

20/20 Vision Quest

You can improve your eyesight by regularly performing this series of simple exercises.

By Cybèle Tomlinson

When you look at Meir Schneider, founder and director of the Center and School for Self-Healing in San Francisco, his striking eyes are what you see first. The left eye angles slightly inward and is somewhat murky; the right one is focused and alert.

The fact that Schneider is able to see is nothing short of extraordinary: He was born cross-eyed with microphthalmia (a small eyeball), glaucoma (excessive pressure on the eyes), astigmatism (an irregular curve of the cornea), nystagmus (involuntary shifting of the eyes), and cataracts (an opacity of the lens). At the age of 6, after enduring numerous painful and unsuccessful operations, he was pronounced legally blind.



Schneider credits his restored vision to his practice of yoga for the eyes. These techniques are based on the [Bates Method](#) of vision improvement, developed around the turn of the century by ophthalmologist William Bates, who believed that eyes which were capable of deteriorating were also capable of improving. Over the course of his controversial career, Bates developed an extensive training program for the eyes. He argued that the eyes must be relaxed in order to see well.

Schneider began the Bates Method at age 17. He practiced relaxing the eyes for up to 13 hours a day. "The results were so dramatic when I began to work on myself," he says. "Seeing light—when it happened—was such a dramatic thing that nothing could stand in my way." At the same time, he also discovered how to relax his body and move more freely. Eventually, Schneider gained enough vision to read, walk, run, and even drive.

Since that time, Schneider, who holds a Ph.D. in healing arts, has made helping others with vision limitations his life's work. He began by concentrating on the eyes and then moved to the whole body, aiding those living with muscular dystrophy, multiple sclerosis, and polio.

The Psychology of Seeing

Schneider's techniques are remarkably simple, but you have to be able to abandon your preconceived notions of what eyesight is and how it works.

Seeing involves not just the eyes but the brain. According to Schneider, "Seeing is largely a function of the mind, and only partly a function of the eyes. There are 80 to 110 million rods and 4 to 5 million cones with which the retina senses light. A billion images are produced in the retina every minute. But the brain can't assimilate all these images: It's selective, and determines how much of a picture you will or won't see. It also determines how clear or how fuzzy your vision will be." For instance, when you're bored, your mind tells your eyes not to look, and after awhile that's what happens: You stop looking.

However, there is a demand to see, and in order to do so, we often squint, strain, and stress the eyes. We further abuse our eyes by reading late into the night, watching television, working long hours on computers, and focusing for too long. "How you use your eyes determines their structure," says Schneider.

Yoga for the Eyes

Schneider begins his own eye program with **palming, massage, blinking, and shifting**—exercises which should be done in a relaxed, effortless way. If there is tension in the body, then the exercises will only encourage current habits. In all exercises, keep your breathing deep and full.

Palming. Palming, which was originally invented by Tibetan yogis, is done in darkness with the palms cupping the eyes. Palming soothes the optic nerve, which is often irritated. Sit in a darkened room with your elbows leaning on a table. Relax your back and shoulders, rub your hands together vigorously to warm them, then place your palms over your eyes. Don't press the eye sockets and don't lean on the cheekbones. Visualize total blackness, the most relaxing color for the brain, and breathe deeply. Let the blackness permeate everything: your eyes, your whole body, the room you sit in, the city, the state, the continent, the planet, the stars, the universe.

You may see all kinds of lights, which is an indication of irritation in the optic nerve. In fact, you may not see total darkness until you have completed several palming sessions. Palm for as long as is comfortable.

Massage. Rub your hands together to warm them and then rub the fingers up the bridge of the nose and across the eyebrows to the temples. Find the grooves in the eyebrows and massage them. Then rub the fingers from the nose to the cheekbones and to the ears. Finally, run your fingers across your forehead. Facial massage helps dissolve tension in the eyes, bringing them to a more relaxed state. Massage of the face, head, and body can facilitate this process.

Blinking. Often our tendency is to fall into a kind of myopic stare, especially when under stress. This strains the eyes unnecessarily. Blinking helps keep the eyes moist and tension-free, and increases circulation in the eyes. Begin reprogramming yourself by opening and closing the eyes very softly and gently. Then visualize the eyes blinking. Imagine that it's the eyelashes which open and close the eyes. Breathe deeply. Apply this

technique whenever you look at something, gazing in a soft way and blinking frequently. If the eyes are behaving in this way, then they can't be tense.

Shifting. This involves flitting the eyes rapidly from detail to detail and encourages the eyes to engage with the world and pick up on more details. Normal eyes shift naturally, making many micromovements per second.

Shifting works by engaging the macula, the central part of the retina, which is responsible for clear, detailed vision. By moving the eyes frequently, more information comes through this part of the retina, thus providing the eyes with more in-focus visual information.

Practice by moving your eyes from point to point on whatever you're looking at. Forget the name of the thing you're seeing, and look at its individual parts. Never strain or force yourself; always look with "soft" eyes.

According to Schneider, there are many people who have healed their eyes using these exercises. One woman came to him after being blinded in one of her eyes by flying glass. After she did three long palming sessions—each lasting several hours—she could see light and shadow with her blind eye. In her other eye, her vision went from 20/16 to 20/6.

Another dramatic case is that of an elderly pharmacist who was referred to Schneider after surgery for macular degeneration. The surgery left him with damage to his central vision, thus causing him to see images in multiple. These images were fuzzy and had no depth; the pharmacist's vision measured 20/400. After working with Schneider for six months, his vision was 20/25.

Most of us, thinking these eye conditions are inevitable and unchangeable, simply opt for corrective lenses. But there is a danger in taking this route, because glasses encourage the shape of the eye to remain the same. "Yes, you put on glasses and you can see 20/20, but with time you come to depend on them," says Schneider. "People believe that vision can only deteriorate, not improve. But eyes can improve, and they do improve, given the right conditions."

Resources

Self Healing: My Life and Vision, by Meir Schneider (Penguin, 1989).

The Handbook of Self-Healing, by Meir Schneider and Maureen Larkin (Penguin/Arkana, 1994).

Meir Schneider's Miracle Eyesight Method, by Meir Schneider (two audiotapes, Sounds True, 1996).

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