



The business of yoga

Yoga is now big business, but where do the bucks stop? asks David Spratt

Exclusive retreats in exotic locations, celebrity teacher yoga brands, the global marketing of yoga products, pop stars wearing their yoga practice as a badge of cool ... welcome to the business of yoga.

It's easy to be nostalgic for the yoga of yesteryear unburdened by its current status as a global commodity – but what has the transformation meant for practitioners and teachers?

The obvious and most positive answer is that many more people have been introduced to the practice of yoga. In the USA it is estimated that about ten per cent of the population – more than 25 million

people – have practised yoga, and proportionately Australia may not be far behind.

While an expanding yoga market and increased competition brings benefits – more yoga centres and lower prices for yoga equipment, for example – there are worrying aspects as well. The growing yoga market has attracted entrepreneurs and organisations with a purely business interest. Some fitness centres and gyms, for example, slot in yoga between the boxercise and pump classes because there is a buck to be made out of it, with no apparent commitment to yoga practice.

If yoga is simply another product line to be sold for profit, one way to make money is to squeeze as many people as possible into a class – up to 50 or 60 – and reduce costs by employing inexperienced teachers on low wages. For the entrepreneur there may be little concern as to whether the teachers hired are adequately trained, can sustain teaching twenty or so classes a week, or are teaching in an effective and safe manner. In these conditions it is not surprising to hear of students new to yoga being instructed to practise headstands or arm balances in their very first class.

But for all this, the fact is that many diverse organisations and businesses have

brought yoga to many people previously denied access to yoga, especially in those less wealthy areas where dedicated yoga centres have been slower to establish.

Whilst most centres are committed to teaching yoga in all its breadth, some yoga teaching environments do focus only on the physical aspects of *asana* (the postures), thus reducing the seven limbs of yoga practice to a single, easy-to-teach, gym routine described as a 'fitness workout'. Is this yoga, or simply using the 'yoga' catchphrase as a marketing tool? Without the aspects of *pranayama* (breathing practices) and the balance of action and reflection; without the journey into stillness, such yoga teaching offers little long-term engagement for the student and becomes a boring routine for the teacher. Those who simply want to make a buck will inevitably move onto the next big thing, for example, in recent times, re-inventing themselves as Pilates instructors or entrepreneurs.

Fortunately those students looking for more, and the dedicated students, will likely search for more engaging and qualified and dedicated teachers, because for the student of yoga, there are plenty of choices. The student as an aware consumer can find out the history of the 'style' of yoga they are learning or are interested in starting. They are likely to ask about the teacher's qualifications – has their training ranged over a handful of hours, or hundreds of hours plus years of personal practice? Similarly they will have a look at the centre where they will be doing yoga classes and ask friends about their experiences.

The quality of training varies widely amongst yoga teachers. Many people teaching in the dedicated yoga centres of an established lineage have practised for many years before beginning up to two years of challenging teacher training and have then taught for another period before achieving their final teaching qualification. This is the case, for example, with Iyengar Yoga in Australia, where the national association now publishes a list of qualified teachers on the web (www.iyengaryoga.asn.au) so that the public can confirm a teacher's claim to being a qualified Iyengar yoga teacher. For most of the other widely taught schools of yoga (such as Ashtanga, Sivananda and Satyananda for example) it is not too difficult to use the web to establish the credentials of a prospective teacher.

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<Superannuation and yoga teachers> Are you, as a yoga teacher, receiving the superannuation payments to which you are entitled?

Superannuation is an important ethical, social and financial issue for yoga teachers – whether as employers or employees. Ethical, because as yoga practitioners we strive for truthfulness. Social, because increasingly superannuation may be our main source of retirement income. Financially, because it makes a significant difference to the effective income of yoga teachers.

The Superannuation Guarantee legislation applies to all employers and covers most employees, including full-time, part-time and casual staff. The definition of employee is extended to include some additional categories of workers, including company directors, some artists and sportspersons and certain contractors. There are some exceptions: superannuation is not compulsory for employees who are paid less than \$450 in any month; aged 70 years of age and over; under 18 years of age working for not more than 30 hours a week; or performing work of a private or domestic nature for not more than 30 hours a week for a non-business employer.

Thus, in general, any yoga teacher, whether full-time or part-time, permanent or casual, who earns more than \$450 per month must be paid superannuation, and the employer is acting illegally if they do not do so.

Significantly, even if a teacher is considered to be a contractor, superannuation must still be paid if the contract is 'wholly or

principally for labour'. The Tax Office has provided the following explanation: "For the superannuation guarantee, an employee includes a person engaged under a contract that is wholly or principally for labour." This means that a contractor can be an employee under superannuation guarantee. Even if the person quotes an Australian Business Number (ABN), the person may be considered to be an employee for superannuation guarantee purposes. The other party to the contract is the employer.' [www.ato.gov.au/super/content.asp?doc=/content/19159.htm]

Thus, in general, even if a teacher has their own Australian Business Number and invoices a yoga studio for teaching services, they are considered to be an employee for superannuation purposes. From this perspective, the overwhelming majority of yoga teachers working as contractors should be paid superannuation, providing they earn \$450 per month. Exceptions would only be in those cases where they are providing something significantly other than labour, such as circumstances where they effectively only 'rent' the space and provide their own props and equipment, do their own advertising and promotion, keep their own accounts and do their own banking and so on.

The Australian Tax Office website on superannuation contains a large amount of useful information which you can access at www.ato.gov.au

At the other end of the spectrum, some teachers may have attended little more than the odd weekend of yoga ‘teacher training’. *Yoga Sutra I.12* teaches *Abhyasa vairagyabhyam tannirodbab*: “Practice and detachment are the means to still the movements of consciousness.” Sustained practice is at the core of yoga teacher training, and the yoga community has every right to challenge the notion that abbreviated teacher training courses and courses that elevate theory or book learning over sustained practice are an adequate preparation for the professional yoga teacher.

For the yoga teacher, the business of yoga brings a complex range of choices and contradictions. To be employed, or self-employed; to start a yoga school and employ others; to work part-time or try to make a living solely by teaching yoga? Whatever path is chosen, the teacher, like many of those entering today’s diverse job market, is confronted by an array of professional issues for which they may be ill prepared. Few of the yoga teacher associations in Australia have hitherto accepted the breadth of the need of their members for serious, ongoing professional development, nor do many teacher training courses give it adequate attention.

professional malpractice, legally challenged for unfair dismissal, fined for late tax returns. As a consequence of their lack of knowledge in the area of professional development, for example, it appears that some teachers are not receiving superannuation contributions from their employers to which they are legally entitled.

Yoga may be an ancient art, but that is no reason for archaic employment practices. People may appreciate yoga for its engagement with spiritual practice, but that is not a reason to treat them unfairly as employees. It may be convenient for employers to employ teachers on a part-time, casual basis, describing the teacher as a ‘contractor’, which has the effect of sidestepping their legal obligations regarding superannuation and workers’ compensation. By law this must be paid for contractors so long as they are primarily providing their labour. Professional recreation centres tend to pay teachers on an hourly basis, though the rate is often far from adequate. Can a teacher really physically sustain teaching more than twenty classes a week at less than \$30 an hour, without holiday or sick pay, for a professional working life of perhaps 30 years?

superannuation, provided with holiday pay and encouraged in their professional development contribute far more to the success of a yoga teaching enterprise and share more responsibility than those who don’t know what their pay will be next week. Similarly whether they will have a job next month, or whether they can afford a holiday at year’s end.

The competencies of management and marketing, planning and product development, accounting and advertising, information technology and industrial relations do not come naturally to most people in small business, including yoga teachers with their own business. They are skills to be acquired, or to be consciously recognised as being best delegated to competent employees or outside contractors. Learning them requires a lot less effort than gaining teaching-level yoga competencies, yet they are often put in the ‘too hard’ basket.

Has sufficient attention been devoted to articulating the contradictions that arise between the yoga teacher’s role as a practitioner and teacher on the one hand, and a business person or self-employed professional on the other? Is there enough time in the week to practise two to three hours a day, teach eight or ten classes and run a business successfully? Cut back on the practice to run the business, and the heart of one’s yoga diminishes; focus on the practice and teaching at the expense of the business and there may be no money for wages. How much is it reasonable to charge for a class or workshop or teacher training; will I make more by upping prices, or would that be ripping off students to meet my own needs? What happens if I put income in my back pocket to pay bills and then I’m short when its time to pay GST? How can I resolve the contradiction between yoga’s path of undoing the emotional fluctuations (*vrittis*) of everyday material life, and running a business, which seems to be all about material life?

Yoga tradition expounds a path of truthfulness (*satya*) and non-stealing (*asteya*). How then can a yoga teacher or employee justify, for example, systematically understating their taxable income for personal gain, when most tax revenue comes back to the community as expenditure on health and education, social security and public services for the benefit of the many?

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The yoga teacher, even as an employee, has much to keep an eye on: the full range of health and safety laws that affect their work, workers’ compensation requirements, the law on taxation and superannuation, the legal implications of ‘duty of care’, and their rights and responsibilities under Australian industrial law, whether it be award conditions or minimum rates of pay. Many yoga teachers have little knowledge in these areas, but as a start much can be learned even in a few hours of Googling and talking to colleagues. In the real world, yoga teachers do injure themselves, get sued for

On the other hand, in many dedicated yoga centres it is common to pay teachers piece rates (payment according to the number of students who attend a class). This a precarious and unpredictable form of income that can set teachers into competition against one another, encourages teachers to be ‘nice’ as opposed to effective, punishes teachers with classes at less popular times, and makes no provision for teachers who are sick, or for holiday income. Employees contribute to an organisation depending on how they are treated. Employees who are guaranteed a reasonable wage, paid

What do such actions say about our understanding of yoga philosophy, which is founded on a belief in the connection, the inter-relationship, the unity of all things and which characterises a sense of aloneness, separateness and selfishness as being the world of *maya* – illusion?

How can the *practice* of yoga be brought to the *business* of yoga? Perhaps part of the answer lies in yoga's conception of 'practice', which is often interpreted as applying only to the hours of the week dedicated to asana and pranayama, chanting and meditating. But does not practice (*abhyasa*) apply to all aspects of one's existence? Are such notions as discipline and dispassion (*vairagya*), action and reflection, truthfulness and discernment as relevant to our everyday life and business life as to those hours spent on the mat? Can we also observe the *yamas* and *niyamas* – yoga's codes of right conduct towards others and ourselves – in our working or business life; by applying the notions of disciplined action and then reflection on the effects of our action; by querying why we make the decisions we do

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as managers or professional teachers; by being dispassionate about the outcome of our efforts, and perhaps by projecting equanimity towards objects, including that most sacred of all objects in the modern capitalist world – money?

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