

Eight Stations of the road to Unique Self

(An excerpt from chapter 4 of Awaken Your Unique Self, by Dr. Marc Gafni)

THERE ARE EIGHT DISTINCT STATIONS in the evolution of identity on the path to your Unique Self. You will recognize them as you encounter them on your journey. I will now outline the stations to give you a view of the whole picture. Do not worry about fully understanding each station as you read it for the first time. The meanings and contours of the key stations will become clear as we explore them over the course of the book.

Station 1: Pre-personal Self

The first station appears at the beginning of life, before you have developed a sense of your personal separate self. In individual development, this is the station of the infant who is not yet individuated from their mother or environment. However, this pre-personal station doesn't disappear completely after infancy; it remains with us and reappears later in life in different forms. It is, for example, the station of someone who loses their autonomy and sense of identity in an abusive cult or lynch mob or someone caught in the group- think of politically-correct victimology. Falling in love also requires you to move—at least for a time—from the clear boundaries of the personal to the fusion of the pre-personal. It is for this reason that Freud, in his less romantic moments, viewed falling in love as regressive. Deeper insight reveals that this “falling” is an absolutely necessary, if temporary, first station of love. It gives the lover a temporary glimpse into what might be possible. In the next station, boundaries snap back into place as the personal reasserts itself. This is the station where lovers must decide if they are willing to stay and do the work. If all goes well you then evolve to station three, true love, when the infatuation of fusion is transmuted into the ecstasy of union. But the initial infatuation with another is one of the places, long after infancy, in which the pre-personal reappears in our lives.^{xxxv}

Station 2: Separate Self: Level One Personal

In this station of development, you move from the pre-personal to the first personal stage of human development. This is when the personality, sometimes referred to as the ego, or separate self, comes online. The formation of personality and ego is a wonderfully healthy and necessary stage. You learn to experience yourself as a separate entity among many other separate entities, with your own boundaries and identity. The separate self is born. You feel joy at your success and frustration at your failure. At this station, the distinction between your false self, True Self, and Unique Self does not yet appear.

In this station you are wonderfully caught up in the glory of your story. In the best expression of this station, you are not thinking about your story; you are simply living it. There is great potential depth at this level of consciousness, expressed in part by a direct and unflinching recognition of what is. There comes a time when, in order to grow, you need to get over the fantasy of your idealized life and start recognizing the story of your life for what it is. You embrace your life in all of its complexity, ecstasy, and pain. You can bear it all, and you delight in it all, because it is your life. And in claiming your life as it is, you start to feel something deeply right about it and about yourself. There emerges in you a willingness to take absolute responsibility for everything that happens in your life. You are fully identified with your story. You are a player in your life and not a victim of its circumstances.

Many teachers like to say, “You are not your story.” They are right, but only partially. They fail to distinguish between the ego story and the Unique Self story. But there is also great wisdom in this first level of the personal, the station of ego and personality. The ego prefigures the Unique Self. And as we shall see, there are many important stations through which you must still evolve toward your full depth and enlightenment. In the next stages of development, you will need to first clarify your story and then to dis-identify with it, in order to return to your ego story at a much higher level of consciousness, the level of Unique Self. While first glimmerings of Unique Self appear at this level of separate self, it can only fully be realized when ego gets over itself.

Station 3: False Self

False self is the unhealthy form of separate self. In this station, you take an essential step in the transformation and evolution of your identity. It is here that you begin to consciously deploy what Freud called the observing ego. Your ability to see the inner structure of your personality comes online. As you separate and look at the story of your life as an object, its contours and patterns begin to become clear to you. You begin to recognize some of the core beliefs that have defined and sometimes deformed your life. Certain core mind-sets start to stand out. You see that you have a particular way of fixing your attention, of stabilizing yourself with familiar and deeply held beliefs.

In this station, the essential practice is that of “making subject object”: Just as we get settled in the story of who we are, something amazing, something startling happens. We see that we have been telling a story. The entire narrative that we have formulated, the one that we have become so accustomed to, so comfortable with, slips from our subjective experience and becomes an object, an artifact. Remember Robert Kegan’s insight: the subject of one level of development becomes the object of the next level of development. The understanding of this stage of the journey is based in part on the pioneering work of the great psychologists Robert Assagioli, Oscar Ichazo, and others, which reveals how the fixation of attention, which creates a false sense of self, is the very mechanism that prevents us from uncovering our deeper nature. Your fixation is the particular prism through which you see the world, the way in which, very early in your life, your attention fixated into a very particular pattern. This fixation of attention into a particular slant of seeing will naturally produce a distorted picture of your identity, which is your false self. Your false self is the unhealthy and distorted expression of your separate self.

Your false self fixation often expresses itself in a sentence or series of sentences: “I am not safe.” “I am not enough.” “I am bad.” “I am too much.” You live inside your sentence. You need to step outside of your sentence in order to genuinely realize your True Self.

The model of the Enneagram type describes another kind of fixation. It is a distorted pattern of perceived meaning upon which you fixate early in your life, which then shapes and determines your experience of reality.

Recognizing these patterns, trance-ending them, and deploying them skillfully is the next critical step in your evolution. To walk toward your enlightenment, you must recognize your fixations, break their hold on you, and cleanse the doors of your perception.

To recognize your false self, you must first see it. This is the process of making subject—your false self—into object; your false self becomes an object that you can see and therefore change.

The discernment of the observing ego allows you to take the first steps out of your false self into your real life. You still identify with your separate self, but without the distorting smoke and mirrors of your false self.

Station 4: True Self—Classical Enlightenment: Impersonal

In this station we make the momentous, freeing leap from the personal to the transpersonal. This has been called by some the liberation from the personal and the great realization of the impersonal. It would be more accurate to say that it is liberation from the ego personality, which is only level one of the personal. This level of the personal is transcended only to reappear in clarified form at the level of Unique Self, but first we must realize our True Selves.

We are ready and even yearning to evolve beyond our separate-self ego. We are no longer able to adhere to an identification with self that is painfully limited. The space beyond the story, the awareness beyond the fixations of attention, and the contracted conception of self now become the foreground instead of the background. This is the classical stage of ego dissolution. You realize your True Nature. Your identity shifts from your separate-self ego to your True Self. You move to transcend your personality and identify with your essence. This is the change that changes everything.

Sometimes this dissolution occurs spontaneously, sometimes through overwhelming pain or extreme fatigue; at other times, it emerges as the fruition of years of dedicated study and practice. Yet even at this stage of development, the ego does not disappear. Rather the ego is freed from its own narcissism and becomes an ally. You never evolve beyond ego. You evolve beyond your exclusive identification with ego.

As you begin to dislodge from your exclusive identification with the separate self, as you become disillusioned, you may be fearful or anxious, longing for the old, solid ground of your narrow identity. At the same time, your growing sense is that you are part of an infinitely larger context, that you are part of the “seamless coat of the Uni-verse.”

Understand that this is not a one-time event, but a continuous process of death and rebirth at each and every moment.

At this station, you engage in spiritual practice in order to dislodge your identity from the hell of separation, and you begin to realize your identity as the eternal Witness, as Big Mind/Big Heart, as the effortless spacious awareness behind this moment and every moment. You recognize your profound interconnectedness with others and the world. You realize that you are part of the larger field of love, intelligence, and creativity underlying All-That-Is. You reach beyond time and taste eternity, stepping out of the stream of past, present, and future, consenting to the full presence of the unchanging Now.

Two Notes on True Self

The first note concerns one’s level of True Self-realization and the relationship between True Self and Unique Self. Clearly there are different levels of True Self-realization. Our evolution beyond exclusive identification with ego is an ongoing process, and it is fueled by regular practice. Many people have glimmerings of True Self-realization at several different times in their lives and then remain faithful to the lived memory of that experience. (In fact, one definition of faith could be “living with fidelity to those moments when you authentically realize the true nature of yourself and the universe”!)

All this means that levels of True Self-realization vary greatly from person to person. It is fair to say, however, that there is a direct relationship between the level of your True Self-realization and the clarity of your Unique Self awakening. The more deeply you know your True Self, the more you can

be sure that your experience of a distinctive self-sense is at the level of Unique Self and not merely the grasping of ego. The more experiences of True Self you have, especially if you ally them with certain practices (witness practice, surrender practice, and others), the more you are able to discern between the voices of your child-ego and the experience of self that comes from true alignment with the divine in you.

The second note concerns the nature and method of True Self-realization. If you can only realize True Self by attaining the ultimate realization of Buddha, and if Unique Self comes online only after one has attained that level of True Self-realization, then only a very few people could ever realize Unique Self. That would make Unique Self-realization practically irrelevant for most human beings. Yet we know that True Self is accessed through many different means, not only through a nondual realization, born of first-person meditative practice, as in the classical Zen kensho or Hindu samadhi. Realizing True Self can happen through non-meditative experiences like prayer, ecstatic dance, spontaneous visionary experience, or even during a tennis game or a car accident. A sense of being enmeshed in and intertwined with invisible lines of connection that link all of reality may be accessed through direct contact with many forms of the transcendent, including contact with personal, second-person forms of the divine such as Christ or the divine mother. You can access glimmerings of True Self in the course of living for a higher social purpose or artistic vision, or by incarnating values like service and kindness. For example, my grandmother was a profoundly awake woman who experienced herself as selflessly committed to the highest good of all beings, and connected to all beings. Her compassion was vast, and her consciousness was full of God-awareness. She never meditated or had a nondual satori realization in her life. Indeed, she never heard of meditation. Her major formal spiritual practice was praying, reading psalms, and absorbing the laws and stories of the great Jewish masters, along with the ritual practices of Jewish teaching. All of this served to produce in her what can only be described as an enlightened consciousness, which had profoundly transcended separate self. There are many like her, who have had enough experience of contact with True Self to be able to awaken to their Unique Self, and to discern the difference between Unique Self and ego.

Station 5: Unique Self—The New Enlightenment: Level Two Personal

At the fifth station you witness the emergence of Unique Self. The personal comes back online at a higher level of consciousness. You realize that your True Self is not merely an indistinct part of a larger unification, but expresses itself uniquely, and that you have a unique role to play in the evolutionary unfolding. The personal face of your True Self is your Unique Self. You are able to consciously incarnate the evolutionary impulse toward healing and transformation that initiates, animates, and guides reality. No one else in the world can respond as you can to the unique need of All-That-Is, that is yours and only yours to address, and the place of your full liberation and power.

Awakening to your Unique Self has been called the “Pearl beyond Price” by the Sufi adherents, or “ani after ayin” by Kabbalists. It is alluded to as “Kosmic Consciousness assuming individual form” in the Yoga Vasistha of Hinduism.

Unique Self is not just another subtle disguise of the ego.

Not in the least. Unique Self is rather the personal face of True Self. Unique Self is the antidote to the grasping of ego. In one moment, you are fully alive, dynamically reaching for love and manifestation, and yet you are willing to let go of any attachment in the next moment. Your ego is still present, but you have moved beyond exclusive identification with your ego. The ego points toward Unique Self. Your Unique Self, which begins to reveal itself at the level of personality, comes to full flower only after freeing itself from the grasping of ego through genuine and repeated experiences of ego

clarification and trance- ending. Unique Self appears gradually and in direct proportion to the level of egoic clarification and trance-ending. Unique Self also shows up fleetingly in peak experiences in conjunction with parallel appearances of True Self. An example of this might be a moment of “flow” or an Eros experience, sometimes called “being in the zone,” when ego temporarily drops, and a felt or even lived experience of Unique Self becomes temporarily available to the person.

In classical enlightenment, we move from an experience of ourselves as a-part, to a felt experience of ourselves as an indivisible expression of the larger oneness, where the sense of the part dissolves and the wholeness even shift of emphasis, we evolve to an even deeper depth of realization. At this station, we begin to experience ourselves as the part again, but from the place of vast awareness, we realize that the part is not separate. We realize that we are not a separate but rather a unique part of a larger whole. And you realize that whole living in you, in part. Your awakening or enlightenment has a perspective that is held only by you.

True Self + Perspective = Unique Self

This stage is hinted at in the Tenth Ox herding picture in Buddhism, one of ten snapshots of enlightenment. In the tenth picture, the man walks back to the marketplace—and I would add “in order to offer his Unique Gifts and to perform the unique bodhisattva obligations that can and must be fulfilled by him alone.”

Evolutionary Unique Self

It is not enough, however, to awaken only to your Unique Expression of True Self. As we will unfold in more depth in Chapter 8, there is a second critical dimension of awakening that is essential to Unique Self-realization. I received a direct transmission of this second dimension of Unique Self enlightenment from my lineage teachers who are best described as evolutionary mystics.

Isaac Luria, the teacher of my teachers, the great evolutionary mystic of the Renaissance period, taught that every action that a person takes must be with the explicit consciousness and intention of “tikkun”. “Tikkun” is best translated as the evolutionary healing and transformation of all of reality. Every action must be invested with evolutionary intention. In Luria’s language it must be “leshem yichud”, meaning for the sake of the evolutionary integration and transformation of all of reality.

Said simply in the language of the evolutionary mystics themselves, to awaken to your Unique self is to “shift your perspective.” The way the evolutionary mystics say it is simply to shift your perspective from “your side” to “God’s side.” To the evolutionary mystics, to awaken means not necessarily to have a profound mystical state experience in which you feel all of being living in you; rather, to awaken is to dramatically, yet simply, shift your alignment. To no longer align with your will, but with God’s will.

We do not mean God here in the old mythic sense of the ethnocentric God who created the world in six days and is anti-science, vengeful, and anti-humanity. By God, Luria refers to the evolutionary process of unfolding which drives and animates the kosmos on every level of existence. God’s will is the will of the kosmos. God is what Aurobindo refers to in his great work *The Future Evolution of Man* as the evolutionary imperative or what has been more recently renamed as *The Evolutionary Impulse*¹. It is the creative force of the kosmos, which is, intends, and moves All-That-Is toward healing and transformation. It is the evolutionary impulse that lives in you, as you, and through you.

To awaken to your Unique Self means to awaken to the impulse to evolve, which is the divine creativity surging in you at this very moment, reaching toward the good, the true, and the beautiful.

To awaken to your Unique Self is to realize—as the evolutionary mystics taught us—that you live in an evolutionary context. To awaken to your Unique Self is to realize that your True Self is not static. When we thought that the divine field was an eternal absolute, then naturally we felt that the realization of True Self was the awakening to your unqualified eternal, absolute, and unchanging consciousness. The evolutionary mystics, however, from Luria to Schelling to Kook to Aurobindo, awakened to the evolving nature of spirit. As we moved into modernity and Darwinian science, the contemporary evolutionary mystics realized that their initial insight into the evolution of spirit applied not only to spirit, but also to the evolution of the biosphere, of the physical world. As my teacher Abraham Kook writes, “all of reality”—matter, body, mind, soul, and spirit—“is always evolving.” To be a mystic is to know something of the interior face of the kosmos. The novice knows today what only the most advanced souls knew five hundred years ago, that evolution is the inner mechanism of mystery.

For example, Renaissance mystic Isaac Luria and his school of Kabbalists had a deep knowing of the inner evolutionary process of spirit. They knew through deep mystical contemplation that the awakened human being was actively and consciously engaging in the evolution of all of reality. In their more audacious nondual formulations, these evolutionary mystics, writing in the 16th century, realized that man is responsible for the evolution of God.

They understood and clearly articulated that the specific privilege and wild responsibility of the human being is to awaken to conscious evolution. And, these very evolutionary mystics are the original inspiration for the core teaching of Unique Self. This is substantively different than what my colleague, Andrew Cohen, calls Authentic Self. For Authentic Self in his teaching is an “awakened impersonal function.” By contrast, Unique Self is the personal after the impersonal and is characterized by irreducible uniqueness.

In this broader evolutionary mystical context, it is possible to say simply that in the awakened Unique Self, evolution becomes conscious of itself. It is the awakened Unique Self feeling the imperative of evolution consciously alive in herself that is therefore called to give her Unique Gifts for the sake of the evolution of all of reality. So, the Unique Self in full realization might be more accurately termed the evolutionary Unique Self. The awakened Unique Self who has evolved beyond exclusive identification with ego is constantly being called by the evolutionary impulse. Indeed, it is in consciously aligning his Unique Self will with the evolutionary will of the kosmos that the human being is pulled beyond ego to True Self, and then to the personal face of True Self—Unique Self. One does not escape ego by awakening to the evolutionary Unique Self. Ego is always present. However, by identifying with the infinitely larger context of the evolutionary Unique Self, the limited identification with ego is gloriously trance-ended.

Station 6: Unique Shadow

In the post-enlightenment experience, there are still layers to be shed. Even when we are most expansive, most identified with All-That-Is, small pockets of identity are kept out of our awareness, although they are experienced quite directly by everyone around us. You simply can't see them directly, even though recognizing them would free up your energy and directly facilitate a more powerful and beautiful expression of your Uniqueness. This is what is called, both in some of the great traditions and in modern psychology, your shadow.

Learning to recognize and do shadow work is one of the challenges of the full journey of Unique Self. Although shadow work begins at the level of separate self, the full completion of your shadow work is directly connected to your realization of Unique Self. The common understanding of shadow is the negative material about yourself that you are unable to own in your first person. This negative

material—your jealousy, pettiness, fear, rage, brutality—is understood to be generic. The same core material is said to show up and be repressed into shadow, to a greater and larger degree, by everyone. This is a true but highly partial understanding of shadow.

In Unique Self teaching, we evolve the shadow work conversation and realize that shadow is not generic—shadow is intensely personal. This is a critical evolutionary unfolding of our understanding of shadow.

Your personal shadow is your Unique Shadow. Your Unique Shadow is your dis-owned Unique Self, the unavoidable result of a life yet un-lived. Shadow is not merely your repressed negative material. Shadow is your dis-owned, denied, or distorted Unique Self. Your Unique Self and your Unique Shadow are a double helix of light and dark coiled into the patterns of becoming.

Remember William Blake’s teaching on wisdom and folly: “If the fool would follow his folly, he would become wise. In precisely the same way, you can follow the path of your Unique Shadow back to your Unique Self.

You can almost learn more about yourself through your darkness than you can through your light.

Station 7: Your Unique Gift

The obligation that wells up from your evolutionary realization of Unique Self is your responsibility to give the gifts that are yours alone to give, gifts that are desired and needed by the rest of creation. Every human being has a particular set of gifts to offer in the world. Your Unique Perspective gives birth to what I call your Unique Gift.

The ability to offer this gift freely and fully depends on your ability to free yourself of limiting and false notions of who you are, and to instead identify with your larger service. And beautifully, when this happens you are also able to allow others to be fully who they are as Unique Beings: complete, whole, and specific. This is one of the litmus tests of whether you are in Unique Self or in ego, whether you are able to joyously recognize and affirm the Unique Self of others without feeling that they are taking something that is yours.

Your Unique Gift is the particular contribution that you can make to the evolution of consciousness, which can be made by no one else who ever was, is, or will be. Both the overwhelming desire and ability to give your Unique Gift is a direct and spontaneous expression of your Unique Self-realization. Your Unique Gift, whether public or private, is your divine evolutionary gift to All-That-Is. It is the very face of God, the unique face of evolution alive and awake, in you, as you, and through you. Some of our gifts are modest, private, and intimate; some are larger than life and have dramatic impact in the public sphere. Some of our gifts are actively given; others emerge from the very uniqueness of our being and presence.

This last point is subtle but essential. Unique Self contains in it something of the old idea of “answering the call” that is essential in Kabbalah and Protestant theology. But it is much more than that. Your Unique Self expresses itself in your Unique Being as well as in your Unique Becoming. Unique Self might have a public face, but it can also be utterly private. A hermit may live Unique Self no less than the president of the United States.

Station 8: Unique Vow, Unique Obligation

In the Buddhist tradition, the bodhisattva is one who seeks Buddhahood through practicing noble action. The bodhisattva vows to postpone his or her complete awakening and fulfillment until all other beings are awakened and fulfilled. In Kabbalah this same archetype is called the Tzadik. The determining factor in their actions is compassion, deployed by utilizing the highest insight and wisdom. The realization of Unique Self may be regarded as bodhisattva activity, the unique manifestation of wisdom and guidance. The Unique Self bodhisattva vow is an expression of evolutionary joy and responsibility, even as it is a commitment to the fulfillment of your evolutionary obligation.

Many of us recoil when we hear the word “obligation.” We identify obligation with arbitrarily imposed limitations set by the church or state that suffocate the naturally free human being. Let’s inquire for a moment what obligation might mean at a higher level of consciousness, rather than the obligation imposed by an authority external to you. This inquiry yields the deeper truth that obligation is the ultimate liberation. Obligation frees you from ambivalence and allows you to commit 1,000 percent to the inherent invitation that is the Unique Obligation present in every unique situation.

Obligation at this level of consciousness is created by the direct and clear recognition of authentic need that can be uniquely addressed by you and you alone. For example, let’s say you are stuck on a lush tropical island with another person. There is abundant food. The problem is, due to a physical ailment, this person is unable to feed herself. Are you obligated to feed her? Most people would agree that in this situation, you have an absolute obligation to feed her. Why is this so? It is based on what I call the fivefold principle of authentic obligation.

First, there is a need.

Second, it is a genuine and not a contrived need. Third, you clearly recognize the need. Fourth, you are capable of fulfilling the need.

Fifth, you realize that you are uniquely capable; the need can be uniquely addressed by you and you alone. The combination of these five factors creates your Unique Obligation to give the Unique Gift that can be given only by you in this moment. Generally, we cringe at the word obligation. We commonly understand obligation to be the opposite of love. In the original Hebrew, however, love and obligation are the same word. Authentic obligation is a natural by-product of authentic love.

Every true obligation is sourced in love. Unique love creates a Unique Obligation to give your Unique Gift. While most of our gifts address more subtle hungers than food, there is no person who does not possess Unique Gifts that respond to unique needs. From a nondual perspective, it is your Unique Gift that creates your Unique Obligation. To live your Unique Self and offer your Unique Gift is to align yourself with the evolutionary impulse and fulfill your evolutionary obligation. The realization of your Unique Self awakens you to the truth that there is a Unique Gift that your singular being and becoming offers the world, which is desperately needed by All-That-Is, and can be given by you and you alone. There is no more powerful and joyous realization available to a human being. It is the matrix of meaning that fills your life and is the core of your Unique Self enlightenment.