



Huna Article

What Is Huna?

by Graeme Kapono Ulrich

Many people express ideas about what *Huna* is from different perspectives. Some have learned the system developed by Max Freedom Long, some approach it through modern New Age interpretations, and others use the word very loosely for almost any Hawaiian-flavored healing or spiritual practice.

This article is mainly about *Kahili Huna*, which may also be called *Huna Kupua*. While I have read Max Freedom Long and respect the importance of his work, my own training is in the Kahili family tradition, as taught by Serge Kahili King. This is a *kupua* (shaman) tradition from Kauai, maintained through an unbroken lineage to the present day.

In earlier times, this knowledge didn't have a single formal name in the way modern students expect. It may have been referred to descriptively, for example as *ka 'ike huna*, esoteric knowledge, or *na'au huna*, gut knowledge. Related language exists elsewhere in Polynesia. In New Zealand Māori, *kura huna* is defined as important knowledge. Given that Māori and Hawaiians had been separated for many centuries before European contact, the persistence of related language and concepts is significant. It suggests that these ideas are very old, even if the modern use of *Huna* as the name of a system is more recent.

The word *huna* is often translated as “the secret,” but that can be misleading. As used in this tradition, it refers less to something deliberately concealed and more to something small, subtle, or hard to see — the less obvious principles and patterns of life. Hawaiian also has the related word *hunā*, which more directly carries the meaning of hiding, concealing, or keeping something secret.

This distinction matters because some people try to claim that *Huna* is not Hawaiian at all. That criticism is partly understandable when directed at some forms of *Huna* influenced by Max Freedom Long. Long did valuable work in bringing public attention to Hawaiian esoteric knowledge, but Serge Kahili King notes that Long never claimed to have met a *kahuna*. He worked from stories, language study using an old Hawaiian dictionary, and then combined what he found with ideas from psychology, Indian culture, Egyptian studies, Theosophy, and his own broader esoteric background.

It is also possible that Long interpreted some Hawaiian words through concepts he already knew from those other systems. Serge describes Long's system as workable, but also says that some of its ideas — especially the idea of separate autonomously evolving spirits and the method of building and sending *mana* to a higher self — are not Polynesian or Hawaiian concepts. This does not make Long's work worthless, but it does mean that Hawaiian vocabulary in his system does not always mean the underlying concept is Hawaiian in origin.

Max Freedom Long claimed to have drawn on material associated with William Tufts Brigham, the former curator and director of the Bishop Museum. However, that connection

is disputed, and some modern researchers argue that Long's claims about Brigham cannot be verified from Brigham's own writings.

In earlier teaching contexts we often simply called this system *Huna*. However, because the word has been used in different ways by different people, it is now helpful to be more specific. To distinguish this Hawaiian family tradition from other systems using the same name, I now refer to it as *Kahili Huna* or *Huna Kupua*.

So it is fair to say that parts of Freedom Long's system are not Hawaiian in origin. That does not mean all use of the word *Huna* is invalid. *Kahili Huna*, or *Huna Kupua*, comes from a different source: the Kahili family *kupua* tradition. In this approach, *Huna* is not treated as dogma, religion, or a fixed set of supernatural laws. It is a practical philosophy — a set of useful ideas or assumptions — rather than the techniques themselves.

In the Kahili tradition, *Huna Kupua* refers to the relationship between *Huna* as a body of esoteric wisdom and *kupua* or *kalakupua* as the practical shamanic application of that wisdom. Serge Kahili King defines *Huna* as “the esoteric wisdom of Polynesia” and *kupua* as “a specialized healer who works with the powers of the mind and the forces of nature.” He compares *kupua* in this sense with the Tungusic word “shaman” and connects the *kupua* path with what he calls the “Way of the Adventurer.”

In this framework, *Huna* is not simply a list of techniques. It is organized around sets of useful assumptions: the Seven Principles, the Three or Four Selves, and the Four Levels of Reality. These are not presented as dogma, but as practical ways of understanding and changing experience.

Kupua is often used as a shortened form of *kalakupua* when referring to the practitioner, but like many Hawaiian words its meaning depends on context. The best-known *kupua* in Polynesian tradition is *Māui Kupua*. Although the stories of *Māui* do not usually present him as a “healer” in the narrow clinical sense, they repeatedly show him using extraordinary skill, knowledge, power, and ingenuity for the benefit of the people.

In this broader sense, the healing purpose of the *kupua* is to restore harmony, increase effectiveness, and bring benefit. This also reflects Serge's statement:

“Huna is not a philosophy that tells you how you should live. It is a philosophy that teaches you how to change, if you want to.”

In other words, *Huna* is not a moral code, religion, or set of rules. It is a practical philosophy for understanding and changing experience.

So, when people ask “What is *Huna*?” the simplest answer is not “*Huna* is a set of techniques.” It is more accurate to say that *Huna* is a practical philosophy of life, and *kupua* is one way that philosophy is applied as a shamanic skillset.

The Basic Framework of Huna

In *Kahili Huna*, the teaching is organized around several sets of useful assumptions. These are not presented as fixed laws or required beliefs. They are ways of thinking that can be tested through experience and used because they are effective.

The first and best-known framework is the Seven Principles:

1. ***‘Ike*** The world is what you think it is.
2. ***Kala*** There are no limits.
3. ***Makia*** Energy flows where attention goes.
4. ***Manawa*** Now is the moment of power.
5. ***Aloha*** To love is to be happy with.
6. ***Mana*** All power comes from within.
7. ***Pono*** Effectiveness is the measure of truth.

These principles are not commandments. They are not rules for how everyone must live. They are practical ways of looking at experience. Each one offers a different way to change perception, behavior, emotion, relationship, or circumstance.

Strictly speaking, the first four are the core principles or assumptions about experience: *‘Ike*, *Kala*, *Makia*, and *Manawa*. The last three — *Aloha*, *Mana*, and *Pono* — can also be understood as behaviors or ways of acting from those assumptions: loving, empowering, and choosing what is effective. This is only a very brief explanation for context. For a deeper reading of these concepts, Serge Kahili King’s book *Urban Shaman* gives a much fuller presentation.

The first principle, *‘Ike*, points to the way assumptions, expectations, beliefs, attitudes, emotions, and habitual focus shape experience. The second principle, *Kala*, reminds us that limits are not always as fixed as they appear, and that freedom increases as tension, fear, and restriction are released. The third principle, *Makia*, reminds us that attention is creative. The fourth principle, *Manawa*, brings power back to the present moment. The sixth principle, *Mana*, points to inner authority and the power to choose, act, and respond. The seventh principle, *Pono*, keeps the system practical: the question is not merely “Is this belief correct?” but “Does this way of thinking help produce the best result?”

Because these ideas are used as practical tools rather than fixed dogma, *Huna* can appear in different forms. Similar principles can be found in other spiritual, psychological, philosophical, and healing traditions. Serge Kahili King’s article “The Gospel of Huna,” for example, compares the Seven Principles with sayings attributed to Jesus, showing that the same kind of wisdom can be recognized in other frameworks as well.

What makes the Seven Principles *Huna* in this context is not that no one else has ever expressed similar ideas. It is the way these ideas are organized, named, understood, and applied within the Kahili *kupua* tradition.

The Three Selves, or Four

Another important framework in *Kahili Huna* is the teaching of the Three Selves, sometimes expanded to four. This is a model for understanding human behavior and experience through different functions of the self.

In Serge’s summary:

1. The High Self — *Kāne* or *Aumakua* — inspires.
2. The Conscious Self — *Lono* — imagines.
3. The Subconscious Self — *Ku* — remembers.

4. The Core Self — *Kanaloa* — wills.

In general Hawaiian usage, *aumakua* may refer to a family or ancestral guardian spirit. Here, however, *Aumakua* is used more specifically for the High Self. *Kāne* is also being used in relation to the High Self, but I generally use *Aumakua* because *Kāne* can easily be confused with *kāne*, meaning man or male.

In common usage, *Kanaloa* is the name of the god of the ocean. In this esoteric context, it refers to the state in which *Aumakua*, *Lono*, and *Ku* are working together in harmony. *Kanaloa* should not be understood as another part added to the other three, but as their integration, with will, centeredness, and absolute confidence.

These are not separate beings fighting inside a person. They are better understood as aspects, functions, or ways of describing how a human being operates. This is one of the important differences between *Kahili Huna* and some interpretations influenced by Max Freedom Long. In the Kahili tradition, the selves are not treated as separate autonomously evolving spirits. They are aspects of one whole person.

This model is useful because it gives a practical way to understand inner conflict, memory, habit, inspiration, imagination, choice, and will. If a person wants to change, it is not enough to think differently at the conscious level. The body, memory, feeling, imagination, inspiration, and will all need to cooperate.

The Four Levels of Reality

A third major framework in *Kahili Huna* is the Four Levels of Reality. These describe different ways of experiencing and interpreting life:

1. Everything is objective — scientific reality.
2. Everything is subjective — psychic reality.
3. Everything is symbolic — shamanic reality.
4. Everything is holistic — mystical reality.

These levels are not separate places. They are frameworks of experience. A person can look at the same event objectively, subjectively, symbolically, or holistically, and each viewpoint will reveal different possibilities.

At the objective level, things are treated as separate and physical. This is the level of ordinary practical action, measurement, cause and effect, and everyday life.

At the subjective level, everything is connected. Relationship, feeling, energy, intuition, telepathy, and communication with nature belong more naturally to this framework.

At the symbolic level, experience is read as meaning. Dreams, omens, metaphors, imagery, ritual, and inner journeys operate strongly here.

At the holistic level, the emphasis is identity and oneness. Instead of relating to something as separate, the practitioner may experience being one with it.

The *kupua* learns to move between these frameworks deliberately. This is not done for fantasy or escape, but to change experience more effectively. In Serge's explanation, the *kupua* learns to move in and out of these realities in order to change experience.

Techniques Are Applications

This brings us back to one of the most common misunderstandings about *Huna*.

Many people describe *Huna* by listing techniques: breathwork, meditation, blessing, chanting, dream work, *ho'oponopono*, bodywork, *hula*, imagery, energy work, working with nature, or communication with the Three Selves. These can all be useful practices, and many of them can be used within a *Huna* framework, but they are not *Huna* itself.

A person can practice breathing without using *Huna*. A person can meditate without using *Huna*. A person can do bodywork, chanting, forgiveness work, visualization, or energy work from many different philosophies. What makes a practice part of *Kahili Huna* is not the outer form of the technique. It is the way the practice is understood and applied through the principles, the model of the selves, and the frameworks of reality.

For example, a simple breathing practice may be understood through *Makia*, because attention directs energy. It may be understood through *Manawa*, because the power to change is in the present moment. It may involve *Ku*, because the body and memory respond to rhythm, feeling, and repetition. It may become a *kupua* practice when it is used deliberately to shift state, increase *mana*, communicate with nature, or change experience.

The technique is the vehicle. *Huna* is the map.

A Practical Philosophy of Change

Huna is therefore not best understood as a religion, a doctrine, a therapy, or a collection of exotic techniques. In *Kahili Huna*, it is a practical philosophy of life and change. It gives people ways to understand experience, shift attention, work with belief, increase love, use power wisely, and choose what is most effective.

This is why Serge's statement is so important and bears repeating:

"Huna is not a philosophy that tells you how you should live. It is a philosophy that teaches you how to change, if you want to."

That sentence expresses the heart of the matter. *Huna* does not ask people to submit to a belief system. It offers tools. The value of those tools is found in their use.

So, in the simplest terms:

Huna is the philosophy.

Kupua is the shamanic application.

The techniques are ways of putting the philosophy into practice.

Huna is the study and use of the subtle principles of life — the things that may be small, easily overlooked, or hard to see at first, but which can make a profound difference when they are understood and applied.

Graeme Kapono Ulrich (May, 2026)

[Aloha New Zealand](#) *School of Hawaiian Shamanism*

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