

The Art of Resilience: The Japanese Ikigai in Sports

Dr. Biju Thomas
Principal (i/c) & Associate Professor of Physical Education
Baselius College, Kottayam.
Kerala

Abstract

Austrian psychiatrist Viktor Frankl developed the concept of logotherapy based on the premise that the primary motivational force of an individual is to find a meaning in life. Viktor outlines how his theories helped him to survive his Holocaust experience and how that experience further developed and reinforced his theories. Japan is the nation that suffered the most in the World War II. Japan's cities were destroyed, its stockpiles exhausted, and its industrial capacity gutted. But like a phoenix, it has risen to one of the most valued industrial power. The nation possesses a philosophy called Ikigai that aims at a happy and long life.

In islands like Okinawa, with a remarkably high number of centenarians, they follow a unique diet and Ikigai to live long. The National Geographic Explorer Dan Buettner has recorded Okinawa as a blue zone in his book *The Blue Zones: Lessons for Living Longer from the People Who've Lived the Longest*. Ikigai is what allows a person to look forward to the future even if he/she is miserable right now. Japanese people perceive that the sum of small joys in everyday life results in more fulfilling life as a whole.

Ikigai can be a sports philosophy and applied to the life of ordinary persons and sportspersons. Japanese sportsperson Dai Tamesue is one who continues his mission in life as a coach and developed programmes life TRAC "Relay and Teamwork" to create love towards physical training at an early age. To maintain a healthy body and mind, one needs to have a disciplined life; physical training is essential for the maintenance of health. From the early age,

the education system and society should be able to invoke interest towards sports among the children. The centenarians in Okinawa is a model to the world, on how to attain happiness and lead a contained life. Ikigai can ensure a life without lifestyle diseases; a life close to nature, close to one's self.

Keywords: Logotherapy, Ikigai, sports, fitness, health, lifestyle diseases

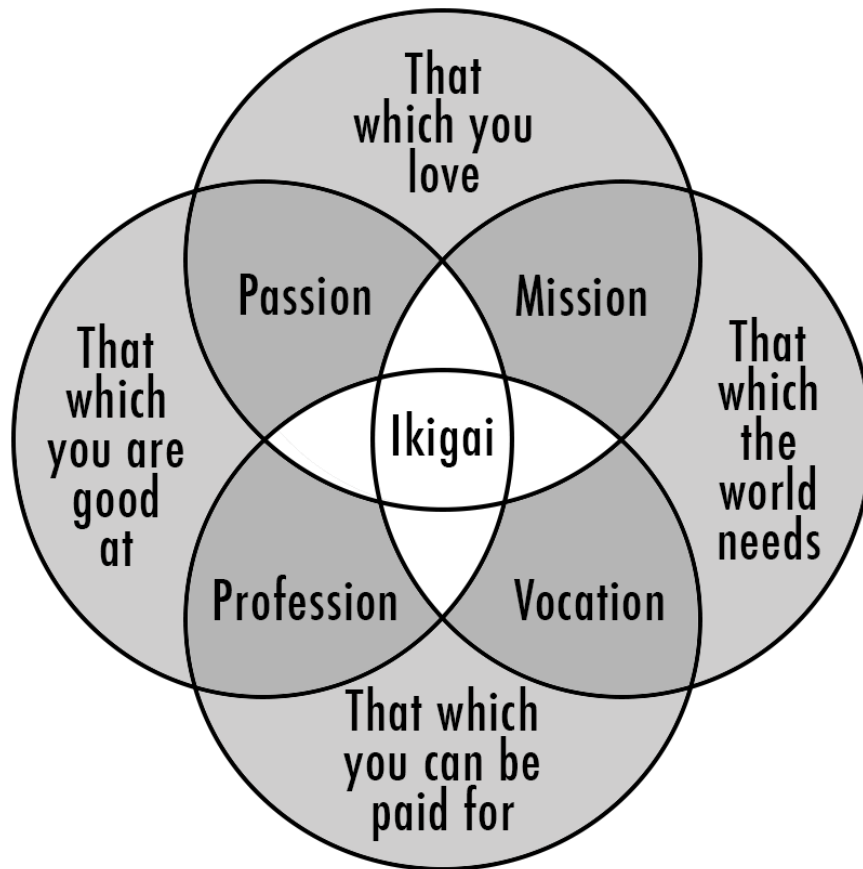
Human beings are most motivated by a search for meaning, indicating that the meaning of life is the biggest question on our minds and the biggest stressor on our psyches, says Austrian psychiatrist Viktor Frankl. He developed the concept of logotherapy based on the premise that the primary motivational force of an individual is to find a meaning in life (Frankl, 1958). It is based on an existential analysis focusing on Kierkegaard's 'will to meaning' as opposed to Adler's Nietzschean doctrine of 'will to power' or Freud's 'will to pleasure' (Batthyány). In his book *Man's Search for Meaning*, Viktor outlines how his theories helped him to survive his Holocaust experience and how that experience further developed and reinforced his theories (2006).

Japan is the nation that suffered the most in the World War II. Japan's cities were destroyed, its stockpiles exhausted, and its industrial capacity gutted. But like a phoenix, it has risen to one of the most valued industrial power. The Japanese educational system is one of the most comprehensive and effective in the world. Today it is the nation with the highest per capita income of all Asians, and have high life expectancy. The country's notorious work culture ensures most people put in long hours at the office, governed by strict hierarchical rules. Overwork is not uncommon and the last trains home on weekdays around midnight are filled

with people in suits. How do they manage? The secret have to do with what Japanese call Ikigai (Mitsubishi, 2017).

Ikigai is a concept similar to logotherapy. It is a lifestyle that is based on the idea of happiness in living. In the 2003 research paper on Ikigai, the co-author Akihiro Hasegawa, a clinical psychologist and associate professor at Toyo Eiwa University, has related the word *Ikigai* as part of everyday Japanese language. It is composed of two words: *iki*, which means life and *gai*, which describes value or worth (Hasegawa, Fujiwara, Hoshi, & Shinkai, 2003). Hasegawa traces the origin of the word back to the Heian period (794 to 1185). *Gai* might have derived from the word *kai* (shell) which were considered as precious, and Ikigai originated to signify the value in living. Mieko Kamiya is another psychiatrist who authored *Ikigai Ni Tsuite* (*On the Meaning of Life*) in 1966 says that Ikigai is what allows a person to look forward to the future even if he/she is miserable right now (Kamiya, 1980). Hasegawa has the opinion that Japanese people perceive that the sum of small joys in everyday life results in more fulfilling life as a whole.

Ikigai is sometimes represented in a Venn diagram. The elements in the concept of Ikigai and how they are blended together is illustrated below. The original diagram was created by British community activist Marc Winn in 2014 (Winn, 2014) from a TED Talk on Longevity by Dan Buettner.



Japanese culture values team more than individual and the workers are driven by the emotion of being useful to others. It does not mean that Ikigai is all about working harder and longer. Japan is a place where employees prefer to work overtime with tragic outcomes – death from overwork claims more than 2,000 lives a year (Gorvett, 2016). But many times, Ikigai is associated with longevity. Japan has some of the longest-living citizens in the world – 87 years for women and 81 for men. And in islands like Okinawa, with a remarkably high number of centenarians, they follow a unique diet and Ikigai to live long. The National Geographic Explorer Dan Buettner has recorded Okinawa as a blue zone in his book *The Blue Zones: Lessons for Living Longer from the People Who've Lived the Longest*. “Older people are celebrated, they feel obligated to pass on their wisdom to younger generations,” he says. This

gives them a purpose in life outside of themselves, in service to their communities (Buettner, 2010).

When analysing the diagram shown above, one may find that attaining Ikigai is an unrealistic pursuit. One who believes in Ikigai and searching for it in his/her entire life will find it a waste of time. One may also think that if one cannot find it, one cannot live a meaningful, happy life. Hence, searching for one's Ikigai is a wrong approach. One does not need to find the thing called Ikigai but one can attain it by finding satisfaction through several activities. If one wishes for Ikigai, he/she should not neglect any of the circles, and always aim for the intersections. One needs to maintain a fine balance between the elements, and strive his/her journey to the centre.

Ikigai and Sportspersons

If one had tried to find Ikigai in work, he/she may find a huge sense of loss and emptiness after retirement. This is especially true for athletes, who have a relatively shorter career. The Japanese sprinter Dai Tamesue who retired in 2012, said in an interview that the fundamental question he asked after he retired was: "What was it that I wanted to achieve by playing sports? For me, what I wanted to achieve through competing in track and field was to change people's perceptions" (2017). After retiring, he pursued ways to pass on the benefits of sports into society through associate organizations like Samurai Co. Ltd, Athlete Society, and Xiborg. Tamesue is an example of the flexible nature of ikigai and how it can be applied.

Dai Tamesue says that after his retirement, when he has started business, he would not understand the feeling of making people successful. But there can be no "win-win" in sports. When he loses the spirit sometimes, he compares himself with the past as an athlete. If this

check is not done very often, people will not grow up. The spirit to move forward, do something that brings meaning to the self and others, leads to happiness (2017).

The Coach, the Player, and Ikigai

There is significant influence from the part of the coach to inspire the player. He should be someone who would shake the player to bring to reality if he/she moves away from the goal. But today, this master-discipline relationship is not like the past. If the player feels stagnant, and if he does not shake himself, then the growth curve becomes either stagnant or slow. But one must remember that the curve will not always grow upward. One may not always be the number one player in the world; but continuing the growth is also important and the player must shake and rise in difficult situations.

There would be instances in the life of players which made them “stronger”. Those moments are important and should be incorporate into their approach towards life because they are things that they rarely experience. In order to break through, “self-shaking ability” is necessary. In a competitive era where everything is one’s own responsibility, it’s a necessary skill. A player must face difficult times and should be proactive and sensitive to his/her own growth and stagnation. Only then the curve will grow upward, and one grows in his/her life, and thereby grow to attain Ikigai.

Dai Tamesue shares how he had found out the right path when he had to choose between 100m and 400m sprint:

I wrote 100m and 400m hurdles in the notebook, divided the pages, and worked out the “likes” and “dislikes” of each. Then, it was summarized as “100m is a flower shape but it is difficult to win” and “400m hurdle is sober but easy to win”. For me, winning and standing on the world stage was most important (2017).

When checking Mark Winn's graphs, one can find four circles, each of them are joined together and in the centre, there is the Ikigai, towards which one should move in his/her life.

There are four elements in the outer side:

- that which you love
- that which you are good at
- that which you can be paid for
- that which the world needs

The thing that which you love and that which you are good at creates passion for it. The thing that which you are good at and that which you can be paid for makes your profession. The thing that which you can be paid for and that which the world needs makes your vocation. And finally, the thing that which the world needs and that which you live makes your mission in life. Altogether, the balance between your passion, profession, vocation and mission makes you find your Ikigai.

In their book *Ikigai: The Japanese Secret to a Long and Happy Life*, originally written in Spanish by Hector Garcia Puigcerver and Francesc Miralles break down the ten rules that can help anyone find their own Ikigai:

1. Stay active and don't retire
2. Leave urgency behind and adopt a slower pace of life
3. Only eat until you are 80 per cent full
4. Surround yourself with good friends
5. Get in shape through daily, gentle exercise
6. Smile and acknowledge people around you
7. Reconnect with nature

8. Give thanks to anything that brightens our day and makes us feel alive.

9. Live in the moment

10. Follow your ikigai (Puigcerver & Miralles, 2017)

If a player wants to be successful in a sport, the first step he has to take is to love the item he wants to be in. And if one finds that he/she is good at the sport, he/she has to develop a passion towards the particular item. The passion will make him/her to shine in the sport. The coach has a major role to play to develop in the player a passion towards the sport. Through constant practice, burnish the talent of the player. This will make him a trusted player on whom agencies can invest. When one begins to shine at competitions, he/she becomes a star and people will be ready to pay for the talent. Then it turns out to be a profession for the sportsperson.

The life of many of the successful sportspersons go through these two stages. The passion towards an item makes it the profession for the player. But many a time, the journey towards Ikigai in his/her life ends in these stages. After the retirement from the sports career, players withdraw from their stream to lead another life. They fail to attain Ikigai in their life and sometimes lead an unhappy life. This is a persisting problem in the field of sports where a vacuum is created after retirement; and that too in an early stage in life.

Dai Tamesue has overcome this situation in his life by changing the perceptions of people around the world:

Athletes suffer with a great sense of loss when they retire. I like my land, and I will bet my life on land. I realized that onshore was a means, not a purpose. What I really wanted to achieve on my land was to change the perceptions of people around the world. Even if a player retires, it may not be possible for him/her to play the leading role, but he/she

seems to be involved in creating a mechanism. Whether you are a child or an adult, recognizing that “I can do more,” “I may have more possibilities,” is the first step in preparing for your personal life (2017).

Many a time, parents are not confident about sending their children to sports. Or they are anxious of failures in the life of their children than successes. Children are not free to make choices and they are bound by the dreams and anxieties of the parents. Tamesue comments in this:

I think that there is a cliff beyond this road, and if you go on that way you will fall into the sea, but when you actually go there, the knowledge that the road was continuing properly will be made early. Since children live in a safe area, we still need someone to take them outside. So, when you actually go out, you can tell me, “The danger I thought was a narrow range” (2017).

Cybozu Co. Ltd. and Samurai Co. Ltd. has brought the TRAC division to encourage running. TRAC was born from the desire to convey the joy of running. It runs an educational program called “Relay and Teamwork” for elementary school students. The aim of this programme is:

“Relay and Teamwork” is a program developed by Cybozu, and part of the “teamwork training”, that conducts in-house training combined with the “relay program” at the play school at TRAC. In the 1st hour, learn about the strengths of yourself and your classmates, learn “5 points necessary for teamwork”, and then experience the teamwork by making use of each other’s strengths and compensating for their weaknesses through actual relays. By experiencing the knowledge learned in the 1st hour, in the 2nd hour, the knowledge is embodied — the ability to help each other, the ability to collaborate

with others, and the ability to communicate with others, which are necessary even in society. We aim to contribute to the development of children, enhance their interest in sports, gives a sense of familiarity with sports, improves physical strength and athletic ability, and let experience teamwork (Cybozu Inc., 2017).

Tamesue's programme is a fine example of creating passion among the children towards sports and mentoring them to make sports a profession. He is a living example of continuing further steps to pursue Ikigai. After his retirement he wished to continue his passion and tried to pass on the benefits of sports into society. He does what the world needs making sports his vocation. He continues his love towards sports and making it a mission in his life. He is a successful sportsperson and a coach, by attaining that balance called Ikigai.

Conclusion

Ikigai is a philosophy of life in which one balances one's life between passion, profession, vocation and mission. It gives vision and meaning to one's life. Sports is a vocation that many people consider as a risky engagement. To maintain a healthy body and mind, one need to have a disciplined life; physical training is essential for the maintenance of health. From the early age, the education system and society should be able to invoke interest towards sports among the children. Tamesue is a sportsperson who continue his efforts and enlighten the society regarding the role of sports and games in human life. He takes it as a mission in his life and living a balanced life of Ikigai. Though one cannot expect everyone to be successful in sports or in any particular field, it does not make it undesirable.

Training and maintaining a healthy body and mind are essential to gain meaning in life. Success should not be attached to academic or professional fields. Avoiding those areas which one think as "worthless" will not bring him/her success and meaning in life. Exploring and

embracing all areas of life is essential for a meaningful life. Ikigai is a fine philosophy from Japan that shows to the world how to balance work and life.

Ikigai can be a sports philosophy and applied to the life of ordinary persons and sportspersons. Tamesue's efforts to bring up a healthy generation, and develop the love towards physical training is a model to all societies. For a sportsperson, it is a philosophy that well balance his/her life and mission. For an ordinary person, it says that there are no undesirable and avoidable areas in life. The centenarians in Okinawa is a model to the world, on how to attain happiness and lead a contained life. Though everyone may not be able to lead the life of a sportsperson, attaining a strong body and thereby a strong mind can give a happy and long life. Ikigai can ensure a life without lifestyle diseases; a life close to nature, close to one's self.

References

Batthyány, A. What is Logotherapy/ Existential Analysis? Retrieved October 7, 2019, from

Logotherapy and Existential Analysis website:

<https://www.univie.ac.at/logotherapy/logotherapy.html>

Buettner, D. (2010). *The Blue Zones: Lessons for Living Longer from the People Who've Lived the Longest*. Washington DC: National Geographic Society.

Cybozu, Inc. (2017, January 11). Cybozu and Dai Tamesue Produce "TRAC by Teamwork"

Program for "TRAC" School. Retrieved October 8, 2019, from Cybozu website:

<https://topics.cybozu.co.jp/news/2017/01/11-1562.html>

Frankl, V. E. (1958). On Logotherapy and Existential Analysis. *The American Journal of Psychoanalysis*, 18(1), 28–37. <https://doi.org/10.1007/BF01871876>

Frankl, V. E. (2006). *Man's Search for Meaning*. Boston: Beacon Press.

Gorvett, Z. (2016, September 14). Can You Work Yourself to Death? Retrieved October 11,

2019, from BBC website: <https://www.bbc.com/worklife/article/20160912-is-there-such-thing-as-death-from-overwork>

Hasegawa, A., Fujiwara, Y., Hoshi, T., & Shinkai, S. (2003). Regional Differences in “Ikigai” in the Elderly: Relationship with Family Structure, Physical Condition and Life Function. *Nippon Ronen Igakkai Zasshi Japanese Journal of Geriatrics*, 40(4), 390–396. <https://doi.org/10.3143/geriatrics.40.390>

Kamiya, M. (1980). *Ikigai Ni Tsuite*. Tokyo: Misuzu Shobō.

Mitsuhashi, Y. (2017, August 8). Ikigai: A Japanese Concept to Improve Work and Life.

Retrieved October 11, 2019, from BBC website:

<https://www.bbc.com/worklife/article/20170807-ikigai-a-japanese-concept-to-improve-work-and-life>

Puigcerver, H. G., & Miralles, F. (2017). *Ikigai: The Japanese Secret to a Long and Happy Life* (H. Cleary, Trans.). New York: Penguin Random House.

Tamesue, D. (2017, June 6). *The More Fearful One’s Own Growth is, the More he/ she will do Disadvantageous and Difficult Things* (Y. Aono, Interviewer) [Cybozu Blog].

Retrieved from <https://cybozushiki.cybozu.co.jp/articles/m001286.html>

Winn, M. (2014, May 14). What is your Ikigai? Retrieved October 7, 2019, from The View Inside Me website: <http://theviewinside.me/what-is-your-ikigai/>