



A Rare Sight For Sore Eyes

How often do you see a blind person with a guide dog in Japan? Right. Not very often. Although there is now a thriving movement to train guide dogs here, Japan is still able to offer far fewer blind people dogs than the U.K., America or Australia, for example. This month's feature looks at the problems of working dogs in a non-user friendly environment.

The definitions of totally blind, partially blind and visually impaired vary from country to country but, roughly speaking, about 3% of blind people have guide dogs in the U.S.A., approximately 5% in the U.K. and an impressive 20% in Australia. In Japan, the figure is still well under 1%, which represents about 800 dogs. Sam Tawada, controller of the Kansai Guide Dogs Association (head office in Kyoto), estimates that probably 5% of blind people here would like dogs, if they had the option, a similar figure to the U.K., where there are over 4,000 dogs in use. So why are there so few dogs here? What problems face the burgeoning guide dog movement?

A potted history

Dogs leading blind people are not a totally new sight in the East; there are examples in Chinese paintings of the thirteenth century. But, unlike Western Europe, which has a long tradition of using dogs to work with people and other animals (in hunting, shepherding, etc.), there has been no tradition of working dogs in Japan. Eye-Mate, in Tokyo, the biggest guide dog centre which turns out about 30 dogs a year, attributes this to the different needs of animal (cattle, sheep) rearing cultures as against one based on arable farming. The only 'working' dogs in Japan have been (untrained) watch dogs.

Guide dog training began seriously in Germany in the twenties, as a result of experiments to help soldiers blinded in the first world war. The prime mover in its spread was an American woman, Mrs. Dorothy Eustis, who was then in Switzerland, breeding and training alsatians (German shepherds), already in use there in the customs, army and police services. She set up the first guide dog centre in Switzerland, *L'Oeil Qui Voit* (or the Seeing Eye, as the dogs came to be known in America) and by 1930 her idea had spread to the U.S.A. and England.

The first guide dog to visit Japan came on a sightseeing trip with his American master, in the early thirties, and was followed by four imported German-trained dogs in 1938, which were given

to Japanese soldiers. But when these dogs died, the movement died with them.

After World War II and the American occupation, however, newly developing theories of social welfare provided more fertile ground for the seeds of a new movement to train guide dogs, here in Japan. Kenichi Shioya trained the first domestically born dog, Champy, in 1956. Despite financial difficulties and problems over official recognition, a Japan Guide Dog Association was formed in 1961 which began producing one dog a year.

However, at this point the lack of a consistent philosophy, which still characterises the Japanese movement, became apparent. A division of views over whether providing guide dogs was an act of charity, or a more dignified ideal of helping the blind to help themselves, finally led Shioya to found his own organization, Eye-Mate Inc. in 1970.

Meanwhile, others, including several blind people, had become interested in setting up training centres but, with no central body leading the way, a proliferation of independent centres began, resulting in eight separate centres today: Kyoto (training centre, Kameoka), Osaka (training centre, Wakayama), Nagoya, Sapporo, Tochigi, Tokyo (two) and Fukuoka.

Some controllers of dog centres, like Sam Tawada, cling fiercely to their independence even though it means a lot of time spent fund raising. Tawada's centre is financed almost all by public donation with only about 5% from Kyoto City and Prefecture. Fund-raising activities include demonstrations, open days, educational talks in schools and Tawada's new 'friends' scheme of membership of the centre for ¥6,000 a year. (At present there are 350 members for the year-old scheme but Tawada aims modestly for 10,000.)

On the other hand, in Osaka's centre in Shirahama, Wakayama (a joint project between Japan Lighthouse and Osaka City), two thirds of training costs are met by local and national government with only a third coming from private donations. Kiyoshi Hibino, director of Osaka's Social Adjustment and Vocational Training Centre for the Blind, feels that government should

recognise dogs as a necessary aid for non-sighted people and fund them automatically — something it isn't required to do now.

Lack of uniform approach

In a well-run school such as the Kansai/Kameoka one (Tawada has just been approached to become one of the International Federation of Guide Dog Centre's assessors), independence works well. But the disadvantages to the Japanese movement as a whole are many. Philosophy and training standards vary enormously from centre to centre and there is no way to impose higher standards on those found wanting. Evidence of actual mistreatment of animals is anecdotal and probably very rare. Associations in countries such as Australia and the U.K. have become involved through being approached to provide breeding stock for Japanese centres, which are all now inspected regularly by the International Federation.

However, differences over the place of discipline in training philosophies, for example, can have a major effect on the quality of the relationship between the dog and its user. Tawada believes temperament is most important: a successful partnership is possible only if the dog likes its work and really enjoys walking alongside people and lying still for periods. Hence his dogs are never forced to do something they don't naturally enjoy and will be rejected as guide dogs rather than disciplined. He disapproves of what he calls 'hard training', the usual method of training dogs in Japan by hitting them or shouting at them. "There are no bad dogs in my kennels — in fact there is no such thing as a bad dog, only bad owners." But as Walter Conron, breeding manager of the Royal Guide Dogs Association of Australia, told *The Japan Times* on a recent visit, "The centres' philosophies as to what a guide dog should be range from a tool to enhance a person's mobility, to a dog being a companion to its owner."

As well as this, there are variations in standards of breeding and rearing. Conron has warned of "lack of interest in the background of pups and the possibility of the dogs carrying hereditary illnesses." For example, labradors are prone to hereditary blindness, epilepsy and arthritis, often not detectable till the dogs are about five or six.

Early training and puppy walking also varies widely. From birth to four months is the most crucial period in the dog's life, during which 80% of its brain is developed. In the Kansai Kameoka centre, the pups are boarded out with puppy walking families who as well as giving them plenty of attention, walk them to get them used to traffic, buses, stairs and other hazards. In the Shirahama centre, volunteer puppy walkers visit the centre at first and the pup's homestay begins when they are two to four months old. The family is responsible for exposing the puppy to the TV, radio, washing machine and other household items, teaching it to ride quietly in cars and trains and sit or lie calmly in public buildings.

The Kansai centre is the only one to train the guide dogs to go on escalators, which is allowed in Japan (though not in Britain). Indeed, Kansai guide dogs and their owners glide onto escalators with more aplomb than the average sighted person. Tawada visits local department stores and stations with the dogs to achieve this, overcoming