

# Discovering the Healing Potential: Integrating Ikigai into Medical Humanities

Project Report

Submitted by

Lakshmi Gayathri K (Reg. No. SB21CE016)

Under the guidance of

Ms. Neena George

*In partial fulfilment of requirements for award of the degree*

*Of Bachelor of Arts*

St. Teresa's College (Autonomous), Ernakulam



College With Potential for

Excellence Accredited by NAAC with 'A++' Grade

Affiliated to

Mahatma Gandhi University

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## Declaration

I do affirm that the project “Discovering the Healing Potential: Integrating Ikigai into Medical Humanities” submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirement for the award of the Bachelor of Arts degree in English Literature and Communication Studies has not previously formed the basis for the award of any degree, diploma, fellowship or any other similar title or recognition.

Ernakulam

Lakshmi Gayathri K

22 March 2024

Reg. No: SB21CE016

B.A. English Literature and Communication Studies

St. Teresa’s College (Autonomous)

## Certificate

I hereby certify that this project entitled “Understanding Ikigai and the Medical Humanities” by Lakshmi Gayathri K is a record of bonafide work carried out by her under my supervision and guidance.



Ernakulam

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "N. George".

Ms. Neena George

22 March 2024

Department of Communicative English

St. Teresa's College (Autonomous)

## Acknowledgement

I take this opportunity to offer my humble prayers and thanks to God Almighty for His mercy and blessings for the completion of this project.

I am deeply grateful to Rev. Dr.Sr. Vinitha, CSST, Provincial Superior and Manager, St. Teresa's College (Autonomous), Ernakulam, for her kind cooperation and I am highly indebted to Rev. Sr. Emeline, CSST, Director, St. Teresa's College (Autonomous), Ernakulam and Dr. Alphonsa Vijaya Joseph, Principal, St. Teresa's College (Autonomous), Ernakulam for their unconditional support and encouragement during my course of study in this institution.

I am extremely grateful to Ms. Allu Alfred, Head of the Department of Communicative English, St. Teresa's College (Autonomous) for the valuable suggestions and guidance provided by her in fulfilling this project. I am profoundly indebted to my guide for her constant support and help for the successful completion of this project.

I am extremely thankful to my supervising guide, Ms. Neena George, Department of Communicative English for her guidance and to all the teachers of the department for their valuable help rendered for the successful completion of this project.

Last but not the least, I wish to express my gratitude to my friends and family for their love and support.

Lakshmi Gayathri K

## Abstract

The project investigates the concept of Ikigai, within the context of medical humanities, aiming to explore its implications for individual well-being and healthcare practices. The Japanese term, Ikigai roughly translates as "a reason for being" or "sense of purpose." It's a concept that encourages people to discover what truly matters to them and help them live a life filled with purpose and joy. Ikigai holds profound significance in Japanese culture and has gained attention for its potential health benefits. The people of Japan believe that everyone has an Ikigai – a reason to jump out of bed each morning.

The significant role of Ikigai in promoting physical, emotional, and social health is examined well. The project aims to deepen the understanding of human fulfilment and offer insights into improving healthcare outcomes and patient well-being through Ikigai and medical humanities.

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## Chapter 1

### Introduction

Exploring Ikigai: Unravelling Life's Meaning and Its Impact on Well-being".

The primary aim of this research project is to investigate the correlation between Ikigai and Medical Humanities. The study delves into the significance of Ikigai in individuals' lives and its influence on their health and overall well-being.

Ikigai is a Japanese term that blends two words: “iki ” meaning “ to live,” and “ gai ” meaning “ a reason to live. ” It’s a concept that encourages people to discover what truly matters to them and to live a life filled with purpose and joy. The people of Japan believe that everyone has an Ikigai – a reason to jump out of bed each morning.

The International bestseller book, Ikigai - The Japanese Secret to a long and Happy Life by Hector Garcia and Francesc Miralles introduces the Japanese culture and the secrets behind the long and happy life of the Okinawans. Hence, it is experimental, everyday life phenomena that relates to one’s reason for being or the life purpose.

The book was originally published on 2016, and later making it the International bestseller with 105 million copies being sold worldwide. The book describes Ikigai as an Art of Living. Ikigai is not merely a concept or philosophy, but rather a comprehensive approach to life. Viewing Ikigai as an "Art of Living" implies that it requires cultivation, creativity, and continual refinement.

The book helps in discovering one’s Ikigai. It is believed that there is a strong passion inside a person, a unique talent that gives meaning to his days and drives him to share the best of himself until the very end.

Ikigai was introduced to the Japanese public by psychiatrist Dr. Mieko Kamia. She chose this word because of its uniqueness as it was hard to express in other languages. In late 1950's while Dr. Kamia was treating patients with leprosy, she began to wonder why some people can remain hopeful even being in difficult situations but others could not. On her search, she could reveal that patients who were in touch with Ikigai were able to have such hope and overcome their terrible circumstances. She emphasised that, this Ikigai cannot be understood without a living experience. It is a feeling that arises in your body when living on a mission. Dr. Kamia emphasises that Ikigai is not a logical or philosophical concept, it is an experimental one. This perspective echoes in Dr. Ken Mogy's book, "The Little Book of Ikigai." Dr. Mogy highlights that contemporary Japanese society has veered away from experiencing Ikigai in their everyday lives, increasingly fixated on external goals due to globalization and technological advancements.

According to a Japanese proverb, “only staying active will make you want to live a hundred years.” (Héctor Garcia & Francesco Miralles , Ikigai 2017) It implies that maintaining an active lifestyle is crucial for longevity and a fulfilling life. It suggests to remain engaged in physical, mental, and social pursuits as it contributes to the overall well-being and the desire to live a long and meaningful life.

The initial encounter with the above mentioned book occurred two years back, in the year 2021. From that moment, existed an anticipation to own a personal copy. The aesthetic allure of the book's design and binding proved captivating. The routine of reading two to five pages daily, a consistent practice of literary engagement began to manifest. Each session offered insights into Japanese cultures, customs, and traditions, sparking a profound fascination with the subject matter. The immersive nature of the text evoked a sense of vicarious experience within the cultural landscape of Japan. The book served as a catalyst for personal development, prompting introspection and the cultivation of new habits. The

integration of the book's teachings into daily life prompted experimentation, resulting in discernible enhancements and a burgeoning sense of satisfaction.

The concluding pages of the book posed a profound question, a mission or a challenge to discover. The authors of this book advise to follow one's inner Ikigai. The quotation in the book, "If you don't know your Ikigai yet, as Victor Frankl says, your mission is to discover it" encompasses the idea of uncovering one's Ikigai, or sense of purpose, which is essential for a fulfilling life. Victor Frankl, a distinguished psychiatrist and Holocaust survivor, understood the importance of finding meaning even in the face of adversity. Frankl's assertion suggests that if an individual has not yet identified their Ikigai, their mission becomes the pursuit of discovering it.

Feeling overwhelmed by questions and uncertainties, various thoughts emerged: What defines Ikigai? How is it found? How can its essence be recognized? However, it was the presence of these questions that motivated to continue and led to the discovery of Ikigai. The book opened up new perspectives to the public.

The encounter with one of the authors of the book, Francesc Miralles, at the Kerala Literature Festival (KLF-2023), was a moment of profound gratitude and blessing. Attending his lectures on the book, Ikigai, and obtaining an autograph from him added to the sense of privilege. Learning of the author's visit to India, particularly to Kerala, sparked great happiness and curiosity. Travelling all the way from Kochi to Calicut in desire to meet the author made to wait for his appearance at the venue. Upon meeting him, a polite greeting of "Hello Ladies...?" was received. Despite the limited conversation his warm greeting and radiant smile illuminated the moment, making it truly memorable.

By the end of the thesis, the meaning of life will be explored, along with uncovering the secret behind a long and happy life.

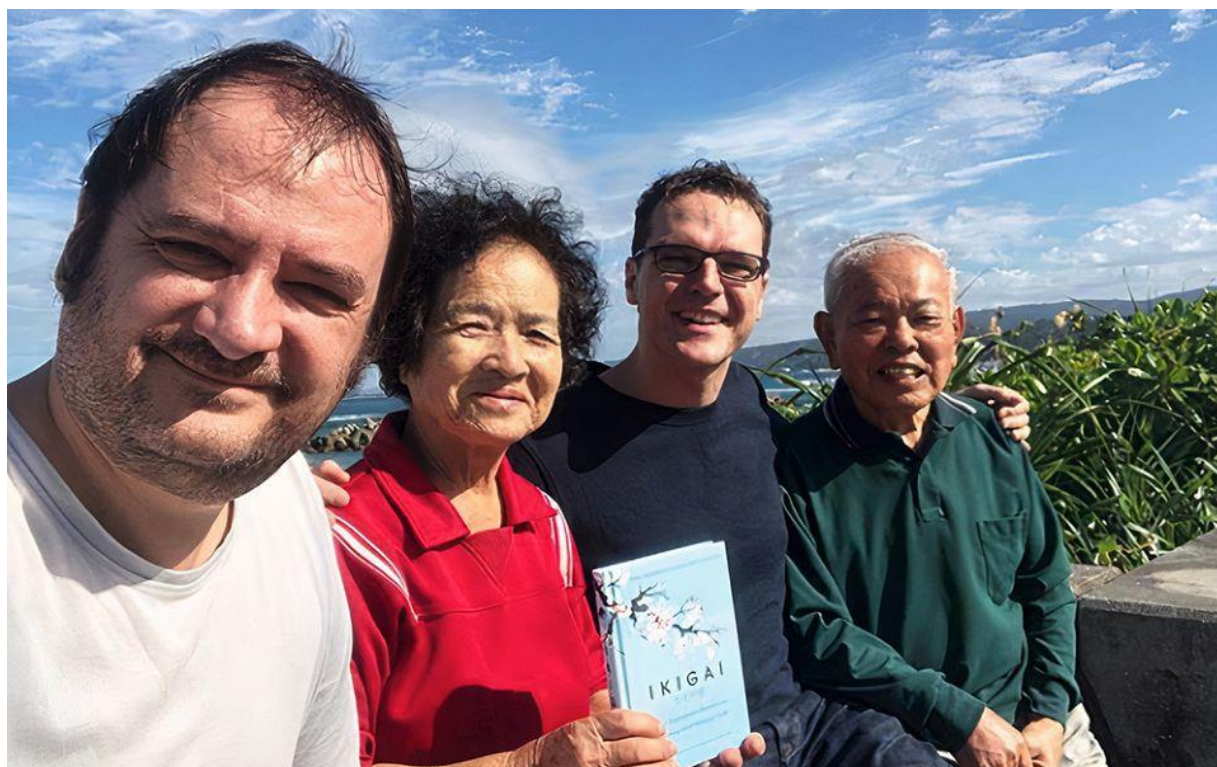


Figure 1.1 Héctor Garcia (second from the right) and Francesco Miralles (far left) with the elderly residents of Ogimi Village in Okinawa.

The autograph received from the author, Francesc Miralles is being attached below.

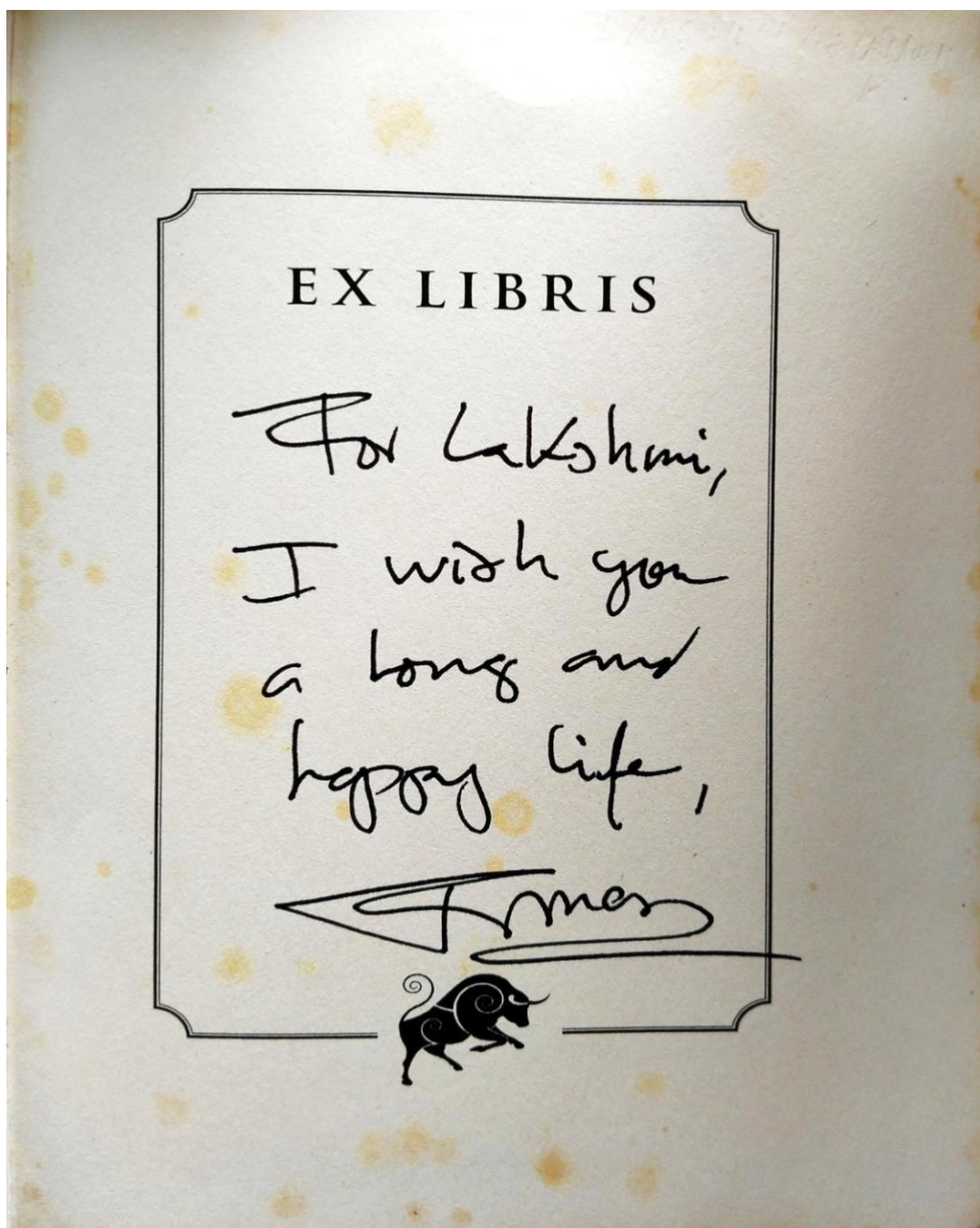


Figure 1.2 Autograph of the author, Francesc Miralles.



## Chapter 2

### Featuring Okinawa, Japan: Do you have an Ikigai?

Ikigai is a Japanese concept, which roughly translates as “the happiness of always being busy.” It is true that, one can stay young if they are active without retiring from their passion. Do you know which country has the highest rate of people over the age of 100? The International bestseller book, *Ikigai - The Japanese Secret to a long and Happy Life* by Hector Garcia and Francesc Miralles book deals with explanation of the extraordinary longevity of the Japanese, especially on the island of Okinawa. Okinawa has around 24.55 people over the age of 100. The inhabitants of the Okinawa Island in the south of Japan live longer than people anywhere else in the world.



Figure 2.1 An elderly woman of Okinawa region who is above 100 years.

People of Okinawa have a way of life. As mentioned earlier people of Japan believe that everyone has an Ikigai, a reason to jump out of bed each morning. Ikigai is considered to be the reason behind their long and happy life. The book says that a clearly defined Ikigai

brings satisfaction, happiness, and meaning to our lives. The book shares insights from Japanese philosophy on the lasting health of body, mind and spirit. Living in Japan, it will be amazed to see that even after they retire from working, many people still stay active and continue doing what they enjoy for as long as they can stay healthy. There is, in fact, no word in Japanese that means retire in the sense of “leaving the workforce for good” as in English.

Dan Buettner, who is a reporter for National Geographic and familiar with Japan, says that having a purpose in life is really important in Japanese culture. According to Dan Buettner, Japanese society values the concept of Ikigai, which encompasses finding meaning, fulfilment, and direction in one's life. Having a clear sense of purpose not only guides individuals in their daily pursuits but also contributes to their overall well-being and longevity.

In fact, the concept of retirement as we know it doesn't really exist there. Okinawa is considered as the Island of Eternal youth. It is otherwise called the Blue Zones, the geographical regions where people live longest. Some research on longevity studies indicates that being part of a supportive community and having a clear sense of purpose in life (Ikigai) are just as crucial as following the healthy Japanese diet (known for its health benefits). People in Okinawa live longer than most people in the world and they have fewer health problems like cancer and heart disease. They also don't suffer as much from inflammation. Many of the older adults are very healthy and energetic, which is surprising for their age. Women have fewer severe symptoms during menopause, and both men and women have higher levels of hormones related to sex for a longer time. The rate of dementia in these areas is much lower than in other places around the world. Ikigai plays an important role in the health and longevity of the Okinawans. The Okinawans belief in Ikigai gives them a reason to get up every day and helps them stay healthy and live longer, which makes them wanted to live up to a hundred years and more.

What factors makes the Okinawans live a hundred years and more? According to Scientists who researched on Okinawa, the factors that make a life of longevity are the diet, exercise, finding a purpose in life (Ikigai) and forming strong social bonds like a group of friends in the community and having some good family relations. Three of the regions in Okinawa are islands, due to which there is scarcity of enough resources. So, the communities are forced to help each other, hence the people always have strong bond with everyone in the community. The members of the Okinawan community follow “The 80 percent secret” in their food culture. The 80 percent secret is the method of filling your belly only up to the 80 percent of their capacity. It is an ancient wisdom that advises against eating until we are full. The Okinawans stop eating when they feel their stomachs are about 80 percent full. This helps in preventing overeating and avoiding the long digestion that can make their bodies age faster.

Indians normally have the habit of eating their meals until their stomach is full. According to the Indian culture, eating meals heavily is considered as healthy and eating less food was believed to be unhealthy or insufficient.

It is said that what we eat apart from our daily meals, for example eating snacks in between meals will give us pleasure in short term and not on the long run. Apart from knowing what to eat, the way how the food is served also considered important. This is because, in Japan people tend to eat in small plates so that the amount of quantity the Japanese consumed will be less. The meals in a Japanese restaurant is served in five plates, four being very small and the main dish, being slightly bigger in size. This kind of serving will give the customers a satisfaction of eating full at the same time helping them to consume less quantity of food. New studies by food experts show that Okinawans eat fewer calories than people in the United States, about 1,800 to 1,900 each day. They also have lower body



weights compared to Americans. Okinawans mainly eat tofu, sweet potatoes, fish (three times a week), and lots of vegetables every day.

The above factors contribute to the longevity of Okinawans, thus enabling them to live to the age of hundred and beyond.



Figure 2.2 An elderly women being engaged with the vegetables of her garden.

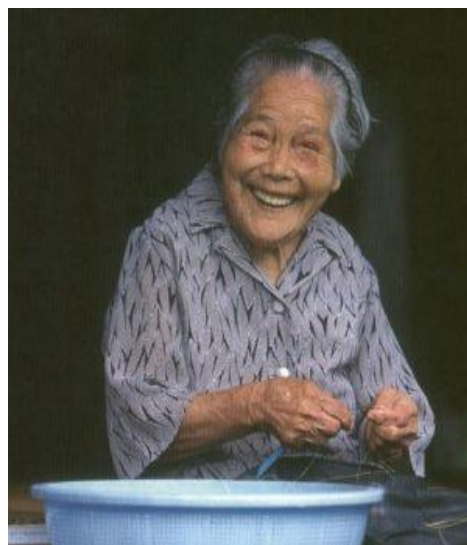


Figure 2.3 Older women being busy with her chores.

## Chapter 3

### Harmonizing Health and Humanity: Exploring Ikigai in Medical Practice

Father of modern medicine Hippocrates, a physician, believed in humoral medicine. The concept of medical humanities originated in the late 1960s when a group of individuals critiqued medical education and dedicated themselves to proactive measures to reform the existing landscape. Medical humanities encompass an interdisciplinary field comprising pure humanities (Literature, History, Philosophy), social sciences (Sociology, Anthropology, Cultural Studies), and arts (Visual Arts, Performing Arts).

Medical humanity is concerned with whole patient and not only his symptoms and science, through having an insight into his socio-cultural background experiences values, beliefs, spirituality and emotions. Medical humanity expected to promote betterment of medical practice, clinical competency and professionalism. It is applied to achieve some of the goals of medical education and practice. It aims at understanding health, illness, sufferings, death, disability and recovery of health care issues from a non-bio-medical approach.

The essence of medical humanities is the formation of culturally competent Doctor, who sees his patient as individuals with distinct social, philosophical, spiritual and psychological background, i.e., a whole person and not a constellation of symptoms and science. Major theme of medical humanities is “Caring Medicine” in contrast to the “Curative Medicine” – theme of biomedical sciences. An article published in 1927 remarks that scientific knowledge alone, is not sufficient for proper care of patients as it does not investigate the human as a whole. Various journals are now being published in medical humanities. “The Medical Humanities” by Springer stands as the top journal. The concept of professionalism needs skills, such as empathy, efficient communication, critical thinking and judgement. These

skills are related by a way or another to medical humanities. For example, reading Literature may promote empathy.

The International Bestseller book, “Ikigai – The Japanese Secret to a Long and Happy Life”, by the authors, Hector Garcia and Francesc Miralles explores the Japanese concept of finding one's purpose in life and living with meaning. It delves into the secrets of longevity and happiness. Medical humanities can be related with this book because both the authors talk about how people find their purpose in life and what makes them happy.

Medical humanities in Ikigai, help us understand how the sense of purpose affects people's health and well-being. It also looks at how culture, history, and ethics play a part in this.

"Ikigai" encourages readers to reflect on their passions, talents, and values to uncover their own Ikigai and live a more purposeful life.

The connection between Medical Humanities and the Ikigai book lies in understanding how finding purpose and meaning in life impacts health and well-being of individuals.

The concept of Ikigai underscores the importance of balance and harmony in life. It promotes a holistic approach to health and happiness. The Japanese culture plays an important role on the concept of Ikigai. In Japan, people value the idea of Ikigai, that is having a special reason to wake up in the morning every day and live each day happily with purpose. The pursuit of Ikigai is often associated with longevity and overall well-being in Japanese culture.

In Japan, finding your Ikigai is believed to have a long and happy life by living with purpose, doing things that make you happy, and staying close to each other. It brings them immense joy and happiness. Ikigai ensures fulfilment in life by pursuing one's passions, talents, and values. In the Japanese society, Ikigai deeply focuses on the idea of finding purpose and meaning in everyday life.

Based on information from the UN National Library of Medicine, having an Ikigai is linked to many health advantages for older people. These include lower chances of getting depression, dementia, disabilities, and heart problems.

### Building Mental Fortitude: The Essential Role of Resilience

Resilience is a concept of mental condition that is widely accepted by the psychologists. An individual with a clearly defined Ikigai can focus on their passion no matter what they never give up, in any adverse conditions or situations. Resilience is not just the ability to persevere, it is an outlook that can be cultivated to stay focused on the important things in life rather than focussing on the urgent things that create negative emotions. To confront the ups and downs in our lives, we need proper training for our body, mind and emotional resilience, that i.e., we should have the ability to deal with setbacks.

### Cultivating Emotional Well-being Through Meditation

Normally people are not supposed to worry about things that are beyond their control. A clear sense of what we can do and what we cannot do must be realised. If we never realise it, people will be gifted with negative emotions.

Epictetus quoted, “It’s not what happens to you, but how you react that matters.”

In “Buddhism”, Meditation has found a way in which we become aware of our desires and emotions and thus free ourselves from them. Thus, we can train ourselves to get away from anger, jealousy and resentment.

## Chapter 4

### Illuminating Insights and Constraints: Exploring Ikigai

A national wide longitudinal study of Japanese older adults was conducted by Japan Gerontological Evaluation Study (JAGES) in the year 2013 and on subsequent outcomes were assessed continuously for three years. Adults above the age of 65 years were allowed to participate for the evaluation who were connected with Ikigai. The findings of the evaluation were concluded after three years follow up. The adults who were having Ikigai were associated with a 31% lower risk of developing functional disability, 36% lower risk of developing dementia. During the three year follow up, it resulted in decreased depressive symptoms and higher level of happiness, life satisfaction, instrumental activity of daily living and certain social outcomes.

The Tsurugaya Project was initiated to test the sense of life worth living (Ikigai) and incident functional disabilities in elderly Japanese persons. The aim of the present study was to investigate the association between Ikigai and incident functional disabilities among elderly persons. The study was conducted with 830 elderly Japanese persons above seventy years in the year 2003. After 12 years follow up assessment, it was found that, Ikigai is significantly associated with a lower risk of incident functional disability. Among 830 participants, 640 felt Ikigai, 163 were uncertain and 27 did not feel Ikigai. The result showed that, the participants who felt Ikigai did not show a tendency of obvious depressive symptoms. This project was supported by ministry of Japan and it can be relied on.

On research, as per the behavioural medicine research council (Freedland KE, 2019), it has been found that Ikigai is good for mental health. It is found to be a protective factor in overcoming stress, anxiety, and other psychological problems. It also shows lower incidents of psychological disorders and slower age related deformities.

Researches on Ikigai has been consistently found positively associated with better physical health. (McKnight & Kashdan, 2009), (Heintzelman, 2013) , (Hill & Turiano, 2014)

Ikigai has been linked to the following: 1) faster recovery from knee surgery, 2) lower risk of disability in old age, 3) greater odds of survival in myocardial infarction, 4) better immune functioning, 5) better subjective health and health related quality of life, 6) lower levels of allostatic load.

Also, Ikigai is associated with more health promoting behaviours such as exercising, refraining from smoking and stronger belief that one has control over one's health.

Ikigai has its own limitations. Despite the reported benefits of Ikigai, this field is limited by the quality of research evidences. Major challenge of researches in Ikigai is that, it is hard to operate because of its subjective nature and it is difficult to have a correct measurement. The measurement can be observed only on the basis of living experiences and these measures were limited to Japanese public. It cannot be compared or mixed up with other cultures and there is no publishing or researches done showing the presence of Ikigai in western populations. The other limitation of Ikigai is that, the meaning of Ikigai is unique. The complete meaning of Ikigai could only be expressed fully in the Japanese language. So, it has been always argued that this word cannot be exactly translated into English. This is the difficulty that it could not be explored or researched in the western populations. The lack of imperial evidence surrounding Ikigai research has also limited the ability to which casual conclusions can be made. Existing literature on Ikigai has relied on anecdotal evidence or cross-sectional data. More longitudinal researches are to be followed to understand the concept of Ikigai properly.

Lastly, most important limitation of Ikigai is that, it does not have a role once a person is treated for an illness, but definitely the scope of Ikigai can be placed along with the

medical treatment of a person. To an extent, Ikigai can improve the mental condition of the person who is undergoing a treatment and giving chances to recover from the illness. This way, Ikigai is indirectly connected to a person who is undergoing a medical treatment.



Figure 4.1 Venn diagram featured in the book, *Ikigai: The Japanese Secret to a Long and Happy Life*.

According to Garcia, the Venn diagram featured in his book, developed by American Entrepreneur Marc Winn, serves as a valuable tool for discovering one's Ikigai. By categorizing aspects of life into "what you love," "what the world needs," "what you can be paid for," and "what you are good at," individuals can effectively sort their thoughts. For instance, a passion for cooking coupled with culinary skills may fulfil both the categories of meeting societal needs and potential employment. Even if it's challenging to satisfy all four categories simultaneously, maintaining awareness of them can enrich one's Ikigai, leading to greater fulfilment.

## Chapter 5

### Conclusion

The primary aim of this research project was to investigate the relationship between Ikigai and Medical Humanities. In the initial two chapters, various factors contributing to a healthy life were discussed. Subsequently, the fourth chapter delved into the limitations and findings of the research. It has become evident that Ikigai significantly impacts an individual's life and influences their overall health. The examination of Ikigai within the framework of medical humanities uncovers a profound connection between personal purpose and holistic well-being. This study underscores how Ikigai, or one's sense of purpose, plays a pivotal role in fostering both physical and emotional well-being. Embracing Ikigai in healthcare promotes empathy and patient-centered care, thereby enhancing the quality of healthcare provision. The integration of Ikigai into medical humanities presents a promising avenue for advancing individual and societal well-being.

The presence of a purpose in life has been shown to enhance the health and well-being of individuals residing in the Okinawa region. In conclusion, this research substantiates the connection between Ikigai and Medical Humanities, demonstrating their integral roles in promoting both physical health and emotional happiness.



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