



In High Gear

I was reminded this morning - while on my way to the pool for my regular swim - of an encounter I had some years ago while in the woods. I had taken my tent and some camping supplies to a local forest, and was camping there for a day, for no other reason than to 'get away from it all' just for a short time.

While walking along a forest path near my camping spot, I had met a man who was in the woods cutting *sakaki* branches. This is actually quite a common activity in those woods, and I frequently see people near my home carrying small bundles of such branches that they have clipped, and which they will place in the family shrine. The man I met that day though - quite an elderly gent - wasn't cutting *sakaki* for his own use; his purpose for being in the forest was to harvest large quantities of the branches and take them down into town where he would sell them to florist shops.

It is quite a long way from the woodland to the shopping street in town, so of course it was most efficient for him to carry as many branches as he possibly could in each trip. And what a huge bundle of them he had created for himself! He had used some kind of vine found nearby to first tie the branches into bunches, and then to tie the bunches together into groups. He had then used a piece of rope to tie all these bundles into a huge mass of greenery that he hoisted onto his back for the trip down to town.

Now this was surprising enough - that an elderly man could carry such a heavy pack - but what was even more surprising was that he was happy, even eager, to stand in the pathway chatting with me. We must have stood there for about ten minutes, me carrying nothing, him carrying that huge bundle, before we said our goodbyes and he headed off down the pathway towards the city.

Where on earth could such an elderly guy get so much energy and power? And this is not an isolated example; if you have ever travelled on local trains in the Japanese countryside, you have almost certainly seen elderly women carrying huge bundles of vegetables, taking them to sell in nearby towns. They get off the train, hoist the heavy cargo onto their back, and stride off down the street, while 'youngsters' like me look on in amazement.

But I have to tell you about the event this morning that reminded me of these things. My route to the pool takes me over a bridge across the Tama River and then up a long, and very steep hill on the other side. I shift my bicycle gear into 'low', bend over the handlebars, and then 'Go go go!' all the way up the slope. (Honestly speaking, the trip to the pool gives me more exercise than the swim itself!)

Today though, as I pumped my way up the hill, what did I see half-way up, but a group of middle school boys. They wore some kind of sports uniform, and I suppose were on their way to a nearby school ground for practice. And what were they doing? They were all walking their bicycles, leaning into the climb, and slowly plodding their way up the slope. As I passed them, my white beard blowing in the breeze, I couldn't help but look in their direction and give them a nice big smile!

You know, I think that maybe I'm going to enjoy my old age ... when I get there!

David Bull
Seseragi Studio
Nagabuchi 8-4-5 Ome City
Tokyo Japan 198-0052
<http://astoryaweek.com>