

Cupping and Guasha

by Damian Carey

These two techniques, Cupping and Guasha, are closely related and highly effective. They form part of the “folk medicine” of the Orient and deserve a worthy place in the tool kit of any Oriental Medicine practitioner or bodyworker. They achieve clinical results that are otherwise very labour intensive to attain.

Cupping technique is the better known of the two techniques, having appeared in the 1970's film *Zorba the Greek*. Cupping technique is well known in many southern and eastern European cultures such as northern Italy, Greece, the Baltic states and Poland. I speculate the technique arrived in Europe from the Orient via the Silk Road trade route. The theory behind cupping technique blends well with ancient Greek theories of health and healing.

Early Chinese texts refer to cupping as a process to help expel “devils” or malevolent spirits. Similarly the Greeks referred to pathogenic “humours” or “winds” which could be expelled from the body.

Cupping Technique



The technique of cupping is simple. Generally, a specially made glass jar is used which is round and has a broad, flat edge. A flame is inserted briefly and rapidly into the jar; this is not enough to heat the jar but sufficient to heat the air in the jar and burn the oxygen. This has the effect of creating a partial vacuum. If the jar is quickly placed onto the skin, usually the back or belly, the vacuum causes the jar to stick to the skin. Indeed it will pull a quantity of skin and underlying tissue inside the rim of the cup. Effectively what is happening is the cup is acting like a local pump. By drawing on the tissues, the cupping automatically draws on or mobilises the local fluids. Therefore any of the pathogenic factors (“malevolent spirits”) such as Heat, Cold or Damp will be dispersed.

It is important to understand that this technique is operating at two different levels. Take for example a condition of Cold in the Stomach and Spleen. In such a case we would apply cups to the Front Mu points of the Stomach and Spleen, CV 12 and Liv 13. The cups would be retained for 10 - 15 minutes and on removal it is very likely the skin at those points would be literally cold to the touch. So there is a literal, local effect that is readily observable; but more than this, there is a systemic effect: the cups are sending a message to body to disperse Cold from the Spleen and Stomach or to put it another way, the micro is effecting the macro.

Cups will usually leave a bruise which will itself be indicative of the level of congestion or invasion of the local tissues. You will be able to observe through the glass jar an immediate discoloration of the skin: a red colour indicates Heat; dark red/purplish indicates chronic Heat and/or stagnant Blood; a white sheen is indicative of Cold; moisture gathering in the jar indicates the presence of Damp. Occasionally blistering will occur which is generally indicative of depletion of Qi. The bruise will disperse gradually over a few days; darker bruising may take a week or ten days to fade completely.



Cups are frequently used on the Back Shu points and can therefore be directed at specific organs such as Large Intestine, Kidney, Spleen or Lung. They can be used on the scapula or on top of the shoulders as well as around the sacrum and buttocks. It is highly effective way of dispersing stagnant Blood around old injuries or areas of overuse such as in frozen shoulder syndrome. Any area of soft tissue is available for cupping as long as the skin is flat enough to create the suction. It is not appropriate to cup areas with insufficient flesh, such as the sacrum of a male. Excessively hairy skin can first be oiled to facilitate a stronger grip.

Sliding Cup Technique



This is a variation of the standard cupping technique. It is done on the middle and upper sections of the back. The back must first be well lubricated with oil. The jar is placed on the back with a lighter than usual suction. Some practice is usually required to attain the right level of grip; it must be strong enough to maintain a suction while the jar is manipulated, but a strong grip will be too difficult to move the cup and far too painful for the patient. Once the right level of grip is attained the jar is gripped close to its edge and then slid up and down the back along the line of the spinal muscles. Provided the patient has ample flesh the cup can also be slid along the spine itself and over the scapulae.

This technique is another version of a Guasha, which we will describe in a moment. Let us just say here that the sliding cup technique is a powerful therapy which allows a much stronger dispersion over a much greater surface area than single cupping will allow.

Guasha

Guasha is the technique of scraping the body with a hard object. Its purpose is to stimulate the circulation and thereby to disperse inflammation or Heat in the body. As with Cupping Technique, Guasha is a folk medicine technique and is very common throughout China and South East Asia. It is not generally not taught in the Chinese acupuncture colleges, quite simply because everybody already knows how to use it. It is the equivalent of a hot lemon and honey drink for Westerners faced with a cold or flu and is indeed often used to resolve that condition.

A variety of tools can be used. Traditionally the Chinese used a piece of buffalo horn, moulded with a rounded edge. This has been replaced with the common ceramic spoon that you will see in any Chinese restaurant. Throughout Vietnam, Malaysia and Indonesia you will find practitioners using coins. The Australian twenty cent piece is ideal and makes the whole procedure very cheap medicine! Any other slightly softened sharp object can be used, such as the plastic or metal lid of a jar. The Japanese often use a particular tool known as a Yoneyama which is a small copper/bronze object with a rounded edge. Avoid any excessively sharp object, this will be too rough on the skin and will cause pain. Likewise avoid objects which are too soft; they will simply not be effective enough.



The technique is usually, but not always, applied with oil in order to minimise discomfort. The main site to apply Guasha is the back. The skin should be scraped with the Guasha tool fairly firmly but not excessively. Work in lines along the spine (provided it has ample flesh to protect it) and then along the bladder channel lines. If the tissues are distinctly congested or inflamed a crimson/red bruising will appear fairly quickly. This bruising is referred to as the Sha. A distinct, dark Sha indicates very inflamed tissues or areas of excess Heat. A mild Sha will appear as only a pinkish red flush with perhaps a few flecks of crimson.

This picture shows only a mild Sha in the centre of the back but a very strong Sha towards the sides. This patient has a predominantly Liver related disharmony (post viral syndrome with headaches and excessive tiredness); the diagnosis here is (partially) deficient Liver Yin with Liver Fire. Liver Fire is generally widely spread and dominant at the flanks.



Guasha can be applied on other areas of the body beside the back. For example Lung Heat can be dispersed by a light Guasha to the forearm between Lu 5 and Lu 6, as well as the upper chest between K 27/28 and Lu 1/2. Old injuries with stagnant Blood can be treated with Guasha on sites such as the chest/rib cage, the shoulders and the knee. Overuse/carpal tunnel syndrome can be treated by Guasha to the extensor muscles of the forearm (LI 8, 9 and 10). Guasha to the neck can be applied to relieve chronic neck spasm.

Guasha to the forearm to disperse Lung Heat



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Guasha to the upper back revealing Liver Fire



Guasha to upper chest, Heat in the Lung

How Guasha Works

By rubbing the skin you are stimulating the circulation, increasing the flow of blood and lymph fluid at the surface. This causes any excessive metabolic waste that is trapped in the tissues to be dispersed. In the language of Chinese medicine it stimulates the Wei Qi which resides at the surface to expel pathogens.

The technique of Guasha is an application of the principle of treating the Exterior first. Wind Cold can penetrate the surface, causing the Blood to congeal or stagnate. A patient in such a condition will not necessarily be manifesting symptoms of disease, however they may well be sore and have aching muscles. Any further stress on their system has the potential of depleting their Qi, at which stage the pathogen may penetrate deeper into the body. By applying Guasha the Wind Cold is expelled, the circulation of Blood is restored and the range of movement of the muscles and tendons is enhanced.

The sight of a patient's back is often enough to disturb them (and their spouse) so care must be taken to explain the procedure clearly before its application. Be assured the Sha will disperse rapidly over two to three days. The skin will greatly benefit from Guasha as the layers of dead cells are removed. The patient may feel tender at the surface for a few hours after Guasha or even a sensation like mild sunburn. This will resolve rapidly. Most people will feel an immediate relief of pain and increase in mobility after a Guasha. Many people report a sensation of lightness, as if a strong weight has been taken from them. People with excessive tiredness may experience more available energy.

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Guasha is a very powerful and useful technique. I have often described its potential as being equally to a dozen strong massages. Let me give you an example to highlight the efficacy of Guasha. This is a story I was told in my early days of training:

A policeman had sustained serious injuries as a result of a motor vehicle accident. His chest had been severely bruised and he experienced a great deal of pain in the chest for many months after the accident. Despite going through all the usual medical hoops nobody had been able to give him any relief from incessant pain. He was told he would probably have to live with it for the rest of his life.

Eventually he had to retire from the police force on a sickness pension. One day he turned up at the clinic of a little old Chinese Medicine practitioner who immediately applied Guasha to the man's chest. As you can imagine this would be an uncomfortable procedure for anyone, let alone someone with chronic pain at the site. Despite the man's obvious pain, the practitioner proceeded until he had raised a dark purple Sha over an extensive area of the ribs. The man walked out of the clinic shortly afterwards completely free of pain and was able to return to work shortly afterwards.