

Pragmatism and Imagination: yoga in a post-pandemic world...

Two years ago – January 2019 – I wrote an article on yoga teachers' pay: *Let's Talk About...* A lot has happened since then. A lot! More yoga studios. More teachers trained. More books on yoga. A pandemic. The end of Donald Trump. Brexit. Some grim economic forecasts. It seems like the only thing that has not happened is the arrival of aliens (or maybe that has already happened...)

Undoubtedly, the pandemic has had a huge impact on yoga teaching. Twelve months ago, my knowledge of Zoom was zero. Twelve months ago, the yoga boom seemed set to continue and continue, albeit a boom that also meant many yoga teachers (and not only recent ones but also those who had been teaching for years) were financially struggling. Someone wrote to me after I published that January 2019 article: "I LOVED reading your article about yoga pay. The fucking ELEPHANT IN THE ROOM."

The fact is that pay rates in the UK yoga industry have at best been stagnant for years. Maybe for the last two decades. A long time. And some pay rates have actually decreased. While the cost of living has gone up. While the competition for classes has got substantially more intense. Some long-term teachers turn to teaching trainings as a way of being better rewarded for their years of experience. Thus more teachers looking for classes to teach.

Numerous Aspects

There are numerous aspects to this situation. And then the pandemic: this has been a sledgehammer to the yoga industry. A number of studios have permanently closed; I know of others that are on the edge of closure. Significantly more yoga classes are available on platforms such as YouTube (free content that undermines the income of other teachers and can devalue teaching professionalism). Many teachers are teaching their own classes and workshops independently through Zoom (so not needing to access the physical space that can be provided by yoga studios and gyms). And a few top teachers making even more money because their Zoom classes get hundreds of participants.

It is astonishing what has happened in these last two years. Pluses are that taboos are being broken. That the Yoga Teachers' Union has been created in the UK. Yoga teachers are connecting and having public conversations about working conditions. Models of competitiveness and hyper-individualism are being questioned. Some teachers are consciously encouraging other teachers to avoid making classes too cheap (and thus undercutting). Maybe you might remember those insightful words from Anna Taylor: "How do we stay well when working in the wellness industry?"

We need to think outside the boxes — if only because the boxes have been battered by the pandemic. And then the truth is that for many teachers, those pre-pandemic boxes were exploitative and unfair. As radical filmmaker Adam Curtis recently said: "Covid has been like lightning on a dark night. Suddenly you see what has been there the whole time."

We need to be both pragmatic and imaginative. To stand together; to campaign for transparency around pay rates/recruitment policies; to call for studios and gyms to publish easily interpreted summary financials; to look at how we can have models of working that are healthy, sustainable, holistic.

In my February 2019 follow-up article (*Let's Talk About Too...*), there were suggestions that top teachers who run lucrative trainings take slightly smaller pay to allow for less well-paid teachers to be better remunerated; that larger yoga studios pay teachers to attend meetings; that yoga TTs applicants are informed of conditions within the yoga industry before they commit to the course. And there is more than could be done: such as mentoring for teachers being an accepted fact of becoming better teachers rather than an option that few take up; such as the work of yoga teaching being appropriately valued by both students and studios.

Simple Steps

Simple steps are possible: all places employing yoga teachers publicly publish rates of pay; all teachers running trainings and workshops pay their assistants; pay caps for top teachers as a way of supporting other teachers. Here are some examples of the last two steps from my own personal experience (and recognising that there are different experiences).

- Assistants on trainings: £100 per day
- Assistants on in-person, busy workshops: £35
- External teachers on courses: £280 for a three-hour session
- Pay caps: when top teachers are being paid a per head amount plus an hourly rate, their payment is for the first 30 students. Income from students 31+ go into a pot that the studio uses to support less busy classes.

Of course, who knows what will happen over the next twelve months, over the next two years. *Yoga Sutra* 2.16 might be translated: “The future is unwritten”. Historian Perry Anderson wrote: “Human creativity is such that we cannot know in advance what we will know in the future, so the very basis of our evolution is in principle unpredictable.”

The yoga industry has various equations. The three legs of student/studio/teacher: are they reasonably equal? Essential principles for teaching such as personal practice, continuing study, self-enquiry: does this happen? The realising that teaching more than 20 classes a week is not sustainable – nor sensible. The realising that to be a yoga teacher requires commitment and dedication – and many other skills that simply cannot be covered in that very basic package of a 200-hour TT.

Someone recently asked: Will yoga survive the pandemic? This question could be restructured (because yoga will survive the pandemic) to: What form will yoga take post-pandemic? A yoga of big business, dominating studios, rock-star teachers (this might be called ‘industrial yoga’)? Or a yoga of relationships, egalitarianism, intelligent dialogue (this might be called ‘yoga of intimacy’)? Or the parasitical vampires (MindBody Online, ClassPass, Lululemon, etc) taking ever larger slices of the cake? You can now do online yoga with an avatar (that is one way of lowering labour costs).

Zoom/online classes are here to stay (and it has to be acknowledged they were also here pre-pandemic). But before the pandemic, the substantial majority of these online classes were pre-recorded (via YouTube, for example). A major shift during the pandemic has been the rise of live online classes. This shift is here to stay.

I also think that it is likely that after the pandemic, plenty of people will want to practice in physical proximity again. This of course means teachers will be coming out of their home spaces and teaching in physical spaces, whether that is a yoga studio, a gym or a space they rent themselves. Another factor in the mix is that many teachers’ income has shrunk so it is possible that courses/trainings are going to struggle finding enough participants.

All these varied elements certainly can exist simultaneously. And we as yoga teachers can tilt the balances. We can alter the power dynamics. We can make these practices that we love to be grounded more in ethical integrity than mere profiteering and self-exploitation.

Right now

Right now, we can start to constructively work for positive changes. Such as the public conversations inspired by the Yoga Teachers' Union. Such as the realisation that for every hour we are paid, on average we do about another two hours work (so when you are being paid £30 for a hour class, remember that for this figure to accurately reflect your hourly wage, it has to be divided by three). Such as telling students how much we are being paid for classes. Such as looking to join together rather than undermine and undercut. Such as being imaginative about how we are working: collaboration, mutual support, co-operatives. Can we dare to see a better and fairer and more just world?

Let us be practical: for example, supporting studios that have supported teachers these last 12 months. Let us be imaginative: thinking outside the boxes and dreaming of different working ways. Yoga teachers can be very good at devising elaborate sequences and constructing insightful themes. Could we apply these skills to our working conditions? We have precious moments of opportunity. Instead of yoga teaching at times being draining and disheartening, it could be inspiring and sustainable.

Norman Blair
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www.yogawithnorman.co.uk

For more information on the Yoga Teachers' Union, contact Laura at yogachair@iwgb.co.uk; and the website is <https://yogateachersunion.co.uk>

I have a monthly newsletter. If you would like to receive it, please email yogawithnorman@gmail.com

If you would like to read other articles that I have written about yoga teachers' pay and working conditions, go to my website:
<https://www.yogawithnorman.co.uk/articles-and-interviews>