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Tratak and its benefits: A Review

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ABSTRACT

At the present time several *Yogic* practices, meditation, *Pranayama*, and *Mantra*, etc. are playing important role in treating physiological and psychological problems. The ancient Indian *Yoga* text, *Hatha Yoga Pradipika*, describes six cleansing techniques. The objective of cleansing techniques is to purify and prepare the body for the practice of *yoga* postures, and meditation. *Trataka* (*Yogic* visual concentration technique) is one of these techniques. In this study, ancient texts and contemporary research findings are analysed to gain a better understanding of *Trataka*.

Key words: *Trataka*, *physio-psychological problems*, *Yoga*

INTRODUCTION

Yoga is the most popular complementary health approach, practiced by people citing maintenance of health and well-being according to the National Centre for Complementary and Integrative Health (NCCIH). *Yoga* is a spiritual discipline that has been practised for thousands of years to help people achieve psychological and physiological homeostasis.^[1] *Yoga* practices appear to prevent neurodegeneration and enhance neuroplasticity by influencing specific brain areas involved with domains of cognition such as hippocampus, amygdala, prefrontal cortex, insula.^[2]

The ancient *yogic* scripture explained many different *Yoga* techniques and procedures. *Hatha Yoga* is a popular approach that emphasises *Asana* (*yogic* postures), *Pranayama* (voluntary breath control), *Meditation*, *Mudhra*, *Bandha* (psychic lock), and

Shodhana Kriyas (cleansing practices). The classical texts of *Hathayoga* described the profound impact of the six cleansing techniques on various aspects of one's personality, which are also validated through empirical studies.^[3] *Hathapradipika* and *Gheranda Samhita*, two traditional classical *Hatha Yoga* texts, emphasise six types of cleansing techniques (*Shatkriyas*), with their primary mechanism of action being stimulation. The techniques include *Dhauti* (internal cleansing), *Basti* (*yogic* enema), *Neti* (nasal cleansing), *Trataka* (TK) (concentrated gazing), *Nauli* (abdominal massaging) and *Kapalabhati* (frontal sinus cleansing).^[4]

MATERIAL AND METHODS

Searches for pertinent literature were conducted using classical texts, online databases PubMed, Scopus, and Google Scholar etc.

Trataka (*Yogic* Visual concentration)

Trataka is one of the cleansing techniques that has been investigated further within the *Shodana Kriya*, which considered to enhance vision and positively influence cognitive processes. TK, also known as concentrated gazing. The literal meaning of the Sanskrit word *Trataka* is "to gaze steadily." Looking intently with an unwavering gaze at a small point until tears are shed is known as *Trataka*.^[5]

Trataka not only brings an end to the mind's distractions but also enhances the ability to

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concentrate. It increases the power of memory and brings the mind in a state of awareness, attention and focus. The present review describes the TK techniques, mechanism and benefits.

Types of *Trataka*^[6]

In *Yoga*, three types of *Trataka* are acknowledged. The first is *Bahiranga Trataka* (external *Trataka*). The second is *Antar Trataka* (inner or internal *Trataka*). The third type of *Trataka* is *Adho Trataka*, which is practised with the eyes half open and half closed.

For *Bahir Trataka*, an object or image which has a form is selected. One can practise *Bahir Trataka* making use of such an object, provided one's consciousness merges with it while gazing at it continuously. Choose a symbol, bearing in mind that the symbol should not be changed. Otherwise, the after-image reflected on the screen of the mind would become obsolete, and the practice would need to be started again from the beginning. Also, the full benefits of the practice would not be derived.

Generally, people are extroverted by nature, so for many people it is impossible to keep the eyes closed even for two minutes. *Bahir Trataka*, is very useful here. Through *Bahir Trataka* the eyes are trained to be fixed and steady at one spot, so that the *Chitta-Vrittis*, the patterns or dispositions of the mind, are changed and can easily be converted into introversion.

For *Antar Trataka*, the eyes are closed and the imaginative power of the mind is awakened. An image is fixed on the inner space of the mind, *Chidakasha*, and then *Trataka* is performed on it. For this, an inner or mental symbol can be chosen. A *Yantra*, geometrical diagram, the sun or moon, one's own *Ishta*, deity of choice, or the *Guru* can be used as the symbol.

In the beginning, the practice of *Antaranga Trataka* is possible only after the practice of *Bahiranga Trataka*. With external *Trataka*, the practice of concentrating *Chitta* at one place is achieved and it helps an inner after-image to emerge. When the after-image appears clearly on the inner screen, *Chitta* immediately becomes one-pointed, because thoughts other than the after-image are obliterated. Once this is achieved,

Antar Trataka is a very effective practice to channel the energy on a definite path. Concentration and the state of meditation are attained with this type of *Trataka*. People who can easily perceive the image of their symbol mentally can do *Antar Trataka* without practising on an external object first.

For *Adho Trataka*, practise with the eyes half open and half closed. In *Trataka*, different positions of the eyes have been studied and named. Open eyes are called *Poornima Drishti*, full vision. The full moon is also called *Poornima*. Closed eyes are called *Ama Drishti*; *Ama* relates to the word *Amavasya*, and the no moon or dark moon is referred to as *Amavasya*. Half open eyes are called *Pratipada Drishti*. *Poornima Drishti* is used in external *Trataka*, *Ama Drishti* in inner *Trataka* and *Pratipada Drishti* is made use of in *Adho Trataka*. *Nasikagra Drishti*, *Nasikagra Mudra* and *Shambhavi Mudra* are also considered to be practices of *Adho Trataka*.

In *Hatha Yoga*, it is believed that by merely practising *Trataka* a person can become a master of all *Siddhis* and can attain the state of self-realization, because the mind merges into the object. *Trataka* can therefore be considered as a practice of *Laya Yoga*, where the practitioner's consciousness dissolves into whatever is concentrated upon.

It is essential to choose an external form for *Bahir* or external *Trataka*. As stated, earlier *Trataka* can be practised on anything, whether it is a flame, one's own shadow or some other symbol. After practising *Trataka* on the external object or symbol, one may enter into subtle or internal *Antar Trataka*. Once this is perfected, practices such as *Shambhavi Mudra* take on a different dimension.

Time of practice: The ideal time for this practice is early morning or at night.

Duration: It is said that if the object of concentration is physical in nature, such as a flame, *Trataka* should not be practised for more than five minutes. The duration in fact depends on the individual, but it is essential to obtain directions from a very experienced guide if intending to practise for longer. Five minutes of

practice is sufficient to remove some types of eye defects.

Precautions: Do not practise *Trataka* on a flame that is not steady. People with visual problems should ensure that the symbol is positioned so that a double image is not seen, and should seek expert guidance if this is not possible. Generally, *Trataka* should not be practised wearing spectacles. Although the texts specifically mention tears, notice that the wording indicates practising till the threshold of this experience. The point of the practice is not to make tears roll down the face, but simply to practise as long as one can without this happening.

Contra-indications: People with glaucoma should not practise *Trataka*. Epileptics should not practise *Trataka* on a candle flame. *Trataka* should not be practised on the sun.

Main procedure

Bahya Trataka

- Practice in a dark room.
- Place a candle two or three feet in front of yourself with the flame at the level of eye. It is important to note that the flame is still and does not flicker at all.
- Sit in a comfortable meditative pose like *Padmasana*, *Siddhasana* or *Sukhasana* and place the hands on the knees in *Jnana Mudra*.
- Relax your whole body, close your eyes and prepare yourself as for any meditative practice.
- Practice *kaya Sthairyam* (steadiness of the body) for a few minutes.
- Then open your eyes and gaze at the middle portion of the candle flame, just above the wick.
- Try to keep the eyes perfectly steady. Do not blink.
- Lower the eyelids if the eyes become sore or tired.
- Stare as long as possible, five to ten minutes, or if you can gaze longer without closing the eyes, do so.

- Only when you really need to, you should close the eyes.
- Try to keep the mind empty. If any thoughts come, put them out of the mind immediately.
- Remain silent throughout the whole practice.
- When you finally close the eyes, keep them fixed on the impression of the flame in front.
- If it moves bring it back to the centre and continue gazing until the impression disappears.
- Once you can stabilize the image, study it and look intently at the colour.
- Keep the mind completely devoid of thoughts. Only be aware of the object of concentration. When thoughts come, let them pass and remain uninvolved.
- Practice for fifteen to twenty minutes unless advised to perform for a longer period.

Aabhyantara Trataka

- Practice in a dark room.
- Sit in a comfortable meditative pose like *Padmasana*, *Siddhasana* or *Sukhasana* and place the hands on the knees in *Jnana Mudra*.
- Relax your whole body, close your eyes and prepare yourself as for any meditative practice.
- Practice *Kaya Sthairyam* (steadiness of the body) for a few minutes.
- Keep your eyes closed throughout the practice and concentrate on your symbol.
- If you have no symbol, try to visualize a point of light, like a twinkling star or moon.
- Try to see the object clearly and steadily in the dark space in front of the closed eyes.
- Practice for five to twenty minutes.

Benefits of Trataka

Tratak guided Meditation, an ideal meditation technique for people of all age groups. *Tratak* has physiological, psychological and spiritual benefits on the individual who follows it.

Sage *Gheranda* says three things in this respect. First, *Netrarogaa Vinashyanti*, *Trataka* removes defects of the eyes. This is its physical benefit. Second, *Divyadrishthi Prajaayate*, divine vision is created. This is its divine benefit. Third, *Shaambhavee Jaayate Dhruvam*, the *Siddhi* of *Shambhavi* is achieved. This is its spiritual benefit.^[7]

Effects of *Trataka* on autonomic functions

Trataka is a simple way to increase memory. It is very useful for people suffering from nervous tension. It also influences the brainwaves, which change according to our physical, mental and emotional activities. The frequency of these waves slowly reduces with *Trataka*. The mind becomes thoughtless and free from disorders and freedom from emotional ailments is attained. Relaxation, Emotional balance, feeling of pleasantness were increased. A shift from sympathetic to Parasympathetic happens during TK. Reduction in neuroticism, Galvanic Skin Resistance (GSR) and attention fluctuation, increase in BSR indicating a better psycho-physiological health.^[8]

Increased relaxation and alpha activity along with decreased heart rate (HR) and respiratory rate (RR) along with an increase in PTG (vasodilation) were all observed after receiving TK in patients who suffered from primary hypertension.^[9]

TK Yoga has a significant improvement on neuropsychological functions.

There is a positive effect of TK on mental relaxation as measured by EEG.^[10] It diminishes anger, suspicion, irritation, anxiety, and resentment. Vision has a direct link with the state of consciousness. Conflicting thoughts lead to mental restlessness and instability. *Trataka* is the best way to manage this condition. By stabilizing the eyes during *Trataka* the consciousness, *chitta*, can be made steady and free of tension. When the *Chitta* becomes one-pointed, the pineal gland is energized and a higher state is achieved.

After practising TK, a person feels more relaxed, happy, quiet, and light, and that they also have a better pattern of sleep. TK is helpful in insomnia and increases quality of sleep. It appears that TK could be a potential

treatment modality for reducing the severity of insomnia because it helps reduce stress and promotes a calm state of mind.^[11]

Effects of *Trataka* on Attention and Cognition

TK sessions improved selective attention, reaction inhibition, and cognitive flexibility. The practice increases awareness and calms all dimensions of inner activity.^[12]

Effects of *Trataka* on eye disorders

Yogic literatures claim that the *Tratak Kriya* was found to be effective in treatment of many eye diseases.^[13] The individuals who practised TK saw a satisfactory improvement in their visual accuracy and perception.

TK *Yoga Kriya* shows mild and moderate improvement on *Timira* w.s.r. to Ammetropia and Presbyopia.^[14]

The staring continuously to alternate relaxation and contraction of ciliary muscles of eye. In glaucoma patients, this effect results in improved outflow of aqueous humor reducing the Intra Ocular Pressure. It can be used as a non-pharmacological agent for treating glaucoma by reducing IOP which improve the quality of life (QoL) in glaucoma patients.^[15]

TK able to improves blood circulation while also easing the strain that is placed on the eye muscles. Symptoms like eye watering, burning, redness, and eye strain improved.

Visual discomfort, which included dryness, irritation, burning, redness, and photosensitivity were reduced in computer professionals in a research study.^[16]

Trataka is considered to be the best practice for clearing and purifying the *Antahkarana*, the inner tool of consciousness.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Yoga is appraised to be one of the most important efficacious and valuable tools available to overcome various physical and psychological problems. *Yoga* practices stimulated and balances all system of body and increase mental clarity, emotional stability, and a greater sense of well-being. Meditation is an experience in itself which enhances the quality of life.

Tratak has physiological, psychological and spiritual benefits on the individual who follows it. It is highly recommended for students and working professionals for greater efficiency. Various research studies have shown that eye exercises can help with health problems. TK has shown significant benefit on autonomic function, cognition, relaxation and sleep. It helps to alleviate a variety of eye discomforts.

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