



BUDDHIST PEACE FELLOWSHIP

Buddhism and the Death Penalty October 2006

"I vow not to kill. Not killing life, the Buddha seed grows. Transmit the life of Buddha and do not kill."

Every version of the Buddha's ethical precepts begins with this principle: not killing. The Buddha, and all the great spiritual teachers — Jesus, Mohammed, the Hebrew prophets, Gandhi — tell us that all life is sacred, and that violence only begets violence. The logic of cause and effect, karma and its fruit, is inescapable even when you dress it up in the emperor's clothes of punitive and retributive justice.

We see capital punishment as the enactment of a cruel and primitive urge for vengeance dressed in the fabric of legality. We see such laws as the domestic expression of the same kind of self-centered violence and irrational, destructive military policies that the U.S. is presently supporting around the world. We believe that capital punishment degrades and brutalizes our society by teaching the use of violence in reaction to violence. We see that the harm of capital punishment is not just to the man or woman put to death, but to our whole society — to the guards and technicians, the warden, the governor, the families of victims, and to ourselves as citizens who allow this kind of barbarism to go forward.

Capital Punishment is the cutting edge of America's prison system. As social scientists, clergy, politicians, and communities of color all know, this is a broken system of justice, although as a system of repression and injustice, sowing seeds of violence it is remarkably effective. Capital Punishment cannot be fixed. It rests on a foundation of violence and retribution. We are dedicated to a new system of justice built on enduring principles of love, restoration, and redemption. Let those be the lights that guide us.

As Engaged Buddhists we believe that social and personal transformation are always possible, and that even wounded people can change contribute to life. We do not believe in a sentence of "Life Without the Possibility of Parole" (LWOP) for those who take life as a one-size-fits-all remedy. While it is true that society reasonably expects protection from those who — by reason of mental illness, and extreme physical or psychological trauma — prey on others, the great majority of all prisoners are capable of transformation. This is our understanding of human nature. As for the handful who must be restrained or separated for their own protection and the safety of others, even these prisoners must be afforded a humane environment, food, medicine, and the possibility of meaningful work.

We believe that capital punishment not only fails to serve as deterrence to violence and murder, but that it nourishes the seeds of violence that exist within each of us.

We believe that there is no fair or practical way to arrive at a sentence of death. Our criminal

justice system is so weighted against the poor and against men and women of color that an even application of the law is impossible. In recent years we have seen so many death sentences overturned by new DNA evidence and prosecutorial misconduct. We also see that capital cases are often based on forced confessions, mistaken identification, and jailhouse informants. To continue with capital punishment in its present state means that more innocent people are bound to die.

We recognize that according to a *Los Angeles Times* 2005 study, the California death penalty system costs approximately \$90,000 more a year to house an inmate on death row, than in the general prison population or \$57.5 million annually. This amount does not include legal fees for prosecution, defense, mandated appeals, and other costs that more than double the overall cost. We believe that these substantial funds should be used for much-needed life-affirming services like education, healthcare, and housing.

The California People of Faith Working Against the Death Penalty (CPF), of which Buddhist Peace Fellowship is a charter member, offers this Declaration of Life.

1. I am opposed to capital punishment on any grounds whatsoever.
2. I believe it is morally wrong for any state or other government entity to take the life of a human being by way of capital punishment.
3. I believe (and am statistically supported) that capital punishment serves no purpose other than that of revenge. Taking life for the purpose of revenge is abhorrent to me.

If one is in agreement with this declaration, certain obligations arise. These obligations, of course, arise from our understanding of the Buddha's precepts as well. In his version of the First Precept, "Reverence for Life," Vietnamese Zen Master Thich Nhat Hanh writes: "*I am determined not to kill, not to let others kill, and not to condone any killing in the world, in my thinking, and in my way of life.*" This is pretty straightforward, but the inner and outer work is hard.

What is this work? Organize against the death penalty in your communities, in your centers and temples, in your churches, synagogues, and mosques. Talk about the death penalty; debate it with your friends. When executions are scheduled, join with sisters and brothers of all faiths to sit at the prison gates and bear witness. This is really important. It is never pleasant to be inside or outside the prison but it is necessary to speak for sanity and compassion with our bodies.

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Wisdom and Compassion for Progressive Social Change