

Episode 2: Karma Capitalism Killed Yoga

- (Jesal) We live in a lawless land with no HR.
- (Tejal) Hello, everyone. I'm Tejal.
- (Jesal) And I'm Jesal.
- (Tejal) And this is Yoga is Dead.
- (Jesal) We're two Indian-American yoga teachers navigating the weird and tricky world of yoga.
- (Tejal) Get ready to hear our personal stories, thoughts, and research on who killed yoga. Grab some chai, a tall comfortable seat, and let's go.
- (Jesal) What's up, Tejal? What's on your mind?
- (Tejal) Just a sunny day, feeling good... I have one thought.
- (Jesal) What?
- (Tejal) Did karma kill yoga?
- (Jesal) What do you mean when you say karma killed yoga?
- (Tejal) I mean, this idea that businesses are touting as Karma Yoga or Seva Yoga and asking people to do work for free.
- (Jesal) Yeah. We're talking about fair pay, labor practices, issues around money in yoga, right?
- (Tejal) Yeah, exploiting people who come to yoga because they believe in it, and then asking them to do stuff for you for free.
- (Jesal) Right. So we're calling this karma capitalism.
- (Tejal) For us, we're talking about karma and business settings like yoga studios that are really exploiting free work, free labor. You know traditionally, Karma Yoga is a path of purifying our heart and counteracting the influence of egoism. So it's written in the Gita that Karma Yoga is performing one's own dharma, or ethical right action, or righteous duty. I don't know how that relates to mopping floors and giving classes for free and stuff.

- (Jesal) We're talking really about the mutation and mix up that comes from businesses who are profiting off of free labor, or other unfair and unethical business practices using the guise of karma or seva. Karma is about choice and there can't be any expectation or attachment to any outcome. The way studios are pitching Karma Yoga to us creates scenarios in which we begin to expect an outcome. For example, I'll work at the studio in exchange for free classes. This isn't Karma Yoga because there's an expectation of free classes.
- (Tejal) True karma, or selfless action, comes from acting without expectation of receiving anything or of having any impact at all. So the more yoga you practice -- and we're talking about the internal work and practicing the yamas and the niyamas -- theoretically, the more compassion you have for self and others, and you start working in service to others through your own personal choice. And that's the key to what karma is. It isn't when someone asks you to do something for them in exchange for goods or services -- that's *bartering*. Our paths are truly different, then our own righteous duty or ethical right action isn't going to be the same thing to get to that place of liberation or Nirvana and enlightenment that the yoga practice essentially tells us we're working towards.
- (Jesal) And then there's the idea, the Hindu idea of dharma, too, right? That you have to hit these certain landmarks in your life as a householder, not as like a yogi that went off into the woods, but if you live the life of a householder, you're supposed to raise a family, earn an income, and then at the end of your life you're supposed to do some selfless acts in your retirement ages.
- (Tejal) In the current yoga landscape, we see studios asking for teachers and staff to do unpaid work under the guise of Karma Yoga. Studios hold the power and because we are manipulated to believe this is part of the spiritual practice, we feel good about it, at least in the beginning. Let's be clear: studios are capitalist enterprises and they are nothing like ashrams. Many ashrams, for example, have work exchange programs that provide lodging, meals, education, and other community-based support and activities.
- (Jesal) Here are ways that studios are taking advantage of people spiritually in order to receive unpaid labor -- Having them teach unpaid charity or donation-based classes, unpaid front desk or admin work, having them do unpaid cleaning of studios and mats, unpaid meetings and training times (and not including training for the different roles you expect teachers to take on), unpaid consulting or marketing work.
- (Tejal) No guaranteed contract, no guaranteed hours, no autonomy over scheduling as an independent contractor.
- (Jesal) Minimum wages are not guaranteed. There's no clarity on employment type, or pay, or benefits. Usually, there's no additional benefits outside of pay.

(Tejal) There's no labor union, no oversight for fair pay and equity. Essentially no governance at all and tons of people opening up yoga shops without a realistic business plan, and feeling pretty damn good about it because, you know, karma.

(Jesal) (laughs)

(Tejal) We know that's a lot, but no fear. We're about to dive in, complete with our personal horror stories and all.

(Jesal) First, let's just say right off the bat -- yoga teachers, if you're contemplating opening a studio, don't open a business if you don't have the capital investment to pay staff even when no one shows up for class, period. Your instructor showed up, your instructor carved out that time, why isn't that worth something when they are willing and able to engage?

(Tejal) Don't open a studio because someone told you, "you're a good yoga teacher, girl." Shit, even if 100 people said, "You should teach yoga." Don't open that studio, Becky.

(Jesal) Don't open because you're tired of everyone asking when you're going to open a studio. Seriously people, stop asking yoga teachers when they're going to open a studio. That's like asking a university professor when they're planning on opening up a university. And seriously, if you can't pay your teachers, why are you opening up a business? Studio owners, consider this a PSA. Your employees are your product. If you think you're selling yoga, you're wrong. You're selling yoga teachers. Without the teacher, there is no product. People come to your classes not just for the yoga, usually not for the yoga at all. They usually come because of the personality of the teacher, and the way they instruct, their speaking voice, their mannerisms.

(Tejal) We know a lot about our students, and we care. But if our manager doesn't see that, we don't feel valued.

(Jesal) Right. And the business will ultimately fail because they don't realize the model of the business they're actually running to begin with.

(Tejal) Jesal, let's start with your great story about contracts. I remember when I first heard this story, Jesal, I could barely believe it.

(Jesal) So... some of you might know that I was working for a Teacher Training. And let me tell you how this Teacher Training worked.

(Tejal) Well first, why were you involved with their Teacher Training? Did you have a relationship with them?

- (Jesal) I did. I had done a training there myself and I knew one of the directors of the training. And one of the directors had asked me if I wanted to step in and teach.
- (Tejal) So they invited you.
- (Jesal) They invited me.
- (Tejal) Amazing.
- (Jesal) Great. But the way it worked is there was no contract at any point in time. I basically received an email a couple of weeks before, and I would just show up, and there was no talk about pay. There's no negotiation of pay or benefits. They basically decided what they were going to pay me, and they paid me. And I trusted them to pay me, and they did, luckily. When it comes to this Teacher Training and me teaching on their staff, what was interesting is that eventually, they tried to take advantage of my employment. I had actually generated a lot of profitable ideas for them, stuff that I gave away for free without any compensation. I didn't expect to. I just wanted to be a team player at the time.
- (Tejal) Guys, in between the lines here, that's called consulting! People get paid for that outside of the yoga industry. Go on, Jesal.
- (Jesal) Well yes, exactly. So I was consulting and I was giving them a ton of marketing ideas because they claimed that they weren't doing as financially well as they wanted to or needed to. So, and being a team player, I give this idea of "why don't you take some of your classes online?" Meaning, you have all this material, you're already teaching a 200-hour base-level training, and you have so much more material, why don't you expand on some of that, and go online, and sell some classes to your already existing audience. They loved that idea. I thought we were going to have a discussion about it, meaning, I think they had asked me if I was interested in helping them out filming those classes.
- (Jesal) And so I was under the impression that we were going to have a negotiation about terms -- like how many classes, how many hours, what the compensation would look like, who was going to own the content, the copyright, all of that. Instead, a few months later, me and the entire session staff get an email. So this email was sent out in November of 2018. And it reads something like, "As you may or may not know, we get a lot of students who need another option for making up their missed hours. They move right after the training, get sick, et cetera, and it really stresses them out. So we're in the process of trying to create a make-up hour option for the students that is low cost and accessible. We're doing a trial run offering the more bookish lectures online with some supplementary material exercises to do after. The plan is to just record lectures and then post them onto a secure platform where they can then pay a small fee to watch the video, and then do online classes through OpenLearning." So the studio is planning on collecting some money from the students.

- (Tejal) Just a small fee though, Jesal. (sarcastic)
- (Jesal) Mm-hmm (affirmative).
- (Tejal) Mm-hmm (affirmative).
- (Jesal) Kind of like a correspondence course. "The other director and I can manage online activities, but we need your lectures. I know some of you have already signed this release, but I would like to have updated versions." Meanwhile, I had never gotten this release before. This was new information. I was shocked to even be reading this email. "So please sign and date the attached video release form. If you want to just review it and reply back that you reviewed and agreed to the terms and conditions, that works too. We'll do the recordings over the January sessions. Don't feel like you have to prepare anything different other than be your wonderful selves. This is going to be a very low-budget expedient enterprise. So just be you."
- (Tejal) Wow, red flag much?
- (Jesal) To summarize the contract: it says that the training, meaning those directors, were going to own all of the material, the copyright to the material itself, meaning if I taught this material elsewhere I could potentially be sued. They're going to own the video, meaning, if they sold the video, let's say to another company, I would have no say over how my image was ever been used. They weren't going to compensate me in any way for this video. So they weren't going to pay me royalties, they weren't going to pay me even for my time or money, any extra than what they would pay me for already teaching the class in person. And that they're not restricted to selling this to third parties. And I was not on board with this.
- (Tejal) That's not a release. That's like, "Give me your firstborn, please."
- (Jesal) Yeah. (laughs) I mean, they even said that they had the right to mix and use my image however they desire. So, they could put me in like a prank video, or they could sell it to like the KKK to use however... to disparage me if they wanted to. Not that they would do that, but that's essentially, they wanted me to sign it away. And I wrote back basically saying, "I'm open to negotiation, but this contract doesn't work for me as is." And I think the response was, "Don't worry, we'll find someone else to do this." I was no longer on their website listed as a trainer. So, no guaranteed hours, no guaranteed pay, no guaranteed contract of any kind. And basically, they said, "Oh, if we can't take advantage of you and exploit you, then you're no longer a part of our program, even though you've given a ton of work and a ton of ideas to us for free in good faith."
- (Tejal) Yeah, you're being too nice because they didn't say any of that to you.
- (Jesal) No.
- (Tejal) They were completely silent on the communication.

(Jesal) Exactly, exactly.

(Tejal) Well I'm sorry for you, but I think you dodged a bullet.

(Jesal) I do too. One of my mentors, she had mentioned that, "Actually, you should just do it on your own." Like before this had even happened, she said, "You should just do it on your own. It's going to take so much more money, and time, and effort than you think. And at the end of the day, if you split this with the training, you're barely going to be able to break even." So, I guess the universe worked itself out, and I am going to film my own classes at some point. But it was just funny because then this happened and I was like, "Uh huh, okay, I guess all signs pointed to I should not be working with these people."

(Tejal) Yeah, sounds like it.

(Jesal) Have you had any experiences similar to this, or have you had guaranteed hours at any of your jobs?

(Tejal) Well, I thought I did have guaranteed hours and I just found a yoga teacher contract I signed in 2015 or early 2016, stating that my position at the studio under the High Line was two shifts, two classes a shift, because teaching four classes was how their studio community would get to know me better. Just after that part in the contract was this, quote: "I understand the company reserves the right to change my hours, wages, and working conditions at any time." End quote.

(Jesal) What the?

(Tejal) Yeah, what the. Which seems like a shitty thing to add to a contract, but also doesn't seem too uncommon, sadly. It ended up working out for those four classes for two years, kinda sorta. I mean, about two years in, they decided to change my schedule due to low attendance at the studio overall, and cut two of my classes. So this was like a mixed bag of feelings for me because I had given them two years. I really enjoyed the community. You're going to hear a lot of yoga teachers explain their point of view in making business type of decisions with their jobs defending their relationship with the community. "I love the students so much. I want to be there for the students. And so, I'm okay with compromising on X, Y, Z, and all the other things."

(Tejal) So, at the point in time where they decided to cut my two classes, they said, "Unfortunately, we can't give you any more than this week's notice. So, next week, you're SOL for those two classes." I was able to fill the time with some other work, *and* I was getting paid per head. So I was traveling to the studio for two years, to do four classes, getting paid based on attendance in their classes. Attendance in my classes got lower as well as every other class at the studio. And this was due to some other factors based on the management. Prices had changed a couple times in one year. It was already a *hella* expensive studio to practice at. And it wasn't very stable in terms of staff. And the students could feel that shakiness.

- (Jesal) True of any company where there's a lot of turnover.
- (Tejal) Yeah. You know, people are going to ask questions, and they're just going to feel a little uneasy. So at the time that they gave me notice that those two classes were going to be dropped, I was sad, but I had found something to cover it. The students hated the change and complained, rightly so. After a week of those classes being off the schedule, the manager asked me to take back the classes.
- (Jesal) (laughs)
- (Tejal) Yeah! Well guess what? *This* yoga teacher doesn't have the privilege of not working. So, like I said, I filled that time with other work. And of course, that's bittersweet. I had new work, but I was missing those students. And I had been with them for *two years*. When it came time to meet with the owner, I said exactly that: "I don't have the luxury or privilege of not working. So I had to fill my time with work."
- (Jesal) So Tejal, this was an at-will contract though, right?
- (Tejal) Yes, exactly. Their contract had an employment at-will section. So this is something really common in contracts that I'm not sure if people understand all too well. At-will employment simply means that at any time without any notice, for any reason, other than breaking federal and state law, the employer can terminate my employment instantly, and I can leave their employ instantly.
- (Jesal) So this has more to do with termination. This doesn't have to do with changing hours and pay.
- (Tejal) No, but that instant termination, that's a bitch. So I worked at a North Brooklyn studio chain for about nine months in 2016, which is actually where I met Lindsay, our podcast editor. So thankful for that. But during those nine months, there are a lot of ups and downs at that studio. And this one specific example is the studio owner decided, after eight months, to demand that I give up the four classes I just mentioned.
- (Jesal) At the previous studio.
- (Tejal) At the previous studio. So even though when I was hired, she was completely okay with me having those classes. Because I upfront told her I have this other previous commitment, I've been doing it for X amount of years, I really enjoy it, and I want to stay at that other place. She was more than fine. In that moment, rather than continue to work out a schedule for me that accommodated my four classes at the Chelsea studio, she kind of dangled her TT [teacher training] graduates in my face saying, "If you're not willing to do this for me, I have people that will."
- (Jesal) And this is like a common thing in the yoga community, right? Like, completely devaluing their employees, basically saying, "If you don't do all the things I ask of you, no matter how outrageous, you'll be replaced. We'll just find somebody else."

- (Tejal) Yeah. I'll just swap you out for that next yoga teacher. Someone once told me, "This is New York City. You can just throw your arm out and you'll hit a yoga teacher."
- (Jesal) Which might very well be true, but in other industries, right, there's some sort of laws, or labor unions, or something protecting employment. We don't have that in our community, do we?
- (Tejal) No. So she showed up to one of my Wednesday evening classes, asked me again to quit, to which I said, "No, I've been at that other place for two years, and I definitely need the money." And she said, "Okay, then that class you just taught here was your last class. Your login and password will be disabled tonight."
- (Jesal) So just on the spot at-will terminated.
- (Tejal) Yeah. Now that was traumatic for me. I went from seeing nearly 400 to 500 students in three studio locations in North Brooklyn, to not saying goodbye to a single one, and being out of 20 or so hours of work.
- (Jesal) That sucks.
- (Tejal) Yeah, that stung for a minute.
- (Jesal) So we just took a little break in the studio and Lindsay, our sound engineer and editor, was blown away by this. And Lindsay has some thoughts to share on her experience as the student.
- (Tejal) Hey, Lindsay!
- (Lindsay) Hey, Tejal.
- (Tejal) Aw so nice to see you across the table here. I think you just shared with us your reaction to my story. I didn't realize this is the first time you heard that story.
- (Lindsay) Yeah, well I told you my jaw just literally like dropped to the floor while I was listening and editing because I didn't know what actually happened to you. You were one of my favorite teachers. And I always felt like there was a connection, and you explain things in a way that made sense, and it had such a profound effect on my yoga practice. And I always looked forward to that. And there were other teachers too, during that time at that studio when you were there, that I notice a lot were just *gone* suddenly without any explanation. And it was heartbreaking, honestly.
- (Jesal) So Lindsay wanted to hop off to actually be our sound engineer.
- (Jesal and Tejal) (laugh)

- (Jesal) But she just told me that actually that studio was pressuring her for two years to do their Teacher Training, and they were being really pushy about it. She didn't even feel comfortable about it. She felt like something was off.
- (Tejal) And now she knows a lot of my truth.
- (Jesal) (laughs) Yep, something was off, Lindsay.
- (Tejal) So let's continue on with our list from earlier: Minimum wages that are not guaranteed, no clarity on employment type, and no additional benefits, *rarely*, outside of pay.
- (Jesal) So, one of the issues that sort of encompasses these things is the type of employment. A lot of people don't understand whether they're an employee, or they're an independent contractor, or they're a consultant.
- (Tejal) The essence of it, if you're an employee somewhere, then you can expect at least minimum wage. If you're an independent contractor, *you can not*. And does that get abused often in the yoga studio scene? Yes, 100%. To be properly classified as a contractor, a worker should not be a permanent, integral part of your business. So listen up, yoga teachers, do you feel like you're an integral part of a yoga business?
- (Jesal) I mean, doesn't that go back to what we just said? Teachers are the product? Without the teachers, there's no yoga?
- (Tejal) So how is it that so many studio owners are getting away letting the teachers believe that they're not important and not integral?
- (Jesal) Goes back to culture.
- (Tejal) Yeah. So I found this example to help bring it home. Say you're a freelance sketch artist, who submits drawings for review to the same magazine on a monthly basis, with no upfront commitment for purchase. That person's a contractor since each sketch sold is a new job and there was no guarantee of work provided in the beginning. I think based on that logic, you can argue both sides of the case that yoga teachers can be employees, and that they can be independent contractors. But mind you, I don't have, you know, the legal background on this. It's just my understanding based on this research. So if the business cancels class because no one shows and you're an independent contractor, the business doesn't have to pay you for showing up because there was no guarantee of work initially in the first place.
- (Jesal) So this is what happens most often in the yoga industry.
- (Tejal) Yeah, true. And then the other side, but what if you're an independent contractor, and you don't show up because you haven't been guaranteed work, and then the studio is unable to offer classes to the students who do show up? Is that then okay as well

because nobody's guaranteeing anyone anything? So either way, I think it's worth getting more clarity.

(Jesal) It's in the benefit of the business to clarify this as well as the benefit of the employee or the yoga teacher, however you want to classify them.

(Tejal) So we can get into the weeds a little more because actually when you're doing these classifications and you're misclassifying, like telling a teacher they're an independent contractor when actually you need them to have the business at all, there are some penalties to that. When an employee is misclassified as a contractor and the situation is brought to the attention of the government -- because it can be reported -- the business can be fined big time and required to back pay. If the business is a local, independently-owned yoga studio, that could run them into the ground.

(Jesal) But the problem is that most teachers don't really have the resources or the money to be able to actually take this to the government, to sue, or to take any legal recourse.

(Tejal) Totally. Resources, money, time, understanding of the law -- there isn't even a lot of precedent around it.

(Jesal) This misclassification, it actually leads to a lot of the flakiness that we see in the industry too, don't we hear --

(Tejal) Yeah, I would think so, I think so. If you don't feel valued and if you're not guaranteed pay or a job when you arrive at your place of employment, what's the point in showing up?

(Jesal) And we hear lots of studio owners or business owners say like, "Yoga teachers are just so flaky." But again, if you're not paying your employees, or guaranteeing pay or hours, why are they incentivized to show up? If I were in a situation where they couldn't guarantee me employment or hours and I needed to pay rent desperately, I might just skip that work for guaranteed work elsewhere.

(Tejal) Absolutely. Show up for some place that *will* pay me. I'm about to share a story about a yoga teacher contract I signed that was an independent contractor agreement, and included an overbroad, unfair non-compete clause. And I just want to caution all the yoga teachers out there really interested about jobs and getting more work: make sure you read the fine print in the contracts that you sign and have those honest conversations with potential employers because in my case, I got sued.

(Jesal) What happened?

(Tejal) Well, a friend of a friend was renting space to offer yoga classes. Here's some of the language in that contract, which included a non-compete clause. "For so long as independent contractor shall work for [business name], and for a period of six months after termination, for any reason, independent contractor shall not directly or indirectly solicit business from customers, clients, and prospective clients of [business name]."

Prospective client shows up a lot. If they're not already working with the yoga studio and they exist as human beings, does that make you a prospective client?

(Jesal) Good question!

(Tejal) Yeah. It seems a little overwrought. So, a little more on that non-compete clause read, "The term non-compete geographic area for purposes of this agreement shall be defined as within a three-mile radius of business address."

(Jesal) Which in New York City is like, insane.

(Tejal) Yeah. Think of that three-mile radius around Bed-Stuy. I live in Bushwick. What the hell? I can no longer teach human beings in Brooklyn? These clauses I've learned are usually considered overbroad, overreaching, and cause undue harm to the yoga teacher.

(Jesal) Which is why you won the sue.

(Tejal) Yes, eventually, I won the sue. The court's generally looked down upon legal action taken on these clauses. But beware, an employer can still sue a friend, I mean, a yoga teacher for breaching the clause in their employer opinion.

(Jesal) So what did you do exactly, though, that she thought was in breach of the contract?

(Tejal) My employer lasted about six to eight months, where I was teaching two classes a week for \$20 a class, but ...

(Jesal) Big money.

(Tejal) Big money, I know. But because she couldn't really maintain that business or her model that she had created, there was a period of four months where there were no classes. We were still friends, so we hung out all the time, but there were no classes being offered, and I wasn't being paid for any of that work. So, after four months, it was December, I secured a position, teaching at the North Brooklyn studio I just talked to you about.

(Jesal) The one that Lindsay was a student.

(Tejal) Exactly. I let my so-called friend know and she said, "No problem. I totally understand." Three weeks later in January, I emailed the people on my yoga list ...

(Jesal) This is for your own business that you have.

(Tejal) My own business, my own schedule, my own new teaching commitment, and they were not her clients.

(Jesal) But they happen to live in Brooklyn and be human.

- (Tejal) Exactly, human beings in Brooklyn. By the end of April, I was being sued for my very own breach of non-compete lawsuit.
- (Jesal) How long did that lawsuit last?
- (Tejal) It lasted about two years.
- (Jesal) Holy crap.
- (Tejal) I went through two law firms. Many hours of meetings later, the court granted summary judgment in my favor, which was expected from the start. But as a defendant, you have to pay to defend yourself. Otherwise, you get fined big time. I couldn't afford either, but I really could not afford being fined.
- (Jesal) So you're stuck between a rock and a hard place.
- (Tejal) Exactly.
- (Jesal) So how did you manage paying for legal counsel?
- (Tejal) I was lucky enough to ask my family.
- (Jesal) So, if you don't have a support system, you're screwed, basically.
- (Tejal) You're screwed, basically. I'll just say I've yet to pay my family back and that second law firm came from a yoga student relationship where he took me on pro bono.
- (Jesal) Wow.
- (Tejal) Yep. Connections, people.
- (Jesal) I wonder how she even found somebody to defend her.
- (Tejal) Oh, you see, you see the underbelly of the legal system here.
- (Jesal) Yeah.
- (Tejal) Yeah, going through that stuff. But that friend may still be trying to sell yoga to people. I'm not sure.
- (Jesal) I wonder how you're still calling her friend after all that.
- (Tejal) Oh, you can't see my air quotes, which is exactly one more reason why our podcast is called Yoga is Dead. So I'd like to take a moment just to deep breathe for our former yoga selves that experienced all this trauma and for anyone out there that might be going through all the same similar type of stuff in their own journey to teach this

amazing discipline to people, but really finding themselves in a rock and a hard place too.

(Jesal) Yeah, you're not alone. Speaking of issues, let's move on because we mentioned more. I mean, there's no labor union at all. There's no oversight, or fair pay, or equity at all. I mean, for me and my situation with the Teacher Training Program, that might have come in handy a little. They said that they didn't have the money to pay us for these videos that they wanted us to do for free.

(Tejal) And then they slipped you off their website.

(Jesal) Yep. Turns out I saw on social media that they actually opened a new studio. So they had the money to open a studio, where they didn't actually have a space before they were renting, but they didn't have the money to pay their teachers.

(Tejal) This isn't making sense. How is this equitable? How are they being rewarded with another studio when their staff isn't even making minimum wage for their work?

(Jesal) Who knows?

(Tejal) It's bogus. It's bogus, really. One of my private clients and I were discussing this podcast episode. He guided me to the Working Families Party in NYC because his tip was at this party organizes for causes like you're describing. So I looked it up and the Working Family Party advocates for well-paying jobs, and they fought, and won in 2004 to increase the minimum wage here in NY, which has since gone up, but that's a win they had in 2004. Now, we yoga teachers, we don't have to up and change our political party designation, see progress, but we can simply organize to communicate our needs.

(Jesal) So if employees are unhappy about conditions with the company they work for, they can petition to join a union?

(Tejal) They can, and you don't even have to get that far to the union stage. If the position drive is successful, then management has one month to meet with the workers or the yoga teachers and determine what the grievances are, and then one more month to implement changes.

(Jesal) So, essentially, you can work to redistribute power that the well-meaning Love and Light touting studio owners tend to lure order of the staff with statements like, "I'd love to pay you more. The studio just can't right now. We can't afford you. If we pay you more, we'd have to pay everyone," et cetera, et cetera.

(Tejal) Ultimately, our stance is that yoga teachers need to be paid for doing their job.

(Jesal) We haven't even gotten to bartering. It can be considered legal if both the studio and the teacher or front desk person whoever is bartering both report on their taxes. But how often do we actually see that? We often see front desk people working for free in exchange for classes with no one reporting that this is taxable income. On the teacher

side of things, we hear a lot of guilt and emotion around this whole idea of money, right? Money is considered evil. We're conditioned to think that yoga teachers shouldn't make money.

(Tejal) We are feeling insecure because we might not feel like we're good enough. I hear a lot of things like, "I'm grateful for the community classes I was given."

(Jesal) In the beginning, I didn't feel like I was ready to teach on the staff.

(Tejal) I think yoga should be free. So, I was happy to do it.

(Jesal) I feel guilty asking to be paid to teach.

(Tejal) I'm not as good as the other teachers or as experienced. So it makes sense not to be paid.

(Jesal) What about people who can't afford yoga?

(Tejal) I get it though, the studio isn't really making any money. Let me tell you why these thoughts are problems. If you don't feel good enough already after a Teacher Training to do the teaching jobs, isn't that the fault of the training? If you're signing up for a TT, wouldn't it make sense to know what jobs are available for you once you actually receive that certificate? When it comes to feeling prepared to teach in a new space, why aren't you receiving any paid training to feel good enough to teach there and be part of the team?

(Jesal) I want to go through some of these statements one by one. We hear things like, "I'm grateful for the community classes I was given."

(Tejal) Your worthiness is not based on how you feel. If the studio is asking you to teach or offering you space to teach their community, you deserve to be paid, community class or not. A lot of people have said to me in discussing this topic in particular, "I'm really happy I was given a community class. I don't think that I needed to be paid." I say to them, "Were you being supervised when you offered class to a community of students?" "No." "Well, how could you be sure that you were doing the right thing for that community of students?" "I don't know." "So, you were acting as an employee, preparing to teach class. Nobody was watching, supervising, evaluating, mentoring, and you're happy not being paid for your effort?"

(Jesal) And then usually, in my experience, there's no end date to this. For us, at that studio under the High Line, they had asked us after that anatomy training to teach community classes until the studio owner and manager could separately manage to make the class. Part of why I didn't teach there is because there was no one in sight. I had been teaching community classes for three months, and the studio owner still wasn't able to make my class, and she couldn't nail down a date for me. I thought, "Well, how long do you expect me to keep teaching free classes?" There were more issues there too. When I ask him what the pay rate would be if and when I finally got on the schedule, they wouldn't

answer my question. When I ask him what additional benefits were, he wouldn't answer my question. I basically felt it was unprofessional. I'd never been in an interview setting outside of yoga, where the terms weren't clear, and it wasn't a two-way interview process to see if the fit was right.

(Tejal) And then you can ask me the same question like why did I actually do the community classes, and then go on to teach there for two and a half years. I fall into one of these statements we just mentioned. I think I needed the experience, I had convinced myself that I wasn't as good as the other teachers yet. So, it made sense that I get to do dry runs every so often. But at the end, the day I was teaching classes in the studio for people who were donating and paying to come there.

(Jesal) It also begs the question, why didn't you feel ready? You had a 200-hour under your belt, you had a 300-hour under your belt, and you had just taken their anatomy training specific to that studio.

(Tejal) Another 100-hour.

(Jesal) Yeah. So why didn't you feel worthy?

(Tejal) I think it played on my insecurities. I think the examples from our White Women Killed Yoga and being told, "No, you're not right. You're wrong. What you've learned is incorrect." Also, I thought, I have a few months to spare, which really who does, to offer these classes and get better at it, and then, yeah, I'd like to teach here. Honestly, I didn't get treated that well. I stayed there for a lot longer than I should have. But hard lesson learned, and I still learned it.

(Jesal) If you took their anatomy training, and you had all these hours of training under your belt, and you didn't feel ready, what does that say about Teacher Trainings?

(Tejal) This whole yoga should be free business. I'm not comfortable asking for pay on something so spiritual that changed my life so much. Jesal, can you talk about this a little bit?

(Jesal) Oh, yeah. I'll go on and rant on this, and actually have a little story. But before I tell this anecdote, I want to preface our conversation by saying I do believe that low cost, free, and accessible yoga classes should be available to certain communities. But teachers should have a choice of if, when, and how they offer their classes, and having to work unpaid at a for-profit business is not necessarily what they should look like. As an example of that, I volunteer for a nonprofit organization, and we fundraise so that we can provide free trainings to low-mobility populations who need yoga and can't necessarily pay to do the whole training.

(Jesal) I volunteer my time, but it's my choice. I give the time, effort, and services I feel that I can give, and it's under the label of a nonprofit. So my anecdote is that an Indian woman contacted me to teach her, and a group meditation, and she didn't have the group, she wanted me to create the group for her. But when I told her what my rate was, she

basically scoffed at me and said, "Well, you should charge for poses, an asana, I get it, but I don't think you should charge for meditation. It's too spiritual." I hear this in the industry all the time like, "Why are you charging for yoga? Yoga should be free." I have sat with this question for years and years, and I've finally gotten super clear on why I need to charge.

(Jesal) The answer doesn't really come from me, it comes from somebody else that I followed on Instagram. For the life of me, I can't remember who, and if I do remember, I'll link back to that person. But the argument that they made was so logical. Yoga is already free. Yoga is out there. You can Google it. You can go on YouTube. You can go to the library. There are free books, free yoga everywhere. So Yoga is free. But if you want somebody to explain it to you, and to live next door to you, to explain it to you, then you gotta pay. You can go to the Himalayas. No one's stopping you. You can go to the Himalayas, go to Rishikesh, go find a yogi up in the mountains, who's taken a vow of poverty and made this their entire life. But if you want somebody who's invested time and money, and lives in a convenient place for you to get to, and still has to pay the same rent, and the same cost of living you do, then you're not entitled to free yoga.

(Tejal) That's so beautifully put. There's another example, sadhguru, a spiritual teacher, should the spiritual process be offered free? Essentially, he says the spiritual process has no charge. Spiritual courses do.

(Jesal) Right, anybody can be the Buddha, and sit, and meditate, and find nirvana.

(Tejal) No one's going to charge you to do that. In the city, though, he says, "It costs. Even here where there ashram is, if you don't want to pay, if I do it in a slum, will you come and attend the program? No, you want it in a five-star hotel, but you want it free." At one time, they did offer the programs free, but then people were walking it out with total disregard for the whole thing. "Most people, unfortunately," he says, "don't value their word as much as they value their money." So people coming should pay depending on the venue and logistics. The same logic should apply to the pay for the people providing the process.

(Jesal) Now, we're going to hear all these counterexamples, I know. All these like trolls that are like, "Well, all these yogis who gave up their material possessions and are teaching yoga for free, you should do that too." It's like, again, if you want it convenient, then you're not going to expect a yogi in the mountains to do that. You want a householder to do it. This is where an important distinction comes in. We're talking about two very different types of yogis or yoga teachers, whatever you want to call them. It kind of requires a little bit of a history lesson. When I look at the history of yoga, it's not considered mainstream part of Hinduism or Hindu culture. It just wasn't, like most of the yogis, and again, there are exceptions to every rule because India is super diverse.

(Jesal) But most yogis back in the day were considered outside of the mainstream householder, and therefore, they would give up their lifestyle, they would give up their material possessions, go to the mountains, or go to some remote location, and dedicate their life to this, and teach for free. But also, it was a culture that supported this. There was a

culture that supported begging. It was expected that if a yogi came to your house and beg for food, that you would give them food or a reference I found were they could specifically ask for wheat, but I'm sure culture to culture, it varied.

(Jesal) So that was one model of care, right? There's one social model that supported this type of yoga, the give up your possessions and work for free, and in exchange, society will take care of you because this is the fabric of our social structure. It's understood. Many years later, came this idea that householders should also practice yoga. There are exceptions to every rule, but when we talk my mainstream yoga, householders doing yoga is a more modern concept. And so householders still have to make ends meet, which means they have to make a living, and that money is not considered evil, that they still need to provide for themselves, their children, education, food, whatever. And so, we have to look at these things very differently. And then we had to take all of that out of the context of India and bring it into the West, where there is no social structure of giving to yogis. If a man dressed in orange robes came to your apartment door and ask you for food, you'd probably think he was crazy, and call the cops.

(Tejal) Yeah, absolutely. You have to take things out of the historical context because that's what's happening with the times, they're changing.

(Jesal) The context in which yoga is being taught has changed dramatically.

(Tejal) Dramatically. There's a studio structure, there's logistics, there's rent, there's utilities.

(Jesal) Going back to that dharma idea that like you pay for your education, you get married, you have children, then you retire, then you do seva, and it's on your own terms. You decide what those good works are going to be.

(Tejal) So the last thing we often hear around this whole concept is, "I get it, the studio itself isn't making any money." So, it makes sense to me that I'm not making any money, or the idea of 50/50 pay for studio-verse teacher, again, no guarantee. To that, I say, "Wait, wait, wait, hold the phone." So now the yoga teacher is responsible for the entire studio to make money. They are personally responsible for their specific students' social and personal calendars to ensure busy classes and full attendance. I think we skipped a whole lot of steps here.

(Jesal) I mean, going back to your university example, isn't that like asking one professor to make enough money to support the whole university?

(Tejal) Or to understand if the university is not making money, the professor is not going to get paid to teach his course? No, it doesn't happen, and that shouldn't be happening.

(Jesal) The studio model should be the studio that does the marketing and promotion, and has the reach of audience so that the teacher can teach, and get paid, and do their job, right?

- (Tejal) Right, because if the studio is expecting the teacher to then do the marketing and teach the class, shouldn't they be getting paid for two jobs?
- (Jesal) Yep. Why not at that point just have your own business?
- (Tejal) Right. So, we are talking about business, right? We're talking about somebody else's business, somebody who outfitted a yoga studio, pays the rent, pays utilities and aims, everybody says this, to have stellar client experiences, but that can't afford to pay the people that make the place work. So here's my tip to you yoga teachers. If you find yourself being asked to teach without a guarantee of pay, that 50/50 scenario, or donation based, and you get something, but maybe nothing, run the other way. Even the best-laid yoga studio plans can go south, but please, don't mess with the worst-laid yoga studio plans.
- (Tejal) What's the fun of jumping onto a sinking ship? If they're not committed to right action, how can they expected a view, and isn't operating on that model just ensuring that the only people that are available, and left to teach, and okay with that structure are people of privilege, who can afford to work without pay, who have the time to lay about and maybe work if they want to, which are statistically mostly white people to be the teachers at the studio. So we're circling back to diversity and inclusivity. How are you ensuring that your space is inclusive, and diversity if this is the practice that you're offering.
- (Jesal) Which is a great point because the more diverse of an inclusive you are, the better chance you have of making money. It works both ways. It's funny because at least in New York City, almost every studio is teaching the same style of yoga with slight differences, or almost all teaching Vinyasa, or some really athletic form of Hatha Yoga, and they're all catering to the same crowd, the thin, able-bodied white people. And yet if they just diversified a little bit in their offering, in their target audience, they would find that the competition is a lot less. I mean, Tejal, what is that phrase that we hear all the time in this industry?
- (Tejal) The yoga industry is saturated.
- (Jesal) Right, and that's a lie, we know that. It's not saturated, unless 100% of people are doing yoga or close to it. It's not a saturated market. There's always more people to reach.
- (Tejal) It just means a business isn't doing its job to market to more people.
- (Jesal) Right. They're not being inclusive and they're losing out. So, if you need an excuse to get more inclusive and to get more diverse, this is it. We want to end this episode by talking about two scenarios of karma capitalism. One where karma capitalism is really an abuse of the situation and one where it actually works out really well.
- (Tejal) I found out that a popular donation-based yoga chain in New York City does a little bit of catfishing. I found this out because I spoke to two of their current teachers. So after

you've completed this studio's training, then they tell you, the next step is to teach community classes. "Okay," you might think, "I would like to try a few of those." But then they tell you, "You need to teach between 20 and 25 community classes, typically one per week." Maybe after those 50 hours of free labor for them with little or no supervision, you might get placed on the schedule, maybe, but no guarantee. Now, that sounds like the ultimate setup to me. Many people in the city practice here, because it's so affordable and donation based, but I urge you, yoga students, ask your studio how they pay. Make sure you're comfortable with the pay structure because you and I both know when a yoga teacher is having a bad day and doesn't feel valued, that same energy can be felt and ruin it for everyone practicing.

(Jesal) I know that we were going to go into a positive example, but I know we have one more example of catfishing, which is another popular hip hop-based yoga studio in New York City, where they do a Teacher Training and they don't actually train the students to teach at that studios.

(Tejal) They give the 200-hour Teacher Training and it surprises some of the students in their Teacher Training because they don't actually go into the model of how they teach the classes at the studio. So, it's a classic example of you get a certificate, but they're not going to hire you. They're going to invite you to take a mentorship and pay, I think, several more thousands of dollars in order to be prepared to then get a job, which will probably take a lot longer than the months you took in training to pay back.

(Jesal) I know that you have a great situation with a mentor of yours.

(Tejal) Yeah. I would really love to take this opportunity to shine a light on one of my mentors, Juliana Mitchell, at Living Now Yoga. I met Juliana during my first TT, and have loved her teachings ever since. I've studied with her for the past six years. So we stayed really close. I valued her opinion and advice. I listened to her a lot in the beginning, and I questioned a lot of the things she was offering, and we have a really good dialogue. I recently completed a private mentorship program with her. At the closing of our 75 hours, she gave me a sandwich container and talked about what cheese sandwiches work best with the homeless community that she's discovered. She asked me to at least for the four sandwiches that fit in that container to hand out sandwiches to those in need as ongoing seva, and up to me whether I could continue to do that or not, but to consider ways that I can incorporate seva into my life.

(Jesal) She also recognizes seva as a personal choice and it's a personal path. You don't just dictate what kind of karma or seva you're going to do. That's not part of an ethical business. If you want people to give back, I think most yoga teachers are more than happy to give back in whatever way they can. But it should be their choice what they can do, and what they can afford to do.

(Tejal) Yeah. For her, she had the point of view that she didn't like to share about her seva because she knew she wasn't attached to any external outcome or reward by other people for doing this work. I think she since changed her mind because she thinks it's a valuable teaching.

(Jesal) So, ultimately, we have to come back to our introductory question, could karma capitalism kill yoga?

(Tejal) Yes, the mutated and mixed-up definition of karma capitalism or Karma Yoga is killing yoga and creating harm to people. We hope that you continue to listen and learn about these issues we brought up and start to effect real change for the yoga community that you live in.

(Jesal) Now the question for you. Did karma capitalism kill yoga? Hit us up on our Instagram handle at Yoga is Dead podcast, or email us at yogaisdeadpodcast@gmail.com. As always, please support this work by subscribing and by becoming a patron. Patrons get exclusive member-only content like extra videos, live conversations, Miss Yoga is Dead stickers and things. You can sign up for as little as \$2 per month and the benefits build from there. Check out www.patreon.com/yogaisdeadpodcast. Thanks for listening. I'm Jesal.

(Tejal) I'm Tejal.

(Jesal) Catch us next time on Yoga is Dead.