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Jīvaka Across Cultures

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Jīvaka — called the “Father Doctor” by healers in Thailand, and the “King of Physicians” in Mahayana Buddhist traditions — is a vibrant example of a crossculturally transmitted Buddhist medical symbol.

Tradition holds that Jīvaka was the personal physician of the Buddha, and a biography of Jīvaka is found within the Buddhist scriptures in multiple languages. It is said that Jīvaka was an orphan who was raised by Prince Abhāya. When he came of age, he studied medicine with a well-known master in northwestern India, apprenticing with this teacher for a period of many years before returning back home. Different versions of the biography relate up to a dozen cases where Jīvaka healed different individuals, including instances of major surgeries like the opening of the abdominal and cranial cavities. Among Jīvaka’s patients were merchants and their wives, kings, and in some versions even the Buddha himself, who came to him for a purgative of powdered lotus flowers.

Regional legends of the King of Physicians have grown around this core narrative:

Southeast Asia



Jīvaka is enshrined in the national temple of Thailand (Wat Phra Kaew).

In the Theravada Buddhist canon, the biography of Jīvaka is found in the eighth Khandhaka of the Mahāvagga section of the Pāli Vinaya, the monastic “basket of discipline” composed from the fourth to the first century BC. In addition, other Theravada scriptures mention Jīvaka as the donor of a mango grove called Jīvakarama, which he donated for the use of the Buddha’s order

of monks as a retreat for the rainy season. He also on occasion is mentioned as a listener of the Buddha's preaching, including in one text named for him, the Jivaka Sutta.

Though he is not widely revered in other countries, in contemporary Thailand, Jivaka is the "patron saint" of traditional Thai healers and is propitiated for assistance in healing client's ailments. Jivaka is viewed as a powerful ally in the Thai spirit cosmology, whose presence can be invoked by a healer in order to dispel disease. Many Thai practitioners believe that Jivaka discovered traditional Thai herbal medicine, therapeutic massage, and other healing practices himself, and treat him as the progenitor of their lineage. Stories abound in the oral tradition about Jivaka's teachings and travels in Thailand, although these are not found in the canonical Pāli literature.

Central Asia and Tibet



Mandala of patriarchs of Tibetan medicine. (Jivaka is in the far upper right corner).

By the late first millennium C.E., Jivaka was being worshipped at Dunhuang and Turfan along the Silk Road. A medical text attributed to him (the Jivakapustaka) written in Sanskrit and Kohtanese discovered in this region demonstrates his importance to medieval medicine in India and Central Asia as well.

Jivaka's biography also appears in the Tibetan Buddhist canon, where he is said to have been an expert in trephination (the surgical opening of the skull) for the extraction of parasites. He is considered an important patriarch of the Tibetan medical tradition, for example being depicted in the Medicine Buddha mandala from the Blue Beryl commentary along with other important medical figures from Buddhist and Āyurvedic tradition.

East Asia



Detail from a children's book containing a story about Jivaka (published by Dharma Drum).

In East Asia, where Jivaka is known as Qipo 耆婆 or Qiyu 耆域, he is said to have been born with acupuncture needles in his hands and to have performed various Chinese medical diagnostic procedures. (Note that he is not to be confused with the second- to third-century monk or *lohan* who is also called Jivaka.) The biography of the “King of Physicians” is found in different Chinese recensions dating from between the fourth and fifth centuries. Several medical formulas were named after Jivaka in the traditional Chinese medicine formularies compiled in the medieval period by the famous doctor Sun Simiao, and his name appears in numerous medical texts from across East Asia.

Although historians long have considered Jivaka's biography to be an important example of the introduction of Indian medicine to East Asia, in Chinese translation the purposes of the story were clearly hagiographic rather than medical. The texts mobilize language and literary tropes from popular literature, and transform the “King of Physicians” into a familiar Chinese miracle-healer (*fangshi* or *shenyi*). Portraying the famous Buddhist healer in such a light was important to Buddhist proselytism in China. Consequently, the Jivaka story became a well-known tale retold for centuries in China, and still makes an occasional appearance in popular retellings and children's books.

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