

# An Integral View of Unique Self

## Overview

Unique Self is a liberating realization that promises to integrate the so-called “trans-egoic,” no-self teachings of Eastern traditions with the individuality emphasized in the West and the uniqueness which is inherent to all human beings. We would offer Unique Self as a living koan; an inquiry meant to provoke curiosity, exploration and presence, rather than an attempt to reify or fix our self- understanding.

We understand that Unique Self can and will be interpreted differently according to personal inclination and constitution, cultural orientation, and differences in stages of development. For example, a Benedictine monk whose realization validates an eternal transcendent soul may understand Unique Self as an expression of that unique soul. A Zen Buddhist, whose realization does not posit a reified transcendent, may experience Unique Self as the freedom to manifest exactly as we are: complete, whole, empty, and unique. In another example, a secular materialist might understand Unique Self as an expression of one’s unique perspective and abilities to succeed and develop.

In each case, we would hope that the Integral practitioner will see that classic enlightenment, in the formulation of the great traditions as a realized state of unity with the oneness of all ever-present reality, is a recognition of what might be called “True Self.” This realization finds that the total number of true selves only and always is one. At the same time, every person’s awakening to this oneness arises through their own unique perspective. In this way, True Self plus my own perspective = My Unique Self.

In developmental psychology terms, the fullest flowering of Unique Self might best be articulated as a living glimpse into the “Indigo” stage of human consciousness and self-identity: this is the stage of evolution of human consciousness at which my felt ever-present unity of reality—a state of ongoing “flow presence,” if you will—and the unique characteristics of my own life and perspective—the unique evolutionary features of my life— clearly intersect and find a cohesive and stabilized integration.

## Our Intent

Our efforts at ISE are meant to provide a vibrant, open, and enlivened look into the emerging potential of the possibility for humanity at this stage in our evolution. In the first person perspective, Unique Self is a practice of recognizing the profundity of your own life, the preciousness of your specific perspective, history, and talents, and the opportunity to become fully who you already are—I am uniquely this. In the second person perspective Unique Self is an opportunity to see and support the uniqueness of others’ gifts and to foster a durable community that supports the evolutionary possibilities of humankind—I see who you uniquely are. And in the third-person perspective Unique Self can be understood as an evolutionary emergent—a

subtle, gentle, yet powerful and compelling whisper from the emerging future of humankind—this is who we can become.

## **The Foundation of Unique Self**

Integral Spirituality provides a foundational program upon which to reconstruct spiritual insights and human meaning-making in a modern world that has transcended merely literal interpretations of religious mythology and seeks to transcend the nihilistic and narcissistic assertions of atheistic scientism and postmodern relativism. Unique Self rests squarely on the “post-metaphysical” core of Integral Spirituality.

### Tenet 1: Perspective is foundational

Integral philosophy maintains that the deep structure of reality is composed of perspectives. Whether we take this commitment as “strong” (ontologically real) or “weak” (usefully descriptive), we can still easily understand that all sentient creatures have a perspective.

### Tenet 2: Uniqueness is obvious

All human beings and perhaps all sentient beings will have a unique perspective. This perspective will be unique on the one hand due to different location—all perspectives have a unique angle of perception— but also due to the different psychology, biology, culture, and history of each creature and its context.

### Tenet 3: Perspectives evolve

Going further, we see that all sentient creatures have their being arise in 4 quadrants—those of subjective experience, biological, cultural, and social dimensions—and that each of these quadrants is holonic in nature. Therefore each aspect of reality evolves over time and thus perspectives will also evolve over time.

### Tenet 4: Metaphysics is unnecessary

There is no necessary metaphysical aspect to perspectives. While a metaphysical perspective is not necessary to an engagement with Unique Self, there is nothing about perspective that precludes ontological revelations. Perspectives thus create a common ground up and down the spiral. In the post-metaphysical view they arise, for example, in human beings and evolve over time, inexorably influenced and co-created by the evolution of all four quadrants. We need not make any necessary reference to any transcendental concepts or extra-evolutionary features to describe Unique Self. At the same time, Unique Self does not exclude communities who hold a set of realizations that they signify as pertaining to the transcendent (e.g., God). Thus every perspective grounded in direct experience supported by a valid community of interpreters has an honored, if partial place, at the Integral table.

## Tenet 5: Ego need not be transcended or obliterated

Ego is a term that is used in many ways. We will use “ego” in this context to mean the general patterns of self-understanding and self-identity that developmental psychologists have tested and articulated using Integral’s Zone-2 research methodologies (the outside view of an individual-interior reality). Of course, viewed from within our own subjectivity (i.e., Zone 1), these same patterns “look and feel” as purely phenomenological realities. Because this usage of ego is around an enduring line of self-development that extends up and down the first-person holonic spectrum, it is inaccurate to think of ego as being transcended, per se. Rather, ego expressions become more inclusive, subtle, refined and expansive with each successive stage of development and envelopment.

## Tenet 6: We are never outside of a state, and always within a stage

All “structure-stages” of consciousness get enacted only within the ontology of present-moment states. We are never outside of the now. So states describe a “substrate of awareness” in which the real arises (and gets interpreted), and stages of consciousness can be understood as the large-scale characterizable patterns of these moment-to-moment interpretations. So we can discuss a state of deep presence, flow states, or non-dual identity. But as any uniqueness of self comes into the picture, there will always be a stage particularity to the interpretive act. It makes no sense to talk about Unique Self as a state outside of a particular developmental stage. Unique Self is always interpreted through the prism of stage development.

## Tenet 7: Unique Self is an “Indigo” stage of consciousness

After considering all other tenets above, it is clear that Unique Self therefore can best be described as the stage at which general patterns of ego development evidence an integration between stabilized “no-self” insight (e.g., cosmic identification) and one’s own felt-sense of uniqueness in their life, talents and history (i.e., their 4 quadrant evolution). This stage has been empirically mapped and articulated using Zone-2 methodologies as the “Indigo” self.

We might describe the subtle and refined ego of the Unique Self understanding as one which has let go of the exclusive identification of the subject with its separate self. The transcending of the egoic separate self through repeated access to “presence-flow” states is the goal of classical enlightenment teaching. This, however, does not mean that the ego is annihilated. Rather the exclusive identification with the egoic separate self is overcome. We are able to experience our fundamental identity—not as an ego isolated from other, nature, community, and all that is—rather as part of a larger whole. Note the similarities of this description with how researchers have characterized the Indigo stage of ego development:

“[They] experience themselves and others as part of ongoing humanity, embedded in the creative ground, fulfilling ‘the destiny of evolution’ and are in tune with their lives

and their shared humanity ‘as a simultaneous expression of their unique selves.’” (Cook- Greuter 2002)

That is, these individuals are capable of integrating the unity of reality realized only in deep presence-states (the “creative ground”) and their own uniqueness as a living expression of a dynamic evolutionary process that continually will call on them for their special contribution (“the destiny of evolution”).

We allow for the possibility that glimmerings of this stage of consciousness, where Unique Self has emerged as this integration, can appear up and down the spiral of human development.

This note on Unique Self was co-authored by Ken Wilber, Robb Smith, Dr. Marc Gafni and Diane Musho Hamilton. It emerged from years of Integral Dialogue and out of the joyful, spirited and creative process of preparing ISE.