

# THE STORY OF JIVAKA – PHYSICIAN TO THE LORD BUDDHA

By Vikrama

## Preamble



Jivaka

The story of medicine within the Indian sub-continent goes back several millennia prior to the modern era. Like in all regions of the world the early attempts of mankind to combat disease were inextricably linked with mystery and the supernatural. Commencing with the Aryan invasion of the continent around 1500 BCE, the so-called *vedic* period of medicine may have commenced. Religious teachings, concepts of life, of well-being, and disease, are contained in the sacred teachings of dubious antiquity known now as the *vedas*. These are four in number namely: The *Rig veda*, the *Samaveda*, the *Yajurveda*, and the *Atharveda*. Through the ages the knowledge and wisdom of these *vedas* had been handed down from teacher to pupil orally and memorised for handing over to the next generation. They for the most part consisted of charms and spells designed to ward off diseases. The *Atharveda*, which was one that was mostly concerned with curative methods, was through the centuries improved by observation and intuition, and eventually became a corpus of literature, that came to be identified as "*Ayur Veda*". This literally meant the science or knowledge of life. It is believed that the earliest literature appeared during the second millennium BCE, following this Vedic period. The progressive increase in the literature on medicine and healthy living may have developed over centuries and the landmark events were the emergence of the two compendia by Charaka and by Sushruta. These now constitute the basis of all Ayurvedic medicine, but the period during which they emerged is unclear, being differently placed by historians as between 600 BCE and 100 CE.

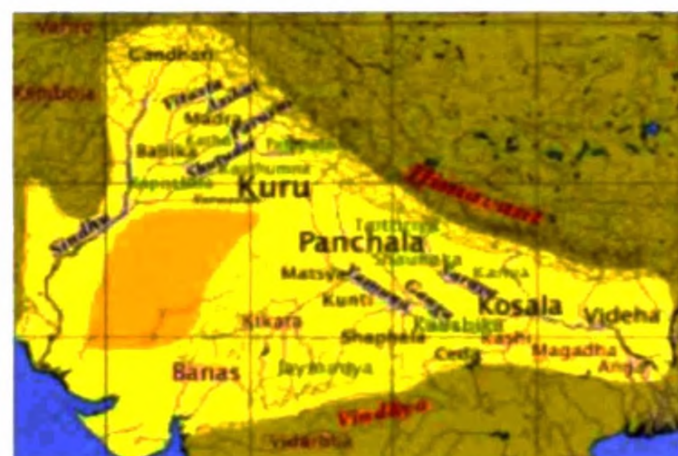
Dr.M.S.Valiathan, the internationally distinguished modern surgeon and authority on Ayurveda puts it thus: "The core of Ayurvedic doctrines, profiles of diseases and procedures remained unchanged over centuries whereas changes which did occur were more or less confined to medicinal formulations..."

It is probably during this grey period of history that the Lord Buddha lived, 563-483 BCE, and so the vague period of the life of his physician Jivaka is placed as the 6th century BCE. This is prior to the period of the famed Ayurvedic experts, Charaka and Susruta and organised Ayurvedic practice. However the story of Jivaka, told in a fashion that may be apocryphal, makes one of the charming tales of the early medical history of the subcontinent. It is also indicative of the nature of the roots of Ayurveda and the spread of knowledge over the regions at the time

## Early life of Jivaka

The story of Jivaka, the great physician of the Lord Buddha, was recorded to have been unearthed in the library of Dr. Bharat Vaidya. The story had been originally published in the Pali journal called Health, - a publication of the: *Prabhuram Anant Pharmacy for the Upheaval of Ayurveda*.

It is recorded as having been re-written by a Raj Vaidya Harjivan Ratnaji Bhatt, in 1929, and based on an original script of Jivaka's life, along with a list of Jivaka's prescriptions preserved and presented by, Rev. Ch. Damodar Swami, a professor of Sanskrit from Sri Lanka. It had been translated into English, by Dr. Bharat Vaidya (2011), and re-published in English, (Heather, 2012, MuleyGunakar, 2000).



Location of the ancient empire of King Bimbisara and birthplace of Jivaka in Magadha

King Bimbisara, at the time was the reigning monarch of the Magadha empire, a predominantly Buddhist region during the time of the Buddha; and the boundaries of this region were quite different to those of present day India. King Bimbisara reigned in Rajgriha, near, Nalanda and Gaya, in the province of Bihar. He had expressed the desire to have a dancer in his court, like the famed dancer who was Ambapali. Accordingly, a dancer Salavati, with the enchanting voice and mesmerising dance technique, was presented to him, and she was accepted; and in time ascended to the position as the favourite courtesan of the King's court. As would invariably happen, she soon became pregnant and gave birth to a baby boy. Salavati, thinking less of the child, and more of her position and professional prospects, decided to abandon the baby, and instructed her servants to place the baby in a basket and leave him in the garbage heap beyond the walls of the city. The crown prince, Prince Abhaya, while riding past noticed some crows surrounding the garbage dump and on inquiry found the abandoned baby, who in reality may have been the illegitimate son of the king himself. Prince Abhaya caused the baby to be brought to the palace to be brought up by the ladies of the court. He gave him the name Jivaka. So in this strange turn of events the baby had been rescued by his step brother. He had been given the name Jivaka, (meaning life), as he had successfully survived his harsh fate prior to the rescue. Upon learning, as he grew up, of his humble beginning, Jivaka endeavoured to study purposefully, and encouraged by Prince Abhaya, his foster father, he set his sights on becoming a physician.

As a teenager he, on his own, travelled on the established trade route and entered the great seat of learning that was in Taxila. This was an institution near present day Rawalpindi in Pakistan. In the time of the Buddha, Taxila or Takshasila as it was also known was a celebrated seat of learning. It was then not a University Town, with a normal campus and halls such as even then existed in Nalanda. Reference to student life in the Buddhist Jataka stories indicate, that at Taxila at the time, the homes of the teachers, was where the actual learning took place. Students were generally admitted when in their teens. Those from wealthy families boarded with the teachers and paid them handsomely for the food lodging and instructions. Pupils from Royal families had their separate independent quarters. Those from poor families who were unable to pay their expenses were called upon to attend on their teacher and the family. Apart from medicine Takshasila was a world famous centre of learning for a variety of subjects including: sciences, arts, crafts, and the humanities. Jivaka who was one of the less wealthy pupils chose to study medicine under one who was then recognised as one of the world famous physicians, Atreya, styled in Chinese and Tibetan texts as "Streya". He was to spend seven years at this seat of learning.

Jivaka proved a hardworking and able student, with a penchant for investigation and observation befitting that of a physician. He worked diligently for his Guru, and also selflessly assisted fellow students with their work. Seven years had passed when Jivaka inquired of his Guru, as to when his work would be finished. It was nearing what was the equivalent of graduation time, and the story is told as follows:

*As a final exercise the Guru had assigned the pupils a practical examination. He asked the students to take a shovel and travel one square yogama, ( 14 km square approximately,) around the region of Taxisala, and bring back samples of any plants that did not possess medicinal properties. Most of the students had returned with a variety of plants; but a disappointed Jivaka, had come back much later without any, and had said: Oh! Teacher: all the plants are remedies and there is nothing which is not one.*

Satisfied with this, the teacher pronounced that Jivaka was ready to do his own professional work.

Yet another episode that is quoted in the stories of Jivaka's early life is this:

*Jivaka together with the Guru Atreya and several other students were travelling on a jungle track and noticed some animal foot-prints. Jivaka informed the party that those were foot-prints of an elephant, a female one and blind in the right eye, and about to bring forth a calf that day. He had also observed, that a woman who was riding on the elephant was also blind in the right eye, and she would be delivering a baby boy that same day. Asked by Atreya and his astonished fellow students to explain his observations, Jivaka had responded thus: Having been brought up within a Royal family, he knew that the footprints of male elephants were circular, whereas those of female elephants were oblong. Explaining further, he had said that the elephant had eaten grass only from the left side of the road and that she was pressing hardest towards the right side, suggesting that the foal was to be a male. Lastly, he had explained that the woman riding the elephant was blind in the right eye because she had, upon descending, picked flowers that grew on the left side, and the heels of her feet had made deeper than usual impressions, and that the backward lean suggested that she was pregnant. The students as well as their Guru Atreya, had been astounded to find that when they verified them, all of the statements had been correct.*

There were many such tales about Jivaka.

Finally, Jivaka had graduated, and was now a fully-fledged Physician, and the Guru, Atreya congratulated him on his successful completion of his training, and gave him basic funds and the means to get back to his native Magadha.



*Taxila University in the ancient times was a celebrated centre of learning*

### **Jivaka's Professional exploits**

Jivaka is stated to have set out on foot and reached the city of Saketa, now known as Ayodhya. In Saketa, Jivaka ran out of the modest funds he had been given and realised that the path ahead to Magadha would be difficult without adequate means. He bravely decided to try out the value of his acquired expertise. The story is told of how he began his professional practice by offering his services as a Vaidya of Ayurveda throughout the city.

*On inquiring after those who may be potential patients he had come across a wealthy merchant whose wife had been unwell for seven years. He had gone to the merchant's house and announced that he was a Vaidya who had come to treat the patient. The merchant's wife had inquired from her security guard about the nature of the Vaidya who had come, and was informed that he was quite young. She had been treated by the most reputed scholars of the city and was hesitant to trust the youthful stranger. However Jivaka had endeavoured to win her trust and had informed her that he would not request any payment to begin with, but with confidence had told her that she may pay him whatever fee she thought fit, once she was*

*completely cured. With this the merchant's wife had agreed to be treated by him. As had been taught him during his training he was said to have firstly applied the technique of "Ashtavida Pariksha" – the eightfold method of examination of a patient. (This constituted examination of the nadi, that is the pulse, the mala, which is the bowel movements and excreta, the mutra, which is the urine, jinva, the tongue, and rupa the patient's body, etc.) Eventually Jivaka had diagnosed, that the lady primarily needed treatment for the recurrent headaches she was suffering from. He treated her for a sinus condition with a nasya – an extract of herbs with ghee, and after a while her condition improved. He continued with treatment that completely rid her of her seven yearlong ailments. She was reported to have paid him in 16,000. Kahapanas, silver coins, and so did her grandson and his wife; and her husband gave her in addition, even more coins, servants, a horse and carriage. Now enriched as he was, Jivaka returned to Magadha to the palace of Prince Abhaya. He was then said to have handed over all he had earned to Prince Abhaya his foster father, for educating him. Abhaya refused this, and instructed him to build his own home in proximity to the Palace.*

The Mahavagga, a Buddhist text, attributes many such miraculous cures to Jivaka. It is due to these Buddhist texts that some facts of the life of one of India's great physicians is recorded. Another such anecdote that is reported of Jivaka, the Physician is this:

*The old king Bimbisara of Magadha, had been suffering from bleeding haemorrhoids, and the blood on his garments had been an embarrassment. He confided in his son Prince Abhaya who advised him to consult Jivaka. Soon Jivaka the physician had cured the old king of his ailment and he was again offered payment which was declined. The king thereupon gifted Jivaka a Palace with a garden full of mango trees and other fruit trees, and a small village within the district. Jivaka was to later build a monastery in this garden for Buddhist monks.(Jivakambhavana)*

Jivaka had by now become the most sought after physician in King Bimbisara's kingdom. Rich and prestigious merchants had sought his services to cure them of various ailments and apocryphal stories of a number of such cases are in the records. He had received wealth and property but he valued most of all a silk shawl he was given by the King to be presented to the Buddha. The King wished him to be the official physician to the Buddha whose health was at the time beginning to cause concern.

## Physician to the Buddha



*Jivaka image as Buddha's doctor*

Following the successful treatment of the Old King Bimbisara, himself, the King made him Physician to his Royal court. The king who had now become an ardent follower of the Buddha also recommended Jivaka to the Buddha too. So Jivaka saw the Buddha and soon became physician to the Buddha as well as to his monks.

And as had been stated:

*Jivaka had treated the Buddha for his ailments and received accolades from the great sage, but he had only requested that the Buddha accept the shawl that King Bimbisara had given him to be presented to the Lord himself.*

In his time as a celebrated physician there are many anecdotes that were related in regard to Jivaka's skill as a physician. Unfortunately, there are no indications in any of the stories about the species of medicinal plants that were used by the physician Jivaka to accomplish the cures he made. However in his treatment of the ailing Buddha there is indication that in a purgation program of treatment, he may have used the plants *Terminalia chebula*, (Sinhala: *Aralu*, and Sanskrit: *Amalaki*) and *Embilica officinalis*. (Sinhala: *Nelli*). This story goes as follows:

*At this time Lord Buddha had revealed to his disciple, Ayushman Ananda, that he had toxins within his body for which he wished to take the treatment known as purgation. Ayushman Ananda called in Jivaka who having examined the Buddha proceeded to prepare the medicines for the treatment. This would bring on nine rounds of purgation and then a second medicine was to be administered which again would bring another nine rounds of purgation. This would be followed by another round of medicine and as Jivaka estimated the Buddha's condition needed nineteen rounds of purgation. It had been noted that the myrobolans, Amalaki, was one of the ingredients used as in the previous instances where Jivaka had treated the King. When the*

*Lord Buddha had completed the final round of purgation he was cured and Jivaka had ordered Ananda to prepare a warm bath for him. When the Lord Buddha had asked Jivaka what he wished to have as a token of his appreciation for the cure, Jivaka declined any presents but requested the Lord Buddha to accept a Shawl the king Bimbisara had presented to him to be given to the Buddha. He also requested the Buddha to discontinue the traditional practice of his monks using clothes stitched from discarded pieces of cloth, cut and stitched together and dyed. Jivaka's request was promptly granted by the Buddha and thenceforth monks and disciples were permitted to accept cloth offered to them by laymen and townsfolk.*

During this period that followed it is said that Jivaka had been consulted by several of the rulers of neighbouring states as his reputation had spread far and wide. One such monarch to seek his services had been the King of Ujjeni, King Prodyod, one of his most formidable patients.

*As the story is told the King was reputedly averse to the consumption of Ghee, which was at the time a popular medium for the introduction of herbal extracts for internal use. Jivaka is recorded to have circumvented this in his treatment by preparing an astringent decoction with the necessary ghee incorporated within, and administering it to the king, while making arrangements for his swift getaway in case the hot tempered monarch found out. The medicine had eventually cured the King who was most grateful.*

Once again, these stories are mainly at best apocryphal, and their veracity can never be ascertained. However, more importantly, they are strongly indicative of the existence at the time of an exceptional human being with medical knowledge and skills that were extraordinary, who lived during the Buddha's lifetime which means, prior to the time of Charaka or Sushruta.

*According to the Mahavagga, Jivaka also performed surgical interventions. The following story is about a Sethi or merchant prince of Rajagrha who was ailing for a considerable time with a head ailment. He had been treated by several physicians of the day but he appeared doomed to die. Then another merchant went to the Magathan King Bimbisara and told him that the sick Sethi had rendered good service to His majesty and to the merchant's guild. He implored the king to request the Royal Physician, Jivaka to treat him. The king accordingly invited Jivaka to go to the Sethi; and the story goes on as:*

*After examining the Sethi, Jivaka told him that he had to be operated and that after the operation he would have to lie on his left side, his right side and on his back for seven months in each position. The patient agreed. Then Jivaka in performing the*

operation got the Sethi to lie on his bed tied him fast to the bed and cut through the scalp, and drew apart the skin on the two sides to enable him to draw out two worms from the wound. Then he stitched up the skin and anointed it with salve.... Following the operation the Sethi could only lie seven days each in the positions prescribed. He expressed his inability to lie any further. Jivaka then told the Sethi that he had rested enough and added: "If I had not spoken to you as I did you may not have rested even as long as you did. Now you are cured" It is stated that the Sethi gave a 100,000 Kahapanas to the King and another 100,000. to Jivaka.

Yet another Mahavagga story about Jivaka's surgical skills concerns the son of the Sethi of Varanasi. The youngster while performing Gymnastics had suffered a strangulation of the intestines. Again the father had come to the king and requested the attention of the Royal physician for his son's acute condition. The king consented and Jivaka had to go to Varanasi to attend to his patient. Then as the story goes:

*He ordered all the people to leave the patient's room, drew the curtains and tied him fast to a pillar and cut through and drew out the strangulated intestines corrected them and placed them inside before stitching up. He then daubed the wound with herbs and salve. The Sethi's son was cured in time and Jivaka was given a large fee.*

In more serious vein, one of the main contributions of Jivaka to medicine at the time appears to have been to elaborate the virtues of purgation as a methodology for the elimination of toxins from the body., a methodology that is now well entrenched in modern day Ayurvedic practice.

Jivaka, it is said, was able to treat chronic constipation as well as to perform surgical interventions when there seemed to be intestinal obstructions. He was also reputed to have developed herbal remedies for the healing of wounds. It is understandable that the medicines used by Jivaka were those currently in use by the established schools of medicine such as in Taxila, where Jivaka studied under Atreya, and they would undoubtedly have subsequently entered the subsequent compendiums such as those of Charaka and Sushruta. Jivaka's work is also mentioned in several Buddhist Chronicles such as the *Mahawansa*.

### **Jivaka as a healer outside India**

Jivaka's reputation as a benign healer of disease had spread far and wide beyond the borders of modern India. In Thailand for instance he has been recognised as the Father of Thai Medicine and the founder of the presently globally known Thai Massage system. Tradition holds that:

*The founder of what was termed Buddhist Medicine was a Jivaka Komarabhacca, the personal doctor of the Buddha. One of the earliest Buddhist texts the Pali Canon mentions Jivaka in several places as a wealthy lay physician and the donor of a mango grove called Jivakarama, which he donated to the Buddha as a retreat for the Sanga.*

Along with the spread of Buddhism, the medicine of India also spread to other lands. The personal physician of the Buddha Jivaka was also known as Jivaka Kaumara Bhitya which means "expert in Paediatrics" In the early part there existed a large volume of literature on the subject but it has been noted by subsequent scholars that the Jivaka compendium was regarded as the authoritative work on paediatrics. But today no text of Jivaka is available. All that remains are references to Jivaka saying...Thus spoke Jivaka..and cohesive texts that existed are no more.

There is however a detailed biography of Jivaka in the Mahavagga section of the Vinaya Pitaka. This section describes his beginnings and the miraculous cures he was known to have affected. The Buddha's period of Indian history was an era when Indian medicine was in transition from the vedic system, which included also supernatural phenomena, to the more rational system that evolved into what we know as Ayurveda. The transition had taken many centuries and was perhaps finalised into a rational basis with the twin compendia of Charaka and Sushruta. Jivaka's reputation travelled with the Buddhist scriptures in many directions. Jivaka appears in Tibetan Medical scrolls and his life is depicted in the art form in Thangka paintings.



*Thangka Painting depicting Jivaka's skills*

In most of the Buddhist world of today he is not a well identified figure, but in Thailand he is revered as the "Father Doctor" who developed herbal medicine, therapeutic massage and other healing practices which he taught to successive generations. Though the transmission of ancient medical practices may have had several pathways, it is clear that the work of Jivaka is an important landmark in the tradition of eastern medicine.

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### Innovation

The failure to keep up with innovation is really the failure to develop and focus core competences in the direction of change of progress.

Jas. M. Utterback Mastering the Dynamics of innovation. Haarvard Business School Press 1994.

### Allergic to Peanuts?

#### For some kids eating them helps.

A new study is adding to a small but growing pile of evidence that kids with food allergies can benefit when exposed, under a doctor's supervision, to the very food they react poorly to. Last week, a team of British researchers reported that 22 children with peanut allergies generally did well when given higher and higher doses of peanut flour mixed into chocolate bars over several months. After 30 weeks the children got about 32 roasted peanuts to eat. Fourteen tolerated that dose; on average, the peanut serving size the children could handle grew 1000 fold. The work was done in Cambridge. Its not the last word and doctors warn that parents should not try this on their own; the study was small and had no control group. But it builds on similar evidence for eggs and milk allergies. There's also hope that eating peanuts can help to prevent allergies to them in the first place. A different UK study expected to end in 2014 is trying to thwart peanut allergies in hundreds of kids who are at high risk.

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### Ballet of Plant Movement.

In the Northern Hemisphere winter is ending and the world of plants seems dead and lifeless. However spring is on the way and the ever present plants will again resurface. Their return will herald a re-greening of the Earth, a ballet of germination and sprouting. But for most people, plants are seen as if inanimate objects. Trees stand majestically, grass carpets a lawn, and flowers provide a backdrop of colour, yet all appear to stand lifeless, except for swaying in the wind. Intellectually you know they are alive, you learnt that in school. You also learnt they are sessile – they do not move, at least not in the animal-centric sense of the word.

*Sarah E. Wyatt in Science (2011), 331, 1520.*