

## Movement, mantras and *mums*

Phnom Penh's expectant mothers have an exercise option that benefits the baby too – pre-natal yoga, with **Anna Weil** of **Wandering Stars**. Words by **Liz Ledden**.



**Born under a wandering star** *Anna Weil stresses the importance of relaxation during pregnancy*

“PRE-NATAL YOGA DOESN'T just focus on yourself,” explains yoga instructor Anna Weil, “it is also about connecting with your baby.” She is speaking from her comfortable house in Boeung Kang Kong, also the site of her Saturday morning pre-natal yoga class. Anna says this yoga form not only builds strength but also focuses on the changes taking place to the pregnant woman's body. “It balances hormones and influences mood, metabolism and emotions,” she explains.

Originally from the Ukraine, Anna is an American-trained yoga instructor with many years experience teaching different forms of yoga to expatriate women. She had her own child while living in Tashkent, Uzbekistan, where friends urged her to add pre-natal yoga to her repertoire.

In Phnom Penh, her classes are usually heard about via word of mouth. In addition to pre-natal yoga she also teaches a regular women's yoga class and yoga for kids. Wandering Stars – the

name given to her classes – refers to the nomadic nature of her expatriate clientele.

### ■ WORKING OUT WITH BABY

On the day I attended, six expectant mothers with baby bumps of various shapes and sizes have shown up at Anna's home. The class is held in a spacious ground floor room replete with cushions and gongs, adding a spiritual touch. The session begins.

Anna's instructions are encouraging and reassuring, not only teaching the class what to do next but explaining the benefits to mind, body and baby.

The class itself proves to be a fairly strenuous work out – for the novice anyway! Our babies are swirled around on what Anna calls a “magical ride” as the class makes circular rotations, bent at the hips. Intense breathing increases the oxygen supply and a balancing manoeuvre helps train the mind to focus in preparation for the rigours of labour that lie ahead.

Certain postures are familiar from other forms of yoga, though there's nothing too extreme that could cause any harm. Anna says that women up to four months pregnant can actually partake in other forms of yoga, as long as they don't exert their abdominal muscles too much. After this stage expectant mums should resume a specific pre-natal yoga class.

The class chants certain mantras as one, letting go of fear with a resounding “Wha” sound. Anna informs the class that focusing on breathing can actually lessen or at least provide a distraction from pain. This is why it is so important to master breathing techniques before giving birth.

A meditation session at the end involves hugging the babies through our stomachs, and is designed to provide a reflective, calming and connecting experience between mother and child.

After the one-hour class, we convene at the back of the room

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for some hearty homemade chai and the inevitable swapping of pregnancy stories.

### ■ THE BENEFITS

On a physical level, pre-natal yoga “makes you feel better, and gives you more energy,” says Anna. She also claims that babies are “absolutely aware” of what's happening. Their position changes as the mother exercises, fluid moves around, and their nervous system is stimulated. “It benefits their physical development,” she adds.

It is also all about relaxation, as babies can sense their mothers' moods.

“You have more fears when you're pregnant,” Anna explains, “so it's very important to relax, as the baby feels it right away.”

The class is a chance to forget about other aspects of life, to focus on your pregnancy and other women in the same situation. More than an empowering experience, pre-natal yoga provides a sound physical workout and does wonders for calming the mind, providing a new source of inner strength. This is something any pregnant woman can benefit from.

*Wandering Stars' pre-natal yoga class is held on Saturdays from 9am to 10.15am. Cost: US\$5. Contact Anna Weil, Tel: 092 569 643 for further details. ■*