupada, 1977; SB 11.7.42-43 – Purport). Sri Dattatreya adds: "Know all objects of material perception to be empty, like Space, Know the Pure One as neither bound nor free. The nectar of knowledge, undifferentiated, like the sky" (Avadhuta Gita 3.7). The fragmentary self, trapped in materiality, awaits reunion with the Universal Self. The boundless sky is an eternal reminder of this essential Unity.</p>
<p>4. The Waters (SB 11.7.44) serve all without pride and purify those who bathe. They preserve and give life, which is why the Vedas speak of them as the God Narayana-Vishnu (Padma Purana 6.127.3 et seq.). "Just as pure water is transparent, a saintly person transparently manifests the Personality of Godhead" (Prabhupada, 1977; SB 11.7.44 – Purport). Pure and holy people are like the sacred Ganga, which purifies by sight, contact, and praise (Tapasyananda, 1982). The lesson is that purification comes from association with purity.</p>

5. Fire (SB 11.7.45-47; also Avadhuta Upanisad 9) purifies what it consumes and its qualities are not sullied by contact with the material world (Ambikananda, 2000). "I am the fire than burns the sins of the sinless" (Avadhuta Gita 3.10). The knowledge of a teacher is also like fire, which lies latent in fuel like the Supreme in all creation, and blazes to life when conditions are right for the purification of the world (Tagare & Shastri, 1994; Tapasyananda, 1982). Elsewhere, Rabindranath Tagore urges educators and learners to see themselves as "Visvakarmas," world-makers, while, in line with the aspirations of environmental education for sustainable development, Sri Dattatreya urges teachers to use the fire of learning to purify the Earthly body of God (Nelson, 1998). He adds: "One should not even consider the quality of the teacher but only the essence of that which is taught. Does not a boat, though devoid of paint and beauty, still ferry passengers?" (Avadhuta Gita 2.1-2).

6. The Moon (SB 11.7.48) waxes and wanes but remains unchanged. There is only one moon, no matter how many names its different phases receive. The world tends to hide single truths beneath a welter of discrete names but "when intelligence is thus divided, it ceases to be all comprehending" (Avadhuta Gita 2.21-22). Of course, the teaching also refers to metempsychosis, the belief that, like the Moon, "the soul is a continuous reality, although material bodies appear and disappear constantly" through birth, death, then reincarnation (Prabhupada, 1977; SB 11.7.49 – Purport).

7. The Sun (SB 11.7.49) is reflected in a million puddles; each reflection seems different but it is the same Sun. Equally, the spirit seems to be contained within different bodies but, in reality, is the same in all (Sivananda, 1999). One's self is constant, a fragment of the greater Self, that answers to many names and is deluded into thinking it is different. In fact, Nature and Spirit have the same essence, the all-encompassing Brahman-Vishnu. The Sun's second lesson is that while it drives the hydrological cycle, the climate, and the entire biosphere, releasing its gifts to the needy at the proper time, it does not do this for personal gain (Tapasyananda, 1982; Avadhuta Upanisad 9). Similarly, the teacher should act from a sense of duty, not avarice.

8. The Pigeons (Kapota) (SB 11.7.52-74) warn against developing obsessive love or attachments in the transient material world. A devoted pair of lovebirds raises a brood of young who become entrapped in a net by a hunter. Unable to live without their children, the parents join the young in the hunter's trap. Similarly, those who focus on transient things may be destroyed by their loss. Sri Dattatreya reinforces this difficult teaching by taking His own body as 25<sup>th</sup> teacher. He points out that even this, upon which so much energy was expended, is a temporary possession, destined to be consumed by other creatures after its death (also Padma Purana 6.126.4-18). "After many reincarnations, achieving a human body is a rare privilege for this alone yearned to know the Truth of its own Nature and ... might be used to achieve liberation" (Ambikananda, 2000, p. 52). However, human life, a door to God-realization, is wasted upon those who, being distracted by attachments in the material world, neglect their spiritual development (Keshavadas, 1982; Tagare & Shastri, 1994).

9. A Python (SB 11.8.1-4) eats whatever comes its way and is satisfied. Its teaching is not to run in pursuit of worldly things, but to limit desires and learn to accept what life brings. The Mahatma Gandhi, of course, developed his concept of limited wants into Sarvodaya, the pioneering political economy of sustainability (Doctor, 1967). However, Srila Prabhupada extends the Python's message of self-regulation and acceptance into one of reflection. "If by God's arrangement one is forced to suffer material hardship, then one should think, "Due to my past sinful activity I am now being punished. In this way, God is mercifully making me humble" ... one must accept the Personality of Godhead as the supreme controller" (Prabhupada, 1977; SB 11.8.3 – Purport).

<p>10. The Bumblebee (SB 11.8.9-12) actively seeks material benefits in the world. However, it does this with discretion, taking only what it needs from each flower. It collects food from all flowers, high and low, large and small, as a scholar should seek wisdom from a range of scriptural authorities (Tapasyananda, 1982). However, it burdens none and even helps them achieve their purpose through pollination, much as a teacher should live gently upon the Earth and help others realize their true goals—but unlike the bee, the wise person should not store up material treasures.</p>
<p>11. The Beekeeper (SB 11.8.15-16) profits by honeybees, who may work themselves to death to build up a horde of material wealth: honey. “Wealth ... can bring only pain ... wealth hoarded waits only to fill the thief’s pockets” (Ambikananda, 2000, p. 43).</p>
<p>12. The Hawk (Kurara) (SB 11.9.1-2) picks up some food and is then attacked by other, bigger birds. When it gives up the food, it is left in peace. The message, again, is that worldly possessions are a source of trouble. Happiness and enlightenment belong to one who lives simply and seeks only spiritual goals. “Why do you desire affluence? You have no wealth, you have no wife, you have nothing that is thy own? This is the nectar of Supreme Knowledge” (Avadhuta Gita 3.38).</p>
<p>13. The Ocean (SB 11.8.5-6; also Avadhuta Upanisad 10), like the Supreme, is limitless, timeless, and lucid at the surface, yet so deep that nothing disturbs its lower waters. It receives a million rivers yet remains unchanged. Equally, the wise should seek equipoise, be absorbed by the ocean of Godhead, and remain unperturbed by the river-like inputs of the senses. Elsewhere, Sri Dattatreya teaches that a spiritual aspirant should begin by cultivating a mental white blanket to cover the noise from the bodily senses and then striving to unite with the essence of each element in turn, beginning with the earth, to enter into the mind of all things—a process analogous to ecological Self-realization (Markandeya Purana 40. 15-22; cf. Haigh, 2006).</p>
<p>14. The Moth (SB 11.8.7-8) is the first of a series of gurus that expose the pitfalls of the senses. Here, sight destroys reason just as it destroys the moth that flirts with a flame, so one should control the senses and dwell in God rather than the world (Keshavadas, 1982).</p>
<p>15. The Elephant (SB 11.8.13-14) is lured into a pit by the scent of its mate and then fettered, enslaved, and tormented by the mahout’s goad. Lord Krishna calls lust an all-devouring enemy (Bhagavadgita 3.37-39). Srila Prabhupada reflects, “one should remain aloof from sense gratification in the form of sex pleasure; otherwise, there is no possibility of understanding the spiritual world” (Prabhupada, 1977, SB 11.13 – Purport).</p>
<p>16. The Deer (SB 11.8.17-18) is driven into nets by the sounds of the beaters. Keshavadas (1982) suggests that vulgar music and entertainment should be avoided, but sacred music and dance is beneficial. However, the deer is driven by fear, another obsession and distraction that helps veil the spirit in illusion. Sri Dattatreya adds: “Here is the One, without purity and impurity, without whole or part. Why do you, who are in union with that identity, feel grief or fear?” (Avadhuta Gita 5.8).</p>
<p>17. The Fish (SB 11.8.19-21) rushes to its death lured by greed, the bait of food (Tapasyananda, 1982). Keshavadas (1982) suggests that if the desire for food is controlled, so the other senses are controlled automatically.</p>
<p>18. “Pingala” (SB 11.8.22-44), the prostitute, after a bad evening, becomes disgusted with her life, her body, and transient pleasures. Realizing the oneness of the Self, hoping for the mercy of the God-within, she decides to change her ways, renounce worldly things, and devote her life to the Lord. “Expectations of</p>



<p>this world and the people in it are the sources of our greatest misery, Pingala let these go and retired in peace” (Ambikananda, 2000, p. 47).</p> <p>Pingala’s rejection of her ancient profession is also warning to all who prostitute their time, body, self-respect, and principles in the name of a career or money-making activities. Equally, it cautions those who ruin their lives by rat-racing after prizes, promotions, etc. During a bout of illness caused by over-work, the author found a cartoon on a colleague’s door which read: “The graveyards are full of indispensable people.” Most of the dead are soon forgotten, so what did their work achieve? Ultimately, there is only One that needs to be pleased, who also advises that surrendered service in the world is a sure way ahead (SB 11.11.22-25).</p>
<p>19. The Child (SB 11.9.3-4) lives in innocent bliss. Of course, “both the fool and the devotee may be said to be peaceful ... they are free from the ordinary anxiety of the materially ambitious ... [but a] fool’s peace is like ... dead stone, whereas a devotee’s satisfaction is based on perfect knowledge” (Prabhupada, 1977, SB 11.9.4 – Purport).</p>
<p>20. The Maiden (SB 11.9.3-4) is the first of three teachers who illustrate the importance of focus and screening out the clutter of the material world. The maiden is surprised by guests who she must feed. She has to grind grain for them in secret lest she expose her parents’ poverty, but as she works, her arm bangles jangle. To keep silence, she breaks all but one on each wrist and continues working. Company is a distraction (Shirdibaba.org, 2003). “Give up the association of those who are not devoted to the Supreme Lord. This is the actual lesson to be learned” suggests Srila Prabhupada (1977, SB 11.9.10 – Purport).</p>
<p>21. The Snake (SB 11.9.14-15) lives alone in an abandoned hole and avoids humans’ company. Those seeking Self-realization “should abide in the cave of their own heart” (Keshavadas, 1982, p. 15).</p>
<p>22. The Arrowsmith (SB 11.9.11-13) focuses so completely on his work that he fails to notice the fanfare as a King processes past his doorway. Total concentration is the way to achieve Self-realization.</p>
<p>23. The Spider (SB 11.9.16-21) builds a beautiful web and then, a day or two later, consumes and destroys that same web. So, the Supreme exudes each material universe and after a while draws it back into the Self. The Supreme Self has no desires and is beyond the reach of cause and effect. However, people make webs from their own ideas and become entangled in them, so the wise abandon all worldly thoughts (Sivananda, 1999).</p>
<p>24. The Caterpillar (SB 11.9.22-24) that the wasp takes and keeps in its nest, in time, becomes like the wasp. Equally “we come to be that upon which the mind is set” (Maitri Upanishad 6, 34, v 3). “Whatever an embodied being sets its mind upon, that we become” (Ambikananda, 2000, p. 52). “If one constantly meditates upon the Supreme Personality of Godhead, one will achieve a spiritual body just like that of the Lord” (Prabhupada, 1977, SB 11.9.22 – Purport).</p>

Table 1. Sri Dattatreya’s 24 gurus.

Reviewing these 24 gurus in Table 1, the Earth displays forbearance and steadfastness, and the wind the freedom of Truth. The Sun, Moon, and Ocean emphasize the unchanging nature of Truth, and that everything is a manifestation of the one eternal Truth. The boundless sky and the deep unper-

turbed Ocean reassure that the spiritual Self is beyond materiality. The spider reminds that everything in the material world is transient. The moth, elephant, deer, and fish warn against the distractions of desire. The lovebird pigeons, honeybee, hawk, and Pingala warn against building worldly attachments, while Pingala demonstrates that anyone can change their course. The child's happiness evokes the happiness of freedom from material care. The python and bumblebee emphasize the benefits of living simply. Fire and water attest to the power of the teacher to purify the world, while the learner is guided by the maiden and the snake who avoid distraction, the arrowsmith who demonstrates focus, and the caterpillar which teaches that by concentrating on God, one can return to Godhead, the ultimate goal.

In sum, this worldview conceives the material world as a sacred text whose essence is the ultimate Truth. Sri Dattatreya's 24 gurus present the material world as instruction from the Supreme and an aspect of Godhead. Materiality may distract, but it also signposts the path to transcendence (Sarre, 1995, p. 120). Following Samkhya philosophy, the 24 gurus teach about the unity of the material world, the sacred essence it contains, and the greater spiritual Self. They concern "dharma," how to live properly, and they promote a collection of virtues related to environmental education for sustainable development, which Sage Narada summarizes as: contentment, forgiveness, self-control, non-stealing, purity, control of the senses, humility, learning, truth, and equanimity (Narada Parivrajaka Upanishad 3.24). Nevertheless, by proposing a way of life that treats the world gently, that considers every being to share the same spirit soul, that replaces shallow materialism with a search for spiritual purification, and that weighs every action as service to Godhead, they suggest a less harmful way of living with the Earth.

### Sri Dattatreya's Teaching Methods

Sri Dattatreya's incarnation concerns teaching about transcendence (Srimad Bhagavatam 1.13.11). Using Upanisadic verses, devotees pray to the world-guru, who is One with Godhead and who embodies the highest learning, which is devotion to Lord Vishnu (Bahadur, 1957, p. 45). However, Lord Dattatreya is the Vaisnava preceptor of the path of knowledge. His teachings direct the mind to see beneath mundane surface appearances and challenge spiritual seekers to see beyond the everyday (Markandeya Purana 37.1-38.6). While some of Sri Dattatreya's instruction is didactic, as in His Yoga and Sannyasa Upanisads, and much involves aphorism, as in the Avadhuta Gita, His classic Puranic teachings involve experiential puzzles. Here Sri Dattatreya sets the learner the challenge of seeing beyond their own pretensions and prejudices (Markandeya Purana 17.17-24). When King Ayu arrives to request a son, Dattatreya assumes the form of a dissolute oriental potentate: "Dattatreya, his eyes red due to spiritous liquor, was sporting with women ... sang, danced, and heavily drank liquor. The best of the meditating saints, without a sacred

thread ...” (Padma Purana 2.103.110-113). Of course the King, recognizing Lord Vishnu beneath this mask and the shadow of his own failings, so obtains his desire (Padma Purana 2.103.124-138). The Deva Indra, seeking help against a host of demons, gains his wish through a similar experience, which also contains the message that one is destroyed if wealth and fortune go to your head (Markandeya Purana 18.14-58). Sri Dattatreya challenges prejudice in the tale of Eknath, who fails to recognize his God, simply because He chooses to wear Islamic dress (Abbott, 1927/1981). Similarly, in the *Srimad Bhagavatam*, Sri Dattatreya delivers His teachings to the industrious, venerable King Yadu in the form of a beautiful “hippy flower-child” and to the active, indomitable, Maharaja Prahlad as an obese person lying beneath a heap of dust. Once again His message is: do not accept surface appearances but seek the Truth within, a beneficial approach for all education.

The experiential element is essential to the message in these cases as it is in the 24 gurus. Many Hindu teachers emphasize the importance of personal experimentation and experiential learning (Gandhi, 1927-1929; Sharma, 1993). Sri Dattatreya applies this approach to all aspects of observed life.

Curiously, while revising this paper, the author was called to admire a lunar eclipse (March 3, 2007). Tradition recalls the myth of Rahu, a demon whose head, despite decapitation by Lord Vishnu, remains in the heavens and occasionally swallows the Moon. Modern Vaisnavas would more likely recall the eclipse that greeted the appearance of Sri Chaitanya in 15<sup>th</sup> century Bengal. However, recognizing the Moon as a symbol for mind, one mindful of Sri Dattatreya might learn that while the shadow of world occasionally obscures the light of even the most pure, the shadow soon passes.

### How Sri Dattatreya's Teachings May Inform Environmental Education for Sustainable Development

This study aims to broaden the multicultural base of environmental education for sustainable development by giving those seeking to merge ideas about world religions and environmental education into some useful bedrock material. It tackles a key question posed by Orr (1994): “How are minds to be made safe for the biosphere”? (p. 204).

Sri Dattatreya teaches reverence for a world which is an aspect of the Supreme. Recent discussion in the journal *Religious Studies* opposes the notion that the theistic view of nature is untenable, because nature's inconsistencies make it impossible to comprehend it as a teleological system, with the argument that God's designs need not be obvious to any human observer (Cordry, 2006; Wynn, 2006). Sri Dattatreya teaches the learner to seek out that hidden message; were this world a computer game, His advice would be to look beyond the virtual reality and consider the designer. Dwivedi et al. (1984) proclaim Sri Dattatreya to be the “embodiment of the ecological cycle” (p. 51), but His teachings do not concern the world's

machineries, only realization of the immanence of God within nature. Still, they remain relevant to environmental education for sustainable development because, as spiritual beings, we should seek for meaning within nature (Cordry, 2006; cf. Nelson, 1998).

Sri Dattatreya's teachings are also important because they teach non-possession, which was also a central part of Gandhi's thesis (Doctor, 1967). Greed, the hoarding of material wealth and emotional attachment to possessions, is the source of many serious social and environmental problems. The recipe of simple living, high thoughts, and the search for spiritual wealth and well-being, supported in Gandhi's thesis by material service to society, and in Sri Dattatreya's case by service through instruction, is a sure remedy (Orr, 1994).

Despite this, Srila Prabhupada calls "the systems of philosophers like ... Dattatreya ... dangerous creatures" (Caitanya-caritamrta Adi 2.1 – Purport). The Vaisnava *acharyas* worry that the innocent will fail to discern the deeper meanings of Lord Dattatreya's transcendental pastimes and that His teachings may be taken to suggest that the Supreme is impersonal, as in Sankara's Advaita Vedanta (Sharma, 2004). However, the Vedas agree that "Lord Dattatreya is the reincarnation of the four armed Vishnu" (Jabala Darsana Upanishad, 1), while Sri Dattatreya teaches that one "who is not devoted to Lord Vishnu is doomed ... atheists are condemned ... [and] all that is done without faith ... is accursed" (Padma Purana 6.126.19-25).

Still, Sri Dattatreya is a patron of the path of knowledge, not devotion. Proposing that the world should be interpreted, rather like a complex puzzle, His method is dry, intellectual discrimination. Hence, Srila Prabhupada links Him to the lowest stage of devotion; far below those levels where the Lord is worshipped as friend, child, or lover, and which redirect these powerful human emotions from mundane to transcendental service (Tapasyananda, 1990). Elsewhere, Macy asks environmentalists to see "the world as lover, the world as self," recognizing that environmental education for sustainable development requires passion as well as intellect (Haigh, 2006; Macy, 1991).

Many environmentalists argue that passion should be matched by action, but Sri Dattatreya emphasizes "re-visioning," not action. He remains detached, an observer, a teacher, perhaps, but not an actor in the sense of Gandhi. Of course, academic "detachment" is an obstacle for environmental education for sustainable development, which, using environmental action as its key, seeks to make the global future a personal concern for every person.

Vaisnavas are troubled also by Sri Dattatreya's assertion that a disciple should learn from many teachers. For centuries, the preservation of each spiritual tradition has depended on a succession of spiritual teachers, each guarding a particular view of the Absolute. Srila Prabhupada notes: "Although the Absolute Truth is one without a second, the sages have described Him in many different ways. Therefore, one may not be able to acquire very firm or complete knowledge from one spiritual master" (Prabhupada, 1977; Srimad

Bhagavatam 11.9.31 – Purport). Sri Dattatreya’s advice, to “read around your subject,” would also be endorsed by most educators.

Lord Dattatreya’s teachings target renunciants “but there is a more general message, which is that ... to gain liberation, it is necessary ‘to let go of who we think we are’ and seek the Truth” (Ambikananda, 2000, p. 40). This view unites Vaisnavism and deep ecology, albeit with different emphasis (Cremo & Goswami, 1995). Vaisnavism tries to help spiritual beings overcome their human experience, while deep ecology helps human beings experience the spiritual unity of Nature. However, both try to wean the learner from seeing themselves as a solitary “I” and into identification with a larger unity, which the Vaisnavas define in Universal terms (Haigh, 2006). Of course, the realization that humans and their habitat, however defined, are One is a key insight for environmental education for sustainable development.

Sri Dattatreya is an aspect of Lord Vishnu-Krishna, who pervades everything, who controls everything, and from whom everything is made. However, many find it preferable to invest the mantle of environmental guru, closer to the ultimate source, Lord Krishna (e.g., Cremo & Goswami, 1995; Prime, 1992, 2002). This also has the advantage that it provides a programme for action, namely “to make this world’s nature as much like the Divine Nature of Goloka Vrindavana [Lord Krishna’s heaven] as possible” (Cremo & Goswami, 1995, p. 87). However, Lord Krishna personally draws attention to Sri Dattatreya and His spiritual perspective on the world (Ambikananda, 2000). Sri Dattatreya’s teachings challenge materialism. They encourage learners to pay more attention to their eternal spirit than their transient, mundane lives. Previously, environmentalists emphasized environmental action, but today, environmental education for sustainable development is more deeply concerned to change the way people think. “The historical mission of our times is to reinvent the human ... with critical reflection” (Berry, 1999, p. 159).

## Conclusion

The main problems of environmental education for sustainable development are mental, not environmental. They arise from everything we conceive ourselves and our world to be and our views about how we should direct our lives. The challenge for environmental education for sustainable development is to make humans safe for the biosphere (Orr, 1994). By teaching that the world is sacred, by showing a way of interpreting that world that keeps its spiritual nature to the fore, and by teaching a way of life that prefers spiritual development to material or economic, Sri Dattatreya’s ancient teachings contain a valuable messages for modern environmental education for sustainable development. His education encourages learners to reinvent themselves as spiritual beings living within a sacred Earth. Sri Dattatreya, a patron for teachers on the path of knowledge, offers a vision, which is extended to practical action by Lord Krishna in his larger teachings of the

Uddhava and Bhagavad Gitas. However, Sri Dattatreya's teaching of the 24 gurus demonstrates a method for making sense of the world and poses a challenge: do you really understand what you see? Of course, the answer has nothing to do with the mechanics of creation. It is for the embodied soul to see beyond its material cage and realize its true nature as an isolated drop from the ocean of the Supreme.

## Notes on Contributor

**Martin Haigh**, a specialist in geographical education and co-editor of the *Journal of Geography in Higher Education*, is Professor and University Teaching Fellow at Oxford Brookes University, Oxford, England. **Contact:** School of Social Sciences and Law with Westminster Institute, Oxford Brookes University, Oxford, OX3 0BP, UK; mhaigh@brookes.ac.uk

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