

**F**or centuries, cupping was a popular European therapy for colds, asthma and traumatic injury. With the advent of modern medicine, cupping fell out of fashion in the West until recently when actress Gwyneth Paltrow appeared in newspapers and national magazines with cupping marks on her back.

Cupping is a therapy in which a vacuum is created in a glass jar. The jar is then quickly placed on the skin to draw surface tissue up into the cup. Its therapeutic effect is to draw stagnant fluids up to the surface tissues where they can be easily dispersed. Cupping on the upper back and chest also helps lung ailments by loosening phlegm so that it can be coughed up.

Cupping is easy to do and useful in the treatment of martial arts injuries. Although cupping remains part of Traditional Chinese medicine, it started as a folk remedy practiced by the common people of China.

For martial arts injuries, cupping is used in the acute stage when there is swelling and discoloration. If there are stagnant blood and fluids, a round purple-looking bruise will result. In cases of a pulled muscle or back strain, cupping should be followed by gentle massage with a warm dispersing liniment or ointment such as tiger balm or red flower oil (available at Chinese pharmacies).

In the case of a sprain there may be local swelling and discoloration. Bleeding the area with a small lancet, purchased in any pharmacy, followed by cupping, which will then draw out stagnant blood, can significantly reduce the pain and swelling which often slow the healing process. If bones are broken cupping should not be applied over the site of the break, nor should it applied to the abdomen, the face or performed on the back or abdomen of pregnant women.

Glass cups specifically designed for cupping can be purchased at many Chinese herb shops or supply houses which service practitioners of Traditional Chinese medicine. The cups come in two basic forms: plastic or glass cups with built-in valves in which a pump is used to suck out the air and create a vacuum; or solid glass cups in

which a flame is used to burn up the air inside the cup — it is then quickly placed on the skin. Although more cumbersome, this method adds heat to the equation, which creates its own therapeutic effect. A thick-lipped cup such as a shot glass or baby food jar can be used with the latter method in a pinch. Do not use drinking glasses; the lip may be too thin, cutting the skin as suction is created. To remove the cups, press on the skin at the edge of the cup to let air back and release the suction. Never just pull the cup off; this can be painful and can damage the skin.

Cupping often creates a round bruise. This is merely a result of the stagnant blood and fluids being drawn up to the surface. The bruise will fade within several days to a week. If you do use bleeding in conjunction with cupping, remember to clean the skin first and dispose of the lancet properly. Consult your local pharmacist for information about regulations for proper disposal.

Cupping can be useful in treating the large muscle areas of the back and legs, which often absorb damage in sparring and competition. It can also be effective in cases of deep bruising where there is stagnant blood in the deeper muscle layers. In these instances there often is pain

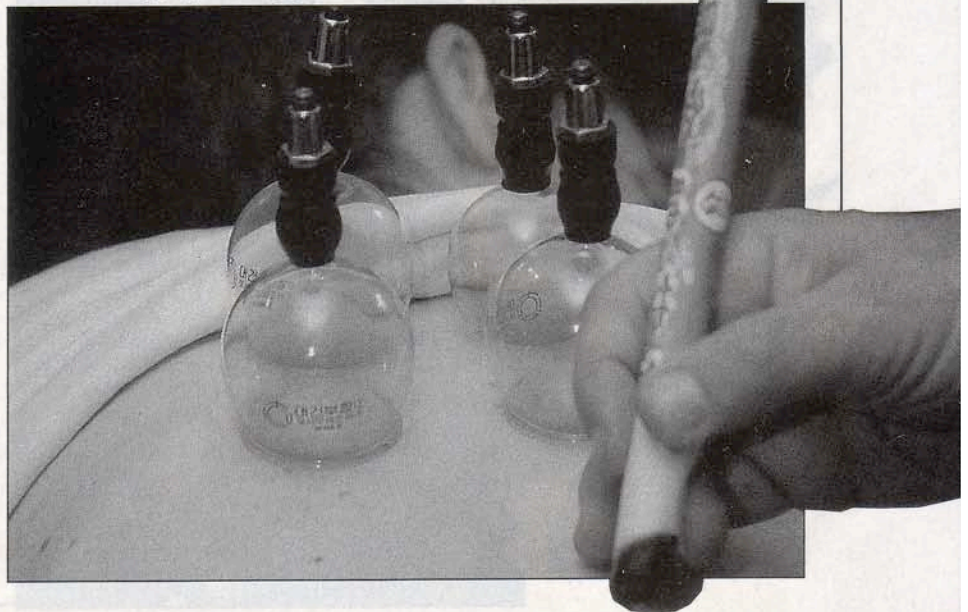
without visible bruising. Cupping can draw extravasated blood and fluid up to the surface where it can be effectively dispersed.

In my clinic we often use cupping for shoulder and neck problems, which occur because of exposure to cold. While this notion is discounted in the West, every practitioner of Chinese medicine has treated neck and shoulder pain in which the onset began after the patient fell asleep with a fan or air conditioner blowing on him or her. Alternatively they may have been caught outside dressed improperly for a day that suddenly turns cold and rainy. In these instances, cold penetrates directly into the superficial muscle layers, blocking the normal flow of qi, blood and body fluids and causing constriction and pain. Cupping can be used to draw the cold up to the surface where it can be dispersed with massage and warming liniments.

Although cupping is a "folk remedy," it is also an effective medical procedure that should be used correctly and carefully. "Do no harm" is the first maxim learned by practitioners of Chinese medicine. Consult with a licensed practitioner of traditional Chinese medicine if you have questions about how or when to use cupping. ☯

*Tom Bisio writes a monthly column for Inside Kung-Fu.*

## Cupping



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