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Good Karma \$1

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Good Karma \$1

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