

Yoga: Is It Your Business?

by Pragya Bha

Purpose: To examine how yoga teaching is essentially an entrepreneurial venture.

Introduction

I was recently interviewed for a program for women entrepreneurs who are 'impactful changemakers in their domains'. Our interaction was around billions of dollars in funding and revenue, bottom lines, company growth, returns, equity, liability, risk assessment...finally circling back to the billion dollars. At the risk of being branded an unambitious dilettante, I ventured to ask if they had ever mentored someone who wasn't driven by billions of dollars and the supposed prestige that comes with having hundreds of employees. Someone who was driven to live on and by their art. Someone with no team, no investors, no employees...quite simply, someone like me. An artist, a teacher or a musician, who sustain themselves through their art. The answer was that 'the term entrepreneur implies having a team and working on something larger than oneself'. I found myself once again face to face with a commonly held notion - that a yoga teacher, like an artist or a freelance musician, is simply not involved in something of much significance, something serious enough to effect change beyond their spheres. A yoga teacher is praised for putting their leg behind their head, but few understand the effort put into the study of anatomy and biomechanics that goes behind that feat. She is counted in the ranks of a hobbyist at best and a dilettante at worst; but not accorded due respect for the courage and conviction of turning a passion into a source of stable income.

As a profession, yoga has historically been blanketed under archaic dogma and a multitude of cultural, traditional and religious nuances¹, which contributed to it never being an established professional pursuit (this of course changed over the last few decades). Furthermore, because yoga as a competitive commercial enterprise is a relatively nascent phenomenon, yoga teachers themselves grapple with finding a balance between yoga teaching as imparted in the traditional context and how it is imparted in the fitness obsessed, consumer driven market of today. Having personally observed the workings of established enterprises and the start-up culture, it is apparent to me that although yoga is a complex field (made even more so by virtue of the special place it occupies in our culture), yoga teachers still navigate their careers using many of the attitudes, behaviours and ideas prevalent in the conventional start-up space today.

¹ Such as the belief that it is a 'noble' profession and for everyone and hence should not be monetised.

The multi-billion dollar industry of yoga hasn't been a fluke, but the hard work of intelligent, creative and inspired individuals. With socio-economic development and the resultant changes in ideas geared toward commodification, yoga is now up for consumption. A closer look at the evolution of yoga as a profession against a background of change fueled by development will shed light on the world of entrepreneurial yogis. They have been innovative, collaborative, courageous and driven to create impact, all characteristics of great entrepreneurs. Yoga professionals (whether as studio owners or independent teachers) are quintessential entrepreneurs, and it is time they be credited as such.

The Evolution of the Indian Market

The Indian economy was a closed one until the 1980s. Those times were defined by businesses such as Maruti cars, Maggi noodles, HMT watches and Tata salt. Set up by the best entrepreneurs of the time, these companies rapidly created powerful industries, which brought about socio-economic growth. Indian leaders too were interested in creating a strong and sustainable economy. In 1957, Jawaharlal Nehru himself convinced IBM to make investments in India. This was done with a view of expansion, modernisation, forethought, and entrepreneurial acumen. In this nascent economy the middle classes were attracted to the safety and stability of jobs in the government sector.

The evolution of the middle classes is reflective of this spirit of free trade, innovation and exploration. The disposable income of the middle classes has steadily increased twentyfold in the last twenty-five years. This increase has come with financial freedom. Indians are spending more per capita, traveling more than ever before and foraying into territory hitherto unexplored by their parents and grandparents.

Attitudes and values have also changed. No longer lured by the stable income promised by the government sector, the Indian youth has become more experimental. What had once seemed 'safe' and 'secure' was no longer considered lucrative. The aspirations now were not only to earn money, but to generate and create wealth. The advent of an open and free market, government encouragement and a new middle class that was willing and ambitious gave India impetus for rapid social change.

By the beginning of the new millennium India was poised on the brink of a great renaissance.

Enter the Entrepreneur

In a young country, and its growing economy, everyone (from the corner mom and pop store to the large business houses) has survived by innovating and ideating. It can be argued that Maruti, IBM and even Nestle (Maggi), though they were large businesses, were also our first entrepreneurs. In a rapidly changing landscape, entrepreneurship is characterized by the willingness and courage to take financial risks to bring a new product or idea to the market.² 'Entrepreneur' connotes someone who has a vision, can convince others of this vision and then is willing to take financial risks to realise the vision. They look past traditional business structures to think out of the box. Early entrepreneurs were not sitting within the confines of their estates and making a living. Instead, they were planning to explore unknown vistas, raising funds for the ship and crew for their journey to the New World. Christopher Columbus lobbied (various kingdoms in the 1400s) for a team, raised capital and promised his investors (Queen Isabella I and King Ferdinand II) the Far East. They were risking not only large capital, but at times, also their lives. The Columbus expeditions have all the ingredients for the classical startup - There was heroism, exploration, discovery and of course, financial risk. What's more? Just like a classic entrepreneur, he failed! He never did discover India. In a great show of self-belief (an important characteristic for any entrepreneur) and happy delirium he named the indigenous Americans, *los indios*.

From 2010 onwards, start-ups began mushrooming in all sectors. Indians increasingly sought to create their own destinies, unshackled from the history of social class, caste and strata. The startup ecosystem has garnered significant attention in recent times, not only because of the sheer number of entrepreneurial initiatives, but also given its strong angel investor network. With nearly \$20 bn of capital inflows and about 100,000 people, the Indian startup ecosystem today ranks amongst the top five in the world. Bengaluru ranks in the top 20 startup cities in the world.³ Entrepreneurship has gone viral.

² http://www.sdcmsmzn.com/notes/deepak/08_chapter-1.pdf

³ <http://media-publications.bcg.com/bcg-sift-1-3-indias-startup-story-unlocking-true-potential.pdf>

According to the economist Joseph Schumpeter, “The entrepreneur in an advanced economy is an individual who introduces something new in the economy- a method of production not yet tested by experience in the branch of manufacturing, a product with which consumers are not yet familiar, a new source of raw material or of new markets and the like”⁴ Applying this definition closer to home, we have OYO changing the way we book our hotel rooms, Flipkart forever changing the way we shop, Ola cabs reducing our time haggling with difficult auto-wallahs, Swiggy changing the way we order in, Jumbo Tail enabling small *kirana* owners to seamlessly procure their wares, Bira changing our Goa experience.

The FitPreneur

As far back as 1970 there was a plethora of fitness programs on TV such as Jillian Micheals with her aerobics and Liliias Folan with her Liliias, Yoga, and You. Closer to home we had Dhirendra Brahmachari on Doordarshan with his weekly show called Yogabhyasa. More recently (in the early 2000s), millions of Indians across the country practiced yoga with Baba Ramdev on the Aastha channel. Television was bringing a fitness revolution right into our homes. Meanwhile, fitness trainers, armed with smartphone cameras had started dabbling with hybrid models to train their clients. So even before it became de-reguer to have a ClassPass⁵ subscription, busy trainers would often record videos for their clients to train with at their convenience. In a way this was a dry run for the fitness innovations to come.

The new millenium also saw the rise of YouTubers offering fitness routines in the comfort of our homes. The videos were usually shot at home, with a rudimentary knowledge of angles and very basic camera equipment. However, the phenomenal fan following of such channels was an indication that there was a demand for this format of exercising.

This increased interest in fitness may have been a result of the increasing stress we were experiencing due to globalisation and the resultant culture of mindless consumption. The buzzwords of the time became ‘mindfulness’, ‘stress relief’, ‘rejuvenation’, ‘balance’ etc. It wasn’t a surprise then that apps started to measure how many calories we were burning, remind us to have a drink of water, and to walk another few steps to make it our 5 km target. Soon

⁴ http://www.sdcmsmzn.com/notes/deepak/08_chapter-1.pdf

⁵ <https://classpass.com/>

apps would remind us to 'switch off' or to 'take a break' or even to quite simply, 'breathe'. Apps had started to replace personal trainers and dieticians; and in some cases, even doctors.

The stage had been set for 'online fitness'.

The Market for Yoga

The yoga market has proven to be a tougher nut to crack than the fitness and nutrition markets. There are many reasons for this, the primary one being that it has been entrenched in the Indian psyche since time immemorial; and as such has many preconceived notions and prejudices associated with it. It is not only millennials who are practicing yoga, but also their grandparents. Yet for every person who spends significant time and money on yoga retreats today, there is another who says 'Yoga is too boring for me.'

This diversity in opinions combined with deep seated bias poses unique challenges. Yoga teachers often find themselves providing justification for their fees as there is widespread belief that yoga classes should be offered at nominal rates (or even for free!). Many teachers struggle to find an optimum balance between self practice and teaching classes so as not to burnout or get injured. The judgement that comes with being held to a higher spiritual benchmark and forever exude 'the pink of health' takes a toll on many. Yoga teachers have, by necessity, become entrepreneurial in order to handle these challenges as many of these threaten their sustenance itself! Because this is a nascent profession, the nature of entrepreneurship within the yoga world merits a closer look. Is the business of yoga the same as any other commercial enterprise?

A Brief History of Yoga Teaching

Yoga's undeniable spiritual aspect sets it apart from other forms of fitness. Traditionally yoga was a path and lifestyle to adhere to. Those interested in following the path of yoga were actively seeking out gurus and holy men to show them the way. Once they were accepted, they enjoyed the benefits that came with this 'profession' - the protection and help of a guru, a community of like minded people, a common cause, enough to eat and clothe themselves. Noted schools such as Kaivalyadhama and the Sivananda Ashram have been around since the

1930s, imparting knowledge in the *guru-shishya parampara*. These shishyas went on to spread the teachings of their gurus and thus yoga spread. In the modern scenario this is equal to being recruited by a company, enjoying benefits such as HRA & conveyance allowance, contracted along with other employees for the job description of the company and finally, drawing an income with which to satisfy needs. And yet, yoga was not considered a career option.

The Yogi as an Entrepreneur - The Yogipreneur

There is an oft-repeated saying in the yoga world that a good yoga teacher is also a good yoga student. A long, fulfilling and successful teaching career rests on the bedrock of sustained personal sadhana. A yoga teacher must continue seeking knowledge from a variety of sources, ranging from yoga retreats, teacher trainings, specialised workshops, etc. A yoga teacher, just like a doctor, incurs a significant cost for any additional workshops she attends. The deeper your practice, the better your teaching. And frequently this teaching is not free. It is no wonder then, that long term yoga students traverse the journey from personal sadhana to yoga business/independent yoga teacher, seeking a balance between spiritual upliftment and material growth.

The late 90s and early 2000s saw many people quitting stable salaried jobs to take the plunge into the world of yoga teaching. They dreamt of 'following their passion' and 'sharing their love of yoga with the world' and 'spreading the knowledge of yoga'. However, sooner than later, they faced the reality of meeting basic living and lifestyle expenses. Many who dreamt of being 'full-time' yoga teachers soon realised that it takes years to build the kind of following that ensures full group classes, and teaching at the local studio simply doesn't amount to a sustainable income.

The physical challenge of teaching classes at multiple locations and earning enough for a comfortable lifestyle has many teachers burning out within a year of teaching. Those who do survive, do so with an ingenious mix of talent, perseverance, an entrepreneurial spirit and a sense for business. Did I just use the word 'business' in a sentence about yoga?!

Indian teachers and philosophers had been travelling to the West to impart teachings since the 1800s (Swami Vivekananda Parliament of Religions in 1893, Jiddu Krishnamurthy in 1911). They were usually sponsored by large and wealthy (religious or intellectual) organisations. The

turn of the 19th century saw a universal interest in the ancient practice of yoga. Scholars and spiritual seekers had been traveling to India for centuries, and documenting their travels through paintings, personal essays and even books. Before the Beatles' arrival at the now defunct International Ashram for Meditation, Ram Das had already embarked on a search for Neem Karoli Baba (of the Himalaya Yoga fame) in the late 60s. And prior to that in 1934, Indra Devi and Vanda Scaravelli had made their way to T Krishnamacharya to sit at the masters' feet and delve deeper into the philosophy of yoga. More Indian yoga maestros becoming accessible to the west certainly led to more awareness and interest in yoga.

In 1954 BKS Iyengar made his first journey overseas, to teach the violinist Yehudi Menuhin yoga in Gstaad, Switzerland. This was perhaps the harbinger of 'teaching tours' as we've come to know them today. Travelling for Indian yoga teachers at the time wasn't easy. India had just become an independent nation and was reeling from a colonial hangover. BKS Iyengar has spoken of the racism he encountered in the UK⁶, while Pattabhi Jois initially refused to teach the white students who had come to him, saying they were 'impure'. Indeed, there was a belief that to cross the waters and go into foreign shores was akin to defiling oneself. However, Jois started teaching western students in the 1960s, and first traveled abroad until 1974.

Although BKS Iyengar and Pattabhi Jois had travelled with great hardship to their own gurus, it's interesting to note they didn't believe their students had to do the same. Not only was this thought a stark break from tradition, but one that made yoga more accessible, providing a supply for the existing demand in the market. From a business standpoint, this is the point where an existing thought process was discarded in favor of an unconventional new and more innovative one. As demand for their work increased, teachers found newer and more creative ways to increase the supply.

Inadvertently, the yoga world started to think of finances, marketing and advertising. If yoga teachers were the salespeople and their particular style of yoga the product, then travel was a way to market themselves and increase their sales. Much of the 'branding' work was already done by their students. Stories such as Yehudi Menuhin gifting Iyengar a watch engraved with

⁶ <https://kripalu.org/resources/remembering-b-k-s-iyengar-man-who-was-once-anti-advertisement-yoga>

“To my best violin teacher, BKS Iyengar”⁷, went a long way to establish his particular brand of yoga.

An increase in travel also brought along with it the mingling of cultures and exchange of ideas. This in turn brought about a change in perception and also encouraged yoga students to think out of the box. Until now students travelling to India to learn yoga were doing so ostensibly for the desire to learn yoga and attain enlightenment. This changed as western students started to consider teaching yoga as a way to support themselves financially.⁸ Interested in immersing themselves in the authentic yogic lifestyle, students saw themselves as capable and indeed, responsible for continuing the legacy of their gurus. Many teachers had already started permitting, and even encouraging, worthy students to go forth and teach. However, there was no clearly defined method or system of certification..

This changed with the advent of the TTCs or Teacher Training Courses, which is perhaps when business first met the ancient art of yoga.

Arrival of the TTC

The infamous Bikram Choudhary can be credited with being the mastermind of the modern Teacher Training Course. Legend goes that during a private class with Shirley MacLaine, she told a young and fresh out of India Bikram, “You can’t keep teaching like this forever. You’ll never make any money!” Bikram, who had already started gaining much adulation and success as a group and personal yoga teacher, took this to heart. He had already amassed a fan following with his sequence of 26 postures done in a period of 90 minutes. He shrewdly filed a patent (one that was never granted) for the sequence and then went about methodically creating the first phenomenally successful yoga business in history.

The reason for Bikram’s success isn’t hard to understand. For any product to be successful, it has to be simple, functional and accessible. People wanted to practice yoga without the time, effort and money to go to India, and if they could also become authorised to teach for a fee, then they would pay for that too. Bikram rose to the challenge and commercialised the age-old *guru-shishya parampara*. For a fee you could learn his sequence, his script and he would

⁷ <https://iymv.org/yehudi-menuhin-and-bks-iyengars-transformative-friendship/>

⁸ In 1972 David Williams received his 6-month YTC certification at Dr. Swami Gitananda's Ananda Ashram in Pondicherry. It was David Williams, along with his then girlfriend Nancy Gilgoff, who sponsored Pattabhi Jois' first trip to the US in 1975.

certify you as a teacher in his tradition. Once they started teaching, they would also pay him royalty. As he already had a mass following, he had a fair understanding of his target audience. He drew up his terms and figured out his pricing. Bikram was in business, and the business was thriving. His business model has since been copied by all yoga studios. A significant portion of income for studios today is their TTCs. Entrepreneurial yoga studio owners have since enhanced the TTC and perfected this model. While Bikram taught his entire TTC himself, today we have studios collaborating with expert teachers to give aspiring teachers a well-rounded experience. Much like any other product, the TTC has undergone many iterations, not only in response to market feedback and demand, but also in response to brilliant, thoughtful yogipreneurship.

For many years, the ultimate ambition for a yoga teacher was to own their own studio. There was not only prestige attached to this but also a sense of stability and regular income. The trade-off, however, was more than what many yoga teachers are willing to pay.

The Yogipreneur - the Yoga Studio Owner

‘What if I told you to take a step back, Pragya,’ I was asked at the same interview. ‘You will never teach another yoga class again. Instead you will create a system which will create more yoga teachers - a phenomenal system larger than yourself!’ The sheen of excitement in my interviewer’s eyes did nothing for me.

‘If you told me I would never teach yoga again in any capacity, I would unequivocally have to turn your offer down,’ I said.

Between 1990 and 2005 yoga studios were thriving. For consumers, it was convenient to have access to a variety of classes, teachers and timings; and all within their budget. An intrinsic aspect of an entrepreneur's mental makeup is a drive to make a positive impact on society. Yoga studio owners were constantly putting on their entrepreneurial and business hats to do just that. They wanted to offer various kinds of yoga classes, pilates, other forms of physical fitness classes, nutrition advice and even mental health counseling, in short, all your holistic health solutions under one roof. Yoga studio owners spend time analysing marketing strategies, hiring and training, quality control, meeting deadlines, bottom lines and the investors.

Many studio owners start a studio with the intention of teaching more yoga and being involved in their profession in a more impactful way. However, many soon realize that running a yoga studio doesn't necessarily mean more yoga for them. The yogipreneur eventually becomes an entrepreneur who loves yoga and is lucky enough to attend an occasional yoga class. Owning a studio was definitely a dream come true and meant financial stability - but somewhere along the way the practice of yoga starts to take a backseat. It becomes more difficult to wake up early to do your practice, or to find an hour during the day when you don't have something else to attend to. In the day-to-day running of the business, it becomes a challenge to focus on your own development as a yogi. A yoga studio owner becomes, for all practical purposes, an entrepreneur who has a yoga business instead of (as originally imagined), a yogi who also runs a yoga business. No wonder then, that although many yoga teachers run very successful yoga studios, they realize that the business of yoga is less about the actual practice of yoga and more about running a successful enterprise. In the running of a yoga space, teachers realize that the focus has shifted from the teaching of yoga to the management of an institute. "Initially it was great because I was teaching more and there was a lot of freedom," says Medha Bhaskar of Amrutha Bindu Yoga. "But eventually there were the usual challenges of keeping the business running."

"Commodification of anything changes something in its essence," says Lester Kurtz⁹, a professor of Sociology at George Mason University. "To put it very crudely, love making and sex are the same thing, but one is love and the other prostitution. You're teaching yoga - but are you doing it for the money or for the love of the subject?" Studio owners quickly found that somewhere between analysing balance sheets and new marketing strategies, their purpose changed from one of spirituality to one of capitalism., their love-making had turned into sex.

The Yogipreneur - The Independent Yoga Teacher

Many yoga teachers were disillusioned by this commodification of spirituality. They also discovered that starting a yoga studio is not an easy task. For a teacher who is more comfortable expostulating the *Yoga Sutras of Patanjali* than with balance sheets and profit projections, the idea of raising funds, speaking to investors, setting up processes, marketing, hiring etc is a daunting one. Added to that is the fact that most yoga teachers don't have a

⁹ Gods in the Global Village: The World's Religions in Sociological Perspective

background in management studies. Luvena Rangel, president of the WICCI¹⁰ Karnataka Yoga Council told me, “I always wanted to have a brick and mortar space of my own. When I moved to India I didn’t know who to trust and had no clarity about the finances. I decided to get my feet wet by teaching, and eventually I realised I enjoy the teaching bit more than I would enjoy running a yoga space. Even if I had someone else taking care of the space, I would always be involved in the management of it, and I might get stuck there.”

The clarity that Luvena has is uncommon. Most fresh TTC grads looking to teach yoga for a living are utterly befuddled by how to move forward. As an engineering student I knew I could either go on to study management, get an MS or I could end up getting employed by a company. A fresh TTC graduate has only a rough idea of how to get started. Yoga studios don’t conduct regular recruitment drives, and fresh teachers have to rely predominantly on word of mouth to get teaching gigs. In stark contrast to the yoga studio owner, an independent yoga teacher ends up spending all her time on the teaching of yoga - including time spent in traffic driving from class to class, and barely ends up making enough money to eke out a comfortable living. “My first few months of teaching, I was making Rs. 6000-7000 a month from the classes I was teaching,” says Sugandha Agrawal, yogipreneur and founder of Wellness Sutra. “I had recently given up my job and put all my money in a venture that failed. At the time my husband supported me immensely.”

What helped Sugandha and Luvena at the time was the ability to look at the problem analytically. Like entrepreneurs in any other field, they looked at their assets (in Sugandha’s case it was a supportive husband) and used those assets to continue pursuing their vision. Luvena came from a work experience of 13 years with BP Middle East. She credits her work experience for her skills of planning, active listening, systems, organization, her eye for detail and accountability. All these have helped her in her decision making and risk taking as a freelance yoga teacher. In the pursuit of a successful yoga teaching career, the skills that come in handy are no different than what are required in any other profession.

Lack of such skills coupled with the belief that it is unyogic to hanker after material wealth has many aspiring yoga teachers bidding adieu to the profession. There is great discord within the yoga community about pricing and fees. It is a long held belief by yoga purists that gurus live on

¹⁰ Women’s India Chamber of Commerce and Industry

guru dakshina alone. “And this dakshina was not much,” explained Uma Subramaniam¹¹ to me. “In the old days students would pick up *samith*, from the forest and that was it. That was enough for the guru because we don’t do it for the money. That might be easy for me to say, but I really do believe that. I know it’s an unpopular view, but I do believe that.”

Teachers who rely on teaching to pay the bills disagree. As Sugandha puts it, “If someone is providing a service of, let’s say, jute bags made by up-cycled material, they charge for it because it is a service they are providing, and this service is giving back to the society. In the same way, as yoga teachers we give back to society in a way that is immeasurable and we deserve to be compensated. I know there is an internal struggle with lots of people with regards to this. But,” she adds, “I come from a business family, so charging for my work has never been an issue for me.”

A yogipreneur's journey is like that of any other entrepreneur - unclear, messy, skewed and discouraging. Conviction and balance go a long way to stay on the path. Many independent/freelance teachers are thriving. They’ve been lucky to find the sweet spot between financial ambitions and spiritual quests. As independent teachers, they can plan their classes and their pricing around factors such as their own practice and study, their health insurance and even their time off.

Personally, I’ve found that if a teacher sticks to it long enough with professionalism, ethics and conviction in her work, sooner or later, she ‘makes it’. In my own journey, I have ensured that I always implemented the professionalism that was expected of me in my corporate career and always made time for my personal practice; and I feel that has made all the difference. It does take time to carve a niche for yourself - one where your income enables you to have a secure life and where you’re not compromising on your spiritual ideals in trying to make that income. “I think Dharma Mitra has it down,” says Jack Westerholt¹², referring to Sri Dharma Mitra, inventor of the Dharma Yoga Wheel.¹³ “He has created a wonderful enterprise and does teacher training courses too, but he is still immersed in his own spiritual path. You can see that reflected in the offerings he shares with the world.”

¹¹ Core group member, a1000yoga Academy

¹² Yoga practitioner and Brand Creative at The Richard’s Group

¹³ <https://www.dharmayogacenter.com/about/sri-dharma-mitra/>

The Corona Virus - The Yogipreneur Thrives Again

Covid 19 changed the world as we know it. Ours was a world of hands-on adjustments and tuning in to the teacher's energy. Many were resistant to the change and refused to jump on the online bandwagon. But those who did eventually realized that there is so much benefit to derive from going indoors and online. Entrepreneurial yoga teachers realized that quite literally, the world was a potential student.

Perhaps the most interesting phenomenon of this time was that while large, VC funded fitness startups languished as their 'clients' didn't want to go online, the niche yoga teacher was in her element. The clients at some of the most popular offline fitness studios dropped out and thronged to the Zoom rooms of teachers who they had hitherto only heard about, but never had access to. I myself saw a 100% increase in attendance in my group classes and a 500% increase in my private sessions. With this came a corresponding increase in income.

This was not as straightforward as it sounds. Teaching online comes with the challenge of patchy internet and space constraints; but yoga teachers have been able to address them creatively and intelligently. They started modifying their classes to suit an online audience. There was an increase in engagement with students and on social media. Teachers started creating a conscious social media presence for themselves. Teachers of all ages suddenly found that they were relevant to an audience that traversed age and nationalities. Finally, the more outgoing yoga teachers started to collaborate with each other to create workshops, online yoga festivals and classes that they would not be able to create alone.

This pandemic has seen a lot of teachers giving up teaching or quietly fading into the background because as the world changed, they refused to evolve. The Corona virus was a boon for intelligent, smart and entrepreneurial yoga teachers. A primary rule of entrepreneurship is to evolve with changing markets. 2020 showed us that the business of yoga is subject to the vagaries of any other business.

The Way Forward

"Yoga teachers are hesitant to start up and that in my opinion is a huge challenge," says Sugandha. "TTCs teach us the art of becoming yoga teachers. We learn what to teach and even how to teach, but we don't learn anything about the actual business of yoga. TTCs should

add a section for that in their curriculum. A person with an MBA or a degree in communications is more likely to be successful as a yoga teacher because they learn all the other skills necessary to be successful in a marketplace.”

Sugandha is not alone in thinking this. “I definitely had an edge because of my experience in the banking sector,” says Uma. “I had a sense of responsibility, professionalism, I was good with my communication and my presentation skills. You also learn how to establish your boundaries, which is difficult for fresh teachers to assert.”

Learnings for Newbie Yoga Teachers

Through this research I have been privy to many differing beliefs about the field of yoga and to various kinds of yoga teachers. However, there was a common thread running through every teacher I met. Each teacher had the drive to succeed in this undertaking and the intelligence to support that journey. They had the capacity and maturity to shift between the different roles of artist, teacher, student, business owner and entrepreneur whenever needed. None of the teachers I spoke to came to the teaching of yoga with the idea that this would be a side business or an easy income stream. And above all they had an unshakable belief in the philosophy of yoga.

Those who wish to make a life teaching yoga can learn a great deal from the experiences of established teachers. Good teachers prioritize personal sadhana and study. Once at RIMYI Pune, a teacher advised younger teachers “if you don’t practice, you don’t teach.” It is ironic then that while listening to a podcast about the business of yoga, the guest advised yoga teachers to not practice too much as that leads to physical and mental fatigue¹⁴. At times new yoga teachers get so consumed with teaching that they don’t spend adequate time on their own learning. It is essential for yoga teachers to set aside quality time for themselves. The more time you spend on deepening your own study, the more valuable you are for your students. Ideally, you should attend classes regularly with senior teachers. In addition to this, having a grounding in anatomy and yoga literature is also important. Growth, both materially and spiritually, doesn't happen in a vacuum. It requires intent, effort and smart planning.

¹⁴ Teaching Yoga Podcast: Where Photography & Yoga Intersect with Tara D’cruz Noble’

Such close interaction with teachers across the spectrum also made it apparent to me that a good teacher is the result of a long process, and there are no shortcuts to that process. We are meant to embrace the process of growing into the teacher we are meant to be. Just like we're constantly evolving as practitioners, we are evolving as teachers too. Maturity and wisdom come with time and experience. "I think wisdom is an essential attribute of a yoga teacher and that doesn't come with only age or experience. Some very young people are wise," says Luvena.

I have also observed that those who held the mistaken belief that teaching yoga is an easy and relaxing pastime have been unable to create a sustainable career for themselves. This is because yoga is not only a profession, but a path. Those who are on the path know that to be in it for the long haul, you need to draw upon learnings you gain from life, other professions, even other educational courses. Those who aspire to be career yoga teachers must weigh in on all the experiences life has to offer them. It is advisable to actually work somewhere else and spend years as a student, before you decide to settle down for life as a yoga teacher.

At this time it is also important to bring in the online teaching aspect. The Covid 19 pandemic saw an increase in the number of online TTCs. People as young as 15 were getting certified to teach within 15 days of 2 hour classes. Needless to say, the cost of such trainings was also 'highly competitive'. I once spoke to a graduate of one such course and was surprised by her aversion to teaching offline. "Classes will be online only," she told me. Upon my insistence that she not rely only on an online 200 RYT and only online teaching if she's considering a serious career in yoga, she told me, "Luckily people have started asking for me and I think that's a good thing." The burgeoning of online TTCs has given many aspirants the idea that yoga teaching is about a certificate. Yoga teaching certifications may have definitely become more accessible, but a sustainable career in yoga will still elude you, unless you're willing to give it the time, energy and respect it deserves.

The business and the personal sadhana are two sides of one coin and as such must evolve together. It is easy to get carried away with the business of yoga, especially because the business pays our bills. The middle ground can be found in the teachings of Vedanta. The shastras encourage us to look at the rose and its thorns with acceptance. An aversion to the thorns shouldn't be the reason to abandon the beauty of the rose. So tyaga of materialistic wealth through which we sustain our life, is not the answer. The answer is to face the limitations

of our situation and to accept the drawbacks, if any. Yoga philosophy is our true north and we must not lose sight of it as we create fulfilling, sustainable teaching careers for ourselves.