



Zen Tails: No Presents Please

Peter Whitfield

Nancy Bevington, Illustrator

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When one person's anger is aimed at another, must the proffered "gift" be accepted? If it is refused, who owns it? Whitfield asks these profound questions in the context of a simple, entertaining story of a disgruntled grizzly and a beatifically peaceful wombat. The story opens with an illuminating contrast in perspective: Guru Walter Wombat, clad in a saffron robe and sitting in the lotus position beneath an elm tree, exults in the beauty of the day; Grizzel Bear finds nothing but discomfort and inconvenience in nature's same features. When Grizzel's path of discontent collides with the wombat's post of serenity, the bear threatens the guru. Wombat's delightfully unexpected response—"It is not my birthday"—introduces the lesson that mollifies Grizzel's anger and adjusts his perspective.

The story is followed by a two-part explanation that is probably unnecessary: one page re-tells the story in its more traditional form, as a tale of the Buddha and a human disciple; the last page explicates the moral behind Grizzel's experience with Walter Wombat. But the story is simple and powerful enough to carry its own message, even to the pre-reader who hears it read aloud. The reader can easily skip the last two pages, however, and enjoy this anthropomorphized animal tale of an enlightened moment.

No Presents Please is just one in writer and philosophy lecturer Whitfield's *Zen Tails* series of interpretations of Buddhist stories for children. In this as in each of the *Zen Tails*, Whitfield's words are paired with the richly textured illustrations of Nancy Bevington. Her expressive portraits of the characters extend to smoke coming out of the infuriated Grizzel's ears; Wombat's other-worldly state is reflected in his half-lidded gaze and crooked smile, and in his skeptically raised brow when Grizzel, trampling a daisy, insists, "I'm not angry!"

As in many Buddhist tales, the disciple in this story might be said to represent the innocent child every adult harbors inside—and the Buddha, the wise and gentle elder all parents hope to embody for their children. (August 18, 2009)

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