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## **Jivaka**

Prince Abhaya, the son of King Bimbisara, was riding through the city when he saw a flock of crows circling and cawing loudly around a small bundle. Stopping his carriage, he investigated the sound and found a newborn baby boy who had been left to die amongst the garbage on the roadside. Upon inquiry he learned that a courtesan had discarded her illegitimate son whom she felt was a burden, and had left him to die.

Prince Abhaya was transfused with compassion for the newborn babe that still clung to life despite its ugly surroundings. He decided to adopt the baby as his own. The baby was named Jivaka Komara Bhacca – Jivaka, meaning ‘life’, because of his will to live, and Komara Bhacca, which meant ‘adopted by a prince’.

Jivaka led a privileged life in the palace. His friends, however, often teased him as he had no mother. Jivaka, who was embarrassed by the teasing, questioned his father about his origin. When he heard about his origins and his will to live he decided that he would one day grow up to be a preserver of life. He felt that he had no real heritage or family as he was only the adopted son of the prince. Physicians, however, were treated with great respect. Determined to earn the respect he felt he lacked due to his birth, Jivaka decided to go to the University of Taxila to become a physician.

Jivaka approached Disapamok, a well-known scholar, for his training. At this time Sakka, the King of the Heavens, was observing the world. He realized that it was time for Jivaka, who had in past births aspired to be the physician of the Buddha, to begin his training. Sakka, however, wanted to ensure that Jivaka had more than just the best training available in India. This was the young man who would have the privilege to be the physician of the Buddha. Sakka decided to take a hand in the training of young Jivaka so that he would have celestial knowledge in the art of medicine. With this in view, He entered the body of Disapamok. Jivaka excelled in his studies. Disapamok, however, soon realized that the training that he was providing was being influenced by celestial beings. The knowledge that was being imparted through him far excelled his knowledge of medicine. Jivaka quickly learned medicines and cures of which Disapamok himself had no knowledge. Jivaka completed in seven years the physicians training which usually took eleven years.

Realizing that Jivaka’s education was complete, Disapamok asked him to go forth and bring back a plant, herb or root that could not be used for medicinal purposes for the preservation of life. After travelling far and wide Jivaka returned to his teacher to inform him that no such plant, herb, or root existed. All of nature’s treasures were beneficial for the preservation of life. The joyous teacher then praised his pupil by informing him that his education was complete. Jivaka had surpassed his teacher in knowledge.

Jivaka decided to go back to Rajagaha to his adoptive father. On the way he stopped to rest in a city named Saletha. He soon heard that the young daughter of the city’s

wealthiest nobleman was sick. Despite the ministering of many well-known physicians, she had suffered from severe headaches for seven years. Jivaka approached the nobleman, as he was confident that he could cure the maiden. The maiden, however, was not impressed by the very young man who claimed he could cure her when older, well-known physicians had failed. Offering his services for free, Jivaka continued to declare boldly that he could cure her.

Gathering herbs and roots, Jivaka prepared the medicine which he then administered to her through her nostrils. Before long the maiden's headaches disappeared. The grateful nobleman showered Jivaka with gifts and gold and provided him with a golden chariot. Jivaka approached Prince Abhaya's palace in great style.

Handing over his newly earned wealth to his adoptive father, Jivaka thanked him for his love, compassion, and caring. Prince Abhaya, however, returned all the wealth to Jivaka and informed him that he owed him naught as he was his true son and heir. He then told him that during his absence he had found out the full story of his origin. His mother, Salawathi, was the sought-after courtesan of the kings and nobility. Wanting to retain her freedom, she had discarded the baby whom she felt would be a burden to her. Prince Abhaya had unknowingly adopted his own child as he had loved his son dearly even prior to knowing that he was in fact his own child. Prince Abhaya built a palace to serve as Jivaka's residence and provided him with many servants.

Jivaka's second patient was none other than his own grandfather, King Bimbisara. The king had a huge growth in his stomach that bled from time to time on his royal robe. So prominent was the growth that his consorts had started to tease the king by saying that he was with child. The king had been treated by all the great physicians of the country to no avail. Prince Abhaya informed Jivaka of his grandfather's plight.

Diagnosing the disease sight unseen, Jivaka immediately prepared the suitable medicine. Then hiding it on his person, he visited the king. After examining the king he administered the medicine that he had brought with him. Before long the king's growth shrank and his wound healed. The grateful king called his entourage of five hundred consorts who had teased him unmercifully by asking if his first-born was to be a boy or a girl, and commanded them to give all their jewellery as a gift to Jivaka. Before long a mound of precious jewellery higher than Jivaka himself was placed at his feet. However, Jivaka refused this payment and requested permission from the king to return the ornaments back to his consorts. Even more impressed by Jivaka's deportment, the king showered him with wealth, gifted him with the royal mango grove and made him the royal physician.

Jivaka's reputation as a great physician grew quickly. He was the physician of kings, noblemen and the Buddha. The text mentions that he operated and successfully removed two tumours from the brain of a rich merchant who was a good friend of King Bimbisara. He also operated successfully to remove a blockage in the intestines of a nobleman. In one instance when the Buddha was afflicted with stomach problems, Jivaka prepared the medicine, and applying it on a blue lotus flower, offered it to the Buddha. Jivaka then

asked the Buddha to inhale the essence emanating from the flower. The medicine which Jivaka had prepared with devotion and presented so beautifully, cured the Buddha's stomach ailment.

Jivaka had in one instance risked his life to attend a very cruel and vicious king named Chanda Pradyotha. One of the King Pradyotha's subjects had offered him a shawl that had been dropped by a Deva in the forest. Admiring the very beautiful shawl, the king had reflected that he should gift it to Jivaka who had risked his life to save him. Jivaka, however, felt that there was only one person worthy of such a shawl. He in turn offered it to the Buddha. The Buddha accepted the celestial shawl and, as requested by Jivaka, dispensed a sermon on the giving of robes. After listening to the discourse, Jivaka attained the first stage of enlightenment, Sotapanna. The Buddha felt that keeping such a valuable shawl in the monastery would attract thieves, which would endanger His monks. Addressing Ananda, he requested that the shawl be cut into strips and re-sewn so that it would be of little value to thieves. This custom of wearing patched garments still remains among the Sangha. Even their new robes are made of strips of material that are sewn together so that even the robe they wear would help them in the practice of non-attachment.

Jivaka built a monastery in his mango grove so that he could be close to the Buddha when attending to His needs. It was Jivaka who attended to the Buddha's foot when it was cut by the sliver of rock that Devadatta rolled down the hill at Gijjhakuta. It was also Jivaka who treated the Buddha in His last days, when He was overcome by stomach pains.

The Buddha dispensed the Jivaka Sutta when Jivaka questioned him on the controversial question of the kammic effects of eating meat. The Buddha explained that the eating of meat was not in itself an unwholesome act if the following conditions were met:

**Adittha:** One has not seen the slaughtering of the animal.

**Asuta:** One has not heard that it was killed for his or her consumption.

**Aparisankita:** There should be no doubt at all in the mind of the person consuming the meat that the animal was not killed for the purpose of his or her consumption.

The Buddha said:

*“Taking life, beating, cutting, binding, stealing, lying, fraud, deceit, pretence at knowledge, adultery; this is uncleanliness and not the eating of flesh.*

*When men are rough and harsh, backbiting, treacherous, without compassion, haughty, ungenerous and do not give anything to anybody; this is uncleanliness and not the eating of flesh.*

*Anger, pride, obstinacy, antagonism, hypocrisy, envy, ostentation, pride of opinion, interacting with the unrighteous; this is uncleanliness and not the eating of flesh.*

*When men are of bad morals, refuse to pay their debts, are slanderers, deceitful in their dealings, pretenders, when the vilest of men commit foul deeds; this is uncleanliness and not the eating of flesh.*

*When men attack living beings either because of greed or hostility and are always bent upon evil, they go to darkness after death and fall headlong into hell; this is uncleanliness and not the eating of flesh.*

*Jivaka, I have declared that one should not make use of meat if it has been seen, heard or suspected to have been killed on purpose for a monk. I allow the monks meat that is quite pure in three respects: if it has not been seen, heard or suspected to have been killed on purpose for a monk.” — (Amagandha Sutta)*

The Buddha’s teaching is known as the middle path. He did not go to extremes or command anyone to do anything. While he gave permission for His monks to be vegetarians if they so wished, He did not state this to be a discipline rule as he felt that doing so would cause unnecessary hardship to His monks.

Buddhists should refrain from eating meat that has been seen, heard or suspected to have been killed for them. Buddhists should also refrain from killing, instigating others to kill or from a livelihood that involves the breeding of animals for killing. Monks have also been instructed in the Vinaya Pitaka to refrain from eating certain types of meat such as snake and elephant flesh, because wild animals are attracted to the smell of such flesh and tend to attack those who have partaken of such meat.

The Buddha has declared that ***kamma is intention***. As such one should not condemn a person just because he is eating meat to sustain himself. This is not the same as a person who is eating meat as a result of intense greed for meat and enjoyment in killing for the palate. Neither should one discourage those who have chosen to refrain from eating meat. A balanced diet can be achieved without meat. Many Buddhists have opted to become vegetarians as it assists them in the practice of loving-kindness.

It was also at Jivaka’s request that the Buddha established that monks should sweep the compound of the monastery and attend to other duties that would exercise their bodies. Jivaka, seeing the benefit of exercise for a healthy life, requested this and other mild duties to be performed by the monks to ensure their health. With foresight, love and compassion the devoted Jivaka took care of the physical health of the Buddha and His Sangha.