



Dattātreya, Sandalwood, Possibly Mysore, Southern India, ca. 1850 - 1870

This particular piece of sculptural art represents an image of Dattātreya, believed to be a minor incarnation of Lord Viṣṇu.¹ He was an ascetic. In this portrayal, he is beautifully depicted as the Trinity, embodying the divine essence of Brahma, Viṣṇu, and Mahesh in a singular, harmonious form. The three gods appear in a single indivisible whole. This three-headed Dattātreya image is being popularized after the year 1550; an early reference is found in Gurucharita.

The iconography of Dattātreya typically features three heads and six arms, accompanied by four dogs of various colours and a cow, particularly in representations from the post-16th century. Notably, the current depiction lacks the presence of a cow.

The sculpture is supported by a round-shaped stele and a horizontally shaped and multi-layered base. The central head represents Viṣṇu, while the left and right heads depict Śiva and Brahma, respectively. Both Śiva and Brahma are adorned with jata-mukuta, and Śiva carries the Ganga in his hair, resembling the form known as Gangadhara Śiva. Viṣṇu wears a Karaṇḍamukuta, a headpiece typically associated with Śiva or the goddess.

The presence of dogs in the sculpture symbolises the Vedas, though they remain uncoloured as the image is carved from sandalwood. This representation of the Vedas challenges and undermines traditional Brahminical norms and serves to exorcise the uncleanness and sexual licentiousness often attributed to these animals. The dogs are integral to Lord's antinomian identity.²

¹T. A. Gopinatha Rao, *Elements of Hindu Iconography. Vol. I, Part 1*. Madras: Law Printing House. 1916.

²Rigopoulos, *Dattātreya: The immortal guru, Yogin, and avatāra: A study of the transformative and inclusive character of a multi-faceted Hindu deity*. Delhi: Sri Satguru. 2000.

Additionally, the figure is sheltered by the Audumbara tree, recognised as the kalpataru, or wish-fulfilling tree, in Kalyug.³ This tree is associated with Dattātreyā, who is believed to have meditated or lived beneath it. References to the Audumbara tree can be found in the source known as the Gurucharita.⁴ A species of bird is being relocated to the tree. The artist has realistically drafted the birds; it could be a Koel.

Dattātreyā's faces are calm and majestic, reminiscent of an aesthetic figure. His features are chiselled, displaying prominent double eyebrows, fish-shaped eyes, a sharp nose, and protruding lips. The cheeks are fuller, complementing an uplifted chin. On Viṣṇu's forehead, we see a Vaishnava tilak, while the other two faces—Śiva's and Brahma's—are adorned with Shaivite tilaks. He is depicted in an abhanga posture. The lord's upper body is bare, while his lower body is draped in a loincloth featuring intricate patterns, styled in a certain manner. A knot is tied at the left side, and the cloth conveys a sense of movement and fluidity, closely hugging his body.

The lord is being heavily ornamented and embellished, such as wearing karṇabhūṣaṇa⁵ (earrings), kaṇṭhī (a shorter necklace), muktāvalī (a pearl-studded necklace), and ratnāvalī (a two-layered necklace as well as a larger necklace). He also wears a hara, which appears to be broken. In his lower right hand, he showcases a piece of rucikā or cūlikā (wrist ornament), while his other wrists remain bare. Both shoulders are embellished with aṅgada (elaborate shoulder ornaments). On his feet, he dons pādukas (wooden sandals), which are significant iconographic attributes, highlighting his ascetic nature as he roams the universe. The pādukas serve as objects of devotion and symbolise the presence of divinity.⁶

The weapons or *astra* he is holding in his hands are:

- Upper right hand: śaṅkha (conch), an attribute of Viṣṇu
- Middle right hand: padmā (lotus flower), an attribute of both Viṣṇu and Brahma
- Lower right hand: kamaṇḍalu (lotus pot), an attribute of Brahma
- Upper left hand: cakra (disk), an attribute of Viṣṇu
- Middle left hand: pāśa (noose or rope), an attribute of Śiva
- Lower left hand: gadā (club), an attribute of Viṣṇu

The sculpture is embellished with a highly ornate floriated design at the lower end, adding to its decorative appeal and showcasing the intricate craftsmanship involved in its creation. This design serves to enhance the overall aesthetic experience of the piece, further highlighting the divine nature of Dattātreyā and the artistry of the sculptor.

³M.Y.S.U Fullerton *Texts and trees: Ritual engagements with Audumbar Tree in the Dattātreyā sampradāya*, 1970. *ScholarWorks*. Available at: https://scholarworks.calstate.edu/concern/datasets/cz30q058n?utm_source (Accessed: 10 July 2025).

⁴*Shri Guru Charitra*. Available at: <https://www.sdssc.in/pdf/Guru-Charitra.pdf> (Accessed: 10 July 2025).

⁵Revaprasad, Dewedi. *Natyashastra*. Delhi: Aryan Books, 2015.

⁶Rigopoulos, *Dattātreyā: The immortal guru, Yogin, and avatāra: A study of the transformative and inclusive character of a multi-faceted Hindu deity*.