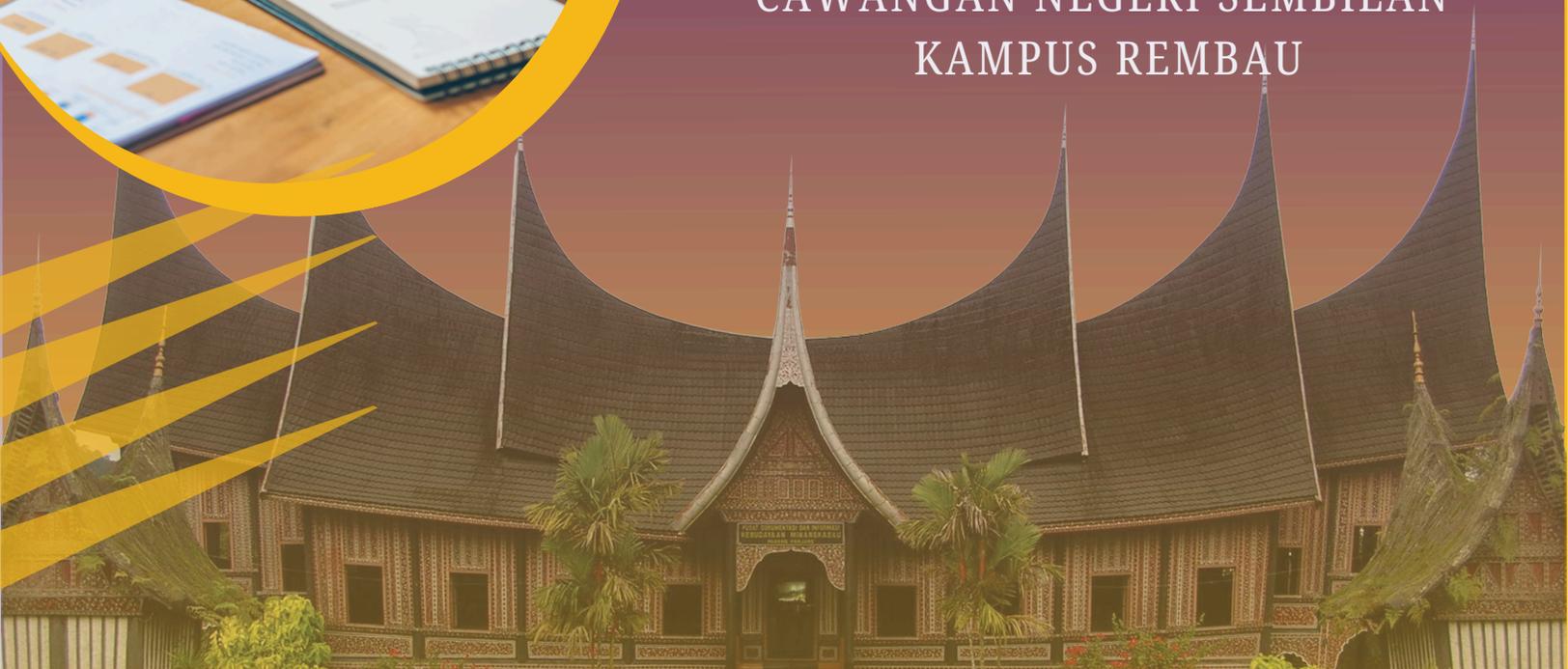


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# IKIGAI: THE EVOLVING JAPANESE SECRET TO A LONG AND HAPPY LIFE

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In the mist-shrouded valleys of Okinawa, Japan, a region celebrated for its extraordinary population of centenarians, researchers have long sought the elixir of their longevity. While diet and exercise play a role, the true secret is often found not in what they do, but in why they do it. This "why" is encapsulated in the concept of **Ikigai** (pronounced ee-key-guy). More than just a philosophy, Ikigai is a practical framework for living that blends purpose, community, and mindfulness, and a growing body of scientific evidence is now beginning to explain its profound impact on our health and happiness.

## **Moving Beyond the Venn Diagram: The Cultural Depth of Ikigai**

In the West, Ikigai is frequently visualised as a Venn diagram: four overlapping circles representing what you love, what you are good at, what the world needs, and what you can be paid for. The intersection is your Ikigai. While this is a useful tool for career reflection, it is a modern interpretation that can obscure the concept's deeper cultural essence.

True Ikigai is less about a single, monumental life purpose and more about the accumulation of small, daily joys and responsibilities that make life feel worth living. It is the joy of a morning ritual, the satisfaction of a garden well-tended, the warmth of a shared meal, or the quiet dedication to a lifelong craft. For a centenarian fisherman, his Ikigai might be providing for his community. For a grandmother, it is the practice of weaving traditional textiles. Ikigai is the thread that connects

these acts, infusing them with meaning and direction without the pressure of a grand title.

### **The Science of Purpose: What Recent Research Says**

The benefits of having a purpose in life are moving from philosophical conjecture to scientific fact. A recent 2023 longitudinal study published in Preventive Medicine that followed over 13,000 Americans aged 50 and older found that **"higher purpose in life was associated with a lower risk of mortality from all causes,"** even after controlling for a wide array of socioeconomic, behavioural, and psychological factors (Koga et al., 2023). This isn't merely about living longer; it's about living better. Research has consistently linked a strong sense of purpose to improved mental health, greater resilience against stress, and even better physical function in older adults.

This is where Ikigai offers a structured path to cultivating this life-enhancing sense of purpose. It encourages a journey of self-inquiry through four fundamental questions:

#### **What do you LOVE?** (Your Passion)

This is the domain of joy and flow. What activities cause you to lose all sense of time? What subjects ignite your curiosity?

#### **What are you GOOD AT?** (Your Vocation)

This requires an honest inventory of your skills and talents. What comes naturally to you? What have you mastered through practice?

#### **What does the WORLD NEED?** (Your Mission)

Ikigai is inherently communal. This question connects your existence to the larger social fabric. What problems do you feel compelled to help solve?

#### **What can you be PAID FOR?** (Your Profession)

This is the pillar of sustainability. It bridges passion with practicality, ensuring your purpose can viably support your life.

The convergence of all four is the ideal, but the pursuit itself is where the value lies. The act of reflecting on these questions actively engages the brain in constructing a narrative of meaning, which is a key psychological component of well-being.

## The Pillars of an Ikigai-Informed Life

Finding your reason for being is amplified when supported by a holistic lifestyle, much like that of the Okinawans. These are not separate secrets but interconnected pillars that support a life of Ikigai.

- **Connection and Community (Moai):** In Okinawa, people often form moai—a lifelong social network for mutual support, often starting in childhood. These are more than friends; they are a built-in social safety net. A 2022 review in *Nature Ageing* emphasised that "**social isolation and loneliness are major risk factors for adverse health outcomes,**" including dementia and cardiovascular disease, underscoring the critical protective role of strong community ties (Smith & Victor, 2022).
- **Mindful Nutrition (Hara Hachi Bu):** The Confucian-inspired adage Hara Hachi Bu—eat until you are 80% full—is a practice in mindful consumption. It aligns with modern research on caloric restriction, which is linked to longevity and reduced oxidative stress. The traditional Okinawan diet, rich in vegetables, sweet potatoes, tofu, and omega-3 fatty acids, provides the nutrients to fuel a purposeful life.
- **Natural Movement:** The world's longest-lived people do not necessarily pump iron or run marathons. Instead, they move naturally throughout the day. They garden, walk, cycle to the market, and practice gentle martial arts, such as Tai Chi. This integrated physical activity reduces inflammation, maintains muscle mass, and supports cognitive function, all of which are essential for having the energy to pursue one's Ikigai.
- **Mindfulness and Presence:** The practice of being fully engaged in the present moment is central to accessing daily Ikigai. Whether it's through the meticulous preparation of tea, focusing entirely on a conversation, or appreciating the beauty of a walk, this mindfulness reduces the anxiety of past regrets and future worries. It allows you to find purpose not in some distant goal, but in the quality of your attention to the present task.

## Integrating Ikigai into a Modern, High-Paced World

You need not move to a Japanese island to cultivate Ikigai. The integration begins with small, intentional shifts:

1. **Identify Micro-Ikigais:** Your purpose doesn't have to be one big thing. What are the small things that bring you joy and a sense of accomplishment today? Baking

bread, helping a colleague, reading a story to a child? Acknowledge these as valid and meaningful expressions of your Ikigai.

2. **Reframe Your Work:** Instead of viewing your job as merely a pay check, ask: How does my work serve others? What skills am I honing? Can I find moments of flow in my tasks? Aligning your career with your Ikigai is a process of finding meaning within your current role.
3. **Prioritise Your Tribe:** Actively invest in relationships. Schedule regular, device-free time with loved ones. Seek out communities—a volunteering group, a club, a class—that align with your values. Remember, your Ikigai is often found in service to your moai.
4. **Practice Mindful Rituals:** Introduce small moments of stillness and intention into your day. A five-minute morning meditation, savouring your coffee without distraction, or a short walk in nature can be powerful acts of mindfulness that ground you in your purpose.

### **The Ultimate Reward: A Life of Meaning**

The pursuit of Ikigai is not a final destination but a continuous, evolving journey. It is the understanding that your life has inherent value and that you have something unique to offer the world. It is a robust antidote to the stress, isolation, and existential confusion that can characterise modern life.

As the science now confirms, those who cultivate their Ikigai are not just crafting a more philosophically satisfying life; they are making a series of daily choices that directly contribute to a longer, healthier, and more resilient existence. They wake up with a reason, and they go to bed with a sense of accomplishment. In the end, Ikigai is the Japanese art of making sure that no matter how long your life is, it is always, unquestionably, a life worth living.

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