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## Analysis Of Karma In The Film Running On Karma

Running on Karma is a local production by famous directors Johnnie To and Ka Fai Wai. Wai, who is famous for shadowing Buddhist themes into his productions. As the name implies, this film is mainly talking about one prominent Buddhist theme, karma. This is emphasized on the poster by the line translated from Chinese that nothing can be brought away, only the karma that follows. The story told in this film is closely intertwined with this concept, which is going to be carefully analyzed and discussed in this paper.

### Brief Story

Big, who was a Buddhist monk, can see the past karma after he hit a bird to death unintentionally due to his resentment for his friend, Jade's death caused by Sun Ko. He is not able to tell the fortune but can see the cause based on the result, phala. He suffers the pain of seeing the karma and gave up being a monk. When he works in a strip bar, he meets Lee Fung Yee in a clearance action by the police. He sees the past negative karma of this girl that she was a Japanese soldier slaughtered innumerable people in the previous life; and he is moved by her kindness to try to help her. What happens to Lee in the end also utterly changes Big. Lee's death caused by the same killer SunKo enlightens Big's understanding of karma and he becomes a monk again.

### Karma

Simply, karma is deed, action and is equated with our intention or volition, Cetana. It can be acted through body, speech or mind (Nibbedhika Sutta AN 6.63). It is often likened to a seed which will cultivate and results in certain fruit, phala. This process is called the ripening, vipaka. The fruit may be tasty or inedible determined by the doer's volition, virtuous or unvirtuous; and the doer is the heir to their intentional karma.

There are some ways to lessen the effect of negative karmic fruit, for example, truly regretting a related past action and resolving not to do it again. Then the effect would just be like the reduced salinity of the water in the river Ganges instead of the high salinity of the water in a small cup of water. This karma may thus not be definite or absolute to be brought to fruition.

Karma does not necessarily bring phala just in the next life, it may be just later in the present life, or next life or the life after next. As mentioned above, the karmic force and also the karmic fruit may be changed by regretting, and the karmic force may until now not strong enough to

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result in the fruition, therefore, the law of karma is actually flexible and dynamic. This kind of cumulation has also explained that the movement between the rebirths is not haphazard but governed by the law of karma; and also, karma and the results seem unrelated but actually have some connections as the interaction of the past and the present shapes the present and the present actions shape both the present and the future.

## **Bullied a dog and becomes a police dog**

A police dog died of a stray bullet shot by Lee in a chase and arrest; and Big sees the dog's past life that it was a boy chasing and hitting a dog. It should not be said that it is the 'punishment' for it to deserve but the natural result of its past actions according to the law of karma. As it is a police dog which has been serving for the public's good, it is probable that some good karma accumulates, and negative karmic force may be reduced.

## **Indian fellow apprentices' animosity**

An Indian man killed an Indian restaurant owner in a fight. Big sees that they are fellow apprentices in this life and also the past few lives. It shows that their animosity is not as simple as only in this life but also the past few lives. The restaurateur betrayed the Indian man in the past life and is killed as a result of his past karma in this life. The arrest is also the result of the Indian man's karma that he killed the restaurateur and the CID agent.

The Indian man saved a beetle from trapping in a puddle of water in the past life and therefore the beetle will repay to save him as a woman in this life. The beetle lost its left arm and the woman's left arm would also be amputated. When the woman is really amputated of her left arm, she also finds it strange to help the Indian man unconditionally but for some undescrivable reasons. Curiously, she doesn't regret doing so at all and smiles when she expresses such thought to Lee. It is like she feels she has nothing to regret even if she dies of this incident. The operation of the law of karma is subtle which is embodied in this story.

## **The protagonist – Lee Fung Yee**

Lee Fung Yee is a kind and brave policewoman that she cares Big's wound at first. Big sees her past karma that she was a brutal Japanese soldier who has killed many lives. Since every intentional action is pregnant with its result, he predicts the girl would die young miserably. He is attracted by her goodness and helps her twice in order to try to save her from this tragic karma. Nevertheless, he finds out that the Japanese soldier image still follows Lee, he finds frustrated confronting the law of karma. He confesses what he finds to Lee, and Lee feels it is unfair. Nonetheless, she is not desperate to abandon herself. Instead, she works harder to handle

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police cases and decides to lure SunKo out by sacrificing herself.

Lee finally meets a violent end and her head is cut off and hanged on the tree. When Big finds this, he cries out in resentment nearly to chase and kill SunKo. When he is blind with anger, the mirror image of himself in his heart appears. He provokes Big to fight against him and fights Big back in the same way. This implies that once the unwholesome action occurs, there must be an unwholesome result caused. To cease this entanglement, one should let go of such unwholesome thoughts of reprisal. In one thought heaven, Big chooses to let go of his hatred and wears his robes again. He lives on the mountain for five years, and he meets SunKo one day. After his understanding of karma, his renunciation of hatred makes him a calm person to embrace SunKo and help him to face the result of his karma.

This story has raised another important question whether it is fair for someone kind in this life to carry on the negative karma of the last person which seems they are unrelated. However, their relationship may be indicated by an analogy inserted in Big and Lee's walk that an old woman picks up two water bottles on the street. One plants the karmic seed, there must be another one to pick up the fruit of it provided the right conditions since the karmic force will never disappear and the result of karma will inevitably ripen. That is the reason why Big says to Lee that the Japanese soldier is not Lee, and Lee is not the Japanese soldier as well. But Lee has to bear the results of the karma committed by the Japanese soldier as she is the one picks up the Japanese soldier's bottles.

## Freedom of Choice

Although Lee was a brutal Japanese soldier who "carries too much sin" according to Big's master, Master Wer; she is a human and becomes Lee, which implies the past karma of her was somehow kind to accumulate good deeds to be qualified for being a human instead of animals or hell-beings or the like in this life.

Being a human means having the ability and choice to be virtuous and good; and this means human has more freedom for being intentionally good which means larger possibility of accumulating good deeds than other beings like the animals. As we own the free will to act, those virtuous or unvirtuous actions are borne by ourselves and there is no excuse for us to shift off the responsibility for those actions. This is implied in the film according to the lines said by Lee that 'for every event that occurs, another will follow as a result of the first'. Our lives are determined by our actions but not by fatalism, which subjugates all actions to destiny. Only those people who understand the law of karma, or the cause and effect can be responsible for their lives or actions well.

As the nature of karma is determined by the intention or will behind it (Harvey 2013: 40), the

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thought-moment of choice is of pivotal importance to accumulate good or evil deeds. There is an old Chinese saying, 'One thought heaven, one thought hell'. In this thought-moment of choice, the Indian man chose to save the beetle from danger and accumulated the good action for the beetle to save him back in this life. In this thought-moment of choice, Sergeant Chung chooses not to shoot the Indian man just because of his own resentment. In this thought-moment of choice, Big chooses not to revenge on SunKo for Jade and Lee after his realization of the law of karma.

Aside from the thought-moment of choice, a pivotal question is asked by Big that who is the savior of Lee. Master Wen at first answers it is the Big, but Big knows that it is actually Lee herself. Lee chooses to be a good and kind person, and this choice is the cause of the Big's help for Lee. She has made the effort to accumulate more good deeds and her result of finding SunKo is the cause of Big's understanding of the law of karma. Master Wen says Big can 'see' the karma at first but not using the word 'understand' because Big gave up being a monk since he mistook the law of karma for fatalism which the results are unchangeable and inevitable corresponding to the cause. Lee's effort enlightens him that the exertion of the cause and effect can be conditioned.

## **Be Present: cultivate wholesome actions**

Lee does not give up herself after she knows that she carries that much evil karmic force. Instead, she chooses to work harder at present. The Buddha says that to see what you have done before, look at what you are now. Also, today's action will lead to tomorrow's consequence. From this, we can observe that the present is the one we should focus on instead of being attached to the past or the future. We should do more wholesome actions to accumulate good karmic force. For example, we may act according to the ten wholesome actions to stop evil and cultivate good. At the end of this film, Lee's incarnation says that she wishes there will not be anyone else murdering people, which brings out the preaching that only the cause ceased can lead to the cessation of vipaka of bad phala.

## **Conclusion**

A message is explicitly conveyed through this movie that our body is empty that does not really exist, only the karma does. Unlike fatalism, there is still an opportunity for us to make a complete end of suffering through our practice of religious life. Act, speak, and think according to the ten wholesome actions; and focus on our present karma can the cessation of bad karmic force be achieved.

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