

# Exploring the Life, Legacy and Contributions of Jivaka in Buddhism

SHAKTI DHAR YADAV

*Lumbini Buddhist University, Central Campus, Lumbini, Nepal*

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• **Email:** Shaktidharyadav@lbu.edu.np

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## Abstract

*Jivaka was a prominent figure in ancient Buddhist medicine. He was renowned for his advanced medical knowledge, skillful diagnoses, innovative surgical methods, and emphasis on public health and preventive care. He blended his expertise with deep Buddhist philosophical principles, expressing compassion, mindfulness, and interconnectedness in his healing practices. He was close to the Buddha and the Sangha, so he believed that caring for both the body and the mind was important in medicine. Jivaka illustrated compassionate healthcare rooted in ethical values by treating both the Buddha and his followers. This article examines the medical skills and philosophical ideas of Jivaka, highlighting how his approach to combining medicine and philosophy has influenced both his era and contemporary perspectives on holistic care.*

**Keywords:** *Ayurveda, Surgery, Mindfulness, Compassion, Medicine, Herbs.*

## Introduction

Jivaka Komarabhacca is a well-known doctor in Buddhist tradition. He is also an important figure in ancient Indian medicine. He was found as a baby in Rajagriha by Prince Abhaya (Singh 45). Jivaka had a hard early life, but worked to become a skilled doctor. He studied medicine at the famous University of Taxila. There, he became very good in many areas of medicine, including surgery and the use of herbal medicine (Sharma 205). Jivaka treated all people equally, even the poor and sick. He showed great care and kindness to everyone he helped.

Jivaka played an important role in caring for the health of the Buddha. He also looked after the monks in the Buddha's community. He became very close to the Buddha through his care. Many Buddhist texts talk about the treatments he gave. These stories show his deep medical knowledge and kind nature. Jivaka is honored as a lay follower of the Buddha. He is also seen as a key person in stories that connect medicine, spiritual life, and ethical living. His life and work have inspired many people over time. His story shows the power of learning, helping others, and working to improve people's lives (Mehta 89).

Jivaka was born in the ancient kingdom of Magadha. Buddhist writings tell us that his mother was Amrapali, a courtesan in Rajagriha. She left him after he was born because she feared what society would say. The baby was left in a trash heap. Prince Abhaya adopted him and provided all sorts of facilities. (Zysk 23).

People remember Jivaka for his innovative approaches to healing. He believed in holistic treatment of both the body and the mind. This matched Buddhist values like compassion and mindfulness (Wujastyk 67). He used herbal medicines and followed good moral ethics in his work. His work brought together healing and spiritual teachings.

Jivaka's work went far beyond just being a doctor. He is seen as an important part of Buddhist history. He helped shape traditional medicine in many Asian countries. His story shows how healing and living a good life are deeply connected. His teachings and actions still matter today and continue to inspire people (Sharma 102).

## **Biographical Tale of Jivaka**

Jivaka was born during a time of significant social and cultural changes in ancient India. He lived in the 5th century BCE, a period when the new teachings of Buddhism began challenging traditional religious and medical practices. In Buddhist writings, Jivaka is often regarded as the "father of medicine," with his life stories emphasizing his integration of medical expertise with strong ethical principles (Wujastyk 47).

Jivaka was the son of Amrapali, who is also called Salavati in some stories. She was a courtesan from the Republic of Rajagriha. His father was an unknown merchant. Because he was born out of matrimony, Amrapali left him on a garbage heap outside the city of Ratnagiri in the kingdom of Magadha, hoping someone would find him or

that he would die (Kashyap 77).

Luckily, Prince Abhaya, the son of King Bimbisara of Magadha, was passing by and heard the baby crying. He felt moved by the sound and decided to adopt the child. He named him “Jivaka,” which means “alive” or “one who lives,” because the baby had survived such a terrible start. The name “Komārabhacca” is believed to be linked to his royal upbringing, since “Komāra” means prince (Chan & Chan 88).

Jivaka showed signs of being very smart and curious when he was young. Seeing his potential, Prince Abhaya arranged for him to study medicine. Jivaka went to the famous city of Taxila, where he was taught by the respected Ayurvedic teacher, Athreya Punarvasu. Athreya was believed to be from the family of the ancient teacher Atreya. Jivaka spent seven years learning medicine, working hard and showing great skill in understanding medical science (Kashyap 77).

After these seven years of hard training, Guru Athreya gave his students a final test. He told them to go into the Himalayan forest and find plants that could be used as medicine. They had to return before morning with the plants and explain how each one could heal. All of the students came back with many plants, proud to show what they had found. But Jivaka returned with nothing. When the teacher asked why, Jivaka said he couldn’t find a single plant that had no healing power. Athreya was amazed by this answer. He saw that Jivaka truly understood nature and its healing gifts. He knew then that Jivaka would become a great doctor who would use his knowledge to help people everywhere (Ghosh 71).

## **Career as a Physician: Miraculous Cures by Jivaka**

After finishing his studies, Jivaka returned to Magadha to begin his career as a doctor. He quickly gained fame for his skill in healing. People from many backgrounds came to him for help—kings, monks, and ordinary people. Jivaka was known for his sharp ability to find out what was wrong and offer the right treatment. He dealt with many difficult cases in his career. Some of the most well-known ones are described below:

### **a. Treatment Given to the Merchant’s Wife**

In the city of Saketa, a merchant’s wife had suffered from terrible headaches for many years. On his way back from Taxila, Jivaka visited her. After examining her, he asked for a small amount of ghee. He mixed the ghee with special medicines and gave it to her through the nose while she lay on her back. The mixture came out through her

mouth and was spat into a container. Amazingly, this single treatment cured her long-lasting pain. It showed Jivaka's great medical skill (Zysk 70–71).

The woman and her family were very thankful. She, her son, and her daughter-in-law each gave Jivaka 4,000 coins as a reward. The merchant added more gifts: another 4,000 coins, a male and female servant, and a horse chariot. Jivaka took all these gifts to Prince Abhaya to offer them. But the prince kindly refused and told Jivaka to build a house in the palace instead. Jivaka agreed and built the house (Horner 71).

#### b. A Special Case of Head Surgery

A merchant from Rajagaha suffered from a serious head disease called "*sisabaddha*." Jivaka treated him by laying him down on a bed and carefully tying him in place. He made a cut in the skin of the man's head. Then he opened a suture in the skull and removed two living worms—one large and one small. He showed them to the people watching. After removing them, he closed the suture, stitched the skin, and applied healing medicine. The treatment cured the man and showed how skilled Jivaka was in surgery (Ubeysekara NP).

#### c. Treatment of Fistula

King Seniya Bimbisara of Magadha had a painful rectal fistula, called "*bhagandala*." The disease caused bleeding and great discomfort. Even though he was a king, the illness made him suffer. Jivaka, known for his skill, was called to help. He made a careful plan that involved surgery and medicine. Jivaka treated the king successfully. The king's health and dignity were restored thanks to Jivaka's care (Horner 386–87).

#### d. A Knot in the Bowels

In Varanasi, a merchant's son got a knot in his intestines ("*antaganthabaddha*") after doing somersaults with a stick. This likely hurt his stomach and caused trouble with digestion and weakness. Jivaka treated him by cutting open the abdomen, removing the knot, and showing it to the man's wife. Then he put the intestines back, stitched the wound, and applied a healing paste. This operation is similar to the Ayurvedic method of laparotomy described by Sushruta, which involves washing, oiling, stitching, and applying medicine to the bowels (Zysk 73–75).

#### e. Morbid Pallor (Pandurogabodha)

Jivaka traveled to Ujjeni to treat King Pajjota, who had a disease that needed ghee for treatment. But the king hated the taste of ghee and refused to take it. Jivaka came up with a clever idea. He boiled the ghee with herbs to change its color, odor, and taste, making it seem like a strong herbal drink. The king drank it without knowing it was ghee. The ghee made him vomit, which cleaned his system and cured the illness. Jivaka's smart thinking helped save the king's life and showed his ability to adjust treatments to fit the patient's needs (Zysk 74–75).

#### f. The Body Filled with Bodily Dosas (Dosabhisanna)

One day, the Buddha became sick due to an imbalance of bodily *dosas*. Jivaka decided that a mild purgative was needed. First, he gently oiled the Buddha's body for a few days. Then he prepared a purgative by mixing medicines with three handfuls of lotus flowers. The Buddha was told to smell each handful. Each time, the medicine cleaned his body ten times, totaling thirty purgations. Afterward, the Buddha bathed and was told to eat only light food until he was fully balanced again. This careful and gentle treatment shows Jivaka's ability to help even very delicate patients (Zysk 76–77).

#### g. Magical Treatment and Spiritual Advice to Ajatsatru

Jivaka also helped King Ajatashatru in a very special way. The king had killed his father, King Bimbisara, after being influenced by Devadatta. He had also tried to harm the Buddha. Because of his guilt, Ajatashatru developed sores and suffered deeply. He asked his six ministers for advice, but they told him to go to non-Buddhist teachers. Jivaka advised him to visit the Buddha instead. The Buddha meditated and healed the king's body. Then he taught him the *Nirvana Sutra*, which helped the king find peace and make up for his wrongdoings. Jivaka also told the king about a man named Ajita, who had committed similar sins but was forgiven through the Buddha's teachings. Ajatashatru later became a strong supporter of Buddhism. He helped organize the First Buddhist Council and ruled Magadha wisely. His name, "Ajatashatru," meaning "unborn enemy," refers to a prophecy about his future conflict with his father (Walshe 91–93).

### Service to the Buddha and the Sangha

One of the most well-known parts of Jivaka's life is his connection to Buddhism. He became the personal doctor of Gautama Buddha and the monastic community, called the Sangha. This important role brought him closer to the Buddha's teachings,

and Jivaka became a faithful follower.

#### a. Donation of a Vihara

Jivaka Amravana Vihara is an old Buddhist monastery located near Rajgir in Bihar, India. Jivaka became rich by treating wealthy people, but he never charged poor patients. He often visited the Buddha to ask about his health and to learn more about Buddhist teachings.

The Buddha usually lived at Veluvana Monastery in Rajagiri, which was a gift from King Bimbisara. The long distance made it hard for Jivaka to visit regularly. To solve this, Jivaka bought a mango grove and gave it to the Buddha. The Buddha stayed there sometimes, and monks used it for their rainy season retreats. The place was originally just a mango orchard. Jivaka built a monastery there and gave it to the Sangha. The Buddha was treated at this monastery after Devadatta tried to kill him by dropping a rock that injured him (Bechert 305).

#### b. Monk Allowed to Accept Robes from Lay Devotees

During the Buddha's time, monks wore robes made from thrown-away cloth. This practice showed their simple life and helped avoid worldly attachment. Jivaka was worried that wearing dirty rags could make monks sick. He asked the Buddha to let monks wear robes given by laypeople. The Buddha agreed. This started the tradition where lay followers could offer robes to monks as a form of support (Horner 54–55).

#### c. Offering of a Robe to the Buddha

King Canda Pajjota of Avanti had a skin condition that made him look pale and unhealthy. None of his doctors could help him. He was a friend of King Bimbisara, so he asked him to send Jivaka.

Jivaka found that the king needed a ghee-based medicine. But the king had a bad temper and hated ghee. So he cleverly hid the ghee in another kind of herbal drink. He gave the disguised ghee to the king and quickly left, pretending to be busy elsewhere. When the king found out about the ghee, he was angry. But by then, he had already recovered. Happy with the results, he gave Jivaka a rare and expensive shawl (Zysk 48).

He brought the shawl back to Rajagiri and offered it to the Buddha. The Buddha tore it into pieces and made it into a robe, so that it would not seem too valuable. After this, the Buddha gave Jivaka a teaching, and he reached the first level of

enlightenment, called Stream Entry (Sotapanna) (Horner 35).

Later, the king of Kasi sent Jivaka some high-quality woolen fabric. He gave it to the Buddha to receive blessings. The Buddha accepted it, gave Jivaka another Dhamma talk, and allowed monks to use woolen cloth. This started a new rule for monastic clothing (Davids and Oldenberg 123).

#### d. Protection of Monks from Five Fatal Diseases

In ancient Magadha, five serious diseases were common: leprosy, boils, eczema, tuberculosis (consumption), and epilepsy. Many people with these illnesses came to Jivaka for help.

But Jivaka was very busy taking care of King Bimbisara, the royal family, and the monks, including the Buddha. Some sick people were so desperate that they offered him money or even themselves as servants. Still, Jivaka couldn't treat them. These people noticed that monks received good care and lived in comfort. So, some of them joined the monastic order just to get medical treatment. Jivaka did his best to care for sick monks, but it became hard to manage his other duties (Strong 112).

One man joined the order only to get treated, and after he got better, he left. Jivaka was upset and blamed the monks for letting sick people join just to get cured. He told the Buddha about the issue. The Buddha agreed and made a rule. People suffering from those five diseases could not become monks. This helped protect the Sangha and made sure that care was given only to those truly committed (Horner 54–55).

### **Buddha's Prevailing Lesson to Jivaka**

Jivaka became one of the Buddha's most important disciples. He often spent his free time with the Buddha and the Sangha. He regularly asked the Buddha for guidance on different topics and life events. Some of the main teachings the Buddha gave to Jivaka are discussed below.

#### a. Ethical Suggestion of Consuming Meat

The *Jivaka Sutta* (Majjhima Nikāya 55) is a teaching the Buddha gave at Jivaka's monastery in Rājagaha. In this sermon, Jivaka asked the Buddha if it was right for monks to eat meat that was specially prepared for them. The Buddha explained that monks could eat meat only if three conditions were met. These conditions are called the "threefold purity" rule (*ti-koṭi-parisuddha*). According to the Buddha, monks can



eat meat if they: (1) did not see the animal being killed, (2) did not hear that it was killed for them, and (3) did not suspect it was killed for them.

This teaching made sure that monks did not take part in killing animals. It followed the Buddhist idea of non-violence (*ahimsa*). But if the meat came from an animal that was killed just for the monks, it was not allowed. The *Jivaka Sutta* also stressed that monks should live ethically and eat in a mindful way. This teaching had a strong effect on the way Buddhist monks thought about eating meat. It also helped shape vegetarian practices in some Buddhist groups (Bodhi 486–89).

#### b. Guidance on the Qualities of a True Physician

Another sermon, found in the *Aṅguttara Nikāya* (AN 8.26), is also called the *Jivaka Sutta*. In this teaching, Jivaka asked the Buddha what makes someone a good doctor. The Buddha shared eight qualities that a truly skilled and helpful doctor should have. A good doctor should: (1) know the types of diseases, (2) diagnose them properly, (3) know the correct medicines, (4) give the right treatment, (5) give medicine with care and kindness, (6) make sure the treatment helps the patient, (7) avoid being selfish or greedy, and (8) stay committed to helping others. This teaching showed that being a doctor is not only about treating sickness but also about caring for people with wisdom and compassion (Bodhi 1140–42).

### **The Role of Jivaka in the Life of the Buddha**

Jivaka's skills in medicine played an important role in supporting the Buddha and his community of monks. He did more than just heal people's bodies—he also helped support the spiritual and moral values that Buddhism teaches.

#### a. Treating Illness

Jivaka is most famous for being the personal doctor of the Buddha. Whenever the Buddha became sick, Jivaka treated him with great care. He helped the Buddha get better, which allowed him to continue teaching the Dhamma (Zysk 78). This shows how important good health is in the spiritual life. Without good health, even great teachers like the Buddha would not be able to share their teachings (Filliozat 120).

#### b. Compassionate Care

Jivaka showed the true spirit of Buddhism through his kindness and compassion. He treated the Buddha, but also cared for the poor, the sick, and those who had no one



else to help them. He never cared about whether someone was rich or poor—he treated everyone equally. This shows the Buddhist value of helping all living beings with love and unselfishness (Meulenbeld 112). Because of this, Jivaka became respected not only as a doctor but also as a compassionate and spiritual person.

### c. Spiritual and Physical Well-being

Jivaka also helped shape how Buddhists think about health. He believed that being physically healthy helps people think clearly and grow spiritually. By keeping the monks and nuns healthy, Jivaka made it easier for them to focus on their spiritual practices. Without illness as a distraction, they could meditate, study, and follow the Buddha's path more fully (Wujastyk 89).

## Medical Practices of Jivaka

Jivaka Komarabhacca is remembered for his advanced and thoughtful medical practices. He combined physical healing with ethical and spiritual care. His way of treating patients focused on healing the body, calming the mind, and supporting the spirit. This balanced approach made him one of the most respected doctors of his time. The key parts of his medical practice are explained below:

### a. Herbal Medicine

Jivaka used many kinds of medicinal plants to treat different diseases. His work helped form the base of Ayurvedic medicine. He had deep knowledge about herbs and how they could help the body heal. Some common herbs he used were turmeric, ginger, and neem. These plants are known for reducing swelling and helping the body recover (Wujastyk 67).

Jivaka believed in using natural treatments instead of harmful chemicals. This matched well with Buddhist values of peace, balance, and non-violence. His trust in the power of nature showed his understanding that health comes from living in harmony with the world (Meulenbeld 89).

### b. Surgical Innovation

Besides being a master of herbal medicine, Jivaka was also an expert surgeon. He performed many difficult surgeries with skill and care. Old writings describe how he treated broken bones, deep wounds, and even performed trepanation, a surgery where a hole is made in the skull to reduce pressure (Zysk 45).

His surgery methods were far ahead of his time. They showed how committed he was to reducing pain and helping people recover. Jivaka worked to stop diseases before they started and to heal people when they became sick (Filliozat 102).

### c. Holistic Healing

Jivaka believed that health was not just about the body. He taught that the body, mind, and spirit are all connected. If one part is sick, the others can be affected too. That's why he supported a holistic approach to healing. He believed that clear thinking and spiritual peace were just as important as physical health. He often told his patients to meditate, live ethically, and follow a balanced lifestyle. These ideas are closely related to Buddhist teachings about mindfulness and inner peace (Sharma 56).

## Conclusion

Jivaka is a major figure in both medical history and Buddhist tradition. He lived a life of compassion, strong values, and whole-body healing. His story—from being a child left alone to becoming a respected doctor—shows the power of learning, faith, and serving others.

Jivaka's medical skills, such as his surgeries and plant-based treatments, proved his deep knowledge. But more than that, he understood that health also depends on kindness, calmness, and spiritual strength. He worked closely with the Buddha and the monks, helping to connect medicine with Buddhist ideas like mindfulness and loving-kindness.

Jivaka's influence lasted far beyond his lifetime. He helped shape traditional medicine in many parts of Asia. He also inspired people to make healthcare available to everyone, no matter their wealth or background. His life reminds us of how important it is to live with kindness, help others, and live ethically. Jivaka is a lasting symbol of how medicine, spirituality, and ethics can come together. His story continues to inspire doctors, healers, and anyone who wants to help others live better, healthier lives.

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