

From Deconstruction to Reconstruction:
Marc Gafni and the 'Unique Self'

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Introduction

As practices promoting mindfulness become more prevalent in contemporary society, a question naturally emerges: What role should “mind-body” or contemplative practices play in education and academic life? What do they have to do with the study of science, or the humanities and the arts? What place do they have in the curriculum?

For much of the modern era, the answer to that question was *none whatsoever*. Any mind-body practice was understood to lie outside the objective goals of the academy, because such practice involved subjective internal states often linked to particular religious traditions. In fact, a good part of modern Western intellectual history has been a rebellion against, or at least a differentiation from, the dogmas of religion and coercive (yet unprovable) metaphysical claims. Every subject from science to art has had to disentangle itself from such claims, including the study of religion itself.

But the last 40 years or so have brought a new understanding of contemplative practice as a kind of embodied self-awareness. Such practices involve the movement of the mind and body in ways that are not primarily cognitive, and incorporate the use of the breath and the stilling of the “monkey mind.” Their primary goal is to draw the practitioner into direct awareness and experience of the present. They include meditation, yoga, chant, contemplation of nature, contemplative prayer, poetry, dance, or even methods for listening, playing an instrument, or shooting an arrow. These are separate from dogma, even from the entire religious matrix itself. There is a growing body of practitioners who choose this direction not as an expression of loyalty to a particular tradition or to fulfill an external obligation. *Rather, they practice to gain knowledge.* They ask, “How can I live differently?” and “How can I know more deeply and fully?” They may think of themselves as religious or secular, or “spiritual but not religious,” or they may disavow labels altogether, but this is the direction of their quest.

These are also the very questions that many students ask. If you are a student, you know there is nothing abstract about these issues. These are questions of the heart—questions about human nature and direction. They are intellectual, emotional, and spiritual—and always personal. Most likely you’ve asked yourself some of the same questions I’ve been asked by other students:

- “People keep telling me to be myself, but I don’t really know who that is. I feel pulled in so many directions.”
- “Do we have free will, at all? Or are we totally determined by our genes, and conditioned by our environment?”

- “Why, in the midst of all they have, are so many people angry and dissatisfied? Can I hope to avoid this? Why is there so much addiction? Why depression, among people who have so much to offer?”
- “I haven’t found any kind of God I can believe in, yet I somehow feel there is something more to life. Your thoughts?”
- “Are science and religion looking at the same world? They seem so contradictory. Your husband is a physicist. Do you argue about this? ”
- “Is there such a thing as truth? Is there anything I can be certain of?”
- “Do you think life has some kind of point, or meaning? Or is it, as Shakespeare said, ‘a tale told by an idiot’? It really feels that way. Then all of sudden, even though I have no real answers, the feeling goes away.”

These are more than a series of isolated questions. When you pose them, you are asking if there is some kind of map you can trust, one that might give you a reliable sense of direction. The old maps that your parents and grandparents grew up with are not enough, and there don’t seem to be others around that really describe the territory. Your liberal arts education has taught you critical analysis and fluency in different ways of thinking, but hasn’t equipped you with a reliable “inner GPS” that can navigate contradictions and find its way. You might sense that such a thing is possible, but you observe that many in the world around you seem to lack both compass and map—and you do not want to be among them.

How can contemplative practice help you discern such a map? First, there is the practical level. Contemplative practice can encourage the ability to focus and enter into a subject with minimal distraction and interruption. It can help a great deal with stress reduction. Moving more deeply, it can foster the capacity to hold apparent contradictions in tension with each other without immediate dismissal of one side. It can encourage you to listen to and help develop the ideas of others from a less egoic perspective—and to see connections between disciplines that infuse their understanding of each other. It helps provide the space for deeper creativity and inspiration. At its most profound level, contemplative practice has the potential to help you reconnect with a deeper sense of purpose, meaning, and value in your life.

This goal is at the heart of the work of philosopher Marc Gafni, director of the Center for Integral Wisdom, a think tank dedicated to evolving and articulating a shared global framework of meaning and responsibility. Gafni, who holds a Ph.D. from Oxford, is classically trained in the study of the Kabbalah, as well as in modern and postmodern schools of epistemology (the study of knowledge, or how we know what we know). His work brings significant developmental insights of modern psychology and science together with spiritual practice and the study of world religions. Along with philosopher Ken Wilber and other scholars, Gafni is working on the articulation of an Integral world spirituality. Its first principle is what Gafni has termed “**Unique Self**”—a theory of self and contemplative practice that he has likened to a puzzle piece. The unique self has all the idiosyncrasies—the many-formed edges—of an individual life, and yet it is also profoundly committed to the larger whole.

This article is an introduction to Gafni’s theory of the unique self, and to the making of maps and the solving of puzzles. We’ll begin by exploring three meta-questions that underlie Gafni’s theory: What do we know? How do we know it? And what does it mean to be a self?

Epistemology and the Nature of the Self

I. The Question of Knowledge: Certainty and Uncertainty in Western Culture

Gafni outlines a broad “history of certainty and uncertainty” in Western culture. Despite innumerable counter movements and revolutions within each, three broad historical eras have held sway:

Level 1: Certainty Resides in the Church

Level 1 describes the centuries during which the traditional truths of the church, synagogue, and mosque placed spirit at the top and the material world at the bottom. This **great chain of being**, as described by the American philosopher-historian Arthur Lovejoy, dates back to Plato and Aristotle and was the primary philosophy in the history of ideas for over 2,000 years. It spoke of an interconnected world where everything has a place, and where “certainty” meant a kind of clarity about one’s prescribed role in that world. The individual was defined primarily in terms of his or her larger context, particularly the church or state.

The image of a great chain or ladder of being was later used by the church to enshrine its authority, with the church and its leaders now identified with soul and spirit. The church/synagogue/mosque sought to maintain control in order to promote greater stability. Even the Inquisition, destructive as it later proved to be, was founded with the intention of keeping order in the world. What could be seen as the holistic hierarchy of the great chain became the dominator hierarchy of the church. There was no widespread public discussion of faith and doubt, or individual belief. The locus of authority was outside the individual. The threat of sin and damnation stood guard against temptation and gender roles were fixed and given. Women were subject to the authority of men, and all forms of sexuality were held at bay by rigid laws. The major goal was inner transformation or obedience to the will of God and the will of the state.

Even at this level, however, there was a marked distinction between the exoteric level of the Western tradition and the inner mystical or esoteric level. In the inner mystical core of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam there was a greater universalism, freedom, autonomy, and respect for individual difference. Stratified social roles fell away in certain settings, and the lines blurring gender roles were at least somewhat smudged.

Eventually, the certainties of the traditional Level 1 era gave way to uncertainty about the role of the church and its teachings. As the German social philosopher Jürgen Habermas pointed out, the church overreached in its claim to absolute certainty, because it didn’t differentiate between value spheres. It claimed to know how many bones were in the human body; it did not know. It claimed to know how the solar system was arranged; it did not know. The authority of the church was challenged, and trust and control shattered. As the church battled ceaselessly within itself and with other traditions over questions of physical and metaphysical truth, new directions of knowledge arose to take its place.

Level 2: Certainty Resides in Reason and the Scientific Method

By the time of the Renaissance, a new form of certainty had been established in countries that experienced some form of the Western enlightenment. As consolidated by the English philosopher Francis Bacon and others, **the scientific method (in which data must be collected and mathematics used to describe the behavior of nature) emerged as the primary path to truth**—ushering in what we call the modern era and the reliance on objectively verifiable and disprovable empirical data. Although the French mathematician and philosopher René Descartes still posited “the idea of a perfect God” as the source of certainty, he identified the capacity for reason as the basis for individual self-knowledge and, along with the empiricists, helped pave the way for methodical exploration of the natural world.

Authority shifted from the church to the reasoning mind of the individual and the objective discoveries of science. Starting with the rich Italian merchants of the Renaissance (the Humanists) and the rise of the middle class, the authority of the Vatican started to erode in matters of knowledge as well as finance. Enlightened leaders realized that moral duty remained essential for the well-being of the city-state. Ethics were formalized as concepts—by German philosopher Immanuel Kant’s rational and categorical duty towards others, the developing idea of the inalienable rights of the human, and later from actions conducive to the greatest happiness in society. Not everyone was understood to have these rights—many non-elites, including women, were excluded. But these ideas were proposed as semi democratic alternatives to divine or monarchical fiat. Achievement in the material, economic, and other manifest realms was the order of the day.

By the 19th century, historical criticism developed in the humanities alongside the study of context in sources and authorship. The literal truth of Scripture was disputed, despite a firm pushback from what in Protestant circles was called “fundamentalism.” Deconstructionism got its early start as the sources and redaction (editing) of texts were examined. In the study of human nature, modern psychology turned its major focus to material components such as repressed sexual energy, and later to neuroscience. The idea of divine truth was demoted, and often discarded altogether.

In the words of 20th century German social philosopher Max Weber, the universe gradually began to be “disenchanted”—what could not be measured or observed was thought to be less than real. The word “science,” Latin for “knowledge,” came to mean that all knowledge was subject to the scientific method. The church’s authority on the “interior face” of the cosmos—what one might access through spiritual practice—was increasingly dismissed, as was that of other religions. The realm of spirit, and subjective claims about the nature of interior experience, were no longer considered dimensions of true knowledge.

True science indeed establishes important third-person forms of knowledge independent of first-person exclusive claims. **But the era of “scientism” had begun,** leading to an excessive reliance on objective measurement. Efforts to understand human nature through simple behaviorism, the hydraulics of physical or sexual energy, and other purely material forces bore some fruit but came up short. Material progress provided the comforts of technology for those who could afford them. Yet the distribution of those comforts remained uneven, and they were at times an empty promise even for those who enjoyed them.

This era had promised a path to human dignity and the independence of the individual, but had left a shadow. It undermined another dimension of human nature, or at least left it unfulfilled. Technological progress, with its overwhelming power, threatened the value of individual and personal experience in a world increasingly industrialized. Again new directions of knowledge arose, now challenging the methods of objectivity and science.

Level 3: Uncertainty Is the New Certainty

The 20th-century postmodern revolution in the humanities took issue with the idea of objective certainty and universal truth, challenging even the existence of fact itself. It recognized the deep significance of race, gender, class, culture, and other perspectives, and a much fuller understanding of human development emerged, with an awareness of perspective as foundational in how one experiences the world. One's direct experience took on an important voice, along with freedom from external definition and forms of oppression. Across the academy generally, and certainly in the academic field of religion, the importance of identifying privileged viewpoints gathered strength. Resistance to anything resembling proselytization was intense. Historians found new lenses through which to view previously established narratives, and literary scholars in all languages did the same. The value of Western culture itself was questioned, and the traditional and scientific certainties of both Level 1 and Level 2 were attacked—even as universities provided the academic context and tools for the challenge.

But as old truths were overthrown, this new movement often seemed to lack any sense of commitment to larger themes and ideals. The resistance to proselytization led to a resistance to any narrative at all. In a sense, the grand narrative of postmodernity is that there is no grand narrative. One's own group sometimes became the primary source of identity, without a larger whole. For others, nihilism challenged any claims to core values upon which one might build the foundation of a good life. Ideals like "Lux et Veritas," etched into the stone walls of many schools, seemed quaint. In the academic study of religion, students were encouraged to look critically at various paths and at most to put the pieces together for themselves. Yet justice and oppression often remained core concerns, and for those who felt a personal commitment to alleviating suffering in the world, the mismatch between the world's need and their own limited capacity to help often led to exhaustion.

In the postmodern era, the simple preference of the individual ("You can be whatever you want") is elevated beyond what it can sustain on its own, and there is not enough grounding to anchor the roots of deep connection to others. For some, the continued rise of fundamentalism has stepped in to fill the gap, providing a set of dogmatic truths and rules for action. For many, the pursuit of money is as good a measure of self-development and access to the good life as any, and popular culture is often built around those who have "made it" to an affluent (though often dysfunctional) lifestyle. Forms of depression, addiction, and narcissism are well-trod paths in every social class. Technology seems to provide the tantalizing alternative of constant connection, but the contact is often shallow. More profound and permanent signposts are missing.

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As a student today, you are heir to all three of these levels—the traditional, the scientific, and the postmodern. They may coexist uneasily in your mind, forming a framework for how you process and interpret the world. The work of education today, Marc Gafni believes, is to help students articulate their own “inescapable framework,” a term coined by the contemporary Canadian philosopher Charles Taylor. Some sort of framework is implicit in any individual’s worldview, whether we are conscious of it or not. The task then, writes Gafni, is to help evolve that framework into a “vision of meaning,” providing us with a continually evolving sense of direction, a kind of map-in-motion. Such a map would articulate an understanding of the self that is capable of connecting the truths that Levels 1-3 have uncovered.

In Integral philosophy, the elements of such a framework are called “orienting generalizations.” Among them are discernments about different kinds of knowledge and perspective, all of which have a place in this larger map of the self.

II. The Question of Knowing: How Do We Know What We Know?

To make these discernments, Integral philosophy sketches a vision of **three different, but equally important, perspectives on knowing**—each of which contributes to our knowledge of reality and has its own tests of validity:

1. Personal subjective knowledge (first person, often called in English by the Greek word *gnosis*);
2. Interpersonal/intersubjective dialogue and discourse, including politics and ethics (second person); and
3. The knowledge exemplified by modern science (third person).

Second, philosophers have long pointed to three kinds of knowledge—the avenues of sense, mind, and spirit. They overlap in significant ways but also have distinct characteristics.

1. **The avenue of the senses yields knowledge of the material world in several ways. One is sensual knowledge**, which includes but is not limited to the five classical senses of taste, touch, sight, smell, and hearing. Each of those reveals something about the nature of reality, in multiple and overlapping modes. The contemporary French philosopher of science Michael Serres writes, “We are bathed in things from head to toe. Light, shadow, clamor, silence, fragrances, all sorts of waves... we are not aboard a vessel, ten feet above the water line, but submerged in the water itself.” **Another is sense knowledge derived from the gathering of data, and the scientific method is its path to truth.** Knowledge is evaluated on the basis of whether there is some empirical perception or observation that could disprove a given proposition (Karl Popper’s test of falsifiability). It seeks to bring order and to quantify. Science’s method is to gather data, evaluate results, repeat the experiment in double-blind conditions and then submit the results of repeatable experiments to others in the scientific community, which checks and cross-checks the method and data before accepting as real the new knowledge resulting from the experiments. This is called the objective “It,” because it primarily handles information in third person. An object is investigated, measured, and classified, and a theory proposed about its performance that can be disproven. Scientific study may draw on the avenue of the spirit in that scientists are often motivated by a sense of personal value, curiosity, or direction, and it often uses and contributes to the avenue of the mind. But the avenue of the senses is primarily about connection to the material world.

2. **The *avenue of the mind* refers to rational deductive thought and reasoned discourse. It also refers to information gathered, analyzed and interpreted by the subjective mind.** It could involve mathematical knowledge accessed through the logical mind, or it could involve moral consideration. The avenue of the mind fosters the “We” of knowledge beyond merely individual perspective or preference. This is the community of moral values in dialogue, shaping and being shaped by a mixture of empiricism, truths of reason, transmitted truths from trustworthy sources, and shared subjective truths. This realm, usually called philosophy, makes ethical distinctions, identifies and develops concepts, and articulates frameworks of meaning. It is central in discerning value, and evolving meaning, law, and culture in all of their multifaceted forms. Moral discourse is rarely informed exclusively by the avenue of the mind. It is also shaped to one degree or another by the avenue of spirit, though sometimes only in an implicit or even unconscious way. Our moral judgments are not based entirely on rational thought.

3. **The *avenue of the spirit* refers to the sphere of meaning, values, purpose, aesthetic judgment, and love.** This is the realm that suggests possible new directions for academic understanding. Although it draws on the second- and third-person perspectives, at its core it is a form of knowledge that is ultimately first person, the “I.” It requires direct contact with what is variously called by words like essence, spirit, the ultimate, the ground of being, or God—the nonconceptual awareness of a larger dimension of the self, found on a stable basis through one of many paths of spiritual development, broadly understood. The origin and presence of our emotions is clarified here. It involves self-knowledge, self-inquiry, and subjective intelligence. Before any interpretation, the experience of ultimate value and meaning is found here, in the realm of interiors. That direct contact is then interpreted to yield particular purpose and worldview. How, for example, do we describe being in love? Our responses are not scientific or moral judgments, but rather a different kind of “I know” in which the certainty of dogma is replaced by the certainty of being. Values are in part derived in this sphere. While the second- and third-person perspectives are still incorporated, the sense of moral intuition arises here—and a sense of obligation to those values. This realm is essential to what is often called wisdom, and it is distinct from the dogmatic and ritual structures of any particular religion. It requires some kind of contemplative practice—a gradual, embodied, and often noncognitive education of the heart through experience and reflection. The avenue of the spirit is already at work in much of the academy, guiding the work of its researchers and theorists and artists—but it is usually not discussed and is often hidden.

These avenues, of course, are not sharply demarcated as we describe them here. The three sometimes disqualify each other with the word “merely”: the spirit is dismissed as merely subjective; the mind as merely theoretical; and senses as merely impersonal fact. Yet each of these three avenues is a critical strand of knowing. It is fair to say that the three avenues are included in each other: if you merge the perception of the senses with the perception of the spirit, you add an interior, aesthetic dimension to, for example, touch or smell. We need a way to integrate and value all three.

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In order to develop a mature and seasoned use of all three avenues, a new kind of self-understanding is needed—something that draws them together in an integrated but always evolving

form. The question emerges: Who is the person who is doing the knowing? The knower, the known, and the knowledge are, as Aristotle observed, inextricably intertwined.

III. The Question of Self: Who Are We?

At this point, we shift our focus to the last of the three issues: the problem of self. What does it mean to be a self? How does the self know anything?

Marc Gafni's primary work in this area over the last few decades has focused on a fluid model of identity that he calls the "unique self"—the fundamental essence of each person, which expresses itself through all three perspectives (first, second, and third person) and can access all the modes of knowing (the avenues of the senses, mind, and spirit). Because its path of development recognizes and values all three forms of knowledge, the unique self can integrate the advances of the historical eras described above in a profoundly personal and individual way.

The Developmental Path of the Unique Self

The unique-self framework extends our current understanding of psychological development and, based in part on its in-depth integration of premodern, modern, postmodern strands of knowing, is a key contribution of Gafni's work. The sense of the unique self evolves over six phases, the first four of which are currently understood in much of modern psychology and contemplative teaching:

1. **The *prepersonal* nature of the very young child, which is merged with the fullness of the mother or primary caregiver.** The mother and baby are a complete picture of what Gafni calls Eros, not in the sexual sense with which the word has come to be associated, but in the fullest sense of merger with the source of being.
2. **The necessary and often exhilarating development of the *separate self* or personal ego** (the mature independence of which is the distinctive feature of the Western enlightenment). Without this, the individual would have no sense of specific identity or agency in the world.
3. **The "*false self*" or *persona*, a distorted identity taken on to cover up or deny the pain of separation, as well as the limited identity of being merely a separate self.** The exhilaration of independence is accompanied and sometimes overwhelmed by the vulnerability of separateness. The false self seeks ways to establish a kind of false fullness that seems to recapture the earlier security of union with the mother. Left undeveloped, the false self becomes addicted to what we might call "pseudo-Eros," such as excessive attachment to drugs, work, money, pornography, and other compulsive behaviors. It is the attachment to any form of identity that is rooted in separate ego and not essence, and often supported by modern consumer culture.
4. **An emerging awareness of the deeper *true self* that connects all beings and of which all beings are a part.** This is the distinctive feature of both the Eastern and Western mystical understanding of

enlightenment, in which the archetypal movement is to awaken from the limited separate self to a far greater (infinite) sense of presence in the cosmos. The true self (sometimes called no self, original self, or other names) is experienced through some combination of first-person experience, sacred study, or the grace of spiritual transmission and teaching. Although it can be interpreted in ethnocentric and other less universal ways, it is the awareness of an impersonal and nondual oneness that underlies and permeates all of reality. This connected awareness is the basis for compassion, or love and kindness toward all sentient beings.

5. **The *unique self*, the dimension of personal uniqueness that begins to come alive with the deepening awareness of true self.** It therefore requires an ongoing spiritual practice, with the desire and capacity to connect with what we can call source, essence, Eros, love, or God—a quality of aliveness and vitality. This uniqueness is not the desire for self-promotion that limits the separate ego, and not solely a function of one’s conditioning. Rather, the unique self is the inherent expression of personal essence, particular to each individual. It includes but goes beyond the impersonal true self. It centers and clarifies the personal distinctiveness of the separate self with a unique perspective that is fundamental. It is sustained by true Eros or life force. It is profoundly creative and relational, forming a connection to the world that is well beyond the capacity of the separate self ego. The unique self is the personal form of the true self.

6. **The *evolutionary unique self* that is committed to the growth of others as much as to itself, and to social structures that advance both.** In this final level, the unique self awakens to the larger evolutionary context, transcending the limited scope and concerns of the ego self, and developing an awareness of its own personal contribution and sense of responsibility toward the uniqueness of others. From this perspective, as Gafni put it, “No one is an extra on the set.”

Uniqueness is a characteristic of the essence of a human being. Essence is understood in the true-self sense of being whole and undivided. When uniqueness is defined as a property of essence, it becomes the foundation of connection within and beyond the self. In Gafni’s words, it is “irreducible.” Whatever fractures the connection has the quality of being unhealed or off-center, similar to what in religious traditions is called *dukkha* or sin, and in psychology is often called shadow or the false self. One’s unique self—and that of others—goes unseen and unheeded. The ongoing discernment of this personal and collective shadow is part of the unique-self spiritual practice.

The unique self, unlike the separate or ego self, is not in fundamental tension with the larger second-person or third-person context. The ego self of Western individualism often clashes with larger contexts, especially in the United States, where the rights of the individual separate self are declared to be inalienable, and community (second person) and the rule of law (third person) are tolerated only as protection from others’ “nasty and brutish” nature (to use English philosopher Thomas Hobbes’ characterization). By contrast, in Gafni’s framework, human nature is “nasty and brutish” only when dominated by the separate ego and the false self. Its true nature is energized by love, the dimension of life that radiates from the true self.

With the healing quality of the true self, the unique self naturally values the interrelationship and essential wholeness of the many parts. It values the second person, recognizing in the other and the self a mutuality

of uniqueness. It values the third person, which reveals the contour of the larger whole, of which the unique self is an inextricable part. **The development of the unique self creates a kind of “we space” that highly values personal and public relationships, and the structures that enhance them.**

Putting the Pieces Together

For students, the unique-self framework suggests an approach to learning that includes a natural and necessary place for contemplative practice. The avenues of the spirit, mind, and senses are each important modes of knowing for the unique self. All three have to be brought to bear on what you come to understand as truth. None is superior to the other, nor are they reducible to the other. Each is distinct form of knowing, yielding a distinct form of knowledge and using different methods to discover that knowledge.

Ideally, the three spheres of knowing overlap: A poet might write with acute objective discernment as well as experienced aesthetic sensitivity; a judge might formulate a legal opinion that takes into sensitive account the nuanced human situation before him or her. Many scientists have spoken of qualities of awe and mystery—even reverence—that sometimes inform their study. A concert pianist, asked how he keeps an encyclopedic knowledge of Bach in his head, simply responds, “It’s not in my head.” It is not a purely cognitive memory. It directly involves the whole body, or what we might call the “bodymind.” **The advancement of the human mind in our era lies in an ability to move fluidly among all three spheres, developing and recognizing their capacities in each of us to different degrees.**

As Habermas suggested, different ways of knowing have different validity claims that they must meet in order to be fairly received as genuine knowledge. The avenue of the senses, in its scientific form, is subject to all of the validity claims that are required to verify empirical knowledge. You check the reliability of the instruments of perception and require repeatability in double-blind conditions, and then offer your conclusions for examination by a community of the experts in the domain in which you are claiming knowledge. With the avenue of the mind, you use a rational deductive method that likewise is subject to rigorous validity claims and careful peer review. **The avenue of the spirit is subject to validity claims as well.** It cannot make dogmatic claims, but must follow the same method of establishing genuine knowledge that is used by the avenues of the senses and the mind. There must be an exemplar—meaning an experimental practice. It must be repeatable; it must be shown under double-blind conditions to yield similar results; and it must be validated by those with experience in this path.

Meditation is one example of this. It is a practice. It yields direct empirical knowing about the nature of reality—especially the interior faces of reality. It is repeatable. It has been practiced by communities the world over who have no contact with each other, a form of double-blind condition. For many (though not all), it yields strikingly similar conclusions about the nature of reality. It has, for example, shown practitioners for more than two millennia that the separate self is not the sum total of identity. It has pointed to the interconnected nature of all reality. It has opened up a holistic world space of being that gives rise to compassion and mutuality. But meditation does not make dogmatic claims about the nature of reality. Rather, it says: “Here is the practice. Try it yourself over an extended period of time with expert guidance and see what it shows you.” This is but one example of a contemplative practice that

yields a distinct form of knowing. The Dalai Lama, one of the best-known teachers of Buddhism in the West, consistently refers to the teaching of Buddhism as mind science. It is empirical, experimental, accessible in first person, subject to validity claims, and requires affirmation through a community of practitioners. Ancient spiritual teaching contributes millennia of spiritual practice to contemplative knowledge, and many modern teachers are developing it in valuable ways. You will have to find the paths and the teachers that are most helpful for you.

The certainty emerging from contemplative practice is very different in quality and kind from the old monolithic certainties that were the surface structures of the great religious traditions. Those included dogmas such as how the *puja* (the act of worship) should be done, the doctrinal exclusion of women from the priesthood, and the belief that anyone outside one's ethnocentric community was either qualitatively inferior or in some way damned. Some of the great mystic poets even shared such views, and historical criticism was right to see them in historical context. But we cannot deny the truths of higher levels of consciousness altogether, without loss of something fundamentally human.

The knowledge resulting from contemplative practice is essentially the shared depth structure of the great traditions. A true spiritual practice connects you to source or true self. This connection forms the basis on which one meets a commitment such as the bodhisattva vow or the commandment to love others as oneself. Without a spiritual practice that awakens the capacity to transcend the ego, it would be impossible to forgive or to live a life of sustained compassion and love to those beyond our inner circle of egocentric security. Compassion would remain a worthy idea, impossible to achieve. The unique self is the lived experience of your unique quality of essence. It is an expression of dharma, or a fundamental insight into the way things are—with manifold unique perspectives. It is not a dogma designed to yield a single answer.

Unique Self Practice

Drawing in part on a framework of the psychologist John Welwood, Gafni summarizes the injunctions of the unique self's spiritual practice in this way:

1. **Show up**—with the willingness to learn and act on your unique perspective, gifts, identity, and obligation. The first step is a choice to pursue this path of awakening to the unique self. It has to be what you really want, and it has to be your decision to seek it.
2. **Wake up**—to the nature of consciousness beyond your separate self. This is the commonly understood meaning of spiritual awakening, and can take any of the forms of contemplative or embodied movement practice. These nearly always begin with a focus on the breath and the present-time awareness of the body, and involve a sense of connection to something greater than the individual self. They vary from formal seated meditation in a zendo to the martial arts to walking the rope in a ropes course to a conscious approach to drawing or playing a sport or a musical instrument.

3. **Grow up**—to the awareness of larger spheres of social reality, moving from the egocentric world of the separate ego to a world-centric or cosmic-centered perspective that seeks to know, engage, and value other societies and cultures. This means valuing the unique qualities of all beings, in as wide a circle as you can develop.

4. **Clean up**—gaining insight into the unconscious projections and shadow complexes of the false self, which stem in large part from anxiety over your own insufficiency. The discernment process here accelerates more easily with perception of the unique self, and the resulting clarity about your own presence. It involves questioning your own motives and actions, and a desire to distinguish between self-centered action and genuine connection. It requires a willingness to hear feedback from others.

5. **Open up**—to the fundamental quality of love. Love is a perception of the uniqueness of self and other, a willingness to stay open in the face of pain, and the capacity to suspend your ego and give deeply to another for the sake of their higher good, whatever that may be—and regardless of whether it benefits you. The unique self is capable of service to others in a way that the ego is not.

Taken together, these steps of the unique self practice honor the insights into the deeper nature of reality of the traditional Level 1 era; the advances in science and psychology of the Level 2 modern era; and the emphasis on the importance of perspective and radical individualism of the Level 3 postmodern era. They support and complement each other in ongoing ways. And while we can become increasingly expert at them, each of the five steps remains a lifelong commitment.

The Experience of Eros

We have described Eros as the energy and vibrant force of the unique self. What do we mean by this kind of energy, and why is it so central to the unique self? Eros was the name the Greeks gave to the god of love, whose name means desire. While he is sometimes associated, like his Roman counterpart, Cupid, with flights of romantic fantasy, the quality of desire is much deeper than that, and much more important. **Eros is that sense of vitality and aliveness so present when you are engaged—and so noticeably absent when you are not.** It is what you might feel when you run into a close friend, or play music you love, or dive deeply into a project that completely fascinates you. It is not just a product of those circumstances; it is also a quality that you bring and that you can cultivate. It becomes a key part of that inner GPS. When you choose to move in the direction of your unique self, you choose this. It requires first that you **know how to be fully present**—not distracted. It requires a willingness to step inside—a kind of intimacy with whatever you are doing or whomever you are with. It is interesting that both intimacy and Eros have become associated with physical sexuality, when in fact that quality of full engagement can be present in so many other ways as well (and is certainly not always present in physical sexuality).

Gafni writes,

“To be in Eros is to step out of your small self and experience the universe, alive, awake and moving through you. The power, aliveness and energy of reality awaken in you, and you see things as they truly

are. In this vision, people are not competitors but confidantes. Reality is not frightening and fragmented but ecstatic and whole. Eros is the force of allurements, which is always creating new connections. All of reality rests in Eros. All of reality is called forth by Eros.”

Eros has a quality of longing—not in the sense of pining after what you cannot have, but in the sense of seeking fuller connection. In this way it is dynamic: It is not primarily a placid sense of fulfillment, but rather a quality of becoming. It encourages you to look for more, to be alert to possibility. In a conversation it might encourage you to listen more closely, to share more deeply. On a team it might encourage everyone to stretch, to support, to become better competitors, even to bring out the best in your opponents. When you write or paint, it is that willingness to stay open to the creative voice. It may be what transforms an act of physical sexuality into something deeply fulfilling. It may be the patience and love that it takes to remain present at the bedside of a dying person, to be alert to whatever is needed in that moment. It draws on every kind of knowledge. It has an infinite number of possibilities that only you can recognize in the context of your own life. What they have in common are qualities that Gafni points to in his writings: presence, vital aliveness, interiority, wholeness or connection, desire, and urgency.

These are not experiences the separate ego knows how to have, but they are your birthright. They are part of what it means to be human, and they are what define the unique self. They are “spiritual” in the sense of tapping a connection or love that is not of your own invention. But there is nothing ethereal or otherworldly about them. They are grounded in your own experience. They require patience, and discernment, and self-inquiry, and commitment—but they are yours, and they are already at play in your life.

Moral Obligation as a Quality of the Unique Self

Gafni’s unique self grounds a theory of obligation or responsibility that gives meaning to each individual life, and is specific to you. Here a key caveat is in order. By obligation, Gafni is not speaking of the common obligations we all share, like paying taxes. The original Hebrew word for obligation, *chovah*, might help explain what he means by the word; the same root word also means love. In that sense the unique self is the embodied recognition that each of us is a unique expression of love. You are the only you. There are things, large and small, that each person is able to do, which no one else will ever do in the same way. There is a perspective no one else can access or express in the same way. A deeper notion of obligation wells up from within this recognition. Obligation is the natural expression of the intelligence that can only act through each unique individual. This is the obligation to be the unique gift that you are in the world, in the overall shape of a life as well as in the day-to-day encounter with each moment. In relationship, love is a kind of perception—a willingness to look for and support the unique self in others as well as yourself. It is a commitment to uniqueness as a quality of each person. This is not a commitment the separate ego has the strength to make.

The unique gift meets a unique need in the world. It emerges as the individual becomes fully present to his or her life circumstances, with particular interests, talents, and perspective. It may require you to take a risk or make a sacrifice that the egoic self would either avoid, or turn to personal advantage. But the unique gift serves the larger whole. For a CEO to go out of his or her way to advance a serious corporate

environmental vision is to serve a wider and deeper perspective than merely the quarterly bottom line. In the larger context, the environment is a stakeholder in the corporation and the corporation is a stakeholder in the environment. Or it could also be the parent who truly sees his or her disabled child, and finds ways to develop the child's strengths—perhaps even working for disabled children generally. It could be the athlete who plays his or her best to win, but never loses sight of the opponent as a truly valuable part of the whole. All of these could be done for personal gain, but to do them well requires commitment, flexibility, creativity, and above all a kind of bond that transcends personal ego.

Gafni uses the metaphor of a puzzle piece to help clarify the difference. The *separate ego* is a puzzle piece that has no larger puzzle to which it belongs. It may have interesting qualities, but is fundamentally isolated and painfully self-conscious. The *true self* is a puzzle in which all the lines separating the pieces have been erased—a unity that allows no ultimate distinctions among the parts. The *unique self* is a piece that has all the features and characteristics of an individual life—becoming part of a puzzle that energizes and honors the parts, and is profoundly committed to the whole.

We could look at the *evolutionary unique self* as a kind of multidimensional puzzle-in-motion. We might even see it as “selfing,” because it is not a static state. It moves creatively through certainty and uncertainty, toward greater complexity and awareness, while still holding shape. Committed to the whole, it develops the perspective necessary to make significant decisions affecting future generations. It first takes seriously the “deconstructions” of truth brought about by science and the postmodern era. It then reweaves them into a new sense of self and gnosis that draws on the best connecting practices of the religious traditions, and is fully informed by the mind and by the lived experience of the individual. It remains deeply connected to Eros as its guiding force.

Conclusion

The experience of introducing Gafni's unique self into the classroom is illuminating. Some of the ways it has spoken to other students may resonate with you as well. Perhaps it rekindles a sense of excitement about your own significant contribution in the world, and gives you a path to realize it. It may open a way to inner knowing and subjective truth, without sacrificing science and other kinds of knowledge. It may change the way you respond to others—since the unique self begins to unfold only with the awareness of the true self that connects all beings, it leads to a true valuing of others. It identifies the work that must be done to loosen the identification with the separate self. It may give you a sense of God or spirit that you can believe in, or you may prefer not to use such words. By whatever name, the connection with true Eros, though it takes work and practice, is a far more compelling experience than any brief shot of pseudo-Eros can ever provide.

The reaction of many students is often something like amazement. “How is it possible,” they wonder, “that at age 18 I have never heard this described before?” And yet, perhaps the unique self is only useful once we have begun to experience the suffering and emptiness of the separate ego. It is then that the conscious awareness of this practice begins to emerge as a relief, and then finally as a kind of compass toward another way to live.

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