

Sitting Still Like a Frog
An Online Course in Teaching Mindfulness to Kids
Taught by Eline Snel

Talk One, Part 1: Mindfulness Begins with You

ELINE: First of all, I would like to introduce myself. My name is Eline Snel, and I am from Holland, from the middle of Holland. I'm here with my husband, Hank, and he is supporting me with the microphone the whole weekend. *[Laughter]*

I would like to tell you something about when my mindfulness experience started. It was a long time ago. When I was in late adolescence, I started to read about what mindfulness could mean in my personal life. I read some books; I did some effort to find a teacher, which I couldn't find at that time. In my family, we were not used to meditating, so I was . . . not really a black sheep, but no one did understand what I was doing.

When I was twenty-five, I got my first son. That wasn't very easy for me at that time because he was crying all the time, day and night, hour after hour, so I got a little bit exhausted. And that was the first time I really could experience with the day-to-day mindfulness practicing. It helped me a lot, to be with him when he was crying and not thinking all the time what was going wrong with me or with him or with all kind of other things in the family. It helped me to stay really here in this moment when he was crying; I was with him when he was crying. When I breastfed, I was doing only that and not ruminating or thinking about all the things that went wrong. Sometimes I wondered, I must be not a good mother, because otherwise why would he be crying all the time? Sometimes it came up in my mind, and then I realized, "I don't know if I am a good mother or not. We will find out in the next, well, fifty years, maybe." *[Laughter]*

Now he's a very good surf teacher, so one of the things he taught me, really, was how to be a mother in the first place, and the second thing he taught me was how to learn to surf. As you all know, maybe, you cannot stop the waves, but you can learn to surf. Surfing is not a very easy sport. Who of you did ever surf the waves, without a sail? Yes. And what do you think? Is it a very easy sport to do? No. No, it's very difficult to keep balance. It's very difficult to stay on with both feet on the (inaudible), and he really taught me to do it. I only, to be honest, did it a few times, but he taught me how to do that. Those two things I learned from him at the beginning, and we can learn a lot from our children.

In Holland, I'm an MBSR teacher, especially for teachers in schools. I teach whole teams of teachers in the schools, after a working day. For example, I go into the schools and teach them the

eight-week program; more and more teachers in Holland realize how much they need the mindful skills for their profession, because it's such a demanding job to be a teacher. It's so important, I think, really important, for every teacher—and also for every parent—to be able to be present, as present as you can, because every child feels when teachers are as present as they can. In fact, when we are asking children who are their best teachers, it's not about that they can teach such good geography or math or something else, but it's always about being in contact—always being present. I think that's the most important thing for teachers as well as for parents—that we are able to be really here, as Jon Kabat-Zinn can say so lovely, to drop into the moment. We don't have a Dutch word for that—"to drop into the moment"—but in English, it's a very good idea to do that regularly.

So I teach teams of teachers in the MBSR courses, and I also teach a lot of kids in all kind of age groups. When I started to do that, it was after some principals of schools had the MBSR training and the eight-week training. Twelve principals of schools joined me in that course. During that course, they said to me, "Well, this is so good for us; we can imagine that it could also benefit children enormously." At that time—it's now, I think, eight or nine years ago—there was nothing for children developed. In fact, nothing in Europe was developed. There were no books. There were no child trainers. There was no information at all. The information I had came from America, and there wasn't, also, a kind of method. So they asked me, after finishing the course, "Could you develop something for children?" That was a very interesting question because I hadn't even thought about that possibility before that question.

Well, those moments are special moments in a lifetime, when you get a question from someone and that changes your whole life. Because I'd been giving mindfulness training for a long time—I think for twenty-five years already—but I'd done nothing for children. The experience I had was with my own children, and that was very important, but to teach it in a class setting—it's something else. When I got that question, I thought immediately that I want to try this. I want to develop a training for children—I have to learn it from the children. There's no one else that can teach me how to teach children other than the children themselves.

So I went to different schools and asked them to invite me in their classrooms. I was a kind of guest teacher, and that was great that they wanted to have me. Then, I just started to begin with being mindful. What is being mindful? Most of the children never heard of the word *mindful*, so we call it in schools in Holland "attention training"/"awareness training." And the word *mindfulness* isn't so easy in schools in Holland. People think very rapidly that it's a kind of, sometimes, religion, or it's only Buddhistic or that kind of thing. So we try to avoid the term *mindfulness* and call it "attention training" or "awareness training" for children.

Then teachers and parents started to be more interested immediately. So I started with a information morning with the teachers and asked them what they thought about what mindfulness is—what attention is. It wasn't such an easy question; I'd found that out already in my personal life because my daughter—it's my second child, which I gave birth to nine years after my surfing son—had definitely a concentration problem, and she was growing really angry with me when I just said to her, "Anne, just concentrate. Try to concentrate, and it's much easier for you to do your schoolwork." She said, "Mom, I don't know how to do it. I'm just lost in how to try to concentrate. I don't know how to do it." Then I went to her school and asked her teacher, "How do you teach children to concentrate?" They said, "well, we don't. We just don't. We ask them to concentrate and to focus, but we don't teach them how to do that." That was, for me, when she was six—and she's now twenty-seven—a point in my history that I realized the importance of mindfulness for children in schools.

When I gave those workshops in school time with teachers during lunchtime—most of the time I only had twenty minutes or something—I started always with the question, "What is mindfulness? What is it?" And I'm curious how many of you are familiar with mindfulness training or mindfulness exercises. How many of you are familiar with doing mindfulness practice? OK, thank you. When we would find out at this moment what mindfulness is . . . Who knows a kind of definition of *mindfulness*? What is mindfulness? We have a microphone. Yes?

STUDENT 1: Well, traditionally, one hears it is awareness that is nonjudgmental. I think it's like a friendly, freedom-giving presence. So there's the relational aspect.

ELINE: Yeah.

STUDENT 1: There's what's getting attention, and there's awareness and choice.

ELINE: Yes, there is that friendly, nonjudgmental awareness about your inner world and, at the same time, about your outer world. Yes, thank you. That's really true.

STUDENT 2: An understanding that we have a choice of how to show up. We have a choice about how to respond.

ELINE: Yes. So it's also about being aware of our urge to react immediately and be able to stop reacting immediately and have a choice. That's also really important about the mindfulness skills. Is there another one who wants to add something? Yes.

STUDENT 3: To me, mindfulness means the awareness or the ability to unconditionally observe the phenomena or the experiences or the events or anything in the present moment.

ELINE: Yes, that's true. Thank you very much. Yeah. Can I ask you something? What do you know . . . when you just pop up what mindfulness means for you? Is there something you want to say about it or not?

STUDENT 4: Being kind and being aware and knowing what you're saying and—

ELINE: Yes, being kind.

STUDENT 4: Thinking before you say things.

ELINE: Yes.

STUDENT 4: And thinking how they will affect the other person.

ELINE: Yes. OK, thank you very much. That's very true. Great.

When we talk about mindfulness/awareness, we always talk about this present moment, and it's not so easy to be in the present moment. Most of the time, our mind is keeping us away from the present moment, and sometimes in a split second, we are completely somewhere else. Sometimes we even notice it at the first beginning.

So I would like to do a very short awareness meditation with you. Sometimes I will use my paper because I am still a bit uncertain about doing this in a, for me, not very familiar language. In Holland I wouldn't take a paper, but here sometimes I need it. Sorry for that, but I hope you understand.

Let's just notice how we are sitting at this moment. When we try to be in this present moment and not to do anything else, other than just be in this moment . . . Maybe you can be aware of how you are sitting now. Without changing anything, without changing your posture or need to sit in another

way, what do you notice about your sitting here? What do you notice about your legs, for example? And what do you observe about your back, your arms, your neck, your head?

When you observe your sitting position like this, maybe you feel you don't sit as comfortable as you would like to sit. So I would like to ask you to change a little bit your posture now, and try to make yourself as comfortable as is possible on this chair. Tomorrow, we will sit some more on cushions. But at this moment, I would like to ask you to sit as comfortable as you can.

Then direct your attention—your awareness—to the movement of the breathing. Maybe at this point you can point your attention to your nostrils and notice how the air is coming in and coming out again. Maybe you notice a slight difference in temperature, for example, between the air that's coming in and coming out. Then you can point your attention to your breast and stay, for a while, with the movement of the breathing in the chest. What do you find out when you are sitting here in this space with your attention very close to the movements of the breathing, the breath? What do you notice now in this moment? Is the breath regular or irregular? Is it calm or not so calm? You don't need to think about the breath; just be with the breath. Then you can let your attention go a little bit lower and go to the belly, and stay for a while with your friendly, nonjudgmental attention with the movement of the breath in the belly—this in-breath and this out-breath. Then try to be in this moment with the in-breath and the out-breath for a few more seconds, without the urge to change anything or without thinking about breathing—just experiencing it. When you hear the sound of the bell in a moment, you can just stop this exercise. [*Rings bell*]

Being in the moment was not so easy when I did this for the first time with children, but they did very well to start with. What do you find out about being in the moment? Maybe we can go on a little bit with questioning and doing a little bit of inquiry; we always do the same with children, and I will tell you something about inquiry later on. Who wants to tell us something about his or her experience of those few minutes we just did this small meditation? What did you experience, finding out, for example, how your sitting position was? What did you observe about your sitting position? Is there something you did observe?

STUDENT 5: These chairs are very uncomfortable.

ELINE: The chairs are very uncomfortable.

STUDENT 5: They really hurt my back.

ELINE: Yeah, and what exactly did you notice about the chairs in relationship to your body?

STUDENT 5: You want me to go into how they're designed?

ELINE: No, but . . .

STUDENT 5: The open back makes it really uncomfortable to sit.

ELINE: OK, yes.

STUDENT 5: I was eyeing those little guys over there.

ELINE: Yeah. OK, thank you. And another?

STUDENT 6: These chairs are way more comfortable than the ones at school.

ELINE: Oh, OK.

STUDENT 6: The little second-grade chairs at school.

ELINE: Yeah.

STUDENT 6: No, I did notice that my head was tilted to one side that I hadn't noticed before, and I had a little tension in my arms that I hadn't noticed; the breathing, I thought, was much softer than I would have expected my breathing to be at this moment, not as deep as I usually notice it to be, just softer and more shallow.

ELINE: Yeah, OK, so all kinds of different observations and also a different opinion about a chair. Yeah. There are a lot of different possibilities we can find out during a few minutes of a meditation. Yes?

STUDENT 7: I actually had the opposite: I thought I was comfortable until I paid attention and realized I wasn't that uncomfortable, but I could be more comfortable.

ELINE: Yeah.

STUDENT 7: I also noticed I could get only like half a breath, not a full one.

ELINE: OK, yeah, that's also interesting. Some thoughts can give you the illusion that everything is OK and it's comfortable until you point your attention and your awareness to the sitting posture, and then you find out it's something else. Yeah, that's what mindfulness and awareness is about: finding out what is going on in reality and not what we think about the reality. Yes. OK?

STUDENT 8: I noticed the fly buzzing in my ear, which I really enjoy.

ELINE: A fly?

STUDENT 8: There was a little fly buzzing around my ear at first, and I like that, because I've started over the years with meditation to notice when the bees or the flies start buzzing around your ears. Then it flew over here, and it bit me a couple times. I usually don't get bitten by them at all, and I really noticed that, but that didn't really bother me, so I noticed that—that it didn't really bother me, because I was in such a calm and relaxed space.

ELINE: Another, yes?

STUDENT 9: That's interesting that Elizabeth mentioned that, because I always get bit by mosquitos, but I never feel it, and as I was meditating or calming my mind, I felt it. I felt it land on me, and then I felt it bite me, so that's the first time. Then I also realized, after I also assessed my comfort level, that the more I relaxed . . . Then you said, "Just be the breath . . ." It's like I dropped the mind, like I'm not the mind; I'm not the body; and I just dropped away from that. So that was really nice.

ELINE: Yes, very interesting experience. Thank you very much. Thank you for all your sharing. We will do that a lot during the coming hours, today and tomorrow.

When I started to do this meditation—a kind of adult meditation—with children, they started to . . . I don't know the word. I don't know the word. How . . .?

STUDENT 10: Squirm.

ELINE: Squirm? Yes, that also, but also like this. [*She mimics a yawn*] What is the word for that?

GELINE: Yawn.

ELINE: Yawn, yes . . . “Well, this is not interesting for us . . .” At that point, I thought, I need something else for the children to teach them how they can benefit from mindfulness and how they can meditate for a bit longer time than only a few seconds. I realized that I needed a metaphor they could identify with. Then I had some sleepless months—I think three or something—and I'm a very good sleeper. I was thinking, what kind of metaphor do I need for those children? They don't need so much theory about mindfulness; they need something that they can identify with and immediately know, “OK, this is about what we are going to do.” So after three months, I wake up Hank in the morning; most of the time he's an early riser, but I think it was at five o'clock or something, and then I said to him, “Hank, I do have the metaphor. It has to be a frog.” Well, he wasn't quite awake at that moment. “A frog? At this time in the morning? What's going on?” But I realized that the metaphor of the frog could be very interesting for children. I started asking the children, “What do you see? What do you really see when you see a frog?”

Well, what do you see when you see a frog? What is the first thing you see when you see a frog? Anyone a clue?

STUDENT 11: I see a readiness.

ELINE: “A readiness.” Yes, that's what kids also say: “I see that he's ready to jump—to make enormous jumps.” And that's what our mind is also doing. Our mind is capable to go away—far away—from the body. In a split second, you can be in Turkey, or you can be on your last holiday, which was very nice, somewhere in Greece or in America or a place you have been. Your body is still here, but your mind is going far away. Children can immediately understand when they look at the frog that the jumps the frog is making can be compared to the jumps that our minds are making.

Another thing when they look at frog is that a frog can sit very still—very, very still, and they don't move a thing. He's not in a kind of trance when there is a fly and he's a little bit hungry. His large tongue picks immediately the fly out of the air. So he's also aware of his surroundings; when he's sitting still, he is aware of his inner world, but also the world around him. He's hearing sounds. When you are going too near to the frog, he's jumping away. He immediately notices it.

The third thing that children find interesting about the frog and mindfulness is that they can really observe, very well, the breathing of the belly of the frog. Sometimes it's breathing here; sometimes it's breathing here. When they look at a frog, they can see the jumps; they can see he's sitting still and is aware of his inner and outer world; they can see the belly is going up and a little bit down. So they can observe it with themselves also very well.

And there is that nice fairytale about the prince and the golden ball. Do you know that fairytale? Yes? It's about the princess that throws her ball into the water by accident and then the frog catches the ball: "I have it here, but you have to do something to get your ball back." It was not just something; she had to kiss the frog. She didn't like that so much: not only kissing the frog, but he had to sit next to her at the dining table in her palace. That's also about mindfulness: we have to have some intentions. We have to do something. It's not growing from itself; we have to do something and something not so easy, too.

To meditate every day or to do some informal or formal meditations every day, you have to make choices for that. It's not growing on the tree. But when you do it—when you make a kind of appointment with yourself that you are having the intention to practice mindfulness during a longer time—then that transformation is also starting to come. That's so beautiful in that fairytale, I think, when the frog is changing into the prince, and that's what happening—when I tell the story to children—that when they practice mindfulness sometimes for a few minutes, sometimes for five or ten minutes, then something will definitely transform and change. That's what they really notice after a few weeks, having this mindfulness practice in the class or in a private practice or in hospital. They start to find out that something is changing in their inner world, in their impulsivity, in their . . .

STUDENT 12: Capability?

ELINE: Capability, thank you. To be more kind to themselves and to be more compassionate to others—those are such big changes in a child's life.

We have some schools in Holland where 750 children are trained in mindfulness—the frog method. Two teachers are training the whole school, and they don't need any bullying programs anymore because the bullying has stopped. Without doing anything, it's just because of practicing the mindfulness in the schools. They start with it every day a few minutes, and then they do the program for eight weeks, and then they go on with practicing five minutes: frog meditation sometimes, compassion meditation, the safe-place meditation. We will practice that also in the coming days.

That's that transformation of the prince and the golden ball, and, well, as children sometimes say to me, "Miss, thank you very much for this training. I don't think you're aware of it—of this—but I think you gave me something for life." Especially the sentence I like very much: "I don't think you are aware of it." [Laughter] It's so, so funny when they say that. It . . . [inaudible] twelve-year-old, and then I get sometimes little notes from them. I can open them when I'm home, not now, but because I'm very shy; they don't allow me to open it where they are the moment they are with me, and sometimes those sentences are in those little letters. They are lovely. I always keep them for the rest of my life, I think.

This is a little bit the birth of the frog that was necessary to go on with the training, because I realized when I started training children, I could not use the words I used for the adults. It was a complete other language I had to start with. I also had to find some stories. We had to do a little bit more movement—mindful movements—in the lessons. Then some parents came to me and started to ask me, "You made this training for the children. Why don't you make something for us?"

I didn't have the intention to write a book at all. It just happened a little bit to me, like that question of the teachers who asked me, "Could you develop something for the children?" The parents asked me, "When our children are in the classroom and they are having the mindfulness lesson, what can we do to support them at home?" Then I thought, maybe I can write a little thing for the parents with the same exercises so that they can support the children at home. I did that, and that was the birth of the book for parents—*Sitting Still Like a Frog*. So that's a little bit the background of how this all happened before I was training children at all.