

A short biography of Jivaka Komárabhacca

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Jivaka-Komárabhacca was a celebrated physician, a contemporary of the Buddha. He was the son of a woman named Sálavatí, who was a courtesan of Rájagaha, and it has been said that Abhayarájakumára was his father. Directly after being born, the child was placed in a basket and thrown on a garbage heap, from which he was rescued by Abhayarájakumára. Legend says that as Abhaya passed by the heap, he questioned bystanders about the child, and they responded “jívati” (he is alive), and so the child was called Jivaka. He became known as Komárabhacca because he was brought up by the prince (*kumárena posápito*). It has also been suggested, however, that Komárabhacca was derived from the word *Kaumárabhrtya*, which means the medical treatment of infants (*pediatrics*).

When Jivaka became a young man, he set off for Takkasilá without his father’s knowledge, and studied medicine there for seven years. After his apprenticeship, his teacher gave him some money and sent him away, declaring him fit to practice medicine. His first patient was a wealthy woman in Sáketa, and for curing her, he received sixteen thousand kahápanas, two servants, and a coach with horses. When he finally returned to Rájagaha, Prince Abhaya established him in his own residence. While there, he cured King Bimbisára of a troublesome fistula and received as reward all the ornaments of Bimbisára's five hundred wives. He was appointed physician to the king and the king's women and also to the fraternity of monks with the Buddha at its head. Other cures of Jivaka's included that of the setthi of Rájagaha on whom he performed trepanation (opening of the skull), and of the son, the setthi of Benares, who was suffering from chronic intestinal trouble. Jivaka received sixteen thousand kahápanas for this treatment.

When Candappajjota, king of Ujjeni, became ill, Bimbisára asked Jívaka to attend to him. Candappajjota was known to have a strong dislike for ghee (clarified butter), but ghee, mixed with other ingredients, was the only remedy. Jívaka prepared the medicine, prescribed it for the king, and fearing his wrath, quickly rode away on one of the king's elephants named Bhaddavatiká. When the king, in a rage, discovered the nature of the medicine, he ordered Jivaka's capture and sent his servant Káka after him. Káka discovered Jívaka breakfasting at Kosambí and Jivaka persuaded him to eat half a myrobalan (Indian gall nut), which purged him violently. Jívaka then explained to Káka why he had fled from the court and. He returned the elephant, and proceeded to Rájagaha. As a result of Jivaka's medicine, the king was cured and, as a token of his gratitude, sent Jívaka a suit of very fine cloth (síveyyaka), which Jívaka presented to the Buddha.

Jívaka was drawn greatly to the Buddha. Once when the Buddha became ill, Jívaka found it necessary to administer a purge, and he had fat rubbed into the Buddha's body and gave him a handful of lotuses to smell. Jívaka was away when the purgative acted, and suddenly remembered that he had forgotten to tell the Buddha to bathe in warm water in order to complete the cure. The Buddha read his thoughts and bathed as required, and the cure was complete. Once, on another occasion, the Buddha's foot was injured by a fragment of a rock hurled by Devadatta. He had to be carried from Maddakucchi to Jívaka's Ambavana, or mango grove. There Jívaka applied an astringent, and having bandaged the wound, he left the city expecting to return in time to remove it. But by the time he did return, the city gates were closed and he could not enter. He was greatly worried because he knew that if the bandage remained on all night, the Buddha would suffer intense pain. But again, the Buddha read his thoughts and removed the bandage.

After Jívaka became a Sotápanna (first level of realization), he was anxious to visit the Buddha twice a day, and finding Veluvana too far away, he built a monastery in his own mango grove (*ambavana*) in Rájagaha, which he then donated to the Buddha and his monks. When Bimbisára died, Jívaka continued to serve Ajátasattu, and was responsible for bringing him to the Buddha after his crime of parricide.

Jívaka's fame as a physician brought him more work than he could cope with, but he never neglected his duties to the Sangha. Many people, afflicted with disease and unable to pay for treatment, joined the Order so that they might receive free medical care. On discovering that the Order was being taken advantage of in this way, he asked the Buddha to set a restriction that men afflicted with certain diseases would be refused entry into the Order. Jívaka was declared by the Buddha chief among his lay followers, and was referred to as *aggam puggalappasannánam* (loved by the people). Jivaka is included in a list of good men who have been assured of the realization of deathlessness.

At a meal once given by Jívaka, the Buddha refused to be served until Cúlapanthaka, who had been left out of the invitation, had been sent for. It may have been the preaching of the Jivaka Sutta, which brought about Jívaka's conversion to the Buddha's teachings.