I would like to extend my sincere appreciation to We Believe of Greater Cleveland for inviting me to present the Buddhist view of capital punishment. I regret that I am unable to be with you in person today, but I hope this written explanation of our views will assist all of you as you work to end this most disturbing practice.

One of the most basic Precepts of the Buddhist tradition has to do with life itself. At our temple it is known as the First Precept, and it reads, “Not to destroy life; to respect and cherish life in all its forms.” This Precept speaks to a number of Buddhist principles. One of these principles is known as “ahimsa” or “harmlessness.” We are taught that practicing ahimsa creates within us a profound sense of compassion. Ahimsa is the reason that most Buddhist practitioners tend to be vegetarian; we are trying our best to preserve and uphold life. We realize that human beings must take life in order to live; even those Buddhists who are vegetarians must take the life of plants for sustenance. But by practicing ahimsa we develop a greater appreciation for the life which has been taken in order to sustain our own life, and so we are able to keep the taking of life to a minimum.

The First Precept also relates to the teaching of karma, which is also known as cause-and-effect. Buddhist teaching states that those volitional actions which are taken by a sentient being will reverberate back that being, either in this existence or in a subsequent existence. Karmic effects are dependent upon the intention of the being, and karma can manifest itself individually or collectively. So if our intention as an individual is to take life, this karma of suffering will reverberate back to that individual. Likewise, if our intention as a collection of people (a city, a state or a nation) is to take life, that collection of people will experience those same karmic effects, and collective suffering will be the result.

Buddhism teaches that karma is created by our volitional actions, words and thoughts. So if our willful actions lead directly to the taking of life, the karma of death will be experienced. If our spiteful or deceitful words inspire others to take life, the karma of death will be experienced. And if our thoughts of revenge and hatred uphold the taking of life by an individual, city, state or nation, then that same karma of death will be experienced.

And of course, it works the other way as well. When our thoughts, words and actions are
directed toward upholding life, then the karma of life, the karma of compassion and the karma of loving-kindness will be experienced by any individual, city, state or nation that chooses to uphold life.

In the Dhammapada, a collection of the Buddha’s sayings, is the following verse which speaks to the karmic principle: “‘He abused me, mistreated me, defeated me, robbed me.”’ Harboring such thoughts keeps hatred alive. ‘He abused me, mistreated me, defeated me, robbed me.’ Releasing such thoughts banishes hatred for all time. Animosity does not eradicate animosity. Only by loving kindness is animosity dissolved. This law is ancient and eternal. There are those who are aware that we are always facing death. Knowing this, they put aside all contentiousness.”

The Buddha often spoke of the principle of loving-kindness, or “metta.” Loving-kindness is simply “love extended.” Too often we hold our love very tightly to ourselves. The principle of loving-kindness allows us to apply love universally instead of selectively. In the case of a criminal act, for instance, most of our love is extended to the victim of the crime. This is most reasonable, and we should act in this manner. However, while most of us extend our love and best wishes to the victim of a crime, little if any of these kinds of thoughts, words and actions are extended to the perpetrators of a crime.

Extending our compassion to criminals is not meant to justify their behavior or to insult their victims and their victims’ families, but to recognize that someone who commits a crime does so because they are drowning in what the Buddhist tradition calls the Three Poisons, namely craving, hatred and delusion. If those who commit acts against others could be regarded this way by more of us, the criminal justice system would become more focused on true justice and rehabilitation than on warehousing and revenge.

From the Buddhist perspective, capital punishment is ultimately self-defeating because it only reinforces the same negative qualities that cause violent crimes to occur in the first place, the Three Poisons of craving, hatred and delusion. From the Buddhist perspective the karma of deliberately taking a human life, which Buddhism regards as the most favorable form of rebirth, is weighty indeed. We as individuals and as a society suffer greatly when we engage in such institutionalized brutality. If we can convince others to employ both compassion and wisdom in dealing with the perpetrators of crime, the victims of crime and the root causes of crime, we will have gone a long way toward creating what the Buddhist tradition would call a
Pure Land on Earth.

(If there is some time left, please read the following)

I would like to conclude with a Buddhist verse called The Four Immeasurables which speaks most eloquently to this topic. Please join with me in extending these intentions to all living beings:

For the sake of all sentient beings, we humbly extend these wishes:

May all beings have true happiness;
May all beings be freed from suffering and the causes of suffering;

May all beings be one with the Highest Perfect Joy;
May all beings dwell in equanimity, freed from discrimination and attachment.