

# **Ikigai- The Japanese Art of Story-Telling as a Way of Life**

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Story-telling has been an art in itself from time immemorial. The origins of literature are based on the idea that story-telling has enhanced the very quality of life and hobby alike. It is both an instruction and a source of knowledge and information. Story-telling has sub-genres within itself. Language is woven into creative and real-incident based stories. In order to create a visually appealing effect, stories were narrated as instances and recorded as events in the pages of history.

Literature has always been full of stories which are depictive of a certain age and clime. Stories innately capture the mood and narration of the narrator. The point of view is a literary device which is of great prominence and significance in literature. In psychological terms, it is also known as Sensory or Cognitive appeal. Cognitive appeal explains itself in a situation which has implications of a serious kind.

Raison de etre or the joie de vivre of life is that aspect which constitutes the meaning and living of life in true terms. It is highly synonymous with the philosophy of ikigai.

According to Psychology, Cognitive Appeal is that emotion which presents truth in the form of a priori or premise. Truth is examined and based on a logical conclusion. There is no room for scepticism or doubt. It relates to the innate ability to do things with confidence and with the spirit of achievement. The most advantageous aspect is that cognitive appeal triggers off the aspect of creativity. It helps one reach the unimaginable, and also attain the unattainable.

Based on these aspects of Cognition, is another line of thought brought forth by the authors of the famous book "Ikigai", Hector Garcia and Francesc Miralles. Their philosophy is centred around Logotherapy which is a famous line of thought that generates the idea of helping patients generate the purpose of their very life battling through and conquering their neuroses. The past has to be conquered and let go in order to break free from the shackles of the mind. Only this could aid in the development of the mind and its obsessions. This therapy requires a certain amount of courage on the part of the speaker or narrator as it helps him/her face problems upfront and decide on bettering their own fate and self. It is as powerful as becoming a catalyst for change. Logotherapy is the aspect of always being happy and contented by being busy.

My paper examines the blending of three elements to form a wholeness ensuring longevity of life, the result of which is a live precept of the long life of Okinawans. This is also known as Logo Therapy in literature or the "joie de vivre of life" in general terms.

Just as the famous English proverb goes, “the busy bee has no time for sorrow”, it is synonymous with life itself. One needs to always engage in some work in order to keep away from lethargy or idleness. This not only builds a healthy body in a healthy mind but also keeps the mind active and engaging in good thoughts and ideas. This book *Ikigai*, is full of ideas and Epithets that help in wisdom- building. Simple living and healthy eating habits are the distinguishing factors for a person’s success in life both materially and physically.

The time-tested method of bringing longevity to a person’s life is by consuming green tea, living a good life in the outdoors with a sub-tropical climate. The most important ingredient is to avoid taking on stress which has been a witness in the island of Okinawa that has a prized possession of having many centenarians. The disciplined life that people led and the consumption of the fruit called *shiku wasa* which is full of antioxidant properties takes the cake. Happiness is part of the mysterious process of contentment and satisfaction in this book, *Ikigai*. This process comes because of the idea that *bunagayas* or forest tribes lived a life based on their own premise and *priori*.

The “Reason for Being” is referred to as the idea of possessing four things or aspects namely passion, mission, profession and vocation. The simplest philosophy embedded is that one should not think of retiring from life at all. In other words, one should never cease to do what one enjoys. The ultimate bliss lies in feeling satisfied with the choices of our own lives, finding identity and purpose in life is the final goal and contentment. Disciplined and controlled eating is another practice that the Okinawans would vouch for, filling only 80 percent of their stomach with food. This ensures in better digestive capacities with reduced oxidation levels for the body. It is one of the time-tested remedies for giving longevity to the body. Filling food in five small plates is quite appetising but at the same time, the body will not have a tendency to overeat. It seems to be a visually appealing sight though in reality, only half of the food can be consumed. This is the real secret behind the effective eating habits of the Japanese. Alongside this, non-inflammatory and disease prevention foods like Tofu, Fish, sweet potatoes, vegetables are consumed. This philosophy of *Ikigai* is synonymous with the principle of Epicurus or Epicureanism which believes in the ideology that there should be a complete elimination of pain and sufferings which are eminent in life. This is inclusive of the removal of both “Aponia” and “Ataraxia”. “Aponia” refers to physical pain and “Ataraxia” refers to mental pain in Epicurean terminology. The root cause of this pain is that of excessive indulgence in desires of the mind and body. Terms such as “Tetrapharmakos” refers to the avoidance of pain and nervousness coupled with fear. A clear distinction should be drawn between the necessary pleasures of life and the unnecessary ones.

Community-living is an important contributor to a happy life. They are the preceptors of happiness. This theme is one of the leading leitmotifs in the *Ikigai* principle. ‘Moai’ is the term accorded to the communities within the group of the Okinawans. Their community faith and benefit programs are amazing. They have formed groups wherein they mutually fulfil each other’s social and religious goals. Banking upon the support and cooperation of each other in times of crisis adds to the aspect of good community-living. This impinges upon ‘mind fulfilment’ according to the experts in psychological research. The point that they reiterate is on the aspect of the Fulfilled Life Scale or FLS. Their work is being published in the research journal, “Frontiers in Psychology”. The three most important factors are

self, life and legacy; while the remaining categories are wholeness, fit and value. According to them, if all these factors are being met, then an individual is contented. Ikigai also follows this same principle.

Prone ness to stress is another causative factor for many disease conditions. Simple things like going to school and pursuing an education causes untold stress in young children. This could have been avoided. Healthy cells are damaged as a result of this activity. Cell ageing happens due to the projection of intense stress levels. The other major repercussions include problems such as high blood pressure and psychosomatic problems. Another disease provoking condition includes, the modern lifestyle disease- excessive sitting and less of physical activity in office-related conditions.

The Okinawans strictly follow the regimen of having a sound sleep for 9 hours a day. During this process, a hormone called melatonin is being released which triggers off the production of antioxidant properties and strengthens the nervous system. This helps the body and mind to get recharged. Osteoporosis and Alzheimer's disease is unknown to this place. The people of this place are greatly active mentally. The natural anti-ageing remedies are possessing a positive attitude and very high emotional awareness. These two aspects can take a person very far. Facing any amount of challenge with a positive frame of mind helps in reducing stress and anxiety to a great extent. The true witness to a person who surpassed all numbers and lived up to the ripe old age of 111 is a Japanese native called Alexander Imich. He has vouched for retaining the healthy practices of eating and longevity.

There is always a constant quest for seeking satisfaction or contentment in life which is the ultimate goal for any human being. Past achievements and future plans carry a conglomerate that can become a guiding force for other things, the idea that if someone is living a life, can also battle problems concerning it. Logotherapy also seeks to eliminate one's thoughts of suicide and this meaning of life can never be created, instead it can be discovered. It works to such a great extent that a son could save his mother from suicidal and destructive thoughts. Incidentally, the son had a motivation to live in order to discover the shaping of his future. One's loss could have been another's gain too.

Morita Therapy is another way of projecting one's life in a positive frame of mind. The ways of dealing with different types of emotions are part of this therapy. It basically emphasises on the aspect of Occupational Therapy for the benefit of both mind and body. The silence projected by the patient is itself a rejuvenating one. It creates the feel of divorcing oneself from the clutter of emotions that man is made up of. Keeping a tab on the emotions will go a long way in stabilizing it too. For instance, if one withholds one's anger for three days, then it is an effective way to calm down. The pent up or bottled-up emotions pave way for purgation or purification of emotions. This helps in rejuvenating one's self. The idea of working hard and focussing on the work at hand is more productive in increasing one's lifespan. Negating or eliminating stress is a causative factor for shortening lives. There could be maximum avoidance of this in order to succeed. Lifestyle diseases like obesity and cancer could be curbed if one possesses good activity levels. Sedentary living is the proven factor for many diseases which is an idealist and causes trouble keeping one's strength and stamina alive.

Sufficient Melatonin production keeps the body free from diseases. Sleep is the well-known mantra for prevention of many diseases. This production gets lower and lower post the age of thirty and it can be

compensated by eating a balanced diet. Victor Frankl had introduced the therapy of survival. He had studied prisoners who had been kept under the concentration camps. They were of two different temperaments. The first category of them belonged to the positive minded ones, followed by negative ones. The primary category ones were goal-oriented in life and hoped to be out of prison soon. As a result of this, they were released sooner.

While Morita therapy and Logotherapy are bodily retreats, Ikigai itself is a spiritual retreat. It rejuvenates and provides a kind of sublime experience. The principle of “Going with the flow” is being reiterated in Ikigai; the implications of this being that one should adjust oneself according to the circumstances and situations. The aspect of “optimal experience” is being explained by a famous author, Csikszentmihalyi in his book, “The Psychology of Optimal Experience”. Ikigai narrates seven sure shot ways to success. They are what to do, how to do, how well to perform the task, where to go, possessing challenges, having sufficient skills and concentration or focus. Leaving one’s comfort zone is as important as not coming to terms with one’s own life. There is always an internal fight or existential clash of ideologies going on within our internal psyche. The external health and physical fitness that one enjoys comes from experiencing Logotherapy or realizing one’s own self. The gap between accomplishment and desire are the ways to fulfilment.

Philosophers of the theory of self-fulfilment like Alan Gewirth in his book titled “self-fulfilment” philosophises that it is the attainment of a satisfying life worth lived well. Worry has been the only force by which the desires of our lives cannot be fulfilled. In order to do away with the aspect of worry, one needs to induce humour or light-heartedness in the way of lighting up one’s paths. Lack of concentration and focus are the biggest challenges that the human brain faces in today’s times. Excessive smart phone usage by the children of today make it difficult for them to sleep and conquer their worries. Depression also plays havoc with their system. In order to practice good concentration skills, one needs to perform the Pomodoro Technique where one is allotted 25 or 30 minutes of rest followed by 5 minutes of leisure. In this way, the brain effectively equips itself with the routine and leisure kind of technique. This helps in the oiling of the overworked parts; kind of comparison. Ganbaru or the technique of perseverance is important in a Japanese native. The values of hard work are instilled in them right from the very beginning. Constantly updating one’s skill set helps one stay in tune with the demands of the current time. It also brings about a sense of confidence. The Japanese people are adept at learning new skills for survival.

Similar to the concept of learning and imbibing new skills, Ikigai reflects upon the idea of maintaining simplicity as a way of life. Even simple skills as cooking and performing household chores takes on a note of appreciation from the elders of the house. The principle of Shintoism enumerates the fact that nature’s sources like trees and forests have a kamo or a spirit within them. The commonality is the aspect of life which flows through them. The connectedness of man with nature is disappearing, according to the Japanese artists. They live realistic lives and felicitate their artists to such an extent that it becomes broadcast on Television the next day. The Japanese people pursue their hobby of improvising on their skill from the moment they retire. Alongside this, the real Ikigai lies in rendering life and enthusiasm to routine tasks and activities. The normal lift operators are not thrown out of their service as the officers want pleasant people to operate it.

Meditation practices like focussing on the breathing techniques of air moving in and out of the nose would help one in clearing one's thoughts and having a good mindset. One of the technological advances and its obsession is the cell phone which commonly calls for our undivided attention. The general tendency of people is to keep the focus on the journey at hand, but nevertheless it is on the goal. Alpha and Theta brain waves are generated while meditating. Ritualisation is more effective than working towards one's goals. Following the daily practices of meditation and rituals help one in maintaining the inner sanctity of a person. Going with the flow is important in every way. It is the ultimate Ikigai and the purpose of life. Several supercentenarians were enquired about their lifestyle and the prompt reply is that of eating sushi; vinegared rice with vegetables and fish) and having a good sleep. Rest rejuvenates the body and prevents it from getting diseases.

Complete abstinence from non-vegetarian food is the secret to longevity, of another supercentenarian. Others vouch for staying alert and active as long as one lives and helping others from difficulties. The fear of death is also the sole cause for unhappiness in life. This fear also drives a person to develop insecurities and doubt. Art in any form is devoid of the age factor. It has nothing to do with the physical stamina of a person according to the Ikigai practitioners. Their passion for work is so intense and full of life that Osamu Tezuka, the father of modern cartoons in Japan proclaimed that he wanted to work.

According to T. H. White in "The Once and Future King", "You may grow old and trembling in your anatomies, you may lie awake at night listening to the disorder of your veins, you may miss your only love, you may see the world about you devastated by evil lunatics, or know your honour trampled in the sewers of baser minds. There is only one thing for it then -to learn. Learn why the world wags and what wags it. That is the only thing which the mind can never exhaust, never alienate, never be tortured by, never fear or distrust, and never dream of regretting" according to T. H. White in "The Once and Future King".

With the growing of age and wisdom, newer and better facilities of the mind get developed. It keeps getting more and more enhanced. Seeing newer things and developments are the light of the day. An artist, Ellsworth Kelly declares that this phenomenon exists. The longevity of life in a country like Japan is because of the idea that there exists a health-based culture of wellness and happiness followed by most citizens of the country. Organic food and avoidance of outside eating prolongs life. These are strictly followed by the Japanese. "The preparation process is termed as "slow food". By this, the implication is that it is being prepared by the most experienced of chefs but in an organic preference of vegetables. Any celebration adds to the togetherness of the group's spirit of renewal. The most active citizens of Japan are the ones who are older and fall above the age bracket of 80 years.

Gate-ball is the most popular of all games in Japan's Ikigai towns. The interconnectedness or 'mabui' of one person spreads to the entire community. It is the spirit and the very source of our life force. Calmness of both the mind and the body are essential aspects of a good life. They branch out into three different aspects like finding something to do, something to love and something to hope for. Longevity water or the water of sustenance and life is bottled up, it is being purchased by people too. They believe in the beginning of life at 80 years of age, coming to terms with it at 90 and waiting for miracles to happen at 100. The time-tested tool for longevity is to worry less, according to the Ikigai experts. As also, the

interaction between strangers should be multiplied, and this would give one the confidence to face life. Getting along with everyone is important as this would bring in the wholeness of the experience. Waking up at 4 o'clock in the morning and doing some form of exercise helps the brain to get active. Cultivating one's own vegetables and cooking them is real hard work and its in doing these chores that one's ikigai is made. Friends keep good company and it is very important to nurture it. These help in building up a psychologically good and healthy life. The way to induce friendships and goodwill among one's peers is to try to gel well with all. Simple things of life give pleasure and happiness like laughter, chilling out with grandchildren and yuimaaru, which comprehends itself as the community feeling of performing chores together.

Apart from these aspects, the health secret of the Okinawans is the habit of walking. There are no trains connecting the city with the other. Walking or cycling are the other alternative modes of transport. Consuming less than 10 grams of salt is the dietary recommendation of the Japanese Government to its citizens. Eating an array of vegetables and fruits called the "rainbow diet" is useful for the health benefits that it offers. Vegetables like the red bell pepper, carrots, spinach add life to the years ahead. White rice and noodles are the most in-demand foods of the Japanese. White Sugar is rarely eaten, and their sugar requirement comes from the cane sugar. The principle of Hara Hachi bu is followed. This refers to stopping to eat when one is almost 80% full. Restricting the excessive intake of calories aids in the proper functioning of the digestive system. IGF or the Insulin like Growth Factor 1 is a protein that plays an important role in the ageing process. The lesser the amount, the greater is the chance of ageing cells multiplying. The time-tested method of fasting for two days in a week is sufficient enough to detoxify the body.

The main aim of the Japanese in defining the well-being of its citizens is to adopt small practices that would go a long way in steering the body clear of disease conditions. The blend of Jasmine and Green Tea offers many untold benefits. Green Tea is an effective remedy for lifestyle diseases and purification of the human body. Nobiletin is a kind of flavonoid which is rich in antioxidants. It preserves the cells of the body. Healthy options like tofu, sardines, mackerel, tuna, citrus and dry fruits give energy and antioxidant properties. These have to be added to the diet without compromise. 'Radio Taiso' is a morning warm-up exercise. It is performed with the objective of staying healthy throughout the day. The similar exercise that is designed to keep movement intact is that of Yoga. The tried and tested poses make it easy for humans to become more flexible. Of similar origins is the martial art called Tai-chi. It is definitively a self-defence technique and art.

Along with the effective practising of these techniques that benefit the mind, there are other qualities which seek fulfilment in an individual's self-worth. The quality of resilience or the power of perseverance is the Ikigai of maintaining positivity and self-belief. Religion and steadfast faith in God are the motivators to those who want to pursue the skill of resilience. Resilience, in other words tends to the skill of picking oneself up from failures and negativity in life. There are some things which cannot be changed, unreachable and beyond the control of human beings. The corresponding principles of Cynicism and Stoicism vis a vis that of abstaining from all worldly pleasures and enjoying it to a certain limit are valid in today's era. The pinnacle of all persons attaining the position of an apatheia is that of a state of calmness.

Another aspect of an effective portrayal of a survival skill is that of Seneca who lived a luxurious life and practised the aspect of negative portrayal. Seneca was an ancient philosopher. Negative portrayal or negative visualisation has its interpretation in the idea of getting prepared for the worst of situations. It also helps in the process of visualising oneself in very gory and pathetic situations. The outcome of this will be to have the courage to muster oneself to convert into positive things.

Another life tip is that of not worrying about things which are beyond our control and reach. What is within our reach could be transformed and utilised well to suit our talent and capability. Linear time should be given importance as it fits the frame of mind we are in. The present time has all its glories within it and brings promises untold. The best utilisation of it results in positivity and endurance.

The twin concepts of 'wabi-sabi' and 'ichi-go' and 'ichi-e' in Japanese means it is similar to the philosophy of 'carpe diem' or seize the day. This goes with the practice of making the best use of the opportunity given or utilising the moment. There is a clear distinction between fragility and robustness. Fragility refers to persons when they are harmed while robustness refers to things which withstands harm without getting weak. It has the added power and punch to it. Ikigai also believes in diversifying one's talents. There should be a primary talent followed by a secondary one. Fragility also extends to the food habits we possess and the unnecessary energy spent on evil things. Life is a mix of a multitude of experiences myriad. Living in the moment is more important than a whole life spent in worry and solitude. Mitsuo Aida is a practitioner of Haiku. He propounds the philosophy of identifying with the other and trying to associate as much as possible. Happiness is decided not by fate but by being heartfelt. The common quest for meaning and purpose of life is the same, the disruption in life because of powerful forces like power and prestige should be diverted into constructive energies.

In conclusion, the author philosophises on the idea of making work a passion and surrounding oneself with positive vibes and forte. This alone sustains life force and makes life worth living. Though this book offers the hope of a long life, it is not necessarily a happy one. As the famous saying goes, "it is not the years in your life that count, but the life in your years". If one adheres to this principle, then life is worth living.

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