

Bettina Lemke

Ikigai

Finding the Meaning of Life in the
Everyday. A Practical Guidebook
160 Pages

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Let yourself be silently drawn by the strange pull of what you really
love. It will not lead you astray.

Rumi

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A Vital Experience

“Ikigai” – I first came across this beautiful Japanese term a few years ago, while researching the subject of optimism. It stands for the feeling of seeing a meaning in life, having something worth living for. People with a lot of ikigai, so I read, lead a fulfilled life and know what they get up for in the morning. According to recent studies, they also have a longer life expectancy than people with little ikigai. That instantly sparked my interest. I was thrilled by the fact that the Japanese have a special word for the feeling of regarding life as having a purpose. We don't have an equivalent term, but I wish we did. Aside from that, it seemed very logical to me that one can have a lot or a little of this ikigai and that it's a vital force that affects mental and physical health – depending on how much we possess. If people see no meaning in their own existence, don't know what they're living for, why they lead each day anew, they logically have less energy and joie de vivre than people who have recognised their personal purpose in life and who structure their everyday life as far as possible towards doing fulfilling things that bring them happiness and satisfaction.

The subject had me gripped in a matter of seconds, and so I decided to look into it more closely as soon as I could. And ultimately, that vital moment of reading about the principle of ikigai for the first time led me to write this book.

Part I

Life's Dynamo Ikigai

The Question of Meaning



Every individual feels deep in their heart the desire for a life filled with meaning. This longing is perfectly sufficient to make all of us seekers and discoverers of meaning, our whole lives long.

Elisabeth Lukas

At some point in our lives, every one of us comes up against the question of the meaning of life. We might not ask ourselves the question in a deep philosophical sense. Instead, we might wonder: Why am I here in the world? What am I doing here? And why? Many of us don't find the answers, or find only inadequate responses. Let's be honest: What answers do we get when we ask our friends why they get up in the morning? And who can tell us at the drop of a hat what makes up their personal purpose in life? Often, we feel helpless in the face of questions like these because we'd certainly like to know the answers, but they're not easy to grasp. And some people might react with consternation because the question makes them realize their painful lack of drive and their lives seem absolutely devoid of meaning or purpose.

The Japanese principle of ikigai can help us in an astonishing way to find meaning in our everyday lives, because every one of us possesses ikigai.

In the first part of this book you'll find out all about this fascinating life philosophy and how it can bring us inspiration, joy, energy and even longer, healthier lives. In the second part, you can set out in search of your personal purpose in life. A detailed programme of exercises, with numerous tried and tested questions to ask and mental techniques to try, leads you step by step along the path to your own ikigai. Once you've recognized it you can use it purposefully to lead an inspired, active and ultimately fulfilled life – ideally, even to a great age.

So it's certainly worth setting out on a determined quest for meaning. I wish you many enlightening realizations and much joy along the way. And I wish you lots of ikigai at all times.

Please note: You can read this book chronologically from beginning to end. That way, you'll find out the facts worth knowing about the principle of ikigai. But if you can't wait to set out in search of your personal ikigai you can skip straight to the practice section starting on page \$\$, and dip into the introductory section whenever you find the time.

A Mere Vision?

Imagine the following situation. It's Friday night and the weekend is about to begin. You've planned a cycling tour with friends or family for the next day. You want to set out early to enjoy the morning atmosphere and make the most of the day. As you go to bed, your heart skips at the thought of getting out into nature again and breathing fresh air. You're looking forward to the physical exercise, spending time with people you like, chatting with them, taking a nice rest stop along the way, and to switching off at last after a long hard week and leaving your everyday life far behind. You fall asleep with that feeling of anticipation and get up bright and early the next morning, full of energy and motivation. Worthwhile objectives beckon, soon making you forget the last vestiges of tiredness. You savour your morning coffee, swiftly pack your cycling bags and then set out in a buoyant mood. The day with all its adventures awaits you and you're going to relish every minute of it.

I'm sure you know that feeling. It doesn't matter whether you're a fan of cycling tours, mountain walks, long days in the forest or museum visits, whether you like to spend your Saturdays canoeing, on the football pitch

or working on your almost finished model plane – we all enjoy doing things that spark our enthusiasm and make our hearts skip a beat. How much easier everything is when our inner motivation pushes us along the way! When we know we'll be doing something we like, something that gives us joy. Wouldn't it be great if we could carry over the motivating of a day like that to most of the other days in our lives? If we could answer the question "What do I get up for in the morning?" in general? If we could do so with great ease and a sense of security, from the bottom of our hearts? Wouldn't it be an enticing idea to wake up regularly in the knowledge of having a plan that gives our lives meaning and fulfilment?

The wonderful philosophy of ikigai shows that this doesn't have to be a mere vision of paradise.

On the Good Fortune of Doing Something Meaningful

These pretty-looking Japanese characters spell out the word ikigai:

Even the range of meanings makes the term fascinating. To simplify slightly, iki could be translated as "life" and gai means something like "reason, purpose, meaning, outcome, value, being worthwhile". As each individual character has complex connotations, ikigai encapsulates:

- the meaning of life
- what is worth living for
- the feeling for which it's worth getting up in the morning
- the good fortune of doing things that make life worth living
- personal fulfilment and life motivation
- the feeling of being alive
- the reason for living
- joy and a goal in life

In other words, ikigai describes the state of mind of someone who sees a purpose in life and therefore has the wonderful good fortune of having something meaningful to do.

Those who have recognized their ikigai feel joy at life and inner satisfaction, are optimistic and feel alive.

They are motivated and capable of enthusiasm, possess inner strength and a great deal of resilience.

Naturally enough, they know what they are living for and what direction they want their lives to go in.

But ikigai not only refers to the deep sense of fulfilment felt by those who know what gives their lives meaning.

The term also applies to specific activities, circumstances, relationships to other people, attitudes or interests, dreams and goals and a lot more. In slightly simplified terms, we can say that our personal ikigai is made up of four large subject areas. These are:

- the things we really enjoy doing
- our strengths or what we are good at
- the things for which we get paid or could get paid, or for which we can receive some kind of reward from others
- things the world needs

Some elements of our ikigai only belong in one area, while others can be put in several categories or even all four. Let me explain it to you using a few specific examples.

For a concert pianist who designates playing music as her ikigai, all four areas play a role. The pianist does

something she likes doing. It's an occupation that completely fulfils her. On top of that, playing the piano is something she's obviously talented at, which means it's also one of her strengths. And as she doesn't just play the piano at home for her own enjoyment but also appears on stage, she does something for the world. People who attend her concerts get joy out of her music and virtuoso talent, perhaps even sourcing their own personal ikigai from it. And last but not least, the pianist gets paid for playing and can earn her living from it. So she's fortunate enough to know what makes her life worthwhile. She's able to live out her passion, cultivate her talent and always has something meaningful to do. That gives her motivation, happiness, inner satisfaction and a series of new objectives to pursue. On top of which, what she does is very sustainable because she can live from it.

Ikigai is not just reserved for those people like our pianist who have discovered one great passion in their lives and are able to make it their profession. It's also contained in smaller, less obvious things that we hardly find significant – wrongly so. For instance, someone can find ikigai even in watching the sun rise every morning, going running with friends, reading books to dive into different worlds, practicing mindfulness, being there for the family, taking long walks with the dog, learning a new foreign language, living out their creativity in a painting class... From the tiniest of things all the way to very large projects – the possibilities are endlessly varied. And for those who haven't yet found their ikigai, searching for it can be just that: ikigai!

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Basic Rules for a Life Filled with Meaning

What use is even the best meaning in life if we're constantly running from one appointment to the next, always two steps ahead in our minds, checking our messages every few minutes and letting the breaking news on our computers or smartphones dictate our inner rhythm? With all the challenges of a hectic everyday life, if we forget to make sure we have enough balance we'll be so stressed, tense or exhausted that we'll be incapable of even perceiving our ikigai, let alone putting certain aspects of it into practice.

The important thing is to come down regularly, to take time out briefly or for longer, and to make sure we have a healthy balance all in all, on various levels. In this way, we have something to counter the stress and other energy-leeching factors that can even make us ill, and we also provide space for the nicer things in life and our ikigai. The following brief tips will help with the self-care that we all need to bear in mind.

Conscious Breathing

Stress and tension often lead to shallow breathing and poor oxygen provision. As a result, we quickly feel tired and wiped out. Pay regular conscious attention to your breathing and try to make it a habit to breathe calmly and deeply in and out in hectic situations. Meditation is a good way to start, focusing deliberately on your breathing. You'll find a couple of meditation exercises in the practical section (see pages \$ and \$). As soon as you have a little routine, you'll be able to switch briefly in almost any situation and slip in a mini breathing exercise. It has an instant relaxing effect, making you feel refreshed and more comfortable. Keep reminding yourself – at an office meeting, while tidying up at home, out on a walk... How are you breathing right now?

Healthy Eating

A balanced diet is another key pillar of good self-care. Despite all the different health-conscious trends in our Western societies, a large proportion of people still consume too many calories and too few nutrients. Their food is low in fibre and vitamins and often contains too much sugar, salt and all kinds of additives. That



applies especially to industrially produced ready meals.

It's interesting to take a look at the traditional diet on Okinawa. It consists of lots of different fresh fruit and vegetables and soya products such as tofu, plenty of seaweed and fish and relatively little meat. In addition, meals are fairly low in fat and salt and contain little sugar. The Japanese also drink a lot of green tea and have an interesting rule known as "hara hachi bu". The idea is to stop eating once the stomach is eighty per cent full. It's a good way to avoid overeating and – who knows – perhaps it's one of the secrets behind the Okinawa islanders' long lives.

Whatever the case, we should take more time for eating and stick to a healthy and varied diet.

Sufficient Exercise

Make sure to get regular exercise. It makes us feel better, relaxes us, breaks down stress and improves our physical and mental performance. This is another area where we can follow the Okinawa islanders' example – they stay active and physical until old age. Time to get up off that sofa!

A Good Night's Sleep

If you get too little sleep you soon find yourself unbalanced and lacking energy. Our bodies need sleep to regenerate and recharge our batteries, if you like. Look after yourself by making sure you get plenty of restorative sleep.

Work-Life Balance

As a rule, we can deal fairly well with intense work phases and even excess stress for a certain period. But when we face challenges like this, we need to find a healthy balance in good time. Pushing ourselves for too long harms our bodies and our minds. Stressful periods should be followed by extended rest and relaxation phases, when we can do all the things we didn't get around to for a while – eating well, getting enough sleep, plenty of exercise, meeting friends, finding inner peace and relaxation, taking a holiday, pursuing our own thoughts, doing something creative, daydreaming, thinking about the meaning of life and listening to the rhythm of our souls.

Building Resilience

All the basics listed above help build our resilience. If we're in mental and physical equilibrium, problems upset us far less than when we're already stressed and almost at the limit of our strength. And our ikigai also plays an important role in terms of resilience.

If we see our own lives as meaningful and regard it as our personal responsibility to structure as we see fit, it's easier for us to counter adverse external circumstances and blows of fortune to maintain an inner balance, or to get it back quickly. In the words of the founder of logotherapy, Viktor Frankl: "If there is one thing that might help people through difficulties, it is the knowledge of something like a meaning, waiting so to speak to be fulfilled."

Living in Community

Spending time with other people has countless positive effects on us. It fosters our sense of humour, sociability and social activities. New inspirations and other opinions help us stay open and automatically interested. We discover a wealth of new things, partly because others point them out to us. A friend might take us along to a concert or an art exhibition – events we might never have thought of attending. A lot of things, such as sporting activities, are easier if we do them in company. Other people offer us an inexhaustible pool of ideas that we can access at any time. On top of that, stable and reliable relationships in

which both sides are happy to support each other give us a feeling of belonging, and that has immense value. A life in community is not only good for our health – it also lends purpose and meaning.

PART II

Discovering Your Own Ikigai

The Treasure Hunt

<SQ> Twenty years from now you will be more disappointed by the things you didn't do than by the ones you did do. So throw off the bowlines. Sail away from the safe harbour. Catch the trade winds in your sails.

Explore. Dream. Discover.

Mark Twain<EQ>

This second part of the book leads you step by step to your personal ikigai, using a practical programme of exercises. These will help you to recognize what is important to you in life, what inspires and enthuses you and what lends you energy and fulfilment – in short, what gives your life meaning and makes it worth living.

Take a playful approach to the exercises and keep an open mind without thinking too much about it or wondering how it works. Be curious about what you'll discover on the quest for your ikigai and trust that the answers to the questions in this exercise programme are already inside you, like a valuable treasure waiting for you to unearth it or focus more deeply on it.

So let's get started on the treasure hunt for your personal ikigai.

Travel Preparations

The following exercises offer you an opportunity to get creative and embark on a journey of personal discovery. They include effective instruments for reflecting on yourself and your deepest wishes and desires, but also to explore your innate potential, your affinities and abilities and numerous other facets of your personality in detail.

The programme as a whole is methodically structured. It contains tried and tested exercises, some of which follow on from each other. That means it makes most sense to work through the practice section in the correct order, to get the best possible use of the many different opportunities to find out about yourself. As every individual is different and unique, some exercises might trigger cascades of thoughts, images and associations in you, while others might take more effort to find answers. But do try to go through all the exercises with concentration and at the same time with a certain sense of lightness. That way, you'll improve the probability of making good progress along your path to ikigai and gaining new insights about yourself. If you want to take a break now and then or can't find the time to concentrate on the exercises, that's fine. You don't have to stick to a strict schedule to finish the programme. Just pick up where you left off as soon as you find the time and energy again.

While you work through the exercises, you should make sure you have peace and quiet – whether at home or outside in nature at a place where you feel comfortable. All you need is this book and two different coloured pens or pencils. Use one pen or pencil to write and the other to highlight certain notes later on. You'll find exact instructions in each exercise.

A lot of exercises begin with a brainstorming session, where you should let your thoughts roam free. Simply write down what comes to mind without thinking too much about it. The main point of this process is to get ideas flowing without inhibitions, without constraining or censoring yourself. It's a fun, creative process. In later steps, you'll have an opportunity to think over the outcome of your brainstorming lists and focus more closely on certain content. So let's get started.

Orientation Aids

Get into a comfortable position, relax your shoulders for a moment and then focus your mind on the questions in this chapter. Always make sure you take a relaxed approach to the practice section – that will make for more consistent results (I explain in more detail how important it is to avoid the stress trap on page \$\$).

If you like, you can try the following relaxation exercise to get you started off. It reduces stress and encourages mental composure.

<Exercise:beginning>

Letting Go

Stand, sit or lie in a comfortable position, resting your hands lightly on your stomach. Breathe in slowly and deeply through your nose and then out through your mouth, three times. Feel your abdomen rising gently as you breathe in and then falling again. Every time you breathe out, cast off all the day's stress and all the ballast by saying to yourself mentally:

"I'm letting go."

Imagine every tension, every unresolved feeling, every burden on your shoulders dropping away with your breath. Ah!

To finish the exercise, smile.<Exercise:end>

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Golden Signpost

The following questions can give you a great boost in your search for your ikigai. They're like a golden signpost pointing out the right direction. As soon as you're ready, you can begin.

Find a comfortable position again, carry out the breathing exercise from page \$\$ or just relax your shoulders, and then focus your mind on the following questions.

What were your favourite things to do as a child, and what did you like about them? Write down at least three.

- My favourite things to do as a child were:

- What I liked about them:

Very good. You're in the midst of a creative process. The memories in your mind have probably already called up a whole lot of images. Use this moment to turn straight to the next question:

What were your favourite things to do as a teenager?

You can put down all kinds of things here. Whether you loved experimenting with a chemistry set, enjoyed skateboarding or liked to spend all afternoon playing computer games. Which hobbies were really good fun, what did you do with your friends? Feel free to write down things that might seem very banal – such as listening to music, dancing, staring at the surface of a lake for hours or recognising shapes in the clouds in the sky – as part of your list.

- My favourite things to do as a teenager were:

Explain again why you liked doing these things.

- What I liked about them:

And what were your favourite things to do as a young adult? At the time when you began to take your life into your own hands, perhaps left home, discovered the world more and more under your own steam? Here too, list at least three things.

- My favourite things to do as a young adult were:

- What I liked about them:

Great. Following this flood of memories and images, we'll now move onto the next step. You're free to use your analytic skills now. Go through your answers to what you liked about your favourite activities, one by one. What themes are repeated, what is still important to you and feels consistent and right in your mind? Highlight these entries by underlining key words or messages in a different colour. Once you've finished you can tackle the last step.

Look at the key messages you've highlighted and think about what insights you can take from them. Try to put these conclusions into very brief words and note them down in the theme list below. Let me explain this process using an example from my personal lists:

As a child, one of my favourite things to do was climbing trees. My list of what I liked about it looks like this:
I felt free and untethered and I had a strong sense of connection to the tree and the forest as a whole; I liked the feeling of being "above things" – looking at the world from above and pursuing my thoughts; I was also glad to overcome my fears and feel my strength while I climbed.

As all these things are still important to me, I underlined the key terms in every statement with a coloured pen. That looked like this:

I felt free and untethered and I had a strong sense of connection to the tree and the forest as a whole; I liked the feeling of being "above things" – looking at the world from above and pursuing my thoughts; I was also glad to overcome my fears and feel my strength while I climbed.

Then I thought about what these core messages say about me and I noted down the following in my theme

list:

The feeling of freedom and adventure, connection to nature, quest for new perspectives, thinking/reflecting about something, overcoming boundaries, self-efficiency, self-affirmation, physical activity.

Admittedly, I managed to derive a lot of different aspects from just one favourite activity. But they still play a major role in my life today. I'm always surprised at how accurate the insights are that we can gain about ourselves through this apparently simple exercise. It's as if we awaken a certain world in our minds while making these lists, a world full of colours, possibilities and promise, yet also a place of great clarity. A world that we often can't fully access in our everyday lives, because the way is blocked by countless demands and obligations, stress and tensions and a feeling of always being busy.

And now it's your turn again. Take plenty of time for this step, but please don't get stressed if you can't derive as many aspects from one of your favourite activities. Sometimes we can recognize several themes and sometimes there's only one to be seen. All that's important is for you to explore why you liked doing something.

Go through your highlighted core messages and enter your insights in the following list.

Theme List

If you've filled in all the lists in today's exercise unit, you've made good progress. You can now take a break and put the book down. If you have plenty of energy left, feel free to continue. But always make sure you only ever do the exercises when you're feeling mentally awake and attentive.

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Filling in the Chart

Now take a look at the following chart:

Think about which area of the chart is the right place for each of your highlighted words and sentences. For example, the more an entry is about something you like doing and the less about something you might get paid for, the higher up it belongs in the chart. And the more it's something the world needs and the less good you're at it, the further to the right you put the word or the sentence. Put everything you've underlined into the relevant area according to this principle.

Interpreting the Chart

Take a look at your finished chart. If you've worked intensively through the exercises in the book, you should have quite a lot of entries in some fields.

Now turn over to the next page.

The Common Intersection

The following chart shows what each intersection between the circles stands for. Entries on the last double



pages that you placed at the bottom left or nearby are related to professional life. Entries at the bottom right are to do with your calling. The area on the top left refers to your passions and the top right is all about your mission.

Looking at your own chart, you might find a central word or core sentence for every intersection, which applies particularly well to your career, your calling, passion and mission. Or there might be several fitting words or sentences. Put these into the coloured ikigai chart on the sheet included at the end of the book.

Great! This exercise has brought you a whole lot closer to your ikigai. All the main circles in the chart intersect and cross-fertilize each other. Ikigai is not just about doing something we're enthusiastic about. It becomes all the more sustainable and meaningful if it corresponds with our personal affinities and abilities, if we can simultaneously make a living out of it and it's something the world can make use of.

The boundaries in the chart are fluid, by the way. Let's take a look at the intersections between mission and calling, for example. According to our model, the mission is something we like doing and something the world also needs. At the moment when we get paid for it or might get paid for it, it becomes a calling. Here's a specific case:

Someone really likes writing, loves putting his thoughts down on paper and creating entire fantasy worlds, and perhaps he even has a message that he'd like to share with others. That means his mission is to entertain and inspire others with his stories and to change the world in a small way.

If he finds a publisher to bring out his books, then that mission becomes a calling. And if his books sell enough copies for him to earn a living by writing, that's all the better.

It's also conceivable that this person doesn't want to find a publisher; he writes simply for fun. He might self-publish his stories or share them on a blog – letting the world get something out of them in a different way. He earns his living by other means but over the years his blog gets more and more clicks and he's eventually discovered by a publisher, enabling him to spend more time on his writing...

A similar scenario might come about with videos that someone uploads to an internet platform just for fun. The video-maker likes doing it, lets other people enjoy her films, and if all goes well and her videos get a lot of clicks she might even make money out of them.

As I've explained, individual aspects in the different areas can have an immense effect on our ikigai. But once you've found a convincing intersection in the middle of the chart, it shouldn't be too hard for you to answer the questions: What do I get up for in the morning? What makes my life rewarding and worth living? What gives it a meaning?