

# The Gift of Litter



If you see litter – or somebody dropping litter, in the street or the country or seaside or on public transport or in car parks, or you even see somebody dropping litter out of a moving vehicle, what is your reaction? How do you *feel* when you see litter or even think about it?

***“Not more rubbish!”***

***“What is the matter with these people?!”***

***“Why can’t they just put it in the bin?”***

***“What’s the use of fines – they just do it anyway?!”***

***“They need more than fines to stop them I can tell you!”***

***“Why should we have to pick it up?!”***

***“Don’t they have any sense of common decency?!”***

***“This is a health hazard!”***

***“We really ought to clamp down on this!”***

***“It spoils the look of everything too!”***

Litter makes a lot of us pretty fed up and even angry, and sometimes we come close to ‘litter-rage’. It can affect our mood, the physical sensations we experience and the things we do and say. In short, litter seems to cause a whole host of reactions that are for some of us very extreme and liable to cause unwanted added trouble.

In and of itself litter is just litter – discarded waste that we find and see in places we would rather not see it. Litter is litter. It’s not personally directed against us, and it’s not usually put where we find it to deliberately antagonize and upset us as an individual. Litter - along with all the other things we experience in life is something our mind perceives. It is something on which our mind focuses and pays attention to. Litter is an object of mind.

I know there is a significant health and economic cost involved in the issue of litter, but what interests me here, is not the socio-political issue, but more the psychological ‘cost’ associated with the reactions we each have to litter. Every time we react in an angry or irritated way to the fact of litter, we experience a lot of stress. The people who discard litter may do so mindlessly and not give it much thought, so it probably doesn’t affect them very much, but every time we get upset about litter and angrily kick it, walk past it or pick it up and take it to a bin, we create stress. This is stress created by the mind, not the litter!

The stress is real though, and it causes us to get into a frame of mind and body that means we are focused on and paying attention to negative aspects of life. This is not helpful, because it leads us to be grumpy and to get in touch with all sorts of angry, self-righteous, and 'anti' feelings. This in turn can affect the way we interact with others and the way we see and deal with the things we do in everyday life. When we are preoccupied about the rights and wrongs of litter, it also makes us a liability in such terms as safety, and potentially we are putting at risk the health and well-being of ourselves and others.

Reacting to litter in an angry, bitter and resentful way may turn out to have more costs than the mindless act of throwing away the litter in the first place!

Litter, as I said, is an object of mind, and in the Mindful sense, it represents an **opportunity** for practice.

Next time you see a piece of litter, allow yourself to practice being Mindful in this way .....

*“There is litter – I am aware of litter – I will breathe”.*

*“Let me pause and breathe in this moment”.*

*“This litter is an object of mind – it does not mean to cause me harm or distress”.*

*“Coming back to the present moment, I am aware that I’m having thoughts, feelings and physical sensations as a reaction to the litter”.*

*I will allow these thoughts, feelings and sensations to come, to be here and to pass..... ”.*

*“I have the intention to pick up the litter with a mind of compassion”.*

*“Perhaps this litter has been dropped mindlessly – perhaps this litter has arrived here accidentally..... I do not know”.*

*“I have a ‘don’t know’ mind”.*

*“I will breathe and smile a half smile of compassion, as I Mindfully approach and pick up the litter.”*

*“If someone has dropped this litter deliberately, I will allow myself to feel compassion for them and to send Loving Kindness towards them”.*

*“There is stress in litter – as best I can, I will not add to the stress. I will practice being Mindfully aware of my reactions, observing, witnessing and calmly and kindly letting go of anything that may be harmful or unhelpful to myself or others in this situation”.*