

To Kill the Will To Kill
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In the Lotus Sutra, Shakyamuni declares that life is the most valuable jewel in the universe. Nichiren Daishonin also says: "Life is the most precious of all treasures. Even one extra day of life is worth more than ten million *ryo* of gold" (MW-1, 230). With the recent death sentence of Timothy McVeigh, capital punishment and this related philosophic issue of the value of life are once again being discussed.

What is the Buddhist view of the death penalty? In *Choose Life*, the dialogue between SGI President Ikeda and historian Arnold Toynbee, the sanctity of human life is discussed. President Ikeda advocates a criminal justice system that values life above everything else.

By having such a system, he says, the Buddha nature inherent in every human's life is acknowledged. He explains that his reason "for insisting that the death penalty ought to be abolished everywhere is based on Buddhist respect for the dignity of life." If every person's life were valued, then it follows that death would not be chosen as a means of punishment.

President Ikeda also examines the death penalty in *Human Values in a Changing World*, his dialogue with sociologist Dr. Bryan Wilson. Here he places valuing life above valuing crime prevention, saying that "life must not be manipulated as a means to an end, even the admirable one of restraining crime." Indeed, despite the use of the death penalty in many states, some statistics show that crime has not significantly decreased to justify the death penalty.

President Ikeda also discusses with Dr. Wilson the lost chance for a criminal to feel remorse for the crime he or she has committed. Buddhism teaches that the only way to cure society's ills is for individuals to do human revolution and change their karma. In killing someone who has committed murder, we leave no chance for this person to change his or her karma, no chance for him or her to "kill the will to kill," as Shakyamuni put it. (Shakyamuni had been asked which living beings could be killed and which could not.) Buddhist thought implies that a person who has not killed the will to kill may just enter the next life and commit the same crime. And on the other hand that even a murderer can change his or her karma in this lifetime.

Does the state become a murderer itself by imposing the death penalty? What kind of karma does a state or country create by killing people? These are serious questions, especially when we consider that we as citizens comprise the state — it's our karma, too. Ultimately, vengeance based on governmental law leaves too much room for error. It is not the Buddhist way of solving the crime problem.

Our emotions about murder are understandable. At times we may feel such remorse or anger that capital punishment for certain crimes, such as the Oklahoma City bombing, seems deserved. But in the end, the taking of life, even when sanctioned by the government, only continues the cycle of killing. It is a grave cause and creates more negative karma.

To oppose the death penalty of course does not mean to advocate letting the guilty walk away. Life imprisonment is a better alternative than taking criminals' lives — then they have the chance to think long and hard about the mistakes they have made.

Every human being has a Buddha nature. Even a person who commits the most heinous crimes has the potential to someday reach Buddhahood. All people, in fact, are equal in the eyes of the Buddha. And as long as a person has this potential to change and create value, he or she has the potential to contribute to society, to make a better world.

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Title: To Kill the Will To Kill
Subject: World Tribune 12/19/97 n.3170 p.11 WT971219p11 Kansas City, Missouri
Author: Patricia Ford
Keywords: City Death Features Kansas Kill Missouri Penalty Special Study Will