

Pilgrimage to Rajgir

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I'd had a strong desire for such a long time, and now was my chance. Many years before my visit, I'd learned that an archeological site excavated in the mid-1800s in Rajgir, Bihar, northern India was believed to be Jivaka's famous mango garden, residence, and dispensary. I knew I would go there one day.

Jivaka's presence in my practice became very strong a few years after my first instruction in Thai massage, and over the years I've witnessed and sensed many things that have led me to fully believe in the power of ancestral transmission. The circumstances surrounding Chaiyuth's death, other teachers' beliefs in Jivaka's intercession, and my own personal interests encouraged me to delve deeper into the spiritual healing aspect of *nuad boran*. Along the way, there were other unusual experiences, some too personal or strange to mention here, that sparked my desire to learn more about this person named Jivaka Kumarabhacca.

I remember when I commissioned bronze statues of Jivaka to be made in a Bangkok foundry for distribution to colleagues, teachers, and students around the world. The sculptor patiently and skillfully refined the details of the mold over a period of several weeks, constantly adjusting the hair, facial features, muscles, garments, and other aspects of the prototype, until we were happy with the results. When they were finally issued, I felt as if I had done something, some small thing, to help dignify Jivaka's presence in the world of Thai healing arts.

My ongoing study helped me to understand that many of the stories surrounding Jivaka and traditional Thai massage were illogical distortions of the

truth, and not based on historical facts. Later, the development, translations, and true meanings of the Thai massage *wai khru* became known to me through research and discussion with colleagues and teachers.

For those readers who still may not know, the plain and simple truth is that Jivaka Kumarabhacca had little or no influence at all on the direct development of traditional Thai massage. He probably never practiced massage, there is no proof that he ever taught monks how to practice massage or Ayurvedic medicine, and he certainly never traveled to Thailand! Yet although these and other myths continue to be spread into the twenty-first century, they do not invalidate or weaken the widespread belief in, and devotion to this legendary doctor from ancient India. What is most important is that a cult following of Jivaka evolved in Thailand, based in a sociocultural and spiritual need to revere him as the ancestral teacher of Thai medicine, so that prayers could be directed to him and through him in order to bring about healing.

Jivaka's presence and intercession in my practice and life had been so apparent in recent years that I felt a strong desire to visit him in his home town. In order to complete the circuit from my first lessons in Thai massage to the present time, I wanted to pay my respects, to pray and give thanks, and to spend some time alone, in communion with spirits of the ancestral past.

Preparations

I planned the trip so that it coincided with a long-term stay in Thailand, and I bought an airline ticket from Bangkok to India for a reasonable price on a discount air carrier. I had the idea to bring back a small amount of earth from the site of Jivaka Amravana, so that I could place it on my altar and also share it with those of my teachers and colleagues who truly believe in his powers of intercession.

Some months before my departure, I spoke to a long-time Thai massage friend who indirectly became one of my teachers, about my upcoming trip to Rajgir. I told him that I wanted to pay my respects to Jivaka by personally bringing an offering of some type, and I asked for his advice. We decided to prepare a special offering that I would deliver to Jivaka's apothecary. My hope was to carry out a *pūja*, and to leave the offering there on that sacred land. I was excited about the prospect of bringing a spiritual gift from Thailand to Jivaka, and also bringing samples of soil from Jivaka Amravana back to Thailand, where he was more revered than in India.

A few weeks before my flight, my friend called and asked if I'd like to visit with his teacher, a Thai *reusi*, before I left for India. I jumped at the opportunity to meet a *reusi*, and to ask for his blessings for my pilgrimage. We traveled about one hour from Bangkok to a suburban neighborhood where the *reusi* lives and practices. During the several hours I and others spent in his

presence, he performed various types of ceremonies and blessings for people in the area, and he recommended a specific type of *sak yant* tattoo for a devotee, which was carried out in an adjoining room. After learning that I was going to visit Jivaka's home and mango garden, he agreed to give me a blessing of protection for my journey. The blessing was long, and it involved a protection amulet, reciting prayers, blowing with breath, sprinkling of holy water with a bamboo whisk, and the use of a sword.

I felt myself changing from the inside as the ceremony unfolded. Afterward, he told me how I should make my offering to Jivaka when I arrived at the site. I was to light sixteen sticks of incense; to pray to the Buddha, the dhamma, the sangha, my parents and my teachers, and then to ask permission from the local spirits that govern that place before I left my offering and removed some soil.

The next day I flew to Kolkata and spent a few days with friends before heading out on my pilgrimage. From Kolkata I flew to Patna, the capital of Bihar, and I spent the night there. Early the next morning, the car and driver I had hired took me on a bumpy road for about 3 hours, until we finally arrived in the town of Rajgir, about 100 kilometers away. The last leg of the journey, to Jivaka Amravana, was by *tanga*, a horse-drawn cart.

A visit with Jivaka and the Buddha

The tanga driver wanted to wait for me, but I let him know that I would be there for a long time. I paid him, and he left me alone with Jivaka. No one was there except for me, and I felt a stillness there that I have experienced only in a few other places on Earth. I could hardly believe my eyes. The elliptical gardens and the foundations of the structures were where Jivaka had grown his medicinal herbs, and where he had lived and practiced medicine! According to Pali scriptures, the Buddha had been treated at least once by Jivaka at this very spot, and lived here for some time.

After about ten minutes of being still, and looking and listening and sensing and feeling, I walked near the road to a blue sign on a rusty metal frame that marked the spot in Hindi and English. The sign read:

JIVAKA AMRAVANA VIHARA

Jivaka was a renowned physician in the royal court of Bimbisara and Ajatshatru during sixth–fifth century BC. He presented his extensive mango grove to Lord Buddha and constructed a monastery for the community. These elliptical structures have been identified as Jivaka Amravana Vihara.



Tangas are an important means of local transport in Rajgir

I heard some sounds, and I turned my head to notice that a troop of monkeys was clambering down from the trees and noisily scavenging through paper and plastic containers for bits of food that were left in a pile of garbage near the eastern fence. Upon seeing this, I remembered that it was on top of a garbage heap where baby Jivaka was found in a basket by Prince Abhaya, son of King Bimbisara.

Then I began a very slow circumambulation of the entire area. I walked slowly, taking it all in, and trying to imagine what it might have

looked like over 2,500 years ago. At one point, a few tourists came to visit, stopping no longer than a few minutes before moving on. It occurred to me that for most people, this place was probably an uninteresting pile of rocks. That thought, how our perceptions are shaped by our personal experiences and beliefs, made me feel simultaneously connected to those tourists and also very separate from them.

Once again, I walked around slowly, but this time I was looking for a place to leave the offering, and after a few minutes I found the perfect place. The tourists had gone, and I was alone again. I dug a small hole in the ground to support the sixteen incense sticks. I lit them and then began what for me was a deeply meaningful personal ceremony – one of the highest points in the chronology of my work as a student, therapist, and teacher of traditional Thai massage.

As I finished my puja, a group of about twenty local people arrived, with many children and even a cow, and they proceeded to have a picnic right there on the grounds of Jivaka Amravana. The kids began to play and run and jump all over the ruins, and the women laid out blankets and baskets of food. I smiled and thought to myself that Jivaka would have approved.

It was mid-afternoon, and I decided to continue on to Gridhakuta Hill, or Vulture Peak, as it is sometimes called, because of a rock formation that resembles a vulture's beak. This was the second most important place I wanted to visit in the area, since it is believed to be the Buddha's favorite meditation spot, and a place where he lived in caves and preached over a period of many years. It was here that he delivered the Lotus Sutra, which speaks of the concept and use of skillful means, and of salvation for all beings. The Prajnaparamitra Sutra (Perfection of Wisdom) was also sermonized here, suggesting that all things,

including ourselves, appear as thought-forms and conceptual constructs.

From Jivaka Amravana, I walked on a road lined with trees and flowering shrubs for about 3 kilometers, until I reached the base of Ratanagiri Hill. From there I took a rickety chairlift to the top, and stopped at a modern *stupa* called Vishwa Shanti before hiking to the Buddha's meditation place.

The approach to Gridhakuta Hill, from an adjoining mountain, provided fabulous views of the surrounding hills, the valley below, and the meandering Banganga River. It was foggy, and sunset was approaching. I reached the final ascent to the actual altar, and by this time, all the monks and tourists were gone. The security policeman and the maintenance person allowed me to enter, and again I was alone at a sacred site, this time at the top of Gridhakuta Hill. I felt so grateful to be there, especially as the last visitor of the day, in silence, at sunset. I said a prayer as the earth continued its slow rotation, bringing with it the illusion that the sun was sinking. After a while, I began the slow descent all the way down to the base of the hill.



One of the elliptical foundations or garden walls on the site of Jivaka Amravana

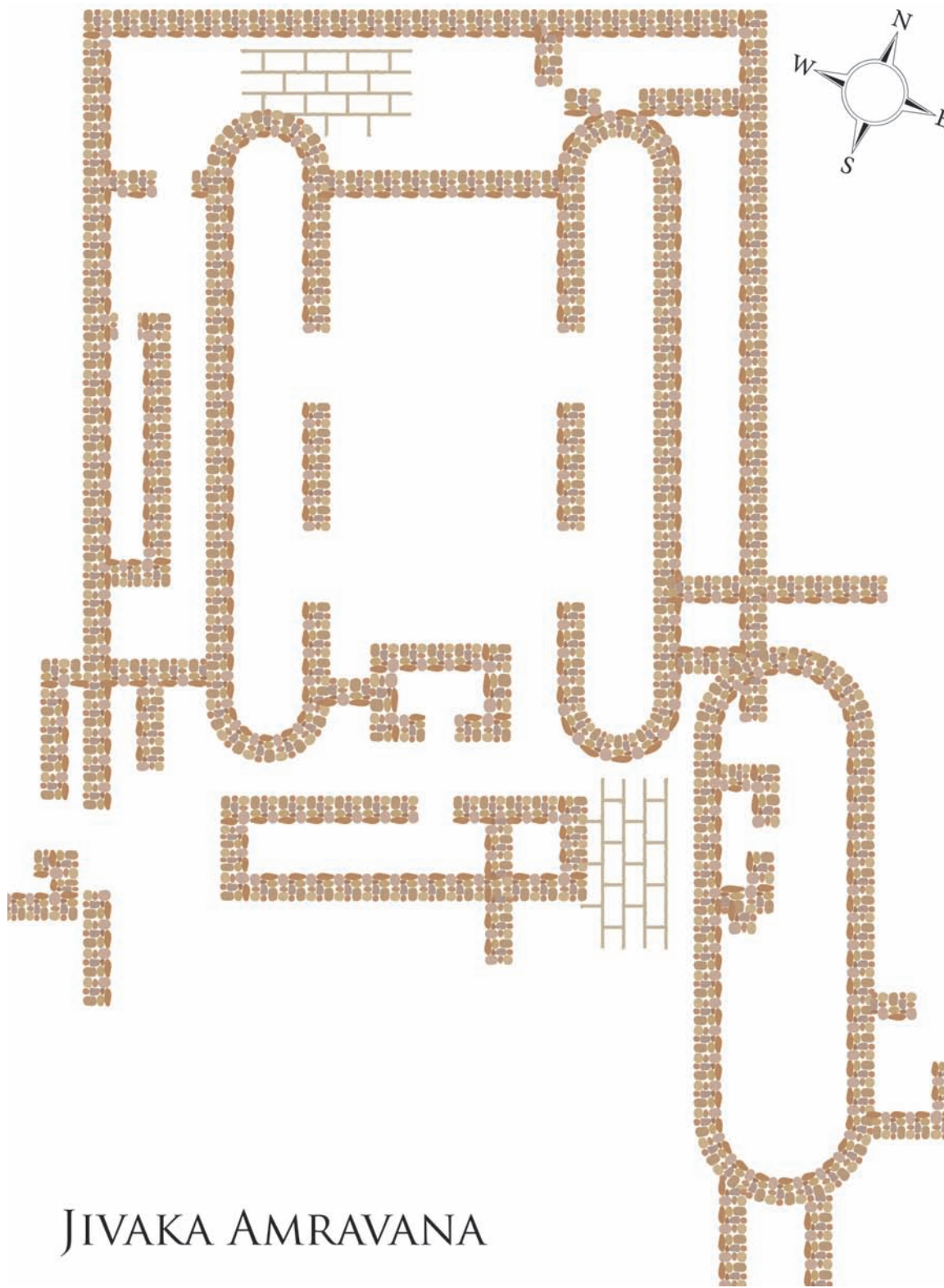
Suggestions for travel to the area

Although Jivaka Amravana and Gridhakuta Hill were the highlights of my days in Rajgir, other places are also worth visiting. Venuvana is the pleasure garden of King Bimbisara, which was bestowed to the Buddha and the first sangha. It is the site of the famous bamboo grove mentioned in Buddhist scriptures. There are numerous Jain and Hindu temples in the area, and several sets of ancient walls surround Rajgir, which provided fortification and

(below left)
Gridhakuta Hill
(Vulture Peak) from
a distance

(below right) The
altar at the top of
Gridhakuta Hill





JIVAKA AMRAVANA

This is an artistic rendering of the plan of Jivaka Amravana. The drawing is not to scale, but the actual site is about 100 meters wide. There are remains of paving stones on the ground in several areas, which may indicate that there were pathways within and around the walls. There also appears to be a courtyard in the center of the two upper elliptical enclosures.

protection in ancient times. The Topada hot springs, mentioned as far back as the epic Mahabharata, are part of the Lakshminarayan temple complex. The impressive ruins of Nalanda, around 12 kilometers away, date from the fifth century AD, and mark the site of an ancient seat of learning in the sciences and arts. Finally, Bodhgaya, the most well-known Buddhist pilgrimage site, and where the Buddha is believed to have attained enlightenment under a bodhi tree, is about 3 hours away by bus or car.



An outcropping of bamboo at Venuvana gardens, once a residence of the Buddha

Professionals in the field of traditional Thai massage, and those who are interested in Jivaka and the Buddha, will enjoy a trip to Rajgir and adjoining areas. There are numerous Buddhist pilgrimage tours you might join, but if you do the trip on your own, it can be rewarding because it allows more time to explore the area and you can decide on your own itinerary. There are airports in Patna and in Gaya, and from either place you can find transportation to Rajgir and to other areas on the Buddhist pilgrimage circuit.

My time in Rajgir helped me to complete a circuit in my professional practice and spiritual growth. I encourage all Thai massage practitioners who believe in the intercession and guidance of Jivaka Kumarabhacca to travel to Rajgir someday, and to pay respects to Jivaka at his home.