

Eyes on Yoga

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Introduction

- We are often told that if you want to know something about someone, look into their eyes. You can see the dull and lifeless, the alert, the sad, and the happy.
- As teachers we are taught to look at individuals. One of the habits a teacher can notice is the tendency of certain students to look down, not just with their eyes but by bending their neck.
- Our eyes both perceive and reveal our beauty. The eyes are a reflection of the body's overall health.
- It is said that "the face is the index of the mind and the eyes are the windows of the soul."
- Meister Eckhart said "The eye with which I see God is the same eye with which God sees me."
- Swami Sitaramanda believes "the fastest way to bring the mind into concentration is through the eyes."
- According to Susan Dalle, "You can't see differently, until you think differently".
- Dr. Jacob Liberman says "If the world outside is unclear, it may simply be a signal that something inside is unclear."
- Technology has helped create a society with eye strain and tired eyes.
- Human eyes need care and attention.



Some Background

- Some people believe that the eyes were never intended for the uses of today. In the early days there were no books, no lights, no movies.
- Lord Krishna tells Arjuna in the Bhagavad Gita, “You are not able to behold me with your own eyes; I give thee the divine eye, behold my lordly yoga” (11.8).
- Patanjali says we tend not to see reality clearly but instead get deluded by the error of false perception in viewing the world. In 2.6 of the Yoga sutras he says we confuse the act of seeing the true perceiver: purusha. In 2.17 he goes on to say that this confusion about the true relationship between the act of seeing, the object seen and the identity of the Seer is the root cause of suffering. His cure for this suffering is to look correctly into the world around us.
- The eyes are viewed as the “seat of the fire” in ayurveda. They are pitta in nature and overheat easily.
- Renown ophthalmologist William H. Bates claimed he could improve visual perception with palming, eyeball rotations and vision shifting. Dr. Bates’ system of education is growing in India but not in the US.
- Swami Sivananda said that sight was the most abused of our senses and he includes extensive series of eye exercises in his treatise.

Benefits of Eye Yoga

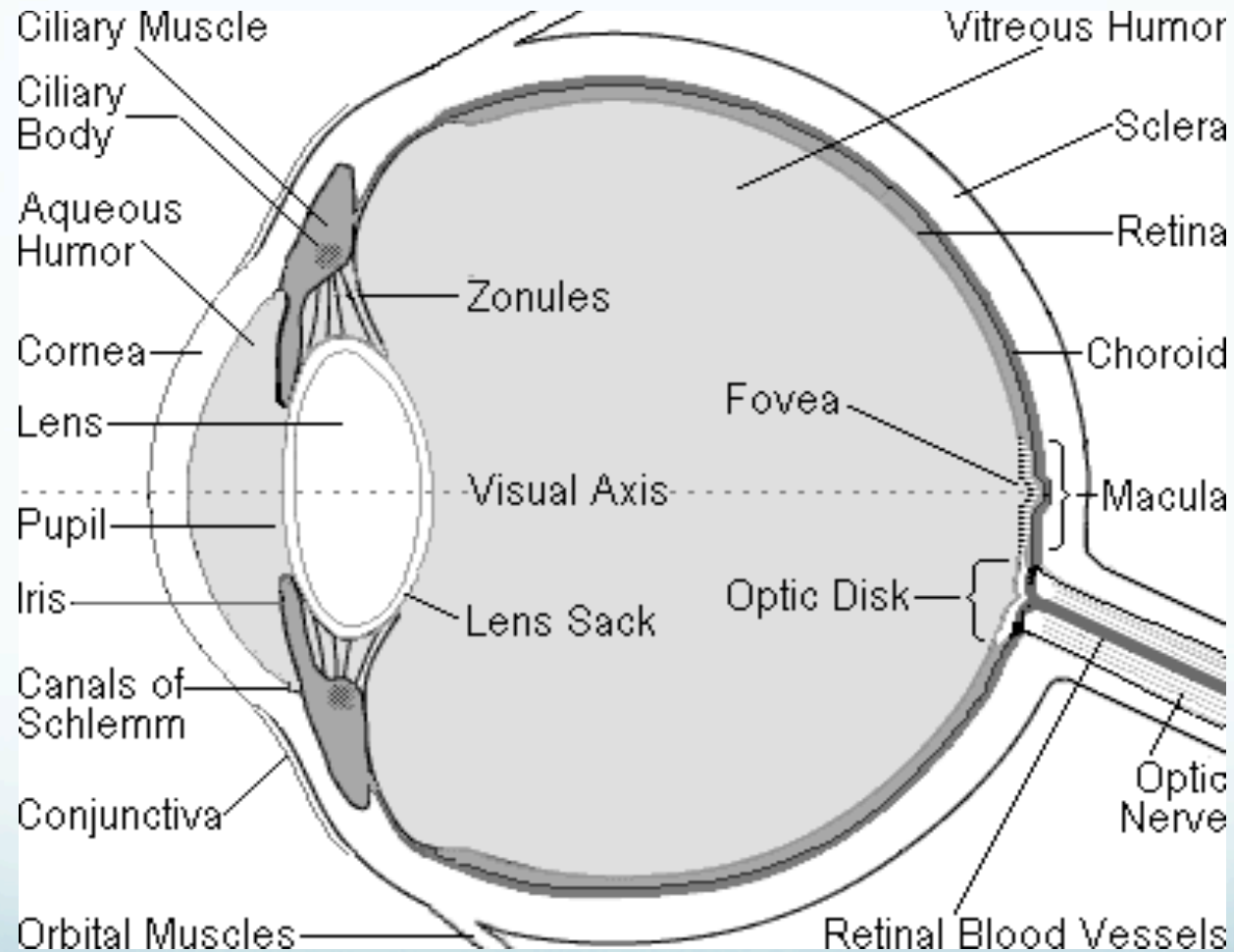
- The benefits of eye yoga range from better vision to increased concentration and spiritual insight. In yoga we learn to focus our eyes with precision. We direct our gaze purposely at a drishti which can help direct the energy of the pose. In balances the dristi can keep you keep upright; in twists, it can help you turn further. In general it helps us stay mentally clear.
- Letting the eyes close in restorative poses and in poses which are held for a long time, allows the senses to be drawn inward, calming the facial muscles and achieving a deeper relaxation.
- A study published in the journal Head and Face Medicine alluded that yoga can soothe irritated eyes. A control group doing yoga an hour a day for five days a week showed a 30 percent decline in eye problems. The class included asana, pranayama and guided relaxation. The study noted that relaxed people blink more and this moistens the eyes.
- The most important element of eye health seems to be relaxation. It is often recommended that a class begin in shavasana and then perform the yoga eye exercises. A relaxed body is more receptive to new habits.
- Robert Abel, author of The Eye Care Revolution, states that “eye exercises compensate for over development of the muscles we use to look at near objects.”
- Our photoreceptors break down and are reconstructed every minute according to Abel. He believes the eye needs darkness to recover from the constant stress of light. One of the easiest ways to ease the stress is to take a deep breath while covering your eyes or palming.

Eyes Represent the Capacity to See

- The eye is an amazingly complex organ. It is filled with nerves, lenses, liquid, and more.
- Our eyes are approximately one inch in diameter. They are pads of fat. The surrounding bones of the skull protect them.
- Major components of the eye are the cornea, pupil, lens, iris, retina and sclera (fig.1). Working together they capture an image and transmit it directly to the brain's occipital lobe via the optic nerve.
- Light reflected from an object we look at enters the eye and is refracted. This creates an upside-down focused image of the object. The brain will turn this in the correct direction.
- Photoreceptors are inside the eye. When struck by light they create nerve impulses. The two types are: cones and receptors. Cones specialize in color vision and rods in black-and-white. Human eyes are able to determine distances and depth because information from the eyes' right and left sides is sent to separate areas for interpretation. The brain recombines the information to create three-dimensional vision.

The Eye Structure

Figure 1



The Third Eye



- The Anja Chakra or “third eye” is located between and just above the eyebrows.
- A yogi trains his mind to turn inward by focusing on this spot.
- The Third Eye Chakra is the 6th Chakra responsible for "the sixth sense". It connects us to our internal intuitions. It gives us our sense of observation. Its element is light and color is purple. It is directed inside. It governs and connects the conscious and the unconscious mind.
- In a balanced Chakra we experience high mental ability. Reality and imagination are clear and distinct and so are logic and emotion. We experience overall good health, clear thinking and focus. It will encourage intuition, empathy of others and build trust in oneself.
- In an unbalanced state with this Chakra we experience fatigue, day dreaming, sleep problems, lack of assertiveness, inability to listen to others, and may even often feel disoriented. When the Chakra is over active, one maybe come immersed in a world of fantasy and even experience hallucinations.

Balancing the Anja Chakra:

- *Practice Meditation which develops intuition.*
- *Use aroma therapeutic essential oils such as Patchouli, Myrrh and Olibanum.*
- *Add purple colors to your wardrobe.*
- *Classical music can enhance the energies flowing to the third eye chakra.*
- *Amethyst, tourmaline and tanzanite are gemstones known to this chakra.*

Trataka – Steady Gazing

Trataka is an eye cleansing exercise described in the Upanishads and other yogic texts. In Ayurveda it is believed that the practice decreases mental lethargy and increases intellect. While normally done with a candle, any object can be focused on.

- Place a candle an arm's length away and at eye level.
- Gaze at the flame for 1-3 minutes without blinking.
- Your eyes may water which will cleanse the eyes and the tear ducts.
- Then close your eyes and picture the candle at a point between the eyebrows.
- Trataka improves eyesight and concentration.



• Yoga Mind and Body , Sivananda Yoga Vedanta Center 1998

According to some, doing this exercise can remove any disease from the eyes, induce clairvoyance, and help develop internal visualization.

Basic Yoga Eye Exercises

- Palming
- Blinking
- Up and Down Viewing
- Side to side Movements
- Diagonal Movements
- Clock Circles
- Near and Distant Viewing
- Close Range Focus
- *Although the exercises call for 10 repetitions, 30 seconds of each will be enough at first. Overdoing the exercises will not make you see better faster. The regular practice of eye yoga over time produces the best results. Listen to your eyes and relax.*
- There are other exercises such as
 - Figure 8s
 - V in, V out
 - Sunning
 - Finger push ups
 - Cross Crawl



Palming

- Sitting with your eyes closed, take some deep breaths to relax.
- Rub the palms of your hands together. When they are warm place them over your eyes.
- The warmth of the palms will transfer to the eyes. The eye muscles will relax.
- When the heat from the hands has been absorbed by the eyes, lower the hands and rub the palms together again. Repeat at least three times.

Blinking

- Sitting with your eyes open, blink very quickly about 10 times.
- Then close your eyes. Take your attention to your breath, inhaling and exhaling for a few breaths.
- Repeat this exercise about 5 times.

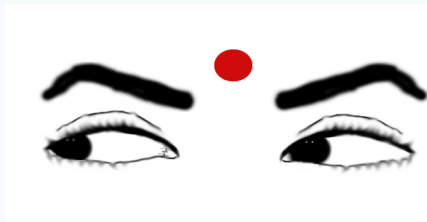
Up and Down Viewing

- Sit comfortably, with the eyes open, the head and neck still, and the entire body relaxed.
- Picture a clock face in front of you, and raise your eyeballs up to 12 o'clock. Hold them there for a second, then lower the eyeballs to six o'clock. Hold them there again. Continue moving the eyeballs up and down 10 times, without blinking if possible. Your gaze should be steady and relaxed. Once you finish these 10, close and rest your eyes.



Side to Side

- In a sitting position, just let your eyes go horizontally —from nine o'clock to three o'clock Repeat this exercise 10 times.
- After completing this exercise close your eyes and rest.



Diagonal Movement

- While sitting with eyes open do diagonal movements—two o'clock to seven o'clock, and eleven o'clock to four o'clock. Repeat this exercise 10 times.
- After completing this exercise close your eyes and rest.

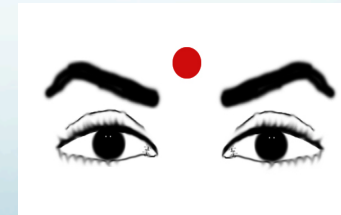
Clock Circles

- Sit comfortably, with the eyes open, the head and neck still, and the entire body relaxed.
- Picture a clock face in front of you, and raise your eyeballs up to 12 o'clock. Hold them there for a second.
- Then slowly rotate your eyes from 1 o'clock clockwise back to 12 o'clock.
- Repeat this exercise five times each in clockwise and then anti-clockwise direction.
- Close and relax the eyes completely.



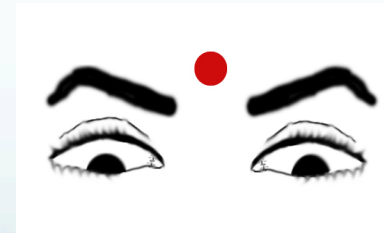
Near and distant viewing

- Sitting in a relaxed position, pick a point in the distance and focus on it.
- This exercise works best if you can do it near a window or outside.
- Extend your arm and put your thumb right underneath the point of concentration.
- Shift your focus between the tip of your thumb and the faraway point, alternating rhythmically between near and distance vision.
- Repeat the exercise 10 times.
- With this exercise, you are training the ciliary body (fig. 1) , which adjusts the lens of the eye. The natural flexibility of the ciliary body is degraded by habitual focus patterns. Shifting focal points counteracts this stiffness as the organ is exercised through its full range. This is similar to working complementary muscle groups in asana practice.
- **Observe the following breathing pattern**
- Inhale during close viewing.
- Exhale during distant viewing



Close-range focus

- As in the previous shifting focus exercise, gaze at your thumb with your arm extended.
- This time move the thumb slowly toward the tip of your nose. Pause there for one second.
- Then reverse the sequence, following the thumb with your eyes as you extend your arm again.
- As before, repeat the sequence 10 times. Close and relax the eyes.
- **Observe the following breathing pattern**
- Inhale during close viewing.
- Exhale during distant viewing.



What You Eat Affects Your Eyes



Vitamins A, C, E, and minerals like copper and zinc are essential to eyesight.

A - eggs, whole milk, sweet potatoes
 Carrots, squash/ butternut, spinach, kale
 C – citrus, strawberries, sweet potatoes
 E – vegetable oils, wheat germ
 Zinc – beef, legumes, poultry, cereals, and pork
 Copper - legumes, potatoes, nuts, seeds, and beef.

Antioxidants, including beta-carotene, lutein, and zeaxanthin, protect the macula from sun damage.

Get these antioxidants from dark leafy greens, egg yolks, yellow peppers, pumpkin, sweet potatoes, and carrots.

Yellow and green vegetables can help prevent age-related macular generation, a leading cause of blindness.

Kale, lettuce, green beans, sweet potatoes, Brussel sprouts,

Foods rich in sulfur, cysteine, and lecithin help protect the lens of your eye from cataract formation.

Excellent choices for sulfur, cysteine and lecithin include garlic, onions, shallots, and capers.

DHA is a fatty acid that provides structural support to cell membranes to boost eye health.

DHA is a fatty acid found in cold water fish like wild salmon, sardines, mackerel, and cod.

To prevent dehydration and dry eyes remember to drink 8 glasses of water.

Blueberries, grapes, and goji berries have antioxidant **and** anti-inflammatory properties that can help improve your vision.



Eyes Represent the Capacity to See

- Problems with the eye may mean there is something we do not want to see either about ourselves or life – past, present or future.
- If we change the way we look at things, the things we look at may change.

Songs about Eyes

I Can See Clearly Now by Bob Marley

I Can See For Miles by The Who

See Me, Feel Me by The Who

Eyes Wide Open by The Goo Goo Dolls

I Close My Eyes And Think Of You by Paul Kelly

Suddenly I See by KT Tunstall

Affirmations for the eyes:

- I now create a life I love to look at.
- I see with love and joy
- I am now willing to see my own beauty and magnificence.
- I see with love and tenderness.

Eye Function

- Vision occupies about 40 percent of the brain's capacity.
- Four of our 12 cranial nerves are dedicated exclusively to vision
- Two other nerves are vision-related. In contrast the cardiac and digestive functions require just one cranial nerve to control both.
- Seeing is largely a function of the mind
- 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.
- The brain cannot assimilate all these images.
- The brain is selective. It determines how much of a picture you will or won't see. It determines how clear or blurry your vision will be. When we're bored, the mind tells the eyes not to look. After awhile that's what happens. We stop looking.
- Many disorders of the eye are related to the malfunctioning of the ocular muscles. This is often caused by chronic mental and emotional tensions.
- Eye problems include – astigmatism, sties, cataracts, crossed, farsightedness, glaucoma, nearsightedness, etc.

Eye Muscles

- Muscles help the eye move. The superior and inferior rectus muscles are for upward and downward motion. The medial and lateral rectus muscles for side to side. The superior and inferior oblique muscles let the eye move up or down and to the side. The oculomotor nerve controls most of these muscles.
- Friction from these movements would quickly damage the eye without lubrication. Tears released by the lacrimal glands provide lubrication so friction from these movements won't damage the eyes. Tears also help remove foreign objects and bacteria from the eye.
- When there is no muscle movement, some sight is turned off as in the "glassy stare".
- The muscles keep the eye muscles relaxed and flexible with one muscle pulling and the other letting go.
- The images received on the retina are carried through the optic nerve to the back part of the brain. This is where the mind interprets the images which results in vision.
- Eye exercises can help maintain or improve vision and eye-brain coordination. According to Jane Rigney Battenberg and Martha Rigney in their book, *Eye Yoga*, you can reawaken deep brain capacities that have been lost over time. "Eye yoga stretches the eye muscles to increase their flexibility, relaxation, ability and stamina."
- As we age there is a gradual loss of flexibility and tone in the eye muscles. They get locked into habitual patterns and lose their ability to focus at different distances.
- The muscles around the eyes lose their tone. Eyesight becomes weak after the muscles around the eyes lose their elasticity and become rigid. Thus the power to focus different distances is reduced.

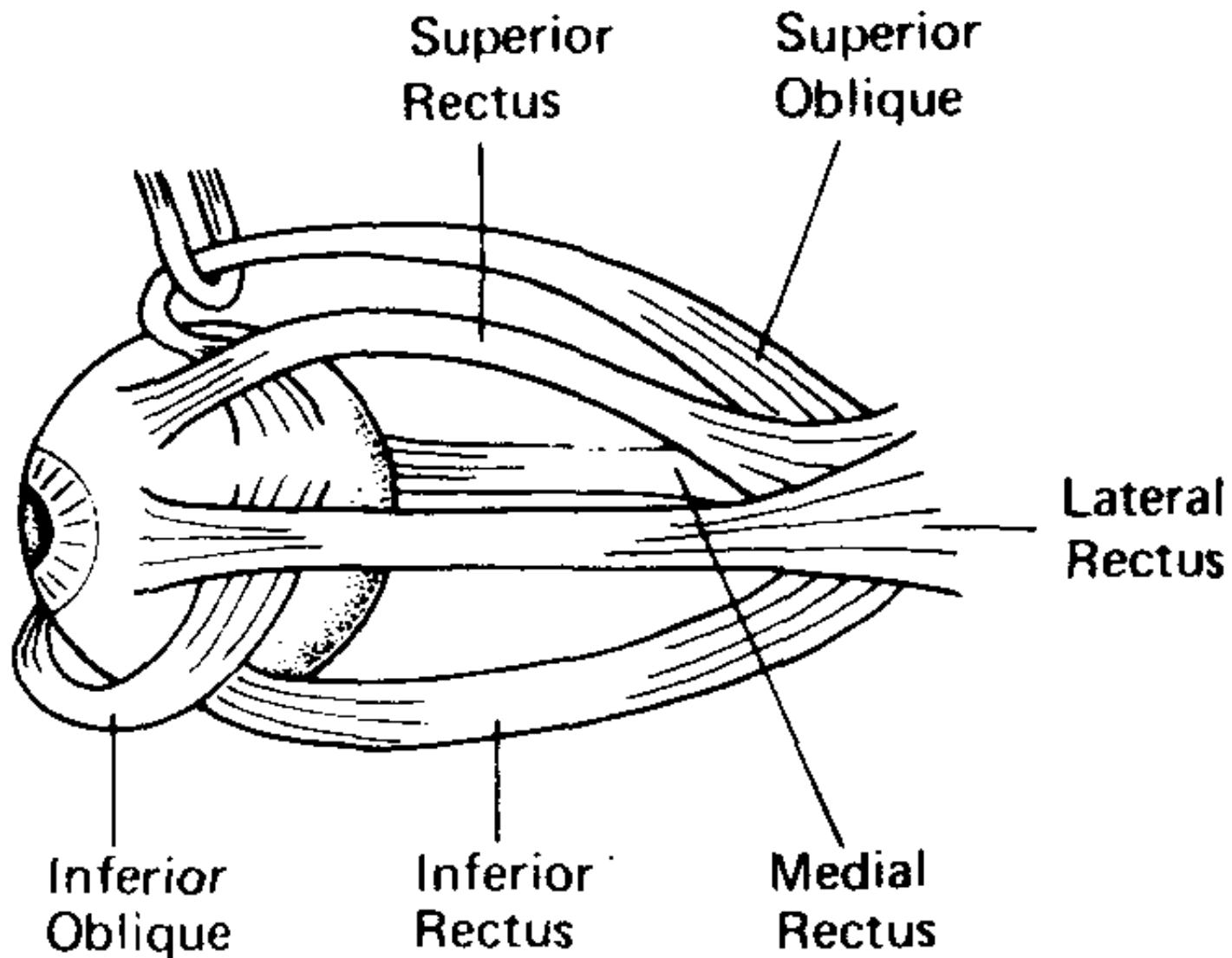


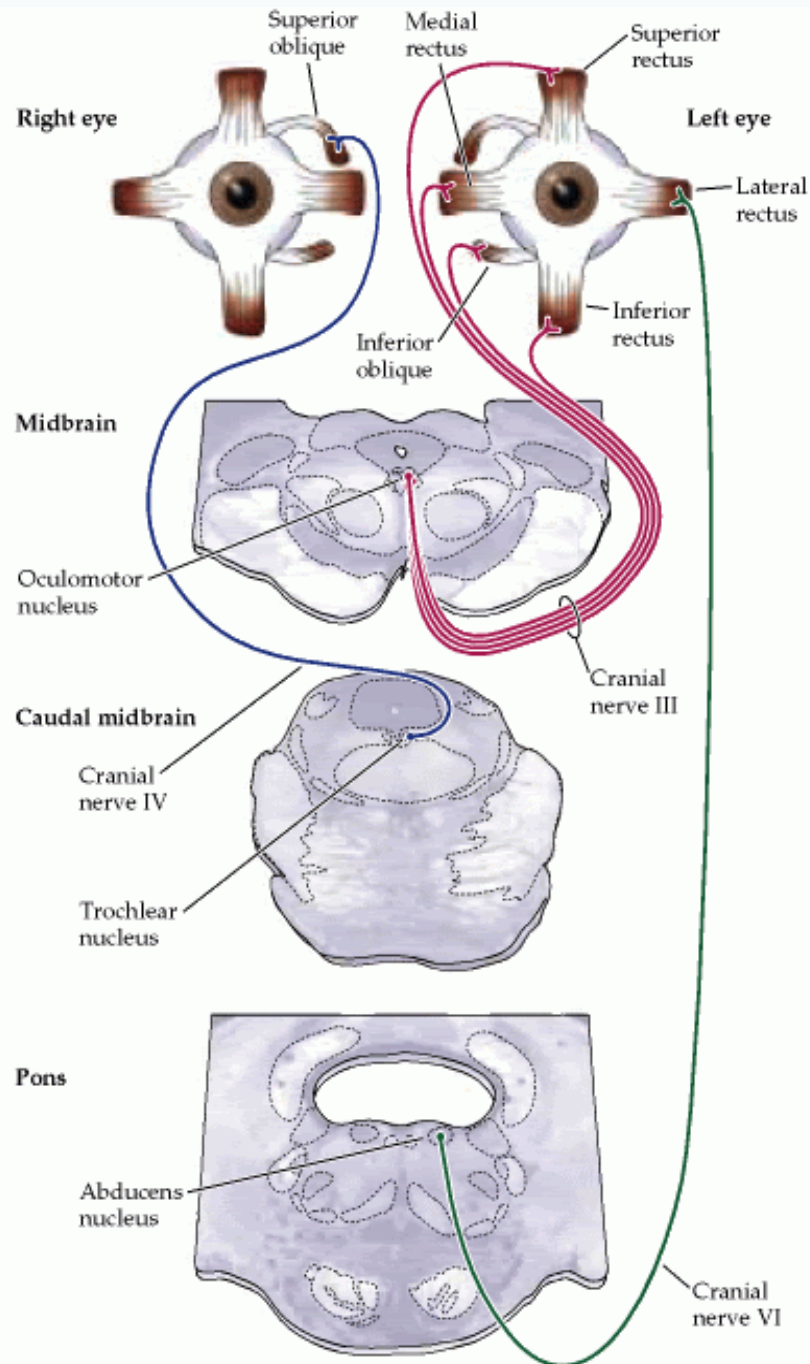
Diagram of eye muscles. Left orbit (lateral aspect).

Eye-Brain Connection

- Everything we take in through our eyes and other senses is represented internally in our brain and nervous system.
- The eyes and the mind are closely associated. The strain of one affects the other.
- Tension around the eyes causes stress and anxiety affecting the brain.
- A person can actually learn greater flexibility of thinking and mental processing by adopting different eye movements, facial expressions, head movements, breathing rates, and other body behaviors.
- In a 1970 study it was found that eye positions can access different functions or internal representations in the brain. We store and retrieve pictures when we look up; sounds when we look side to side and feelings when we look down.
- Donna Eden's cross crawling is recommended for dyslexia or if one side of the brain is overly dominant.
- Dr. Jacob Liberman links vision problems with resisted feelings and traumatic events. He says it is much harder to see clearly when we are not expressing our feelings clearly.
- Denny Ray Johnson discovered a link between the markings and patterns in the iris and a person's personality and emotional traits. There are 4 primary iris structures. By looking at the fibers and forms of the iris, one can predict certain tendencies with which a person was born.
 - Jewel for visual and thoughts
 - Flower for auditory and emotions
 - Stream for kinesthetic and feelings
 - Shaker for the moving power of awakening and change.



Figure 3



Eye Brain Connection

Conclusion

- The eyes are one of the most complex organs of our bodies.
 - Eye yoga enhances the ability to access the visual, the auditory and kinesthetic representations.
 - We can construct or remember visually and auditorily more easily.
 - We can get in touch with feelings and sensations more easily.
 - We can move from one sense to another more smoothly.
 - By exercising our eyes, we are also exercising our brain.
 - Just as other parts of our bodies benefit from yoga, so do our eyes.
 - Knowing more about our eyes can help us understand the significance of attention to our eyes and motivate us to give them that attention.
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- **PRECAUTION: Students who have eye problems such as glaucoma or detached retina should avoid inversion poses.**

In closing,

As we grow may we direct a soft, insightful gaze at the world and learn to see our Self and others as one.

Namaste.

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