

# The Phnom Penh Post

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## Phnom Penh's yoga studios reaching out to youth

Written by Nora Lindstrom

WEDNESDAY, 17 DECEMBER 2008

**Yoga studios in the capital are increasingly reaching out to disadvantaged communities to share the health benefits of the this healing practice**

WITH very few yoga studios in the country, some Cambodian youths, as well as a large number of young people involved with NGOs, are nevertheless feeling the benefits of the practice so popular abroad.

Having arrived in Cambodia in the early 1990s, Tonie Nooyens and partner Hanneke Meijers of Kundalini Yoga Cambodia started their training initiative in January 2007. Their objective is to train Cambodians in the meditation techniques and exercises of Kundalini yoga, enabling them in turn to teach others, particularly through outreach activities to vulnerable communities who might not otherwise have access to yoga and meditation-based support.



Photo supply

Yan Vannac teaching one of his yoga classes.

The training is part of an internationally recognised Kundalini training program, and there are currently nine students at different stages of the course.

### Success story

Yan Vannac, 27, is one of the most advanced yoga students. Yan Vannac met Isabelle Skaburskis, a yoga teacher, some four years ago while working at Raffles Le Royal hotel. A newcomer in town, Skaburskis had taken over the yoga classes at the hotel.

It is beyond fitness...yoga can play an important part in relieving stress caused by social problems ...

"When I saw the classes, I thought, 'Wow, what kind of exercise is this?' The students say they feel good, fresh afterwards," Yan Vannac said. He approached Skaburskis, and his path was set. "I'm not sure if I asked him," Skaburskis said in reference to applying for the scholarship that took Yan Vannac to Australia earlier this year to gain his teaching certificate with her own yoga teacher. "I may just have organised it for him," she admitted.

Be that as it may, Yan Vannac, with his teaching certificate, is clearly pleased and will shortly be en route to Thailand to seek his first teaching certificate in Kundalini yoga. "I love yoga. I want to improve myself and share [yoga] with other Khmer people," Yan Vannac said. "Although some of my friends don't understand, they confuse [yoga] with religion."

Both Nooyens and Skaburskis reject the notion that yoga has to be religious. "Yoga is not necessarily related to Hinduism or Buddhism," Nooyens said. Skaburskis is more direct. "I have an aversion to any religious aspects [being attributed to yoga]. To me, the value and power of yoga is in discovering one's own values and the ability to manifest them in the world."

### Channeling inner energy

For trainee Eung Kimhong, 20, yoga is about experiencing and channelling his inner energy. "I learned about yoga from [fellow trainees] Sorita and Kanika," he said. "At first, I thought it was only for women. However, since I started practising my health is better - now I can even walk in the rain."

According to Sao Kanika, 19, yoga "is about developing myself, about using my breath to help me in daily life. Now, I can also eat more vegetables," she said.

Yan Vannac is a prime example of yoga not being only for women. "He really has worked for it and shown commitment," Skaburskis said, further suggesting she might not always have been the easiest mentor. "Many other Cambodians came to me and said, 'I want to be a teacher', but [I knew] they had no intention of practising yoga first. They just wanted to be instructors to get money," she said. "Vannac stuck with it."

That dedication has made the 27-year-old the most qualified Cambodian yogi in recent memory - not a small feat, though the man himself has remained modest. "I find the spiritual aspect difficult, but I do think yoga has helped me have a better relationship with the community around me," Yan Vannac said.

### Future Plans

Skaburskis is currently designing a holistic yoga-based training program for disadvantaged youth

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in Phnom Penh. "It has two parts. One is about studying the body, starting from its biology. The other is [about how] to work with NGOs".

"I am learning as I go. I have four youths involved in this pilot project who already take part in our outreach activities," she said, while admitting that the trainees initially perceived the project as abstract and thought the concept of studying the body foreign. "Where is the material gain?" was a common question, Skaburskis said.

Nooyens also hopes to get more locals involved in his program, "We have to create a strong foundation first. What we do is not a transfer of skills only. It is an exchange of energies," he said. The Kundalini Yoga House is, indeed, the home of a community, not simply a place of exercise.

Yan Vannac is the key to it all. "I would have been unable to reach out to the local communities without Vannac," Skaburskis said. "The transition was only possible with him."

Nooyens further emphasises the importance of intense involvement of local trainees in teaching both at the studio and during outreach activities. "It is beyond fitness. In a country like Cambodia, yoga can play an important part in relieving stress caused by social problems such as the country's traumatic history, current poverty, HIV/Aids and resettlement issues," he said.

For further information on yoga centers in Phnom Penh, please visit: Kundalini Yoga Cambodia, [www.kundaliniyogacambodia.org](http://www.kundaliniyogacambodia.org), or NataRaj Yoga Centre for Healing Arts, [www.yogacambodia.com](http://www.yogacambodia.com).

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