

Why You Should Not Have an Over-Reliance on Lineage:

by

Gary Simpson

First of all, **what is lineage?**

Lineage is like a family tree. You are part of a lineage whether you like it or not. You had parents, grand-parents, great-grandparents, great-great grandparents and so on. You also have uncles, cousins and maybe even step-mothers or step-fathers if there have been remarriages along the way. The family tree, so to speak. But, enough of the example. I'm sure you understand where I am going with this now.

In martial arts there is also lineage.

Founder A trains disciples B, C and D. Along the way B, for whatever reason, drifts away and no longer pursues his or her training. It happens more often than not. That then leaves disciples C and D. But then along comes disciples E, F and G. Then disciple D dies. Hey, that happens too, unfortunately. Disciples F and G also drift away. I won't persist with this much longer. So, what are we left with?

We have now arrived at Founder A having two main remaining disciples, C and E. Who is the more "senior?" Naturally C is because he started his training first, long before E. However, let's say in this very simplistic example that C does not "pick the art up" anywhere nearly as well as E. E is "junior" to C in terms of learning the art over a shorter period. But E, for whatever reason, is a superior practitioner. This happens too. I have seen it many times in my own journey. E is therefore ranked lower than C. But that can change as more years are added for both.

Let us now say that Founder A dies, taking with him all the knowledge and ability that he has retained and developed over many decades of study and practice. He leaves behind disciples C and E to carry on what he started. And let me be clear here – this is EXACTLY what happens.

Now here is my question...

WHO, out of C or E would you want to learn from?

Obviously the answer should be E.

Let's say now that C and E have a disagreement and they each decide to go their own way. They both had the same teacher so each decides to incorporate the name of the Founder into their own personal schools. Let's say that C calls his school "Founder A Ryu" and E calls his school "Founder A Kai." By the way, that is a fairly typical split where one becomes the style, one becomes the school. Which is more correct? I don't know! I wasn't there when it all fell apart. I never got to choose who was right or who was wrong or who was more right than the other. Personalities become such a big

残
心
会
空
手
道

part of all breakaways.

If you have studied any martial art for any length of time then you will probably have already tried to trace the origins of your art back to a Founder – and there are MANY of them. Some are very famous, so to speak. Some are more obscure. So, you will already have an appreciation, in your own circumstance of the similarity with my example above.

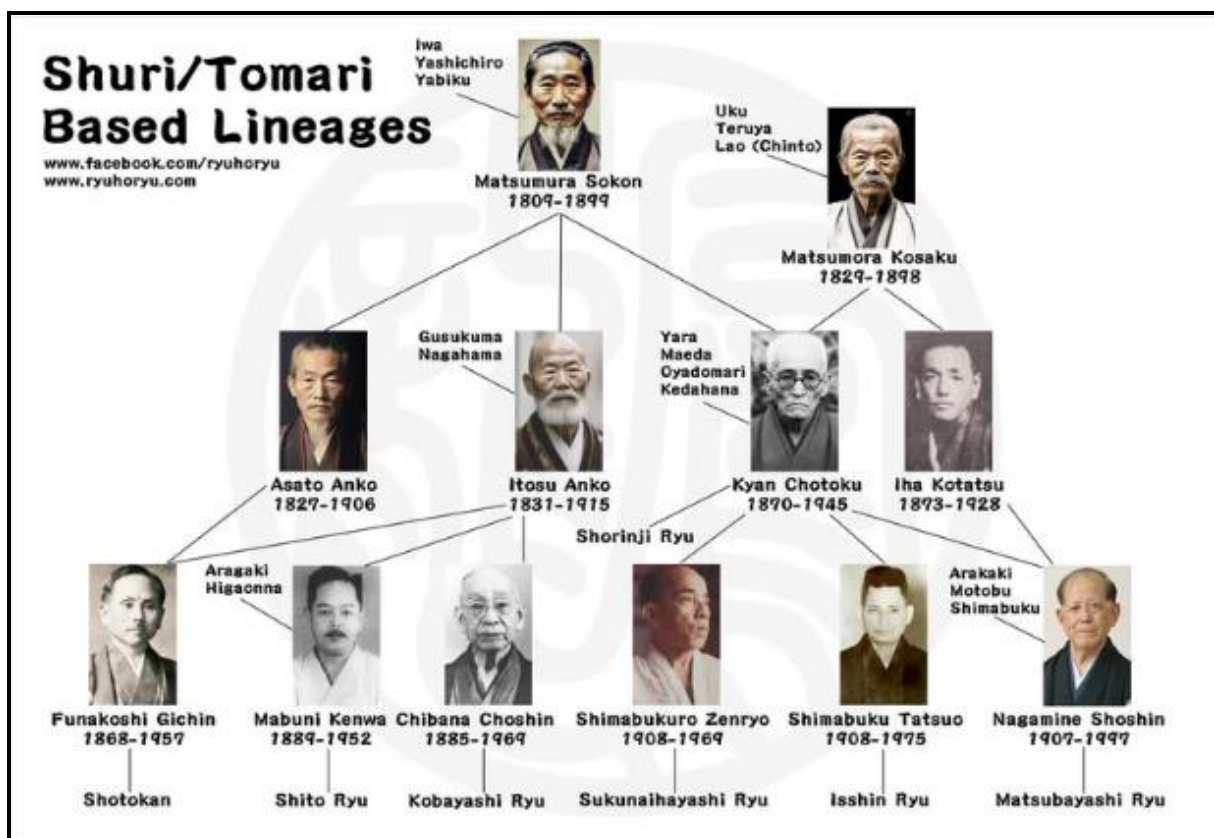
I will keep this aligned with karate so that I can now get more specific – also, because that is what I am more familiar with. These lineages and splits and “cousin” styles abound in ALL martial arts, whether that be karate, ju-jitsu, taekwondo, escrima, judo, kendo, kung fu... whatever!

In karate we have seen these disagreements and splits and rivalry all too often. A classic example occurred in **Kyokushinkai** (which is still fragmenting even now) after the death of its Founder, **Mas Oyama** where various “world” and “all-encompassing” associations were formed – all professing to be the OFFICIAL discipline of their leader, Oyama.

We also saw it in Shotokan (the base art of Zanshin Kai Karate Do and Kobudo) where **Egami Shigeru** and **Nakayama Masatoshi** had disagreements and each went his own way following the death of the founder, **Funakoshi Gichin**.

It happens! In fact, it happens in everything, not just martial arts.

Let us now look at the following (very basic) genealogy chart of karate:



Just look at all that cross-training. And now, to add even further confusion, even historians cannot agree with the same lineages. There are vastly different lineage charts almost everywhere, depending on who wrote what book.

Further complicating the situation are the actual names of many of these forefathers of karate. There are different names and nick-names and aliases so, when referring to these people, the facts can become confused and distorted. Having said that, I will go with the chart above, as it stands.

Notwithstanding what I said above, I have selected this chart for two main reasons:

1 – because of its basicness. That is, it is fairly simple compared to so many that are out there – all claiming to be the definitive representation of who trained with who and who taught whom – if that even makes sense, and

2 – because it is GENERALLY accepted, in the case of Funakoshi Gichin that he only had two main teachers himself – **Azato** and **Itosu**.

Can you start to see the futility of where this all leads to? Essentially, you come to believe whatever it is that you want it to be.

If you have ever researched your own family tree then you will know that the further you go back, the more you have to “assume” and perhaps even just “guess” and, more than likely, just desire to travel up a (somewhat tenuous) path that leads to some sort of famous person or nobility of some sort. In short, almost EVERYBODY wants to be able to say something along the lines of “I have viking blood” or “I am related back in the 1500’s to the King of Denmark” or “I am of samurai descent.”

Everybody loves a bit of romance in their (preferred) so-called historical ties. What about the number of Australians who just love the thought of being related, in some strange bloodline way, to the notorious outlaw, Ned Kelly?

These things are (mostly) all in the minds of the beholders. I’m not saying that some of it isn’t true. Some of it could be but, the further away you get in the number of years that have expired, the greater is the chance of it not being true.

Now, getting back to martial arts (karate) lineages – does it make all that much difference who you can trace your “karate ancestry” back to? Some will say yes, some will say no. I say, to each his (or her) own.

It’s pretty obvious where your “roots” are when you look at the MAIN DIFFERENCE in your “style” versus other styles. **It’s in the kata**. But even kata, supposedly originating from the same source, can have nuanced differences. Nevertheless, different styles have different kata sets (canons).

Drilling down a bit further...

Most karate styles have very similar methods of punching, “blocking” (intercepting), stances etc etc. Yes, there are some notable differences. However, they are nowhere near as insurmountable as most students and even instructors might think. After all, look at the most basic kick in all karate – the front kick. Every style of karate calls it the same thing – “Mae Geri.” And every style performs it exactly the same way. Seriously, how many other ways are there to be able to do it?

Yes, I know that some might argue that there is Mae Tobi Geri (thrusting) and Mae Tobi Keage (scooping) but they are both variations utilised by all the styles. In other words, they are uniform.

So, there is a common core running through every style of karate. It’s the same with the other arts.

The differences are often in the interpretation of the techniques and here is where I return to Disciples C and E in my opening...

... it will probably be “pot-luck” whether you were introduced to one or the other.

As a beginner, how do you know who is the better of the two? Quite simply, you DON’T! Most people do ZERO research before they get started in anything. I was exactly the same. Lucky for me, my best friend at the time was a fellow called **Warren King** (deceased now for many decades) and he was a student of the late, great **Jan de Jong**, a master of ju-jutsu when ju-jutsu was virtually unknown. But I am digressing, as I often do when I have information overload.

Along the way I had a series of teachers, some were good, some were “not so good.” Basically I learned what I could from whoever I could and I supplemented my knowledge with a vast number of books, videos and other material. I joined (and left) many associations along the way.

Eventually, I did what almost every other passionate exponent has done before me – I went out on my own. In this regard, look at the chart again above. You can see that is what has happened over and over and over again. It has to. Otherwise no art or style would survive past its Founder.

My point is this – do not become over enthused or obsessed about who was a student of whom or how far back you can trace your lineage. Above all, just keep looking until you find a Sensei or teacher who suits what you are looking to achieve in your journey



Gary Simpson

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