

Let's Talk About...

Yoga teachers and pay. A fascinating subject that pushes buttons. It is one that a lot of us avoid. Face facts – most of us did not become yoga teachers because we want to earn vast sums of money. We became yoga teachers because we believe in this practice. Because we believe in consciously shifting patterns in positive directions. Because we want to transform the world. Because of love. That much is clear to me.

I have been a full-time yoga teacher since 2001. Much has changed in these eighteen years. I know that job insecurity and wage inequality in general have been on the increase from the 1980s. In my years of teaching yoga, the rates of pay have stayed substantially the same. This is similar to many other freelance occupations.

It can almost be considered 'unyogic' to talk about money. But this view is not grounded in reality. Talking about money is part of practising self-compassion. Having appropriate boundaries. Our sustainability. I know that many yoga teachers are worried about speaking up. I also know the challenges of running centres can be considerable. Studios are under a lot of pressure: increasing costs, competition, making schedules attractive for students. Studios are certainly not immune from performance anxieties and the difficulties of balancing books.

Plenty of yoga teachers struggle to make ends meet. My experience is primarily in London but fellow yoga teachers around the country have confirmed similar circumstances. Cost of living has significantly risen over these years: food, transport, housing. The average cost of a pint of milk in 2003 was 37p; fifteen years later at the end of 2018 it was 44p – nearly 20% increase. A weekly Zones 1-4 travel card in London during that same time period has gone up by more than 60% (in 2003, it was £28.40; at the start of 2019, it is £46.10). Average rents in the UK went up by 19% from 2007 to 2017.

Personally, I have worked for the Life Centre in London since 2008 – more than ten years. My pay is £24 per hour plus £1.40 per student. In that time, my hourly rate has stayed the same but due to increase per head payment, I estimate my overall hourly rate has gone up by about 8% in this time. Yet in 2003 a 75-minute drop-in class at the Life Centre cost £10; in 2019, a 75 minute drop-in costs £17 – an increase of 70%.

Triyoga opened its first studio in 2000. It now has six centres in London with about 750 classes every week and business plans that talk of opening two new centres a year. Triyoga's hourly rate of pay for yoga teachers when it opened in 2000 was £20. It is still the same in 2019. The pay per student at Triyoga ranges from £1.10 to £2.

When I was teaching in gyms in the early 2000s – Virgin Active, Soho Gym, YMCA, GLL – the hourly rate was between £25-£35. It is still fairly similar amounts. A particular central London gym has been paying £25 per hour for the last eight years. Recently, this gym told teachers that they had to pay extra for using facilities (swimming, sauna etc). This means that the pay cut of losing perks is now added onto the pay cut of zero increase for eight years.

For a lot of yoga teachers, beneath the bubbly and friendly exterior, there is exhaustion and anxiety, unhappiness and frustration. As yoga teachers, we are definitely part of the gig economy. Being self-employed means no sick pay, no holiday pay, no retirement pension, no childcare provision. I believe that the hourly rate of pay needs to take into account sick pay, holiday pay,

pension provision, continuing professional development, insurance, supervision, time for planning/marketing/administration.

When teaching, it is a standard requirement that yoga teachers are at the studio fifteen minutes before the class starts. Afterwards, students frequently ask questions and equipment has to be tidied up. Plus there is often the expectation from studios that we will advertise classes through social media. It all adds up. For every hour taught in a studio, I calculate there are 1-3 hours of work that are not paid. This does not include travel time.

When this is put into the equation, yoga teacher pay can be close to the London living wage of £10.55 per hour (the legal minimum wage for over 25s is £7.83). No wonder so many teachers feel devalued, disempowered and worn down. No wonder so many teachers are straining to manage and finding it really quite difficult. It can be particularly hard for yoga teachers who are just starting out. Juggling the balls of practising, teaching, surviving financially and other commitments. This can be challenging and overwhelming.

Some may think that the places where we yoga teachers work take advantage of the reasons why we do this work. That there is a manipulating of our love for practising and sharing yoga. Some may say “well, there are many yoga teachers”. That is true. There has been a huge increase of numbers of yoga teachers in the last eighteen years. And there has been a huge increase in the number of yoga practitioners who need teachers during this time. And there has been a huge increase in the number of studios and classes. Many of these places do well out of yoga teachers’ work – in part because of our static and inadequate rates of pay. A proposal is that hourly rates are meaningfully increased because this will benefit most yoga teachers.

In my opinion, it is unfair and unjust that there has been no wage increase for yoga teachers in many studios. In my opinion, this is about standing up for dignity and security, for respect and fairness. For transparency and truthfulness. These are essential qualities of yoga. Can these qualities be better represented in staffing policies?

I encourage all yoga teachers to take a stand. By talking to management at the places we work about rates of pay. By connecting with other teachers and working together. By asking ourselves and each other how can we best take this forward.

Maybe we need a union...

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Please do feel free to contact me with comments and suggestions yogawithnorman@gmail.com

This article has been informed and guided by comments/feedback from more than ten other yoga teachers.