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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

The Venerable Lama Pema Wangdak Awarded 2009 Ellis Island Medal of Honor

The Venerable Lama Pema Wangdak, New York-based Tibetan religious leader, is a recipient of the Ellis Island Medal of Honor to be presented on May 9, 2009, on Ellis Island. According to the National Ethnic Coalition of Organizations, "The Ellis Island Medals of Honor pay tribute to the ancestry groups that comprise America's unique cultural mosaic."

New York, NY (May 3, 2009) - The Venerable Lama Pema Wangdak is the leader and director of the Palden Sakya Centers and the Vikramasila Foundation. He has been chosen by the National Ethnic Coalition of Organizations (NECO) to receive the Ellis Island Medal of Honor in a ceremony on Saturday, May 9, 2009. Each year, NECO awards the Ellis Island Medal 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.

The nomination letter notes that Lama Pema's "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 is a student of His Holiness the Sakya Trizin and other great masters from the Sakya order of Tibetan Buddhism. 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. In 1982, His Holiness the Sakya Trizin sent Lama Pema to teach in the United States as the first of the younger generation of Tibetan teachers of the Sakya Order. Lama Pema became an American citizen in 1990. For over 26 years, Lama Pema has been guiding Western students, teaching the tenets and beliefs of Tibetan Buddhism in the New York City area at the Palden Sakya Centers, while continuing to travel and teach at Dharma centers around the world. His command of the communication (and he knows fluently English, Hindi and Tibetan language and read write Sanskrit and Nepali) and gentle wisdom and compassion make him an outstanding model in today's world. His humanitarian efforts include the creation of a Braille system in the Tibetan language, the Vikramasila Foundation, and programs that include the Pema Ts'al Schools in Nepal and India.

The Pema Ts'al for Tibetan children was founded in 1995 in Mundgod, South India, in a community of ethnic Tibetans who have lived there since the early sixties. It is an experimental school that nurtures and supports gifted students in the Tibetan refugee community. In 1999, a monastery school was founded in Nepal, primarily to educate ethnic Tibetan students from the Kingdom of Mustang, Nepal. The students of the monastery school, based in Pokhara, Nepal, receive a traditional Tibetan monastic education, as well as study subjects such as English, science, and math.

"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" (NECO nomination letter). Lama Pema has continued to serve the New York Buddhist community as both a spiritual and cultural advisor, and frequently works on projects that enhance the knowledge of Tibet--its religion, art, history, and language.

The Venerable Lama Pema Wangdak will be honored at this year's Ellis Island Medals of Honor ceremony on Saturday, May 9, 2009. The Ellis Island Medal of Honor ranks among this country's 20 most prestigious awards, 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, and philanthropic entrepreneurs. 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 full of pageantry, grandeur, and emotion. All branches of the United States Armed Forces traditionally participate in this event. Dancers in their native costume add to the international flavor of the celebration. A gala dinner in the historic Great Hall on Ellis Island follows the ceremony. As a grand finale, a fireworks display illuminates the sky and America's symbol of freedom, the Statue of Liberty.

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 Venerable Lama Pema Wangdak, Palden Sakya Centers, and the Vikramasila Foundation, see www.paldensakya.org.
