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Good Karma $1

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Abstract
This is a film review of *Good Karma $1* (2013) directed by Amy Laslett and Jason Berger.

Keywords
Karma, Buddhism, Generosity, Panhandling
Good Karma $1

Directed by Amy Laslett and Jason Berger

Slamdance Documentary Short

When you are walking through the streets of a city and get asked for a little money, "anything, any amount will help," what goes through your mind? When you come to a stop at an intersection and an unkempt person holds a sign in view of traffic that reads, “HOMELESS AND HUNGRY,” do you pull out your wallet or roll up your window? How do we decide when to be generous and what does that mean for the giver and the receiver? These are questions at the heart of this insightful short doc that follows “acclaimed ad-guru Alex Bogusky” in his efforts to understand the nature of these handmade signs as sales pitch. What are they pitching? What does one get in return for a handful of change or a couple of bucks? And – can they be more effective?

Bogusky comes to realize that the exchange really depends on creating, as instantaneously as possible, an opportunity for generosity, an experience that is shared by both the giver and receiver. If this is the case, can the ad man pitch
some better “ads” in the form of signs that, he believes, better convey the
donation’s spiritual benefit – “good karma,” or an openness to a stranger’s needs,
or an occasion to suspend judgment and simply act as the moment demands (what
Hindus would understand as dharma, the cosmic measure that results in karma)?
He tries a variety of signs to elicit this response, from “I LOVE YOU” to “WHAT
IF I AM GOD TESTING YOU? ARE YOU READY TO TAKE THAT
CHANCE?” to “WILL TRADE BLESSINGS FOR SPARE CHANGE” to the
titular dollar karmic promise. Bogusky takes these signs to one prominent street
solicitor to ask if he would prefer any of the ad man’s market-driven approaches.
All of the new messages are soundly rejected, largely on the basis of not being the
exact message the disadvantaged wishes to convey about himself.

Bogusky concludes that one cannot write a message appealing for generosity
for someone else; it must be your own appeal. At the same time, the giver cannot
worry about what will be done with the money, whether it be used for food or
booze or drugs or what have you. In that moment of giving, both parties share the
experience of generosity, which, in that moment, is an even greater reward than
the amount given.

— Dereck Daschke