*This commentary is by George Plumb who is a member of the Buddhist Peace Action Vermont group. He lives in Washington, Vermont.*

The Governor Scott administration has proposed building a new 925 bed prison “campus” at an estimated cost of $140 million dollars. The campus would be located in northwestern Vermont.

Buddhist Peace Action Vermont, an organization of engaged Buddhists, wants a more compassionate and caring treatment of people who could be incarcerated and opposes the construction of this massive prison. Before I go into more detail about alternative treatment let’s look at the facts about Vermont incarceration.

There are currently approximately 1,700 people incarcerated including 250 people who are in prisons out of state. There are a variety of reasons why we have so many people incarcerated. Approximately 150 inmates are eligible for release but held for lack of transitional housing. Some 350 to 400 people are held as pretrial detainees. Some need to be held because of violence they have committed but approximately one quarter of the prison population are held simply because they cannot afford bail. Many opiate addicts end up in prison because of their addiction and they have stolen money or goods to feed their addiction but have not committed any violent harm to others. In total Vermont incarcerates three times the number of people it did in the 1980’s and 50% more than it did as recently as the late 1990’s. The U.S. has 5% of the world’s population but 25% of the world’s prison population! 1% of Vermont’s population is black but 10% of our incarcerated population is black and 1out of 14 black men in Vermont is in prison—one of the highest rates in the country. In 2014 approximately 6,500Vermont children had a parent in jail or prison. The average annual cost of incarcerating a defendant in Vermont is $62,224. The 3-year recidivism rate for incarcerated defendants has remained constant at approximately 44% since 2000.

Smart Justice Vermont estimates that Vermont’s prison population could be reduced by 50% through bail and sentencing reforms, a prosecutor accountability initiative, drug policy reforms, and by advancing racial and economic justice throughout Vermont. Restorative justice is another good way of helping deal with people who have committed crimes. Interestingly the Mayor of New York city has recently proposed reducing the city’s incarceration by 50% and closing the infamous Riker’s Island prison.

Buddhist Peace Action Vermont opposes the construction of this massive prison because of our spiritual grounding. People who commit crimes are doing so largely as a result of their own suffering due to the way they were treated as children or the alienation they have in their communities as clearly shown by the many school shootings in recent months. We understand that everything changes, all is impermanent--everyone as individuals, our perceptions, our society's concept of justice which has changed over the years and is evolving now. Building this fortress of incarceration aims to lock in what is impermanent. Sentencing is changing as systems such as Restorative Justice are more frequently used. The person sentenced to 20 years in prison is not the same person after 5 or 10 years. We don't believe that justice is necessarily best served by punishment and isolation, which is what prisons are designed for. "Buddhist justice grows out of a compassion for everyone involved when someone hurts another" (David Loy).

Living behind bars in prisons also creates tremendous stress on the imprisoned person because of the isolation, anxiety, difficulty in maintaining their physical and mental health, not connecting with nature, and in the case of building a prison in northwestern Vermont extremely long distances for many family members and friends to travel. The proposed huge prison would also have significant environmental impacts because of conversion of undeveloped land, more impervious surfaces, and energy consumption.

Along with other spiritual traditions, we understand that every person has “Buddha nature” within them--a divine spark. While for the safety of society some offenders need to be constrained, for the greater, long term good of communities, they need to be liberated from the conditions that led to their offenses, including ignorance, poverty and hatred. What could we provide with the $140 million to be spent largely on bricks and mortar and guards, if it was spent instead on rehabilitation, drug treatment, education, job training, and transition housing? "Your mind is like a piece of land planted with many different kinds of seeds: seeds of joy, peace, mindfulness, understanding, and love; seeds of craving, anger, fear, hate, and forgetfulness. These wholesome and unwholesome seeds are always there, sleeping in the soil of your mind. The quality of your life depends on the seeds you water. The seeds that are watered frequently are those that will grow strong" (Thich Nhat Hanh).