

Yoga Studios in Pandemic Days

In the steep learning curve of yoga studios during a pandemic, there are positive stories.

Down Under are a large yoga studio in Boston, Massachusetts. In these pandemic days, they have kept almost their entire schedule online. Down Under are doing their best to take care of their teachers, their staff, their students. They state: “As major yoga chains and gyms fire and furlough staff with no pay, Down Under stands apart in continuing pay for all 60 teachers and 15 managers while providing classes for its students and free virtual access to front line workers.”

Other studios have done similar good work, such as East of Eden in London, UK. Their owner wrote: “From the day I closed, my aim was to have the whole timetable online to keep everyone together, teachers, front of house staff, and customers.” The Shala in south London offered online classes to everyone who was teaching for them before the pandemic. A teacher in Gothenburg, Sweden reported: “One studio I teach in closed for two weeks and we got paid anyway for the classes we were supposed to have.” These are just a few of the many positive stories that are emerging from yoga land.

In contrast, others have done things differently for various reasons. YogaWorks in New York closed its four studios in April, stating: “This is certainly not the outcome we neither wanted nor anticipated, but these considerable obstacles, which were exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic, have unfortunately made it inevitable.” Here in London, Triyoga have an online schedule as of today (28 May – ten weeks after they closed) that has about 30% of their pre-pandemic local teachers on it. At the same time, Kino McGregor (based in Miami) now has a weekly class on the Triyoga schedule.

Triyoga bringing in international teachers while not giving classes to many of their local regular teachers can be seen as disappointing. One pre-pandemic Triyoga teacher wrote: “Totally shocked and saddened by a complete lack of professionalism and fairness. Unless you are a superstar teacher, they are just not interested.” Someone who had taught at Triyoga for more than ten years wrote: “they dropped me like a hot potato when I questioned their pre-lockdown distancing practices.”

I know there are Triyoga teachers who feel supported by management. But there are other teachers who feel marginalised. Triyoga management present a different interpretation of these events. In an online interview (22 May 2020), Triyoga’s director Jonathan Sattin declared: “We have always wanted a community of teachers.” This intention is admirable but how well do these words resonate with reality? In the same interview, Sattin stated: “We are all in it together.” Would a Triyoga teacher who has lost their classes agree?

Principles

Some yoga studios seem to have lost sight of principles such as fairness and transparency. If studio management have practices such as secret pay rates, promises that are subsequently broken, inner circle favouritism, they need to be challenged. In the frustrations and the fears of current circumstances, can we have the courage to speak up? Can studios be focussed less on brand-building and more on teachers?

In the rapidity of these sudden shifting states, could we be imaginative and flexible? Such as teachers agreeing to pay caps on busy classes to help create a more equitable distribution of

resources (as has happened at the Life Centre in London). Such as the teacher at Yoga At The Forge, a studio in Sussex, who wrote: “We support each other, share the workload, the profits, the benefit of community...It’s an old model that feels right for a new future.”

With physical distancing in yoga classes, maximum numbers will probably be about 25% at most of pre-pandemic capacity. At the earliest, a vaccine for coronavirus might be available in spring 2021. The months ahead are going to be bumpy, problematic and at times exceptionally difficult. Definitely many shades to these situations (less black/white, more shades of grey). Circumstances are nuanced.

Incredibly difficult

Obviously, things are incredibly difficult for studios with their overheads and payments going out on empty buildings. But there are different ways of doing things, as Down Under, East Of Eden, the Shala and others clearly demonstrate. I believe that the hierarchical model – whether it is corporate studios or guru teachers – is outdated. Perhaps trainings could use the multi-teacher model rather than one person being placed up on a pedestal for day after day. Perhaps studios could be more focused on teachers’ sustainability. Perhaps studios could be structured in ways that engage all those involved: owners, teachers, staff and students.

In challenging conditions, we learn what is important. Who stands up and is supportive. And who is not. Practices of generosity, mutual aid and social solidarity are good guides on these paths. Instead of catastrophising, social isolation, fearful mind states, we can be creative, community-oriented, constructive. We can become the change that we wish to happen: ideas do have their own momentum, acorns do become oaks.

To find out more about Down Under, here is an excellent interview with the owner and manager:

<https://www.jbrowniyoga.com/yoga-talks-podcast/2020/4/justine-cohen-michael-ponte>

If you would like to be part of a more collective voice for yoga teachers in the UK, please email here:

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