

Seva and You: Building Sacred Service into Your Yoga Business

By Rebecca Sebastian



Do you remember back when you first started teaching yoga? Fresh faced, excited to share this spiritual path of liberation with other people around you? Maybe you even thought, “If only everyone in the world did yoga, we would be at peace.”

But then you had to make a living. You had to pay your bills, feed yourself and perhaps your family, and you began to wonder: “How can everyone in the world take yoga if I need to charge for it?” So you dove head first into the idea that you needed to be of sacred service to other people, called *seva* in the yoga tradition, and tried to give away your yoga whenever you could.

This is a noble cause, but as part of an industry we struggle with the idea that we need to make yoga accessible to those who cannot afford our typical service prices while nourishing and caring for ourselves as worthy parts of the ecosystem and the capitalism-based world around us.

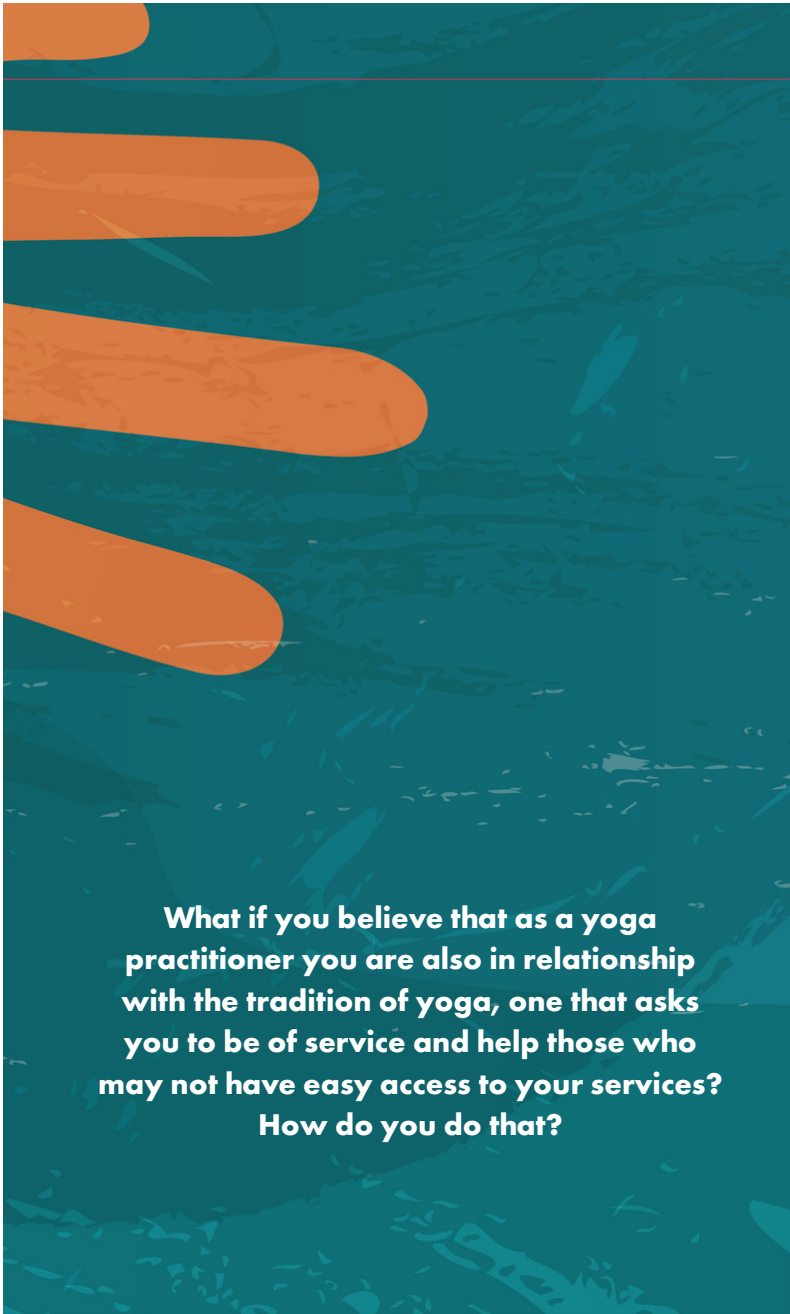
In this article I am going to emphasize two equally important points:

1. It is our honor and obligation to be of service to the greater community. We have a duty to share yoga with as many people as possible, offering to them the same tools that we ourselves find so valuable.
2. We ourselves are important. And if we are honest with ourselves, we want to make a living and thriving wage, take (nonworking!) vacations, participate in care activities that help stave off burnout, and have a life we love.

Often, though, those two points seem to be at odds. Can we share yoga with others through sacred service *and* make a good living?

Our Discomfort About Income and Money

When we discuss the idea that we might be truly uncomfortable with having to think about money, income, and how that works with a



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business that offers yoga, most people slide the discomfort into one of two categories—or into both.

Category 1: We Want to Help People, No Matter What

This challenge with our income involves the acknowledgment that economic disparities exist everywhere and that they disproportionately affect certain groups of people. We know that folks of the global majority, many queer folks, and women face economic challenges that others don't.

And we as yoga folks want to help.

Before we really think about the impact of our actions, we may put out our offerings at a lower rate because we want "everyone" to be able to afford our services.

Two things are worth rethinking in this scenario. First, if you want to truly have an impact in the greater world—that is, if you really want to be of service and help others—you cannot be a person who also needs certain kinds of help.

We all are likely privileged enough to know the airline preflight instruction that we need to put on our own oxygen masks before we help the person next to us, but this is true, metaphorically, in other scenarios in our lives. If you want to make yoga financially accessible to all, you must be a person, business, or organization that doesn't financially need help. If you give all your services away at a lower cost so that you can barely live, you are also not helping the people who are in truly impoverished circumstances.

Let's say you want to charge \$150 for your yoga therapy sessions, but you think people can't afford it and you want to make your pricing more accessible. So you charge \$80 instead. At this price you struggle to pay your bills and need to take two other side jobs to make ends meet. But it's okay—you are doing a service to others.

But are you? The people to whom you really want to offer yoga likely can't afford the \$80 any more than they could afford the \$150, and now you are struggling to keep everything afloat, likely flirting with burnout, and still not helping the people you most want to.

Which brings us to the second reason we have discomfort about money.

We can end up trading our own stability, security, and nourishment for the illusion of being of service—a tradeoff we should not be willing to make.

Category 2: We Don't Like Engaging with Money

We have deep-seated discomfort talking about, asking for, or wanting money. If you seek to be a person who shares yoga with others as both a business and as seva, it is your job to unpack and examine your feelings about money. I encourage you to seek out feminist business models, because many thinkers in this realm have been doing the work of determining how we ask for, work with, and are (or get) comfortable around money. Look closely at why putting what you perceive to be a high price tag on your services makes you so uncomfortable and build a personal practice of always having a price high enough it makes you scared.

Perhaps some of this is centered in what we often call the "scarcity mindset" in yoga,* the underlying belief that there is insufficient money, clients, or opportunities to go around. "The market is so saturated," etc. We are going to flip this idea on its head. You don't need tons of clients to sustain you; you need enough clients willing to pay you what you need to make to thrive.

But can you find those clients? And how do you also find the clients who are seva clients?

You build bridges.

Building Bridges in Your Business

One of the most enjoyable things about considering how you run your business is realizing that you are in a relationship with every person who encounters your operation. How you build bridges for customers, clients, and students to come find you matters. Remember, always: You are a bridge builder.

Embrace the idea that you are building bridges to and for clients. In a typical pay-for-services scenario, people find you based on your efforts to target your ideal clients and the bridges you have built for them to reach you. You make some effort to let people know who and what you are about, and those people who resonate with your message get onto the bridge, meeting you halfway. You provide your services, and they provide a fee as well as their time and attention.

How do you go about building these bridges? You are likely already doing it. You are visible. You post about your business on social media, perhaps run ads for your offerings, send out a newsletter, tell people about your services, and have previous clients and greatest fans telling their friends about you.

This is bridge building, and part of your work as a yoga therapist is exactly this, especially as we are in a profession often still called *emerging*, or perhaps “in its toddlerhood.” We make connections with local health organizations, do lunch-and-learns at hospitals, create ties with local yoga studios, and tell everyone about how we can offer the full spectrum of yoga to help support people in their lives. This is you building bridges on which clients meet you. You are in an equal-energy-exchange relationship that should be mutually beneficial.

But what if you take the concept of seva seriously? What if you believe that as a yoga practitioner you are also in relationship with the tradition of yoga, one that asks you to be of service and help those who may not have easy access to your services? How do you do that?

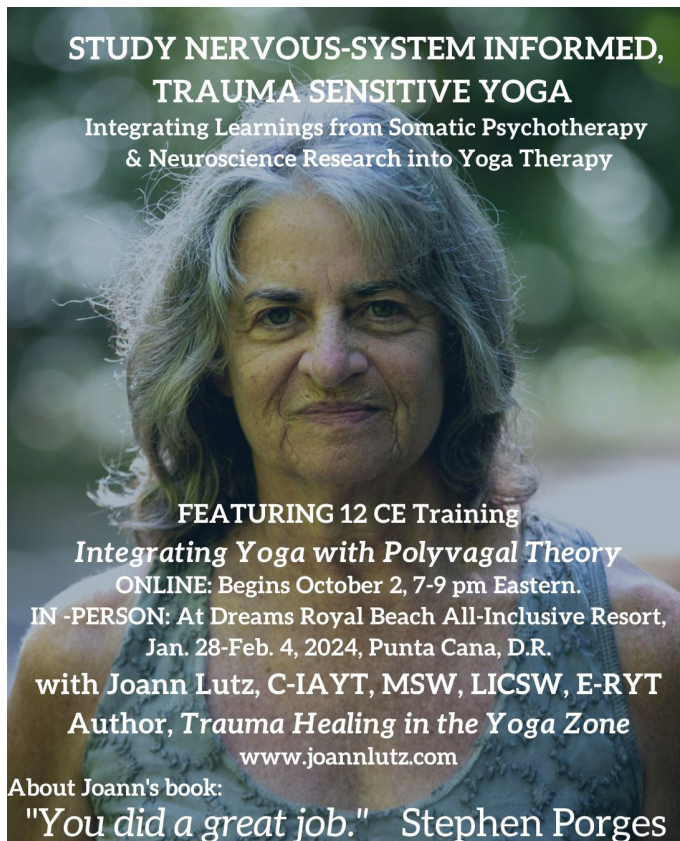
Often you might see people discount their services—or even offer them for free—without much success. You see folks who have offered half-price yoga therapy sessions or free yoga classes who come away disappointed that the classes were full of folks who could have easily paid for the service but came to take advantage of a deal—or they were empty. This leaves us yoga professionals feeling frustrated and wondering why we should bother if nobody takes advantage of our free or discounted offerings anyway.

But this happens because you haven't built a proper seva bridge.

When you are looking to be of true service, to offer yoga to those who don't have easy financial access to our services, offering discounted services to the audience of people you already have isn't the answer. It is, in fact, a gross misuse of privilege. We somehow assume that the people who are in traditionally underinvested-in communities and/or are of low income are looking at, reading, listening to, and thinking about the same things we are. But that is rarely true, so when we share free or low-cost offerings to the communities we inhabit and know about we assume that the folks to whom we wish to be of service are also there, already listening.

The truth is much different. As you look to be of service to people who struggle with financial access, you need to put in more effort to reach them and do the same kind of bridge building and marketing you do for paying clients. You might be assuming that anyone would like a free yoga class or yoga therapy session, is looking for it, and will trust that you know what you're doing.

So let me encourage you to make a mindset shift. It is our privilege to be of service to everyone. It is our honor to share yoga with folks who are often left under-resourced and underinvested in. The gift of being able to give is one given to us, not from us, so we must put in the extra work to share it with everyone. This includes the work of building bridges specifically designed for folks who are members of communities that don't talk about wellness at length; who don't have ready funds; who may not have unlimited high-speed internet; and who might not, as yet, trust you.



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So have you taken the time and effort to make connections in the communities of people whom you wish to serve? Have you also done lunch-and-learns at local shelters for people who are unhoused or have experienced domestic violence? Have you targeted your online reach to include people who are not like you in demographics, economic status, or mindset? Have you reached out to local service organizations to see how you can be a part of their health and wellness initiatives?

These actions are part of building a bridge to be of service. And they are an important step in adding seva to your business model.

Seva-Friendly Business Models

So how do we both get paid and be of service to our communities? Let's look at two models, one you likely know—and the other you probably haven't considered. We will start with the latter.

The Percentage Model

This model isn't often discussed in yoga circles, which is why I wanted to address it first. The percentage model exists using one main premise that I find non-negotiable when discussing money, income, and service within yoga therapy and general yoga spaces. We, the facilitators, yoga therapists, and teachers, need to get paid. We need to make enough money to live, thrive, nourish ourselves, and honor our value in the world.

This is non-negotiable.

I want to reiterate the point that if you wish to be of service to others, you need to be a person who also doesn't need financial help. This concept was highlighted to me in 2019 when I co-founded a yoga-focused nonprofit. The original mission of the organization was to get access to yoga classes for folks who couldn't afford them. To do this, we needed a dollar amount or a line that people had to meet to qualify for yoga classes at a discounted rate. We chose the national poverty line at that time. This is the U.S. federal standard below which a person is considered to be living on a poverty income. And every yoga professional on our board, myself included at the time, qualified for our own program. Not one of us was making enough money to clear the national poverty line if we took our partners' and spouses' incomes out of the equation.

This got me thinking how in our profession we cannot continue like this. Can there be a way to both pay yoga professionals a thriving wage and have us do work that is of service to the greater community? I started doing research, looked at other models used in other industries, and landed on the percentage model.

This model states that you will take the sum of your available time to work as a yoga professional and give a percentage of it away for free.

Here is how it works in a yoga therapy setting with one-to-one clients.

First, decide how many hours a week you can work and sustain your career and sanity. We know that most yoga professionals do not work a full 40 hours a week; there typically isn't that much work available for us, and 40 clients a week would be too many humans to see.

So how many clients can you see in a week? Ten? Twenty? Once you decide on that number, write it down. Now you aren't getting married to that number—it can change over time—but we need a starting point.

Next, ask yourself how much money you would like to make in a week. Notice I didn't say *need*. I am not asking you to live on nothing and never take a vacation. In fact, the attitude that we have in yoga that we should be able to live a pauper existence without rest leads to people having to leave the industry because they can't sustain themselves this way—and trying to was making them miserable.

Let's think again. *How much money would you like to make?* Please don't add any guilt or shame to this amount—money is just an energy exchange. It is okay to have or to want to have enough money to feel safe and comfortable in our lives.



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YOGA THERAPY IN PRACTICE

We now have the two numbers we need for our percentage model: The number of hours we want to work and the amount of money we would like to make. In a typical business the math stops there. You divide the amount you want to make by the amount of time you want to work and charge that rate per hour.

But in yoga business, we add seva.

If you are going to work 20 hours a week, how many hours of those 20 do you want to dedicate to service? These are hours that you give away of your own free will to folks who don't have financial access to typical yoga therapy services. That will reduce the number of hours you can work and get paid, so the math is different.

Let's consider a sample scenario: You want to work 20 hours a week and gross \$70,000 a year. (I chose \$70,000 because that is the amount that can lift the oppression of financial strain from most people's minds and allow them to live a life they love.†) Assuming you take 2 weeks off for vacation a year, this means you want to make \$1,400 per week. If you chose to do an 80/20 split on hours

you get paid versus hours you don't, that means you have 16 hours a week to work for that \$1,400. Simple math means you need to make at minimum \$87 per person you see.

Personally, I don't have capacity for 20 clients, so my cap is 10 hours of yoga therapy clients a week. I charge \$150 per person unless people purchase sessions in bulk, and my math is nearly the same. Charging what you need to make up front allows you to then give away your time graciously to folks who can't pay for yoga therapy but might want to take advantage of what the practices have to offer.

As an individual yoga therapist, I think there is one crucial thing to consider when you are offering seva client services: You must actively choose whom you will be of service to. Just like regular paying clients, take time to sit with this, then decide what sort of group or individuals you would like to serve. Contact an organization that already serves that population, and create a relationship of trust with them. That way, when you have made enough money to offer free services, you just call up the organization and tell them you have space available. Some organizations I have worked with in the past are domestic



violence service organizations, veterans' affairs organizations, and a service organization designed to help immigrants in my community find a nourishing and fruitful way to live.

I also do this as a yoga studio owner: For every 10 members my studio has, I hold one free membership spot for someone who otherwise couldn't afford to come. I choose the folks to whom I am of service—so no guilt trip from Aunt Edna who says she'd love to check it out but also goes out to dinner 6 nights a week. I contact other service organizations and offer them spots for their clients, enter these clients in my software just like any other customer, and nobody knows about the service but me. It is my privilege to share yoga with anyone who may benefit.

Sliding-Scale Pricing

I want to discuss another pricing model, partly because of its popularity in our industry, but also because I find it a bit misleading. Let's take a critical look at sliding-scale pricing.

This is a pricing solution to be of service that goes by many names in our industry. Sliding scale, equity pricing, tiered pricing—they are all part of the same pricing model. In essence, customers are given the option to decide what they can afford to pay and choose the price that best serves them. This common solution to the issue of seva within wellness and yoga spaces has benefits as well as faults.

What works about sliding scales?

Sliding-scale pricing works best when it isn't a long-term strategy. (And when clients are honest about their incomes.) If you have a one-time event, tiered pricing can allow folks financial access who normally could not afford to attend. Maybe you have that one amazing teacher coming to your space or are hosting a one-time yoga therapy sale in your business. In these cases you could employ sliding-scale pricing so more folks could take advantage of your offers.

A sliding scale is also simple to implement into your business, and most people know and understand what this pricing model means. There's no need for much education in your community for people to understand the idea "if you can't afford it, pay less." That leaves less work on your end in customer education and allows you to go about your business with ease.

What doesn't work about sliding scales?

Everything else.

Unless your lowest tiered price is the \$87 you need to have a thriving profession, the yoga facilitator suffers in this model. We trade our own stability, security, and nourishment for the illusion of being of service—a tradeoff we should not be willing to make. For us to show up as our best selves for clients, our own care and nourishment must matter equally.

Sliding scale is one of the oldest marketing tricks in the books, and deciphering intention from reality can be difficult with this model. Typically, businesses have employed sliding scales for products to capture more of the market share. Think of how the Gap is the parent company of the often less expensive brand Old Navy. Is Gap trying to offer its own version of sliding-scale pricing and make some clothing more accessible, or is it just out to capture more of the market share?

The gift of being able to give is one given to us, not from us, so we must put in the extra work to share it with everyone.

The same can be said for sliding-scale pricing. Often, without realizing it, we use a sliding scale to tell people that we are "good" or "yogic." This kind of virtue signaling is actually marketing and shouldn't be conflated with seva.

Finally, a sliding scale pushes our values onto other people. Perhaps it is important to us that all people have access to yoga and wellness practices, but if we are asking people who have more financial wealth to pay for those who have less, we as facilitators aren't even the person doing service—we've simply offered a means for other people to be of service.

Building seva into our business models is one of the many ways we can honor both the spirit of yoga and our business. Undeniably, we need new structures of business to combat the challenges of living within oppressive systems like White supremacy, patriarchy, and capitalism. When we allow ourselves to rethink how we gain money, who has access to our services, and how we are an equal participant in the ecosystem of our yoga businesses, we can forge new paths for ourselves and our industry.

It is our honor to share yoga with others, so let's build ethical and intentional structures where we all can thrive. ●



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*See Laura Kupperman's article "What We Talk About When We Talk About Money" in the Summer 2017 issue of YTT.

†www.pnas.org/doi/full/10.1073/pnas.1011492107#sec-1