



LIVE PONO

Meaning of Pono in Hawaiian & How it Affects Culture

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PONO, like many Hawaiian words, does not have a one-to-one-word English translation. If there were one, it would probably be “righteousness,” as in the state motto: “Ua Mau ke Ea o ka Aina i ka Pono,” or “The life of the land is perpetuated in righteousness.”

What’s missing with the word “righteousness,” however, is the balance and harmony pono connotes for Hawaiians. To be pono means to be in a state of harmony or balance with oneself, others, the land, work and life itself.

Samuel Hoyt Elbert’s Hawaiian dictionary gives six different meanings for pono. While we most often think of pono as an adjective, some meanings here are nouns or adverbs:

Goodness, uprightness, morality, moral qualities, correct or proper procedure, excellence, well-being, prosperity,...duty; moral, fitting, proper, righteous, right, upright, just, virtuous, fair, beneficial, successful, in perfect order...

Pono...differs slightly from the other values in that, for most, it is slightly out of reach. It is something to authentically aspire to rather than to fully attain, mostly because pono means more than doing the right thing in a given situation, but rather living life with balance, harmony and integrity, seeking to improve the surrounding world.

Pono is a large, diverse idea that encompasses a range of balanced, proper and good actions. It is also an idealistic one, in that everyone does something that’s not pono once in a while. But the Hawaiian way is to keep reaching for pono in life by making righteous decisions each day.