

THREE IMPORTANT QUESTIONS

There was once a king who decided that if he knew

-who the most important people to be with were, and

-what the most important thing to do was, and

-when the best time to do each thing was,

that he would certainly be the finest king ever to rule the land. Although he had asked his advisers, none had been able to give him a good answer to these questions.

At last he decided to ask the advice of a wise hermit. The king dressed in the clothes of a commoner and set out for the forest. When he neared the hermit's hut, he ordered his knights to stay back at a distance, and he rode the last section of trail alone.

The king found the hermit digging in his garden. The old man greeted him but continued digging. The king told the hermit that he had come to find answers to his three questions. The hermit listened but gave no answer and continued working. The king observed that the hermit was frail and elderly and that the work was very difficult for him. The king offered to take over the digging, and the hermit allowed it.

The king dug for one hour. Then he repeated the question, but the hermit did not answer. He worked again for another hour, and then repeated his questions with the same results. This continued for a few more hours until the sun began to sink low in the sky. Finally the king got discouraged. "I came to you for answers wise man. If you have none, tell me and I will return home."

Just then someone came running up the path. They turned to see a man with his hands pressed to his stomach and blood flowing from between them. He dropped to the ground at the king's feet.

The king and the hermit knelt down and began tending to the man. The king washed and bandaged the man's wounds. The blood continued to flow so he kept changing the bandages. The king also helped the hermit to get fresh water, and to help the man to drink.

Finally the man slept and did not wake until the next morning. The king too slept upon the ground, waking often to watch over the man. In the morning the man woke up and looked at the king.

"Forgive me," he said to the king.

"You have nothing to forgive me for," the king answered.

"Oh, but I do," he said. "You were my enemy, and I had sworn to take revenge on you for killing my brother and taking my land. I knew that you were coming here today and I decided to kill you on the trail. But when you did not return for many hours I left my hideout to find you. Your guards recognized me and wounded me. I escaped them but I would have bled to death if you had not cared for me. I meant to kill you but now you have saved my life. If I live I shall gladly serve you for the rest of my days."

The king was so happy to have been reconciled with an old enemy that he immediately forgave him and promised to return his land. Then the king called for his knights to carry the man back to his castle to be cared for by his own doctor.

After the wounded man had gone, the king asked the hermit once more if he would not give him the answer to his question.

"Your questions have already been answered." the hermit replied.

"But how?" the king answered, perplexed.

"How?" repeated the hermit.

"If you had not taken pity on my weakness yesterday and helped me instead of returning home, that man would have ambushed and killed you on the trail. Therefore, the most important time was when you were digging my garden beds; and I was the most important person; and the most important thing to do was to do good for me. Later, when the man came running to us, the most important thing to do was to care for him. If you had not bound up his wounds he would have died without making peace with you. Therefore the most important person was that man, and what you did was the most important thing, and the right time was the time when you were doing it."

"You see, the most important time is always the present moment. It is the only time that is important because it is the only time that we have control over. The past we can only look back on and wish that we had done differently. The future we can only imagine.

The most important person is always the one you are with in the present and the only important deed is the deed that does what is best for others."