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ABOUT THE BOOK

Discover the Japanese secret to a long and happy life with the internationally bestselling guide to *ikigai*.



The people of Japan believe that everyone has an *ikigai* – a reason to jump out of bed each morning.

Inspiring and comforting, this book will give you the life-changing tools to uncover your personal *ikigai*. It will show you how to leave urgency behind, find your purpose, nurture friendships and throw yourself into your passions.

Bring meaning and joy to every day with *ikigai*.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Héctor García is a citizen of Japan, where he has lived for over a decade, and of Spain, where he was born. He is the author of several books about Japanese culture, including two worldwide bestsellers, *A Geek in Japan* and *Ikigai*. A former software engineer, he worked at CERN in Switzerland before moving to Japan.

Francesc Miralles is an award-winning and internationally bestselling author of books about how to live well, together with the novels *Love in Small Letters* and *Wabi-Sabi*. Alongside Héctor García, he was welcomed to Okinawa in Japan, where the inhabitants live for longer than in any other place in the world.

There they had the chance to interview more than a hundred villagers about their philosophy for a long and happy life.

*For my brother, Aitor,
who's said to me more often than anyone else,
"I don't know what to do with my life."*

—HÉCTOR GARCÍA

*For all my past, present, and future friends,
for being my home and my motivation along
the way.*

—FRANCESC MIRALLES

seems to be one way of explaining the extraordinary longevity of the Japanese, especially on the island of Okinawa, where there are 24.55 people over the age of 100 for every 100,000 inhabitants—far more than the global average.

Those who study why the inhabitants of this island in the south of Japan live longer than people anywhere else in the world believe that one of the keys—in addition to a healthful diet, a simple life in the outdoors, green tea, and the subtropical climate (its average temperature is like that of Hawaii)—is the *ikigai* that shapes their lives.

While researching this concept, we discovered that not a single book in the fields of psychology or personal development is dedicated to bringing this philosophy to the West.

Is *ikigai* the reason there are more centenarians in Okinawa than anywhere else? How does it inspire people to stay active until the very end? What is the secret to a long and happy life?

As we explored the matter further, we discovered that one place in particular, Ogimi, a rural town on the north end of the island with a population of three thousand, boasts the highest life expectancy in the world—a fact that has earned it the nickname the Village of Longevity.

Okinawa is where most of Japan's *shikuwasa*—a limelike fruit that packs an extraordinary antioxidant punch—comes from. Could that be Ogimi's secret to long life? Or is it the purity of the water used to brew its Moringa tea?

We decided to go study the secrets of the Japanese centenarians in person. After a year of preliminary research we arrived in the village—where residents speak an ancient dialect and practice an animist religion that features long-haired forest sprites called *bunagaya*—with our cameras and recording devices in hand. As soon as we arrived we could sense the incredible friendliness of its residents, who laughed and joked incessantly amid lush green hills fed by crystalline waters.

As we conducted our interviews with the eldest residents of the town, we realized that something far more powerful than just these natural resources was at work: an uncommon joy flows from its inhabitants and guides them through the long and pleasurable journey of their lives.

Again, the mysterious *ikigai*.

But what is it, exactly? How do you get it?

It never ceased to surprise us that this haven of nearly eternal life was located precisely in Okinawa, where two hundred thousand innocent lives were lost at the end of World War II. Rather than harbor animosity toward outsiders, however, Okinawans live by the principle of *ichariba chode*, a local expression that means “treat everyone like a brother, even if you’ve never met them before.”

It turns out that one of the secrets to happiness of Ogimi’s residents is feeling like part of a community. From an early age they practice *yuimaaru*, or teamwork, and so are used to helping one another.

Nurturing friendships, eating light, getting enough rest, and doing regular, moderate exercise are all part of the equation of good health, but at the heart of the *joie de vivre* that inspires these centenarians to keep celebrating birthdays and cherishing each new day is their *ikigai*.

The purpose of this book is to bring the secrets of Japan’s centenarians to you and give you the tools to find your own *ikigai*.

Because those who discover their *ikigai* have everything they need for a long and joyful journey through life.

Happy travels!

HÉCTOR GARCÍA AND FRANCESC MIRALLES

What is your reason for being?

According to the Japanese, everyone has an *ikigai*—what a French philosopher might call a *raison d'être*. Some people have found their *ikigai*, while others are still looking, though they carry it within them.

Our *ikigai* is hidden deep inside each of us, and finding it requires a patient search. According to those born on Okinawa, the island with the most centenarians in the world, our *ikigai* is the reason we get up in the morning.



Based on a diagram by Mark Winn

Whatever you do, don't retire!

Having a clearly defined *ikigai* brings satisfaction, happiness, and meaning to our lives. The purpose of this book is to help you find yours, and to share insights from Japanese philosophy on the lasting health of body, mind, and spirit.

One surprising thing you notice, living in Japan, is how active people remain after they retire. In fact, many Japanese people never really retire—they keep doing what they love for as long as their health allows.

There is, in fact, no word in Japanese that means *retire* in the sense of “leaving the workforce for good” as in English. According to Dan Buettner, a *National Geographic* reporter who knows the country well, having a purpose in life is so important in Japanese culture that our idea of retirement simply doesn’t exist there.

The island of (almost) eternal youth

Certain longevity studies suggest that a strong sense of community and a clearly defined *ikigai* are just as important as the famously healthful Japanese diet—perhaps even more so. Recent medical studies of centenarians from Okinawa and other so-called Blue Zones—the geographic regions where people live longest—provide a number of interesting facts about these extraordinary human beings:

- Not only do they live much longer than the rest of the world’s population, they also suffer from fewer chronic illnesses such as cancer and heart disease; inflammatory disorders are also less common.
- Many of these centenarians enjoy enviable levels of vitality and health that would be unthinkable for people of advanced age elsewhere.
- Their blood tests reveal fewer free radicals (which are responsible for cellular aging), as a result of drinking tea and eating until their

stomachs are only 80 percent full.

- Women experience more moderate symptoms during menopause, and both men and women maintain higher levels of sexual hormones until much later in life.
- The rate of dementia is well below the global average.

The Characters Behind *Ikigai*

In Japanese, *ikigai* is written as 生き甲斐, combining 生き, which means “life,” with 甲斐, which means “to be worthwhile.” 甲斐 can be broken down into the characters 甲, which means “armor,” “number one,” and “to be the first” (to head into battle, taking initiative as a leader), and 斐, which means “beautiful” or “elegant.”

Though we will consider each of these findings over the course of the book, research clearly indicates that the Okinawans’ focus on *ikigai* gives a sense of purpose to each and every day and plays an important role in their health and longevity.

The five Blue Zones

Okinawa holds first place among the world’s Blue Zones. In Okinawa, women in particular live longer and have fewer diseases than anywhere else in the world. The five regions identified and analyzed by Dan Buettner in his book *The Blue Zones* are:

1. *Okinawa, Japan* (especially the northern part of the island). The locals eat a diet rich in vegetables and tofu typically served on small

Recent studies by nutritionists reveal that Okinawans consume a daily average of 1,800 to 1,900 calories, compared to 2,200 to 3,300 in the United States, and have a body mass index between 18 and 22, compared to 26 or 27 in the United States.

The Okinawan diet is rich in tofu, sweet potatoes, fish (three times per week), and vegetables (roughly 11 ounces per day). In the chapter dedicated to nutrition we will see which healthy, antioxidant-rich foods are included in this 80 percent.

Moai: Connected for life

It is customary in Okinawa to form close bonds within local communities. A *moai* is an informal group of people with common interests who look out for one another. For many, serving the community becomes part of their *ikigai*.

The *moai* has its origins in hard times, when farmers would get together to share best practices and help one another cope with meager harvests.

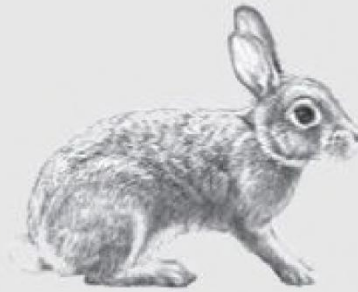
Members of a *moai* make a set monthly contribution to the group. This payment allows them to participate in meetings, dinners, games of go and *shogi* (Japanese chess), or whatever hobby they have in common.

The funds collected by the group are used for activities, but if there is money left over, one member (decided on a rotating basis) receives a set amount from the surplus. In this way, being part of a *moai* helps maintain emotional and financial stability. If a member of a *moai* is in financial trouble, he or she can get an advance from the group's savings. While the details of each *moai*'s accounting practices vary according to the group and its economic means, the feeling of belonging and support gives the individual a sense of security and helps increase life expectancy.

FOLLOWING THIS BRIEF introduction to the topics covered in this book, we look at a few causes of premature aging in modern life, and then explore different factors related to *ikigai*.

Aging's escape velocity

For more than a century, we've managed to add an average of 0.3 years to our life expectancy every year. But what would happen if we had the technology to add a year of life expectancy every year? In theory, we would achieve biological immortality, having reached aging's "escape velocity."



Aging's Escape Velocity and the Rabbit

Imagine a sign far off in the future with a number on it that represents the age of your death. Every year that you live, you advance closer to the sign. When you reach the sign, you die.

Now imagine a rabbit holding the sign and walking to the future. Every year that you live, the rabbit is half a year as far away. After a while, you will reach the rabbit and die.

But what if the rabbit could walk at a pace of one year for every year of your life? You would never be able to catch the rabbit, and therefore you would never die.

The speed at which the rabbit walks to the future is our technology. The more we advance technology and knowledge of our bodies, the faster we can make the rabbit walk.

Aging's escape velocity is the moment at which the rabbit walks at a pace of one year per year or faster, and we become immortal.

Researchers with an eye to the future, such as Ray Kurzweil and Aubrey de Grey, claim that we'll reach this escape velocity in a matter of decades. Other scientists are less optimistic, predicting that we'll reach a limit, a

maximum age we won't be able to surpass, no matter how much technology we have. For example, some biologists assert that our cells stop regenerating after about 120 years.

Active mind, youthful body

There is much wisdom in the classic saying “mens sana in corpore sano” (“a sound mind in a sound body”): It reminds us that both mind and body are important, and that the health of one is connected to that of the other. It has been shown that maintaining an active, adaptable mind is one of the key factors in staying young.

Having a youthful mind also drives you toward a healthy lifestyle that will slow the aging process.

Just as a lack of physical exercise has negative effects on our bodies and mood, a lack of mental exercise is bad for us because it causes our neurons and neural connections to deteriorate—and, as a result, reduces our ability to react to our surroundings.

This is why it's so important to give your brain a workout.

One pioneer in advocating for mental exercise is the Israeli neuroscientist Shlomo Breznitz, who argues that the brain needs a lot of stimulation in order to stay in shape. As he stated in an interview with Eduard Punset for the Spanish television program *Redes*:

There is a tension between what is good for someone and what they want to do. This is because people, especially older people, like to do things as they've always done them. The problem is that when the brain develops ingrained habits, it doesn't need to think anymore. Things get done quickly and efficiently on automatic pilot, often in a very advantageous way. This creates a tendency to stick to routines, and the only way of breaking these is to confront the brain with new information. ¹

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