

*Kath Bartlett, MS, LAc*

Asheville Center for Chinese Medicine  
70 Woodfin Place Suite West Wing Two  
Asheville, North Carolina 28801 828.258.2777  
[kbartlett@AcupunctureAsheville.com](mailto:kbartlett@AcupunctureAsheville.com)  
[www.AcupunctureAsheville.com](http://www.AcupunctureAsheville.com)

31

*Acupuncture  
Chinese Herbology  
Nutritional & Lifestyle Counseling*

## **CUPPING: WHY GWYNETH PALTROW SEES SPOTS**

Gwyneth Paltrow caused some controversy during the summer of 2004 when she appeared at a movie premiere in a backless dress revealing dark circular marks on her back. Oprah Winfrey invited Ms. Paltrow to her show to explain the strange marks. It turns out that before the premiere, the 'Shakespeare in Love' star had been to an acupuncturist who had preformed cupping, an ancient Chinese healing therapy. Paltrow has a long history of embracing alternative therapies, and sees an acupuncturist on a regular basis.

So what is cupping? Do the marks hurt? How does cupping treat illness or injuries?

Cupping is a method of treating disease by using suction to move Qi (energy), blood, lymph. A simple and effective therapeutic technique, cupping can be used alone or in combination with acupuncture and massage. The purpose of cupping is to move stagnant Qi (pronounced 'chee': your body's energy) blood and fluids in the tissues and acupuncture channels (vessels in which Qi flows).



The history of cupping dates far back into ancient times. Evidence of the use of cupping has been found in various periods of time in most parts of the world, including ancient Egypt, Rome and Greece, South America, Africa and Russia. Early cups were made from bamboo or animal horns, and the procedure was employed primarily for draining pustulated sores (like boils), snakebites or bleeding. In Tang Dynasty literature (618-907A.D.) cupping is described as treatment for tuberculosis and rheumatic pain.

During the procedure, light oil is applied to the skin. Glass cups in a variety of sizes (they look like tiny fish bowls) are warmed with a small flame and immediately applied to the skin surface on appropriate acupuncture points. The flame burns off the oxygen in the cup, creating vacuum type suction. The cups are then gently moved around the area, and are usually left on between 5 to 15 minutes.

There is an adage in Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM), "Where there is pain there is stagnation, where there is stagnation there is pain". 'Stagnation' here refers to Qi and blood not moving in the muscles, tissues and acupuncture meridians. Cupping stimulates the flow of Qi, blood and fluids carrying nutrients and oxygen to the affected area. The suction circulates Qi and causes stagnated blood and fluids to rise to the body surface for release, thereby relieving the source of pain or disease. Cupping's uses includes relieving muscle pain, especially back pain from stiffness or injury, menstrual and stomach pain, and clearing congestion in the chest occurring with colds and asthma (those phlegmy coughs and wheezing)

"The great thing about it is that it relieves pain without any side effects," says Dr. Joseph Chiang, a Taiwan-born, U.S.-trained anesthesiologist who also is a licensed acupuncturist. "And it lasts for weeks." The closest thing to a side effect is the bruises cupping can leave. And if little scientific study has been done on cupping, it is nevertheless being accepted by physicians, as well as patients, as an effective means of pain control, Chiang says.

He also notes that acupuncture and cupping are so much more effective for tennis elbow than steroid injections that they've become his preferred treatment option. <sup>1</sup>

Tim Handley had conventional acupuncture and cupping therapy for a painful shoulder. He told BBC News Online: "I had four treatments and it really knocked it on the head. It was brilliant. After the first time I had it I felt absolutely fantastic. The difference was so tangible. It was wonderful. It felt quite strange because the suction was enormous. It was intense but not painful. You could feel the blood being drawn into the muscle." Like Gwyneth, he was bruised afterwards, but the marks vanished quickly. "They are 'healthy bruises' and they disappeared very quickly - within a week. I would have it done again." <sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Ackerman, T. Old Treatment, New Trend. People in Pain Turn to Cupping Therapy. Houston Chronicle.com, November 14, 2004.

<sup>2</sup> Roberts, M. What Caused Gwyneth's Spots. BBC News Online. July 9, 2004.



CBS NEWS

## 'Cupping' Takes The Pain Away

NEW YORK, July 12, 2004

(CBS) Cupping is a form of alternative pain therapy that recently left some curious marks on actress and new mom Gwyneth Paltrow. The

mystery behind the circular marks on Paltrow's back is solved by Michael Gaeta, president of the [Acupuncture Society of New York](#), who describes the therapy on *The Early Show*. He demonstrates the cupping therapy on the back of one of his patients, who was lying on a treatment table. "There are two forms of cupping therapy," Gaeta tells **co-anchor Harry Smith**. "Cupping therapy is a treatment in which the practitioner creates suction in a cup. And then applies that cup to the body, which then draws the skin up around the cup, under the cup."

The traditional method uses fire. Gaeta holds a cotton ball and wets it with alcohol. Then ignites the soaked cotton ball and places it in the cup. He says, "Fire cupping uses a flame to create suction in the cup - you'll see a flame in the cup - and then, we'll apply the cup to the body." The skin gets sucked up and rises under the cup as blood rushes up. "Cupping brings fresh blood to the area, Gaeta says. "So it tends to improve circulation. It also helps open up the chest and benefit the lungs and can even benefit menstrual problems and digestive problems, too. Most commonly, it's used for aches and pains of various types as well as respiratory problems, cough, wheezing, things like that."

"It feels a bit strange," the patient says. "Definitely doesn't hurt. It just feels like someone's pulling at your skin."

Gaeta notes, "Cupping therapy is usually used as part of acupuncture or body work treatment. It's been part of Chinese medicine for over 2,500 years. Originally, animal horn was the original cup. The horn method is the original thing. Later on brass, ceramic, bamboo cups were used." It looks like something out of medieval alchemy, but Gaeta says, it is just an alternate method of treatment. He adds, "Fire cupping is the traditional, most effective method. Some practitioners choose to use the suction cup method, where you pump up the suction cup and that's it. Same kind of thing - just doesn't use flame."

There are very few conditions in which cupping should not be used, such as high fever, skin disease or tendency to bleed easily. Each cupping session last about 10 to 15 minutes and it can be repeated, once the marks are cleared, until the problem is resolved, Gaeta says. To get a treatment, he says, seek a licensed acupuncturist.