

BARE
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at the
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DANCE

Journal One

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BAKULA
BOOKS

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PART VI
Courage-Building,
Cautionary
Kripalu



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January 11, 2005

Killer Kripalu Days

Good morning! It is already 10 a.m. and gray as usual so far this year. Also just as usual, I am writing on my cozy corner of the couch, with Umesh (whose new Indian name has survived longer than Arba-Bhagul's). As he nestles beside me, a lively fire and my Christmas tree cheer me on. Trond says we must take it down on Thursday, the twentieth day of Christmas.

Meanwhile, when sister sun made a rare appearance yesterday, she showed her fiery face just long enough to call me out to trek around Silver Lake in her honor. Thanks to my murderously sore *skewed foot* (*skewed* is the term the foot doctor used to describe my two too-close-together toe bones!), it was a duty walk every step of the way. But—and it's a big but—at the other end of this decrepit body, my yearlong stiff neck, which last fall was worse than ever, may be easing up. Hallelujah.

I don't know which of the many good things I am doing for myself may be responsible: Maurie's massages, Rory's almost imperceptible tweaks, or my physical therapist Paula's strange exercises. In the oddest of these, which I also do at home, I don a thin rubber glove like a dental assistant. Then I hold my temples tight to secure my head with one hand and grip the upper jaw by the front teeth with the other, while trying to pull my top jaw over and down to the right—*hard*. Who knew? Without a better idea, I go ahead and do what I am told.

My strength training and regular walking may also have had a hand in my neck being better, and the nine hours of sleep I get must be helping. Even the regularity of this writing and the sense of greater usefulness it provides me could aid in my healing. God only knows how my neck got so seriously out of whack in the first place, so God alone may know what it will take for it to heal.

As part of my healing effort, I am bravely choosing to return—after a ten-year hiatus—to my longtime spiritual home, Kripalu. The program that calls me back is Panchakarma, the in-depth Indian Ayurvedic cleansing program I've done a few times elsewhere and loved. The minute I read about it in the new Kripalu program guide, I was smitten and decided I had to go.

Now, having considered the considerable cost and long drive by myself in the dead of winter, I am having

Shadowbrook is the name of the facility to which Amrit Desai (whom I used to call Gurudev) moved with his Kripalu community in the mid-1980s. Situated on a huge hill overlooking a lake in Lenox, Massachusetts, the 400-acre property had been reconstituted as a Jesuit monastery after the original mansion built by Andrew Carnegie burned down. Later for many years, it housed Kripalu residents as well as guests, and to this day it is home to the ever-popular Kripalu Center.



second thoughts. But is it really the money—and the threat of running into a blizzard alone, as I have more than once, northeast of Scranton—that stops me? Or am I tripped up about this trip by the prospect of perhaps being made utterly vulnerable again?

Some of my life's most harrowing moments have hit within Shadowbrook's walls. There, and at the earlier Pennsylvania Kripalu ashrams during nearly

twenty years as a Kripalu disciple, teacher and leader, I fell apart and broke open over and over again. I fell apart physically, once for weeks as sick as I've ever been, except when I had dysentery in India. And I fell apart mentally, almost every time I went, my ego pummeled by two conflicting pulls: the desire to be seen and loved, and the dread that if I were seen, rather than being loved I'd be exposed for the fraud I feared I was.

To my credit I kept stepping up to the plate. And I kept getting slapped down—by the myriad mirrors offered by my guru and his disciples—for not being fully myself. Layer by layer, one week or weekend at a time, Kripalu dismantled me, years before Ilana Rubinfeld and her training stripped me bare. Hard as it was to be there, I went because Kripalu was where I learned to love and be loved and felt more rarely alive and capable of joy than anywhere else but India. With each ego jolt delivered by what we called the “Kripalu experience,” I was forced further out of my bedeviled head and down into the heart and soul of me, where love—and I—truly live.

It was sheer torture to have my *cover* blown, or in danger of being, by people like Taponidhi and Vasudev, whose respect my ego lived and (with their considerable help) ultimately died for. How badly I wanted those senior Kripalu disciples, my teachers and mentors, to love and value me. How terrified I was that they wouldn't, if they got to see who this would-be yogini really was.

It's funny when I think about it. I had little sense myself of who we would find deep down past years of deceptive self-protective facades. But short of actual data, I must have been proceeding on the assumption it wouldn't be pretty, or I wouldn't have been so frightened of showing up. But show

up I did for years and years, often taking my yoga students along to watch the slaughter. For my last (now long-ago)

The Kripalu Network was a loose organization of Kripalu Yoga teachers and students around the country and eventually the world, as well as people who had been to Kripalu programs and wanted to keep up their yoga-related practices at home. Other Kripalu teachers and I began forming Kripalu support groups in the 1970s, and as the work spread and more groups were formed, they were clustered into regions, a leader appointed to head each one. I served as the first Mid-Atlantic Regional Leader, mentoring two dozen support group leaders in five states. I was particularly intimidated about supervising a New Jersey group leader—a male psychiatrist.



decade there, I even put myself in the visible, ego-dicey position of a Kripalu Network Regional Leader.

Fortunately, the leadership role entailed training in spiritual mentoring skills. The combination of challenge and support slowly stripped me of the shameful false behaviors I'd long hidden behind. *I simply couldn't get away with them.* The end result of those last several years at Kripalu was to uncover for me, and for those around me, what I (and we all) are made of when we let ego go.

It turned out to be love, of course. But it sure

didn't feel that way during sleepless nights in cell-like rooms once peopled by Catholic monks. How I tossed and turned. Many nights, I traipsed down long hallways to a common bathroom in hopes of relieving my near-chronic Kripalu double-whammy irritable bowel *and* bladder syndromes. My poor body was reflecting as best it could how scared shitless I was that the other Kripalu Network leaders and senior disciples I needed to like me—in order

for *me* to like me—would find me as full of shit figuratively as I was literally.

It is hard to remember now how much of my power I regularly gave away to other people. At the start of my Kripalu run, almost anyone anywhere could hurt me or help me feel better about myself, depending. I didn't yet know how to tend to myself, or who the self needing tending was. I craved peer attention so badly that I let it, or its more fateful *lack*, define me. What is now a mere tendency to be affected by others' opinion of me was then almost the only way I knew how to be.

When somebody liked me, I was okay, which pleased me for the moment. If someone didn't like me, or I thought they didn't, *there was something wrong with me*. If that person mattered to me, I felt unlovable and miserable, for much longer than I'd been happy when I thought I was liked. It took a lot of those shakedown (by shaking me up) roller-coaster rides to realize nothing was ever wrong with me—except that I was foolish enough to think so and act as if I had something to hide.

What needed stripping away in the name of freedom was not the real me at all, of course, but the false “cover” self (or *selves*)—the pretense created in ignorance and long shored up by shame and fear. And stripped near-naked I'd eventually be, at risk of frostbite from a less than warm reception by anyone who might see and not adore *the real me* (and there would be those). But first the pain of keeping up the sham that all was well—and I was cucumber cool in there behind my many masks—had to grow greater than the fear of being rejected as unworthy of being seen.

A day came when I reached a critical tipping point, one fear overtaking the other, forcing the strip-down. I say

the tipping point was *critical* because the ego-wrenching transformation I endured is not something we usually choose to undertake—unless and until the sting of staying the same and holding down the old fort threatens to overwhelm us and take us down. Why would we invite the horrific psychic pain of exposing our presumed-to-be fearsome authentic self if we didn't have to? Most of us need to get darned dissatisfied with our stinky status quo before we'll want to rock the boat—even if it won't sink *us* but only drown the persona we've pretended and tried hard to be.

*Why would we invite the
horrific psychic pain of
exposing our presumed-to-be
fearsome authentic self if
we didn't have to?*

My tipping point came during a workshop where our stalwart Network leader Vasudev overtly called my bluff on an inauthentic thing I said to a group of peers. I can't remember the details but I sure remember the effect—and my affect. I fell into a shame as profound as I ever remember feeling. I was more mortified than the time I was caught gleefully playing with myself under the desk in first grade and my parents were brought in to deal with their sexually precocious little girl.

Being so young, I may have gotten over that one in a hurry (or maybe not). But I burned for weeks in the shame of Vasudev's public unmasking, until it all but burned the old me up. From then on I figured it would be easier to try to play it straight and take my chances. For me, shame beats all other dreaded emotions hands-down—and what a bummer, since facing and erasing our shame is what it often

takes to let go of the selves we've contrived, so as to become the self that we are.

So yes, I am pretty darned sure I hesitate to revisit Kripalu now for the same reason I hesitated to visit it way back when: for fear of stirring the waters of my self—and self-image—once more. I know as well as my English and Sanskrit names that the churning and burning likely to result from showing up there again may blow me—and whatever may remain of my old carefully-contrived covers—right out of the water and into the fire of transformation. Shit.

Though it may well be time for a new round in the battle with ego, it is one excruciating proposition.

Facing ourselves full-on requires immense courage, and I honestly wonder if I've got the heart and guts it takes right now. What a great day it will be when I—and for that matter, all of us—can look forward to and welcome such radical shape-shifting transformation. Till then, I suppose the brave among us will feel the fear and do it anyway. May God bless us on our way!

Sanskrit names are given to disciples on the Kripalu Yoga path. When I was initiated in 1972, I was given the name Bakula, which Gurudev told me means "the guru's scent."



January 12, 2005

Leaving Kripalu Behind

This Wednesday morning may be the grayest day of the year yet, which is saying something, given the winter we've been having. Yesterday, after a teasing snowflake or two mid-morning, it rained cats and dogs all day. Almost two weeks into this new year and not one whole sunny day or decent snowfall to spell the torrents. A Central Pennsylvania record must be going down.

But we know it's perfect, if not fun, for me to be left alone in the gloom. With Trond gone east to Lebanon for a meeting, and all gray and quiet on the western front, I am practically forced to sit here and write. How could I *not* when my life conspires to make it this easy? Nora's lemon butter Christmas cookies, which I've been nibbling on—just one each morning for the past two weeks (now that's discipline!)—are still in evidence (yum, yum). And although the tree comes down tomorrow (boo hoo), it's still up today, lighting *me* up as we speak (yay). Things could be worse.

Cookies, tree or no, I always have the cozy fire Trond makes me, and surely more quiet days to come, urging me inward as they do, to write my way toward the light. Many authors, I gather, compose from suffering, to alleviate a psychic itch they can't quite reach. But remembering Maha's question about whether I am ready to grow without pain, I wonder if I am learning to *write* without pain, sometimes even from a place of joy or at least of relative peace. Let's see.

To begin preparing myself for even the idea of a return trip to Kripalu, I've done something else in addition to

yesterday's intense writing jag about my Kripalu past. I went through the Kripalu curriculum guide, forcing myself to read program descriptions and study the faces of teachers I knew who are still involved there today. Seeing them on the page made me so queasy I shut the quarterly booklet and stuffed it away. I resent having felt I had to fly from the nest on my own while others were content to stay. And I'm jealous of the few I know have less to offer than I do but lead programs there while I sit home in obscurity. It was a hard heart (and ego) break.

In May 1994 at a large Kripalu Network gathering in Rhode Island, I made my farewell in a thankful, tearful talk to the dear men and women I'd worked and played with for almost twenty years. I left because I knew with a deep-down, true-as-can-be knowing that much as I hated to lose good friends, I was done there—the guru and his retinue having had their (spiritual) way with me.

I had met myself, and my brothers and sisters—as we called each other—head-on, in fear and in love. Realizing at last what we humans are made of, I was ready to see what *I* could make of that bittersweet knowledge out beyond Kripalu's once protective but finally constraining walls.

Well before I left, I had begun to see and despair of the guru's failings; how he seemed stuck in a self-absorbed, self-satisfied (really *dissatisfied*) rut he wasn't willing to see. I remember standing wistfully in the back of the room my last time at Kripalu. Gurudev was perfunctorily performing his saffron-robed role, inviting and responding to the same old disciples' same old questions.

As often before, a physician who, like me, had spent nearly twenty years at the guru's feet, asked yet another "relationship" question. I watched Gurudev answer glibly,

dispensing gratuitous advice from high on his velvet throne. The doctor was an accomplished grown man. He should long since have been lifted up off the floor and urged to find answers within. I left the room, the sick feeling in my stomach yet another confirmation that the time had come for me to move on.

Then, and in the months leading up to that last sad day, I saw the guru not practicing what he preached, what I'd learned from him and the disciples he had trained and who had trained me. In a memorable talk years before, Gurudev had told us about the “pathless path” and the need he'd felt to take off from the prescribed way—to carve out a path of his own. He seemed to imply that just as he'd had to differentiate himself from Bapuji, we too would one day need to leave him behind.

He must have known then what I now understand: that if we follow another's path for too long, it becomes our religion, rife with dogma that destroys the soul. He must have known and forgotten. Great teachers train students by encouraging them to take risks, spread their wings and fly. After all, that is what Bapuji had done when he sent Amrit off, at the age of seventeen, to teach in America.

Probably sensing he was about to lose even the semblance of power, Gurudev clung to what was left of his by clinging to—rather than empowering—us, his spiritual children. The tighter his grip, the weaker he got. At last he appeared to me to be defensive, bored and boring, inadvertently pushing me (and others) from the nest. I later realized his behavior must have turned narcissistic, a danger for charismatic leaders—and a cautionary tale for the natural-born teacher I am.

January 13, 2005

My Guru's Nasty Fall

I feel very lucky to have come and gone from Kripalu, and to have embraced and released the priceless guru experience exactly when I did. Less than six months after saying my farewells, Gurudev was thrown from his throne in a nasty sex scandal. My once yoga student, longtime Kripalu resident and always friend Dennis, called from Shadowbrook to tell me on the day the ugly news broke. “Are you sitting down?” he asked, and somehow I knew what was coming.

I was interested in a prurient sort of way. But I was neither shocked nor disappointed. I knew by then Gurudev was no longer who he pretended and surely wanted to be. His sacred yogic teachings were bound to be purer than the real human being conveying them. I wasn't surprised they took firmer hold in me, Dennis and other dedicated students than they had in him. While he was busy performing—and sadly exploiting—his guru role, we were gladly exploring our hearts. While he got caught up in being the messenger, we ran to our practice mats to get the message.

One message *I* got is that human beings have secret shadow sides we had better get in touch with and pay attention to. I learned that from practicing his Kripalu Yoga, which I did as a sort of self-therapy, having discovered that yoga breathing and postures could put me in touch with—and help me release—old unexpressed feelings lodged in my body and blocking my throat and heart.

Using yoga to bring dark unconscious parts of myself into the light of awareness, so they could be expressed and integrated or released, became a regular part of my practice. (This was before the formal Yoga Therapy system pioneered by a Kripalu student and teacher, Michael Lee.) But Gurudev, being an Indian man of humble origins, not a psychologically savvy American like Lee and me—and an isolated guru to boot—apparently missed all that and mismanaged his shadow side. He was all tied up trying to look and act as good as he thought a guru should—like Bapuji.

So Gurudev must not have known that our shadows grow in proportion to our attempts to ignore them and act better than we are. In order to dissipate, shadows need exposure to the light of consciousness and our own compassion. They thrive and get the better of us when they are given the short shrift he likely gave his. It is perhaps

Brahmacharya means conduct that leads to the realization of Brahman or one's Higher Self, including study of the Vedic Scriptures. In American yoga parlance, though, it often refers mainly to self-restraint and mastery of sexual and carnal desire in thought, word and deed, i.e., no sex.



understandable that he didn't know what the hell to do with the likes of his lust, though he no doubt knew that what he did do with it was wrong, especially since he continued insisting his unmarried resident disciples practice *Brahmacharya*.

Bapuji may have handled his dark side by staying so much out of the world and its temptations, contemplating

his demons right along with his God. Who knows?

Gurudev, we know, was very much *in* the world, letting at

least some of his demons run him. He paid the price for not working out (or airing out) his fantasies by *acting* them out, being found out and having his dirty laundry publicly aired. Behind his perfect guru facade was a man with needs and—his feet kissed too many times perhaps—a growing hubris bound to bring him down. It doesn't excuse, but may explain his sordid personal behavior and its stark contrast to the benign public persona and work.

Amrit, as we quickly began to call him, crashed and burned—and was soon forced out—amidst mounting accusations of his cavalier sexual exploits, by disciples young enough to be his daughters. We learned he'd also had a long adulterous affair with his closest associate, the ashram's senior administrator, who at least was closer in age. The young ones must have worshipped him as a Demigod, a point he'd apparently played upon to garner their sexual favors. It was very ugly, especially for those who'd moved to Kripalu and dedicated their lives to its success. Many disciples understandably threw the baby out with the bathwater and wanted none of it. But for me the *message* Amrit Desai delivered, which I took in over two decades and which transformed me totally, was unsullied by revelations of his seamy, steamy exploits.

If I entertained the idea of Amrit Desai as a near God, or godlier than I am—and I *must* have early on—that illusion was long gone by 1994, the year I left (in May) and he fell (in October). Thanks to his potent ancient teachings and my God-given capacity to integrate them into a contemporary woman's life, I had embarked on the disengagement process years before I up and flew the coop.

Along with the graceful yoga he taught me, I am forever indebted to Amrit Desai, for showing me, through the

effects of his *not* doing it, the immense value—for teacher as well as student—of stepping down and back from the limelight whenever we possibly can. I am grateful to have learned in such a clear and graphic way that the job of a spiritual teacher is nothing more or less than to cheer people on to limelights of their own. He didn't do that and got burned out and up.

January 14, 2005

Stepping Back from the Light

Years before my guru days, as a young blazing Leo, I had begun a process of stepping into—then back from—the limelight, through the medium of theater. My childhood passion for acting was generously fueled by our live-in Aunt Del, whose husband had been a Hollywood voice coach. Recognizing my thespian penchant, Del had a stage built in our basement, where she directed plays starring me and the neighbor kids. I went on to do summer theater and was thrilled when, in Seattle at nineteen, I landed the lead role in the American premiere of a small play by Harold Pinter. I was center stage with almost all the lines at a theater-in-the-round. Talk about the limelight!

But not for long. Back in New York that fall and the next summer, the theater director at my college had it out for me, and in for another actress he'd been grooming for all the good parts long before I came on the scene. He cut me out and her *in* to every good part I was right for. I got disappointed but I didn't get the message. It took a gruesome death for me to understand that theater was not to be my path, and the public eye a dangerous place for some of us to play, at least until we've done the private dirty work that breeds humility, self-understanding and self-respect.

The casualty of my lose-the-limelight wake-up call was a writer named Richard whose highly personal Holocaust play I was directing in Philadelphia, where I lived and worked post-college. Soon after we'd cast a talented actor to

play the part of the author (but thinly disguised) and started rehearsals, Richard went stark raving mad. He kidnapped his young daughter for a cross-country road trip during which he had a stroke that left him wordless. Back home and no longer able to read or write, Richard hung himself in his closet, and the spotlight lost its luster for me.

I used to say I gave up the theater. But I now realize it was the other way around. The universe used my last least glorious dramatic foray to send me the clearest possible signal to get and stay off the stage. I haven't written, directed or acted in another play since. Chances are I never will.

But it was not till ten years later, through the practice and teaching of Kripalu Yoga that I began to understand how absolutely critical and useful it was for me to step back from any stage and let others shine. I, who like the charismatic guru had tendencies to be the star—a would-be Icarus setting out for the sun only to crash and burn in the form of an author-effigy—needed to learn to become the moon. If I was not to burn up or out as I went forth in the world, I'd have to learn to pass off my sizzling Leo brilliance to those whose dimmer lights wanted extra illumination.

I would have to temper my radiance, which was too unbridled to be of utmost use to me or anyone else, while inviting others to bask in it till they too were lit up from within. It's akin to what Thich Nhat Hanh said about allowing ourselves to be a torch whose flame lights other torches. To keep my fiery ego out of it, I would need to find ways to act from behind the scenes, becoming the metaphorical life of the party whose name and face no one can later quite recall.

To become the pale moon and reflect others' light was the succinct assignment given me during a reading by an

astrologer yoga student of mine. It's what I began learning to do at Kripalu: to burn off as much of me that was not true, humble and clear as I could—so I might mix up the rest with what I was learning from yoga and use it to kick-start the soul work of others.

Dear Kathy, for years my closest yoga student, and the one above all who taught me to step back and lend my light to another's torch, a few months ago wrote to acknowledge a capacity she had recognized in me before—to *ignite souls*, as I think she put it. Kathy was prompted by a poetry book she'd received, *Prayers to the Infinite*, written by another of my students, Danna Faulds.

Kathy wrote: “Your name in (Danna’s) dedication so sweetly and simply tells the story of the immeasurable impact you have had on the lives of so many people—people that you have steered onto the just right path at the just right time. As you know, I am one of those people. Carolyn Myss speaks of people that we have soul contracts with...people we were destined to meet in this lifetime. I sense that your soul does its work by being in the right place at the right time to meet a great many souls...and in that way you are an awakener.”

I am incredibly touched by Kathy's words, which feel true to me at the level of heart. It *is* my job to light souls. I am here to bring people to the spiritual table, not to feed them, but to teach them to feed themselves—with *themselves*—through self-love, that most fortifying food for the soul.

*A speck of dust from the guru's feet
Forms a bridge strong enough to cross.
Samskara will be overcome.
Worship him as the lord of all.*

Samskara has many meanings. But here it seems to refer to the accumulated impressions made upon our beings through our thoughts, words and deeds. It is related to what we call our *karma*.



Though I love that verse from the *Sri Guru Gita*, which comes to mind on reading Kathy's words, *I would not be a guru*. Never. No disciples bowing to kiss my holy lotus feet, thank you very much. I would be—indeed I am—a sister seeker at the table of spiritual crumbs, who when we get lucky—and graceful—enough, may feast with my tablemates on whole cakes and sweet icing too! A spiritual

teacher does not a *guru* need to be.

The path of a guru can be a lonely one. Increasingly lost and isolated in his insular world, mine seemed inept at intimate human interaction, the give and take it takes to light us up on the worldly plane. I could see it in his ever more empty eyes. Ironically, it was Bapuji, who lived alone in silence for years—rarely surrounded by family and disciples as Gurudev was—who had the innate capacity to connect. I could see it in his sparkling eyes. He looked anything but lonely, presumably because through his relentless self-scrutiny he knew in his bones and nerves, as well as with his bright mind, the thing he often told us, that “the whole world is one family.”

I too am coming to know in my bones something of what he must have meant. I feel less separate from others than ever before. That's because, as Bapuji must have done, I am getting more in touch with and easy about the whole of me, shadow side as well as light. It's only now as I am more connected to all of myself, and so to others, that I realize how terribly separate I used to be.

I wasn't any more separate than I am now, of course. But I felt that way, off spinning in my own little space capsule, not as different from Gurudev as I may first have imagined. I too could be self-absorbed and disconnected, watching what I said and did from behind my many roles. How hard I tried to keep others from bumping against me, knocking me over or out of the game, or I them. And that self-conscious caution kept me from getting close enough to bump into people to *good* effect either. It was a rare person, like Trond, with whom I dared share a lot of myself.

Given all that concern about getting judged and hurt—*about whether I was good enough*—no wonder I woke up nervous on days when I had a yoga class to teach, especially in the early years. Even recently as a new life coach, I could be nervous picking up the phone to support a client. When we separate ourselves from others in fear, we put ourselves on the firing line. We stand before the judge, awaiting the incoming outside verdict, about us and our every move. We play it small, safe, in the box. Hawk-like, we watch others watch us and can easily feel we come up short.

*When we separate ourselves
from others in fear, we put
ourselves on the firing line.*

It is probably the fear of coming up short that kept me from Kripalu these ten years since I (and the guru) left. I was afraid I might not measure up—in my own eyes and the eyes of some who stayed. But you know what? It's okay to have stayed away, even if it was partly shame that kept me. After years of blood, sweat and teary personal growth work, it was time to make and take a break. I was ripe and ready

for the “retreat from battle” sanctioned by Bapuji in my favorite Bapuji talk about the humanity of struggle. I had to cut the umbilical cord to keep on growing *me*.

I am a strange bird, if not as fiercely independent as Trond. Of course I had to strike out on my own to uncover and fully express all of who I am. The next stage of my search called for fewer familiar *reflections* and more unfamiliar *reflection*, an inner engagement to gauge myself and my progress in

contexts of my own making. To come into my own and know the whole world

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as one family, like Bapuji, I had to relinquish the insular path—and its pack—to pursue a wider pathless path. A return to Kripalu may be as good an indicator as any of how well I have fared by myself.