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Dattatreya
The Essence of the Divine Trinity in Hinduism

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*"Sarva Aparaadha Naashaaya
Sarva Paapa Haraaya Cha |
Deva Devaaya Devaaya
Sri Dattatreya Namosthute ||"*

This is a sloka or hymn in praise of Sri Dattatreya, the meaning of which is as follows:

*"I bow to the One who negates Karma,
The One who annihilates all sins
I bow to the God of all Gods
I bow to Sri Guru Dattatreya!"*

Dattatreya, or Sri Datta, as he is also referred to, is a Hindu deity who is also regarded as an aspect of the Divine Trinity or Trimurti of Brahma, Vishnu and Maheshwara. The name "Dattatreya" is derived from two Sanskrit words, Datta (which means "given") and Atreya (which refers to the sage Atri, who was also Datta's biological father).

In the Nath tradition of Hinduism, Dattatreya is considered to be an avatar or reincarnation of Lord Shiva and is revered as the Adi-Guru or the First Teacher of the Adinath Sampradaya of the Nath sect of followers. Dattatreya first emerged as a teacher of Yoga, with clear Tantric traits. But later, he was accepted and absorbed into many other cults and sects, even including the more conventional Vaishnavism. He is also considered more of a God today, than a teacher. Today, this deity is worshiped by a multitude of Hindus from all walks of life, spanning the entire globe.



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DATTATREYA

Data is believed to be the author of the Tripura Rahasya, a treatise on Advaita Vedanta, which was given to Parashurama. Datta's birthday is celebrated in a big way as Datta Jayanti.

Origins of Dattatreya

Dattatreya is regarded as one of the most ancient deities. The earliest references to him can be found as far back as in the Ramayana and the Mahabharata. The Dattatreya Upanishad, which is part of the Atharva Veda, describes him as variously taking the form of a child, a madman and even a demon, in order to help his followers attain moksha

(liberation) from the material world.

In the earliest Tantric traditions, this deity was portrayed with only one head. Gorakshanath was responsible for including Sri Datta in the Nath Sampradaya and giving the deity a socially acceptable form today. The current three-headed form of Guru Sri Datta was probably introduced in the last 900 years or so.

Dattatreya's Birth

Data was born to sage Atri, who had been granted a boon by Lord Shiva that he would be born in their household, to the sage himself. Lord Shiva or Parameshwara, being part of the Trinity, Dattatreya automatically becomes an aspect of the Trimurti.

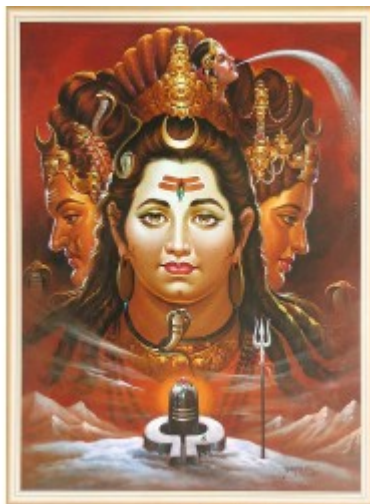
Yet another legend of Datta's birth suggests a rather mystical origin of this deity. Some sources believe that he was born in the jungles of Kashmir, very close to the holy Amarnath.

Datta's Childhood

Young Datta left his home at a very tender age, to roam naked in search of the Absolute One. He wandered around Gujarat, Maharashtra, North Karnataka and Andhra Pradesh. He is believed to have attained enlightenment in a town in Karnataka, known as Ganagapura. It is also said that his original footprints can still be seen in a lonely peak at Girnar.

Even the treatise Tripura Rahasya refers to Parashurama finding Dattatreya meditating on a peak on the Gandhamadana Mountain.

Dattatreya as an Avatar of the Trinity



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TRINITY - BRAHMA, VISHNU, SHIVA

Three of Dattatreya's closest disciples were kings. While one of them was an Asura, the others belonged to the Kshatriya (warrior) clan. Dattatreya was at first regarded as an avatar of Shiva. But later, Vaishnavites claimed that he was an avatar of Vishnu. But many Hindus regard both Shiva and Vishnus as two aspects of the Absolute Brahman. Hence, he went on to identify with the Trinity themselves.

Interestingly, the Dattatreya Upanishad first introduces him as being one with Vishnu and ends with the mantra, "Om Namah Shivaya", thereby also identifying him with Shiva. Towards the end of the third chapter, it says that Shiva pervades all reality and resides as the Eternal Jyoti (Divine Light) in the heart of every man. Shiva is described here as being omnipresent and omniscient. Finally, the chapter closes with the description of Shiva as of being that of Dattatreya.

In the Dasham Granth, Guru Gobind Singh describes Dattatreya (Datt Muni/Datt Dev) as being the incarnation of Rudra, the Supreme Power. This treatise also narrates the entire life story of Datta.

Appearance of Dattatreya

Shri Dattatreya is portrayed in different ways in different traditions among the Hindus. However, the most commonly portrayed image as having six hands; the lowest two

hands holding a Mala (garland) and a Kamandalu (water pot). The middle two hands are shown holding the sacred Shankha (Conch) and Chakra (Discus). Occasionally, portraits also show him holding the Gada (Mace). He is also shown as accompanied by 4 dogs and a cow.

Significance of the Form of Datta

Dattatreya is shown having 3 heads and a form that resonates peace and serenity. In the present Kali Yuga, it is only through pure, divine love, that one can go beyond just being poised and actually attain that type of calmness and serenity. Only those extremely Dharmic (righteous) can follow the fourfold path of Yoga and go ahead to discover the Absolute Truth. Guru Datta radiates that very love and compassion, thereby emanating that peace and love from his person.

The 3 heads of Shri Guru Datta are said to embody his identity as the Devas of the Trinity, namely, Brahma, Vishnu and Shiva. He is also the one who has transcended the 3 qualities or the Triguna and is one with the Sublime Energy of the Absolute Guru. This is why he is also regarded as the Teacher or the Divine Guru.



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DATTATREYA

Sri Datta's 6 Hands

Dattatreya is most often shown as having 6 hands, each holding the Sankha, the Chakra, the Gada, the Trishul (Trident), the Kamandalu (water pot) and the Begging Bowl. Mentioned below is the significance of each of these items:

The Shankha



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SILVER PLATED CONCH WITH STAND

The Shankha or the Conch is the one that resonates with the Naada, the divine sound. "Sam" and "Kham" together stand for Jupiter and Saturn. Saturn stands forms the basis of knowledge spiritual expansion, which is ultimately bestowed by Jupiter. Likewise, the teacher too is responsible to first awaken the need for gaining knowledge in the student and then helping him or her seek extensive training to achieve the same.

The Chakra

The Chakra, the Discus or the Wheel stands for time or the Kalachakra. The teacher presides over this factor too, by training the student to gain knowledge regarding the time factor, also teaching him to adapt equally to both good and bad times in his life, without getting affected by either. Developing a sense of timelessness leads the follower to Ananda or bliss.

The Gada

The Gada or the Mace is symbolic of pride. Pride has to be sacrificed in order to walk the path of the Truth. Dattatreya leads his followers with love and compassion, gently nudging them when they err from the path of Dharma, reminding them to put down their pride and develop love and compassion for other being, thereby experiencing spiritual enlightenment.

The Mace also symbolizes the inverted form of the cerebro-spinal system in our bodies. Guru Datta holding the mace indicates him reversing human conditioning, to free the devotee of his ignorance, finally leading him toward enlightenment.

The Trishul

The Trishul or the Trident symbolizes the triple energies of Ida, Pingala and Sushumna, which are contained in a subtle form within the Brahmadanda. The Ida at the left, gives right to materialization; the Pingala at the right, to spirituality; and the Yogic Sushumna, being the central energy current, works to balance out both these right and left energies. Datta holding the Trident, represents the promise he makes to his followers, to balance out their energies in a way that helps them lead the best life possible, in terms of material pleasure as well as spirituality.



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TRISHUL

The Kamandalu



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KAMANDALU

The Kamandalu or the little water pot indicates that Guru Datta is, in fact, the life carrier. He bestows a good and long life on the student, so that it can aid him in his spiritual journey; his journey along the Path of the Truth. The Master breathes this life-force into his student, thereby helping him perform his daily Yogic practices, finally raising his Kundalini and giving him the moksha that he seeks.

The Begging Bowl

Finally, the begging bowl that Datta holds; signifies that he begs followers to donate their ego, limitations, pride, negativity, evil thoughts and sickness to him, thereby enabling them to be free of the same. Guru Dattatreya then drinks down this "poison" and helps his bhaktas be liberated from all forms of negativity and evil, thereby putting them more firmly on the path toward enlightenment. Incidentally, Lord Shiva is also sometimes portrayed to be carrying a begging bowl for the same reason.

The Four Dogs

Shri Guru Datta is commonly portrayed as being accompanied by 4 dogs of 4 different colors. These 4 dogs represent the following:

- The 4 Vedas: Rig Veda, Sama Veda, Yayur Veda and Atharva Veda
- The 4 Yugas: Krita Yuga, Treta Yuga, Dwapara Yuga and Kali Yuga
- The 4 states of the Word: Para (beyond), Pasyanti (perception); Madhyama (conception), Vaikhari (vocal)
- The 4 states of Existence: Existence, Awareness, Thought and Speech or Action.

Hindu philosophy believes that the entire world was created from the Primordial Sound or Naada, the OM. Thus, the Word is considered most sacred in this Pantheon. The ancient seers considered that the process of creation had 4 main aspects. The Vaishnavites called them Vasudeva, Sankarshana, Pradyumna and Aniruddha. The Shaivites explained the same 4 stages as Paramashiva, Sadashiva, Ishvara and Rudra. The Shaktyas (devotees of the Divine Mother Shakti), on the other hand, referred to them as Parashakti, Iccha Shakti, Jnana Shakti and Kriya Shakti. Today, these very 4 stages are referred to as Pure Consciousness, Will, Love/Wisdom and Intellect.



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OM

In the pre-Vedic era, dogs were regarded as auspicious symbols. Later, it was believed that deities assumed the form of dogs. These animals were also often linked to fidelity and Veera, the quality of great courage, closely associated with warriors. Dogs can be both wild and tame, thereby representing the qualities of fidelity and devotion.

The dog is one of the most sublime symbols of the Vedic system. The dog is capable of sharp auditory capability and has a perception far more advanced than that of human beings. They are also always alert and receptive to teaching. This is the first prerequisite of a good disciple.

The ability to listen and listen to the subtle is what leads the seeker to the Voice of Silence or the Voice of the Divine. This Anahata Naada (that which cannot be heard by the ordinary auditory sense) is what leads the seeker to the Heart Centre, thereby enabling him or her perceive the Sound of the Divine One.

Cultivating silence and awareness helps one form impressions in the subtle plane. The dog again represents this orientation and the impression at higher levels of existence.

Greek mythology too believes in a three-headed dog, called Hydra, that keeps vigil at the

gates of heaven and hell. The dog, being a symbol of alertness and vigilance, also represents the 3 levels of physical sound.

The dog is also capable of great love and compassion, which is far beyond the comprehension of human beings. Cultivating these qualities helps human beings go beyond their physical and bodily limitations to finally realize the Absolute Truth.

The Cow



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DATTATREYA WITH COW

peace, health and joy.

Datta is also accompanied by a white cow - in fact, the cow is protected by the deity. According to Vedic tradition, the cow embodies creation, which nourishes its beings with its milk. Drinking the cow's milk, therefore, is symbolic of receiving that nourishment from the creative cosmic forces; also indicating growth, satiation, contentment, health and joy. The cow embodies the nurturing aspect of the Universe and hence, it is given the utmost respect in Hinduism.

In this system of thought and philosophy, anything that is capable of creating should be given the same respect as of the cow. Hence, Hinduism stipulates that women, the planet Earth, the solar system and the entire cosmic system be given the paramount respect.

It is for this very reason that Datta is shown protecting and nurturing the cow, which bestows happiness,

Comparison between Datta and Krishna

Lord Krishna is also shown being accompanied by a cow, for the selfsame reason. Dattatreya being an extension of Krishna, this depiction bears great profundity to the similarity in their attitudes and personalities.

Through his life story, Lord Krishna ably demonstrated his threefold ability to create like Lord Brahma, to preserve like Lord Vishnu and to destroy like Lord Shiva. Datta too is ascribed these qualities, embodied by his three-headed countenance.

While Datta is considered the Master of Yoga, Lord Krishna taught the Science of Yoga through the teachings of the Bhagavad Gita, which is a conglomeration of Yoga Vidya, Brahma Vidya and the Upanishads.



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KRISHNA AS COWHERD

Avatars of Dattatreya

According to the book "Shri Dattatreya Shodashavatar Charitanee", Guru Sri Datta took 16 avatars or manifestations, which are as follows:

1. Yogiraj
2. Atrivarad
3. Dattatreya
4. Kala Agnishaman
5. Yogijan Vallabh
6. Lila Vishwambar
7. Siddharaj
8. Dnyanasagar
9. Vishwambharavdhoot
10. Mayamuktavadhoot
11. Mayayuktavadhoot
12. Adiguru
13. Shiva Guru Dattatreya
14. Devdeveshwar
15. Digambar
16. Sri Krishna Shyam Kamalnayan

In the Dasopanta sect, all of the above avatars are worshipped and Dasopanta is considered as his 17th avatar. According to the Datta Sampradaya, Sri Pad Sri Vallabh is the first avatar and the second one is Narasimha Saraswati. Apart from these, great spiritual leaders such as Akkalkot Swami Samarth, Sri Vasudevanand Saraswati, Manik Prabhu, Krishna Saraswati, Shirdi Sai Baba, Gajanan Maharaj and Sri Ganapati Sachchidananda Swamiji are also considered to be incarnations of Dattatreya.

Gurus of Dattatreya

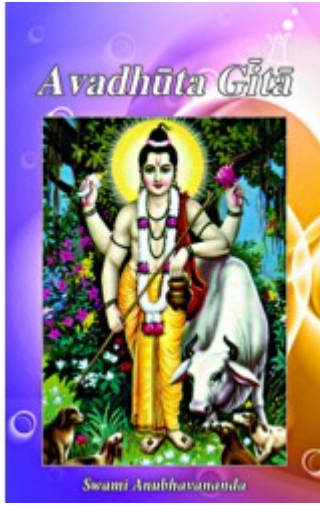
We all have Gurus or teachers. Datta considered the entire Universe and its creations as his teachers, for each of them taught him something useful - such was his greatness and humility. Sri Guru Datta considered that he had 24 Gurus, which are as follows:

1. Mother Earth - She sustains and nourishes the world and its creations and uncomplainingly bears their burden on her own self. Tolerance, patience and forbearance are the lessons Datta learnt from her.
2. Water - Water is the life-sustaining force, which quenches thirst and soothes the body of its heat. Its sweetness and smoothness calms the world and offers comfort.
3. Fire - Fire is bright, luminous and free of sin. It burns everything in sight, but is not cruel or judgmental. It also frees everything from impurity.
4. Air - Air is in continuous movement, regardless of good or bad. It is free and unattached to anyone or anything. The seeker too, should be unfettered thus while following the path of the Truth.
5. Space - Space consists of everything, and yet, is made up of nothingness. It is also unattached, though very much part of the Cosmos.
6. Sun - It warms water, yet sucks it out. It gives light to Earth, therefore breathing life into the planet. It throws its brilliant light on the whole world and cheers everyone.
7. Snake - The serpent never resides in its own house. It moves around at will, in any direction that it wishes to go. It also does not desire anything for its own happiness or benefit.
8. Python - The python is unselfish and free of desire. It accepts whatever it can find as food and keeps going its way.

9. Moon - The moon keeps waxing and waning; yet it remains unchanged. Similarly, the seeker should remain unaffected by all changes taking place in his or her life-cycle.
10. Ocean - The Ocean never changes its appearance or its size during periods of tide and ebb. While some adore it, others fear or even hate it. However, it remains unaffected by others' opinions.
11. Butterfly - The butterfly always flits around happily, knowing its life is short. It is unattached to anything and willingly embraces death by jumping into the flame of the lamp.
12. Dove - Doves are messengers of love and peace. They are beauty and sensitivity personified. A seeker should learn to imitate these qualities of a dove.
13. Fish - Fish are always tempted by the sense of taste. They invariably undergo much pain and suffering and ultimately die at the hands of a human being, trying to bait them. Human beings also exhibit the same tendency of falling for temptation. This should be avoided at all costs.
14. Honeybee - The honeybee works hard to collect honey, but someone else uses it. Likewise, greedy people make others work hard and enjoy the fruits of others' hard labor. However, greed does not pay and such people will always be miserable. A seeker should avoid becoming greedy and avaricious.
15. Deer - The deer, which is such a gentle creature, is always tempted into falling prey to a vile hunter's bait. A seeker should be ever wary of people who exploit others' weaknesses for their own benefit.
16. Elephant - The elephant has amazing memory power. It is capable of remembering people and instances for life. It is also capable of showing much love.
17. Bumblebee - The bumblebee enjoys the fragrance of flowers, but does so without hurting any flower. It also remains unattached to any one particular flower or type of flower.
18. The Prostitute Pingala - A prostitute, called Pingala, lived in the city of Videhnagar. She became disillusioned with her profession and the way she was earning her livelihood. One day, she decided to mend her ways and dedicate the rest of her life to the service of God. She led a peaceful life ever since.
19. Eagle - An eagle held a piece of meat between its beaks and was flying with it. Other greedy eagles began to chase it for the meat and finally grabbed it. The poor eagle was left critically injured in the fight. Seekers should take care not to hoard anything, as they may fall prey to greedy people.
20. Child - A child is pure of heart and holds no grudges. It is unaffected by the cycle of life and by desire, is loving, trusting and nonjudgmental. One should learn to be pristine like the child.
21. The Village Girl - A village girl was at home, thrashing rice. Her bangles were making noise as she worked. There were some guests there and she didn't want to disturb them. Realizing the noise of her bangles could wake them; she removed them and then continued to work. Similarly, a seeker should try not to disturb anyone at any point of time.
22. Arrow-maker - An arrow-maker was so focused on his work, that he did not even notice a King and his entire army pass by. This quality of attention is something everyone should learn from.
23. Spider - A spider spins its web from its own mouth and lives in it. Once its use is over, the creature swallows it back. A seeker should also remain free and unattached to material things around him.
24. Wasp - The wasp is known for its sharp sight and keenness of intent. It keeps poking and prodding their young ones till they turn into lovely-looking, fully-grown

creatures. Their focus is worth learning from.

Avadhuta Gita



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AVADHUTA GITA

According to the Nath Sampradaya, the Avadhuta Gita is a work compiled from the words uttered by Dattatreya, which had been transcribed by his two disciples, Swami and Kartika. Even greats like Swami Vivekananda are said to have held this book in high esteem.

Some of the ideas in this treatise is similar to Shaivite philosophy, Vaishnavite Agamas and Buddhist Tantra as well.

Traditions of the Dattatreya Sect in India

Several Dattatreya sects emerged in many parts of India, predominantly in Gujarat, Maharashtra, Andhra Pradesh and Karnataka. We throw a light on some of these different traditions.

Puranic Tradition

The Puranic tradition of Dattatreya was propagated by several of his oldest disciples, including Kartavirya Sahasrarjuna, Alarka, King Aayu, King Yadu, Sri Parashurama and Saankruti.

Mahanubhav Tradition

The Mahanubhav Panth was brought to the fore by Sri Chakradhar Swami. This sect reveres Guru Sri Datta as the Adiguru or the Original Master. Followers worship Datta as a single-headed deity, with just 2 arms. According to this tradition, the deity continues to rule in all the 4 Yugas and still continues to take different forms, like those of an avadhoot, hunter, sage, tiger and so on. To this day, followers visit places in the state of Maharashtra where Guru Sri Datta is said to have visited. The Datta Jayanti generally falls in the month of December and attracts great crowds to Maharashtra during this time.

Sri Gurucharita Tradition

This tradition arises from Sripad Srivallabha and Sri Narasimha Saraswati. The main disciples promoting this sect include Sri Janardanswami, Dasopant, Eknath, Manik Prabhu, Niranjana Raghunath, Narayan Maharaj Jalwankar, Swami Samarth, Gajanan Maharaj, Shirdi Sai Baba, Shi Vasudevananda Saraswati and so on.

Sakalmat Sampradaya Tradition

As the term "Sakalmat" suggests, this tradition accepts followers from all faiths. This is the Rajyogi type of sect and Sri Chaitanya Dev is worshipped as the ultimate deity. Followers of this sect view items of luxury, jewelry, precious stones and expensive clothing as nothing very important to them. There is no distinction between the rich and the poor and people from all castes and religions were treated as one. This tradition was started by Sri Manik Prabhu. Some of the most prominent followers of this tradition include Bapacharya, Narayan Dikshit and Gopalbua.

Avadhoot Panth Tradition

Started by Sri Pantmaharah Balekindrikar, this tradition spans across the regions of Akol, Balekundri, Belgaum, Daddi, Dharwad, Kochari, Nerali and Gokak. The disciples mainly responsible for the emergence of this tradition, who are also collectively referred to as the "Panth-bandhus" or "Panth Brothers", are Govindarao, Gopalrao, Shankarrao, Vamanrao and Narasimharao.

Famous Temples of Dattatreya

One can find many temples of Dattatreya all over the world. Here is a list of the most famous places of worship dedicated to the deity:

Maharashtra

The Ek Mukhi Dattatreya temple is very ancient - almost 800 years old. Situated near the Vengurla town, this idol is said to have been brought from Narsimavadi. The idol here is one-headed, with four hands.

There is yet another ancient temple in Kolhapur, situated inside the premises of the Vitthala temple near Mirajkar Tikatti.

The Ek Mukhi Datta temple of Narayanpur, Pune, is also very popular. This one is located at the bottom of the Purandar fort.

Another Dattatreya temple in Deogad, Ahmednagar district, is said to be very powerful.

Gujarat

The temple of Narasimha Saraswati in Baroda follows this particular tradition of Datta worship and is very popular among the devotees in and around that area.

The Sri Dattpith Sansthan Pathri lies among the quiet environs of the Vanki River, about 7 kilometers away from the district of Valsad.

Andhra Pradesh

Data is said to have taken his first avatar as Sri Sripad Srivallabha at Pithapuram in Andhra Pradesh. The Datta temple here is said to be one of the most powerful ever.

Experiencing Datta's Presence

While Guru Sri Dattatreya is considered to be omnipresent, omnipotent and omniscient, there are a few special places, things and points in time during which one can specially feel his presence and his grace flowing on his devotees. Mentioned below is a list of these special moments when followers can try and invoke his presence in their lives:

- The Salagrama - this is a natural stone, which is considered to be sacred among Hindus across the world. Spherical in shape, these stones are basically formed out of the shells found in riverbeds.
- Apart from the above, the tree of Audambara, the dog, the cow, and saints radiate the divine presence of Sri Guru Datta.
- His presence can also be specially felt on Thursdays, during the month of Sagittarius, and on full moon and new moon nights as well.
- Vibhuti or sacred ash and Sandalwood, are two substances which can give the devotee an experience of his presence. Hence, they are also recommended to be applied on the seeker's body.

- Sri Guru Datta's temples, places of worship, banks of sacred rivers and places of natural beauty and quiet can also be ideal locations for experiencing his presence.
 - Above all, the practice of Yoga and meditation, and contemplating the Jyoti or the Divine Light, can easily lead the seeker to feel the Adiguru's presence and his grace.
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This article was written by Priya Viswanathan, a teacher/performer of Bharata Natyam, Classical Music and Classical Instrumental Veena. A recipient of several awards for both music and dance, Priya is also a freelance writer online. She currently writes for About.com, a subsidiary of IAC - parent company of Ask.com (<http://mobiledevices.about.com>)

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