

Daily Herald, May 5, 2005

Yoga master delivers serenity, good works to a stressful world

by Burt Constable

Anchored in her yoga beliefs, 4-foot-9-inch Boontiva Truong-Quang stands firm and tall as the maelstrom of life swirls around her.

Her part-time job working all night at a group home in Schaumburg for troubled teenage girls ("my kids") doesn't zap the 53-year-old Boontiva's energy. Neither do her three or more nights a week spent as the overnight supervisor at local PADS shelters for homeless folks.

When the Elgin woman's not working all night, Boontiva rises at 4 a.m., as four hours of sleep is all she desires. She teaches her 11 yoga and pilates classes a week (down from 17). And in her spare time, she must get everything in order to leave this month for her nearly annual, six-week, volunteer pilgrimage to orphanages in Thailand and India.

"Writing a check is not good enough for me," says Boontiva, who wants to make a personal connection by giving the kids toys or other gifts. "I'm shopping around at garage sales."

She plans to visit dozens of kids, wants to treat each orphan equally, and only has room for small items.

In the meantime, her loyal yoga students at The Centre in Elgin wonder how they'll survive her absence.

"Everybody else is panicking," Boontiva says calmly. "I said, 'Why? It will be fine. This might help us to bring a yoga teacher to step forward to help out.' "

She suggests teachers willing to take over her classes call her Optimum Health studio at (847) 697-6397.

Stress surrounds Boontiva, but it exists for her only in her memories.

She used to be on the corporate fast track as a marketing director for the Marriott Corp. Born in Thailand and taught English by French nuns in Bangkok, Boontiva earned master's degrees in marketing and fashion design from Northern Illinois University.

She traveled, made big bucks and had the career many would covet. And yet ...

"I feel this is not satisfaction," Boontiva says she realized one day. "I have the money, the fame, the name, and that's not satisfying."

The single woman quit a year short of being fully vested in her retirement fund so that she could take a trip in a van with her family across her parents' ancestral home in Vietnam.

On that vacation, she grew to admire the mother of one of her brother's friends.

"You look so serene," Boontiva told the woman. The woman, a native of India, told Boontiva about yoga.

"Life should have more to offer," concluded Boontiva, who underwent an intensive seven months of study at The Yoga Institute in India.

While her graceful body leads a dozen members of her Elgin class through the yoga positions, Boontiva says she also works on mental exercises.

"I think of the mind as a monkey," she says with a laugh. She has learned to tame that monkey, but notes the learning process never stops.

"Part of learning, yoga-wise, is to become ego-less," Boontiva says. "Master is only a label. I consider myself as nothing. I don't know all, but I try to find the answer."

A believer in Karma Yoga, Boontiva, who will turn 54 on Thanksgiving Day, says people need to go through four stages. First, learn to care for yourself, and branch out to your loved ones. Then you can help out in the local community, before finally giving something back to the world.

"Give without expecting anything in return," Boontiva says. "Do it well all the time, and do it with joy all the time."

Then she smiles the serene smile of a woman at peace.