

## Rebirth in Cambodia

*The country's first yoga center brings healing and offers Khmer youth a calling.*

By KRISTIN BARENSEN

Soaked in sweat from our dynamic vinyasa practice in the midday tropical heat, I am grateful when we finally come to rest in *shavasana*. As I lie prone on the mat, aware of the “plink plink” of hammers and the faint smell of burning trash, my mind reels with images from my morning visit to the Killing Fields of Choeung Ek.



**AT ANGKOR WAT** Isabelle Skaburskis in tree pose in front of a silk-cotton tree at Ta Prohm Temple.

I see mass graves overgrown with weeds, 8,000 human skulls stacked behind glass. I dream of armed men gathering people in crowds, just as Pol Pot's Khmer Rouge gathered millions of their own countrymen less than 30 years ago. When the class rises to sit for our final *Om*, I direct my bow to the people of



**YOGA STUDENTS** at Kien Kleang Orphanage Center with teacher Isabelle Skaburskis.

Cambodia and send a prayer for their continued healing.

I'm practicing in Cambodia's first dedicated yoga studio, opened in 2004 in the capital city of Phnom Penh. Canadian Isabelle Skaburskis and her Khmer (Cambodian) colleague Yan Vannac are bringing an ancient practice back to a once-Hindu country that has survived unimaginable horrors in its recent past. Their story captures the excitement of bringing yoga to a new frontier and of helping Khmer students recover from their own personal, and their country's collective, trauma.

“I was traveling through Cambodia and it struck me as a deeply compelling place to be,” Skaburskis recalls. “There's an anarchy and almost a vacuum. I thought, ‘I can learn from this place, contribute. The little that I have

is worth something here.” Skaburskis moved to Phnom Penh and started teaching yoga in a hotel. At age 25, she opened NataRaj yoga center—first in a house, and later in a larger venue that has already become a local institution.

“Since last summer, the momentum has shot skyward,” Skaburskis says. Her classes are popular with expatriates and travelers, as are the studio’s frequent workshops with international guest teachers. Many of the expats are involved in rebuilding social services in a country still plagued by corruption. “Yoga helps these students restore energy so they can keep giving in their jobs,” she says.

Skaburskis teaches in a style formalized by Nicky Knoff, an Australian who is certified by such luminaries as B. K. S.



**TEACHING DUO** Yan Vannac and Isabelle Skaburskis practice *utthita hasta padangusthasana* outside their studio.

Iyengar and K. Pattabhi Jois. Knoff and her husband, James Bryan, run the Knoff Yoga School in Cairns, Australia, where Skaburskis was certified and where Vannac hopes to study on scholarship in January 2008.

According to Bryan, Knoff was “one of the first teachers to combine the precision of Iyengar yoga with the strength

and dynamism of Ashtanga.” Every class includes meditation, pranayama, relaxation, and philosophy, in addition to asana practice.

#### THE FIRST KHMER TEACHER

Determined that her classes not be just a *barang* (gringo) experience, Skaburskis is also taking yoga into the community through a growing number of volunteer projects. She is training 26-year-old practitioner Yan Vannac to be the country’s first Khmer teacher.

Vannac first came to work at NataRaj as a financial administrator, but became intrigued by what he observed. “I saw that yoga is about the mind and the body,” he says. “I thought my body was okay, but my mind was not good yet. I started practicing every day, in classes or on my own.”

Yogic mores are traditional in Cambodia, which was in ancient times heavily influenced by Indian culture and language. Hinduism was the state religion until the 14th century, when Theravada Buddhism took hold. But all moral values sustained a heavy blow during the Khmer Rouge regime. When Vannac first heard Skaburskis talk about the yogic *yamas* and *niyamas*, he realized they are the same values described by the Buddhist monks—“but I always thought their lectures were boring,” he says.

Now he is keen to learn more about Buddhism as

well as yoga. Vannac remarked that he was surprised to discover how close some Sanskrit words are to Khmer words (e.g., “sun” is *surya* in Sanskrit and *sorya* in Khmer).

In an appearance on a local television program, Vannac encouraged his peers to rediscover meditation and yoga. “Most young people think meditation is for >>



**TEACHER'S PRACTICE** *Vannac meditates under the "spirit house" at NataRaj studio.*

old people and monks only. I tried to explain that we need it, and that everyone can do it." After the show, some of Vannac's friends said, half-jokingly, that they were afraid he would become a god. But other friends asked him to teach them about meditation and yoga.

"My friends want to practice so much," Vannac says. "But most people think that attending class is too expensive. When I teach, I ask people to pay what they can." Standard prices at NataRaj are \$3 per class for Khmers and \$8 for Westerners.

NataRaj student Tang Hour, a Khmer woman who works in a spa, confirms Vannac's impressions. "Cambodian people like yoga very much, but some don't know about it yet and some ask me, 'what is the yoga?' They would like to know and to learn, but only if it is free or a small charge." She believes yoga will become more popular among Khmers in the next few years, "because it is very helpful for them."

How is yoga helpful for Khmers? Tonie Nooyens, a Dutch teacher of Kundalini yoga at NataRaj, elaborates. "The violent and socially disrupting history of Cambodia has left many collective and individual scars," he says. "Yoga and meditation can be very effective ways for people to deal with the wounds of the past, as well as with the social and spiri-

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tual damage.” It is also a way to practice *ahimsa*—nonviolence—in a society that is still troubled by violence.

#### HEALING FOR TRAFFICKED TEENS

To help some individuals heal, Vannac and Skaburskis teach a weekly volunteer class at a long-term aftercare center for girls ages 9 through 17 who are survivors

become more aware of themselves and the realm of possibilities.” Pond, an American yogi and ex-Marine, emphasizes that the yoga classes are fun, an aspect he finds particularly important for these young people who have had to grow up too fast.

Skaburskis remarks that while the girls are enthusiastic students, “I’m still

control, but not a lot of discipline. Students have to get used to breathing through something that is physically demanding. If you say to them, ‘This will be hard, but don’t drop it’—if you make the pose a challenge to meet—they will hold the pose,” she says. “We are encouraging the girls to believe in their own strength and capabilities.”

*The girls who take their practice seriously have a greater sense of self-confidence—they stand tall and walk with more grace.*

of sexual trafficking and exploitation, a rampant problem in the region.

Opened by the Christian organization Agape International Missions, the center is a live-in protection program focusing on education and life skills training. Co-director James Pond says, “I have noticed that some of the girls who take their practice seriously have a greater sense of self-confidence—they stand tall and walk with more grace and comfort with themselves. Much of their experience has made them feel shame. Yoga has contributed, at least in part, to helping them

trying to figure out how to bring them deeper into the practice, because when it gets hard, they quit, walk out of the room, and don’t come back. They giggle during *Oms* and look at their friends. I don’t tell them to stop laughing; I treat it as an anxiety response.”

Vannac explains one source of their amusement: the translation of asana names. “If I translate ‘downward-facing dog,’ they ask me, ‘Why the dog can do that pose?’”

Skaburskis observes, “In Khmer culture there is a lot of authoritarianism and

#### FROM ORPHAN TO TEACHER

Skaburskis and Vannac also teach a weekly class to a group of children from Kien Kleang Orphanage Center in Phnom Penh. Unlike the giggling girls, the orphans are “serious and polite,” Skaburskis says. “The boys need to be reined in a little—they like to jump into inversions—but they are still very well behaved. Simply having someone smile and tell them they are doing well lights them up.”

This class is sponsored by Azahar, a New York-based organization that >>

provides scholarships to aspiring yoga teachers from disenfranchised communities in developing countries, especially those suffering the consequences of war and violence. Co-founder Yogeswari (Estelle) Eichenberger, a senior teacher

*In meeting teachers and role models, especially like Yannac, a young Khmer, a new world of possibilities opens up for the young students at the orphanage.*

at Jivamukti Yoga Center in Manhattan, and her colleague Mia Berglund taught a week-long yoga intensive at the orphanage that all 110 resident children were invited to participate in. The teachers selected 10 children according to attendance, interest, and talent to continue classes at NataRaj.

Swiss-born Eichenberger, who has set up Azahar projects in Columbia, Lebanon, and Turkey, says, “being chosen for a program like this is a boost for these chil-



**YOGA FOR THE FUTURE** Yan Yannac practices with his young Khmer pupils at the orphanage.

dren's self-confidence. I think, too, that with Isabelle's approach, in a more intimate setting, they can work out some of their pain, their anxieties, and the questions they may have about life. In meeting teachers and role models, especially like Vannac, a young Khmer, a new world of possibilities opens up for them."

This class is a pilot project for a larger collaboration between Azahar and NataRaj to train talented young Khmers as yoga teachers in an effort to eventually create a network of Khmer teachers. Skaburskis is looking at the girls and the orphans "with an eye to who might be interested in going on. Two of the orphans are really keen, really good with assists, and I think with some training they would be amazing teachers."

#### **GROWING INTEREST IN YOGA**

While NataRaj remains Cambodia's only dedicated center, yoga is springing up in other locations around the country, such as hotels and gyms. Singing Tree, an organic café and community resource center in Siem Reap, offers four yoga classes per week and lowers prices for locals. Michael, an Israeli who runs Singing Tree with his Khmer wife and her family, has observed neighboring Thailand's exponential yoga boom and says, "I think it is only a matter of time before yoga takes off here."

Reflecting on her experience so far with NataRaj, Skaburskis says, "It's one thing to get a group of adult expats on the mat and mention how an open body leads to a quiet mind. But when you have a group of kids with different values, who really don't have the conceptual understanding of higher levels of consciousness to be attained through purification of the body and mind, then what are we doing here? How can I get them in their innocence to do more than just exercise?"

"What I really want is to give at least some of these little people something that they will have forever," Skaburskis concludes. "I would feel that I had accomplished something if I were able to get some of the kids of Cambodia to see yoga as I see it." +