Learning Societies Conference
April 4 - 9, 2011
at Deer Park Institute
Himachal Pradesh

For more information contact:
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www.shikshantar.in
www.deerpark.in

compassion
contemplation
creativity
courage
Dear Friends,

It is our great pleasure to invite you to participate in the 6th Learning Societies Conference on “Contemplation, Compassion, Creativity and Courage,” organised jointly by Deer Park Institute, Shikshantar, Multiversity Network, Earth Care Designs, Possibilities, Manzil and Swaraj University. The conference will take place from April 4-9, 2011 in Bir, Himachal Pradesh. Please find attached a background note with more details on the conference, a registration form, and some information about the Deer Park venue.

This intergenerational conference will bring together approximately 120 leading “thinker-doers” from around South Asia who are active in challenging the monopoly of factory-schooling and nurturing diverse learning communities, vernacular traditions, intercultural dialogue and swaraj. There will be organic farmers, artists, artisans, activists, designers, filmmakers, healers, alternative educators, entrepreneurs, homeschoolers, unschoolers, barefoot innovators, parents, youth, spiritual seekers, and more. We believe that the agenda of education and learning is far too important to be left to just B.Ed teachers and NCERT educationists. As with all learning societies events, the conference is open to families and children.

We hope to build upon the reflection, dialogue and co-motion that have been initiated in the Learning Societies network already. There will be a lot of space in the conference to explore radical ideas, proposals and projects. This is a fantastic opportunity to really think outside the box. Most importantly, the central purpose of the conference is to build strong friendships and critical connections. Previous conferences have taken place in Udaipur, Mumbai, Brazil, Jordan, Pakistan, and Iran.

Several exciting inquiries have emerged over this time, and out of these, many new initiatives:

- What is the learning ecology of each of our diverse communities? What challenges is it facing? How can we regenerate it?
- What kinds of unlearning and uplearning experiments are significant and necessary for the times we live in?
- How do we connect learning with healthy food, community media, zero waste, local economy, cultural creativity, and other essential aspects of harmonious living?
- What harm has factory schooling done to us?
- How do each of our individual learning journeys relate to one another?
- What can we do in our own lives and work to challenge the Education and Development systems which are violent, exploitative and dehumanizing?
- How can we recognize diverse forms of power, resistance, regeneration, and engage and strengthen them?
- What are the ways to deepen and expand intercultural dialogue, trust and gift culture?
You may like to review the previous five learning societies books (published by Shikshantar) which contain over 60 essays from around the world. If you do not yet have copies, you can download them from the web at www.swaraj.org/shikshantar/ls_discussion.html or you can write to <shikshantar@yahoo.com> for hard copies. You can also see two previous learning societies conference films on the learning societies facebook page.

The format is of an unConference. This means that we will co-create the agenda together. There will be a lot of open space in the conference for participants to spontaneously share questions, experiences, experiments, workshops, play, music, food, treks, etc., with each other in the spirit of deep dialogue and friendship. We have also decided not to require any submission of formal academic papers. Instead, we are asking that you actively participate in the pre-conference online interactions in the coming months. We feel that this process will help us to better self-organize ourselves into a vibrant learning community when we all meet.

We will be using yahoo groups and facebook for this.

The conference fees will operate on the principle of gift culture. You can contribute whatever you are able to toward the costs of food, accommodation and materials (the rough cost is about Rs.1800 per person). This applies to those staying at the group dorms and dining hall facilities at the Deer Park Institute. Private guest house rooms are also available near the campus which you can book yourself (info about these will be available soon). There are some limited resources available to help cover travel scholarships within India. Please write to us if you will require some assistance for your travel expenses.

Your insights and experiences will greatly enhance the discussion on learning societies in South Asia. Kindly send your registration form as soon as possible to the following email address <saudhakim@gmail.com>. We have limited space available. If you have any further questions, please do not hesitate to contact us.

We look forward to welcoming you at Deer Park!

Yours sincerely,
Prashant Varma, Deer Park
Manish Jain, Shikshantar
Nitin Paranjape, Earth Care Designs
Claude Alvares, Multiversity
Ravi Gulati, Manzil
Aspi and Yasmin Shroff, Possibilities
Saud Hakim and Reva Dandage, Swaraj University
The Paradox of Our Age

We have bigger houses but smaller families;
more conveniences, but less time.

We have more degrees but less sense;
more knowledge but less judgment;
more experts, but more problems;
more medicines but less healthiness.

We've been all the way to the moon and back,
but have trouble in crossing the street to meet our new neighbour.

We built more computers to hold more copies than ever,
but have less real communication;
We have become long on quantity,
but short on quality.

These are times of fast foods but slow digestion;
tall men but short characters;
steep profits but shallow relationships.

It's a time when there is much in the window,
but nothing in the room.

- His Holiness the 14th Dalai Lama

ABOUT THE CONFERENCE THEMES

Not only has this paradox today led the world to the brink of ecological, financial and cultural disaster, we are seemingly trapped within it. Ironically, all over the world, the response to these various crises has been calls for more speed and efficiency, more economic growth, more global markets, more consumerism, more technologies, more violence and even more formal education. On closer reflection and analysis, we find that factory schooling and the 'educated' mind has played a big role in sinking us deeper and deeper into this paradox. At the same time, modern education and development are also eliminating many of the diverse wells of wisdom, trust, aesthetics and imagination necessary for non-violently moving beyond this paradox.
Fortunately, the purity of our hearts cannot escape the inherent inadequacies that exist within the monoculture of the machine, which has given rise to a sense of dissatisfaction, discomfort, despair and a loss of inter-connectedness. The same purity is giving birth to various new non-cooperation and freedom movements around the world – Gross National Happiness, Slow Food, Walkouts-Walkon, Localization, Culture Jamming, Zero-Waste, Voluntary Simplicity, to name but a few – which are seeking to generate a new consciousness to guide us out from the paradox of our age. These are calling for us to slow down, to consume less, reconnect to nature and our hands, learn contextualize from indigenous communities, and unravel the tangle of our industrial-military institutionally-conditioned mind. We feel that there is a need to nurture many diverse learning communities and vibrant ecosystems to individually and collectively re-connect to: our inner voice, senses and wholeness through contemplation; our feelings of compassion that deepen our friendships and spirit of cooperation; our sparks of creativity to dream in new and imaginative ways; and, our courage to initiate and stand behind actions that kindle hope and keep our humanity alive.

The Learning Societies conference at Bir, Himachal Pradesh will offer us space, time and opportunity to meet, explore, share our diverse experiences and dialogue on how the paradox of our age is affecting us and how we are co-creating diverse learning communities to try to move beyond it. In the presence of the Himalayan mountains and its natural glory, we hope to connect to our true selves and embrace the challenge that Samdhong Rimpoché proposes: “The more and more you listen, the more and more you will hear. The more you hear, the more and more deeply you will understand.”

During the conference, we would like to explore some of the following questions:

- How do we relate to each of the themes of Contemplation, Compassion, Creativity and Courage in our life, our work, our spiritual traditions, learning communities and knowledge systems?
- How do these themes relate to notions of freedom, decolonization and Swaraj?
- How can these themes help to generate imaginative approaches and solutions to the myriad challenges and crises that face us today?
- How do these themes help to challenge, dismantle and transform violent and exploitative systems?

Each one of us is blessed with unique gifts and stories. It is time to evoke the magic within us and celebrate the possibilities!
ABOUT THE VENUE
The Himalayas have always been a place of refuge for those seeking some meaning to life beyond dominant notions, standards, conditioning and social expectations. They have offered a glimmer of something bigger than ourselves, our own "ego-centric" worlds, and our day-to-day compulsions.

The Deer Park Institute, situated in the Himalayas, draws most of its inspiration from the Buddha and his legacy. When the Buddha shared his realization for the first time, at the historical Deer Park \textit{mriga dava}, there was no phenomenon called "Buddhism" yet. It was simply an atmosphere where the Buddha Shakyamuni shared his realization of a state completely free from delusion, from the wrong views which pervaded the society and human mind at the time. In a spirit of enquiry, dialogue and debate, accompanied by the experiential framework of contemplative practices, the Buddha strongly emphasized the need to have an individual analysis of reality. Buddha was not just a saint or meditation teacher, but also a social thinker, philosopher, scientist, activist, ecologist, and educator. The wisdom he shared is still very relevant to our individual and collective crises today. When Buddha attained his awakening, his insight was beyond the constructs of identity, gender and caste, with a vast recognition of the diversity of beings and their pre-dispositions. What grew out of this unique spirit of challenging assumptions, stereotypes and systems that caused injustice and suffering was the phenomenon and tradition that today we call “Buddhism.”

Deer Park also draws much inspiration from ancient universities like Nalanda, Vikramshila, and Taxila. Nalanda University wasn’t a university built around the values of a nation state or corporation, but a civilizational university where learning grew out of a very subtle and refined understanding of life – a holistic, harmonious and interdependent worldview.

Thus, the Deer Park Institute seeks to recreate this atmosphere for dialogue, debate, insight and experience in small ways. We strive to create favorable conditions for our individual and collective transformation from ignorance to wisdom. The Deer Park Institute is not seeking to promote pursuits driven by careers or degrees, but rather, ways we can all transform ourselves to reach our limitless potentials as sentient beings. Deer Park supports many local initiatives including zero waste and environmental education, the local wisdom project and the Himalayan film school.
REGISTRATION FORM
If you are interested in attending, please complete and submit this registration form to Saud Hakim at saudhakim@gmail.com

Name:
Organization:
Address:
Telephone #:
Skype Name:
Email:
Website:
Facebook Name:

Would you prefer to stay in (please circle one):
Shared-Room Dormitory          OR          Private Guest House

(Note: if you want a private guest house room, you will need to book it yourself. We will let you know the names of the guest houses where other participants are staying.)

PERSONAL DETAILS
1. Please describe yourself and your own learning/unlearning journey in a short personal note (up to 750 words) which can be shared with the larger group.

2. What kind of learning communities and learning experiments have you been trying co-create?

3. What is attracting you to this gathering?

4. What questions, topics, workshops, etc. related to unfolding learning societies would you like to further share and explore in this conference?