

The Art of Cupping

by Susan Johnson, L.Ac.

The ancient art of cupping has been utilized by healers and lay people in many cultures. Cupping is a suction technique designed to pull toxin build-up and muscle spasm from the body's deeper tissue to the surface of the skin. The cells of the body use oxygen and give off carbon dioxide; when the energy is blocked, the cell waste or carbon dioxide gets blocked. This is called acid or toxin build-up. Physical pain implies a blockage in the flow of energy through a particular area. When toxins or cell waste stagnate in the muscles or joints, it can be very difficult for the body to get rid of this waste, causing further blockage and discomfort. Utilizing cupping techniques we are able, by vacuum or suction, to pull the blockage out of the deeper tissue and move it to the skin's surface. Once on the surface, it is much easier for the body to eliminate toxins through the superficial blood supply or capillary system. In only ten minutes of cupping, not only can we pull toxin build-up out of specific areas, but we can also pull fresh new blood into those areas, which vitalizes and restores proper blood flow.

Cupping is diagnostic as well as therapeutic, and can tell us three basic things. First, cupping tells us exactly **where** the problem is, as we usually cup an area slightly larger than the painful region, in order to ensure that the pain is completely covered. Some skin under the cups will color, and some won't, although the same amount of suction has been used with all cups. Even on the skin under a single cup, one part may color while the rest may not. These colored areas help us identify the sources of pain and discomfort. Second, cupping tells us the **kind of problem** with which we are dealing, as problems relating to toxin build-up or muscle spasm will cause the skin under the cup to color, whereas issues dealing with nerve or bone will not color at all. Third, cupping shows us the **severity** of the problem. Light or moderate blockage will cause the skin under a cup to color pink or red, and it will take a day or two for this color to fade. Severe stagnation can cause the skin to color a deep scarlet, purple, or even black; it may take seven to ten days for the dark color to disperse. All of this information is helpful not only in treating the patient, but in making an accurate diagnosis.

The cupping sensation can be a bit painful for the first sixty seconds, the time during which most of the toxins are removed. It is helpful for the patient to try to relax into the process of being cupped, and to acknowledge and tolerate the pain. Practitioners should ensure that the patient does not hyperventilate by closely

watching the patient's breathing, and encouraging them to inhale and exhale only through the nose, and not through the mouth. This will slow the breathing and prevent the patient from becoming dizzy or lightheaded. The discomfort usually eases after sixty seconds. Patients who are lying down while receiving cups may even doze a bit.

Cups rarely need to be applied for more than ten minutes. If no color appears after a few minutes, cups can be removed and placed elsewhere on the body. Do not leave the room while cupping your patient. Be sure to watch your patient closely; if any blisters begin to appear, the cups should be removed immediately, as blisters indicate that a cup has been left on too long. For many patients, the practitioner's gentle downward stroking of the arms or back can help them to relax and feel the practitioner's presence during the treatment. Be as sensitive as you are able with your patients, and understand that some patients will need you to work especially slowly and gently while cupping them.

Cupping is an extraordinary technique, and its effects are immediate. The healing process may be shortened by weeks or even months by using cupping, a method that manually removes the energy blockage in ways that acupuncture needles cannot.

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