

The Dharma and the Death Penalty

by Diana Lion

The vast majority of state-sponsored executions worldwide are carried out in just a few countries. In 2002, 81 percent of all known executions took place in China, Iran, and the U.S. The U.S. came in third in executing people (71), after China (1060 known) and Iran (113 known). In both China and Iran the true number is undoubtedly higher. This is an obvious case where being in the top three is nothing to boast about.

Currently 38 states in the U.S., plus the U.S. Government and military, have the death penalty, and 12 states do not, along with Washington, DC.

Since 1990, seven countries are known to have executed prisoners who were under 18 years old at the time of the crime: Congo (Democratic Republic), Iran, Nigeria, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, U.S.A. and Yemen. The country which carried out the greatest number of known executions of child offenders was the U.S. (17 since 1990).

Amnesty International recorded three executions of child offenders in 2002: all three of them were in Texas. This year a child offender was executed in the state of Oklahoma.

How do we respond to all this as Buddhist practitioners?

Each year, Amnesty International sponsors a weekend for religious and spiritual congregations throughout the U.S. to take action on ending the death penalty. This year the national Weekend of Faith in Action on the Death Penalty was Oct 10-12. As we go to press, I am inspired that many dharma groups across this country participated in some way – hosting discussions and teach-ins, giving dharma talks, showing films, dedicating the merit of their practice.

I don't see any (good) reason for us to stop talking about the death penalty just because the Weekend of Faith in Action has come and gone. Ending the death penalty fits right in as applied First Precept practice.

So – would you consider pausing for a moment to remember those touched by the death penalty, before any dharma talk or discussion you might be involved in? Maybe bringing something to read about capital punishment, and asking folks to sit in silence for a minute or two, or dedicating the evening to all victims of state-sanctioned and other violence?

Would you and/or your sangha consider continuing to do this until the death penalty is ended in this country?

As dharma practitioners, are we willing to bring the death penalty right onto the cushion with us? Are we willing to pledge to keep this issue alive, as long as there is a death penalty, as part of our commitment to waking up for the benefit of all beings?

Below is the full text of a pledge, and a card showing a short version of this pledge that we are proposing. It is similar to one created by many other faith traditions. This pledge will state our wish that if we are murdered, the murderer not receive the death penalty. Feel free to sign this card and keep it in your wallet. Take the opportunity to bring up the topic with your family, neighbors, and friends. Please let us know what you do with it.

A Declaration about the Preciousness of Life
I, the undersigned, being of sound and disposing mind and memory, do hereby in the presence of witnesses make this Declaration about the preciousness of life. Should I die as a result of a violent crime, I request that the person or persons found guilty of homicide for my killing not be subject to or put in jeopardy of the death penalty under any circumstances, no matter how heinous their crime or how much I may have suffered. The death penalty would only increase my suffering.
I request that the Prosecutor or District Attorney having the jurisdiction of the person or persons alleged to have committed my homicide not file or prosecute an action for capital punishment as a result of my homicide.
This Declaration is not meant to be, and should not be taken as, a statement that the person or persons who have committed my homicide should go unpunished.
I request that my family and friends take whatever actions are necessary to carry out the intent and purpose of this Declaration; and, I further request them to take no action contrary to this Declaration.

A card for your wallet:

<p>I, the undersigned, do hereby make this Declaration about the preciousness of life. Should I die as a result of a violent crime, I request that any person found guilty of my murder not be subject to the death penalty under any circumstances, no matter how heinous their crime or how much I may have suffered.</p> <p>_____ (date)</p> <p>(Signature)</p>	<p>Buddhist Peace Fellowship Prison Project PO Box 3470 Berkeley, CA 94703 prisons@bpf.org www.bpf.org</p>
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