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# IKIGAI

The Japanese Secret  
*to a Long and Happy Life*

HÉCTOR GARCÍA AND FRANCESC MIRALLES



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a Long and Happy Life

Héctor García  
and Francesc Miralles

Translated by Heather Cleary



PENGUIN BOOKS



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An imprint of Penguin Random House LLC

375 Hudson Street

New York, New York 10014

[penguin.com](http://penguin.com)

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Originally published in Spanish as *Ikigai: Los secretos de Japón para una vida larga y feliz* by Ediciones Urano, Barcelona.

Illustration [here](#): Abbie/Shutterstock

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LIBRARY OF CONGRESS CATALOGING-IN-PUBLICATION DATA

Names: García, Héctor, 1981– author. | Miralles, Francesc, 1968– author.

Title: *Ikigai* : the Japanese secret to a long and happy life / Héctor García and Francesc Miralles ; translated by Heather Cleary.

Other titles: *Ikigai*. English

Description: New York : Penguin Books, [2017] | Originally published in Spanish as “*Ikigai: Los secretos de Japón para una vida larga y feliz*” by Ediciones Urano in 2016.” | Includes bibliographical references. | Description based on print version record and CIP data provided by publisher; resource not viewed.

Identifiers: LCCN 2017005811 (print) | LCCN 2017022599 (ebook) | ISBN 9781524704551 (ebook) | ISBN 9780143130727 (hardcover)

Subjects: LCSH: Longevity—Japan. | Longevity. | Happiness. | Quality of life

Classification: LCC RA776.75 (ebook) | LCC RA776.75 .G3713 2017 (print) | DDC 613—dc23

LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2017005811>

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Cover illustration by Olga Grlic

Cover art direction by Roseanne Serra

*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*

*Only staying active will make you want to live a hundred years.*

—Japanese proverb

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## PROLOGUE

### *Ikigai*: A mysterious word

THIS BOOK FIRST came into being on a rainy night in Tokyo, when its authors sat down together for the first time in one of the city's tiny bars.

We had read each other's work but had never met, thanks to the thousands of miles that separate Barcelona from the capital of Japan. Then a mutual acquaintance put us in touch, launching a friendship that led to this project and seems destined to last a lifetime.

The next time we got together, a year later, we strolled through a park in downtown Tokyo and ended up talking about trends in Western psychology, specifically logotherapy, which helps people find their purpose in life.

We remarked that Viktor Frankl's logotherapy had gone out of fashion among practicing therapists, who favored other schools of psychology, though people still search for meaning in what they do and how they live. We ask ourselves things like:

What is the meaning of my life?

Is the point just to live longer, or should I seek a higher purpose?

Why do some people know what they want and have a passion for life, while others languish in confusion?

At some point in our conversation, the mysterious word *ikigai* came up.

This Japanese concept, which translates roughly as “the happiness of always being busy,” is like logotherapy, but it goes a step beyond. It also 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



I

***IKIGAI***

The art of staying young while  
growing old

## 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 plates. In addition to their philosophy of *ikigai*, the *moai*, or close-knit group of friends (see page 15), plays an important role in their longevity.
2. *Sardinia, Italy* (specifically the provinces of Nuoro and Ogliastra). Locals on this island consume plenty of vegetables and one or two glasses of wine per day. As in Okinawa, the cohesive nature of this community is another factor directly related to longevity.
3. *Loma Linda, California*. Researchers studied a group of Seventh-day Adventists who are among the longest-living people in the United States.
4. *The Nicoya Peninsula, Costa Rica*. Locals remain remarkably active after ninety; many of the region’s older residents have no problem getting up at five thirty in the morning to work in the fields.
5. *Ikaria, Greece*. One of every three inhabitants of this island near the coast of Turkey is over ninety years old (compared to less than 1 percent of the population of the United States), a fact that has earned it the nickname the

Island of Long Life. The local secret seems to be a lifestyle that dates back to 500 BC.

In the following chapters, we will examine several factors that seem to be the keys to longevity and are found across the Blue Zones, paying special attention to Okinawa and its so-called Village of Longevity. First, however, it is worth pointing out that three of these regions are islands, where resources can be scarce and communities have to help one another.

For many, helping others might be an *ikigai* strong enough to keep them alive.

According to scientists who have studied the five Blue Zones, the keys to longevity are diet, exercise, finding a purpose in life (an *ikigai*), and forming strong social ties—that is, having a broad circle of friends and good family relations.

Members of these communities manage their time well in order to reduce stress, consume little meat or processed foods, and drink alcohol in moderation.<sup>1</sup>

They don't do strenuous exercise, but they do move every day, taking walks and working in their vegetable gardens. People in the Blue Zones would rather walk than drive. Gardening, which involves daily low-intensity movement, is a practice almost all of them have in common.

## The 80 percent secret

One of the most common sayings in Japan is “Hara hachi bu,” which is repeated before or after eating and means something like “Fill your belly to 80 percent.” Ancient wisdom advises against eating until we are full. This is why Okinawans stop eating when they feel their stomachs reach 80 percent of their capacity, rather than overeating and wearing down their bodies with long digestive processes that accelerate cellular oxidation.

Of course, there is no way to know objectively if your stomach is at 80 percent capacity. The lesson to learn from this saying is that we should stop eating when we are starting to feel full. The extra side dish, the snack we eat when we know in our hearts we don't really need it, the apple pie after lunch—all these will give us pleasure in the short term, but not having them will make us happier in the long term.

The way food is served is also important. By presenting their meals on many small plates, the Japanese tend to eat less. A typical meal in a restaurant in Japan is served in five plates on a tray, four of them very small and the main dish slightly



bigger. Having five plates in front of you makes it seem like you are going to eat a lot, but what happens most of the time is that you end up feeling slightly hungry. This is one of the reasons why Westerners in Japan typically lose weight and stay trim.

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*.



“Want to live longer? Keep super busy. If *hygge* is the art of doing nothing, *ikigai* is the art of doing something—and doing it with supreme focus and joy.” —**NEW YORK POST**

“*Ikigai* urges individuals to simplify their lives by pursuing what sparks joy for them. . . . Much in the same way that *The Life-Changing Magic of Tidying Up* emphasizes ‘choosing what we want to keep, and not what we want to get rid of,’ [*Ikigai*] demonstrates that aging could be an opportunity to keep working, keep smiling, keep active, and keep being social.” —**KONMARI NEWSLETTER**

ISBN 978-0-14-313072-7



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