

生きがいについて
“Ikigai ni Tsuite”
On One's Purpose in Life

Sample Translation
(Japanese to English)

Introduction

It may be difficult for one who has been blessed with a calm and safe life to even imagine that there are people here and there in our world who when they wake up in the morning, that mere awakening instills an unbearable fear. There are people who are devastated by the thought of having to go through another day of life, and who lack the strength to get out of bed. Intolerable suffering or sadness, terribly painful isolation or loneliness, interminable nihilism or fatigue... Those who experience these feelings cannot help but ask themselves again and again, "Why do I have to go on living? What is the purpose?" Examples include one afflicted with an incurable disease, one who has lost the greatest love of their life, one who bet everything on a job or ideal and failed, or one who has committed a crime and does not know what to do with oneself. There are also people who walk alone on the backstreets of life.

So just what is it that makes us feel that there is a purpose in our daily lives? And if we lose that motivation, how will we find a new one? This matter has occupied the center of my thoughts for quite some time. However, it was nine years ago, when I was at the National Sanatorium Nagashima Aiseien for leprosy on an island in the Seto Inland Sea, that this issue gave me a jolt. I was visiting the sanatorium frequently to conduct a series of studies in psychiatric medicine. The astonishment came when I tried out a sentence completion test. About half of the 180 male patients with mild symptoms who took the test wrote that they had no hope or goals for the future. "Every day, I am wasting time." "I try to live meaningfully in my pointless life, but it's a wasted effort." "I'm bored." It was as if they had collaborated on writing the sentences together. Recently, some good medicine for leprosy has been developed. Through treatment, most of the patients at the sanatorium rid themselves of the bacteria that causes the disease and an increasing number of them have gone on to rejoin society. That being said, there are many who suffer from aftereffects of the disease, who are now elderly, or who do not find acceptance by their family or society. Therefore, a great many still hold no hope of reintegrating with society or simply do not wish to in the first place. Most of the patients who took the test belong to this category. The state provided them food, clothing, and shelter, and although they were certainly not fully satisfied with their circumstances, having means of engaging in work and leisure at their disposal, what distressed these people most was a feeling of insignificance.

However, mixed in among the responses were a few that distinctly suggested a joy for life. For example, one patient wrote, “This lifestyle...actually shows me the dignity of having a purpose in life and brings me closer to the true nature of humanity. In the future...I want to do more and more to love people and value my life. I believe that this is what humans hope for and that it is our purpose.”

I later came to know the patient who wrote this on a personal level. His words above were by no means false bravado. There was no doubt in my mind that they were an expression of vigor flowing directly from his existence. He was 39 years old at the time and had fairly serious symptoms. He walked with crutches, as his body had withered in the many years of his affliction. His hair had already turned gray. In the end, he passed away only a few years later. He left behind many poems he wrote.

One person in the same circumstances may feel no purpose in living and dwell in anxiety, while another may be full of joy from being alive. Where does this difference come from? Many different answers could be put forth: it's a matter of one's personality, or it depends on personal history or the way the person thinks, or that a person can feel a purpose to life by changing something about their interpersonal relationships or how they live in society. There is certainly some amount of truth to each of these answers, but purpose in one's life is too big a problem to solve so easily. One of my main reasons for writing this book was to take the time to contemplate this problem.

Accordingly, the materials I obtained at Aiseien play the leading role in this book, in a sense, especially in the latter half. But statistics, questionnaires, and psychological test results have already been compiled in some research papers, so I don't touch on them much here. In investigating a deep issue like the purpose of a human life, I believe the meaningful things are in fact the bits that slip through the holes of the coarse net of mechanical studies, so I picked out food for thought from the morsels that fell through.

However, since the problems that leprosy patients have are, in the end, problems that any person may have—the patients just wind up expressing them in distinct ways—I thought that we should not treat them as such separate matters. I thus researched people in situations that had robbed them of their purpose in life due to other diseases or hardship: cancer patients, sufferers of diseases caused by an atomic bombing, people who had lost the greatest love of their life, death-row inmates, students who were killed in action, and so on. Furthermore, I referenced cases from people I had come into contact with as a psychiatrist over the past 20 years by seeing their behavior as an expression of the world inside the human mind. I also referred to a wide range of real-world cases, not just from psychiatric medicine, but also sources such as psychology, literature, philosophy, and memoirs.

The lead role in the story, however, is after all the leprosy patients. I want to express here my gratitude to those who consented to uncomfortable studies that invaded the privacy of their anguish, who told me so many things while speaking through breaths of agony, and who penned detailed notes with debilitated hands. I believe my contact with people living through leprosy taught me much more than any words from a teacher or any exposition in a book ever could.

What I can say right off the bat, without conducting any research or the like, is the fact that there is nothing humans need more in order to lead a vibrant life than to have a purpose behind it. Therefore, there is nothing crueler than to rob a person of their purpose, and there is no expression of love greater than to give someone said purpose. And yet, because the world inside the mind of each person is different, it is quite difficult to give even one person a purpose in life. There is no single, ready-made answer to the question of what can give a certain person that purpose. The intent of this book is definitely not to push such an answer on the reader. I simply hope that it will bring you at least a little closer to the truth behind this inscrutable question by examining it from different perspectives. There are undoubtedly still many important things that I have not considered through my understanding and ideas.

Chapter 4

What Is Ikigai?

If we use the term ikigai simply to describe that which makes a person feel that they have a purpose in life—in other words, the source or giver of ikigai—then what characteristics does ikigai have in a general sense? The answer will likely differ from person to person. One may think of it as “an incredibly short, even instantaneous, feeling of joy to be alive in this world.” Another may define it as “an immovable, inexhaustible joy that wells up anytime upon reflection. When you have this, no matter what adversity or tragedy you may encounter, you maintain a positive emotional state and you weep with honest tears of joy, for a human life is worth living.” In the end, since there seem to be thousands of individual interpretations of what ikigai is, I would like to take the broadest possible interpretation and set forth the following common characteristics we can largely recognize in what could constitute human ikigai.

The Characteristics of Ikigai

The most obvious characteristic is that ikigai is something that makes a person feel they have a purpose in life.

A few years ago, the Asahi Journal ran a series called “Living Here.” It covered people in every corner of Japan who were pouring their heart into some unique activity that most people don’t know about. Examples included running a mountainside lodge, researching water, collecting books with a

connection to Goethe, crafting figures from rice flour, creating miniature books, a doctor making house calls to patients at different ports, breeding Higo wolfdogs, gathering children with cerebral palsy to edit a magazine, the work of a “ninja doctor,” and so on and so on. The publication kept coming out with new people to feature. You only had to look at the faces of the people in the photos to see that the work they did provided them with vitality and a sense of fulfillment from life.

In other words, each one of these people undoubtedly had *ikigai*. However, *ikigai* doesn't have to be some sort of rare, unusual thing like in these articles. Anybody can gain wonderful *ikigai* from something inconspicuous, like gardening, writing poetry, knitting, pottery, or just helping others. The point is, the activity is a source of joy for life or makes life worth living for the person who does it. From that perspective, there are many kinds of *ikigai*, all of them just as valid as any other.

The second characteristic of *ikigai* is it doesn't necessarily have any relationship with any real profit or benefit that we need to live. If we consider the aforementioned examples, some of them would actually be disadvantageous in this sense. In other words, these are activities that provide no reward and are unnecessary if a human is to simply exist as a living thing. Such reward is also not essential for social life. As it were, such a life may seem to be wasteful, or to be luxurious in some respects. From this perspective, we could say such a disposition possesses aspects of “play” as put forth by Johan Huizinga.

Thirdly, an activity that provides *ikigai* is a voluntary one that a person does because they want to do it. For example, if a person dedicates oneself to medical missionary work because it is their calling, nobody is forcing the person to do it. He or she happily takes up the calling. This act contains an element of self-initiative. This is the living behavior described by Oswald Stewart Wauchope.

The fourth characteristic of *ikigai* is that it is entirely personal. You cannot borrow it or obtain it by imitating somebody else. For each person, it has to perfectly fit the true self deep inside and be a pure expression of that self. Even if *ikigai* takes on an incredibly universal form, such as a mother's love, the way each mother interacts with her children exhibits uniqueness, which means there are endless possible forms. That is especially the case when a child grows and the relationship with the mother develops into more than one of mere blood, but of a relationship between two personalities. If instead the mother simply goes through the motions only out of instinct, duty, or custom, then no matter how good of a mother she may seem in the eyes of others, I don't believe she can obtain true *ikigai*. As a result, the mother may berate her children to be grateful for what she has done or she may complain about motherhood.

Fifth, *ikigai* holds a quality that creates a system of values within the mind of a person who possesses it. If that person has more than one *ikigai*, then they can likely set an order of priority for which *ikigai* they consider most important, and which is next. Ordinarily, a person does not notice this, but it becomes apparent to oneself and others when something extraordinary happens.

Sixth, ikigai creates a unique world within the mind, as if the person is living carefreely within it. Jakob Johann von Uexküll said that every living creature has a unique world within. We could say the same thing about the world of the human mind. If we borrow a metaphor by Anne Morrow Lindbergh, just as a shellfish can work its shell into a variety of shapes, colors, and patterns with its secretions, so can each human create a suitable world of the mind around and within oneself where that person can thrive. When it is plain what the values are within that world and what you should prioritize, there is uniformity, order, and harmony. It gives stability to the person living there. I believe the “desire for stability” is fundamentally satisfied only when there is this calm within the world of the mind, which exists beyond economic and social satisfaction.

The World of the Mind That Ikigai Creates

Let's think about that last point in a little more detail.

Imagine a man who believes that his prestige in society is the most important thing in life. In the world of his mind, he primarily focuses his wit and energy on his goal of standing at the top of the hierarchy, where value is based on social standing and reputation in his occupational category. He also expects his wife to assist him in every way to reach that life goal. In his eyes, the people and other things that have meaning in terms of the degree to which they work toward his goal stand out starkly from everything else. Accordingly, he is sensitive to those people who appear to have great social influence, and he never fails to be courteous to them. To other people, however, especially those with no sway, they barely exist to him, like shadows. As he charges along his career path, he relentlessly pushes aside and resolutely suppresses anything that seems to stand in his way, whether a person or something in his mind.

What about a woman who lives to provide motherly love to her children? Those children are at the center of the world in her mind, and the extent of that world is within the realm of her children's lives. Anything that exists outside of that world is less than a shadow. Because she is absorbed in her goal of carefully raising her children, she feels that people and things have greater value the more they can help her work toward that goal, while anything which she feels impedes her, whether a relative or somebody else's child, she sees as something that has no value and must be driven out. In her eyes, her peers who try to lead lives beyond just raising children are nothing more than lost souls to be pitied. She finds the greatest joy from doing as much as possible to be with her children, not with the rest of society, and she looks up to mothers who do a wonderful job raising their children, as they are worthy of the greatest respect. If she goes down the street and comes upon a large group of children playing, the first thing she does is pick out her children with her eyes and only pays close attention to them. Other children merely pop up in the background of her own and have no meaning other than as a control group.

Now let's imagine that this man and woman are a married couple. Of course, since they run a household together, their worlds have much in common. But just like two circles that overlap only along part of the arc, the areas outside that shared space are entirely different worlds in their minds. They believe they are negotiating with each other without having to take any extra care, and that they are understanding if they can get everything they want. One reason why is that people may get the sense that they know each other, because words act like a secret code in that although two people may say the same thing, they mean something different.

Let's imagine that a clear disconnect arises between these two people. Either the husband or the wife will come to the shocking realization that "even though we've been living together for so long, my spouse has such a poor understanding of me. I've been alone in an entirely different world." He or she will feel a horrible lonesomeness. However, as Jose Ortega y Gasset said, since a human life is inherently a lonely one and love is an attempt to fuse two cases of loneliness into one. Love begins with the effort to know and understand the world in one another's mind. What if from the outset you could completely know the world which your partner inhabits? Unfortunately, such a thing is utterly impossible. Besides, we are drawn to that which holds the unknown or mystery. But if we did know what our partners expect, then, for example, when they use words such as love or sincerity, we should have a clear understanding of what sense those words are being used in and what the context and limits are. If our partner does their best for us in the world in which he or she lives, we should know that this is the maximum love or sincerity which that person has to offer, and to expect anything more would be out of line.

However, since a person can only use the concepts from one's own world to try and explain or understand when stepping outside the world in one's mind, many misunderstandings result. In this respect, semantics, as Alfred Korzybski suggested, should perhaps be considered more of a psychiatric matter.

As the preceding paragraphs show, people generally live as they please within the world of one's own mind, and we hardly realize it. And if the world in which we live becomes too uncomfortable, consciously or not, we start to want things to make that a more comfortable place to live. At that time, we may assign different rationalizations to others or to ourselves, but it may just be an attempt to create a world that is most suited for us to live in, or in other words, a world in our mind where we can exercise the most freedom.

Ikigai and Passion

But can we classify ikigai in an effective manner? We can reference Theodule-Armand Ribot's "Essay on the Passions" (*Essai sur les passions*) on this point. It goes without saying that there are many aspects of ikigai that are not as intense as a passion, but I believe that for many people,

something we can call a passion or obsession is the main constituent of their ikigai, so I took a look at Ribot's classification.

According to Ribot, because passion originates from the orientation within a human being, it can be categorized into the following four groups according to orientation.

1. That which originates from an orientation toward preserving the body. However, since pure biological desires cannot become passion, they can only become one when in combination with many psychological components, especially creative imagination. Therefore, there are not many passions in this category apart from indulgence in food and alcohol.
2. That which originates from an orientation toward preservation of the species. Love is rooted in the strongest biological desires, and it can be connected to the greatest number of psychological components. Therefore, it has shaped the passions of countless people since long ago. Although it is difficult, by its nature, for love between a married couple to be passionate, in special cases—for example, when some circumstances threatened their coexistence—they become acutely aware of the passion and they get closer to its form.
3. That which originates from the intention to expand the ego and exert influence. This group can be further divided into three subcategories.
 - (i) Expressions caused by sympathy. For example, that which originates from altruistic emotions such as friendship, feelings for family, or motherly love will inherently possess a serene quality, which makes it difficult to develop into a passion.
 - (ii) That which takes the form of conquest: sports, hunting, adventure, gambling, control, ambition for prestige and fame, desire for possessions, miserliness.
 - (iii) That which takes a destructive form: exacerbation, anger, revenge, envy.
4. That which originates from a desire for something aesthetically pleasing, scientific, religious, political, or moral. Ribot states that these passions are less universal than those in the preceding three categories and that their force is weak. He terms other special types “little passions,” and he considers passions to collect various things of interest.

That is how Ribot categorizes passions. If one of a person's various ikigai jumps out to take on greater weight, then it is, to some degree, a passion. That makes a passionate person, but one who possesses a passion that comes to dictate their life for many years is by no means just an intense, impulsive person. A person whose intensity comes purely from emotion or impulse will overreact to every single small internal or external stimuli and is likely to immediately express that response through action. Accordingly, since that life is pushed by waves of on-the-spot emotion and impulse, rather than a persistent passion, it can become a life full of ups and downs. We can understand this by considering how Lord Byron and Edgar Allan Poe lived their lives. A person who holds onto an obsession for many years is likely to be very emotional, while also possessing strong repressive aspects within the makeup of their personality. That ability to suppress could be a rational one or an

expression of shyness or timidity. Or it could be a strong tendency toward tenacity since birth, which acts as a brake that prevents the person from easily escaping from one state to another. This kind of suppressive component prevents emotions and impulses from coming out in the form of immediate action. Therefore, these kinds of people will not change how they lead their lives according to on-the-spot stimuli. Occasional emotions or impulses relate to and develop their inherent tenacity within the mind, which actually increases that tenacity's depth, reach, sustainability, and strength.

And if external circumstances exert an additional repressive force, they may further foster this state. While a person of action may battle the outside obstacle head on, that is difficult to do for a shy person, who will therefore not outwardly express one's inner emotions or impulses. That intention will come to occupy more and more of that person's thinking, rapidly increase in strength, and take on the quality of a prejudice or "hyperquantivalent idea." Some scholars or artists who follow one passion in their lives may at first glance seem to be standing upon a perfectly calm sea or following their passion with complete calm and focus.

However, the life of a human being inherently comprises a balance of different aspects and components, so if a person leads their life with an all-or-nothing-approach that bets everything on one *ikigai*, the balance crumbles, which could destroy that lifestyle. "The Quest of the Absolute" by Honore de Balzac provides a wonderful depiction of an academic with such a personality. Just as Ribot said, "All passions, without exception, may lead to death."

In other words, if a person has an *ikigai* that is uncommonly strong, it becomes more important than the lives of that person or of others, and that person feels there is no choice but to sacrifice everything for that *ikigai*. Since the desire to be devoted to something larger or greater than oneself is one of the ultimate desires for *ikigai*, the danger of the above is that the survival of a person dedicated to a single purpose is always under threat. There is a surprisingly large number of cases in which a social worker or an evangelist with a great sense of duty will, while earning respect from the society as a public figure, act like a dictator who oppress those around him or her in private life.

The Variety of *Ikigai*

However, a person typically does not limit oneself to just one *ikigai*. We feel many things that give us joy to be alive, such as work and interacting with family and neighbors.

How should we sort out what kinds of *ikigai* a person can have, including the gentler ones we would not call a passion? According to the seven desires constituting "the mind that seeks *ikigai*" covered in the previous chapter (and which overlap somewhat with Ribot's classification), I have attempted to sort various *ikigai* into groups, listed below. But it goes without saying that these groups get entangled with each other, the *ikigai* can still fit if you move them to other groups, and in

many cases, there are several desires that can be satisfied by one ikigai. For example, raising a child could satisfy many desires, such as the first, second, third, fourth, and seventh on the list.

1. Satisfying desires for feeling an enriched existence

Aesthetic contemplation (of nature, the arts, etc.), play, sports, engaging in hobbies, and other modest joys of everyday living. These include things a person may not recognize as being ikigai. In my surveys of ikigai, there are certainly some people who describe ikigai as “just getting through each day somehow” or “just leading a laidback life.” In a general survey of citizens led by Toru Takahashi, just under 10% of male and female respondents provided such an answer. In my survey of housewives, 6% of housewives said they have “no particular” ikigai, but some wrote in their responses things like “I’m always happy and having fun being alive, so I have nothing in particular to write” or “I have fun in my everyday life and just being alive is my ikigai.” In his diary, Soren Kierkegaard wrote, “A woman is the joy of life (joie de vivre),” meaning that women seem to be better at finding a modest sense of ikigai from leading a normal everyday life. In these cases, they may actually tend to be quite unaware of their ikigai.

2. Satisfying desires for change and growth

Study, travel, mountain climbing, adventure, and so on. All of these things simultaneously satisfy desires for greater experiences, conquest, and contest, because they also seek to inflate the ego, so in a broad sense, we can call them a desire for growth. Other behaviors such as obtaining more possessions or collecting various items are ikigai that satisfy a desire for growth.

3. Satisfying desires for the future

Various life goals, dreams, and ambitions. This covers a wide range of ikigai, from simple things to social, political, and religious ideals and plans for putting them into practice. In some cases, the ikigai may become eschatological expectations of the future that go beyond the present world.

4. Satisfying desires for recognition

This is satisfied in three different ways.

- (i) Interaction through sympathy/empathy, friendship, or love.
- (ii) Winning respect, prestige, or obedience from others through supremacy or dominance.
- (iii) Being needed by others through obedience or service.

5. Satisfying desires for freedom

This group contains the same items as Group 1, but they are here for their gratuitousness. It also contains actions and people that work to expand and free a person from the narrow, small world they inhabit in their mind. In addition to well-known figures, great teachers, founders of religions, and the like, this group includes people who are stars in their field.

6. Satisfying desires for self-actualization

This is where the most personal ikigai come in. This ikigai of self-actualization ties into the uniqueness of being able to do something that nobody else can. In addition to people who make

unique contributions in various aspects of their culture through their special talents, this refers to those engaged in more modest literary activities, textiles, cooking, and so on. In the end, the return from this activity is the joy of creation. The creation of something new that has never been seen before—which shows that one is alive—confirms that the person's life has meaning, thus translating into the seventh ikigai group. Creation does not have to come in the form of producing a painting or song. Simply the ways in which one chooses to use the life given to them can be more of an act of unique creation than anything else. This is an ikigai anyone can attain.

7. Satisfying desires for meaning

This is closely connected to the sixth group. Various jobs and callings that give one a *raison d'être* belong in this group. Gratitude, loyalty, filial piety, and the like may also fall into it. Devotion to someone with a role like the founder of a religious sect, philosophical conviction, and religious belief can also be ikigai that satisfy the desire for a broader, deeper meaning.

The destructive passions Ribot lays out—hatred, anger, revenge, envy, etc.—can also be ikigai or, at the least, an incentive to live. However, a considerable portion of these things may be secondary. In other words, we can think of them as arising in response to the obstruction of a desire for a more constructive ikigai. In that case, we should examine them as the opposite side of that obstructed desire.

It may be debatable as to whether a person possesses a primarily destructive ikigai. Opinions will no doubt diverge depending on how one accounts for the person's character or environment. Objectively speaking from the perspective of psychiatric medicine, I believe it is undeniable that there are very few people with some form of psychopathic personality or disorder of the brain who see their ikigai as coming from destruction itself. In these cases, this is probably how the patient is trying to ascertain a meaning for being alive. But can we help such people discover a different form of ikigai? This to me is the biggest issue, and a challenging one.