

More On Yoga

Ambitions, Sustainability, Finances

A succinct summarising of this essay could be 'how do we stay well when working in the wellness industry?' It continues the ongoing discussions around yoga teachers' pay and the economics of yoga teaching.

Aspirations...

I have been practising and teaching yoga for a long time. I have taught about 10,000 classes, more than 300 workshops and 45 long courses (five-day and eight-day). I have been mentoring yoga teachers since 2006 (first for Yogacampus and then running my own groups). Over time, I have been saddened by what I perceive to be a *devaluing* of this practice that I love. In response to my sadness, I wrote an article in January 2019 about the contentious subject of yoga teachers' pay.¹ This piece, together with contributions from other people, generated much debate. Comments ranged from "so naively one-sided" to "giving a voice to people who have felt voiceless" to "I am in huge support and gratitude of your offerings". What had been mainly private grumblings or considered taboo has become more open.

What I aspire towards is having an open discussion about the economics of yoga teaching: a discussion that is grounded in empathy and transparency. What I wish for is that independents flourish and that corporate models give fair and sustainable pay to their teachers and backroom staff. What I would like is that rather than the devaluing of yoga, there is a *revaluing*. Examples of devaluing include a gym having yoga classes with a video as the teacher; a studio requiring that teachers auditioning had to teach two public classes for free before they were allowed to go on the cover list; studios paying the same pay rates for many years despite the fact their business has grown bigger and bigger.

The focus of the 2019 article and this essay is primarily larger yoga studios in London. This is because of their dominant market role and the fact that they are the public face of much of yoga. I am a strong supporter of the many small yoga studios, the many independent yoga classes, the many examples of yoga teachers working co-operatively. I applaud the courage that it takes to open a yoga studio. I appreciate the diversity that such studios can bring. I know that running a studio is not a goldmine and that many studio owners struggle to survive. One studio owner wrote: "it is a hard business to function in".

Financial realities

The financial reality is that most teachers earn the majority of their income from weekly classes – not workshops or trainings. For studios, their financial realities include payments to teachers, rent, costs for online booking systems and VAT. There are many sides to see. I believe that in the three-way relationship between studios and teachers and students, it is the teachers who are being squeezed. One teacher wrote: "I was a silent one who put up and shut up... Was told once when I queried a lack of pay rise in 14 years – you don't like, leave. Eventually I did."

When I began teaching in 2001, pay varied from £22 per hour (a local leisure centre) to £30 per hour (at many gyms). Pay could be more for privates and corporate classes. Triyoga had opened

in February 2000. Their pay was £20 per hour plus an amount per head. 20 years later, the hourly rate at Triyoga for the vast majority of teachers is still the same: £20 per hour. When Triyoga opened, the per head rate (for each student attending a class) was £1.00. Then a sliding scale for the per head rate was introduced that now in 2020 is between £1.10 and £2.00. In 20 years, the lowest amount for the per head figure has gone up by 10p.

These figures come from my communicating with more than 20 Triyoga teachers. Triyoga management dispute these amounts but have consistently refused to be transparent about pay levels and have stated that teacher payments are confidential. They have also refused to discuss whether their teachers' pay for classes has gone up or gone down since 2000. For one long-term Triyoga teacher, even though they are being paid more per head, their pay from classes has stayed broadly the same because class numbers (due to increased competition from other studios) have gone down. In 20 years, Triyoga has substantially increased in size: from one centre to five, from less than 100 classes a week to more than 750 classes a week. Yet it is important to remember there are teachers who greatly appreciate the opportunity to teach at Triyoga.

More and more yoga

In 2016, a new model entered the market: MoreYoga. MoreYoga claim to be “breaking the mould” by making yoga classes ‘affordable’. But yoga has always been and continues to be affordable if a person is prepared to look beyond the large studios. Plenty of teachers offer classes at cheap rates or on donation. Plenty of teachers work hard to ensure that yoga practice is available to many people. Plenty of teachers donate their time to places that provide accessible yoga classes. Just round the corner from where I live, there are yoga classes in the local community centre – the Hub – at £8 for an hour long class. At the North London Buddhist Centre, a 45 minute yoga class plus a one-hour meditation class costs £8. A teacher in Walthamstow offers a 75-minute class from £7.50.

MoreYoga has ambitious expansion plans. Currently, they have about 30 studios in London with more than 800 classes a week. In July 2018, Shamir Sidhu, the owner, stated: “We aim to be the dominant chain. By 2022 we visualise having 100 sites in London and have growth in regional cities.”ⁱⁱⁱ The MoreYoga chief executive Daniel Marin explained: “Our first business was personal training studios called MoreFit... We had three, but growth was slow and we realised yoga offered much more potential, so we switched our focus.”ⁱⁱⁱⁱ

Some teachers have told me that MoreYoga has been very good to them. That they enjoy teaching for MoreYoga. Currently MoreYoga have about 350 yoga teachers working for them. Nearly all their teachers are paid £30 for a one-hour class. But the actual teachers' time is significantly more than an hour because they have to open and close the studio as there are no receptionists or other staff. This means that MoreYoga teachers are being paid less than many teachers working in studios outside London (as numerous teachers have told me). A reverse London weighting: being paid less for living in London.

Following an article that I wrote in October 2019 (*More Yoga?*),^{iv} it became publicly known that a handful of MoreYoga teachers were paid a higher rate of £40 for a one-hour class. These are the lead teachers at MoreYoga who work internally on yoga development – but until my article was published, it was not commonly known that there were different pay rates. A MoreYoga teacher told me “different rules for different people is a really exploitative way of running business”. Another MoreYoga teacher wrote: “I’m already upset at the level of pay and to hear about the lack of transparency in regards to pay tiers and schemes is disgusting.” Maybe MoreYoga’s ‘mould-breaking’ could be that they pay their teachers £35 for a class; after teaching there for 12

months, this amount is increased to £40 – and after teaching there for 2 years, this amount is increased to £45.

After I sent a draft copy of this essay to MoreYoga with this information, they have established a new policy: “In an effort to create even more transparency around our teachers’ pay, we have now updated our teachers’ manual with our salary offering and communicate this scale to all new teachers.” Hopefully this transparency can be standard practice for all studios.

MoreYoga do allow their teachers to practice with them for free (as happens in many other studios) and they do offer some of their teachers free mentoring and training. But in the training, again there is a drive to make costs as low as possible. By keeping training in-house (rather than paying teachers enough so that they can choose which trainings they wish to attend), this can encourage groupthink. Shamir said in that July 2018 interview: “Everyone is getting squeezed more and more... The middle classes have seen their disposable income drop and they appreciate low-cost *fitness* as much as anyone... We’re passionate about creating a brand, a journey, and a lifestyle that enriches people’s lives.”^v

Products and profits

MoreYoga talks about making yoga affordable and accessible. Important aspirations in my opinion. MoreYoga offers discounted classes to people receiving Universal Credit. A positive policy in my opinion. But the irony is that some MoreYoga teachers might be getting Universal Credit because of their low pay. I do know yoga teachers who receive Universal Credit because – in Shamir’s words – “low wages in the yoga world has sadly been endemic in our industry”.^{vi}

MoreYoga claim to “do our very best to pay above industry standards”.^{vii} In my understanding, this is not an accurate picture of circumstances. One teacher wrote to me about their class at MoreYoga: “I teach at studios all around London and MoreYoga is by far the cheapest rate of pay I receive.” In the words of another MoreYoga teacher: “it’s my lowest paid class”.

In my opinion, the heart of MoreYoga is less about making yoga accessible and more about fixating on ‘price sensitivity’ (how cheap can the classes be while covering costs and continuing to expand). Qualities like excellence of teaching and sustainability of teachers are lost in this drive to the bottom with classes as cheap as possible. A MoreYoga teacher wrote to me: “the pay is not sustainable, and the company exploitative. I frequently lose my voice or get throat ulcers, and have ended up having a burnout each year. Teaching for More Yoga had its benefits while I was newer and gaining confidence and experience, but it no longer holds as much of that value.” A contrast to this is a statement from Shamir in October 2018: “At MoreYoga... We’re excited about setting a higher standard of yoga tuition.”^{viii}

Jessica Garbett, an accountant and yoga teacher, wrote to me: “optimistically half a yoga teachers’ time is revenue earning... payment for each productive hour equates to a lot less per hour over the working week.” And it is worth remembering that businesses save themselves considerable amounts of money by using self-employed people to do the work – this is the gig economy. Taking into account the extra work involved as a MoreYoga teacher, their average hourly rate is about £20. That might sound decent – but remember: no sick pay, no holiday pay, the social media advertising that often has to be done, lesson planning, all the admin work that is an essential part of being self-employed, that we can only teach a few classes a day at most (and need days off). Thus perhaps the hourly rate is more like £10 per hour. The London living wage is £10.75 per hour; the national minimum wage is £8.21.

Of course these conditions are common to plenty of other people. Ruth Whippman, author of *America the Anxious*, wrote: “Like many modern workers, I find that only a small percentage of my job now is actually doing my job. The rest is performing a million acts of unpaid micro-labour... Tweeting and sharing and schmoozing and blogging... The constant curation of a saleable self-demanded by the new economy can be a special hellspring of anxiety.”^{ix} One yoga teacher commented: “A new level of ruthless exploitation is creeping in in the name of modern capitalism.”

MoreYoga’s mould-breaking could be seen as ambitious expansionism, with its high street locations and its glossy advertising campaigns. If MoreYoga really *did* want to break this mould, they could pay their teachers good wages.

A sharp contrast

A sharp contrast to the low pay in classes can be the steep cost of courses. One teacher put it succinctly: “It’s so frustrating when our hours of training and lots of money spent on expensive courses aren’t taken into account when paying our wages.” Examples of expensive courses include a 4-week 200-hour teacher training with 50 participants that costs £7400 (including accommodation); a 7-day course with 40 participants that costs £1500 (non-residential); a 13-day course with 70 participants that costs £1500 (non-residential).

Of course, these events can be enormously expensive to run: venue costs, accommodation for teacher, publicity. And some courses do have discounted places – although this information is not always easy to find. It is also true that a small number of teachers are making a great deal of money from courses and trainings. Just like the bigger society with 1% who are doing very well and many others either just getting by or really struggling (the ‘two pay packets away from eviction’ category).

As I mentioned earlier, I run courses in several locations. I am incredibly fortunate to have a studio at home. There I run a 5-day course that costs £495 and a 9-day course that costs £850; numbers are limited to 12 and of the 12 places, two on every course are bursary places (50% discount). I also teach courses at three other studios.

I believe that it is important to be transparent and open. In part because of teaching in my home studio, I am in that 1% of yoga teachers. My income after costs and before taxation from teaching yoga in tax year 2018–19 was £56,800; costs included payment to other people I work with (more than £20,000), book production (£5700), travel (£4000) and advertising (£3500). I pay the external teachers on the courses that I run £280 for a three-hour session; the person who does the course administration and website maintenance receives £22 per hour (she does about 25 hours work each month); assistants on the three-hour workshops that I teach earn £35; the assistant on one of the external five-day courses gets £120 per day (so £600 for the course); I pay my supervisor £100 for a 90 minute session once every two months; every participant on the courses that I teach receives about £30 worth of course material (manuals and handouts) – which are included in the cost of the course. I give approximately 15% of my pre-tax income to charity and social justice campaigns (ranging from Prison Phoenix Trust to Centrepoint to Extinction Rebellion).

In contrast, my income in 2007–8 – after teaching full-time for 7 years but before I was teaching courses – was £26,500 (after costs and before taxation). Another contrast is the average salary in 2019 in the UK for people working both full-time and part-time was just over £29,000.

Training, mentoring, presence

Far too often becoming a yoga teacher is presented as being far too easy. This plays a part in the devaluing of yoga. A 14-day course costing £1830 offered a 200-hour qualification to be a yoga teacher. These days you can do your entire training online. One such provider has the slogan: “Thanks to technology, anyone, anywhere can become a yoga teacher.” As Jess Glenny wrote: “our students...often believe that yoga teacher training is far more lengthy, thorough, extensive and rigorous than it actually is.”^x As teachers, we need thorough and rigorous training. We require ongoing mentoring as a non-negotiable factor in supporting our teaching. These can be the differences between sinking and swimming.

It is not just knowledge of particular techniques or asana performance that makes a good teacher. Equally important is the quality of presence in yoga teaching. The calmness, the steadying influence, the grounded being of the teacher. But are teachers paid enough to have sufficient personal time when they can be cultivating these qualities for presence? To have space for self-practice, training and self-enquiry? To be able to do what we suggest to our students that they do? Teachers could ponder what is the balance for them between actual teaching time and sufficient self-care. Self-care is our own yoga practice, meditation, psychotherapy – and more. But how is that affordable when class pay rates are low?

Because of these low class pay rates, some teachers are then economically forced towards running courses and retreats when perhaps they are not appropriately experienced to be leading such events. I had been teaching for 12 years before I taught a 5-day course. Some teachers are pushed too early in their teaching trajectory to take that seat of lead teacher. Attempting to run before being able to walk. And this can be on top of trying to teach too many classes. Consequences can include poor quality of training, increased likelihood of students being injured and lack of depth in teaching.

The daily grind

Things certainly can be difficult for many teachers. The daily grind of teaching multiple classes that impacts physically, emotionally and financially. In the last ten years, I have had discussions with many yoga teachers. Accounts from yoga teachers about the challenges and the obstacles of teaching are numerous. “I’m feeling exhausted and am in a lot of pain. I teach twelve classes a week...I can’t afford to drop any classes.” “Students look up to me for guidance and encouragement, but I feel that I don’t have any support myself. I’m constantly going from gym to studio to gym.” “We are wearing out our own body/minds teaching multiple classes for little money in an attempt to help others maintain their body/minds.”^{xi}

The fact is that pay rates for teaching yoga classes have stayed substantially the same for the last twenty years. In that time – just as a comparison – the average house price has more than tripled (from £91,200 in 1999 to £280,000 in 2019). Wages have gone up in the same time period – 1999 to 2019 – by about 70%. And the cost of attending yoga classes has gone up.

Of course, things certainly can be difficult for studios as well. Their running costs have obviously gone up while with increased competition, their student numbers could have dropped. Like a studio where student numbers went down by about 20% in 2019. Their owner wrote to me: “It’s been quite worrying...It is very difficult to draw new people in when a studio down the road is so rock bottom cheap.”

Of course, each of us has different circumstances. Having a wealthy partner or well-off parents willing to support you are significant assets on the yoga teaching career path (in my case, it was

buying a house in London before 2000). Having a generous investor can be a substantial plus for a yoga studio.

Instead of the *devaluing* that can happen, with yoga studios as Poundlands and yoga teachers as Deliveroo drivers dressed in multi-coloured leggings, could we have *revaluing*? Can we recognise that it is not just pay that is being devalued, it is also professionalism? A key is sustainability. I know teachers who teach many classes and many trainings and many retreats. One recently said to me: “I am crazily busy.” Is this sensible and sustainable? Is this good modelling to students? Over the years of teaching, potentially we can become better at what we are doing – but the reality is that many teachers are becoming broken and being burnt-out. I have seen plenty of yoga teachers crash and burn because it is all too much.

Co-operating...

In my opinion, rather than corporatism and commercialising, yoga is about diversity, inclusion and working together. Yoga can be life-changing and a path of waking up. But there has been much silence regarding the economics of teaching yoga – from studios, from long-established teachers, from people who love these practices. Such silence can be the prelude to exploitative practices. A former manager of one large yoga studio wrote to me: “the lack of transparency – that’s the thing that most maddens me...we never offered a pay rise. But if a teacher complained and moaned, they’d think about it. I always told the teachers to complain.”

Anna Taylor, a long-established teacher, wrote: “whilst I feel lucky to teach in studios whose ethos I believe in, some of what I see in this industry feels against the sense of compassion, integrity and fairness and ethics that I feel yoga is meant to reflect. I am not against the need for things to be commercially viable. It makes sense, but I feel that there should be a way for this to be possible without it being the teachers who are the ones to be constantly sacrificed (in terms of their income and wellbeing) in order for the industry to be sustainable.”

Yoga teachers can spend a lot of time studying sutras and being fascinated by asana achievement – and pay surprisingly little attention to the fact that there are different ways of operating a business. Ways that are grounded more in working together and co-operation than hierarchies and competing. An example is Riverford Organic Farmers. In June 2018, its owner gave 74% of the company to employees thus creating an employee-owned business. Another example is the Park Slope Food Co-op in New York. It is probably the biggest food co-operative that runs on members’ labour in the world. It has more than 17,000 members and its prices are 15%–50% cheaper than other grocery stores. In 2018 its turnover was \$58 million. One of its founders responded to the question of why start a co-op (it was set up in 1973) by saying: “I thought that our society was too focussed on (individual success), and not focussed enough on community success and community institutions...we thought it was joyful for people to work together and to have success together.”^{xii}

When these models work well, they have demonstrably positive benefits for both staff and business, like higher morale and higher productivity. As the Riverford owner wrote: “Most people are better, kinder, less greedy and have more to give than our institutions allow them to demonstrate.”^{xiii}

What next?

As teachers of yoga, we are engaged in a profound practice that can significantly influence our lives and those we teach. It is a great privilege to be teaching yoga. Inevitably there are different stories. We teach yoga because we love what we are doing, we teach yoga because we appreciate

possibilities of positively influencing people, we teach yoga because it is a wonderful practice. And many teachers also describe being wearied and worn down, finding it hard to sustain themselves. Challenged by studios' intransigence. Instead could there be an emphasis on value, fairness and teachers' sustainability?

Speaking our truth, standing our ground and supporting each other can be ways of revaluing. Raising aspirations, encouraging confidence and developing collective empowerment can be ways of revaluing. This is not about companies getting bigger and bigger while those who work there stay on the same wages.

We need *fairer* distribution of resources. I believe 21st century capitalism is destroying the environment, multitudes of individuals and society. A radical rethinking of how we are living is required. Small steps are part of this rethinking. Going for the good of the whole is a powerful practice where we learn to see ourselves and each other as deeply connected; where we grow beyond self-preoccupation; where we cultivate relationships of integrity. This is not market opportunism – this is the beating heart of practice. It is good to remember that frictions of resistance can derail ambitions of corporate growth. It is good to ensure that sustainability is a priority for all of us as teachers. It is good to remember that we do have the influence and the power to revalue this practice that we love.

Here are eleven practical points for all of us – teachers, studio owners, practitioners – to consider.

Eleven practical points

- If you are interested in being part of a more collective voice for yoga teachers, please email yogateachersunion@gmail.com.
- If you are an independent yoga studio owner and you would like to be in touch with others in a similar situation, Julia Davis who owns Finchley Yoga can help; Julia@finchleyyoga.com.
- Give the two articles that I wrote in January/February 2019 – *Let's Talk About* and *Let's Talk About Too* – to everyone applying to yoga TTs and to all teachers auditioning in studios.
- Increasing the hourly rate is the fairest way to benefit most teachers. Sliding scales of pay should be offered dependent upon level of qualifications, years of teaching and CPD undertaken.
- 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).
- Studios have transparent policies around recruitment, pay and procedure for pay increase.
- Teachers who run lucrative trainings give 3% of their profit back to the studio that hosts their training as a way of fairly distributing resources. This can then help to fund pay rises and bursary places on trainings.
- Larger studios have a channel for anonymous feedback from teachers and establish teachers' councils (for which participants receive payment).
- Teachers consciously avoid the unpopular (amongst other teachers) and unsustainable (for everyone) strategy of undercutting what other teachers are charging.
- It is recognised that mentoring is a necessity for all teachers as an essential support on the teaching journey.

- The training qualifications for yoga teachers – the standard 200-hour model – is re-evaluated and updated.

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References

ⁱ *Let's Talk About* and its follow-up *Let's Talk About Too* (February 2019) is available on my website www.yogawithnorman.co.uk/articles.

ⁱⁱ *MoreYoga entrepreneurs plan 100 studios for London* Health Club Management 24 July 2018.

ⁱⁱⁱ *MoreYoga entrepreneurs plan 100 studios for London* Health Club Management 24 July 2018.

^{iv} This is available on my website www.yogawithnorman.co.uk/articles.

^v *MoreYoga entrepreneurs plan 100 studios for London* Health Club Management July 2018 (italics added).

^{vi} In a posting from Daniel Marin and Shamir Sidhu on www.facebook.com/groups/Yogateachersuk/ 23 October 2019.

^{vii} In a posting from Daniel Marin and Shamir Sidhu on www.facebook.com/groups/Yogateachersuk/ 23 October 2019.

^{viii} *Everyone Active teams up with More Yoga for 'boutique in a big box' concept* 24 October 2018 (accessed 22 January 2019) <https://www.leisuremanagement.co.uk/detail.cfm?pagetype=detail&subject=news&CodeID=339517>.

^{ix} *New York Times* 24 November 2018.

^x Jess Glenny *The Yoga Teacher Mentor* (Singing Dragon, 2020).

^{xi} First two accounts taken from Jess Glenny *The Yoga Teacher Mentor* (Singing Dragon, 2020); third account from www.facebook.com/groups/Yogateachersuk/ 23 October 2019.

^{xii} *New Yorker* 25 November 2019.

^{xiii} <https://www.riverford.co.uk> (accessed 22 January 2020).