

## Medical History

### Jivaka : The Legendary Physician of Ancient India

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In ancient Indian society, healers occupied a special position. Ancient Hindu texts are frequently interspersed with epithets about diseases and their treatment. For example, the Rigveda, while primarily being a description of Hindu deities, also contains descriptions of Skin Diseases and Jaundice. While ancient literature from most other civilizations deals exclusively with religion and the exploits of kings, India was perhaps unique in the fact that a large portion of ancient Sanskrit and Pali texts dealt with non-religious secular subjects like Medicine. It is from these texts that we come across the name of Jivaka, the physician to Goutam Buddha. Jivaka was a name that travelled beyond the borders of India (or the geographical region currently known as India) to China, Thailand and other Countries (Fig 1).

Like many other ancient Indian public figures, the origins and family background of Jivaka are not documented authentically. While some accounts state that he was the descendant of a royal family, others state that he was of humble origins who was raised by a prince. Whatever the family background, Jivaka studied Medicine at the famous University of Taksashila and became an astute clinician.

There is one famous anecdote regarding Jivaka during his student days. Their teacher, Atreya, sent all the pupils to a forest and asked them to fetch a plant with no medicinal values. Jivaka was the only one who came back empty handed and reported that he could not find such a herb. Atreya was very impressed and named Jivaka as his successor.

Jivaka then came to the city of Rajagriha (present Rajgir) and started his Medical practice. He quickly became famous for his clinical acumen and was appointed court physician to King Bimbisara (543—492 BCE). It was through this king that Jivaka met the great religious preacher, Goutam Buddha. In later part of the life of the Buddha, Jivaka became his essential companion and counsellor. Chinese and Tibetan texts describe vividly how Jivaka treated the Buddha on several occasions and saved His life.

Jivaka was not only the personal physician to Goutam Buddha but also his close disciple. Ancient Buddhist and Pali texts describe in great details about his devotion to Buddhism in its early days. He

was highly revered by the people and his stature as a respected physician of the Kingdom helped a lot in propagating Buddhism among the masses.

While Jivaka is a respected figure in Indian texts, he was deified in ancient Chinese Medical texts. Also, in traditional Thai Medicine, he is still considered a father figure. In traditional Thai Medicine, a ceremony called “WaiKhru” is performed. During this ritual, the students pay homage to Jivaka as the source of ancient knowledge even today. Ancient texts of Chinese Medicine pay homage to Jivaka as the “Medicine King”.

Some treatment methods used by Jivaka are well known to the scholars of ancient Pali texts. For example, he treated some “Disease of the Head” of a patient with Ghee through the nose. He also treated Rectal Fistula of King Bimbisara with some ointment. These texts also mention that Jivaka performed Surgeries on his patients, sometimes even in front of the relatives. But the veracity of these accounts is difficult to verify. One famous Surgery he performed was removing a piece of rock from the foot of the Buddha himself using a knife (Fig 2).

Thus, in conclusion, it can be said that Jivaka was a Physician whose fame transcended the borders of his country and influenced ancient Asian Medical Traditions to a great extent.

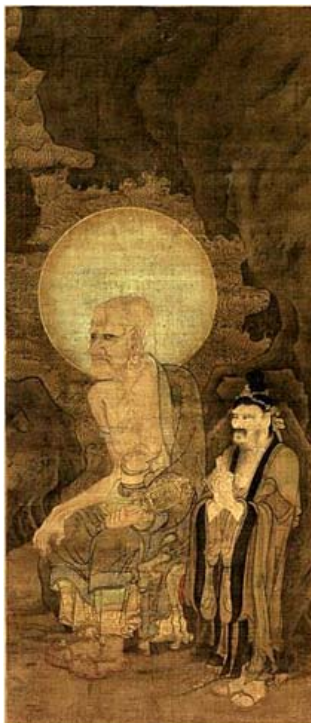


Fig 1 — Painting of Jivaka in 10<sup>th</sup> Century Chinese scroll (Wikimedia Commons)

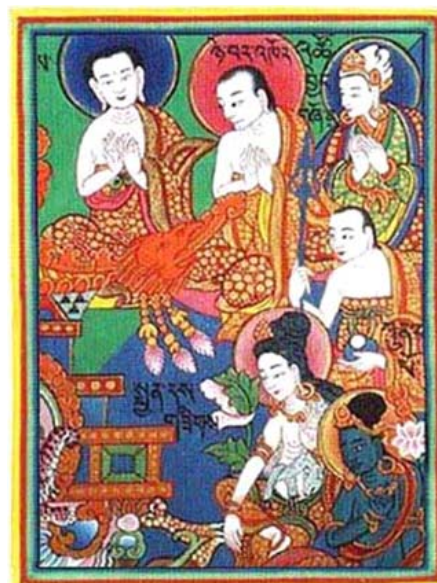


Fig 2 — Ancient Tibetan painting on “patriarchs of Medicine” shows picture of Jivaka