

# 26 Distinctions Between Ego and Unique Self

An excerpt from the book

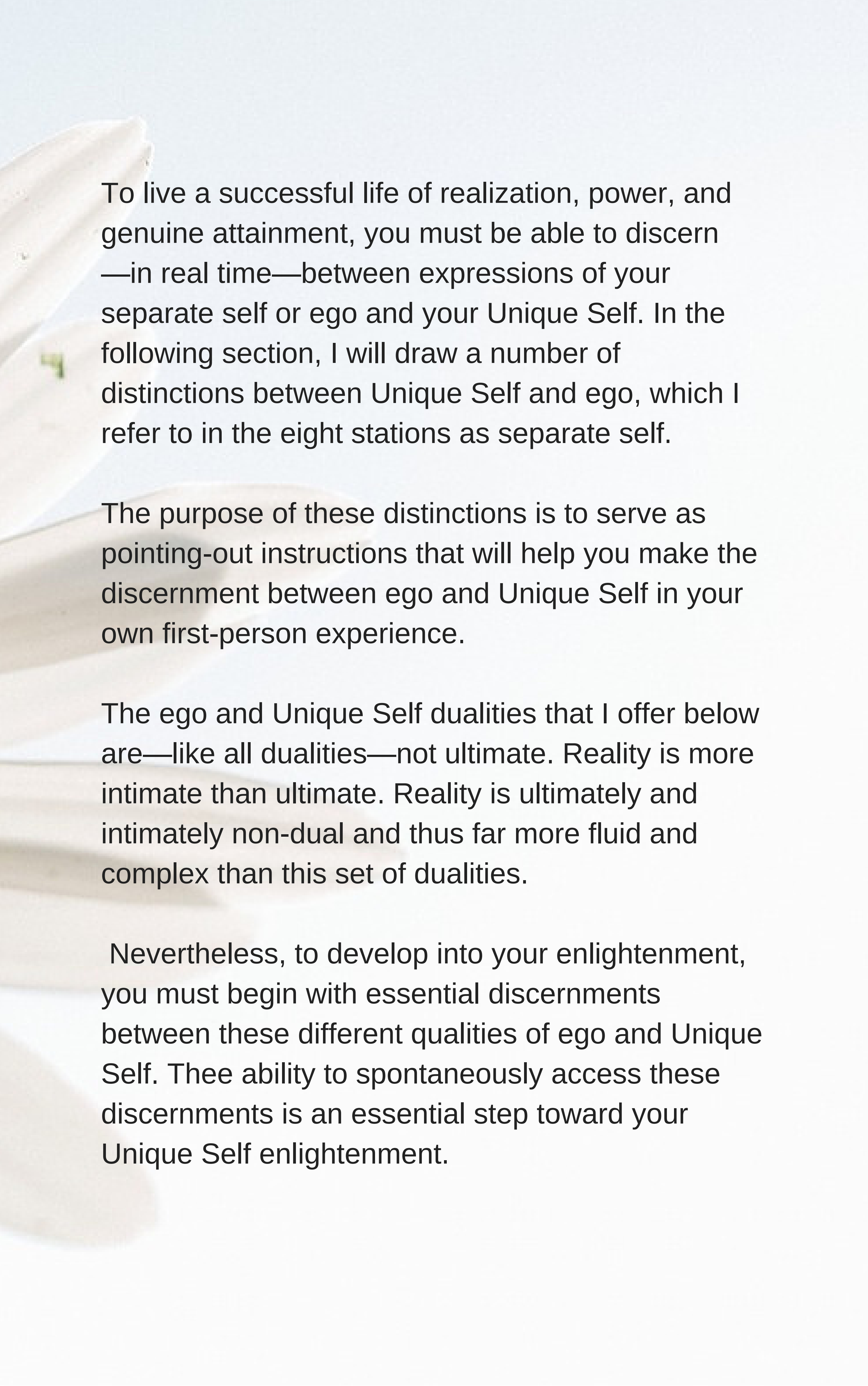
*Self in Integral Evolutionary Mysticism:  
Two Models and Why They Matter*

By Marc Gafni

# 26 Distinctions Between Ego & Unique Self

At the level of ego, you must let go of the illusion of specialness. At the level of Unique Self, you must embrace the infinite gorgeousness of your specialness and the obligation that it creates for you to give your deepest Unique Gifts in the world. Unique Self, which is your Unique Perspective, creates your Unique Gifts, which in turn creates your Unique Obligation to offer your gift.

This entire linked set of unfolding realizations is predicated on the discernment between Unique Self and ego. This discernment is essential to prevent ego from hijacking Unique Self. So what we need to do at this point is deepen our grasp of that discernment, which is all-important for the realization of your Unique Self enlightenment.

A hand holding a white flower against a light blue background. The hand is positioned on the left side of the frame, with the fingers gently gripping the stem of the flower. The flower is white with a yellow center and is angled towards the top left. The background is a solid, light blue color.

To live a successful life of realization, power, and genuine attainment, you must be able to discern—in real time—between expressions of your separate self or ego and your Unique Self. In the following section, I will draw a number of distinctions between Unique Self and ego, which I refer to in the eight stations as separate self.

The purpose of these distinctions is to serve as pointing-out instructions that will help you make the discernment between ego and Unique Self in your own first-person experience.

The ego and Unique Self dualities that I offer below are—like all dualities—not ultimate. Reality is more intimate than ultimate. Reality is ultimately and intimately non-dual and thus far more fluid and complex than this set of dualities.

Nevertheless, to develop into your enlightenment, you must begin with essential discernments between these different qualities of ego and Unique Self. Thee ability to spontaneously access these discernments is an essential step toward your Unique Self enlightenment.



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# Separate or Part of the Whole

The most elemental distinction between Unique Self and ego is that ego is a state of separateness. Ego is apart and not part of the larger whole. Unique Self emerges from a larger wholeness. It is unique but not separate, a distinct expression of the one. For this reason Unique does not come fully online until and unless one has had at least a glimmer or taste of either the—classical, first person True Self enlightenment—or, of being called to service while being held in the embrace of the second-person God.

In Buddhist terms, one might say that Unique Self comes online after a taste of emptiness or sunyata. In Christian terms, one might say that Unique Self comes online after meeting Christ. In the dialectical paradox of first-person and second-person realizations, you show up as Christ after you have met Christ. In Jewish terms, you realize Unique Self after the encounter.

The encounter begins with the first tasting of the commanding presence of the ethical god who both holds you and lives in you as your soul. Or from a mystical perspective, from the presence that also lives in and as your Self.

It is important to emphasize that you do not need a full realization of True Self or the encounter to begin to realize Unique Self.

And it is naturally the case that the deeper and more stable your realization of True Self or the encounter, the deeper and steadier is your realization of Unique Self.

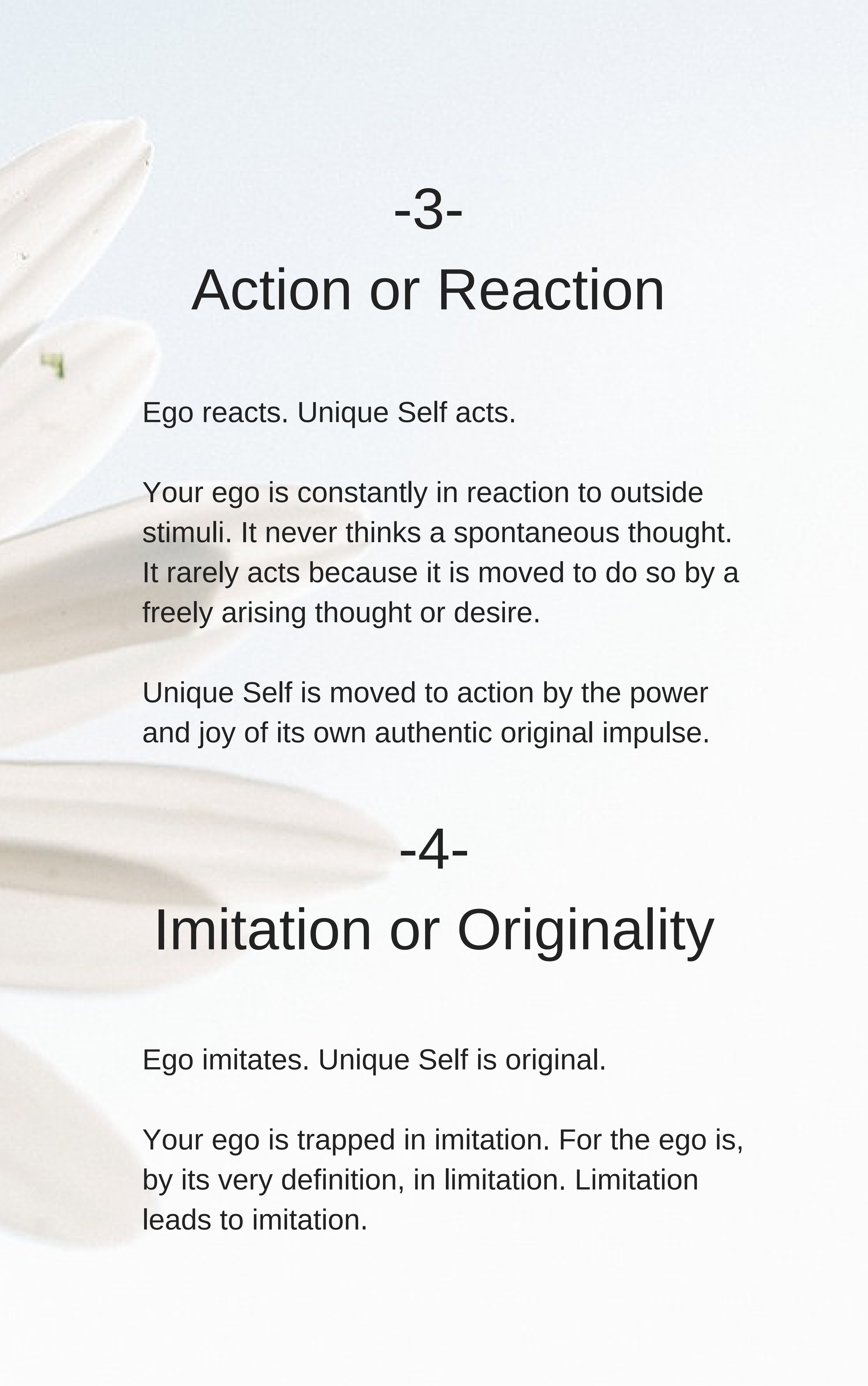
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## Special or Not Special

Your ego thinks that you are special because you are better or worse than other people.

Your Unique Self knows you are special because you are yourself. For the ego, “special” means “better than.”

For your Unique Self, “special” or “different” means distinct and free from any comparison or point of reference. Your specialness is your spontaneous experience of your essence.



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## Action or Reaction

Ego reacts. Unique Self acts.

Your ego is constantly in reaction to outside stimuli. It never thinks a spontaneous thought. It rarely acts because it is moved to do so by a freely arising thought or desire.

Unique Self is moved to action by the power and joy of its own authentic original impulse.

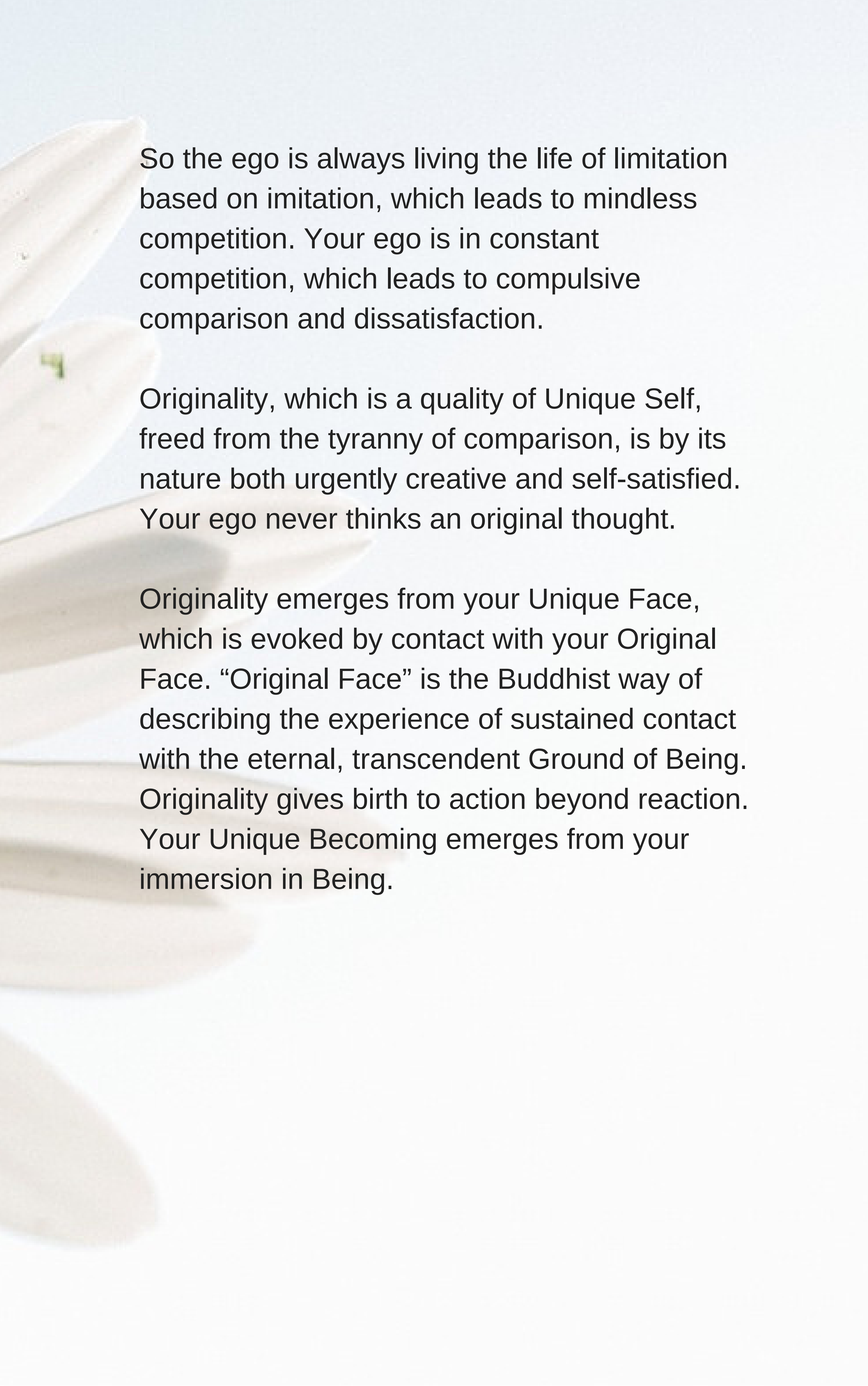
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## Imitation or Originality

Ego imitates. Unique Self is original.

Your ego is trapped in imitation. For the ego is, by its very definition, in limitation. Limitation leads to imitation.





So the ego is always living the life of limitation based on imitation, which leads to mindless competition. Your ego is in constant competition, which leads to compulsive comparison and dissatisfaction.

Originality, which is a quality of Unique Self, freed from the tyranny of comparison, is by its nature both urgently creative and self-satisfied. Your ego never thinks an original thought.

Originality emerges from your Unique Face, which is evoked by contact with your Original Face. “Original Face” is the Buddhist way of describing the experience of sustained contact with the eternal, transcendent Ground of Being. Originality gives birth to action beyond reaction. Your Unique Becoming emerges from your immersion in Being.

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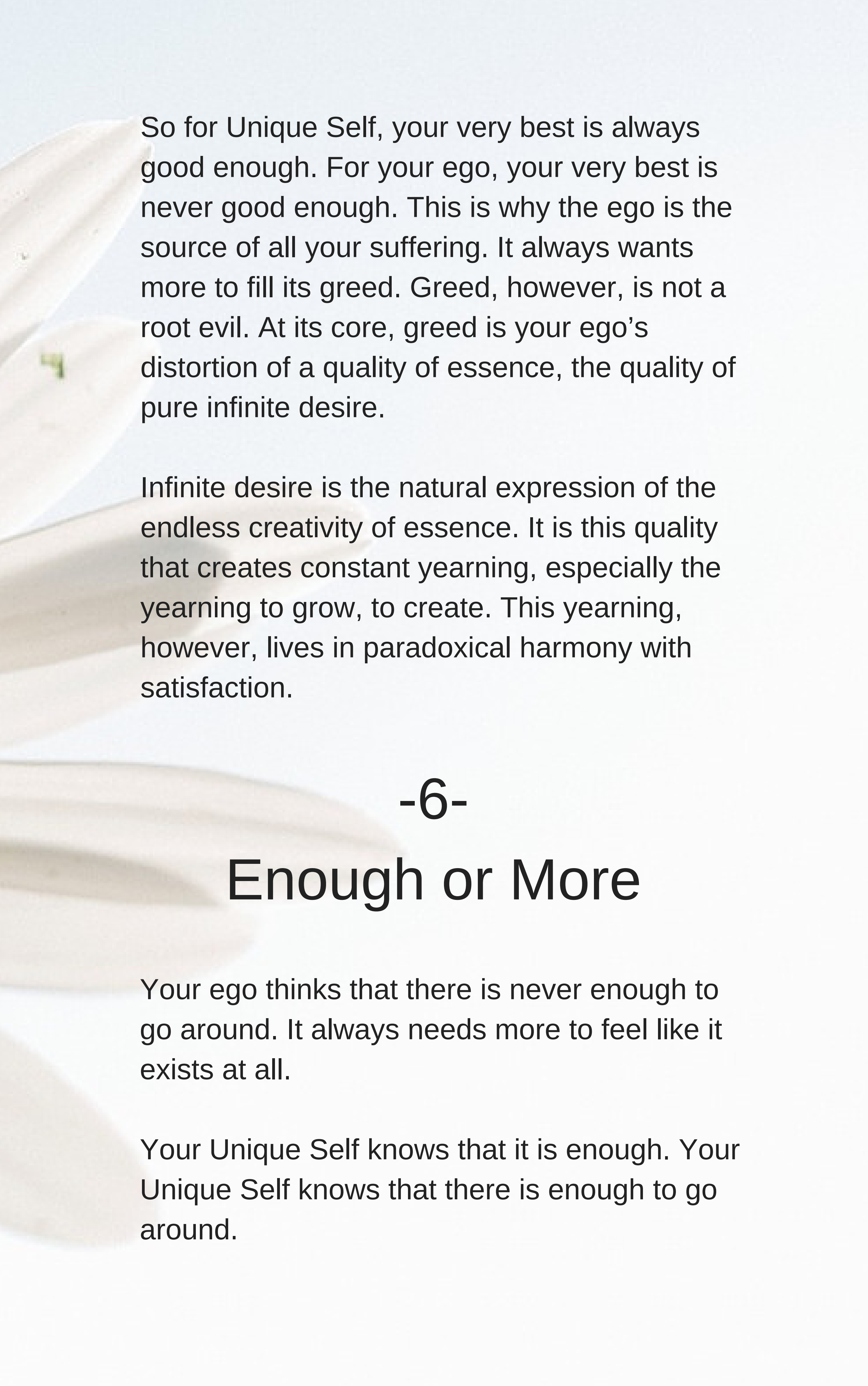
## Satisfaction or Greed

Your separate self is driven by greed. Greed is not the want of anything specific. Rather, it is insatiable want that creates perpetual anxiety. Insatiable want is a structure of the egoic mind, which seeks more and more identity enhancers to confirm its existence. Satisfaction and ego are opposites.

Give the ego everything, and it will not be satisfied. Give the Unique Self anything, and it will be grateful and satisfied. Satisfied, not resigned. Satisfaction emerges from the fullness of whatever the moment brings. Satisfaction comes from contact with Being and from doing your radical, intense best in the world of Becoming without attachment to outcome.

Being is all one, so any moment of Authentic Being gives infinite satisfaction. Becoming is an expression of the evolutionary impulse and not merely of the egoic drive to achieve.





So for Unique Self, your very best is always good enough. For your ego, your very best is never good enough. This is why the ego is the source of all your suffering. It always wants more to fill its greed. Greed, however, is not a root evil. At its core, greed is your ego's distortion of a quality of essence, the quality of pure infinite desire.

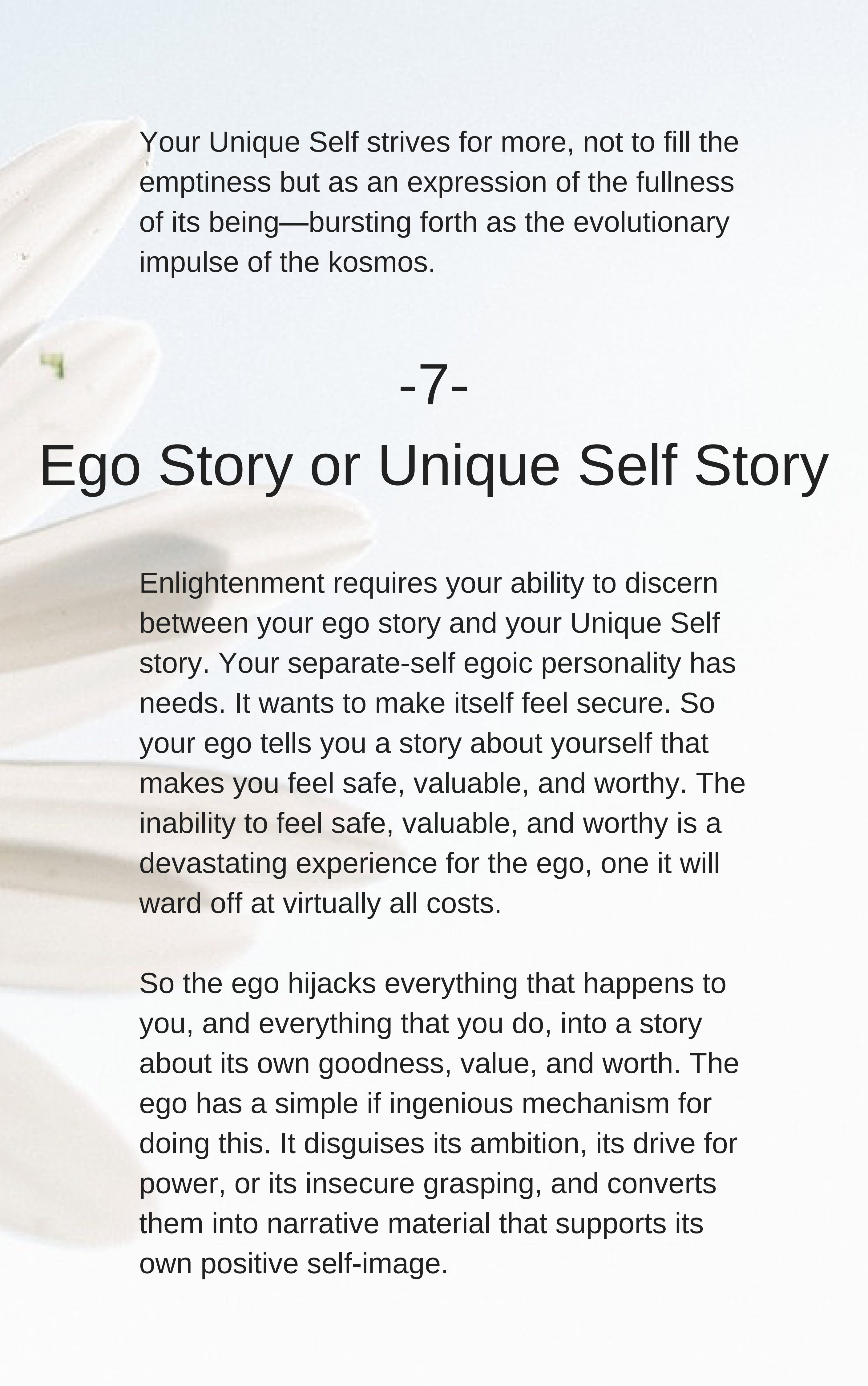
Infinite desire is the natural expression of the endless creativity of essence. It is this quality that creates constant yearning, especially the yearning to grow, to create. This yearning, however, lives in paradoxical harmony with satisfaction.

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## Enough or More

Your ego thinks that there is never enough to go around. It always needs more to feel like it exists at all.

Your Unique Self knows that it is enough. Your Unique Self knows that there is enough to go around.



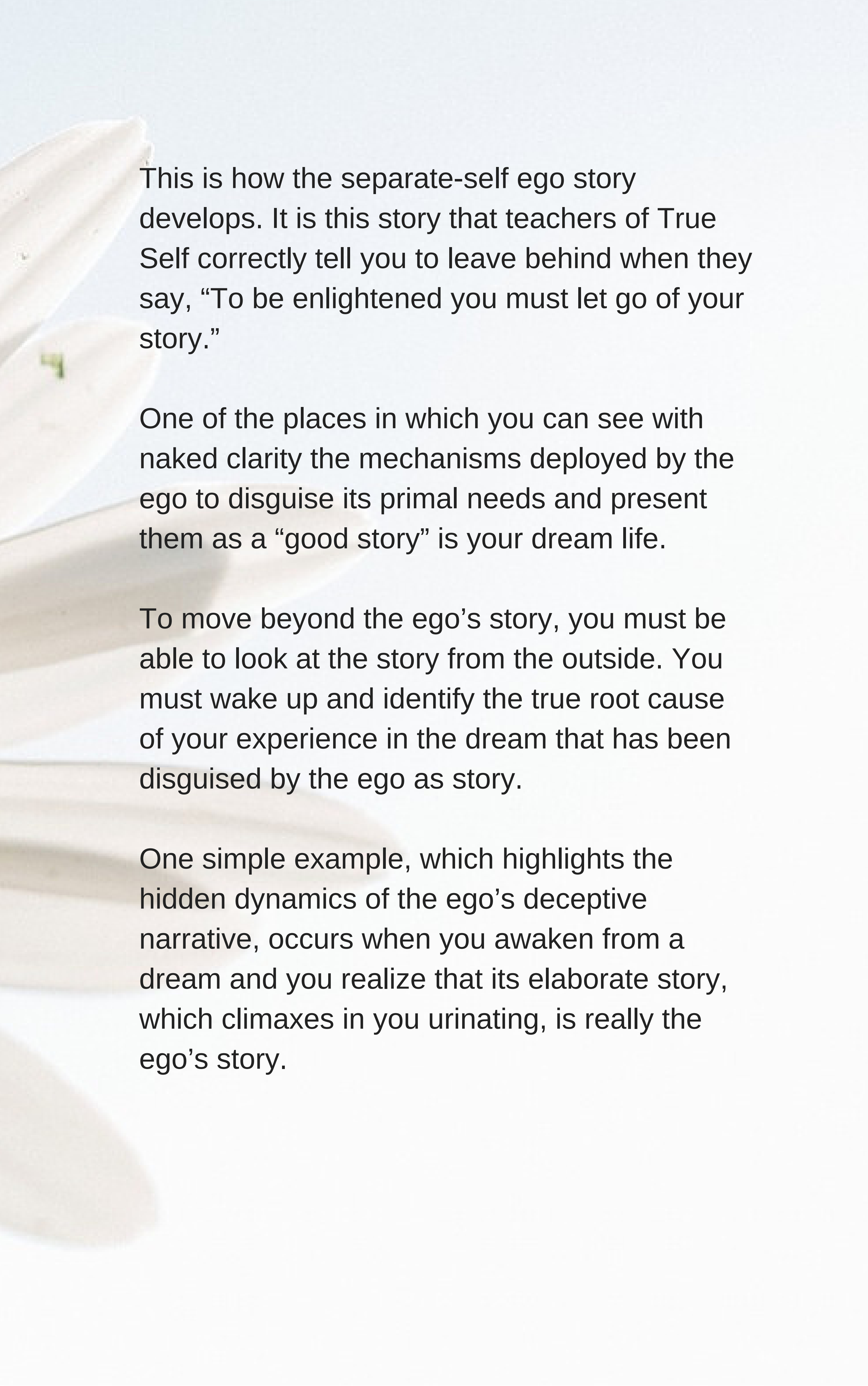
Your Unique Self strives for more, not to fill the emptiness but as an expression of the fullness of its being—bursting forth as the evolutionary impulse of the kosmos.

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## Ego Story or Unique Self Story

Enlightenment requires your ability to discern between your ego story and your Unique Self story. Your separate-self egoic personality has needs. It wants to make itself feel secure. So your ego tells you a story about yourself that makes you feel safe, valuable, and worthy. The inability to feel safe, valuable, and worthy is a devastating experience for the ego, one it will ward off at virtually all costs.

So the ego hijacks everything that happens to you, and everything that you do, into a story about its own goodness, value, and worth. The ego has a simple if ingenious mechanism for doing this. It disguises its ambition, its drive for power, or its insecure grasping, and converts them into narrative material that supports its own positive self-image.



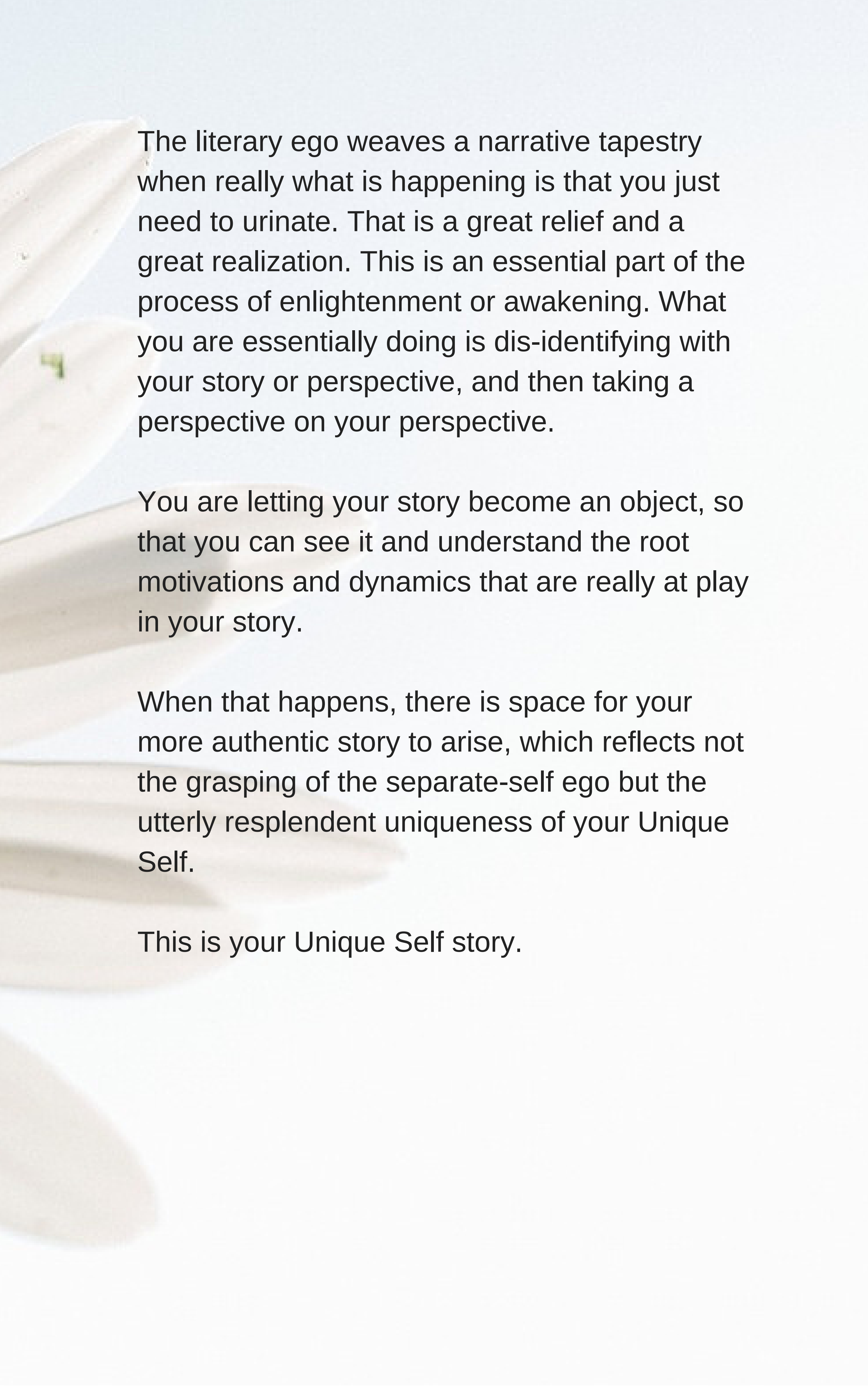
This is how the separate-self ego story develops. It is this story that teachers of True Self correctly tell you to leave behind when they say, “To be enlightened you must let go of your story.”

One of the places in which you can see with naked clarity the mechanisms deployed by the ego to disguise its primal needs and present them as a “good story” is your dream life.

To move beyond the ego’s story, you must be able to look at the story from the outside. You must wake up and identify the true root cause of your experience in the dream that has been disguised by the ego as story.

One simple example, which highlights the hidden dynamics of the ego’s deceptive narrative, occurs when you awaken from a dream and you realize that its elaborate story, which climaxes in you urinating, is really the ego’s story.



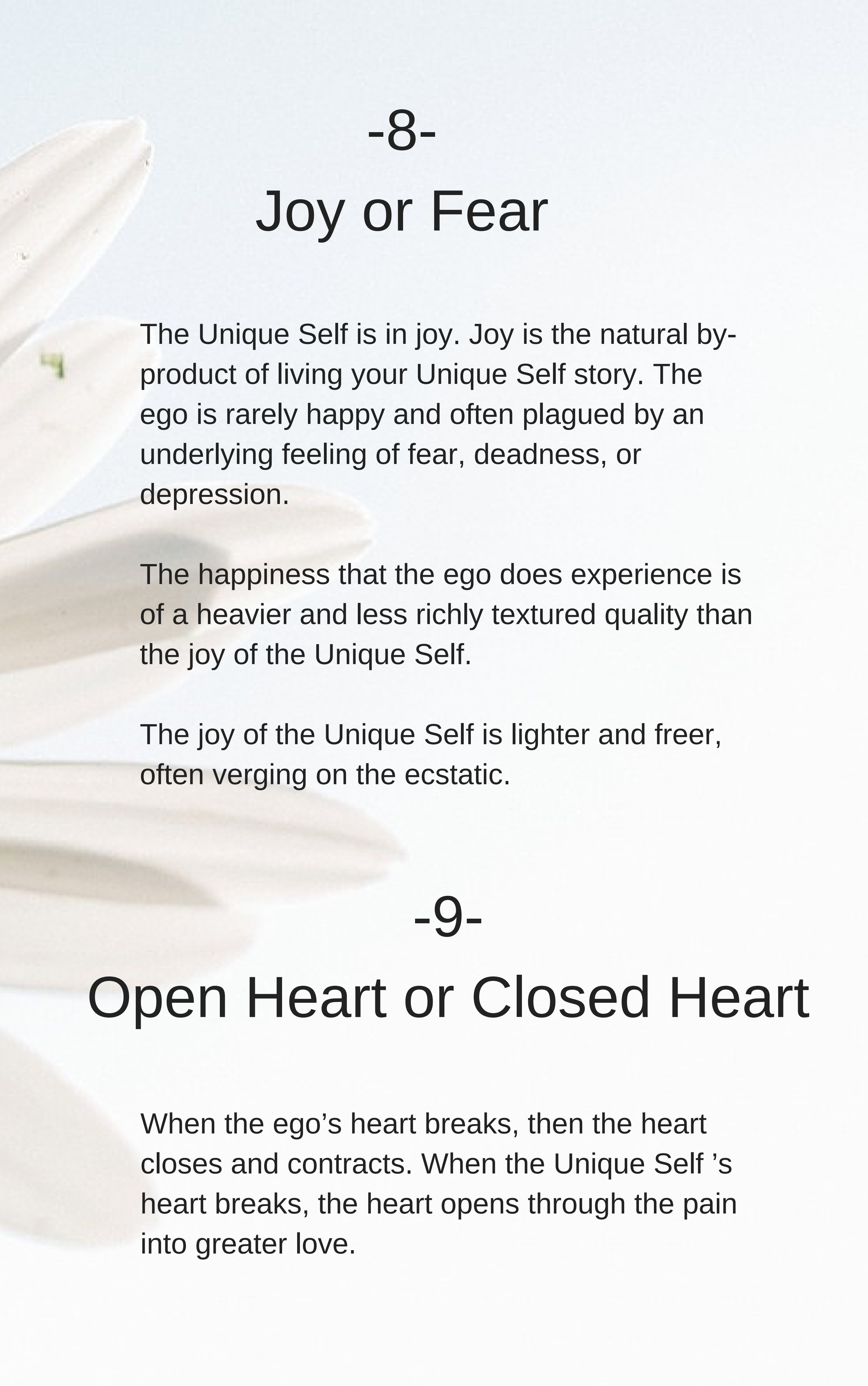


The literary ego weaves a narrative tapestry when really what is happening is that you just need to urinate. That is a great relief and a great realization. This is an essential part of the process of enlightenment or awakening. What you are essentially doing is dis-identifying with your story or perspective, and then taking a perspective on your perspective.

You are letting your story become an object, so that you can see it and understand the root motivations and dynamics that are really at play in your story.

When that happens, there is space for your more authentic story to arise, which reflects not the grasping of the separate-self ego but the utterly resplendent uniqueness of your Unique Self.

This is your Unique Self story.



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## Joy or Fear

The Unique Self is in joy. Joy is the natural by-product of living your Unique Self story. The ego is rarely happy and often plagued by an underlying feeling of fear, deadness, or depression.

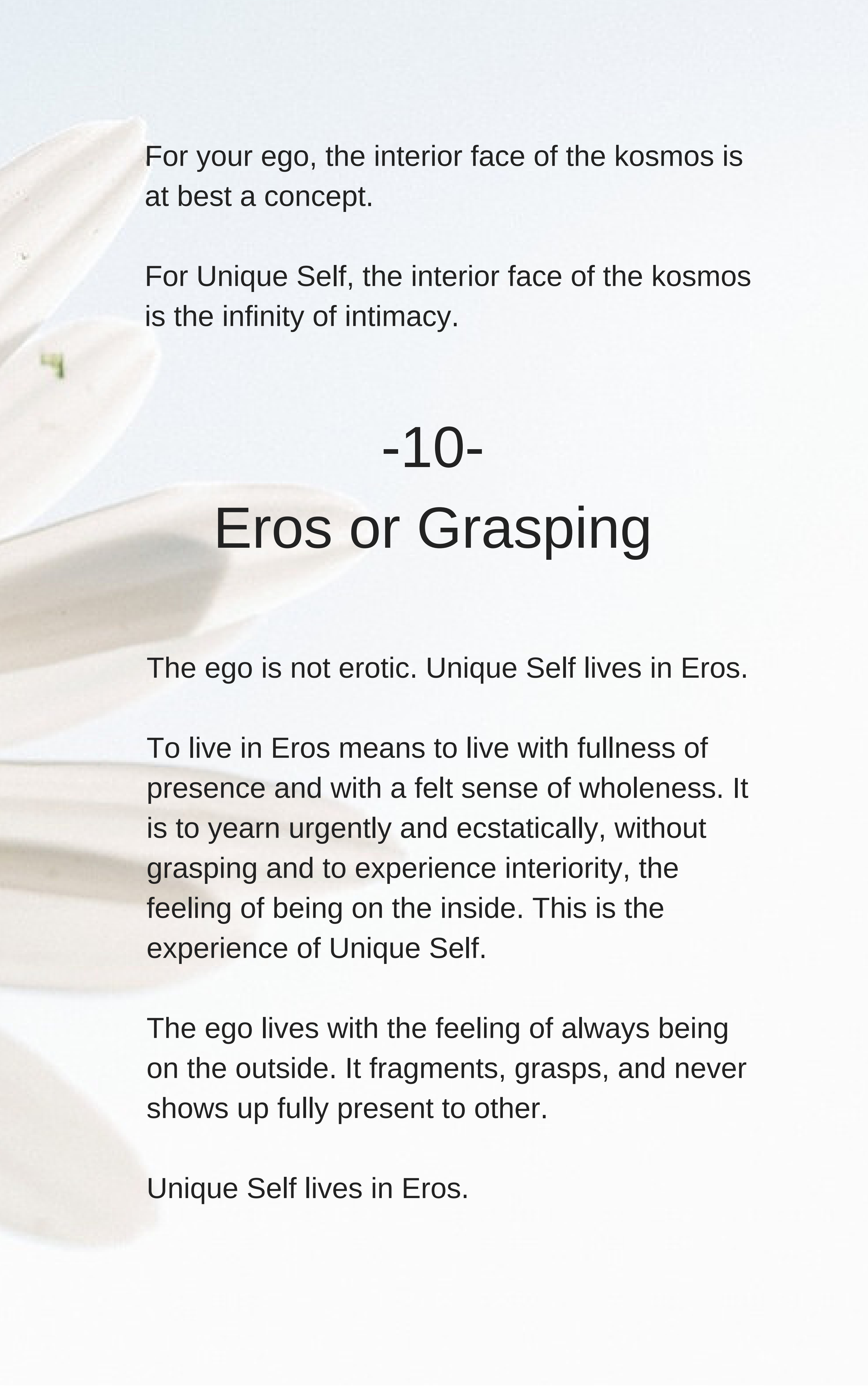
The happiness that the ego does experience is of a heavier and less richly textured quality than the joy of the Unique Self.

The joy of the Unique Self is lighter and freer, often verging on the ecstatic.

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## Open Heart or Closed Heart

When the ego's heart breaks, then the heart closes and contracts. When the Unique Self's heart breaks, the heart opens through the pain into greater love.



For your ego, the interior face of the kosmos is at best a concept.

For Unique Self, the interior face of the kosmos is the infinity of intimacy.

## -10- Eros or Grasping

The ego is not erotic. Unique Self lives in Eros.

To live in Eros means to live with fullness of presence and with a felt sense of wholeness. It is to yearn urgently and ecstatically, without grasping and to experience interiority, the feeling of being on the inside. This is the experience of Unique Self.

The ego lives with the feeling of always being on the outside. It fragments, grasps, and never shows up fully present to other.

Unique Self lives in Eros.





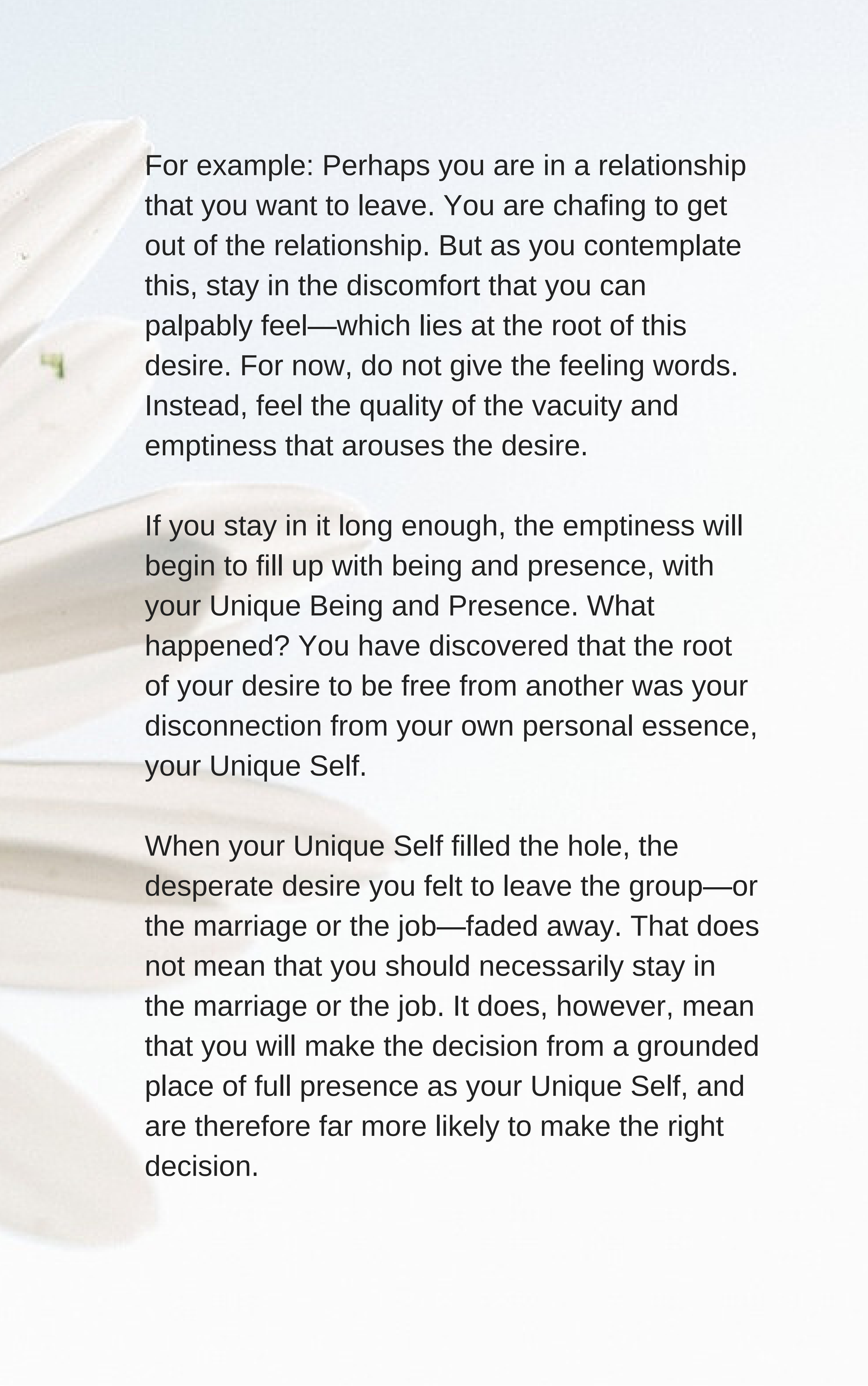
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# Authentic Freedom or Pseudo Freedom

Your ego is a slave that wants to be free.  
Freedom is the quality that we call autonomy.  
Your ego, however, understands and  
experiences freedom/autonomy as freedom  
from external influence. Only then does ego  
feel free to do what it wants.

Unique Self is free. Unique Self understands  
and experiences freedom as the freedom to live  
your Uniqueness and give your deepest gifts in  
the world.

When you feel yourself demanding your egoic  
freedom, stop for a moment and feel into it. Do  
not cover over the emptiness that lies at the  
root of your desire for freedom and autonomy.  
Feel into the emptiness. Feel into the hole.



For example: Perhaps you are in a relationship that you want to leave. You are chafing to get out of the relationship. But as you contemplate this, stay in the discomfort that you can palpably feel—which lies at the root of this desire. For now, do not give the feeling words. Instead, feel the quality of the vacuity and emptiness that arouses the desire.

If you stay in it long enough, the emptiness will begin to fill up with being and presence, with your Unique Being and Presence. What happened? You have discovered that the root of your desire to be free from another was your disconnection from your own personal essence, your Unique Self.

When your Unique Self filled the hole, the desperate desire you felt to leave the group—or the marriage or the job—faded away. That does not mean that you should necessarily stay in the marriage or the job. It does, however, mean that you will make the decision from a grounded place of full presence as your Unique Self, and are therefore far more likely to make the right decision.



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## King or Servant

Ego is the servant pretending to be a king. You are avoiding stepping into your Unique Self for fear of being a king.

Your ego thinks it is God, but does not really believe it, so your ego insanely tries to make itself the God it knows it is not.

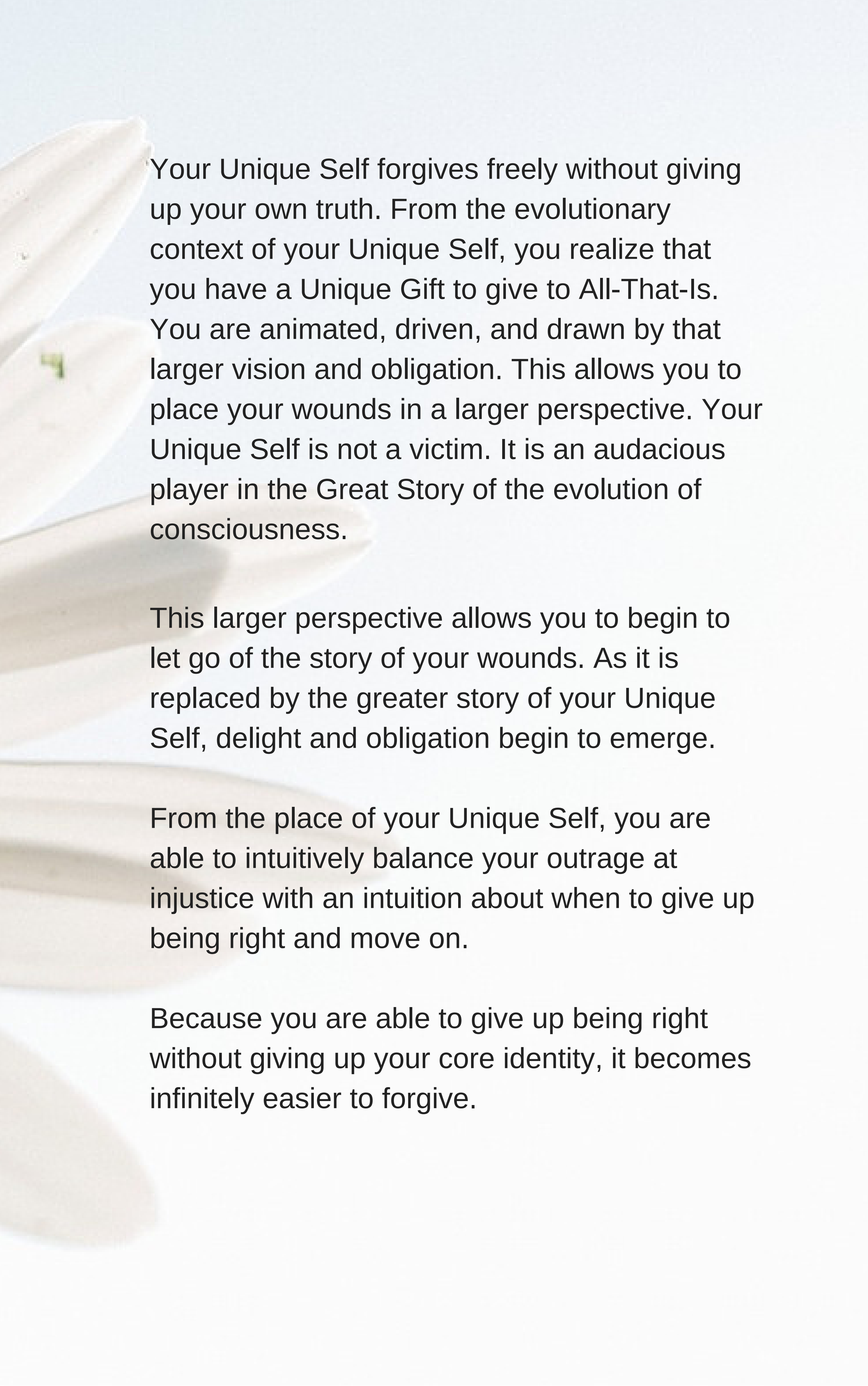
Your Unique Self knows it is God, so it acts in the world with majesty, audacity, and grace.

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## Victim or Player

In your ego, you cling to every petty detail of your story. You never let go of any of your wounds. Your mantra is “I hurt; therefore, I am.” Therefore, your ego can never wholeheartedly forgive. If it does, the ego’s forgiveness is a tactic, not a sacrament.





Your Unique Self forgives freely without giving up your own truth. From the evolutionary context of your Unique Self, you realize that you have a Unique Gift to give to All-That-Is. You are animated, driven, and drawn by that larger vision and obligation. This allows you to place your wounds in a larger perspective. Your Unique Self is not a victim. It is an audacious player in the Great Story of the evolution of consciousness.

This larger perspective allows you to begin to let go of the story of your wounds. As it is replaced by the greater story of your Unique Self, delight and obligation begin to emerge.

From the place of your Unique Self, you are able to intuitively balance your outrage at injustice with an intuition about when to give up being right and move on.

Because you are able to give up being right without giving up your core identity, it becomes infinitely easier to forgive.



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## Betrayal or Loyalty

The ego betrays. The Unique Self is loyal.

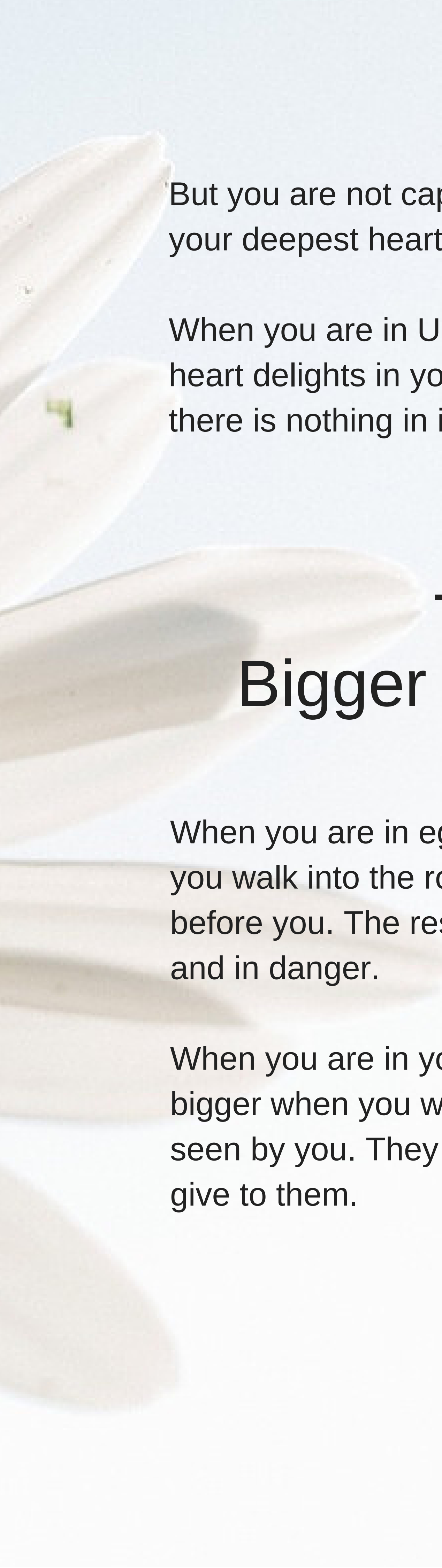
When you are in your ego, and things go bad, you are willing—in your fear—to betray virtually anyone. Your ego is easily identifiable by the shallowness of its integrity.

If you live in Unique Self and things go bad, you find your way, through thick or thin, to a deeper center of spirit.

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## Authentic Friendship or Pseudo Friendship

When you are in ego, you might help friends who are successful and even friends who are down, as long as it does not threaten your position.



But you are not capable of truly delighting in your deepest heart in a friend's large success.

When you are in Unique Self, your deepest heart delights in your friend's success, even if there is nothing in it for you at all.

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## Bigger or Smaller

When you are in ego, people feel smaller when you walk into the room. They feel invisible before you. The result is that they feel depleted and in danger.

When you are in your Unique Self, people feel bigger when you walk into the room. They feel seen by you. They feel your desire to love and give to them.





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## Yes or No

Your ego is always contracting and saying, “No.” Even when your ego says, “Yes,” it is only because it is afraid to say “No.”

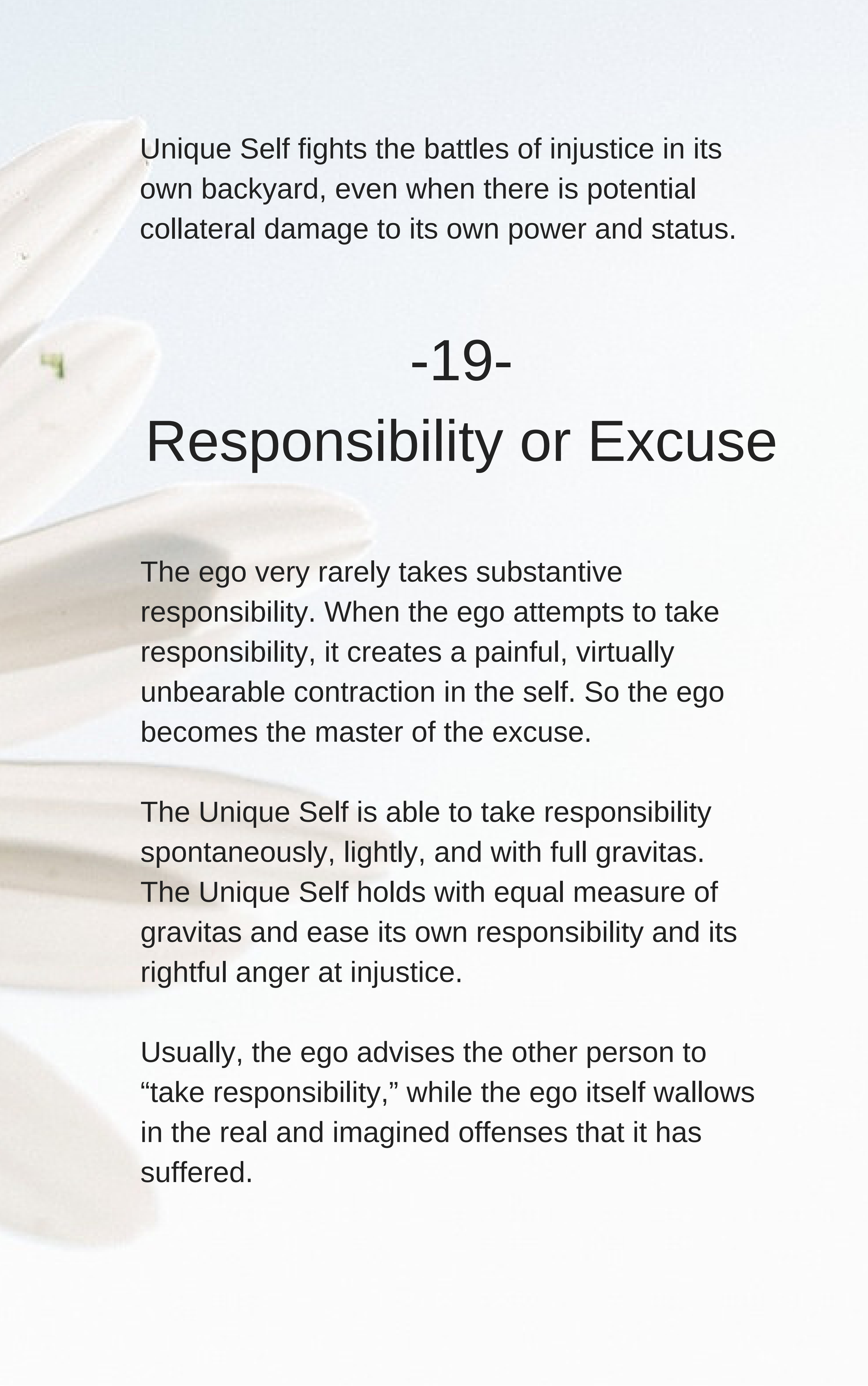
Your Unique Self is always expanding and saying “Yes.” Even when you say “No,” it is only to make room for a more authentic “Yes.”

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## Justice or Injustice

The ego is angry at what is done to it. It very rarely feels the same outrage at what is done to someone else.

The Unique Self is not merely outraged against injustice done to its own person; it is hurt and outraged by any and all injustice. The ego often fights large causes of injustice as a way to bolster its grandiosity.



Unique Self fights the battles of injustice in its own backyard, even when there is potential collateral damage to its own power and status.

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## Responsibility or Excuse

The ego very rarely takes substantive responsibility. When the ego attempts to take responsibility, it creates a painful, virtually unbearable contraction in the self. So the ego becomes the master of the excuse.

The Unique Self is able to take responsibility spontaneously, lightly, and with full gravitas. The Unique Self holds with equal measure of gravitas and ease its own responsibility and its rightful anger at injustice.

Usually, the ego advises the other person to “take responsibility,” while the ego itself wallows in the real and imagined offenses that it has suffered.



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## Paradox or Splitting

The ego is always splitting. It always sees dualities, and it cannot hold paradox or complexity. For the ego, others are either enemies or friends. Actions are either good or bad. The separate-self ego has a very hard time stably holding perspectives other than its own for extended periods of time.

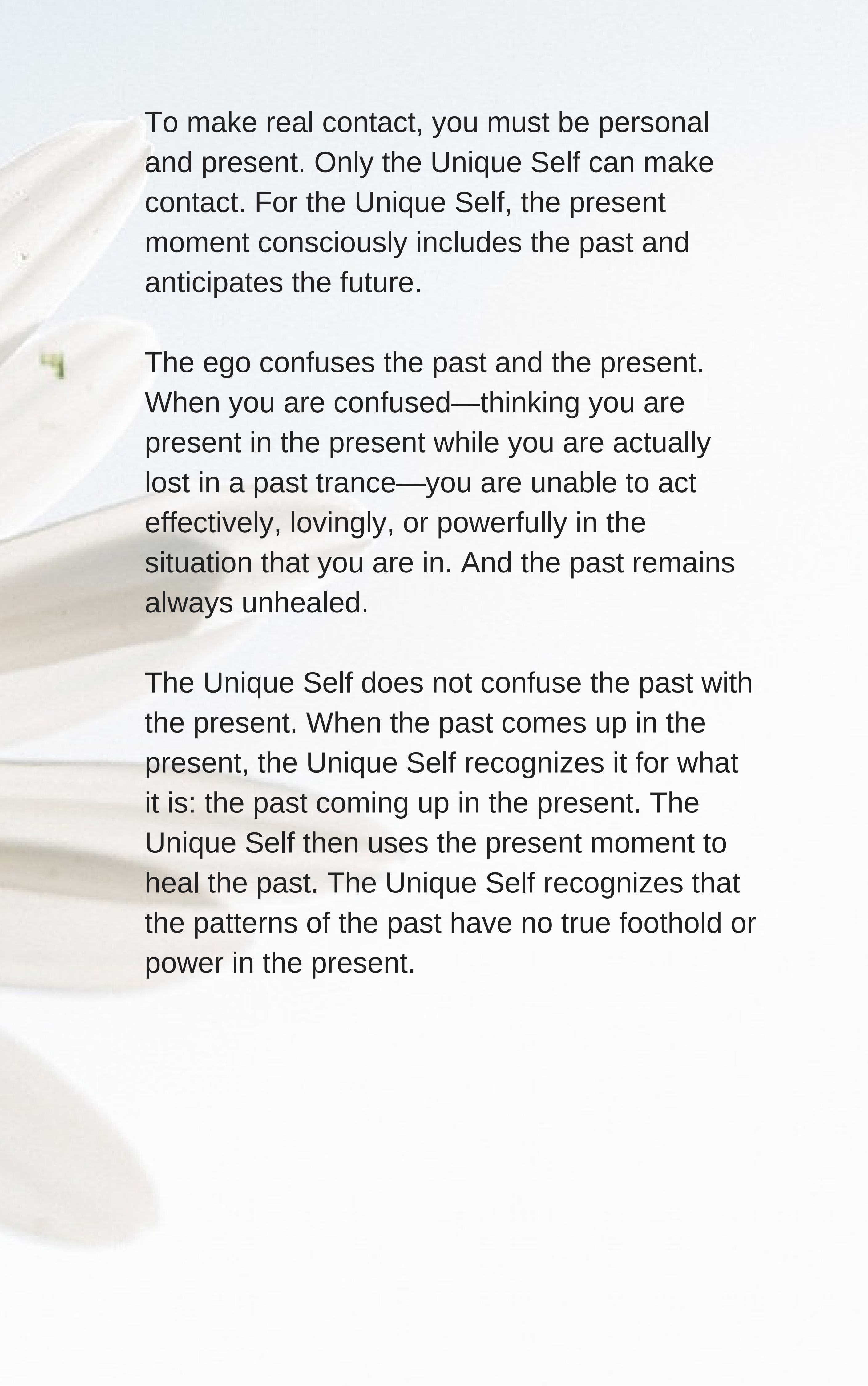
The Unique Self can naturally hold paradox. Contact with the transcendent within the large field of divine reality allows for the holding of opposites. Sacred outrage and equanimity live in paradoxical harmony within the Unique Self.

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## Past or Present

The ego lives in the past, thinking it is the present. Therefore, the ego unconsciously confuses past with present. The ego is unable to create intimacy, which means meeting each other in the fullness of the present moment.





To make real contact, you must be personal and present. Only the Unique Self can make contact. For the Unique Self, the present moment consciously includes the past and anticipates the future.

The ego confuses the past and the present. When you are confused—thinking you are present in the present while you are actually lost in a past trance—you are unable to act effectively, lovingly, or powerfully in the situation that you are in. And the past remains always unhealed.

The Unique Self does not confuse the past with the present. When the past comes up in the present, the Unique Self recognizes it for what it is: the past coming up in the present. The Unique Self then uses the present moment to heal the past. The Unique Self recognizes that the patterns of the past have no true foothold or power in the present.



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## Special Relationship or Open as Love

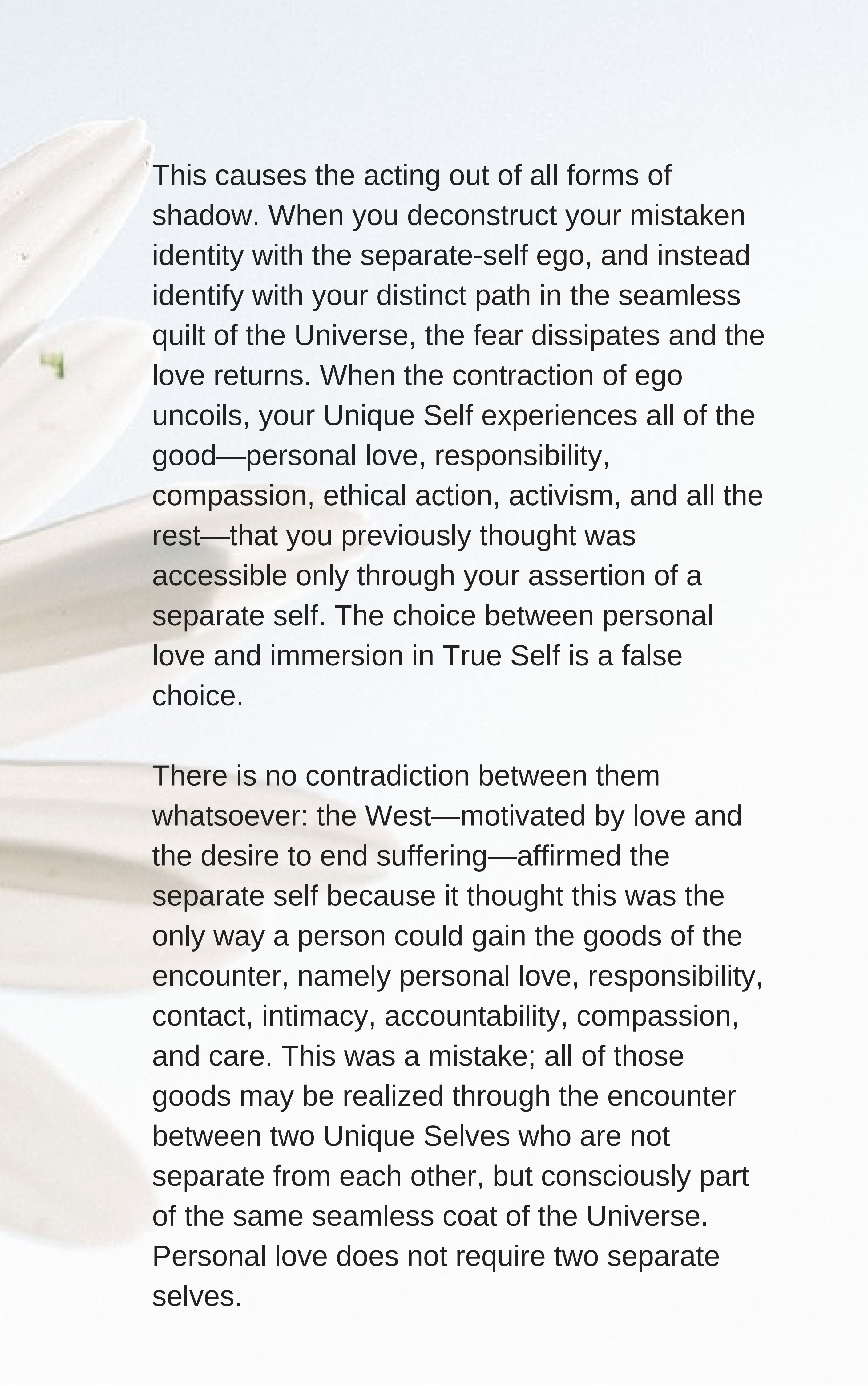
Your ego always seeks the “special relationship”—in the egoic sense—to cover the pain of your emptiness, and thinks the “special relationship” is better than all the rest of your relationships.

The Unique Self does not limit love to one person, even though the traditional definition of marriage or a committed relationship can limit you to one partner at a time. The Unique Self lives open as love in the world.

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## Love or Fear

The isolated ego is the root cause of murder, war, and virtually all human suffering. The ego feels its own fragility, its limits, and its ultimate powerlessness. As a result, the ego grasps for ways to assert power and experience aliveness.



This causes the acting out of all forms of shadow. When you deconstruct your mistaken identity with the separate-self ego, and instead identify with your distinct path in the seamless quilt of the Universe, the fear dissipates and the love returns. When the contraction of ego uncoils, your Unique Self experiences all of the good—personal love, responsibility, compassion, ethical action, activism, and all the rest—that you previously thought was accessible only through your assertion of a separate self. The choice between personal love and immersion in True Self is a false choice.

There is no contradiction between them whatsoever: the West—motivated by love and the desire to end suffering—affirmed the separate self because it thought this was the only way a person could gain the goods of the encounter, namely personal love, responsibility, contact, intimacy, accountability, compassion, and care. This was a mistake; all of those goods may be realized through the encounter between two Unique Selves who are not separate from each other, but consciously part of the same seamless coat of the Universe. Personal love does not require two separate selves.



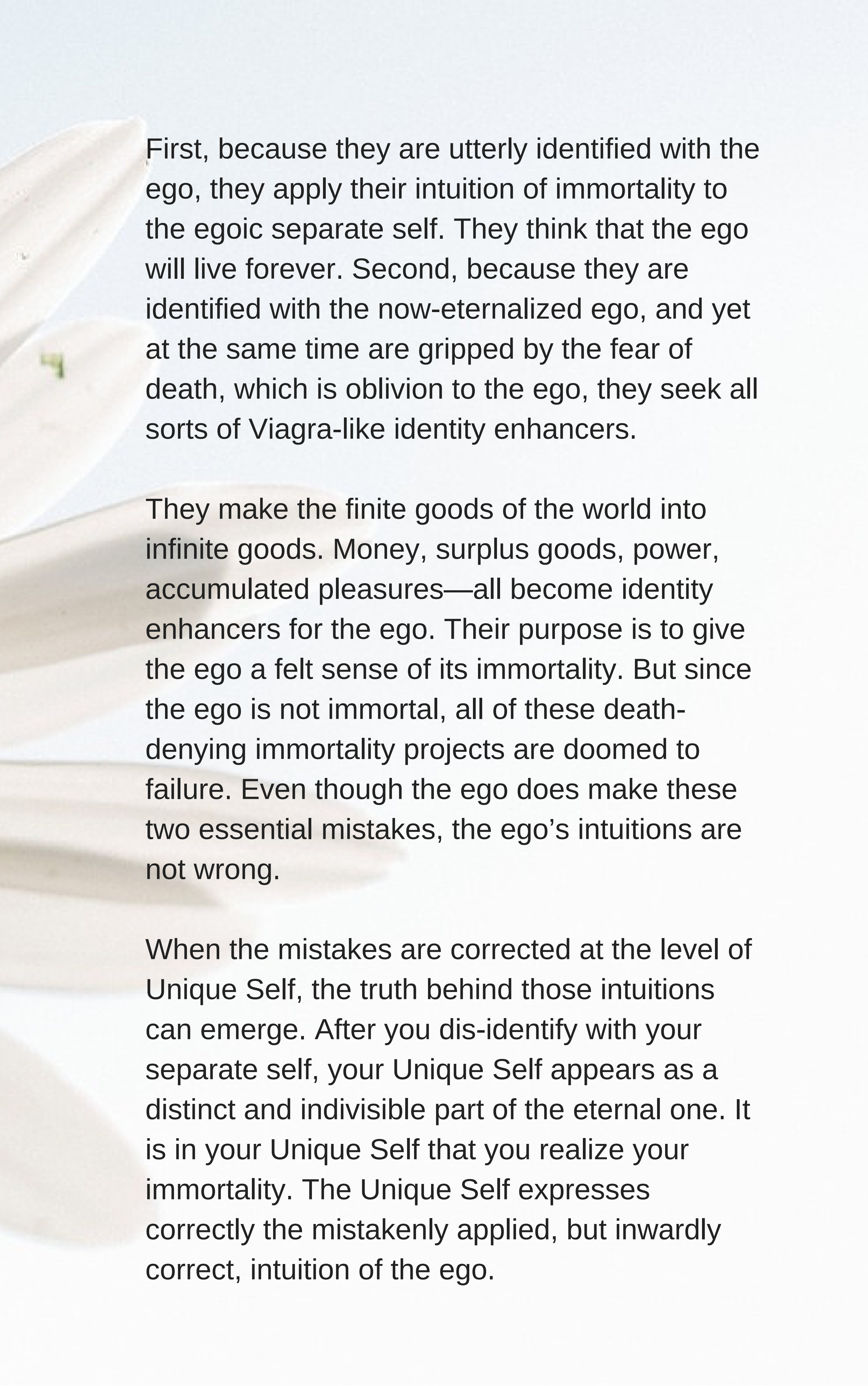
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## Eternity or Death

The ego strives for immortality it can never achieve, and therefore, displaces its grasping for eternity onto projects of control and conquest.

The Unique Self experiences authentically what the ego longs for mistakenly—namely the recognition that it is divine and therefore eternal. This distinction is essential and therefore deserves a brief clarification. The separate self emerges at a certain stage of human history and at a certain stage in the development of the individual human being. As the sense of separate self solidifies, so too does the terror of death.

The person feels correctly that death is wrong, that they should not have to die. They feel that they are eternal and should live forever. They are right. The core intuition of immortality could not be more correct. But locked as they are in separate-self ego awareness, they misapply that core intuition in two ways.



First, because they are utterly identified with the ego, they apply their intuition of immortality to the egoic separate self. They think that the ego will live forever. Second, because they are identified with the now-eternalized ego, and yet at the same time are gripped by the fear of death, which is oblivion to the ego, they seek all sorts of Viagra-like identity enhancers.

They make the finite goods of the world into infinite goods. Money, surplus goods, power, accumulated pleasures—all become identity enhancers for the ego. Their purpose is to give the ego a felt sense of its immortality. But since the ego is not immortal, all of these death-denying immortality projects are doomed to failure. Even though the ego does make these two essential mistakes, the ego's intuitions are not wrong.

When the mistakes are corrected at the level of Unique Self, the truth behind those intuitions can emerge. After you dis-identify with your separate self, your Unique Self appears as a distinct and indivisible part of the eternal one. It is in your Unique Self that you realize your immortality. The Unique Self expresses correctly the mistakenly applied, but inwardly correct, intuition of the ego.



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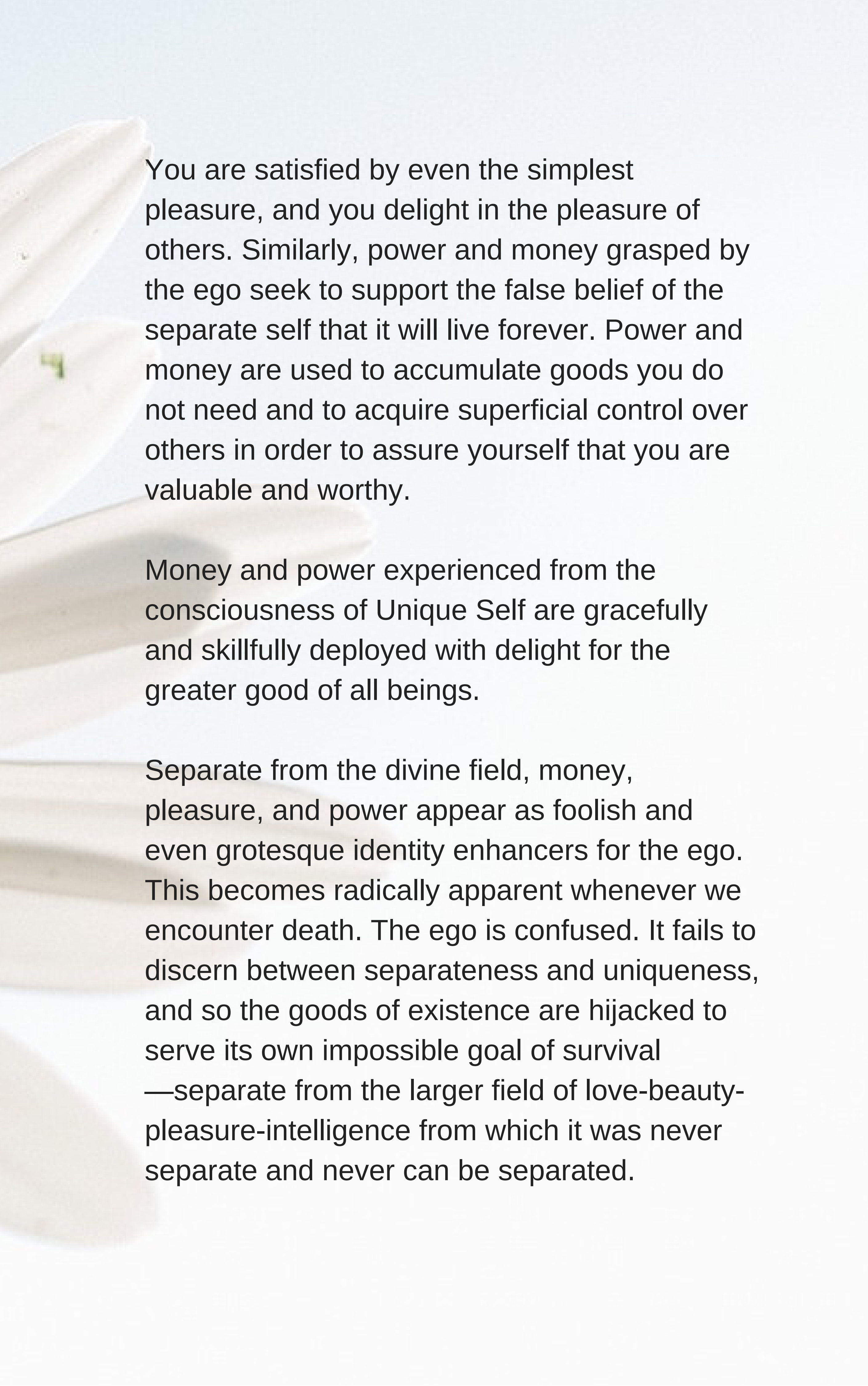
## Pleasure: Delusion or Divine

Money, power, and pleasure—when experienced at the level of ego—appear separate from the divine field and trap you in the clutches of grasping and striving. When experienced from the level of enlightened consciousness—money, power, and pleasure are expressions of your Unique Self touching the divine.

Pleasure from the place of Unique Self is experienced as a divine caress reminding you that the world is sane and good. Ego pleasures feel narcissistic and solidify the coiled contraction into small self. They never satisfy; you are constantly driven to get more and more, and someone else's pleasure makes you feel your own lack.

The same pleasure experienced from the consciousness of Unique Self expands your heart and consciousness into the love-intelligence, love-beauty, and love-pleasure of All-That-Is.





You are satisfied by even the simplest pleasure, and you delight in the pleasure of others. Similarly, power and money grasped by the ego seek to support the false belief of the separate self that it will live forever. Power and money are used to accumulate goods you do not need and to acquire superficial control over others in order to assure yourself that you are valuable and worthy.

Money and power experienced from the consciousness of Unique Self are gracefully and skillfully deployed with delight for the greater good of all beings.

Separate from the divine field, money, pleasure, and power appear as foolish and even grotesque identity enhancers for the ego. This becomes radically apparent whenever we encounter death. The ego is confused. It fails to discern between separateness and uniqueness, and so the goods of existence are hijacked to serve its own impossible goal of survival—separate from the larger field of love-beauty-pleasure-intelligence from which it was never separate and never can be separated.



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## Ego Story or Unique Self Story Reloaded

Your egoic story can be taken away by the circumstances of life. Your Unique Self story can never be taken away from you. Ego can be taken away from you. Unique Self can never be taken away from you.

The expression of Unique Self is not confined to what you do in public. It is not dependent on optimal life circumstances.

Ego depends on these things, but Unique Self always finds a way to flourish. It is wonderful when life conditions meet you and support your most glorious manifestation. You never know when the mystery of fragility will again intrude on your life.

You do know that the apparent unfairness of the world can never take your Unique Self away from you.