

KUMDO: A KOREAN STYLE OF SWORDFIGHTING

What kid didn't grow up watching *Star Wars*, *The Lord of the Rings*, or *Kurosawa* movies and didn't swing a stick or a broom handle around like a sword? There is a feeling of power that comes with the idea of wielding a sword; a feeling of connection to a thousand heroes throughout history. A connection that, as kids, we might not have even understood. Even in this day and age the sword is a powerful symbol. We don't usually



think about it as something that we could learn the use of and really master ourselves, but there are schools keeping the art of swordsmanship alive today. There are many schools out there, from traditional samurai styles, competitive sparring styles like fencing and kendo, European styles, and even fantasy styles like Jedi schools.

Mireu Martial Arts in Coralville, IA is one such school. Mireu Martial Arts Kumdo follows a Korean style of swordsmanship. There are many disciplines under the title "Kumdo", ranging from schools that focus solely on competitive sparring to schools that only focus on forms and real sword techniques. Kumdo is not as

famous as Japanese Kendo, but it is a blend of Korean martial tradition and culture, Japanese sparring and techniques, and historic Chinese influence. This can make for an exciting and versatile martial art. Mireu Martial Arts Kumdo teaches forms as well as sparring and real sword techniques and cutting. This wide-ranging practice is both challenging and engaging with all aspects of practice designed to complement the others and enhance overall skill.

One of the only sources of ancient Korean weapons is the *Muye Dobo Tongji*, or "Illustrated Manual of Martial Arts". This is one of the few military documents that has survived in Korea, and is an invaluable source of knowledge for any Korean martial art. This book describes the use of swords, spears, staves, and unarmed combat. It also details some less common weapons, like the hyupdo: a curved spear, the woldo: a massive curved blade on a spear shaft, and the nang seon: a spear with multiple prongs that look like leaves along the side.

Unfortunately, the original masters who practiced these techniques died a long time ago and direct line of learning between master and student was lost. Thus, kumdo schools must do their best to combine the writings and illustrations of the *Muye Dobo Tongji* with modern knowledge of swordsmanship to create as accurate an interpretation as possible. This means you may see different kumdo schools perform the same form in radically different, but beautiful ways.





Mireu Martial Arts primarily uses forms from the *Muye Dobo Tongji*, but it also uses forms developed by lineage Masters. Some Kumdo schools derive their forms from other sources such as Japanese kata, while others use Chinese taolu. Some schools will create their own modern forms to fit their own style, while others that specialize in sparring may not have any forms at all. Regardless of the source, sword forms teach balance, footwork, techniques, and transitions between blocks and attacks. There is grace and technique hidden within even the most basic sword form. Making attacks using the core, rather than from the arms, maintaining the angle of the sword. Making balanced steps, always ready for attack or defense, and transition smoothly between them. This makes for a beautiful and powerful form.

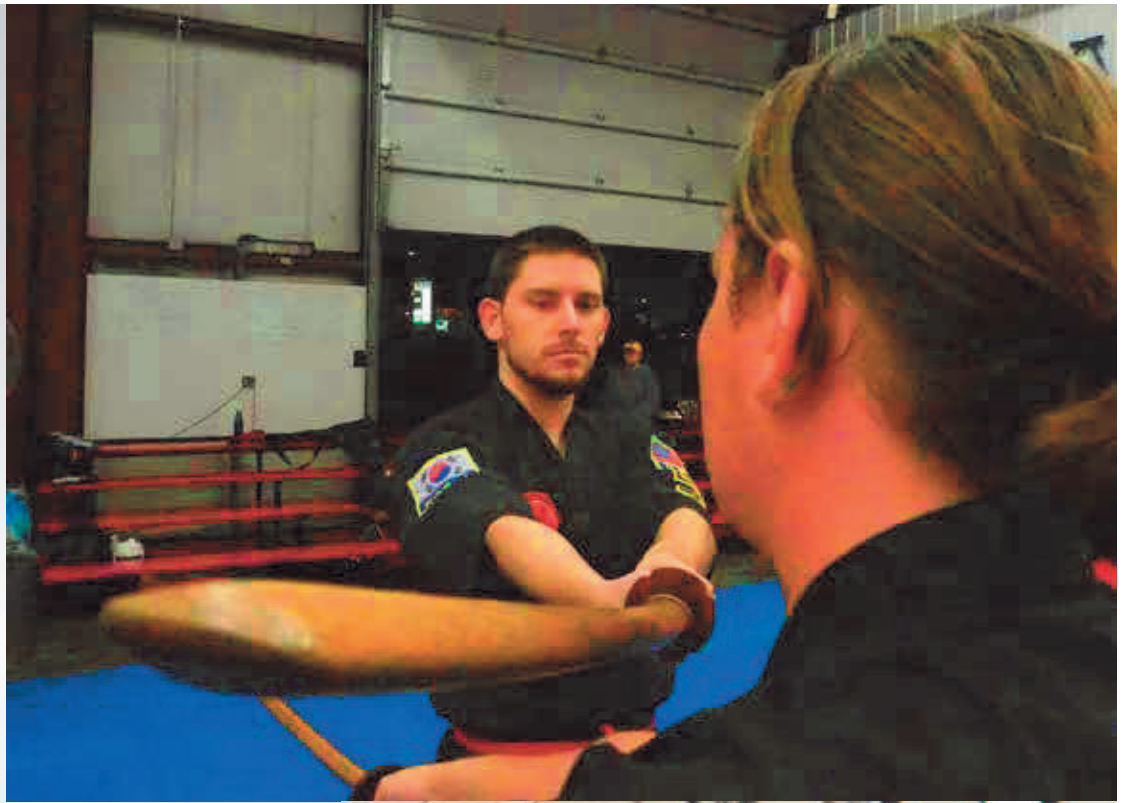
Kumdo sparring is a sport based off of Japanese Kendo, which was imported to Korea in the early 1900s; and there are still tournaments between the two countries. Practitioners wear heavy armor and use bamboo swords to score points. Like European fencing, target areas are limited for sport. In Kumdo, those target areas



are the head, wrist, waist and throat. Sparring is great exercise and it teaches timing and tactics. Unlike choreographed sparring seen in movies, a real sword fight is usually determined in a matter of moments. Incredible focus is required to succeed in sword sparring. Both players waiting for the perfect moment to strike, knowing that to move too early or too late will end with a swift counter-attack.

Some Kumdo schools also practice live blade cutting. This is traditionally done on reed mats (jipdan in Korean, tatami in Japanese), or on bamboo. Fruits and vegetables are common cutting objects. Large sitting produce like watermelons or pumpkins are good for practicing power, while throwing smaller fruits like apples and cutting midair show speed and skill. Cutting can also be performed on sheets of paper to display proper cutting angles. For precision and power control a candle can be lit and either have the wick cut; or blow the candle out with the force of the wind from the sword.

Live cutting is a true test of a sword practitioner's skill. Raw power will only get you so far, poor technique can not only botch a cut, but can result in a broken blade or serious injury. Cutting requires maintaining the sword angle throughout the entire cut. This required proper handling of the sword in the hands, arms, waist and legs. Any inconsistency changes the trajectory of the sword, much like trying to turn sharply while sawing wood. It is not recommended to try cutting without proper training, it takes training from a Master to learn good technique and maintain safety. Once cutting experience is gained, it is incredibly challenging and rewarding.





The true value of Kumdo is focus, discipline, and confidence. All martial arts inspire confidence in students, and it is one of the greatest benefits of martial study. Other martial arts also require focus and discipline, but the need is heightened with the use of a lethal weapon. When dealing with an edged weapon, mistakes can cause serious injury. Masters and students both know they need to stay focused to keep each other safe, this forces the practitioner to maintain high discipline. This focus, discipline, and confidence will support a student throughout their life.

Unfortunately, sword and other weapon martial arts are a relatively small niche in the martial arts community. In some ways, this is understandable. Learning how to kick, punch, and grapple can be used in an unexpected circumstance requiring self-defense, but no one carries around a sword and gets into duals any



longer. However, the confidence learned in any martial art deters bullies in most circumstances on its own. In addition, swordsmanship has a romantic quality that other martial arts lack. It may not be practical, but it connects to history and something primal in all of us.

Kumdo is a fun, difficult, and rewarding martial art to learn. I encourage anyone, whether you are a Master looking to expand your knowledge or a beginner looking to start martial arts, to consider a weapon martial art. It will change your perspective on what martial arts can be and what you can do. Besides, why sit at home watching swordplay in movies or video games, when you can get out there and do it yourself!

