



So you want to open a Yoga School?

It was a hot Sydney afternoon as I slunk into another weekend of my yoga teacher-training course, but I was hot with shame that day. I felt toxic and undeserving to be with my yoga peers after a frantic week in my 'other life' in advertising.

I felt toxic because I'd been researching how to turn people into avid gamblers in preparation for the opening of Sydney's first casino. Intellectually it was fascinating, but I hate gambling and knew I had crossed an ethical line and was no longer prepared to do this to earn a living.

That cathartic moment was the catalyst to actually open my own yoga school (rather than dreaming about it for several more years.) I now find myself running two vibrant yoga schools on Sydney's northern beaches. People often ask what it's like or how I started, and with yoga booming around the country, I thought I'd try and offer a few pointers and some perspective on what is really involved in opening and running your own yoga centre.

The first question is how do you start? Dive in the deep end and ditch your previous job completely, or do you ease your way gradually into teaching more and more? Although it's more than a question of economics, it's no secret that yoga is not a lucrative profession (unless your name is Bikram, Yee or one of a

handful of yoga stars.) So making enough to live on is a real issue if you want to make yoga your livelihood.

Despite this, I was surprised how many teachers I spoke to who abandon well-paid jobs and busy lives to go full-time into yoga, most opening a permanent school soon afterwards. It will always depend on your personal situation and responsibilities to family or children, so take your pick!

I dived in the deep end and quit advertising for good and never regretted it once.

Starting your own school means you are 'self-employed'. For some this is normal, but for others who have only known a regular job and steady wages, it's a scary psychological wrench. Being self-employed is a state-of-mind and the government does not make it easy for you! With the excitement and freedom of running your own show comes responsibility for all sorts of things I'd only delegated to others in my old professional life. Suddenly I was the bookkeeping expert, the IT support-person, maintenance engineer, cleaner, graphic artist, insurance broker and GST expert – oh and I taught a bit of yoga sometimes!

In my idealism, I thought running my own school would give me more time with my young family and less stress in my work life. In reality, the exact opposite was true, at least the

first year although a better balance is finally becoming the norm. Don't under-estimate how much time it takes simply to be in business.

One of my yoga students is an incredibly talented yacht designer, and one day I mentioned to him that he had a dream job, doing what he wanted, creating beautiful boats. He laughed and said, "I run a small business with everything that comes with it and occasionally get to design a boat, probably like you...you run a business and get to teach yoga when time permits!"

So what skills or qualities do you need to run your own school? First a passion for yoga, plus a solid personal practice seem to be the first things every one that I spoke to suggested. It may seem obvious, but you'd be a kidding yourself if you did it for the money!

It is a privilege to teach what you love and to change people's lives through compassion and shared experience. You cannot do this if greed or selfish ambition motivates you.

Probably the greatest issue facing other school founders and myself is balancing the 'doing' with the 'being'. How much do you trust to the 'universe to provide' and, how much do you develop a business plan and make practical efforts to achieve set goals? Anita Roddick of the BodyShop talks of balancing 'principle with profit'.

Patanjali's Yoga Sutras elegantly teach about *Sthira and Sukha* (II. 46) combining alertness (in a pose or in your life,) with a sense of ease or comfort and not straining. As a former type A personality, letting go of details and working more with *Sukha* has been the hardest lesson of running my own yoga school. Similarly, I am constantly reminded of the *Baghavad Gita's* teaching about Karma Yoga, of 'action, not fruit'. Acting from selflessness and for the love of helping others without personal reward or regard for the outcome – one day, I hope to get it right. I still find it hard to trust to in the universe regarding the practicalities of business. To simply go with the flow in a complex operation involving a lot of people, teachers and money is often difficult.

Most teachers I spoke to found they had a wide range of skills that helped their transition into running a school. The important thing is to recognise the skills and qualities you possess, rather than be defined by your old job

description. It may well help to know a little book-keeping or computer skills, but Jodie Robertson of Bikram's Yoga College in Brookvale does not hesitate to say that her amazing memory for names was her most valuable asset in opening a school and still is. For me, a background in marketing and advertising was invaluable in launching the centre to a small local market (even if the budget was rather smaller than those I was previously used to working with!)

Apart from an unshakeable faith in your own destiny and ability, the other indispensable asset is supportive family and friends. There is simply no way I could have worked my old job and managed the start-up of my school, (whilst suffering from glandular fever at the same time) without the unstinting support of my wife. She believed in me no matter what the obstacles with council, tradesmen and with all the other problems that further stretched my meagre budget beyond breaking point. So unless you are Superman or Superwoman, don't set out on your own without a safety net of loved ones, friends or a partner who'll pick you up when these problems seem insurmountable. I can laugh about it now, but it was hell at the time, because I wanted it all to be perfect from the start and could not just let it flow

As a naïve entrepreneur, I can honestly say that opening a studio was the most stressful thing I have ever done, juggling new details and regulations with little or no money.

The other significant hurdle for many is maintaining their own yoga practice when life becomes a long round of commitments to yoga and your students. Some teachers were unequivocal: their own practice always taking priority, time was then allocated for teaching, even if it meant giving away some classes. For many others, the pragmatic reality is that either you have to get up at 3am for your own practice, or you compromise it in favour of your work. I confess to the latter, and for the first year, my own practice was patchy and uneven, only now returning to a solid routine around which I plan my work commitments.

Before I reveal some of the best things about running a yoga school, perhaps I can share a few practicalities that may determine how or if you set up your own studio.

First: why do you want to do it? Is it pure ego, or perhaps a commercial decision to cash in on yoga? These are probably the worst reasons. If instead it is because you want to teach your passion, create your own lifestyle and set your own timetable, then why would you do anything else?

As you move from the dream or vague desire to create a new reality, these are some of the practical issues you will need to resolve.

What can you afford for premises? If you are lucky enough to have the space, you might start from home if you are prepared to have students walk through your private space.

More often in the early days you can rent or hire a hall or community centre, which may offer the advantages of flexibility and "pay as you go," which can be of help as you build your classes. The space will probably be used by others and may not be left in the condition you would like. Unfortunately these spaces are becoming harder to find in most capital cities. The other alternative is to lease or rent space in a suitable location that you can configure to your own requirements. Each of these options (home, casual hire or lease) will have dramatically different financial considerations for you and effects on your future income.

My own experience was to lease premises from the beginning. Stay true to your vision, pester the estate agents every week, network like crazy and something will turn up eventually.

Once you have identified premises, you may need to trade off "space verses location": Yoga requires a fair amount of space that cannot easily be used for other purposes outside of classes. The more space you need the more it usually costs. To get cheaper rents, you invariably have to move to poorer locations, which may effect the number of students. So there is a trade-off between a decent size space in a remote location and a smaller size in a better location. Regardless of where you go, there is the constant issue that it takes years to build classes through out the week. The result is a lot of "down time" in your costly space and you need to budget accordingly to cover your rent. You also need to recognise that you cannot teach every class yourself and will need to pay other teachers or share the load in some way.

Starting up requires money: no matter how spiritual your own quest may be. Landlords

rarely take the promise of a better after-life as collateral on a lease! You will need a bond (usually equivalent to three months' rent) and enough to pay for the first month in advance plus insurance before you can sign a lease. Most commercial leases are anywhere between two and 10 years, remember you will need to do any fitting out, decorating, and signage on top of this. Local council approval is usually required for a change of business-use for commercial premises and council regulates most exterior signs. (open the cheque book and be prepared to wait...a long time.) Get some estimates from workmen if you need them, and plan well in advance whether you will borrow money or have enough saved to plough your own money into the start up. Remember you can save money by doing things yourself or using friendly tradesmen.

Before you leave paid employment it's also worth applying for the maximum credit limits on credit cards or your mortgage, as it is very hard to obtain credit ratings once you have a fluctuating income –or no income at all. You are now self-employed with no track record.

Unfortunately, although "the Universe will provide" is a helpful affirmation, nothing beats a sound business plan just in case! Work out your possible student numbers, also when your classes will be held. There is no point assuming you will have a 10am class if that is unlikely. With this information consider the amount you are going to charge and make sure this is comparable to any other yoga studios in the area. People are going to make cost comparisons especially in the early years when you are an unknown teacher or studio. Remember it may well take up to 12 months to stabilise classes with reasonable numbers on any given week.

Next, ask some basic marketing questions: what other yoga choices are available nearby? Before you spend your hard-earned savings, you must have a clear idea of what your school will stand for and why people will want to come there. If you are "just another yoga school," it will be harder and slower to build your classes. If possible be different and memorable: everyone has heard of Bikram's "Hot Yoga" because it's unique or Ashtanga Yoga because Sting, Geri and Madonna do it. TKV Desikachar says that even his father Sri Krishnamacharya knew he needed to attract a well-known patron to cement his reputation and be able to continue his teaching.

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together so many strands of my own learning in an authentic way, hopefully demonstrating that yoga is genuinely a way of life, not just a few party tricks on the yoga mat. I simply love what I do and the people with whom I come into contact. Life is rich in many ways – though usually not financially – and I love learning something new in every class I teach. Plus, I now spend more time with my children and my wife than before when I was locked in an office job.

Above all, I hope that I can continue the tradition of my own teachers by upholding the highest values and integrity in my schools and unselfishly inspire new students to a yogic path of health, self-awareness and spiritual unfoldment that they may not have been aware of before. Ask me if all the heartache of changing career was worth it and I will reply, "Yes, a million times YES!".

Mark O'Brien opened Qi Natural Therapies & Yoga two years ago in Manly NSW and a second centre in nearby Harbord a year later. He can be contacted on qi@magna.com.au or details of the centres are at www.qiyoga.net.

So stand for something, be it a style of yoga, or a lineage, or a specific age group (seniors, pre-natal etc) and create your own identity. Often this will be built around your own teaching skills. Don't be ashamed of your own expertise and pulling power. You probably already know that a good yoga teacher is like a hairdresser: once people find a good one they will follow them anywhere!

are making enough to pay the rent. Don't forget to work out some form of marketing, be it flyers delivered to the local area, business cards left in coffee shops and notices with tear off contact numbers placed on local community boards. How often have you seen something you are interested in but don't have pen and paper? These are just a few things that may help get you started.

So, let's assume you have cleared the financial and practical hurdles and opened successfully. Your classes are starting to run smoothly, your own practice is thriving and you are looking to add more classes and you

What are the best things about running your own school? For one teacher I know, it is the freedom to choose her own timetable and the privilege of changing people's lives. For me it's a chance to practice compassion and weave

| Studio Calculator | |
|---------------------------------|-----------|
| Rent | \$ |
| Phone | \$ |
| Outgoings Rates/taxes. etc | \$ |
| Set Up Mats, Belts, bolsters | \$ |
| Advertising | \$ |
| Phone-landline | \$ |
| Mobile | \$ |
| Wages Teachers, staff | \$ |
| Miss. | \$ |
| Total | \$ |

| Income Calculator | |
|---|-----------|
| Classes mornings x no.days x no. students x \$ value per student | |
| Total | \$ |
| Classes day x no.days x no. students x \$ value per student | |
| Total | \$ |
| Classes evenings x no.days x no. students x \$ value per student | |
| Additional income? | \$ |
| Total | \$ |