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A Buddha Day Greeting Card
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I received my first Buddha Day card yesterday, and I didn't even have to open an envelope; it came as an e-mail. This was a surprise. The surprise was not about Buddha Day. Although I'm not a scholar of Buddhism, for years I have taught students in my Introduction to Religion course about this Buddhist holy day. I was only slightly surprised by the card. Although I hadn't known Buddhists sent cards on Buddha Day, it makes sense. Christians send cards on Jesus' birthday, so why shouldn't Buddhists send cards on Buddha Day?

No, the surprise came from its character as an e-mail card. It shows that Buddhism is even with Christianity and other religions in taking advantage of the "Information Highway."

Just what is Buddha Day? It celebrates the Buddha's birth, his Enlightenment, and his death. In southeast Asia, where Theravada Buddhism is strong, Buddha day takes place on the first full moon of May.

The Buddha was born in 556 BC and given the name Siddhartha. His father ruled a small country on the slopes of the Himalayan Mountains in northern India. According to Buddhist belief, a prophet foretold that Siddhartha would be either a great king or the savior of the world. His father, the king, wanted him to rule the kingdom, so he was shut into large, luxurious palaces where the boy lacked for nothing. (The Keanu Reeves' movie "The Little Buddha" provides a lush portrayal of this luxury.)

But this scheme was bound to fail. When Siddhartha became a young man, he discovered sickness, old age and death. He decided to seek a way to end this suffering. So he left everything

and became an ascetic hermit. After many difficult years, he attained Enlightenment, understanding not only life and its suffering, but how to escape it through the pursuit of the wisdom that leads to Enlightenment.

Siddhartha, now the Buddha, returned from his hermit's life to teach people how to attain Enlightenment and end their own suffering. Many people followed him and practiced his teachings. At the age of 80, the Buddha died and passed on into Enlightenment, finally attaining the goal he had long postponed.

So it is no surprise that the Buddha Day card depicted the Buddha as happy, for the day celebrates the three events in the Buddha's life that enabled him to "save" humankind: his birth through which he entered this world of suffering, his Enlightenment when he learned how to overcome suffering, and his death when he ended his own suffering.