

How a massive all-granite, hand-carved Hindu temple ended up on Hawai'i's lush Kauai Island

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built Pihanakalani some 1,000 years ago. Lum told her the monks had the means to take care of the land in perpetuity. "And so I laid down my concerns," she said.

Kauka praised the monks' landscaping, from plant choices to controlling invasive species.

"The very fact that we have people on this island who care for our historic places, realize the value of them, and are taking care of them in an exquisite way is remarkable," Kauka said.

Subramuniyaswami prioritized fostering connections across the island's faith traditions. These relationships have stretched beyond Kauai, and continue today. Following the deadly Maui wildfires in August, Palaniswami said, the temple helped connect Hindu donors to local groups leading recovery efforts.

The monastery-temple complex, accessible via a public gate, also helps connect visitors to something greater. Devajyothi Kondapi from Portland, Oregon, has only heard stories about great saints and sages in ancient India who blessed and sanctified the land.

"Here, I feel their presence," she said during a recent visit, a trip she makes a couple times a year. "What makes this a divine place is the monks' discipline."

The monks, who take vows of celibacy, nonviolence, and vegetarianism, are guided and inspired by the philosophy of Shaivism. They live in huts, and begin their day with 4:00am worship and meditation, followed by gardening, woodworking, cooking, and other tasks. They do not speak about their prior lives.

Beyond the temple itself, one of their most significant projects took eight years to complete. In the 1990s, the monks digitized agamas, or ancient Shaivite texts etched on palm leaves, Palaniswami said.

They preserved these fragile texts, or as Palaniswami calls them, a Shaivite "user manual of sorts," and made the digitized version public. Now anyone can read Shaivite instructions on everything from running a temple and celebrating festivals to preparing meals and managing a family.

The Shaivite tradition is one that blends theism (belief in gods) and monism, the belief in one, supreme being, said Satguru Bodhinatha Veylanswami, the order's current leader. The end goal is to attain oneness with the supreme being.

"A beautiful, holy place has the catalytic power to help you find that sacredness within."

Sannyasin Tillainathaswami, a monk who has lived



HAND-CARVED GRANITE. Paramacharya Sadasivanatha Palaniswami, left in the left photo, talks with Acharya Kumarnathaswami, right, in the monk's woodworking shop at the Kauai Hindu Monastery in Kapaa, Hawai'i, in this July 10, 2023 file photo. In the right photo, a statue of Lord Muruga, the Hindu god of war, son of Shiva, and brother of Ganesha, sits in the middle of a meditation space under a banyan tree at the Kauai Hindu Monastery. (AP Photos/Jessie Wardarski, File)

here for more than a decade, said the ancient practice drew him in because it delves deep into the meaning of one's existence.

"If you find the center of yourself, you've found that which is the center of everything," he said.

Over the last 50 years, Palaniswami, who knows every sector of the 382-acre grounds, has carved out tranquil spaces conducive to meditation and reflection. The monk wears flowing saffron robes and a fluffy silver beard. His hair is gathered in a bun atop his head, adorned with a red hibiscus bloom. Streaks of sacred ash mark his forehead, accentuated with a vermilion dot in the middle.

On most days, Palaniswami, who also runs the order's website and publications department, drives a golf cart along the winding pathways tending to the flora — plumeria, orchids, hibiscus, passion fruit, redwood, lotuses, and herbs.

Along with his guru, he planted 108 Rudraksha trees, which are native to Nepal and rarely seen in the west. The word "Rudraksha" in Sanskrit means "the tear of Shiva." The trees bear cerulean fruit, and its seeds are used for prayer, meditation, and protection.

"Shiva was in heaven and looked down on the earth, and when he saw the plight of humans, it so moved him that he wept a tear that rolled off his cheek and fell to the earth," Palaniswami said. "From that tear grew the first Rudraksha tree."

The trees started as 3-inch seedlings about 45 years ago, and now tower over 100 feet with thick roots. The monks pressure-wash the seeds, stringing them into meditation malas, worn as a reminder of Shiva's compassion, said



Palaniswami, who plans to build a public meditation room.

For Veylanswami, the order's leader, his favorite campus meditation spot is where a gentle waterfall meets the gushing Wailua River, which is sacred to some Native Hawaiians.

There, he says, he feels a transformative power, especially when he chants Shiva's name.

Associated Press journalist Audrey McAvoy in Honolulu contributed to this report. Associated Press religion coverage receives support through The AP's collaboration with The Conversation US, with funding from Lilly Endowment Inc. The AP is solely responsible for content.



SEVA & BHAKTI. A man sits at the BAPS Swaminarayan Akshardham inside the garland-like path, or parikrama, which serves as an ornate covered walkway to the largest Hindu temple outside India in the modern era, in Robbinsville, New Jersey. The temple was built by BAPS, a worldwide religious and civic organization within the Swaminarayan sect of Hinduism. (AP Photo/Luis Andres Henao)

Largest Hindu temple outside India in the modern era opens in New Jersey

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performed a ceremony in front of the 49-foot-tall statue of the Bhagwan Nilkanth Varni, who later became known as Bhagwan Swaminarayan, the founder of the sect who ushered in a moral and spiritual renaissance in western India.

Other worshippers prostrated on the floor pressing their foreheads to the ground in reverence. As night fell, Nikita Patel meditated and lit an incense stick before the deity.

"All religions, all communities are welcome here," she said, "And here, they will feel the peace."

Avani Patel visited from Atlanta with her husband and their two children, ages 11 and 15. She knelt inside the temple and marvelled at the ornate ceiling, her hands folded in prayer.

"It's jaw dropping, mind blowing," she said. "You can see divinity radiating

through it all."

Patel said she and her husband, Pritesh, were among the volunteers who gave their time to create the complex, and she is proud to be a part of an organization that would build such a resource to pass on these values to posterity.

Trivedi said he does not view the temple "just as a Hindu place of worship."

"It's not even just Indian or Indian American," he said, adding that the temple stands for universal values that can be found in every religious text and in the hearts and minds of great thinkers and leaders of every era.

"What we've tried to do is express these universal values in a way that relate to all visitors."

Bharath reported from Los Angeles. Associated Press religion coverage receives support through The AP's collaboration with The Conversation US, with funding from Lilly Endowment Inc. The AP is solely responsible for content.

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