

Book Review

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How to Ikigai: the ancient Japanese secret

by: Tim Tamashiro

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“Your purpose in life is to find your purpose and give your whole heart and soul to it” the famous excerpt of Buddha aptly describes the essence of this book. Costumed in the Japanese philosophy of Ikigai-meaning finding one’s true potential, “How to Ikigai” is a manifesto for finding happiness. Written in an elementary fashion, it gives a lucid account of inspirational summaries of people’s endeavours in meaningful avocations. The book captivates readers with blurbs from movies, Youtube channels, and Instagram stories, containing tales of finding delight, joy, and physical and mental well-being. It also gives its reader a short tour of psychological and management theories, academic courses, and religious and cultural discourses on self-actualisation. Happiness is real, hands-on, and feasible, says Tim Tamashiro.

The first part elaborates on the ancient practice of Okinawans called *Ikikai* (meaning “*life shell*”). Trained young girls in small Japanese villages had the drive and zeal to dive into the deep cold sea to gather beautiful red shells. This routine passion to dive gave them a sense of purpose and happiness which later became Japanese heritage-Ikigai, meaning life’s worth. To streamline the vague concept of Ikigai, Winn (2014) developed an Ikigai framework consisting of four strata: Do what you adore, do what you are skilled at, do what others require, and do what you can be paid for. In short, Ikigai is your unique customised idea and philosophy which motivates you to live a happy, joyful, and peaceful life. Further in this part, the book criticises the popular idea of “normal life” impeding one’s chances of attaining Ikigai. Societal expectations define a normal life as a series of sequential steps that one follows to be happy; seeking education, finding a job, and retiring at a certain age, however, it eludes people from happiness.

The second part of the book views Ikigai as a philosophical theory and presents its foundational principles and rules. This section explores several contradictions which are presented between tenets of Ikigai and popular ideologies for living a normal life. For instance, enhancing intuitive power or enhancing mental capabilities, hoarding time or hoarding money, having a rigid or flexible life plan, achieving or learning, doing meaningful work, or just performing a job. In addition, the author also provides a solution to deal with fear and rigidity preventing oneself from fully committing to Ikigai’s principles and rules.

The elaborative third section of the book offers its reader a tutorial on various techniques one can use to achieve Ikigai. Tim presents, four major practices for unleashing one's true potential, these are, beginning a side hustle or job crafting (customising formal jobs to align personal goals), researching (analysing and summarising information), meditating (developing mindfulness towards the present moment), and taking an Ikigai year (taking a gap from professional commitments).

Ikigai, the central idea in the book can be considered a conjoint twin of happiness. Age-old philosophies of happiness are rooted in Epicurean and Epictetus theories. The concept of Ikigai is like Epictetus's ideology of seeking life-long happiness by living a purposeful and moral life (Dobbin, 2011), unlike Epicurus's belief in the mindless pursuit of momentary pleasure in avoidance of pain and mental agony. It is presented as Eudaimonic well-being which results from finding one's true potential in life (Fromm, 1981), and in this context, Ikigai is also associated with existentialism as it pushes one to introspect on life's purpose.

Many people feel that happiness is an abstract notion, and Ikigai too said to be an intuitive and subjective idea (Kamiya, 1966), however, Tim Tamashiro attempts to present some realistic, logical, and feasible methods and tools to achieve happiness in daily life. The book presents Ikigai as the apogee of mental and physical well-being, which can be experienced every day.

The first part of "How to Ikigai" forces its readers to think deeply. It reminds me of Karl Marx's idea of materialistic societies alienating people from self, and Epictetus's theory of finding happiness in a deep understanding of it. The author reiterates his father's last words that everybody's turn comes to die, but it only comes after the chance to live. This is indicative of how precious life is, and one must live it well by being relevant.

One poignant concept propagated by the author in the second part is "time affluence". We see people often saying, "time is money", "time waits for no one", "don't waste time" and so on. This attitude puts extra pressure on available time and makes people time deficient. Tim advises the reader to stop mindless activities and value time by stocking it up so that it can be used to pursue meaningful tasks and activities. This section reminds us of the Greek mythological gods of time Chronos and Kairos. According to popular belief, Chronos symbolises the quantity of time and gobbles the one who tries to conquer him. One defeating Chronos can attain immortality which is a state of bliss. However, he represents the consuming aspect of time and seldom lets one win. Kairos is a god of opportunity, who is gentler and symbolises quality time immersed in short meaningful moments (Craig-Snell, 2011). It seems Tim is suggesting snatching more and more Kairos moments from the jaws of Chronos. Chronos is the daily humdrum of life that devours our energies and leaves no space for undertaking our real hobbies and interests, thus depriving us of profound experiences. The one who practices finding Kairos while in the jaws of man-eating Chronos can reach a state of bliss and happiness.

In the last part, the author cautions the reader that because of the aspirational nature of Ikigai people often forget that it is existent. It is not something one does in the future instead it is done daily. In short, "How to Ikigai" tells its reader to seek Ikigai in the journey and not in the end state. "Ikigai today, come back tomorrow" through these words author highlights the continuational nature of Ikigai, which is a flow and not a cessation.

Conclusion

As growing economies are progressively satisfying human needs and desires, still we all keep searching for some kind of fulfillment that just never comes. This is the major source of human dissatisfaction. Pursuing time affluence, sabbaticals, practicing the art of any form, meditating, job crafting, and other tools suggested by the author in this book to seek self-fulfillment can be viewed as Herzberg et al. (1959) satisfiers whose presence guarantees satisfaction. This book provides succour to those dealing with an existential dilemma and forces readers to self-reflect. It is for those who are stultified by the daily drudgery and are fed up with running between competitiveness and emptiness. In the era of the Great resignation (BBC Worklife, 2022) brought in by the pandemic, more and more people are finding unfulfillment in their current jobs and roles. This book can help them self-reflect, seek internal joy, and guide them in finding meaningful vocations.

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