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

By Bob Haddad

Jivaka Kumarabhaccha

The source figure and patriarch of traditional Thai healing is Jivaka Kumarabhaccha (Kumarabacca) - known in Thailand as Shivaga Kormapaj or simply "Gomalapaj." This historical figure is revered by the Thai people as the ancestral teacher 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 first 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 and 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, is 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.



Early sepia photograph of the 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 keep in one corner of the room, away from the working area. I consider it essential to have a statue or image of Jivaka on your altar. If you place a Buddha image on the same altar containing a Jivaka image, the Buddha should technically be in a slightly higher position than Jivaka. It's a good idea to light a candle for each client you see; the candle can be placed directly in front of your Jivaka statue or image. A "tea candle" placed inside a clear votive cup works well, because each tea candle lasts about three hours, and extinguishes itself neatly in its aluminum sleeve. According to tradition, it is best to not extinguished a candle by breath, so use your fingers, a candle snuffer, or allow it to extinguish itself.

Before you begin each session, you might recite the *Om Namo* mantra quietly to yourself —even just the first section one time — or say a quiet prayer for your client and ask for guidance from Jivaka and your teachers. It is helpful to occasionally glance at the altar during a session to regain focus when necessary. After your client leaves the room and you are cleaning up and clearing the room's energy, you may take another moment to connect to Jivaka and to your altar.

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