Editor's Note: Please see the *EAA* online supplements for this issue including video screencasts, a course syllabus, and an example scoring sheet that will help demonstrate the Moksha game and various procedures described in this article. If you have any questions or comments about these materials, or about the Moksha game itself, you may contact the author at m.dennis@tcu.edu.

ENLIVENED LEARNING
How to Play the Karma-based Moksha Game in the College Classroom

By Mark Dennis

A picture of my Honors World Religions course from Fall 2016. Source: Image courtesy of the author.

This article describes *Moksha* (Sanskrit for "liberation" and "freedom"), a *karma*-based classroom game that I began developing in 2010 for use in my introductory-level World Religions course at Texas Christian University (TCU). The Moksha game has enlivened the classroom by tapping into the competitive spirit of my students. But it has also helped create a more focused learning environment by rewarding mindful, and penalizing distracted or disruptive, behavior. As I describe below, those rewards and penalties are both individual and collective. Students earn individual karma points for doing well on quizzes or papers and by contributing to the classroom discussion, but they lose points for coming late, texting, web surfing, or violating other game rules. Those individual points affect not only a student's final grade, but they also impact his or her team's Moksha score, which determines the size of an end-of-the-semester quiz bonus.

I began creating the game partly out of frustration with such distracted, and occasionally disruptive, student behavior that increasingly affected my ability to focus on the day's material. In a 2010 review of my teaching, departmental colleagues commented on this problem while also expressing frustration over similar behavior in their own classes. That review prompted me to explore alternative teaching methods that would help focus stu-

Dear You,
I Saw that Coming,
I am Surprised you didn't.
Love Always,
KARMA[1]

dents' attention, while also creating an open and lively learning environment wherein students could flourish as critical thinkers.

To these ends, I have substantially revised the structure and content of the World Religions course, abandoning high-stakes exams for frequent, low-stakes quizzes that are an important part of the Moksha game. I have also banned laptops and cellphones, and invite students to simply listen and participate in the day's discussion; with no exams, students have no need to furiously take down lots of notes. Another significant change has been incorporating fun and competitive activities, such as debates, role-playing games, and Moksha, which has enlivened the classroom while reinforcing for students basic tenets of Buddhism and Hinduism—two of the religions we study during the semester.

Those religions, which emerged on the Indian subcontinent, accept distinct interpretations of a basic religious paradigm that *World Religions Today* calls the "myth of liberation."[2] *Samsara,* the first part of the paradigm, refers to the cyclical world of birth, death, and rebirth; and *atman*, the second, is the soul or self that transmigrates in samsara. Karma, the third, is the law of cause and effect; that is, a good action will produce a good result, or "fruit," while a bad action will generate a bad, or bitter, fruit.

Moksha, the final part of the paradigm, points to liberation from the cycle of samsara that one can attain through widely varied religious practices, including yoga, meditation and mindfulness techniques, and adherence to a code of ethical conduct.[3] A simple statement of this code in Buddhism is the *panchashila,* or "five precepts," that prohibits killing, stealing, lying, intoxicating the mind, and sexual misconduct. These simple injunctions are elaborated upon for monastics in the *pratimoksha,* which offer rules for living designed to help practitioners move "toward" (*prati*) "liberation" (moksha) by avoiding bad karma and generating good karma.[4]

The game draws from this paradigm, using karma as the central scoring mechanism to promote mindful, engaged activity, while discouraging those sorts of negative behavior described above that impede students' moving *toward* moksha. Here, however, the *liberation* of moksha is construed not as freedom from the cycle of samsara, but as *freeing* both the mind and classroom space from distraction.

Students gain points for positive classroom behaviors—"good karma"—and lose points for disruptive behaviors—"bad karma." In addition to the individual component, I have implemented a team-based component. My two major goals are to systematize behavior management and enhance meaningful learning. Although there is a definite structure to Moksha as I have used it, what follows can certainly be modified based upon specific classroom objectives of other instructors.

The Moksha Game: Rules

To play the game, you will need the Moksha rules, a scoring sheet, database, and scoreboard. I post the rules online and discuss them on the first day of class. I ask students to read through them again before the next class in preparation for a quiz; I then review the rules, which are detailed, a few more times in the first two weeks of class. The rules document offers students the background on the game described above but also explains how the game affects their grade and the ways in which they can earn and lose karma points.[5]

Individual Moksha Points: Good Karma

Scoring for the Moksha game is straightforward. Students earn points for good karma activities. Many of a student's good karma points come from class participation and quizzes. For each class, I give from zero to three participation points, depending on the number and insight of the comments. I also award students between zero and three individual points for each quiz: three for the highest score, two for the next, one for the third, and zero for all scores below that. I give about two ten-question quizzes per week in a fifteen-week MWF class using PowerPoint and iClickers; those quizzes, which begin right when the bell rings, take just three to four minutes and are straightforward. I tell students that they are meant to reward those who keep up with the reading and represent a form of "information transfer," which is the basic knowledge—the Four Noble Truths of Buddhism or the Five Pillars of Islam, for instance—needed to engage in higher-level critical thinking.

I also award Moksha points to students for their papers: twelve points for 95–100; nine points for 90–94.99; six points for 85–89.99; and three points for 80–84.99. But there are many other ways to offer good karma points to students. For instance, I do so for submitting a "bio-sheet" (a hard copy with a photograph and brief self-introduction) by the second class period and for completing the course review at term's end. I also award points for completing small tasks associated with their essays on Khaled Hosseini's *The Kite Runner*, which goes through multiple drafts during the semester.

Individual Moksha Points: Bad Karma

But students also lose points by generating bad karma if they arrive late to class, use their cellphones or laptops, or violate other game rules. These bad karma points go to both the individual and the team; the first instance of each counts as a single negative point but doubles with each repetition. This doubling of the penalty has been tremendously effective at curtailing recidivism. Moreover, if a student engages in the same negative behavior three times, or accumulates a total of ten negative points from any combination

of bad karma activities, he or she is automatically removed from the team's Moksha score calculation and loses the team bonus, although that student must still participate in graded group projects.[6] In the six years I have been playing the game, only four students have been removed from their teams.

You can add rules as you become comfortable with the game: for example, I added a "false-start" penalty assessed on those who start packing up early (I set my iPhone alarm to go off at the end of class) and another for those who do not follow a simple format for email exchanges with me.

Moksha Teams

I believe teams both strengthen Moksha classroom management and foster innovative, collaborative learning. To create evenly matched teams, I suggest counting individual Moksha points from the second class to the end of the second week. You should then be able to divide students fairly based on their accumulated individual points; when you do so, try to disperse introverts and extroverts, and make sure that each team has a capable leader. When you announce the teams, give them class time to get organized; the team leader should email to you the team's roster—names and email addresses—and come up with a team name. I require team names to be a real or mythical animal or creature preceded by an adjective; team names have ranged from the Lovable Fluffy Bunnies (a Moksha juggernaut) to the fearsome Dragon Slayers. Many teams went for alliteration this past semester; I had the Sly Salamanders, Phosphorescent Phoenixes, Passionate Pandas, and Chipper Chimpanzees.

During the semester, we play team Moksha games for which only teams can win points; that is, a student's individual score remains unaffected.[7] Some are standalone games, while others are tied to group projects, such as in-class Oxford-style debates and Reacting to the Past (RTTP) speeches.[8] These games enliven the classroom and reinforce students' sense of being part of a group.

Grading
Individual Moksha Score

A student's final individual Moksha score is the sum of his or her good karma points subtracted by his or her negative karma points. If, for example, Student A had earned 100 good karma points and received five bad karma points at the end of the semester, her individual Moksha score would be ninety-five. A student's individual Moksha score determines one quarter of his or her final course grade. When I first experimented with the game, I used a range of 70 percent to 100 percent but now use 50 percent to 100 percent. Using the latter range as an example, I would list these percentages in a table like the following, with 1–4 representing first through fourth place and so on: 1–4: 100 percent; 5–8: 95 percent; . . . 33–36: 55 percent; and 37–40: 50 percent. Thus, a student who finished the semester in fifth place would earn 95 percent, while a student who finished in thirty-fifth place would get 55 percent. In spring 2016, I calculated final grades using the following percentages: 25 percent individual Moksha score, 25 percent quiz grade, 40 percent written work, and 10 percent group projects. As an example, a student who received a 95 percent for an individual Moksha score and an 85 percent on all the other graded items would receive a final grade of 87.5 percent (95 x 0.25 + 85 x 0.25 + 85 x 0.40 + 85 x 0.10).

Team Moksha Score

Each team receives a team Moksha score that is made up of two components: first, the points earned and lost by the activities of the individual team members go into the team total. In the case of Student A described above, her team would, at the end of the semester, receive Student A's ninety-five points plus the other team members' points. A team's position on the Moksha scoreboard at semester's end determines a bonus that I add to each team member's final quiz average. In a class with ten teams, I add 5 percentage points to that average for first place, 4.5 percentage points for second, and so on down to 0.5 percentage points for last place—everyone, except those students who accumulate too many bad karma points, gets at least a small bonus. Thus, the four members of the first-place team would receive a 5 percent

bonus added to their adjusted quiz scores at the end of the semester: for example, a team member with an 87 quiz average would jump to a 92, while another with a 68 average would increase to a 73. Since quizzes count for 25 percent of the final grade, finishing toward the top of the team game gives team members a substantial boost. As a result, the team bonus serves as a strong incentive for all members to contribute, or, at a minimum, not to accumulate the bad karma that automatically triggers losing their bonus, as I describe below.

Team games constitute the second component of the team Moksha score. Teams play for incremental points that I announce ahead of time, with the point spread depending on the degree of preparation required. For example, the debates take a good deal of preparation, and so I use a big point spread, awarding twenty points to the first-place team, eighteen to the second, and so on. For background, students listen to the NPR *Intelligence Squared* debate, "The World Would Be Better Off Without Religion."[9] I then present to the class five debate motions relevant to the course material and have teams select, based on their position on the scoreboard (the last-place team picks first), a motion and position. For example, one team might choose to support the motion that "the editor of *The New York Times* should not reprint the cartoons of the Prophet Muhammad," while another might oppose the motion that "all religions are simply different paths going up the same 'mountain.'"[10] Students not involved in a debate use their iClickers to score the other teams based on criteria I post online and display in class using PowerPoint; the average score a team receives from the other Moksha teams accounts for half of their overall average, with the other half coming from me. I rank the overall average scores and give those twenty first-place Moksha points to the team with the highest average, with two points going to the team with the lowest. Teams also receive Moksha points for the speeches they deliver as part of the Reacting to the Past game, a second group project, which recreates the conditions of India's Independence in 1947.[11]

Moksha Data Organization
Scoring Sheet

To keep track of good and bad karma points, you need a scoring sheet to tally points earned through class comments, and lost through texting and such. Immediately after each class, I go through the class roster and record these points in the scoring sheet, which can be a simple Word or Pages document that lists the date—most recent at the top—and points earned and lost from good and bad karma. On a typical day in a class of forty, at least half the students will not earn or lose points. Since bad karma points double each time, I just note the particular infraction in the scoring sheet and then determine the actual points lost when I enter the points into the database, as I describe in the next section. I calculate Moksha points earned from quizzes, papers, and other graded activities by consulting the online gradebook. For example, after I have graded the day's quiz and entered it into the online gradebook, I transfer each student's quiz-based good karma points into the database. I do the same for students' written work.

Database: Individual Scores

The database can be created in Numbers or Excel and should list students alphabetically in the far-left column and the different types of good and bad karma across the topmost row: class comments, quizzes, papers, and so on, in green lettering, followed by tardy, texting, false-start, and so on in red. Label the far-right column in the top row, after the last type of bad karma, "total Moksha points," which equals the good and bad karma points a student has earned. To generate that number, create a simple summation formula that adds a student's good and bad karma together.[12]

After each class period, I update the database by transferring the good and bad karma points from the scoring sheet and good karma points earned if the class took a quiz.[13] For instance, if Student A earned two class comment points and one quiz point, I would simply enter "two" and "one" in the appropriate columns. But if the scoring sheet shows that Student B

had been texting, I cannot immediately tell how many points to deduct without consulting the database, since negative points double with each repetition. Instead, when I look at the texting cell of Student B's Moksha row in the database, if there is a zero, it would mean that this is the first infraction, and so he would receive a negative one; if he already has a negative one, this would be his second infraction and he receives a negative two, giving him negative three total texting points, which is one infraction away from losing the team bonus.

Having entered the good and bad karma points for the day into the database, I make sure to email each student who lost points. I write a friendly email like the following:

> Dear Student B,
> You lost X number of Moksha points today for texting in class. Please remember that the bad karma points double if you do this again; you will also lose your team bonus at the end of the semester if you do this three times or accumulate ten bad karma points. Thank you for your understanding.
> Best wishes, Mark

You can sort the individual points in Numbers or Excel to determine the class rankings and identify the top scores for the scoreboard. I recommend updating students' individual Moksha scores in your gradebook three or four times during the semester so that they have a sense of how the game will affect their overall grade. I enter those grades after five, ten, and fifteen weeks. Since the individual Moksha grade is worth 25 percent of their final grade, this means I post those grades using multipliers of 8.33 percent (five weeks), 16.67 percent (ten weeks), and 25 percent (fifteen weeks).

Database: Team Scores

On a separate page in the database, you should list the teams alphabetically in the far-left column and create a simple summation formula that adds together the total points from each team member. Those points go in

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the column next to the team name and so represent the total team points generated only from team members' individual activity. You will then add team points won in a column added to the right each time you play a team game. In the far-right column, just as you did with the individual scores, perform a simple summation of each row, which will give you each team's total points—that is, the points generated by individual team members and the team game points. You should enter those numbers on the Moksha scoreboard.

Moksha Scoreboard

I use Microsoft Word to create a scoreboard that I update and post on the course online website before class each Monday. Beneath "Moksha scoreboard," "World Religions," and the current date, I list the names and photos of the top four or five students and then the teams from first to last place. Beneath each team's name, I insert a funny, fair-use drawing or cartoon of the team animal with the names and photos of the team members. I take a few minutes at the beginning of Monday's class to dramatically reveal the updated scoreboard, making the most of quite meager showmanship skills. I congratulate those students and teams who did something commendable the previous week and try to generate excitement for the upcoming material and Moksha-related activities.

Conclusion

The principles of Moksha are quite simple, but learning the rules and implementing the game in your class will take some time and effort. The same is true for students. But I explain to them that learning to deal with complexity and mastering the rules of a system—whether a game, computer program, or foreign language—are crucial to developing as critical thinkers. The game also teaches them, through regular feedback and low-stakes assessment, that they themselves are responsible for the taste of the "fruit" they "eat" at the end of the semester, whether it's a ripe and juicy mango or something mushy and bitter.

For me, the effort has been worthwhile because typical distractions have become almost nonexistent and the game has helped me create a classroom environment that is lively and engaged. Yushau Sodiq, my colleague in the TCU Religion Department, is the first teacher other than me to play the game. He did so as an experiment, playing it in one of his two sections of World Religions in spring 2016. To help him get started, I met with him before the semester to discuss the rules, documents, and procedures, and then visited his class a few times. He felt quite pleased with the results and noticed a distinct difference between the two sections; like me, he observed that distracted and disruptive behavior, which had also been a serious concern for him, decreased significantly, while the game helped reinforce teamwork and build rapport among the students, as well as between him and the class.

The game is a natural fit in World Religions and other courses with some connection to the moksha paradigm because of the central role played by karma.[14] Indeed, the game's connection to this paradigm opens up other pedagogical possibilities. This past semester, for example, I connected the attention that the game seeks to promote to Buddhist mindfulness practices. I incorporated a series of mindfulness exercises devised by the Vietnamese Zen Buddhist monk Thich Nhat Hanh, reminding them of his contention, "If in one class, one student lives in mindfulness, the entire class is influenced."[15] As a class, we discussed students' experiences with the unruly "monkey mind" when engaging in these exercises and how they are helpful for developing sustained awareness in a media-soaked environment that constantly assaults the senses. We also touched upon the emergent field of Contemplative Studies (CS)—TCU has an active CS group—and the growing body of research, showing their value in the health sciences, sports, psychology, and other fields. ■

NOTES

1. From the *Zen to Zany* page on Facebook at http://www.facebook.com/ZenToZany/.
2. See John L. Esposito, Darrell J. Fasching, and Todd T. Lewis, eds., *World Religions Today*, 5th ed. (Cambridge: Oxford University Press, 2015). In addition to the myth of liberation from India, the text identifies the myths of nature, history, and harmony. See pages 18–23 for a description of those myths and page 318 for a description of the Hindu moksha paradigm.
3. In traditional forms of Hinduism, moksha is one of the four aims of life that also include duty (*dharma*), sensual fulfillment (*kama*), and worldly gain or prosperity (*artha*). Buddhist philosophy rejects the existence of an enduring *atman*, arguing instead for *anatman*, or selflessness; so too, *nirvana* is more commonly used in Buddhist texts for liberation from the cycle of *samsara*.
4. It is important to note that the simple description I use for karma in the Moksha game does not tease out the nuances of what is a complex topic, which I discuss at length with students. The interpretations of the sources and consequences of karma vary significantly across and within these religious traditions.
5. I use "Moksha points" and "karma points" interchangeably.
6. To keep scoring fair, you may have to adjust some teams' scores because they have one more or one fewer player than other teams. For example, if all teams but one have four players, you should multiply the three-person team's score by 1.334 to get a four-person total. You would perform the same calculation if you dropped a student from a four-person team because of accumulated bad karma.
7. It would be unfair to give an individual twenty Moksha points for winning a one-hour game, when it would take seven or more class periods to earn those points from class comments.
8. See https://reacting.barnard.edu for a description of the pedagogy.
9. The debate is available at http://tinyurl.com/jbk4hh3.
10. The class includes a section on religion and free speech that covers the protests of the Westboro Baptist Church at the funerals of American soldiers killed in battle, the recent Tibetan self-immolations, and the attempted assassination of Malala Yousafzai by the Pakistani Taliban. I have used Stephen Prothero's *God Is Not One: The Eight Rival Religions That Run the World* (San Francisco: HarperOne, 2011) for the last two academic years. Prothero's introduction criticizes the "perennialist" position that is represented by this mountain metaphor.
11. Information on this game is available at http://tinyurl.com/hddkkog. See also my article titled "Integrative Pedagogy: A Case Study of the Lasting Legacy of India's Partition," *Education About Asia* 20, no. 3 (2015): 12–16.
12. If you are unfamiliar with database calculations, there are many good online tutorials that explain the basics.
13. Although you could use the class roster to enter points directly into the database, I would recommend against it because the scoring sheet gives you a record of what happened in each class that you can use to go back if needed.
14. I am working with colleagues who teach aspects of Christianity to revise the game for use in their classrooms. You could also strip the Moksha paradigm from the game and use other relevant principles in a political science, history, or economics class.
15. Thich Nhat Hanh, *The Miracle of Mindfulness: An Introduction to the Practice of Meditation* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1999), 64.

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