

[Home](#)[Current Issue](#)[Alumni](#)[Past Issues](#)[Have Your Say](#)[Class Notes](#)[About Us](#) 

## MOSAIC

Fall 2012

# BREAKTHROUGH THINKING: THE ZEN OF SELF-CONTROL

*Kurt Kleiner*

Rimma Teper has always found her meditation sessions relaxing and therapeutic. Now, as a doctoral candidate in psychology at UTSC, she's helping to understand why meditation is also good for boosting self-control.

Compared to non-meditators, those who meditate show more self-control, Teper has discovered in her research. This is linked to their awareness and acceptance of their emotions.

"[Meditators are] attuned to their own emotions," Teper says.



"They're aware of how they're feeling and they're also good at regulating their emotions. The results suggest these traits account for the better self-control we see in meditators."

Teper was interested in a manifestation of self-control that psychologists call "executive function"—the ability to pay attention to appropriate stimuli and react appropriately. It's what keeps us studying when we'd rather watch TV, or forces us to go outside for that morning jog instead of going back to sleep. Earlier studies had shown that meditators exhibited higher levels of executive function than non-meditators, but the reason for this still had to be pinned down.

Most meditation traditions emphasize two major practices: awareness of the present moment, and acceptance of emotional states. Teper suspected that emotional acceptance was the key to the better self-control.

To test her premise, Teper gave the meditators and non-meditators in her study a test that required high executive control. She then measured their error-related negativity (ERN), which generates an electrical signal in the brain within 100 milliseconds of an error being committed during a task, well before the conscious mind is aware of the error. "It's kind of like an 'uh-oh' response, or a cortical alarm bell," Teper says.

The meditators did better at the task than the non-meditators and also had stronger ERNs. What's even more interesting is that the meditators who did best on the test were the ones who tested highest for emotional awareness. Since ERN triggers a negative feeling that motivates people to do better, meditators may be more aware of that feeling and therefore quicker to improve.

"Meditators are attuned to their emotions. They're also good at regulating their emotions," says Teper. "[This] fits well with our results."

Teper's work, co-authored with her doctoral supervisor, UTSC psychology professor Michael Inzlicht, appears in the

## OTHER MOSAIC STORIES

[Discuss: Health Education for Tomorrow](#)

[Mentorship shows students they belong](#)

[Did you know?](#)

[Take Home: 7 tips for a better lunch break](#)

[An artist for anxious times](#)

[Fried Bread](#)

Oxford Journal Social Cognitive and Affective Neuroscience.

ADD A COMMENT

Your name

Subject

Comment \*

CAPTCHA

This question is for testing whether you are a human visitor and to prevent automated spam submissions.



What code is in the image? \*

Enter the characters shown in the image.

Save

Preview

Privacy Policy

© University of Toronto Scarborough  
1265 Military Trail, Toronto, ON, Canada, M1C 1A4