

Let's Talk About Too....

In January 2019, I published an online article on yoga teachers' pay, *Let's Talk About....* It stimulated considerable response, both from teachers and studios, as it mentioned the unmentionable: speaking openly about pay rates and calling for clarity on topics that some studios wish to keep secret. This article continues that conversation and refines the information about yoga teachers' pay based on feedback from teachers and studios.

The first article was not intended to be fully comprehensive. I did my best to make it balanced without watering down the main points. Which are:

- Many yoga teachers are poorly paid.
- Rates of pay have stayed substantially the same for more than fifteen years.
- Being self-employed has its challenges. No sick pay. No holiday pay. All the extra unpaid work on top of what we are already doing. An estimate is that for every hour teaching, 1-3 hours of work are unpaid.
- Running yoga studios is a competitive and challenging undertaking.
- That many teachers are very grateful for doing this wonderful occupation. A teacher told me: "I love my job."

Responses and risks

One teacher wrote in response to that article: "A huge cry of relief from the yoga community." Another teacher said: "I had kind of mentally resigned myself to the fact that teaching at a studio is just terribly underpaid." Someone who has been teaching for more than twenty years: "I LOVED reading your article about yoga pay. The fucking ELEPHANT IN THE ROOM."

The response from studios has varied. There is a wide variety of studios – from small independent ones that can be struggling as hard as teachers to survive to larger ones that keep expanding. Some have been open and willing to dialogue. A few have been hostile and defensive. One described my earlier article as "incomplete and inaccurate". I asked for clarification and they refused to give details. One studio spoke strongly about their transparency – but then rejected requests for disclosing how much teachers are being paid.

The comments from some studios reflect why many teachers are unwilling to speak up. Beneath the statues of Ganesh and the Buddha, anxieties can lurk in studio corridors. Many yoga teachers grumble in private because they are scared to speak out. One teacher wrote to me about "a general feeling of fear". Fear of losing classes. Fear of rocking the boat. Numerous teachers have told me about their frustrations in dealing with studio management. Studio management can be intimidating. They have the power to cut classes, to withdraw promises, to freeze out teachers who speak up.

One studio manager insisted to me that "their door is always open". And yet the common experience is the ears have walls. What is the point of speaking up when it can be met with anger and dismissiveness? A studio told me about how many new classes had been created through its expansion. More jobs for more teachers. But what is the point of more low-paid jobs? It is like McJobs of the yoga world.

Of course, opening yoga studios is risky. Businesses definitely do go belly-up. Some studios have gone under. I know that for most studios the average rate of payment by students for yoga classes over the last ten years has increased only by small amounts. Students can buy various package deals that are substantially less than the cost of a drop-in class. Yoga centres – both small and large – do struggle. Property costs can be high. Business rates and utility costs go up. Margins can be minimal. It regularly seems a new studio appears on the block.

But we as yoga teachers also take risks. The risk of starting out. When I began teaching in 2001, I gave myself six months to see if I enjoyed it and to make sure that I could financially manage. I lost a £1000 deposit on a retreat that I was teaching because not enough people booked. I have taught classes where no-one turned up (so I did not receive any pay). I made a loss on a workshop because the money paid was less than the rent. Teachers take many risks – it is not just studios.

Sustainable for whom? Different models

Rather than lecturing teachers on the chosen business model, the larger studios need to listen to what is being said. They state that increasing teachers' pay makes the business unsustainable. But some versions of a 'sustainable model' are significantly based on yoga teachers' pay staying broadly the same. This 'sustainable' is to pay teachers at a rate that is *unsustainable* for many to live off. This is exploitative and unfair. This model can be a cause of unhealthy and unholistic lifestyles for many yoga teachers. Teachers in studios have remarkably few rights. In some ways, we are more like serfs in a feudal economy. Some owners seem not to realise how powerful their position is.

Many yoga teachers give up. Burnt-out and overworked. Struggling to survive. Balancing too many balls. In the words of one teacher: "After 11 years of teaching full time, I had to cut right back. Exhausted, depressed and physically broken, I knew I could no longer continue the way I had been going." A long-term teacher wrote: "Sustaining full-time teaching in the face of rising costs with no sick time or holiday pay makes it a constant challenge to live up to our self-care message." For another teacher: "So many teachers that I know are exhausted and feel underpaid and undervalued."

A friend told me that she had worked out five ways to survive as a yoga teacher in London. Have a background in marketing and social media. Or a wealthy partner. Or be living with parents. Or had a highly paid job in the City. Or bought a house before 2000. I am in the last group. Myself and my partner bought a three bedroom house in north London for £72,000 in 1997 (it did need a lot of work – but still: what would £72,000 get you now?).

The low rates of teacher pay increases studios' valuation. For example, if triyoga – with its five centres, with its business plans of expansion, with its position as a brand leader – was to become a public company, then its value could be many millions of pounds. The refusal of long-established studios to take the issue of yoga teachers' pay seriously encourages a downward spiral, thus enabling other studios to get away with low rates of pay and so devalue the cost of attending yoga classes.

A consequence of this approach can be found – as an example – in a business like MoreYoga. MoreYoga pays yoga teachers £30 for a 60-minute class that sometimes has up to 30 students. The teacher has to open and close the studio as there are no receptionists and nearly all the administration is done online. So the pay is more like 90 minutes for £30. By comparison, this £30 figure is the same as what some triyoga teachers are paid for a 60-minute class that has nine students (they receive £20 per hour and £1.10 per head). At an approximation, MoreYoga are

earning at least £150 per class with the teacher earning at most 20% of the class revenue. MoreYoga appears to be booming, with 16 studios currently operating in greater London since opening in 2016. MoreYoga or triyoga – their business models have similarities. Like centres across London. Like low rates of pay for teachers. Like ambitious plans for expanding.

Another example is Fitness on Fire, a studio in central London, which paid £18 for an hour class – and sometimes up to 40 students were in the class. Some Fitness First studios in London pay a flat rate of £25 per class – so if the class is 75 minutes, the hourly rate is then £20. And remember that for every paid hour, there is at least one more hour of unpaid work.

Challenges all round

Undoubtedly, things are tough for many people. Wages have been stagnant in the UK for more than ten years. Life expectancy in the UK after decades of consistent increase is actually going down slightly. After peaking in 2014 at 82.9 years for women and 79.2 years for men, both figures fell in 2015 and dropped lower still in 2016. By contrast, life expectancy continues to rise in countries like Denmark, Germany and Japan. Those of us who have been around for a while need to remember how difficult it can be for younger people. Lower wages. The staggering weight of college debts. Absurd house prices and ridiculous rents.

So this pay concern is not just about yoga studios. It is a reflection of much larger social structures. It could be called the pouring up effect. The wealthy becoming wealthier. The 26 richest people in the world own as much as the poorest 50%. Income inequality has drastically increased in the last 40 years. Social services in many countries have been significantly eroded while the financial sector and the tech giants are making vast amounts of money. This widening gap between the people at the top of the system and everyone else.

Staying silent changes little. If we do not ask, we frequently do not get. Positive change rarely comes from burying our heads in the sand, keeping our mouths shut, hoping it will be OK. A teacher wrote: “I do not think anything is going to change unless teachers (particularly more experienced, with good followings) are REALLY noisy about this, not just to the managers, but to the students.” Some of the large studios are making a lot of money. These studios can be sensitive about their reputation. Their brand identity. Perhaps we could tell students how much we are being paid...

For example, when I was teaching a weekly class at Indaba (2011-2017) I was paid £24 per hour and £2 per head. At the Shala in south London I receive a flat rate of £45 per class (one is 75 minutes and the other is 90 minutes). At Islington Life Centre I receive £24 per hour and £1.40 per head.

Positive shifts happening

But things do change. Shifts happen. Little steps, sometimes breakthroughs, occasional giant leaps. Ingenuity and courage. Like teachers working together co-operatively to organise space and advertise events. Like centres – such as Creative Calm in Manchester – that emphasise more collaborating and community. Like a person handing in their notice and publicising that it was because the pay rate of £25 per hour had stayed the same for eight years. Like teachers talking to each other about conditions of employment and how much they are being paid. Like a person speaking up at a meeting and as a consequence getting about a third more of what had initially been offered by studio management. Like looking at how a more collective voice could be created.

The truth is that many studios will not change policies without being pressurised. A teacher said to me recently: “What is actually required is a union to protect, educate and support.” Our response to studio power can be to act more collectively. And it would be wonderful if the long-established yoga centres stood up and, instead of being reactive and dismissive, be progressive.

This has already happened with some smaller studios. One studio owner told me: “In reality, the public need to be paying more overall per class in order for teachers to also be able to earn more.” Recently a small studio in Chelmsford – Yoga in the Mill – did just that. They gave their teachers a £2 increase (from £30 to £32 for one hour class; from £35 to £37 for a 75 minute class) and raised their class prices by 25p to cover this increase. The owner of Yoga in the Mill told me: “We put the prices up as we hadn’t done so in a while and because of the tremendous value we place on our yoga teachers – they are the beating heart of our business.” Limehouse Yoga in Cornwall paid teachers in 2014 a basic rate of £25 for a class (plus an extra for more experienced teachers). Now their basic rate is £30 for a class plus an amount per head – a 20% increase in five years. A sharp contrast to some other studios.

Value, money, practice?

It is true that a few teachers do very well. Income from workshops, courses and retreats can be lucrative. But this only applies to a small minority of teachers. One idea is that the teachers who are doing very well (I include myself in this group) take a little bit less payment from their trainings. Examples of doing well are a three-day training at triyoga with Jason Crandell which grosses about £25,000; or a five-day training with Shiva Rea at Yogacampus which grosses about £40,000; or five workshops (totalling 12 hours) with Dharma Mittra at Indaba which grosses about £30,000. Of course, the costs of running such courses can be enormous so the net payment to these teachers will vary. And while this taking a little bit less is not letting the large expanding studios off the hook, it *is* encouraging a more equitable distribution of finances within the yoga world.

Valuation needs to be discussed. This includes studios, teachers and students. Why is it acceptable to pay at least £17 for a Barre class? Why are Pilates teachers generally paid more than yoga teachers? Why is the average cost of going to the cinema more than going to a yoga class (and cinema attendance is increasing)? Why do some yoga students pay more for leggings than for classes (Lululemon leggings can be up to £150 while a ten class package at Indaba is £125)? Why is the cheapest ticket for Premiership football £20 while the average rate paid for classes at nearly every London studio due to membership deals and payment packages is perhaps about £10?

These conversations need to include what yoga teachers get paid; what the value of a yoga class is – and how we can create inclusive pricing models that everyone can afford. For example, people with a higher income pay more so that people with lower incomes can attend for a reduced cost. The Life Centre currently offers just this, in their concession rate monthly unlimited membership.

It is a challenge to find a working balance between providing good quality yoga classes and staying accessible and affordable, especially when places like MoreYoga are opening up. I do appreciate the demands of running a yoga centre. A suggestion is that the well-established centres take the lead. Clearly demonstrate to their teachers that they are valued. Not merely by rhetoric or offers of extra classes and workshops — after all, we can only teach so much — but by increasing pay rates. Not words. Not promises of giving teachers a platform on which they could advertise their events. But boots on the ground. Pounds in pay packets. I know that there have been increases for the rate per head (like the Life Centre increased the per head rate bands

about four years ago). I know that individual teachers are paid extra (for example, Mysore teachers at triyoga). I know that teachers get discounts on courses and cheap classes.

But the fact is that the sizeable majority of teachers at the two largest centres in London are on the same hourly rate of pay today that was paid in 2000: £20 per hour at triyoga and £24 per hour at the Life Centre.

There is the irony that this multi-billion \$\$££ yoga industry is largely dependent on yoga teaching while the majority of its teachers are not being adequately paid. Much money goes to clothing manufacturers, website platforms, app developers. Many teachers barely cope, feeling dissatisfied and worn-down – while top teachers are paid very well and a few studios keep expanding.

What next?

A common experience is being cash-strapped, working harder, feeling ever more stretched – and that resistance is futile. Those in power repeatedly state that things are as they are, this is the ‘system’. In my opinion, resistance can in fact be fertile and fulfilling, necessary and much needed. This is a request for negotiations and dialogue that are grounded in dignity and respect. We need to be pragmatic and imaginative.

Here is a list of practical suggestions for moving this conversation forward, seeking to benefit most teachers – and studios.

- A £2 increase in pay per hour, thus showing willingness to listen to teachers’ concerns.
- Teachers running lucrative trainings take a slightly smaller pay to allow for the £2 increase across the board.
- Larger yoga studios pay teachers to attend meetings.
- Larger yoga studios set up channels so that teachers – if they wish – can give anonymous feedback.
- As a way of improving transparency, studios publish easily interpreted summary financials (covering turnover, payments to teachers, payments to other staff, payments for premises, other overheads, directors’ salaries and profits).
- Smaller yoga studios combine together to challenge the punitive VAT rules.
- Sliding scales of pay are offered dependent upon level of qualifications, years of teaching and CPD undertaken.
- In the interests of full disclosure, this article and the first one I wrote on yoga teachers’ pay are sent to all yoga teacher training applicants.

This topic will not be silently squashed back into a box.

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I am collecting a list of teachers who would like to be involved in a collective voice. If you are interested, please email me at yogawithnorman@gmail.com

I have received suggestions and feedback on this article from more than twenty yoga teachers. I am grateful for the assistance and advice. It has made what I write much better and more thorough.

In the interests of respect and openness, I sent this article to all the yoga centres mentioned five days before publication. I have made a few minor amendments in response to their comments.

If you have not read the first article I wrote on yoga teachers' pay, it is available here:
<https://bit.ly/2wwyu54>

