



開拓

meeting the boulders of Kasagi-yama

Perhaps in response to the below-freezing mountain air that quickly rendered my carefully constructed layers of cotton and wool helpless, the boulders of Mt. Kasagi, set beneath a towering evergreen canopy, nestle themselves deep into the mountain's slopes. Tucked in by blankets of soil and moss, the boulders sit quietly, content with their position in time and space.

The town of Ena is quiet on Christmas eve; not that it wouldn't be otherwise. Sitting in front of a gently humming vending machine just outside of Ena station, I await the arrival of Naruse Yohei; a devoted artist and climber who, having lived and climbed in the region for nearly the entirety of his life, has grown older and wiser whilst the boulders of Mt. Kasagi have sunk deeper and deeper into the accepting earth below.

As he pulls up in his mountain-worn SUV, Naruse and I exchange rather quick greetings:

『初めまして』 nice to meet you

『初めまして』 nice to meet you too

『寒いですね』 it's cold.

『寒い！』 it's cold!

It doesn't take a detailed inspection of Naruse's car to understand what he has committed his life to: Guidebooks, ropes, cams, crashpads... three pairs of La Sportiva climbing shoes; I felt at home.

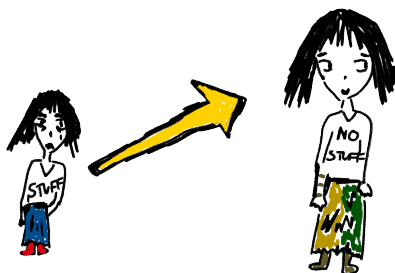
Making the short trip out of Ena and into the surrounding mountains, Naruse points out local landmarks: 木曽川 (Kiso River)、恵那山 (Mt. Ena)、a small statue of a frog, a confectionary shop that specializes in candied chestnuts. We take a turn onto a small mountain road that in spite of its remoteness, was still remarkably well-maintained.



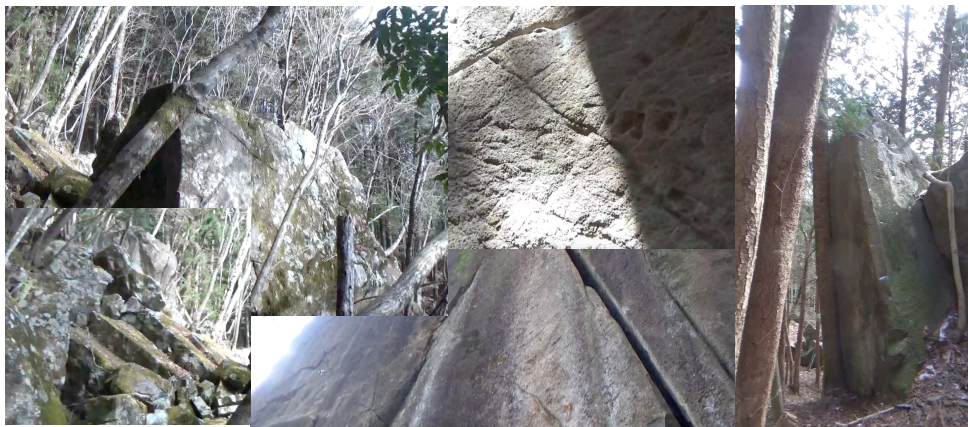
Kasagi-yama is visible right outside my west-facing window. Completely encased in a dense green covering of 杉 (cedar) and 針葉樹 (conifer), it's shoulders broad but mellow, the mountain is rather unsuspecting.



Despite having grown up 20 minutes away from the mountain's trailhead, even Naruse himself did not think to venture up the local mountain until his early 20's. Overshadowed by the taller peaks that fill the eastern horizon, the mountain was never a destination for local hikers and climbers. In fact, it was not until 2009 that the boulders who line themselves up and down Kasagi-yama were uncovered by a local mountain-climbing group that decided rather whimsically to venture up the mountain's lonely trail sometime in the deep-winter.



The granite on the mountain possesses a solidity that rock-climbers yearn for. Shallow cuts and cracks are placed so unpredictably it almost seems intentional. Seeing the potential for rock climbing among these ancient stone-faces, the location of the boulders were relayed to the likes of Dai Koyamada, one of the world's most prolific route developers and first ascensionists. As I sit down to write this article, just about 15 years later, it is thanks to the efforts of Koyamada, Naruse, and plenty of other climbers who participate in the process of 開拓 (*kaitaku*), or route development, that the Kasagi-yama climbing area is now one of the most popular climbing destinations in the entire country, having drawn not only some of the nation's top climbers, but some of the world's. Continuing slowly along the winding road between the towering trees of Kasagi-yama, Naruse tells me about Chris Sharma's (the man widely regarded as one of the greatest climbers of all-time) visit to the area; he made a promise to show me the *Sharma problem* once we arrived.

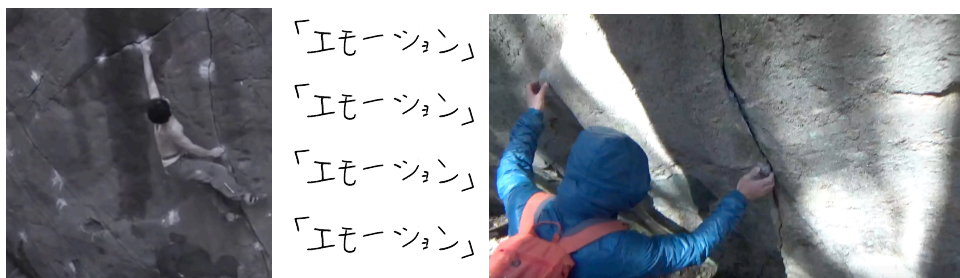


Stepping out of Naruse's car somewhere high up on Kasagi-yama's southeastern-facing slopes, I am struck by stillness. A complete absence of wind. A complete absence of people.



Naruse leads me down a trail that almost immediately reveals one of Japan's most iconic boulders. The エグゾディア(exodia) boulder hosts 7 different lines. This includes 『エモーション』 or *Emotion*, a classic climb whose difficulty has attracted climbers from all over the country since it was first established by Koyamada in 2010. The boulder is relatively stout, yet its measly offerings of tiny indents and crevasses only a few millimeters deep communicate an undeniable confidence; the boulder challenges you to underestimate it, finding joy in rejecting climbers who subconsciously depreciate its challenge based on proximity to the ground or lack of overhang.

Naruse shows me the first few handholds; “sometimes I almost think I can do it.”



Since the area was first discovered by climbers in 2009, 9 sub-areas and hundreds of routes have manifested themselves up-and-down Kasagi-yama. While the world-class difficulty found along the lines presented by Koyamada have gained a notoriety that has associated the climbing on Kasagi-yama with the finger-intensive, intricate-yet-powerful style that Koyamada seems to bring to each boulder he climbs, Naruse has simultaneously pioneered a completely different set of lines that deviate greatly from Koyamada's.

There is beauty to be found within the pure difficulty of Koyamada's lines; problems such as *Emotion* require the climber to perform at their absolute physical limit. It is likely a climber would have to undergo several years of training before they can even conceptualize how their body could move across such razor-thin edges and crystals. This being said, the emphasis and importance placed on the rather arbitrary numbers that are climbing grades have centered the attention of visiting climbers around these difficult lines, subsequently overshadowing the enjoyment that is sure to be found within the tall, aesthetic boulders that Naruse has put up over the past 15 years.

Having roamed the slopes of Kasagi-yama for countless hours, countless days, Naruse's relationship with the boulders of Kasagi-yama exists beyond the act of climbing. Explaining his personal approach to kaitaku, Naruse reveals that it is simply the beauty of the rock itself, the feeling he receives as he stands beneath it, that inspires him to embark on the physical and mental journey that is kaitaku.

“Kaitaku is about understanding the rock. you must communicate with it”



Some boulders are unmistakably introverted; blank granite faces, steep overhangs, sloping edges. If climbing is a process of communication, these boulders may be hesitant to open up, and some may outright reject. However, as Naruse has found over his countless hours in communication, it is when the boulder opens up to you, presents its line, allows you to move up the entirety of its anatomy... it is in these moments a fulfillment that exists beyond the temporary pleasure of completing a difficult climb is realized. To complete the development of a climbing route is to present a work of art, to share an experience; to come to an agreement with nature.

“For me, kaitaku is the most fulfilling part of climbing. It feels like a true adventure.”

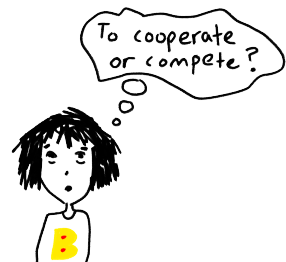
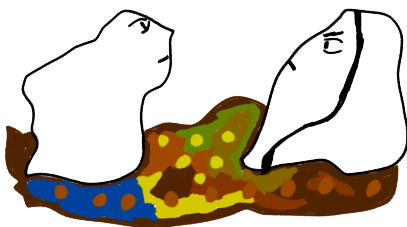
Kaitaku exists not simply as an operation of engineering in which the climber finds an objective path from point A to point B, but as an artistic process derived from the aesthetic preferences of the climber, the physical and mental approach to the individual's movement that has been cultivated by every movement prior. Kaitaku manifests itself through the nature in which the climber *communicates* with the rock.



Rock climbers driven by challenge and confident in their training may come to the rock as an opposing force looking to latch onto its sharpest edges between bouts of aggressive, dynamic movement. As an inherently strenuous activity, physically and mentally taxing, climbers may feel as if they are fighting to stay on the wall with every move, as if the rock is deliberately pushing them away. In fact, the overwhelming majority of the climbing experience is inseparable from falling itself; it took Koyamada days, and likely hundreds of attempts, before he first topped out the 7 meter line that is *Emotion*.

Despite the struggle of climbing existing as something both innate and constant, there are moments, although few-and-far between, where movement begins to feel effortless, unapologetically sharp granite becomes comfortable... an understanding is reached.

Naruse's explanation of "rock communication" conveys to me that it is in these moments where the climber, already having undergone the process of "communicating" with the rock, realizes a profound cooperation that enables such effortless movement. Putting in the time and effort to understand the personality of the rock, the intricacies of the movement offered by the minute features of each hold, a human-boulder relationship is formed. To Naruse, this relationship is reliant on cooperation, rather than competition.



The roots and branches of Kasagi-yama's evergreens assist our descent into a relatively new sub-area of the mountain that Naruse has been exploring recently. Naruse introduces me to his current project: A perfectly vertical wall, at least 5 times the height of the "Exodia" boulder towers above us.

Probably due to some geological phenomenon, but definitely also due to nature's magic, about two-thirds of the wall protrudes slightly further out than the remaining stone; the contrast in depth defines a jagged path that Naruse has set his physical and mental efforts on over the past few months.



We sit underneath the boulder, absorbing its presence.

“I really want to climb this... I haven’t been able to put the moves together yet”

Naruse speaks while his eyes settle on his high point, 3 bolts up.

“It might be too hard for me, but connecting the movement...having the line appear, I think that in itself is enough”

“Some people like to inspect the holds from the top-down. I’ve come to embrace the style of ground-up. When the next hold is an unknown, when each movement requires a connection from the previous... that is the most fun, it provides me with a sense of adventure.”

Again, to the performance-oriented climber, Naruse’s method of *kaitaku*, in which he has embraced the style of ground-up, may seem self-hindering. Why would you willingly add an element of danger and difficulty to an activity that is already dangerous and difficult? As much as climbing can be about pushing one’s mental and physical abilities to the absolute limit, climbing can also be an activity of leisure, a creative outlet, or a lifetime pursuit that persists in one’s life even as their physical capabilities decline with age. Naruse’s style of *kaitaku* is simply derived from the elements of climbing that bring him fulfillment; the pureness of ground-up route-development is indicative of Naruse’s priorities as a climber. He may never top out a boulder as physically challenging as *Emotion*, but luckily for Naruse, it is not the difficulty of the problem that dictates his satisfaction in climbing. Rather, it is the embrace of the process from beginning to end: The shy greeting that proceeds the gradual evolution in which human-rock connection is formed. *Imagination into movement. Feeling-into-imagination-into-movement.* Reaching the next hold 「holds」 just as much importance as reaching the top.

is that not the essence
of 'process', after all?

Just as we feel drawn to certain individuals based on some unidentifiable combination of perspective and experience, different climbers may be drawn to different boulders and lines in a similar sense. Characteristic, aesthetic, and the ability to envision the symbiosis of one's physical body with its geological counterpart.

The boulders whelmed within the soil of Kasagi-yama predate our infantile human existence by millions of years; humanity has never existed in the absence of rocks. As I sit under the boulders of Kasagi-yama at the end of calendar year 2023, I realize the absurdity of climbing. Yet, at the same time, I am also struck by the beauty of linking the human body to nature in an overtly-connected manner in which we cling to granite. The walls present themselves as a challenge to our minds and bodies, yet reaching the top of the climb in no way means that we have conquered the rock. No, it is without a doubt that our geological predecessors will succeed us as well.

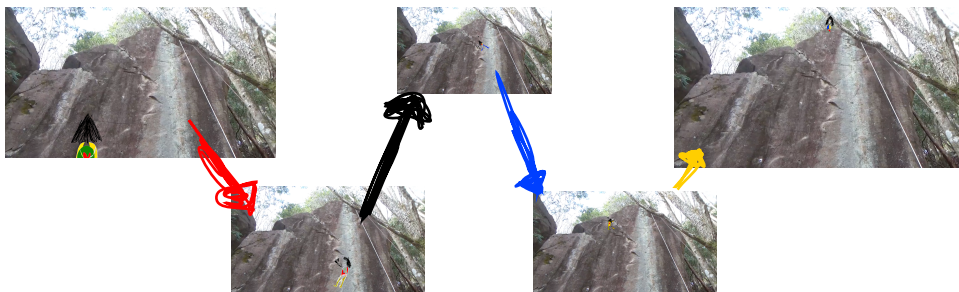


A painter and illustrator off-the-wall, Naruse relates the process of kaitaku to that of painting:

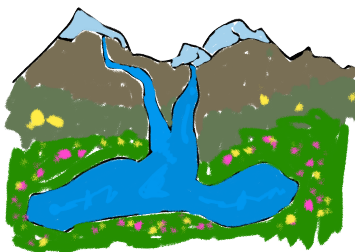
“The rock is a canvas”



A painter is quite possibly our most stereotypical example of what, or who, an artist is. Painters, musicians, writers... there are plenty of people who will be regarded as artists strictly because of the medium they participate in, regardless of process. However, the lines as to who an artist is, and what an artist does can often be blurred as we look towards mediums outside of traditional art, in which individuals are taking particularly artistic approaches in creating, or simply acting out, products and processes that are not widely regarded as art.



Just like dance, climbing is an innate exploration of human movement. Unlike dance, climbing can not be performed solo—every climb is performed with a partner, who, as the larger and wiser, defines the constraints and difficulties of movement. The features of rocks, existing as culminations of millenia of the earth's ever-changing conditions, are ever-changing themselves. As Zen Buddhists in Japan have been reciting since the founding of Soto Buddhism in the 13th century: *They flow just as rivers do.*



As one stands beneath a rock face, studying, reading each crack, knob, pinch, crimp... the divots in the rock become increasingly defined, and all of a sudden, a human-rock relationship is formed. The rock, presenting itself to the human consciousness, encourages (or maybe challenges) the human hand to feel what its features have to offer. A magical forest, with chunks of pure granite gneiss, carved in wavy shapes by an ancient river, rushing down from a rigid mountain range that has eroded into the gentle hillside that Naruse and I carefully navigate, is filled with characters and personalities.

A ray of sun on a south facing boulder, with its north end nestled into the warmth of the hillside dirt, welcomes the human with open arms.

Freshly baked cookies. I am reminded that tomorrow is Christmas.

