

First Tibetan recipient of the Ellis Island Medal of Honor is the Ven. Lama Pema Wangdak

By Vikramasila Foundation

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Lama Pema Wangdak is the first Tibetan to receive an Ellis Island Medal of Honor, an award that ranks among the United State's most prestigious and is officially recognized by both the US Senate and the US House of Representatives. Six Presidents of the United States have received this award as well as many Members of Congress, prominent scientists, athletes, entertainers, corporate executives, and philanthropic entrepreneurs. The award was bestowed on Lama Pema, director of the Palden Sakya Centers and the Vikramasila Foundation, during a ceremony on Ellis Island by the National Ethnic Coalition of Organizations (NECO) on Saturday, May 9, 2009.

Each year, NECO awards the Ellis Island Medals of Honor to outstanding American citizens who live a life dedicated to community service, promoting American values, and building bridges between ethnic communities living within the United States and abroad. NECO was created in 1984 with the belief that the diversity of the American people is what makes this nation great.

NECO's Executive Director, Rosemarie Taglione, notes in Lama Pema's nomination letter that his "position as a leader and a teacher of peace, tolerance, and diversity is to be celebrated. Our country and its citizens benefit from your insight and wisdom."

A monastic since the age of seven, Lama Pema was born in Purang in Western Tibet in 1954 and resettled with his family in a refugee camp in Mundgod, South India. A graduate of the Central Institute of Higher Tibetan Studies in Benares, India, he received his Acharya (master's) degree from Sanskrit University in 1980. A disciple of His Eminence Sakya Gongma Rinpoche and other great masters of the Sakya School of Tibetan Buddhism, Lama Pema was sent to teach in the United States as the first of the younger generation of Tibetan teachers of the Sakya Order in 1982. He became an American citizen eight years later in 1990.

For more than 26 years he has been guiding western students, teaching the tenets of Tibetan Buddhism at the Palden Sakya Centers located in Manhattan, Woodstock, and Philmont, NY; Jamaica, VT; and Dayton, OH, while also traveling and teaching at Dharma centers around the world. A skilled communicator and Sanskrit scholar, who speaks three languages (English, Hindi, and Tibetan), Lama Pema is accessible to his students who are drawn to his gentle wisdom and compassion.

His humanitarian efforts include the creation of the first Braille system in the Tibetan language and the Vikramasila Foundation, programs of which include the Pema Ts'al (Lotus Grove Schools) in Nepal and India. The school for Tibetan children was founded in 1995 in Mundgod, South India, on behalf of the children of the refugee community of Tibetans who have lived there since the early 1960s. (The Tibetan community in Mundgod now numbers around 20,000.) In 1999, a monastery school was founded to educate ethnic Tibetan students from the Kingdom of Mustang, Nepal. The students receive a traditional Tibetan monastic education, as well as studying subjects such as English, science, and math.

Ms. Taglione continued in her letter to Lama Pema: "The Buddhist community is as diverse in New York City as it is around the globe. Your role as a spiritual leader in this great city is no doubt as challenging as it is rewarding."

Continuing to serve the Buddhist community of New York as both a spiritual and cultural adviser, Lama Pema frequently works on projects that enhance the knowledge of Tibet--its religion, art, history, and language.

For additional information about the Venerable Lama Pema Wangdak, Palden Sakya Centers, and the Vikramasila Foundation, see www.vikramasila.org.

About the Award and Ceremony:

Established in 1986 by NECO, the Ellis Island Medals of Honor pay tribute to the ancestry groups that comprise America's unique cultural mosaic. Held on Ellis Island, the event is filled with pageantry, grandeur, and emotion. All branches of the United States Armed Forces traditionally participate and dancers in their native costume add to the international flavor of the celebration. A gala dinner held in the historic Great Hall on Ellis Island follows the ceremony. As a grand finale, fireworks illuminate the sky and America's symbol of freedom, the Statue of Liberty. To date, more than 1,500 American citizens have received an Ellis Island Medals of Honor, with nearly 100 honored in at this 23rd annual ceremony in 2009.

For additional information about the National Ethnic Coalition of Organizations (NECO) and the Ellis Island Medals of Honor, see www.neco.org. For additional information about the May 9 ceremony and other awardees, see http://neco.org/NECO_press_release.php.

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The Vikramasila Foundation is a non-profit organization for religious, educational, and cultural purposes - lead by the Venerable Lama Pema Wangdak.

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Tags	vikramasila, lama pema wangdak, tibetan, buddhism, award, ellis island, medal of honor, palden sakya, sakya
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