



# Soto Zen Buddhist Association

## **Abolish the Death Penalty and Halt All U.S. Federal Executions**

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

—Eihei Dogen Zenji

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

On November 25, 2020 the U.S. Justice Department announced new regulations allowing for the use of new, or rather, old methods for federal executions, including the firing squad and electrocution. According to *The New York Times*:

Last week, the Justice Department announced that it plans to execute three more inmates on federal death row. If the administration does so, along with two other executions already scheduled, it will have put 13 prisoners to death since July, marking one of the deadliest periods in the history of federal capital punishment since at least 1927...

As Soto Zen Buddhist priests and teachers, as people of faith, we vigorously oppose state-sponsored murder and this rush to punish. We see capital punishment as the enactment of a cruel and primitive urge for vengeance draped in the fabric of legality. We believe that capital punishment degrades and brutalizes our society by teaching violence in reaction to violence.

The harm of capital punishment does not just fall on the person put to death, but on our whole society — on guards and technicians, wardens, governors, on families of victims, and on each of us allowing this barbarism to go forward in our name.

Capital punishment is the cutting edge of America's penal system. Social scientists, clergy, politicians, and communities of color all know that this is a broken system, although it is remarkably effective for sowing the seeds of violence. We see no evidence or statistics that capital punishment serves as an effective deterrent to crime. Resting on a foundation of inequality, based on racism and privilege, capital punishment cannot be fixed. Let's end it now, everywhere!

People of faith and conscience wish to build a new system of justice based on love, restoration, and redemption. Let those be the lights that guide us. We believe that social and personal transformation are always possible, and that even wounded people can change and contribute to society. While it is true that people reasonably expect 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 life, a humane environment, and the possibility of meaningful work.

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

What is our work? Organize against the death penalty in your communities, in your centers and temples. Study and talk about the death penalty; debate it with your friends. Write to the U.S. Attorney General and the President—outgoing and incoming—and speak your opposition and convictions. When federal or state executions are scheduled, join with sisters and brothers of all faiths sitting at the prison gates to bear witness. This is important. We must speak for humane policy and compassion with our bodies.

Verse 129 of the *Dhammapada*, Shakyamuni Buddha's early teaching, says: "All tremble at violence; all fear death. Putting oneself in the place of another, one should not kill nor cause another to kill." May we live with this awareness and save all beings.

- **We ask the U. S. Federal Government to immediately halt all planned Federal Executions.**
- **We ask for a Nationwide moratorium on Federal and State Executions.**
- **We ask for our legislatures to reform the justice system to be one of restoration and redemption.**

## **Action Items and Information on the Death Penalty**

- <http://deathpenaltyaction.org/take-action>
- <https://actionnetwork.org/petitions/tell-congress-abolish-the-federal-death-penalty/>
- <https://www.amnesty.org/en/what-we-do/death-penalty/>
- <https://action.aclu.org/petition/stop-federal-executions>
- <https://catholicsmobilizing.org/take-action-stop-federal-executions-1>

Signed,

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