

Why Ending the Death Penalty is Still Critical For Us As Dharma Practitioners

By Diana Lion, Associate Director of Programs
Prison Program Director, Buddhist Peace Fellowship

The Bush Administration has declared victory in Iraq. Many humans, animals and plants are dead; and the seeds of hatred and bitterness toward the American government have been sown worldwide. The Bush Administration has been equally nefarious on the domestic front: On March 18, 2003 (24 hours before the start of the "shock and awe" campaign), Louis Jones, Jr. was executed by the federal government in Terra Haute, Indiana. Jones was an African-American Gulf War I veteran.

Louis Jones, Jr. suffered from post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) following his Gulf War I traumas. He then became the third man to be executed in the federal system since federal executions were reinstated in 2001. The first was another war veteran - Timothy McVeigh. Trial transcripts mention that McVeigh had been seen as an "outstanding soldier ... the top gun in his platoon. [Other soldiers] said they felt safe in the Persian Gulf when they were with him because he was such a good gunner and such a strong soldier." And yet we all know of the tragic consequences brought about by his "superior skills". Another former soldier with PTSD who later committed murder was Manny Babbitt, executed at San Quentin State Prison in California on March 7, 2000. After returning to the U.S. from Vietnam he "ambushed" and murdered an elderly grandmother in the combat style he had learned in Vietnam.

As part of an experiment called The Listening Project, several of us from the Buddhist Peace Fellowship spent a year asking people on the street what the American flag means to them. Many said the flag symbolizes American ideals and that they want to share those ideals with other countries. What struck me most was that some of the ex-military I spoke with shared the vision of American ideals that had motivated them to enlist originally, and their subsequent disillusionment with how those have been acted on. I was moved by what seemed to be their courageous break with the traditionally patriotic line, though many had yet to find a new perspective to replace their old views. We shared strategies for peaceful alternatives to war and bombing. Many of them spoke of their longing for a reality to match their ideals.

Buddhism teaches us the laws of cause and effect. If you sow seeds of violence then you reap seeds of violence. Neither events nor violence are ever simple. They never have only one cause. They are set in motion by complex sets of "causes and conditions" that, in their turn, lead to complex results. The current American administration is not only engaging in a series of conflicts that will lead to more wars; it is planting many seeds of violence in our children, and setting the stage for future executions of PTSD-suffering war veterans.

Through our dharma practice, we learn to sit with the fires of violence and anger that can arise so easily in everyday life. It is not easy to simply sit and not move. When our body feels restless, and all our thoughts are telling us to act, and our emotions are full of pain, it can feel impossible to not move. This is the kind of situation that can lead us to have more empathy with how difficult it is for people to hold back from taking revenge, or commit other acts of violence. And yet, we have all experienced the unfortunate results (karmic momentum) resulting from times when we do act upon those urges, rather than refraining.

During the many execution vigils in which I have sat outside the prison's walls, I've realized that with each execution we are teaching our children that violence is the wisest response to violence. First we recruit young people into the military and train them to kill; then we honor them for it. However when they come back from war with PTSD and continue to commit murder the state then sentences them to death in our names.

Studies show a clear association between PTSD and violence, including murder. Notorious American lawyer Clarence Darrow referred to this association in his 1924 closing arguments of the Leopold and Loeb case:

Your Honor knows that in this very court, crimes of violence have increased, growing out of the war. Not necessarily [only] by those who fought but by those that learned that blood was cheap, and human life was cheap, and if the State could take it lightly why not the boys? There are causes for this terrible crime. There are causes, as I have said, for everything that happens in the world. War is a part of it; education is a part of it; birth is a part of it; money is a part of it - all these conspired to compass the destruction of these two poor boys.

Since the Supreme Court reinstated the death penalty in 1976, we have fed 971 people into the jaws of our execution machines. They have been disproportionately poor, working class, and people of color. This national practice is continuing to create the conditions that lead to an endless cycle of violence in this country and in others.

The question I want us to ask ourselves is: How do we respond to this as Buddhist practitioners?

As Buddhist practitioners, we are acting in alignment with the First Precept of non-harming when we take a stand against the death penalty. The First Precept reminds us that all beings are sacred. When we harm anything living, we break trust, and this in turn harms ourselves and others in our vast web of interconnectedness. In our commitment to include everyone in our circle of compassion, we see that executions not only harm the one who is executed, but also the executioner, and everyone else in that grim circle of state-sanctioned death. As a devoted Buddhist practitioner, I don't see any (good) reason for us to stop talking about the death penalty until we have ended it in this country.

Each year, Amnesty International sponsors a weekend for religious and spiritual congregations throughout the U.S. to take action on ending the death penalty. In 2005 the National Weekend of Faith in Action on the Death Penalty will be on Oct 21-23. In 2004, many dharma groups across the U.S. participated in some way - hosting discussions and teach-ins, giving dharma talks, sitting in silence together, showing films, dedicating the merit of their practice.

So - I'm wondering if you would consider pausing for a moment before any dharma talk or discussion you might be involved in to remember those touched by the death penalty? Consider bringing something to your sangha to read about capital punishment. Consider asking folks to sit in silence for a minute or two at the end of each dharma group to remember all of us who are affected by this tragic state policy. Or consider dedicating one evening a month of your dharma group to all victims of state-sanctioned and other violence.

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

Are we, as dharma practitioners, 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? Are we willing to keep looking at the ways that each of us harbors violence, and keep working on our own inner disarmament?

It is important to remember for those of us who care intensely about peace: Ending the death penalty is karmically connected to working for peace.

As Buddhist practitioners, we see each person's humanity and Buddha nature, and commit to caring for that even when it resides within those who commit acts we oppose. We practice to see the Buddha nature in our friends, in our enemies, in ourselves. We are committed to nurturing the possibility of transformation within each being, while at the same time protecting people from acts of violence and harm by those who might harm again. We are committed to holding the paradoxes and subtleties of what it means to be human in our collective quest for wakefulness, happiness, and true freedom.

And now, let us sit in silence for a few moments.

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[For more information on the Buddhist Peace Fellowship Prison Project, please visit http://www.bpf.org/html/current_projects/prison_project/prison_project.html.]