

Jivaka Komarabhacca

By Pierce Salguero

Tradition holds that the founder of Buddhist medicine is Jivaka Komarabhacca, the personal doctor of the historical Buddha. The earliest Buddhist text, the Pali canon, mention Jivaka in several places as a wealthy lay-physician and the donor of a mango grove called Jivakarama, which he gave for the use of the Buddha's order of monks as a retreat for the pansa, or rainy season.

A detailed biography of Jivaka is provided in the Mahavagga section of the Vinaya Pitaka, the monastic basket of discipline composed from the fourth to the first century BC. In this rather lengthy passage, it is said that Jivaka was an orphan who was raised by a certain Prince Abhaya. When he came of age, he studied medicine with a well-known master in northwestern India, apprenticing with this teacher for a period of seven years before returning back home. The biography then tells of six instances where Jivaka healed different individuals, including two instances of major surgery. Among Jivaka's patients were several merchants, the king, and even the Buddha himself, who came to him for a purgative of powdered lotus flowers.

Although the Vinaya text provides some detail on the practice of medicine in ancient India, historians' knowledge of this period is very sketchy. India at the time of the Buddha was in transition from a strict Vedic system of wrathful war-like gods to more the rational systems of philosophy found in Buddhism and the Upanishads. This also was a period of transition from magical religious medicine based on demonology to the more empirical Ayurvedic medicine

This transition period lasted many centuries. Ayurveda came into being with the writing of the Caraka and Susruta Samhitas, two encyclopedic texts which catalogued the medical knowledge of the day. These works were not composed all at once, but both reached their current form by the fifth century AD. When the hatha yoga system was developed in the tenth to thirteenth centuries AD, yoga postures, energy lines (nadis), and pressure points (marma) also became part of the medical landscape. These traditions were very influential across South and Southeast Asia.

Jivaka's biography traveled with Buddhist scriptures wherever the religion traveled. He appears in Tibetan medical scrolls, as well as early Chinese Buddhist sutras. In the Chinese, where Jivaka is known as Qipo or Qiyu, he is born with acupuncture needles in his hands, and performs various Chinese medical diagnostic procedures. (These sutras are Taisho 553 and 554). Several formulas have been named after Jivaka since the medieval formularies of Sun Simiao.

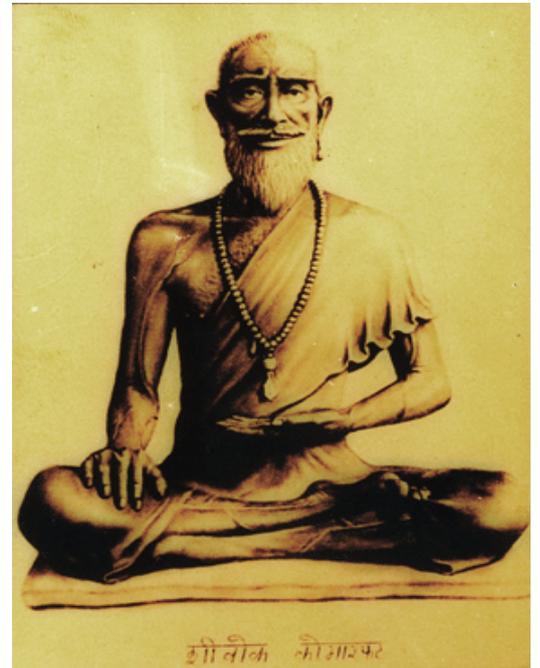
Although in most of the Buddhist world he is a forgotten figure, Jivaka is actively worshipped in Thailand as the "Father Doctor." Many Thais believe that Jivaka developed herbal medicine, therapeutic massage, and other healing practices himself, and taught these to future generations. The course of history tells us that the transmission of Indian medical knowledge to Thailand was far more complicated, but it is clear that the roots of much of the Buddhist world's medical tradition do lie in the ancient past, and that Jivaka is an important figure in this tradition.

Sources:

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Thai icon of Jivaka Komarabhacca