

# GEORGE TRIES ... GUASHA AND CUPPING

by George Ding

I'm the kind of guy that'll try anything once. It's not necessarily a healthy way to live – you end up doing a lot of stuff you regret – but it surely is exciting.

I'd heard about *guasha* (back scraping) and fire cupping, that one-two punch of traditional Chinese medicine, before – almost every masseuse unfortunate enough to knead my stiff, adamant back recommends it.

My latest masseuse seemed very concerned.

"Your body is very stiff," he observed. "Are you under a lot of pressure?"

"Yes," I told him. "I also suffer from crippling anxiety."

"That's not good for your kidneys," he said. "You really should get *guasha* and cupping done by one of our masters."

Although I want to believe in traditional Chinese medicine, it's never worked for me. Then again, I only take it when I get sick and after a couple days of waiting I hit the Tylenol. But I'd never tried *guasha* or cupping before so I thought why not, the worst that could happen is nothing ... right? Maybe not quite right.

The Master was a man in his 50s with close-cropped hair. We exchanged pleasantries as he gently unfolded a square of cloth. Inside was a rectangular piece of bronze the size of a smartphone that he held as gently as if it were a bar of gold. The bronze was dull around the edges and I wondered how he planned to scrape my back with it.

Turns out, the bronze tablet didn't need to be sharp because he pressed it deep into my back as he dragged it up and down. Even though my back was oiled, it felt like he was relieving me of my epidermis.

I told him it hurt but he just chuckled, "Oh this is nothing!"

Afterward, my back was crisscrossed by red gashes, like a bad rash. But the fun wasn't over.

The Master took out a leather box full of glass jars. Out of nowhere a cotton ball soaked with rubbing alcohol burst aflame. He swabbed the inside of each cup with the ball of fire, and then placed the cup gingerly on my

back. Almost immediately the pain set in.

One by one he placed the cups along my shoulders and down the small of my back to my waist. Each new jar brought a new spotlight of pain.

After two minutes, I could no longer move. It hurt even to shift; my skin was stretched taut like a canvas on a frame. When I tried to shift my body, I'd hear the jars chime as they hit one another.

I lay there, ensconced in pain.

"Five more minutes," he said.

When it was over, the Master twisted each jar and one by one they loosened with a satisfying pop. If the scraping made me look like the victim of domestic abuse, the cupping made it look like I had been bitten by giant mosquitoes. My skin rose in huge bumps like dark red tumuli.

I asked the Master what exactly this sado-masochistic ritual would accomplish. It certainly felt like something had changed. When pain had become the norm, the relative lack of pain was a blessing. I felt lighter and, who knows, maybe even healthier.

The Master explained that the suction opens up pathways within the body and allows impurities to be drawn out. All of a sudden, the healthy feeling I had dissipated, replaced by an overwhelming sense of skepticism. I immediately regretted asking the question.

If impurities could be sucked out of the body, could cupping be done at home with the hose attachment to a vacuum cleaner? Also, by the same principle, are hickeys good for your health?

I pressed the Master for an answer and he mumbled something about meridians and said that I needed to take better care of my kidneys. I thanked him for his time.

Outside, I realized that the worst thing that can happen isn't nothing. It's paying someone to abuse you and not getting off on it. I don't regret getting *guasha* and cupping – they make for some beautiful bruises – but it's something I'd try once, and only once.

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