

The Three Questions

(Adapted from the short story by Leo Tolstoy)

Once there was a king. He thought that he would never fail in anything he might undertake if he knew the answers to his three puzzling questions.

“How can I learn to do the right thing at the right time? Who are the people I need the most to help me with the work? How do I know which is the most important thing to do?” asked the king. He then said, **“I announce a great reward to anyone who can give the right answers to my questions.”**

The most learned men came to the kingdom. Each had a different answer to the king’s first question. One of them said, **“For every action, we should draw up a plan in advance, a table of days, months, and years, and must live strictly according to the plan. Only with this timetable, everything can be done at a proper time.”** Another said that the king should do whatever seemed to him necessary at the moment. The third suggested that the king should consult wise men or magicians. Equally various were the answers to the second question and the third question.

The king was confused and the confusion led the king to a hermit who lived in the woods and was widely known for his wisdom. When the king reached the woods, the hermit was digging the ground for planting herbs. **“I have come to you, wise hermit, to ask you to answer three questions. My questions are – How can I learn to do the right thing at the right time? Who are the people I need the most to help me with the work? How do I know which is the most important thing to do?”** The hermit continued digging but looked terribly tired. The king said, **“You look tired. Can I help you?”** He took the spade from the hermit and started digging.

The sun was sinking behind the trees. They suddenly heard footsteps. Someone was running towards the hermit’s hut. He was bleeding from a large wound in his stomach. He fainted and fell to the ground. They took him inside the hut. The king cleaned the wound and covered it with his handkerchief. The king continued to take care of the wounded man all night. In the morning, when the wounded man awoke, he stared at the king for a few seconds. He was overcome with shame when he realized it was the king who had saved his life. He then asked the king to forgive him. **“I have nothing to forgive you for. Who are you?”** asked the king. **“I am your enemy from the neighboring kingdom who had sworn to kill you, because you had killed my brother in a battle. When I heard that you were coming to meet the hermit, I followed you, so that I could kill you. Your men, however, caught me and wounded me. How can I thank you for saving my life? If you hadn’t dressed my wound and looked after me, I would have bled to death. From this day onwards, I will serve you faithfully!”**

Afterwards, the king went out to see the hermit. The hermit looked at the king and said, **“Do you still need an answer from me to your questions? When you came to see me, and you saw that I was getting tired, you decided to help me. If you hadn’t decided to stay and help, you would have been killed by your enemy on your way back. But you saved that man and he made peace with you. Therefore, the most important time is always NOW. The most important PERSON is the one who needs your help. And the most important ACTION is to comfort the person who needs your help.”**