

Chasing down rest, relaxation, renewal

At the **Kripalu** Center, the path to self-awareness comes in a busy day of moving, breathing, thinking

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If one of the goals of meditation is to get to know yourself better, I guess I learned that I don't have the patience for quiet contemplation.

Truthfully, I already knew this — which is why I decided to try a day of retreat and renewal at **Kripalu** Center for Yoga & Health in the first place. Opened in 1983 in a former Jesuit seminary, **Kripalu** puts an emphasis on positive lifestyle change. What better place, I reasoned, to learn how to relax?

Kripalu's programs combine a range of workshops, outdoor activities, yoga, and movement classes. Most people tend to stay for two or three days and many treat themselves to at least an annual pilgrimage. I was in a hurry; I figured one day would be enough.

Certainly, you can get an early start. The day pass begins at 7 a.m. in time for breakfast, which is eaten in peaceful silence. It was a good opportunity to study the floor plans and hiking maps that I had received on arrival along with a tight schedule of activities. I was going to have to be quick on my feet to fit in a full day of relaxation. I was not the only one to notice the irony. "I need to relax from all this relaxation," was a common joke throughout the day. In the end though, the wide range of activities was a boon to a newbie like me. I could sample a lot of different ways of moving — and thinking.

Never having practiced yoga, I decided to ease into things with a two-hour hike. Ben Seidman, the

hike leader, was pretty sure that we would return in time for the next activity. "We usually get back," he told me in a soothing voice, "but you never know what will happen on a hike."

Seidman led the group through **Kripalu**'s orchard, where we paused to do warm-up exercises, take in the view of the Berkshire hills, and feel the warmth of the sun on our faces. As we followed a narrow trail through the woods, the hikers, mostly women, fell into easy conversation. After a while, Seidman suggested that we walk in silence so we could meditate, become more aware of our surroundings — and of our own breathing. "Let your mind wander if you want," he said, "then use your breathing to bring yourself back."

The light dusting of snow on still-vibrant fall foliage had a poignancy that might spark some mindful thinking. But not for me. "Will we make it back in time? Will we make it back in time?" became my mantra as we traipsed through the woods.

We did. Not surprisingly, the rest of the day's activities focused primarily on yoga. I was most in my element during YogaDance, one of **Kripalu**'s most popular offerings. I was a generation or so behind on the popular music that revved up the class, but I channeled memories of sweaty dancing in a basement rec room as yoga coach Jurian Hughes exhorted us to move to the music any way we wanted. "Nothing is wrong," she assured us. "Feel the honey dripping from every joint." In an hour of movement — from languid to vigorous — Hughes hoped we would become more aware of

our breathing. Along with a nostalgia for 1960s music, I left her class with a new mantra: "Inhale, soften. Exhale, melt."

There was no beginner's yoga class on the day I visited **Kripalu**, but several regulars assured me that I would have no trouble following the 90-minute Gentle Yoga class and that the time would pass quickly. Even though I didn't know the names of the yoga positions, none of them was overly difficult and the slow pace was a relief after YogaDance. I was especially buoyed by instructor Michelle Dalbec's promise that by the end of class we would feel as if we had had a full body massage. "It's a good thing to relieve stress," she told us, "and who doesn't need that?" Near the end of the session, as we lay on our backs and concen-



trated on our breathing, the woman next to me fell asleep. I sneaked a peek at my watch.

If I didn't exactly relax, I did work up an appetite. **Kripalu** serves buffet-style meals with lots of choices to accommodate dietary preferences. For lunch, I had carrot-ginger soup and a big salad. For dinner I tucked into cream of mushroom soup and a Moroccan-style dish of chicken and lentils. Luckily, I had chosen one of the two nights per week when dessert is served — in this case, a sweet baklava.

Kripalu allows plenty of time for meals, but since I was only there for a day, I could not squeeze in a soak in the whirlpool, a bake in the sauna, or a meander through the labyrinth. I did steal a few minutes to sit on the outdoor terrace and eat a chocolate chip cookie from the cafe, which also sells gluten-free cookies, organic chocolate and ice cream (along with Ben & Jerry's), and a variety of pain relievers. As rabbits nibbled the grass and chipmunks scampered in the bushes, I had a moment of clarity, perhaps even self-awareness. Rather than try to change my nature, perhaps I should simply make the most of it.

During a workshop called "Falling in Love With Life Again" clinical psychologist Maria Sirois told us that laughter has as posi-

tive an effect on the body as meditation. "We see more and hear more when we laugh," she said. "We cannot be anxious or depressed when we laugh. If you are having a stressful day, Google the laughing yogi." Laugh more — I could do that.

I could also give myself more energy. In a session on Qigong, a pillar of traditional Chinese medicine, Ken Nelson led us through a series of movements that cultivate energy. As we stretched and bent, he exhorted us to polish a ball of energy in our hands and to bathe ourselves in energy. Then he told us to stand on the balls of our feet and gently bounce up and down. "Happy bouncing," he called it. "Do it for 10 minutes a day. It releases endorphins and makes you feel good." We bounced and bounced. "Do it with a smile," Nelson said. "It's all you need."

I resolved to add happy bouncing to my daily routine. But I'm going to take it to a new level — I'm going to laugh.

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Kripalu Center for Yoga & Health

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Day pass includes three meals, workshops, yoga classes, outdoor activities, evening events, and access to amenities including sauna, whirlpool, labyrinth, fitness room, cafe, bookstore, walking and hiking trails, and lakefront beach area. Pre-registration required. \$100-\$120.



PATRICIA HARRIS FOR THE BOSTON GLOBE

The center's artwork is mindful of the Asian roots of yoga.



Hikers are encouraged to keep meditative silence on a woody trail.



PHOTOS BY PATRICIA HARRIS FOR THE BOSTON GLOBE

Artwork graces the walls of the dining room at the Kripalu Center.