

The reality of being a yoga teacher

While embarking on a career as a yoga teacher is a yearning that lies in the heart of many yogis, mastering the practice is just the first step. EMMA PALMER reveals why it's imperative to understand the intricacies of the job – both on and off the mat.

I have a wonderful memory of walking through the Apollo Bay Market with my dad, and being surprised with a gift he bought for me, as he so often did. He handed me a beautifully carved stone with the writing, 'To be a teacher is to touch a life forever.' This was given to me at a pivotal time, as I was halfway through my yoga teacher training course and I was wondering how I would share my love of yoga. This precious gift sits on my desk today, reminding me of the many gifts that being a yoga teacher brings, particularly during some of the most challenging times, because believe it or not, there are challenges.

I remember the beginning of my yoga teacher training journey back in 2001 and how I longed to be able to teach full time; however, teaching yoga back then was really only considered as a hobby – alongside a 'proper job'. Fast-track 15 years and it's hard to believe that CNN listed yoga teaching in the top 100 careers of 2015, and, astonishingly, it came in at number 10.

I had such romantic notions of what teaching yoga would look and feel like; it was a dream of following a career path with greater freedom and meaning, and the genuine desire to truly make a difference in other people's lives. So in May 2004, I made the decision to brave the world of teaching yoga full time while undertaking a Bachelor of Health Sciences degree in naturopathy. My friends and

peers, of course, thought I was crazy, because yoga was in no way as accessible as it is today, and there were very few career opportunities available.

On paper, this decision was not the wisest in terms of facts and figures, but something much stronger was calling me to follow this path, and I listened. I had a bigger dream for myself – and my life – and I knew, deeply, that this was the path for me, despite the red flags to pursue a more stable and reliable career path.

The rewards of being a yoga teacher are immense; knowing that you have made a positive difference to someone's life is rewarding beyond measure. But there are aspects of being a yoga teacher that are not always known, and during the first 12 months after graduation, they can be the most challenging. Here are some aspects to consider when embarking on the yoga teaching journey that we aren't always aware of when idealism storms ahead and the stark realities fade into insignificance.

Be mindful of teaching locations

In the early days of teaching it's natural to say yes to the array of teaching opportunities, but you might end up spending more time in your car or on a train than you bargained for. It's important to narrow down the locations that are going to work for you in the long term and determine how many classes you can realistically teach each week.

And while you're driving between classes, remember to make the most of your time in the car – I still use this time to make the phone calls (safely, on hands-free, of course) from home to the studio.

Embrace early mornings and late nights

Many studios now offer classes that start at 6am and classes that finish as late as 9.30pm. In order to teach these early morning classes you'll need to set your alarm (note to self: always have a back-up alarm too) at 4.30am to get there, warm up and prepare the studio for the students starting their day with an early morning practice. I often made the mistake of not only teaching the 6am classes but also teaching until 9pm the same night, and in the long run it's not sustainable. So if you're teaching early morning classes, try not to commit to the night classes and vice versa and give yourself the time you need to prepare for your classes the following day.

Create a smart teaching schedule

When deciding on your timetable, select the days that you would most like to have off, and then commit to the days and classes that are the most time efficient. For example, aim to pick back-to-back classes or pick up classes that are on your way home at the end of the day. Yoga studios look for teachers that are

committed to their business in the long term, so take on the classes you know you can really give your time to build.

Prepare your outfits in advance

If you're teaching six to eight classes a day in a heated space, having sufficient clothing for wardrobe changes is a must. Make sure you choose fabrics that wash well, and more importantly, dry quickly. Some fabrics dry within a matter of hours, so be wise when choosing fabrics and try and find clothing that will dry overnight – you may need fresh clothes early the next morning.

Keep it fresh and stay inspired

When teaching up to 20 classes a week, you need to keep your classes fresh with consistently varying sequences, particularly when teaching back-to-back classes. One of the best ways to do this is to stay inspired and learn new ways of threading different postures through the *krama* (the sequence), connecting intuitively to the *sankalpa* (theme) for each class and avoiding repetition. Some *sankalpas* can't be prepared in advance and the energy of your students will provide the perfect theme when you need it – so trust yourself and your intuition. Also, don't bank on students attending only one of your classes; it's quite common for students to attend back-to-back classes, particularly when they are different complementary styles.

Stay connected

Irrespective of whether you choose to become a teacher or not, we are, and always will be, students of yoga. Once you start teaching, you will most likely be allocated classes at the same times that you used to practise and it won't be long before your old schedule goes out the window. While home practice usually takes its place, remember to stay connected to your original teachers or the school where you undertook your teacher training. This will help you feel supported and connected to the yoga community.

You may also learn that self-inflicted injuries are most likely to take place when you haven't completed the *krama* to warm up and you're demonstrating postures. Always make sure you take time before each and every class to warm up to ensure your own safety and that of your students.

Remember that it's a business, not a hobby

While you may start out as an independent contractor, setting yourself up from the start is crucial. It's imperative to conduct yourself in a professional manner and get the right financial and legal advice right



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from the start, because it will prove invaluable when you need it the most. Ensure you have set up your finance, marketing, social media strategy and administration processes, remember to contribute to your superannuation fund, sign up for income protection insurance, allocate your wage each week, and know the terms and conditions associated with employment as an independent contractor.

When I requested teaching contracts back in 2003, I was often considered "too professional", but it was something I didn't compromise on and I always ensured the contracts I received had been reviewed through my own legal advisor, too. It's crucial to know the invoicing and payment cycles of different studios. While you may believe that yoga studios and gyms are honest – and most of them are – there are yoga teachers who are

tracking down unpaid invoices that are six to 12 months old. If teaching is your only source of income, ensure you know the terms and conditions of employment prior to starting your new position.

Keep up with your schedule

When working for multiple studios with differing timetables and class fees, it's essential for you to represent each studio as if it is the only one you are teaching for. Your integrity and professionalism is really important, and communicating upcoming events and timetable changes are a welcome quality to have in becoming a highly regarded and sought-after yoga teacher.

Maintain a healthy eating plan

To sustain the long and varying hours, it's essential to have a balanced diet that is rich in protein, fibre, vitamins and minerals. Planning for the week ahead, stocking up on healthy snacks throughout the day and making sure you have sufficient water to stay hydrated between classes is key. You may also want to consider cooking extra meals on your days off and having them ready for those late-night classes. Teaching over such long hours can be exhausting in the long run, and yoga teacher burnout isn't that uncommon, so sustaining your nutritional needs are vital.

Most importantly, stay connected to the energy of why you started your own practice in the first place. Being a yoga teacher really does touch lives forever. **ANH**