

a teacher's path

by Paul Ewart

From army officer to owner of one of Australia's biggest yoga schools, Duncan Peak's yogic path was never clear-cut. "I never really thought about teaching. I definitely had no plans to own my own studio, yet here I am," says the 35-year old yoga teacher and founder of Power Living Australia, which has studios in Sydney and Canberra teaching Power Vinyasa Yoga.

While he first learned about meditation as a teenager, Peak didn't become interested in all the aspects of yoga until the age of 23, after he left the Australian Army, where he was an officer in the Parachute Regiment. At the same time he worked as a business consultant, but his growing passion for yoga eventually inspired him to study it more deeply—he completed a six-month hatha course in the UK at 26. But still there was no desire to teach. This only changed when he subsequently began a three-month Ashtanga yoga course in India. "I started a personal practice course in India," explains Peak. "I remember watching students assisting on the training course and thought 'that's what I want to do'. A week later, I switched."

Returning home, Peak was asked by a friend to lead classes at their studio. Soon after he met Baron Baptiste,

Whether you've decided to explore yoga as a career or you're looking to deepen your understanding of your practice, there's a course out there for you.



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the founder of Power Vinyasa Yoga. Peak studied with him for three years, and it was during this time that the idea of his own studio took shape. In 2004, Peak's first studio opened. Even though the jigsaw pieces were slowly fitting together, establishing the studio wasn't easy. "I actually had to continue to work as a business consultant for the first six months in order to make ends meet," he says, "Teaching up to 18 classes per week and working a full-time job was pretty intense."

For prospective students, Peak's story is proof that becoming

a yoga teacher doesn't happen overnight. Changing your life and developing your practice is an ongoing process that involves challenging yourself daily. This is what personal growth is all about; and ultimately, this is what teacher training is all about too. However, if it's truly the path you want to take, becoming a teacher is one of the most rewarding professions around. "The satisfaction I get from teaching is unparalleled," says Peak, "Teaching is definitely where my heart lies."

THE CALL TO TEACH

The mantra "with great power comes great responsibility" doesn't only apply to superheroes, it's also true of teachers. While leading a yoga class may look simple to an outsider, the preparation, planning and awareness behind each class is not. "There are so many different factors that make a great yoga teacher," says Peak. "Knowledge is very important and I think all of the best teachers I know have an amazing knowledge of the body's physiology and anatomy. Also, the ability to incorporate philosophy into a class is important."

Eve Grzybowski understands the challenges that yoga teachers face well. At 66, she has been teaching yoga for 30 years and has been training teachers for 25 of those, making her something of a training doyenne. Grzybowski studied under Martyn Jackson—one of the first westerners taught directly by B. K. S. Iyengar—and now teaches from her home on Mitchells Island in NSW.

"Sometimes popularity, meaning big class attendances, is confused with quality of teaching," Grzybowski says. "Great teaching can really only come from depth of yoga practice. A good teacher will take feedback from students to help him or her grow in their teaching."

While some yoga styles do have strict eligibility criteria for doing a teacher-training course, such as a minimum amount of time that you've been practising, many do not. Even with criteria to hold yourself to, it can be difficult to know when you're ready to take the next step. Your current

teacher will be a good judge of whether you're ready to progress.

"I didn't think of myself as teacher material and probably wouldn't have if I hadn't been asked to train," Grzybowski says of her own teacher-training experience.

Bondi-based Ashtanga teacher, Nadia Rihani, 30, found herself on a similar path. Now a full-time teacher, she graduated from a yoga course two years ago. "For me it was a natural progression," Rihani explains. "I didn't go into teacher training wanting to teach, but at the end of the year my teacher asked me

to assist and then cover his classes while he was away.

"I think you know you are ready to teach when you have something to teach—you need to be confident that students can learn from you. Teaching is not just about being good at asana, there is so much more."

FOR LOVE, NOT MONEY

While the stress-free life of a yoga teacher must rank at the top of the wish list for "zen-ployment" seekers, the reality can often be very different, particularly when starting out. More and more students are teaching, which means increased competition with each new batch of new graduates. A significantly reduced income can also hit hard.

"A new teacher often experiences insecurities," says Grzybowski. "Finding that the skills learned in basic training are not always adequate. In the early years of teaching, it's often the case that more money is going out than coming in, as you pay for further training, insurance, rent and advertising."

For Rihani, the biggest hurdle was fear. "I was so scared to make the leap away from the security of full-time employment and all the benefits that come with it," she says. "However, things just fell in to place and you learn to deal with the ups and downs of teaching."

TEACHER TRAINING EXPLAINED

Thanks to an increasing demand for teacher training, courses spanning the gamut of yoga styles have cropped up throughout the country. While some specialised yoga styles offer only one teacher-training path (such as Bikram Yoga, which has only one training course, run in America), most students are spoiled for choice.

Prospective trainees will need to ask plenty of questions—both to themselves and to the various training schools. Is the curriculum holistic and suited to my interests? Is the school properly accredited? Will the training schedule work with my other commitments? But, most important is finding the right teacher—someone who inspires, educates and offers up new insights to your practice.

One of the best places to begin is with your favourite yoga studio or instructor. If you regularly take classes at a yoga studio, there is a possibility that the studio offers a certification program. For Rihani, her teacher was the sole factor behind her decision. "I chose my course purely on the person who was teaching it," she says. "I really enjoyed his classes and in him I found a genuine mentor to guide me."

Some training programs are a continuation of older traditions that are relatively unchanged, such as hatha yoga, while others are very modern and have evolved from an East-meets-West move. Regardless of the style of yoga the course is teaching, a great training course needs a balance between practical and theoretical. While asana is important, it is only a small part of yoga and, as such, a training curriculum needs to encompass anatomy, physiology, first aid, meditation, pranayama and more. Though postures and sequence can vary greatly from course to



leap of faith

Canadian-born Kirsty Nugent was in her late 30s when she made the leap from an international, high-flying career in advertising to being a yoga teacher in NSW's Byron Bay. She now teaches at Byron Yoga Centre (and looks after the school's marketing) as well as hosts yoga retreats and private classes.

What made you make the move from the corporate world to a career as a yoga teacher? After 15 years working around the world, I found myself growing tired of marketing products I didn't always believe in and working round the clock under stressful conditions. When I enrolled in my teacher-training course I had no plans to teach. I'd been practising yoga since my late 20s and just wanted to understand my practice on a deeper level. I also felt it was time to take a break from corporate life. I completed a training program at the Byron Yoga Centre in 2008 and ended up never leaving.

How has your life changed since becoming a yoga teacher? I had no expectations as a teacher. I started modestly, just covering one class for a teacher on maternity leave. I slowly built up to three classes of my own per week and now teach on retreats and privately. I have a lot more choice in how and where I spend my time now.

Were there any challenges you faced during your career change? My income did drop considerably, but this was both a career change and a 'sea change' for me. I moved from Sydney to a much simpler life in Byron Bay. I still use my marketing experience consulting, but I ensure a positive benefit by focusing on yoga.

What advice would you give to someone thinking about leaving the corporate world to follow a career in yoga? You need to be realistic about your experience and patient enough to make the transition. Some trainees have unrealistic expectations that they'll be able to work full-time in the yoga world right off the bat. Teaching requires humility, ongoing study and a lot of practice. You never stop learning. I feel I can continue to develop as a yogi and a teacher for the rest of my life. That's incredibly exciting.

course, these other elements should remain the same. However, the depth in which they are covered will also vary, which means it's important to figure out what your goal is for teaching before you commit to a course.

One way of ensuring that a course will cover all the essential aspects of yoga, and is taught by an experienced teacher trainer, is to see if the course is accredited. Accreditation can come from either the yoga style's official association or from a governing yoga body such as Yoga Australia (www.yogaaustralia.org.au) or the American-based Yoga Alliance (www.yogaalliance.org).

The duration of the course is largely dependent on the style you choose. Iyengar training involves a minimum of two years study, for instance, as does training in Yoga In Daily Life and Satyananda Yoga styles. Other courses will offer a few different levels of training, either 200 hours, 350 hours and 500 hours (also known as Level One, Two and Three). It's useful to know that while 200 hours of training (among other criteria) allows

you to be a provisional member of Yoga Australia, you need to complete 150 additional hours of training within three years to keep your membership. Peak believes that while a 200-hour course offers a firm foundation to teach confidently, graduating to a 500-hour course is essential for a full-time teaching career. "A great teacher is also an eternal student," he says.

Aside from the level of training, you'll also need to decide if you want an "intensive" program, which may require you to live on site for a few weeks or months or opt for a part-time training course, which will run over weekends and evenings and last for up to a year or more.

"An intensive course is a relatively new product," explains Grzybowski. "It's a pressure cooker. The shorter the time involved, the more pressure exerted. This satisfies those who need to juggle busy lives or raise a family." Grzybowski has taught



choose the right course

Use these guidelines to help you steer your course towards yoga teaching.

Set your intention. Think about why you want to do the course and what your ultimate goal is. Look at how much time you can commit and how much you are willing to spend.

Research as much as possible. There are countless courses, spanning both style and length. (*Check out the directory of 2011 teacher training courses in this issue, starting on page 89*). Choose a teaching style that resonates with you, and make sure your school is properly accredited. Also find out if the training course has acceptance criteria, such as a minimum amount of time you've been practicing.

Look at the bigger picture. If you're looking at teacher training as a route to a career as a yoga teacher, look for a course that offers real hands-on experience.

Ask questions. Speak to former students and current teacher trainers. If the studio is nearby, perhaps even attend a class or two to see if there's synchronicity with your needs.

Take your time. Don't feel rushed to make a decision. This is all part of your journey; trust that everything will fall into place.

she's attempting to make a living as a yoga teacher after leaving her previous career as a radio producer. She says her training course was challenging not only physically, but also mentally. "It's quite easy for people to put unnecessary pressure on themselves to perform," says Velissaris. "During my level one and two training we were always reminded that yoga is not a competition, but a personal journey. I think that a lot of people come into the training with a Western mindset, and this can create a lot of unnecessary pressure."

Students should venture into training listening to their body closely. The temptation to push too hard physically (especially in an environment with other students) can result in injury. Letting go of the ego aspect—primarily with asana practice—is very important. For the majority, training is a life-changing experience, during which emotions run high. Don't be surprised

teachers on both intensive and long-term courses. She thinks that some trainees do benefit from a longer period of study, but others can lose their focus.

While many students enter teaching-training to embark on a new career, this isn't always the case. Claire Obeid, 28, from Bellevue Hill in Sydney, works in public relations. She completed a hatha yoga training course last month and has no intention of following a career as a yoga teacher. "It was never my intention to teach. After two years of practice, I really wanted to learn about yoga in its entirety," Obeid explains. "It became very apparent that I needed to submerge myself in its teachings and see how real this 'passion' had become."

Obeid believes that her training experience has enriched other areas in her daily life, too. "The knowledge you gain in all the other areas of yoga is invaluable, whether you actually become a teacher or not," she says.

RISE TO THE CHALLENGE

Deanne Velissaris, 32, is based in Melbourne's East Brunswick. A graduate from Purna Yoga teacher training,

if you, or those around you, shed a few tears.

"Training is likely to push buttons," says Grzybowski. "If you're not a particularly studious person, anatomy and physiology will test you. If you're not a physically-oriented person, asana practice will challenge you. If you are shy, face-to-face teaching and making presentations will set you on edge."

Grzybowski believes the most common breakthrough for students is a willingness to face their weaknesses. Thankfully, the training environment is the ideal arena for this. "The caring support of the group is palpable and helps students get through difficulties, whether they be physical, mental or emotional."

SATISFACTION GUARANTEED

The ability to teach something life-changing is a high that many yoga teachers have experienced. As a teacher, there's a real possibility of lighting a spark in students that will evoke the same passion that brought you to teacher training; and that is truly empowering. "The best part of yoga teaching is the satisfaction that comes from giving students something of value, something transformative," Grzybowski explains.

As Obeid never intended to teach, training wasn't a necessary part of her path as a yogi, now she believes that learning the philosophy, history and spirituality of yoga is imperative to a dedicated student. "If the only way to learn about these areas is through teacher training, then it's vital," she says. "Otherwise,

seeking out courses that cover these can be just as good." Likewise, Obeid doesn't see training as a necessary part of a yogi's path. "I believe the real learning happens in your own practice and contact with your teacher," she says. "As Pattabhi Jois put it, the balance should be '99 per cent practice, one per cent theory'."

While establishing a full-time career is no small feat, the positive stories from those that have abound. "My mind is open to a new way of living and I can't wait to explore it further," says Velissaris. "Life is so different now, my outlook and priorities have changed. I didn't anticipate where my training would take me. Now that I teach, I have time in the day to actually do things I enjoy. I am almost never stressed—I get busy, but never stressed."

Irrespective of what happens after training, the most important thing to remember is that a yogi's journey never ends. Though you may have a particular goal before teacher training, this can change. Many graduates go on to combine yoga with other healing modalities such as nutrition or massage—or end up inspired to explore other areas, such as philosophy or pranayama. Have faith in the journey and realise that training may not always take you on the path you originally intended. ❖

Paul Ewart is a freelance journalist and Bikram and vinyasa yoga practitioner based in Sydney.