



# *The Hawaiian Way*

DEFINING THE ALOHA SPIRIT

WORDS BY AMBER NIGHTINGALE

point of view.  
**Aloha** [ə'lohə  
to say hello  
greeting or f  
acknowledg



### What is the Aloha Spirit?

Attempting to describe the *Aloha Spirit* is near impossible, like explaining the feeling of a rapturous scarlet-tinted sunset, or the soothing remedy of human touch. It goes beyond definition and is without a location—an omnipresent energy that lives everywhere. Outwardly (excluding trendy island ware) the Aloha Spirit may be perceived in simple acts of kindness, hospitality, truth, integrity, and steadfast patience in otherwise agitating paradise-laden traffic jams. Core values in family, reverence for nature, and the foundational understanding of the connectedness that binds humanity, all allude to the transcendental Aloha Spirit.

“The spirit of *aloha* affects everything we do, not so much in words, it doesn’t come from the mouth—it comes from the action. To show you have *aloha* is from your action and how you deal with things. *Aloha* is the center of all things Hawaiian,” describes Na’auao Pane’e, a Hawaiian Language teacher at Brigham Young University.

### Hawaiian History, Ethics and Western Influence

Ancient Hawaiian values were centered on a foundation in the Aloha Spirit. As a core element in cultural ideology, practices and spirituality, *aloha* directly translates from the root word *hā*, which means “the breath of life.” This breath penetrated every aspect of Hawaiian existence and resulted in a way of life where appreciation, gratitude and the spirit of generosity prevailed. Some may disagree with the genesis since *aloha* isn’t actually *alohā*. Some etymologists believe it’s more likely to have originated from the Samoan word “*alohfa*” or the Māori word “*aroha*,” which both words mean *love*. Mary Kawena Pukui in the *Hawaiian Dictionary* defines *aloha* as “love, affection, compassion, mercy, sympathy, kindness, grace, charity and greeting.”

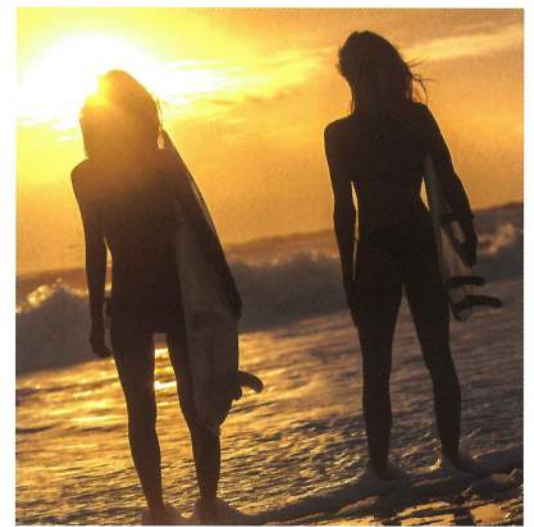
*Aloha ʻāina* (love for the land) was also an essential understanding that illuminated a sincere respect for the earth. Hawaiians emphasized the recognition of *mana* (spirit) found within nature’s bounty, and that how we relate to it is imperative. Communing with nature was a metaphor for family values, such as honoring *kupuna* (elders) and ancestors, while guiding children in the *aloha* tenets. Underlying these interpersonal relationships was the pivotal connection one had with their self. By cultivating a perceptive awareness and understanding of one’s own being, Hawaiians affirmed all areas of life would prosper.

When Westerners arrived in Hawai’i, this sturdy foundation of *aloha* was hugely compromised. In 1778, Captain Cook’s famed discovery occurred, which led to an influx of Western thought and influence. The concept of *aloha* became a way to coin the dignified nature of Hawaiian culture. Along with ships, sailors and disease came Christian missionaries who found common threads in *aloha* ideology to suffuse their religious beliefs. Many Hawaiian rulers were Christianized and a new set of community, cultural, and political values soon took precedence.

For decades that ensued, the arrival of immigrants and other settlers led to a diluted expression of the Aloha Spirit that barely permeated island culture. However, when Hawai’i became America’s 50<sup>th</sup> state in 1959, a revival in the acknowledgment of *aloha* arose.

PHOTO COURTESY: (PG33) MACMAUI; (MIDDLE) KIRKDEERPHOTO.COM; (BOTTOM) HTA/TOR JOHNSON





### Tourism, Politics and Commercial Culture

With its newfound statehood, Hawai'i quickly became the exotic travel destination of choice for intrigued mainlanders. It was a time of profound transition, and the strikingly increasing rates of visitors spawned a new status for Hawai'i—it was birthing a tourism-based culture. Clearly, Hawai'i emanated an idyllic quality that the other states did not, and tourists craved the multicultural ambiance.

Suddenly, the Aloha Spirit became a commonplace column heading in newspapers and a key topic of political discourse. In 1986, the Aloha Spirit was written into state law, found in the *Hawai'i Revised Statutes*—which still exists today. It states, “The ‘Aloha Spirit’ is the coordination of mind and heart within each person. It brings each person to the self. Each person must think and emote good feelings to others.” These basic doctrines of *aloha* instilled a remembrance in the governmental arena that perpetuated cultural roots and defined Hawai'i's unique subjective paradigm.

Lively *lū'au*, *poi* pounding, *bula* performances, and surfing all exuded the island tourism niche that embraced the spirit of *aloha*, which also fashioned a destination image that glimmered commercialism. Finessed in beach resort branding, mass produced souvenirs, and as an epochal greeting that's still standard, *aloha* did admittedly

shine as an asset that fueled a healthy economy and lured inquisitive tourists.

This commodified version of *aloha* is one that is recognized by most. Has *aloha* evolved into a marketing scheme to drive tourism? Some academics might suggest, pointing its finger in objectivity, that the Aloha Spirit has been manipulated to fabricate a culture with profitable aims, while acting as a political band-aid to relieve multicultural tension. *Aloha* becomes like wearing a modish frame of rose-tinted glasses that promises a therapeutical antidote to life's challenges. Has *aloha* retained its cultural virtue?

### Universal Essence of Aloha

Despite its modernized quasi-commercial status, the Aloha Spirit is not confined to a showy storefront t-shirt or cutesy morning coffee mug. It contains within it an unshakeable heritage that is bound by nothing and undeniably beautiful—a pure essence that cannot be dominated or destroyed. Perhaps the external expression of *aloha* has been forcibly resized to fit the ever-changing needs of contemporary society. This present-day rendition of *aloha* does not devalue it, but rather presents a warm memento of a rich spirit with profound cultural and universal significance.

Revered *bula* master and international Hawaiian cultural presence Puna Dawson illuminates, “The

Aloha Spirit is from within. It is that spirit of truth that can be found in every culture—not just Hawaiian. It is an understanding and appreciation for life...all of life's gifts, and how we share them with one another. *Aloha* begins with you.”

The Aloha Spirit is a shimmering emanation of Hawai'i that is infinite and irreplaceable. It's the gentle reminder to breathe, close your eyes, enjoy the breeze, hear the birdsong, and smile candidly at a stranger. *Aloha* resides in forgiveness, nurturing a friend, reverence for nature, counting your blessings, and loving who you are and others. For me, it's a heartfelt inhalation that enlivens appreciation for the beauty of creation and our shared experience as human beings. *Aloha* is a mutual understanding for those blessed to live on the islands—a decree that cannot be reckoned with.

Although the Aloha Spirit can be found in abundance on the Garden Isle with seriously few residents living without, it is not bound to Hawai'i, but instead encompasses a global relevancy.

It ripples across the sapphire ocean to inspire a righteous vision where family, natural resources and the connection with oneself and others are cherished. Throughout history and the present stylish informality of *aloha*, the essence remains the same. May you experience the true legacy of the Aloha Spirit—feeling its eternal breath of life.