

Trataka-Benefits of Candle Gazing Techniques

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Abstract

Meditation offers a rich and complex field of study. Over the last few years, several hundred research studies have demonstrated numerous significant findings including changes in psychological, physiological, and transpersonal realms. This article attempts to summarize these findings and benefits of trataka. We then suggest directions for future research, emphasizing the necessity to continue to expand the paradigm from which meditation research is conducted, from a predominantly re-ductionistic, biomedical model to one which includes subjective and transpersonal domains and an integral perspective.

Keywords: Meditation; Trataka; Psychological; Physiological; Transpersonal

Introduction

Trataka is one of the six cleansing techniques mentioned in the Hatha Yoga Pradipika, the classical text on the practices of Hatha Yoga. It is defined as “looking intently with an unwavering gaze at a small point until the eyes begin to tear, is called Trataka by the great teachers”. Trataka meditation, also known as a tratak sadhana or candle-gazing meditation, is a meditation technique in which the practitioner centers his focus on a single visual point. Trataka can be either internal or external; that is the object that is gazed upon can be an internal object (for example the third eye) or an external one (for example the flame of a candle) [1-3]. Generally our minds get distracted with the objects surrounding us, which stops us from staying focused during meditative practices. To avoid these numerous distractions and obstacle, the burning candle is used as a main object to help retain this image with our minds even when our eyes are closed. This continuous practice tames the mind to remain in control, thereby encouraging control over the various senses in the human body. Most meditation is done with your eyes closed, focusing attention inward. A trataka is a different type of meditation, where you keep your eyes open and focus on a small point or object. Frequently a trataka is done with a candle, and your attention is focused on the flame. A candle gazing meditation helps bring energy to the third eye, increases concentration, and improves memory. The point may be an image, a word, a symbol [4], or even just a dot on the wall. The idea is to allow the gaze to soften and rest gently on this point, so that the mind can relax. Candles are a particularly powerful object to use, because the soft flicker of the candlelight has a natural lulling motion that allows the individual to relax more easily, as if in a trance-like state.

By fixing the gaze the restless mind too comes to a halt. It is said also that control of the ciliary (blink) reflex stimulates the pineal gland, which Kundalini Yoga identifies with the third eye. Trataka is said to enhance the ability to concentrate [5-7]. It increases the power of memory and brings the mind to a state of awareness, attention and focus. The goal of tratak sadhana is to enter samadhi-an intense, focused concentration-by raising the energy in the sixth chakra, located at the third eye [1]. This center is the chakra aligned with one’s vision, both physical sight and internal vision and intuition. Thus, resting the eyes softly is said to induce higher activity in this region. Like many meditation techniques, there are a number of common variants. Most commonly, the focal point is set at eye-level, three to four feet in front of the practitioner. Another common variation is for the focal point to rest on the floor a little further away, between one and two meters from the individual. A secondary aim of candle-gazing meditation- or simply relaxing your gaze on a single point-is to develop the solar plexus in the third chakra (naval center). There are strong associations between the 6th and 3rd chakra centers, so as one gazes at the candle or image, he can more easily build a feeling of warmth and inner fire in his abdominal region [8]. Trataka or yogic practice of concentrated gazing is an ancient hatha yoga exercise used for all round development of our body, mind and soul. The meaning of word trataka is “to look fixedly” or “to stare pointedly”.

Technique of Trataka

The practice of trataka is done by sitting on ground in padmasana (lotus posture), ardha padmasana or sukhasana (comfortable

sitting posture) keeping the spine and the back straight. A cow's ghee lamp is placed at the same level of your eyes at a distance of one metre. Now keeping the mind relaxed one should look at the bright portion of the flame without blinking, till the tears start coming out of your eyes. This is the last phase of trataka. After doing this the eyes should be closed for a while and the practitioner should relax and sit quietly for 3-5 minutes and then slowly open his eyes [9-12]. The exercise can be repeated 2 to 3 times. It is advised that after performing trataka one should wash his eyes and face with water. The time period of trataka from the beginning till the rolling down of tears differs from person to person. It also depends on the mental condition of the individual. The duration of trataka in normal individuals is generally 3-5 minutes and some people can extend the practice to longer periods.

Benefits of Trataka

Fatigue and Headaches: These are removed when practicing of Trataka (Candle Gazing) is done regularly.

Strengthens our eye muscles: As the blinking of an eye is in our control while we focus our attention at the small objects of any material. It helps us in strengthening our eye muscles.

Purifies our eyes: As we exercise it to focus upon a point which helps in improving the internal functions of an eye. This helps in purifying our eyes.

Treats our eye disorders: When we gaze at an object such as the candle flame or any other small object. This improves our eye concentration that helps in treating eye disorders [13].

Relieves insomnia: As practicing Trataka gives us peace by taking away negative thoughts & desires from our minds. This helps us in relieving insomnia.

Aids in treating depression: As Trataka is also a mind purifying technique, this technique purifies the mind by decreasing negative desires or thoughts. This helps in treating depression.

Improves our concentrations: When we practice gazing at any small objects regularly, it increases our consciousness. This improves our concentration power.

Calms our anxious mind: As Trataka practice helps us in disconnecting with the noise & distraction from the external world. This is really deep relaxing or calming your anxious mind.

Promotes our emotional stability: Concentrating on a single object by practicing Trataka, can promote our emotional stability.

Boosts our willpower: When we'll have the spiritual & mental powers by practicing Trataka. Then we can also boost our willpower.

Develops intuition & clairvoyance: As we practice Trataka regularly & consistently is said, it's a key of awakening 'Ajna Chakra'. 'Ajna Chakra' is also known as the 'third eye'. This helps in developing intuition & psychic power.

Improves our vision & memory: It is said that 50% of our minds keep engaging on 'what we see'. Trataka is totally based on vision as it is practiced by visualizing the small objects of any material.

Improves our consciousness power: When we keep concentrating on gazing an object & to optimize it. It improves our consciousness power.

The benefits of Trataka have to do with the eye and mind connection. Difficulty in focusing and making eye contact are possible signs of learning disabilities or anxiety disorders. The relationship between the inability to track a moving object and poor reading performance, and learning disabilities are illustrated in a study done on children with hyperactivity and learning disability compared with a control group. The mental and emotional state of a person often registers with irregular eye movements. Conventional wisdom has shown that people with anxiety disorders and other mental health issues have a harder time establishing eye contact or relaxing their eye movements [14,15]. Although it is often repeated that Trataka heals eye disorders, it is more reasonable to say Trataka helps lessen symptoms instead of heals. Many factors may affect the ability of the eyes to function fully but the use of alternative methods help to address some symptoms of eye disorders and bring relief to patients [5]. These factors include the severity of the disorder, how long the patient had the condition, and the treatments that are used to manage the condition. Despite these careful statements, studies have been made and results have shown that Trataka is effective in improving symptoms of eye disorders. In a study comparing the efficacy of Trataka and eye exercises, both were found effective with improvements in the "clarity of vision, contrast sensitivity, and fineness of objects" but Trataka gave better relief. This study notes that Trataka and eye exercises can be used as additional therapy in addition to medical management for eye disorders. Research performed on elderly patients showed 6 weeks of Trataka sessions made improvements on their visual perception. Although a longer duration of Trataka sessions may bring more significant improvements in visual perception in the elderly study subjects [16].

Trataka had an immediate effect of improving concentration on cognitive performance. The study used the Stroop color-word test, a psychological test which measures the semantic interference when naming the color printed on paper of a different color [6]. Test results revealed an increase in "selective attention, cognitive flexibility, and response inhibition" for those who practiced Trataka meditation compared with the control group. A study of 30 adolescents who practiced Trataka has shown a marked decrease in anxiety symptoms. The practice of yogic gazing helped to calm the mind and also lessened erratic eye movements. The decrease in anxiety symptoms is helpful for people who suffer from it as an additional mode of therapy. The practice of candle gazing has a number of amazing benefits, including opening up your 3rd eye (pineal gland) [11], improved eyesight, focus, concentration and much more. This simple technique is an excellent introduction

to the Art and science of meditation. People of all ages and stress levels can immediately feel the benefits. Students can use this before studying to improve their concentration. Interestingly, in the past few decades Western Psychology is developing theories and methodologies based on the same principle. One of them is EMDR (*Eye Movement Desensitization and Reprocessing*), which is a therapeutic modality for treating trauma, started in 1987 by psychologist Francine Shapiro.

In a research done by the National Institute of Mental Health, EMDR was found to be substantially more efficacious than Prozac for PTSD. It is now recognized as an effective treatment by the World Health Organization (WHO), and is one of the treatments for PTSD sanctioned by the Department of Veterans Affairs. Our eyes are constantly making microscopic jerking movements called *microsaccades*, designed to make sure that the image of anything falling onto the retina is constantly changing (this is called Troxler's Phenomenon). They do this so that the objects in our field of vision keep being registered by the brain; otherwise, by constantly staring at an object for long enough, it tends to disappear from our perception.

In fact, our eyes can focus on multiple things every second. This restless scan of the environment, much like our fight or flight response, was a necessity when living in the jungle. In our modern lifestyle, however, our inability to turn off this anxiety producing pattern does not contribute to our survival or quality of life. Yet, the intensive use of computer and smartphones is training us to be ever more restless with our eyes. This is one of the reasons why our attention span keeps getting shorter.

Conclusion

Interestingly, research from neuropsychologist Marcel Kinsbourne shows that there is a definite relationship between eye position and the dominant hemisphere of your brain; so much so that changing the eye position can directly affect your mood and experience of the world. In his experiments, pictures appearing on the left side of our viewing field, and sounds in the left ear (both transmitted to the right brain), are perceived less agreeable than when they are presented to the other side. If looking right activates the left hemisphere, and looking left activates the right hemisphere, then it's not unreasonable to conclude that holding a perfectly centered and forward gaze produces a balanced brain activity in

both hemispheres. Similar kind of practice is also found in Hindu philosophy, in Zen and Buddhist philosophy. Stilling the eyes is not the only way to achieve stillness of mind, but it is a powerful way, and the feedback is much quicker. Schools of Yoga, Zen, and Tibetan Buddhism have developed open eye meditation techniques based on this principle. In this practice steady gazing is done on a particular object without blinking or moving of eyeballs. The practice of Trataka can be taken up progressively according to one's ability and inclination. Trataka aims to control the dissipation of the mind and becoming aware about the thought process of the mind.

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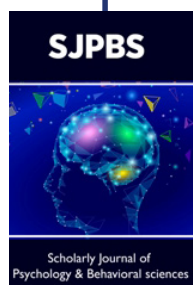
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