At some point in our conversation, the mysterious word ikigai came up. This Japanese concept, which translates roughly as “the happiness of always being busy,” is like logotherapy, but it goes a step beyond. It also seems to be one way of explaining the extraordinary longevity of the Japanese, especially on the island of Okinawa, where there are 24.55 people over the age of 100 for every 100,000 inhabitants—far more than the global average.

The five regions identified and analyzed by Dan Buettner in his book The Blue Zones are: Okinawa, Japan (especially the northern part of the island). The locals eat a diet rich in vegetables and tofu typically served on small plates. In addition to their philosophy of ikigai, the moai, or close-knit group of friends (see page 15), plays an important role in their longevity. Sardinia, Italy (specifically the provinces of Nuoro and Ogliastra). Locals on this island consume plenty of vegetables and one or two glasses of wine per day. As in Okinawa, the cohesive nature of this community is another factor directly related to longevity. Loma Linda, California. Researchers studied a group of Seventh-day Adventists who are among the longest-living people in the United States. The Nicoya Peninsula, Costa Rica. Locals remain remarkably active after ninety; many of the region’s older residents have no problem getting up at five thirty in the morning to work in the fields. Ikaria, Greece. One of every three inhabitants of this island near the coast of Turkey is over ninety years old (compared to less than 1 percent of the population of the United States), a fact that has earned it the nickname the Island of Long Life. The local secret seems to be a lifestyle that dates back to 500 BC.

According to scientists who have studied the five Blue Zones, the keys to longevity are diet, exercise, finding a purpose in life (an ikigai), and forming strong social ties—that is, having a broad circle of friends and good family relations.

Presented with new information, the brain creates new connections and is revitalized. This is why it is so important to expose yourself to change, even if stepping outside your comfort zone means feeling a bit of anxiety.
Dealing with new situations, learning something new every day, playing games, and interacting with other people seem to be essential antiaging strategies for the mind. Furthermore, a more positive outlook in this regard will yield greater mental benefits.

The University of California conducted a similar study, taking data and samples from thirty-nine women who had high levels of stress due to the illness of one of their children and comparing them to samples from women with healthy children and low levels of stress. They found that stress promotes cellular aging by weakening cell structures known as telomeres, which affect cellular regeneration and how our cells age. As the study revealed, the greater the stress, the greater the degenerative effect on cells.

The central premise of this stress-reduction method is focusing on the self: noticing our responses, even if they are conditioned by habit, in order to be fully conscious of them. In this way, we connect with the here and now and limit thoughts that tend to spiral out of control.

In Man’s Search for Meaning, Frankl cites one of Nietzsche’s famous aphorisms: “He who has a why to live for can bear with almost any how.”

Existential crisis, on the other hand, is typical of modern societies in which people do what they are told to do, or what others do, rather than what they want to do.

West, we tend to believe that what we think influences how we feel, which in turn influences how we act. In contrast, Morita therapy focuses on teaching patients to accept their emotions without trying to control them, since their feelings will change as a result of their actions.

As Morita writes in his book Morita Therapy and the True Nature of Anxiety-Based Disorders, “In feelings, it is best to be wealthy and generous.” Morita explained the idea of letting go of negative feelings with the following fable: A donkey that is tied to a post by a rope will keep walking around the post in an attempt to free itself, only to become more immobilized and attached to the post. The same thing applies to people with obsessive thinking who become more trapped in their own suffering when they try to escape from their fears and discomfort.
“Put your hand on a hot stove for a minute and it seems like an hour. Sit with a pretty girl for an hour, and it seems like a minute. That is relativity.”

The Seven Conditions for Achieving Flow According to researcher Owen Schaffer of DePaul University, the requirements for achieving flow are: Knowing what to do Knowing how to do it Knowing how well you are doing Knowing where to go (where navigation is involved) Perceiving significant challenges Perceiving significant skills Being free from distractions

It is much more important to have a compass pointing to a concrete objective than to have a map. Joi Ito, director of the MIT Media Lab, encourages us to use the principle of “compass over maps” as a tool to navigate our world of uncertainty. In the book Whiplash: How to Survive Our Faster Future, he and Jeff Howe write, “In an increasingly unpredictable world moving ever more quickly, a detailed map may lead you deep into the woods at an unnecessarily high cost. A good compass, though, will always take you where you need to go. It doesn’t mean that you should start your journey without any idea where you’re going. What it does mean is understanding that while the path to your goal may not be straight, you’ll finish faster and more efficiently than you would have if you had trudged along a preplanned route.”

Concentrating on one thing at a time may be the single most important factor in achieving flow.

Meditation generates alpha and theta brain waves. For those experienced in meditation, these waves appear right away, while it might take a half hour for a beginner to experience them. These relaxing brain waves are the ones that are activated right before we fall asleep, as we lie in the sun, or right after taking a hot bath. We all carry a spa with us everywhere we go. It’s just a matter of knowing how to get in—something anyone can do, with a bit of practice.

Life is inherently ritualistic. We could argue that humans naturally follow rituals that keep us busy. In some modern cultures, we have been forced out of our ritualistic lives to pursue goal after goal in order to be seen as successful. But throughout history, humans have always been busy. We were hunting, cooking, farming, exploring, and raising families—activities that were structured as rituals to keep us busy throughout our days. But in an unusual way, rituals still permeate daily life and business practices in modern Japan. The main religions in Japan—Confucianism, Buddhism, and Shintoism—are all ones in which the rituals are more important than absolute rules.
The happiest people are not the ones who achieve the most. They are the ones who spend more time than others in a state of flow.

“...The grand essentials to happiness in this life are something to do, something to love, and something to hope for.”

Hara hachi bu is an ancient practice. The twelfth-century book on Zen Buddhism Zazen Youjinki recommends eating two-thirds as much as you might want to. Eating less than one might want is common among all Buddhist temples in the East. Perhaps Buddhism recognized the benefits of limiting caloric intake more than nine centuries ago.

Because they are rich in antioxidants and are eaten nearly every day in the region, these fifteen foods are considered keys to Okinawan vitality: Tofu Miso Tuna Carrots Goya (bitter melon) Kombu (sea kelp) Cabbage Nori (seaweed) Onion Soy sprouts Hechima (cucumber-like gourd) Soybeans (boiled or raw) Sweet potato Peppers Sanpin-cha (jasmine tea)

levels. Sanpin-cha can be found in many different forms in Okinawa, and is even available in vending machines. In addition to all the antioxidant benefits of green tea, it boasts the benefits of jasmine, which include: Reducing the risk of heart attack Strengthening the immune system Helping relieve stress Lowering cholesterol

Shikuwasa is the citrus fruit par excellence of Okinawa, and Ogimi is its largest producer in all of Japan. The fruit is extremely acidic: It is impossible to drink shikuwasa juice without diluting it first with water. Its taste is somewhere between that of a lime and a mandarin orange, to which it bears a family resemblance. Shikuwasas also contain high levels of nobiletin, a flavonoid rich in antioxidants. All citrus fruits—grapefruits, oranges, lemons—are high in nobiletin, but Okinawa’s shikuwasas have forty times as much as oranges. Consuming nobiletin has been proven to protect us from arteriosclerosis, cancer, type 2 diabetes, and obesity in general. Shikuwasas also contain vitamins C and B1, beta carotene, and minerals. They are used in many traditional dishes and to add flavor to food, and are squeezed to make juice. While conducting research at the birthday parties of the town’s “grandparents,” we were served shikuwasa cake.
One of the most commonly used mantras in Buddhism focuses on controlling negative emotions: “Om maṇi padme hūṃ,” in which om is the generosity that purifies the ego, ma is the ethics that purifies jealousy, ni is the patience that purifies passion and desire, pad is the precision that purifies bias, me is the surrender that purifies greed, and hūṃ is the wisdom that purifies hatred.