

# The Great Doctor of Northern India: Jivaka Kaumara-Bhrtya

By **Gunakar Muley**

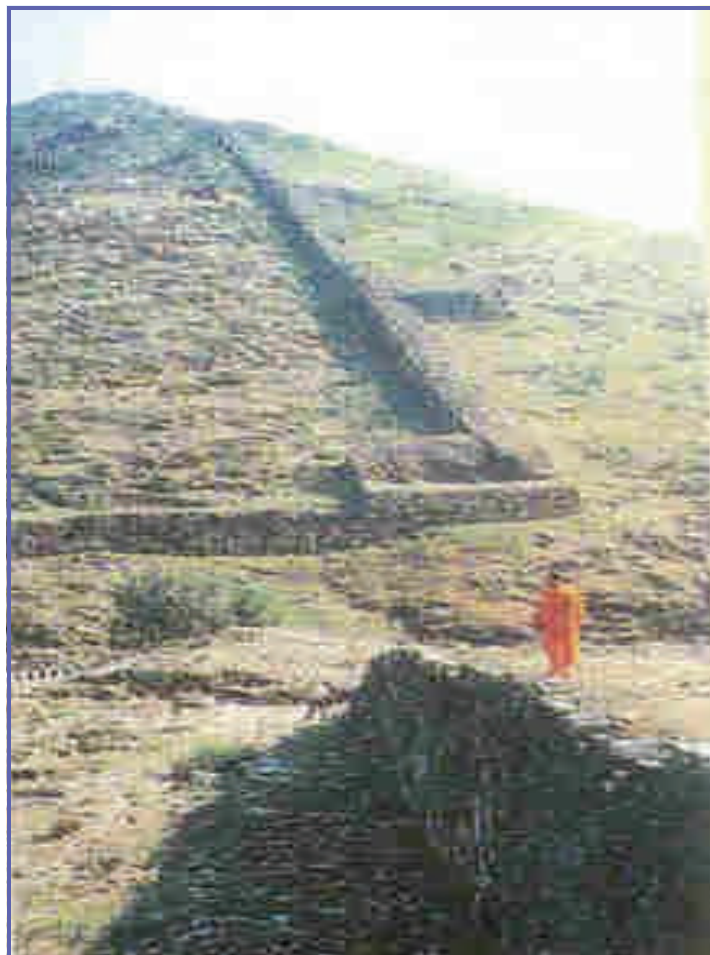
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*Note from the Editor: This article first appeared in Dream 2047, in May of 2000. Dream is a publication of Vigyan Prasar, an autonomous organization operating within the government of India's Department of Science and Technology. Vigyan Prasar's objectives are to popularize science projects and activities on a large scale throughout the country. This is one of the only pieces of current, accessible literature that recounts Jivaka's historical life as a physician and healer, while also presenting photographs and diagrams of places where he lived, studied and traveled. The name "Kaumara-Bhrtya" may be loosely translated as "expert in children's diseases", and Jivaka is known by that name in some ancient Indian texts. In Thailand, Jivaka's second name is known today in several variations, among them Komarbhaccha, Kormapaj and Gomalapaj.*

## Jivaka Kaumara-Bhrtya

The story is some 2,500 years old. The place is Taksasila\*, a famous center of learning at that time. A young boy of sixteen had come from far away Rajagrha (capital of Magadha) to study medicine there from a world-renowned physician. He spent seven years studying medicine there. Before declaring that Jivaka's training was complete, his teacher prescribed assigned him a practical examination. He told him to take a spade and to travel one square *yogana* (approximately 14 kms) around the area of Taksasila and to bring back any plant which did not possess medicinal properties. The student spent a long period of time examining the plants of the entire region as directed by his teacher, but he could not find a single one which was devoid of curative properties and of no use to living beings. When he returned, he reported this finding to his teacher. Satisfied with the answer, the teacher said to him: "You have done your learning well. Now go home and start your practice." The teacher gave him some money for his traveling expenses, and sent him on his way.



Wall of Old Rajagrha, Jivaka's birth place

\* Taxila, in current-day Pakistan, lies about 35 kilometers north-west of Rawalpindi.

The student who studied medicine from the renowned teacher of Taksasila was Jivaka, the most famous physician of Gautama Buddha's time (563-483 BC). Much of what we know about him is from the Buddhist canonical texts. His patients included the Buddha, monks, emperors, rich merchants and common people. Jivaka was the son of Salavati, a courtesan of Rajagrha (*present Rajagira in Bihar, about 100 kilometers southeast of Patna*) which was the capital of the Magadhan empire in the reign of King Bimbisara. After his birth, the child was thrown on a dust-heap where prince Abhaya, son of Bimbisara, noticed that he was still alive (*jivati*). The prince, therefore, named him Jivaka and had him raised under his own personal care.

Jivaka also came to be called Komarabhaccha, meaning the one brought up by the prince. This word also was derivative of *kaumara bhitya* (pediatrics), one of the eight branches of Ayurveda. Sometime in his adolescence, Jivaka learned of his background as an orphan, and without telling Prince Abhaya, he left for Taksasila to study medicine from a famous scholar-physician whose name in some Buddhist texts is given as Streya, or Atreya.

Mahavagga, a Buddhist text, attributes many miraculous cures to Jivaka. When Jivaka was given permission by his teacher to return to Rajagihā, his teacher also gave him some money to meet the expenses for the journey. This money lasted until he reached the town of Saketa (near Faizabad, Uttar Pradesh.), and there he was forced to stop and to begin to earn money through the practice of medicine.



Grdhrahuta hill, in Rajagrha, a favorite retreat area of the Buddha.

At that time, in the city of Saketa, a rich merchant's wife had been suffering for seven years from a chronic disease of the head which many great and renowned physicians could not cure, though they had received much gold as their fees. Being young and inexperienced, Jivaka was given permission to examine her with reluctance and on the condition that no fees would be paid to him if the patient was not cured. Jivaka began the treatment. He took a handful of clarified butter (*ghee*), mixed it with various drugs, boiled it and administered the medicine to the patient through her nose while she was lying on her back in bed.

The medicated ghee was injected through the nose and it came out through the mouth. The patient was completely cured by this one dose. For this Jivaka received 16,000 *kahapanas* (silver coins), two servants and a horse-coach. After reaching Rajagihā, Jivaka presented his first earnings to his patron, prince Abhaya. The prince, however, refused the offer and asked Jivaka to establish himself within the palace area.



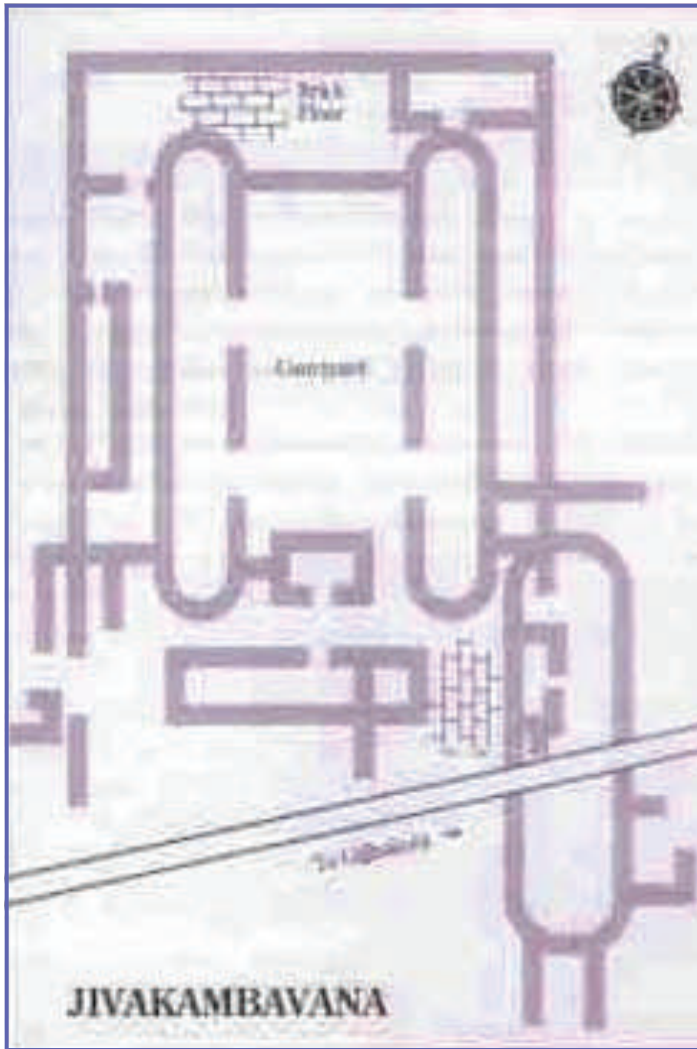
View of the excavated site of Jivakamravana (Jivaka's home), Rajagrhā, India.

At that time king Bimbisara was suffering from an anal fistula. His queens, when they noticed blood on his garments, ridiculed him. The king, desperate to get cured, asked Prince Abhaya to search for a competent physician. Abhaya suggested Jivaka's name, and the king agreed. Following Prince Abhaya's orders, Jivaka put medication on his nail, and with just one application, he cured king Bimbisara. As a reward, the King gave him as reward a large number of ornaments, and appointed him as the Royal physician and also the physician of the Buddha and his Sangha (*fraternity of monks*).

According to the Mahavagga, Jivaka also performed surgical procedures. At that time the Setthi (merchant-prince) of Rajagrhā had been suffering for seven years from a head disease and he had been told by eminent physicians that he would die on the fifth or the seventh day. Then a certain Rajagihā merchant went to the Magadhan king Bimbisara, and said, "That Setthi, Sire, does good service both to Your Majesty and to the merchants' guild. May it please Your Majesty to order the Royal physician Jivaka to cure the Setthi ." Accordingly Jivaka was ordered to cure the Setthi .

After examining the Setthi, Jivaka told him that after the operation, he would have to lie on his left side, his right side and his back for seven months in each position, to which the patient agreed. Then Jivaka performed the operation "*...He ordered the Setthi to lie down on his bed, tied him fast to his bed, cut through the skin of the head, drew apart the flesh on each side of the incision, pulled two worms out of the wound, ... then he closed up the sides of the wound, stitched up the skin on the head, and anointed it with salve...*"

After the operation, the Setthi could only lie for seven days in each of the above positions and expressed his inability to rest any further. Jivaka then told the Setthi he had rested enough, and further said "If I had not spoken thus to you, you would not have laid down even as long as you did. I knew beforehand that 'after three times seven days' you would be restored to health. Arise my good Gahapati (householder), you are restored." Then it is said that the Setthi gave a hundred thousand *kahapanas* to the King and one hundred thousand to Jivaka.



A plan of the Jivakambavana complex at Rajagrha.

According to another Mahavagga story, Jivaka also performed an abdominal operation. At that time, the son of the Setthi of Varanasi, by practicing gymnastics, got his intestines entangled. The patient could not digest anything, nor could he relieve himself in the regular way. He had a discolored appearance, and his veins stood up upon his skin. The Setthi of Varanasi went to Rajagrha and requested King Bimbisara to order Jivaka to attend to his son. The king gave the orders.

Jivaka went to Varanasi and examined his patient carefully. Then, "...he ordered the people to leave the room, drew the curtain, tied him fast to a pillar, placed his wife in front of him, cut through the skin of his belly, drew the twisted intestines out, and showed them to his wife... Then he disentangled the twisted intestines, put the intestines back into their right position, stitched the skin together, and anointed it with salve..." It did not take long for the Setthi's son to completely regain his health. Jivaka received a large fee and returned to Rajagrha.

Jivaka's most difficult patient is said to have been King Pajjota (Pradyota) of Ujjen (Ujjayini), who was suffering from jaundice. Bimbisara lent Jivaka's services to him. When Jivaka went all the way from Rajagihha to Ujjayini, he found that the patient was a very difficult subject of treatment, much worse than his disease. The medicine that he had to prescribe needed to be prepared by boiling *ghee*, to which the king had a great aversion. Nevertheless, Jivaka boiled some *ghee* with various drugs and herbs so that it took on the color, smell and taste of an astringent decoction. Still, Jivaka feared any negative repercussions, and anticipated that the king might later vomit the medicine, and detect in it the *ghee* which he loathed, and as a result order Jivaka to be punished him. Because of this, Jivaka did not wait for the effects of the treatment, but instead he made arrangements for his immediate escape after administering the medicine.

On the pretext of drawing out roots and gathering medicinal drugs, he escaped by choosing and riding on the fastest elephant in the king's stables. While he was away, the treatment began to have its effects and the king was eventually cured. Upon learning that the physician was gone, he sent Jivaka, as a token of his favor, a suit of the finest *sivi* cloth.

Jivaka was a contemporary of the Buddha and was very attached to him. It is recorded that once the humors of the Buddha's body were out of order. The Buddha wished to take a purgative. Ananda, the faithful attendant of the Buddha, conveyed the matter to Jivaka. The physician suggested that fat should be rubbed to the Buddha's body for a few days, and this was done. After that, Jivaka thought about a proper purgative which could be given to a holy person like the Buddha. He selected three lotuses

which he treated with various drugs. Then they were given to the patient as inhalants, and each lotus produced ten purges. After the purgative had its full effect, the Buddha was bathed in warm water and was asked to abstain from liquid food for some time. When the Buddha was completely recovered, Jivaka presented to him the *sivi* cloth that he had received as a gift from King Pajjota of Ujjayini. Jivaka often had to attend the Bhikkhus of the Sangha. Once, in Vaishali, the Bhikkhus were offered too much 'sweet food' for a long period of time, and they became very sick with superfluity of humors in their body. Luckily, Jivaka at that time was present in that city. He attended to the sick Bhikkhus and cured them all. As a famous physician, Jivaka was always extremely busy with patients, but he never neglected the Buddha and his Sangha.



Bhir mound at Taksasila - partial view of excavation.

The Buddha's favourite retreat in Rajagiha was a small peak called Gijjakuta (Gidhrakuta), the Vulture Peak, and the Vesuvana, bequeathed to him by King Bimbisara. A devoted supporter of the Buddha, Jivaka one day thought to himself : *"I have to attend to the Buddha two or three times a day. Both Gidhrakuta and Vesuvana are too far away. My mango grove is closer. Why don't I build a dwelling there for the Buddha ?"* Accordingly, he built *"..night quarters and day quarters, cells, huts, pavilion, ...and a fragrant hut for the Buddha, surrounded by the mango grove with high walls."* That place, called Jivakambavana (Jivakamravana), was the place where the Buddha gave some of his most famous discourses. It was here that one beautiful moonlit night, Ajatasatru, who had recently killed his father, came to visit the Buddha and listened to his discourse, the Samaññaphala Sutta, the Sutra of the Fruit of Asceticism. The Buddha also delivered another two important discourses here, both of them to Jivaka.

All ancient sources agree that the Jivakamravana was located outside the east gate of Rajagiha, somewhere between the east gate and Gidhrakuta hill. The famous Chinese traveller Yuan Chwang (Hiuen Tsiang) who travelled in India during 429-45 AD, described his visit to Rajagiha: *"North-east from Shrigupta's fire-pit, and in the bend of a mountain wall, was a tope (stupa) at the spot where Jivaka, the great physician, had built a hall for the Buddha. Remains of the walls and of the plants and trees within them still existed. Tathagata often stayed here. Beside the tope, the ruins of Jivaka's private residence still survive."* The Jivakamravana, built by Jivaka, was discovered and excavated in 1803-57. Although only the foundations remain, the complex is interesting in that it includes three long elliptical and oblong halls built of stone and bricks. A visitor to Rajagiha has to proceed first along the main road towards the south and then take the road that turns to the left. Soon he will arrive at a clearing in the jungle containing the ruins of Jivakamravana. From there, about 2.5 kilometers towards the east, is Gidhrakuta hill, where the Buddha occasionally lived over a period of many years.

After Jivakamravana, the second most important place in Jivaka's life was Takshasila (Taxila of the Greek era), where he spent seven years completing his medical education under the world famous physician, whose name in some Chinese and Tibetan texts is given as Streya (Atreya). In the 6th-5th century BC, Takshasila was a famous education center in the country. It attracted students from distant parts of India. Pasendi of Kosala, Mahali of Vaisali, Grammarian Panini, Canakya (Kautilya), who wrote the Arthasastra - all had received their higher training at Takshasila. Apart from medicine, the city was also a famous center of education in other sciences, in arts and crafts and in the humanities. As described previously, after seven years of training, Jivaka had to go through a severe practical examination. Every medical student was expected to have a first hand knowledge of medical botany. Also, difficult operations were performed there, like those on the skull or the stomach. Akasagotta, a surgeon contemporary to Jivaka, was a specialist in anorectal operation, which the Buddha disapproved.

In Gautama Buddha's time, Takshasila was a famous center of learning. It was, however, not a university town with a formal campus, lecture hall and residential quarters as there existed in Nalanda. References to the students' life in the Buddhist Jataka stories suggest that at Takshasila the teachers' homes were where the actual learning took place. Students were generally admitted at the age of sixteen. Pupils from rich families boarded with the teacher and paid him handsomely for their food and instructions. Pupils from royal families had separate independent lodgings. Poor pupils, not able to pay their own expenses, attended on their teacher and his family.

For nearly a thousand years, the city of Takshasila existed successively at three sites - Bhir mound, Sirkap and Sirsukh -- representing the ancient, Greek and Kushana phases of political history. All three places have been extensively excavated, but archaeologists have not found any site which they believe could be the campus of this ancient seat of learning. This confirms that only the teachers' homes teacher were the places of study, at least until the time of Jivaka. Later a number of Buddhist monasteries were built at Takshasila and they also became seats of learning.

In Buddhist monasteries, it was laid down that the monks must undertake the nursing of the sick. According to a story in the Mahavagga, this precept was first demonstrated by the Buddha himself. One day, when he was making his daily rounds in the monastery (vihara), he noticed that a monk was suffering from a stomach disorder. He had fallen and lay in his own excreta, and was completely unattended. The Buddha immediately asked Ananda to fetch water and he himself washed the monk with that water, while Ananda wiped him down. The Buddha, taking hold of him from the head and Ananda from the feet, lifted him up and laid him down on his bed. Then the Buddha addressed the monks: *"Ye, O Bhikkhus who have no mother or father to wait upon you. If you wait not one upon the other, who is there, indeed, who will wait upon you? Whosoever, O Bhikkhus, would wait upon me, he should wait upon the sick."*

In the Buddhist scriptures the Buddha is also called Bhaisajya-Guru and Mahabhisak, the great physician. The Sixth Book of the Mahavagga, called Bhaisajya-Skandhaka, describes valuable information about a number of common diseases and their treatment. Diagnosis of disease and charitable distribution of medicines were common practice among the Buddhist *sangha* and this service was carried out by the monks in the monasteries.

The Buddha nursing a sick Bhikkhu. From a painting in Nava jetavana vihar, Sravsti.



In ancient times, Buddhist monks often served as doctors among the lay people from whom he obtained his food. This Buddhist tradition flourished under the patronage of emperor Asoka (272-232 BC) who initiated measures for the relief of suffering of both men and beasts. Asoka's Rock Edict II says: *"Everywhere king Piyadars has arranged for two kinds of medical treatment, viz., medical treatment for men and medical treatment for animals. And, whenever there were no medical herbs beneficial to men and beneficial to animals, they have been caused to be imported and planted. Wherever there were no roots and fruits, they have been caused to be imported and planted. On the roads, wells have been caused to be dug and trees have been caused to be planted for the enjoyment of animals and men."* Along with Buddhism, Indian medicine also spread to other Asian countries. For all these endeavors, the inspiration, indeed, came from the compassionate acts of the Buddha and the wonderful cures of his personal physician Jivaka Kaumara-Bhitya.

Kaumarabhitya means 'expert in children's diseases'. In ancient times this included all the elements of pediatrics, and was one of the eight parts of Ayurveda. In the early period, there existed a large body of literature on the subject. DalhaSa, the 12th century commentator of the Susruta Samhita, says that Jivaka's compendium was regarded as one of the authoritative texts on the subject. But today no text of Jivaka is available. The Kasyapa Samhita, discovered in Nepal in 1938, is now the only text on ancient Indian pediatrics, but it is far too fragmentary to be regarded as a complete volume.

Another text that quotes Jivaka's formulae is the Navan\_taka (meaning 'butter'), a part of the Bower MSS discovered in 1880 from Kuchar in Chinese Turkistan. Based on earlier standard sources, this medical compilation of the 4th century AD, attributes two formulae to Jivaka dealing with children's disease, saying *'Iti hovaca Jivakah'*, (thus spoke Jivaka). One formula is for *bhargi*, long pepper, and *payasya*, mixed together with honey, which may be used as medical syrup to treat vomiting due to excessive phlegm.

From ancient India we have a number of monumental medical texts such as the *Caraka Saêhita* and the *Susruta Saêhita*, but almost nothing definite is known about their authors or compilers. Jivaka, on the other hand, is the only physician from ancient India about whom we know anything for certain. It is true that some of the cures effected by Jivaka as recounted in these texts may be exaggerations, but they certainly indicate the importance attached to accurate observation and deduction in ancient India's medical profession. For the first time in the history of Indian medicine, we have treatment records and accounts of a number of patients who were treated by the great physician Jivaka Kaumara-Bhitya.



Jivaka, seated in a lotus flower.

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