

## **How to Hold a Demonstration/Vigil (to try to end Executions)**

*Adapted from Amnesty International USA,*

*“Faith in Action: An Abolition Resource for Congregations” and BPF Prison Project*

Demonstrations and vigils are great ways for your sangha and coalition members to show the public the support you’ve gathered against the death penalty. They can be held in front of your state senate chambers of governor’s office, and in front of prisons or courthouses. Come together to show your position on legislation, sentencing, or executions.

1. If you have not yet established an anti-death penalty coalition in your community, get in touch with local abolitionists. See if they are planning anything or invite them to join you in your efforts. If you already have a coalition in place, hold a planning session to develop an action plan for your demonstration/vigil.

2. Contact your local and state police. Consider this a courtesy call. Let them know what you want to do (nonviolent protest, number of people expected, moments of silence) and where you want to hold it. They can assist you if you need to get a permit. If you are addressing something that has garnered a lot of publicity and is very controversial, expect opposition. It’s always good to contact the police to keep the sides apart. BPF’s experience has shown that often activist peacekeepers send pro-death penalty people who are being disruptive to stand among the people sitting, because that has a tendency to calm them down. We have even experienced pro-death penalty demonstrators coming to stand among us (who are sitting) all on their own, and feeling enough calm to engage in discussion with people about the issues rather than continuing to simply yell names.

3. If you have enough time before your event, especially if you are holding a vigil outside the prison where an execution is taking place, it is a good idea to hold a training session to prepare your participants. These events can be very emotional, particularly if supporters of capital punishment show up. Have your local abolitionists attend the training, or someone who has gone to demonstrations or vigils before and can inform your group of what they can expect. Do role-playing. Try confronting each other (be a pro-death penalty activist and argue with others about the death penalty) to sharpen your skills about how to handle those situations if/when they crop up. Also, make sure to warn your participants against addressing supporters who might attend: avoid a shouting match that might discredit you before the police and the audience you are addressing. One good communications resource is the skills of Nonviolent Communication, developed by Marshall Rosenberg and now practiced worldwide. Check out their web site at <[www.cnvc.org](http://www.cnvc.org)>.

4. Have an agenda prepared. Meet with the other leaders of your sangha and coalition and plan each step. Create a program/schedule for songs, poems, meditation, speakers, marching, etc. Make sure to reflect on the victim of the crime, as well as the prisoner, and the cycle of violence being perpetuated by the state’s actions. In fact, BPF always sends someone to speak from the stage, to say explicitly that they want to include everyone in their circle of compassion (right up to the governor who did not grant the clemency appeal). Make sure everyone is on the same schedule; you don’t want to appear uncoordinated and lacking credibility. Include some kind of wrap up activity to bring your participants together one last time for reflection and thought.

Another thing you might want to consider is having your own peacekeepers; don’t depend just on the police to keep the situation in control. Use peacekeepers known to participants in your group. They should know to keep your group separate from death penalty

supporters, how to maintain order and keep participants from overreacting. (See the following page for peacekeeping information.)

5. Have a checklist. Make sure to bring enough candles, candleholders, matches, tissues, signs and any other materials you might find useful. Also make a “what if” list, in case it rains, snows, or there is too much wind or heat. There may be other materials you would need to bring along in these circumstances to make sure your vigil/demonstration works. Have some kind of flyer or sheet of information about your meetings and goals available at the event for people who may be interested in joining your efforts.