

Vivian Milroy

Bates System of Eyesight Improvement

William Bates (1860-1931) was a New York optician who, rather naturally, wore glasses. The way people started to wear glasses was that they would complain of eye strain and headaches, their doctors told them to get their eyes tested, and the optician fitted them with glasses which seemed to relieve the symptoms for a period. After a while they complained of further headaches and eye strain and then were fitted with still stronger glasses. Bates was a thinking man and he began to wonder whether a device that only alleviated symptoms for a short period was really the best way of treating headaches and eye strain.

One day he found out by accident that cupping his hands over his eyes relieved his eye strain and at the same time seemed to improve his eyesight. Maybe, he thought, poor vision was a symptom of eyestrain and not vice versa. From this point he began to develop a system of relaxation plus training exercises that dealt with the original symptoms of eye strain and headaches and also improved the eyesight. So gradually he stopped prescribing glasses and began to prescribe his system which in time he had published under the title 'Better Sight Without Glasses' and which was the basis of Aldous Huxley's book, 'The Art of Seeing'.

The most important single factor that Bates discovered was the correlation of strain with poor eyesight. In almost every case, he found that helping the subject just to relax and to use their eyes in an easy relaxed manner did in itself improve the sight and reduce headaches and strain symptoms. Bates developed the philosophy that seeing should be a calm, relaxed, opening to the world, rather than an active busy, 'reaching out' procedure. Seeing was a part of total awareness; it was most efficient when it was a way of being completely in touch with one's 'here and now' experience.

One of the most interesting findings was that short-sightedness nearly always corresponded to a tendency to daydream. In fact Bates claimed that all short-sighted people daydreamed, and all people who daydreamed extensively became short-sighted. There is a sound physiological basis for this. Normally the eyeballs move in short apparently random jerks at a rate of about 85 a minute (saccadic movement). This movement means that the cells in the retina which respond to light are continually being stimulated. This constant stimulation seems to aid sharpness of vision. When daydreaming with eyes open, this rate of movement slows down and the consequent impairment in sharpness of vision leads to a gradual fuzzing of the visual field. This is a vicious circle: the more indistinct the visual field, the more the subject is likely to daydream; the more the subject is likely to daydream, the fuzzier becomes their visual field. An answer to this would be to confine daydreaming and fantasizing to quiet periods when the eyes can be shut and to retain an awareness of one's surroundings at all times, however indistinct some of it may be.

This in fact is another of the ground rules of the Bates system - not to worry about *what is indistinct and what cannot be seen, but to give full awareness to what can be*

seen, however imperfectly - and without straining. In time the eyesight will improve on its own.

Whether taking up the Bates system seriously means that you can immediately throw away your glasses is really a matter for the individual. It must depend on what you use the glasses for and how well you do without them. If you are driving on the M1 at night, this might be a bit hazardous. If you were just washing up, weeding the garden, or chatting with friends, it could be worth while taking the risk. But the basic philosophy above all is not to worry about this. If you don't feel like leaving off your glasses, don't leave them off. If you do, do it quietly and calmly and just see what happens. If you don't like it, put them on back again. Awareness is the keynote: whatever you are doing, be as fully aware as you can, add as much visual information to your sum-total of experience without worrying about it and without straining.

Here are some of the exercises that Bates developed:

1. **Palming:** while sitting comfortably the head is held downwards with the eyes closed and cupped in the palms of the hand, not actually touching the eyelid. This is done in a quiet relaxed way for 2 to 10 minutes at a time.
2. **Swinging:** focussing on a middle-distance object - 20 to 50 feet - with legs apart and then rocking from one foot to the other retaining the focus but being aware of the swinging peripheral and foreground vision.
3. **Splashing:** in the morning splashing warm water on to the closed eyes with fingertips, followed by cold water. In the evening splashing cold water first and following by warm water.
4. **Focussing down.** When reading for example, every so often focussing to as small a detail as possible - like a full stop - and then resuming. Similarly to change the focus continually. If looking into the distance, from time to time focussing on near objects and vice versa. This can also be done as an exercise looking at a pencil a foot from your eyes, and then swinging focus to a distant object, church spire, aeroplane, etc. making sure you do re-focus each time.
5. **Sunning:** Start with adjusting to being in strong sunlight without screwing up the eyes or straining. First with eyes closed, and then with eyes open. Again there must be no strain. If this seems difficult, stop and go in the shade. Ultimately you can relax in strong sunlight and also briefly look through the sun with eyes open. This irradiates the retina and strengthens the eyes. Care must be taken however. It is important that there should be no strain and the moment the sun seems too bright, close your eyes or turn away. This is particular must not be forced.
6. **Blinking:** From time to time try a very rapid eye blink. This is particularly helpful after long periods of reading.

7. **Do not daydream:** this is the most important negative injunction. Remember, daydreaming leads to a slowing down of the eye movements and a deterioration in the ability of the retina to resolve fine detail. If you want to daydream, shut your eyes: if this means knocking over a lamp-post switch to the here-and-now and be really aware of your environment - it could be exciting.
8. **See what is there.** There must at no time be any strain. However bad the eyesight has become, see just what you can see, and do not try to see more than you can take in without strain. In case of reading, if the print is blurred, just try running your gaze between the lines. In time bits will become clearer; then just look at these bits. Above all do not concentrate; do not try; do not work hard at looking. Just relax and see.

References and Further Reading

Clara Hacket. *Relax and See.*

Aldous Huxley. *The Art of Seeing.*

Olive Brown. *Your Innate Power.*

Bates System Oculists:

Michael Ronan, 29 Welbeck Street, W.1.

Evelyn Page, 56 Twyford Avenue, N.2.

Is the person others see
really me?
They only see what they want to see.

Is the person that I feel
any more real?
Can I be who I want to be?

Rosemary Rayner