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FEATURE: Barrier-Free Access to Transport

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A young Tokyo woman
discovering how old age
feels! (Asahi Shimbun)

Editorial

What is missing?

I was going to a meeting by taxi on a bleak London winter morning in the late 1980s. Suddenly, my cab stopped at a pedestrian crossing and the driver got out, raising his hand to stop other cars. I was astonished, but then he walked to the pavement where a man was waiting in a wheelchair and helped him cross the road. He gave a wave of thanks to the waiting drivers before getting back into the cab and starting off again. As the traffic flow returned to normal, I asked him if he knew the man in the wheelchair. He replied quietly, 'No, Sir. I just wanted to help him across'.

People in Japan are growing increasingly concerned about barriers to use of public transport by aged or disabled people, and the government has set guidelines about installing elevators and escalators in stations. This is good because there are still many physical barriers in railway facilities. However, generally speaking, stations in Tokyo are already better equipped for aged or disabled people than in London and other European capitals. Moreover, many Tokyo pavements have been completely renovated with tactile tiles and gentle slopes leading to pedestrian crossings. But while such conveniences are rarely seen in London, the kindness of my London taxi driver is rarely seen in Tokyo.

What is really missing in Tokyo is probably not the facilities alone, but a sense of community that would make people more friendly and helpful to strangers.

T. SUGA

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