

The Japanese Concept 'Ikigai' is a Formula for Happiness and Meaning



Melody Wilding, LMSW Nov 30, 2017 · 10 min read ★

Flash back to 2012. You would find me squished between Wall Street bankers on a bus heading out of New York City at the height of rush hour, with a two hour commute ahead. Stress-induced cortisol was the only thing keeping me going. I was the picture of burnout: frazzled, restless, completely emotionally depleted from forcing myself to pursue a lifestyle that was doing more harm than good.

Up until this point, I had rationalized that I was doing the “right” thing — getting “good” grades, going to a “good” school, getting a “good” job. But now, two facts were blatantly clear: (1) Living this way was *not* sustainable and (2) this was *not* what I was meant to spend my life doing.

For many people, striving to find their purpose in life can resemble a similar winding quest, filled with many twists and wrong turns. Some blindly follow passions that aren't based in reality, then wind up feeling discouraged when their dreams don't materialize. Others resign themselves to careers that bring them money and status, but aren't fulfilling. In both cases, over time, their sense of purpose can begin to fade.

And according to recent studies, lacking a sense of purpose can be detrimental to your health (as I found the hard way).

One international study found that that people who have a sense of purpose in life are at lower risk of death and heart disease. Why? Researchers found that those who feel purpose often have healthier lifestyles. They are more motivated and resilient, which protects them from stress and burnout.

Researchers also found that while individuals from the U.S. defined “purpose” as akin to “usefulness to others”, those from Japan were powered by a deeper, more expansive interpretation of happiness. They refer to this as *ikigai* (**pronounce ee-kee-guy**).

What is ikigai?

Like the Danish word *hygge*, there's no simple, direct translation into English for the Japanese word *ikigai*. It roughly means the “thing that you live for” or “the reason for which you get up in the morning.” In a nutshell, it encompasses the idea that happiness in life is about more than money or a fancy job title.

It's easiest to think about *ikiagi* as an intersection, the common ground between:

- What you love
- What you care about
- What the world needs
- What you can get paid for



[credit: [Wikimedia](#)]

Ikigai has a few essential qualities that separate it from the “follow your passion” truism as we conceive of it in Western culture:

- **It's challenging.** Your *ikigai* should lead to mastery and growth.
- **It's your choice.** You feel a certain degree of autonomy and freedom pursuing your *ikigai*.
- **It involves a commitment of time and belief,** perhaps to a particular cause, skill, trade, or group of people.
- **It boosts your well-being.** *Ikigai* is associated with positive relationships and good health. It gives you more energy than it takes away.

In some sense, an *ikigai* can serve as a compass to navigate both career and life

decisions, which it seems people crave for now more than ever. After all, 20% of millennials and 21% of Gen-X's say that doing work they are passionate about is an important long-term goal.

Before you think this sounds too pie-in-the-sky, consider what one researcher noted: *ikigai* is often not something grand or extraordinary. What better way, then, to discover a sustainable passion than by finding your *ikigai*?

Steps to find your *ikigai*

Understandably, once people become familiar with the concept of *ikigai*, they want to dive right in, tackle defining it like a discrete project, then leap into action based on the results of that project.

But it's important to understand that figuring out your *ikigai* doesn't happen overnight. Rather than being something that you magically discover, your purpose unfolds and will evolve over time.

That's not an excuse to sit back and expect your *ikigai* to present itself. Finding it requires a willingness for deep self-exploration and experimentation, and there are ways to work on that. Thoughtful reflection combined with action-taking can help you to uncover how your values, strengths, and skills can be brought to the foreground to help you find more meaning in your life and career—and the balance of *ikigai*.

Here's a 5-step process on how to foster the right mind set to let your *ikigai* develop.

1. Start with questions.

Grab a journal and ask yourself the following questions:

- What do you love? (These speak to your passion.)
- What are you good at? (These speak to your profession.)
- What does the world need? (These speak to your mission.)
- What can you get paid for? (These speak to your vocation.)

You don't have to force yourself to come up with answers in one sitting. In fact, it's more productive to take your time.

Over the course of a few days or weeks, take notes as ideas and insights come to you. Most importantly, be radically honest with yourself. Don't be afraid to jot down whatever comes to mind, no matter how crazy or irrational it might seem right now.

If those questions aren't sparking as much insight as you would like, try these:

- What would you like to see change in the world?
- What, in your life as it is now, makes you happy?
- Why do you get out of bed in the morning?
- Have you had any life-changing moments that provided a lightning bolt of clarity?

Be sure to include other life or career experiences that significantly inform your values.

After you've answered these questions thoughtfully, start to look for patterns. What kinds of themes are apparent? Are there obvious intersections among categories, or do they seem disparate? If clear links aren't evident, don't worry — that's normal. This process will take time.

It can be hard to see yourself objectively, which is where getting outside feedback comes in. I asked family and friends to anonymously tell me what they saw as my three best qualities. Taking assessments like StrengthsFinder and the VIA character strengths survey also helped me identify (and create a vocabulary around) my skills and traits.

Ironically, qualities about myself that I took for granted were precisely what others saw as unique and valuable. Instead of downplaying my knack for empathy, their comments nudged me to look deeper at how I could leverage my sensitivity as a strength and pivot my career to focus on coaching, teaching, and writing.

2. Map it out.

Mapping out your answers to the questions above is helpful, especially if you feel

stuck. There are all sorts of ways to create a map; experiment with whatever makes visual sense to you.

Some people find it helpful to draw interlocking circles for each category (a Venn diagram, like the one above), while others like to map it on a quadrant, writing ideas that meet multiple criteria near the intersection of the axes. The map doesn't have to be beautiful. It just has to organize your thoughts. This is a living document, so it will change and evolve over time. As you start to test your *ikigai* in the real world, you will strike out things and add others.

Because I'm much more of a experiential learner rather than logical planner, I spent some time thinking through and mapping out my Ideal Day. This involves describing what your ideal *typical* workday looks like in as much detail as possible (remember, an *ikigai* is pragmatic). In other words, you visualize what an energizing day living your *ikigai* might entail.

When I went through this exercise, it was eye opening. I realized I'd love nothing more than to start my day at the gym, followed by working from home. I'd alternate between days of deep work on creative projects and days filled with coaching clients.

Although this was a far cry from my current reality of frantically commuting back-and-forth to New York City, I started making small changes by picking elements of my ideal day to bring to life. For example, I took back control of my calendar, blocking out two hours a week to focus on writing projects.

Over time, these incremental adjustments add up—and move you closer to living a more personally meaningful life.

3. See if it feels right.

Whether you're holding a list or a map or something else from the steps above, reflect and do a gut check.

Gordon Matthews, an anthropologist and *ikigai* researcher, says he uses an intuitive approach to examine his own life. On an occasional basis he checks in with himself about his *ikigai*: "*How's it going? What's bothering me? What's really going on now?*"

These are worthwhile questions to ask, whether you determined your *ikigai* forty years ago or you're just learning about the concept now. If you're on an initial *ikigai* fact-

finding journey, integrating instinctive nudges with logic-driven thinking can lead to a deeper, more coherent sense of purpose.

One of my favorite tools for straddling left- and right- brain perspectives is a design thinking tool called the Odyssey Plan, created by Stanford professors Bill Burnett and Dave Evans.

In an Odyssey Plan exercise for *ikigai*, you “try on” three different paths, or in this case, three different visions of *ikigai*, to see what they feel like.

Start by listing three different descriptions of your possible *ikigai*. The first one should reflect your current path, while the second and third should reflect what you'd choose if money or other people expectations didn't matter. Most of my clients prefer to use the worksheet available on the Designing Your Life website or you can sketch your own. Then, rank how you feel about each *ikigai* path based on:

- How much you like it
- How confident you are in it
- Whether it fits with your life-, work-, and world-view

Burnett and Evans note that approaching your purpose as an 'odyssey' is not only a playful way to evaluate your current path, but it's also a reminder that your *ikigai* evolves as you grow as a person.

4. Test it

The payoff to finding your *ikigai* is in living it out. Like any aspiration, it doesn't happen through introspection alone. You have to commit to consistent action in order to make strides—and also to make adjustments along the way to continue to grow.

Once you've arrived at a working idea about your *ikigai*, it's time to take some action in the real world to test if following this life purpose is *actually* something you will find meaningful and fulfilling.

This may involve shifting priorities or exploring new directions. For example, maybe you opt to travel less and prioritize family time. Perhaps you start a new business that combines multiple interests. You might find yourself changing careers entirely if your

current focus does not overlap with your *ikigai*.

In my case, saying 'yes' to my *ikigai* required saying 'no' more often. I had to strip away certain commitments in order to fully focus on my priorities. It meant creating rock solid boundaries to protect my time and allow me to enter a psychological flow state where my *ikigai* could come to life.

When you begin to take steps towards your goal, your *ikigai* will be tested, and that's a very good thing. Author Neil Pasricha suggests running your *ikigai* through the Saturday Morning Test:

The Saturday Morning Test is your answer to one simple question: What do you do on a Saturday morning when you have nothing to do?

Make sure your *ikigai* is something you'd find yourself blissfully drawn to on a rare day off.

5. Build your support system

As with most of life's transitions, it's critical to have support while consciously developing your sense of *ikigai*.

If you've decided to work towards another career — turning a side project into a full-time endeavor, for instance—it's crucial to have mentors guiding you, as well as to have caring people in your corner.

Cultivate a relationship with someone who has made a similar career transition. Ask about their experience making the leap. Which aspects of it were the most challenging and the most rewarding?

I use author Molly Beck's RO (Reach Out) strategy to build meaningful relationships with other coaches, writers, and thought leaders I admire. Many of these have blossomed into great friendships with people I can turn to with questions or for moral support when I hit inevitable rough patches.

Reminders on the road to finding your “sweet spot”

Try to be non-judgmental about your ikigai.

If you find your sense of purpose through devotion to your career, that's wonderful. It doesn't mean that your family, friends, or spirituality are not important to you, and that you shouldn't make time for them. It simply means that a large part of the “thing that you live for” stems from the sense of reward and accomplishment you get from the things you take on through your vocation and profession.

Not every moment of every day will be blissful.

Keep in mind that even as you pursue your sense of purpose, not every moment of every day will be easy or even enjoyable. Regardless of the changes you've made in your career or life, you'll likely still have to make tradeoffs and compromises from time to time. If you're connected with your sense of purpose most of the time, though, you'll be more resilient and keep bad days in perspective.

Let your ikigai be your guide

An *ikigai*, in some ways, is like a compass. Aligning your actions with the “thing that you live for” helps you navigate life ups-and-downs. As your career evolves and you're presented with more opportunities, you can rely on your *ikigai* to steer you in the right direction.

Remember to evaluate your sense of happiness and purpose at every step along the way. By seeking growth that fits your sense of purpose, you pursue health and happiness as well.