

# General information on Jivaka Kumarbhaccha, and maintaining an altar for use in Thai healing arts

By Bob Haddad

## Jivaka Kumarbhaccha

The source figure and patriarch of traditional Thai healing is Jivaka Komarabhaccha (Kumarbacca) - known in Thailand as Shivaga Kormapaj or simply "Gomalapat." This historical figure is revered by the Thai people as the father of their healing and medicine traditions. Jivaka is mentioned in ancient Buddhist texts as a renowned physician and healer who treated many important people of his day, and who became a devotee of the Buddha, who was his contemporary. He is believed to have traveled with, and to have personally treated the Buddha, and is also known for his donation of free medical services to the *sangha*, the Buddhist monastic order. There are several common misrepresentations about Jivaka and about the early spread of Ayurvedic healing principles in Thailand. One is that Jivaka personally transmitted early practice of Thai massage to Thailand. This is not true, because Jivaka never set foot in Thailand, since Buddhism began to spread from India (now southern Nepal) to Southeast Asia hundreds of years after his own death. Another often-heard claim is that Jivaka taught Buddhist monks how to administer Thai massage, and that the monks in turn were responsible for spreading this healing art throughout Thailand. In actuality, it was probably not the monks themselves who practiced and helped spread the earliest forms of *nuad boran*, but rather the Ayurvedic doctors who accompanied and treated the monks as they spread news of Buddhism and sought converts.



*Photograph of the ancient ruins of Jivaka's home and mango grove in Rajgir, Bihar, India.*

## Your altar

An altar is an important element of a Thai healing practice room. It should be at the head of the room if possible, and should contain items of spiritual focus. Thai massage altars in Thailand usually contain statues or paintings of Jivaka and the Buddha, candles, incense burners, flowers, photographs of teachers and other spiritual items. Whatever you use as a stand, platform or table, keep it small, at eye level while you work (about 4 feet high), and place it in a corner of the room, away from the working area. It is important to have a statue or an image of Jivaka on your altar and a Buddha statue or image should be placed behind it and at a slightly higher level. It's a good idea light a candle for each client you see. A "tea candle" placed inside a clear votive cup works well because each candle lasts around 2-3 hours and extinguishes itself neatly in its aluminum sleeve. Offerings of food and water are usually left on an altar, and your altar can also contain photographs of important teachers and family members.

Before you begin each session, you might recite the last line of the *Om Namó* mantra quietly to yourself, or say a quiet prayer to ask for guidance from Jivaka and your teachers. It can be important to occasionally look at the altar during a session to regain focus and inspiration when necessary. After the client leaves the room and you begin to clean and clear the room's energy, take another moment to connect to your altar, and extinguish the candle if desired. According to tradition, do not use your breath to blow out candles on an altar. Use your moistened fingers or wave an object near the flame to extinguish it.

