

Sword and Spirit

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— Why Budo? —

Regardless of the times you live in, or the circumstances of your life, success largely depends on things you actually can control:

- **Building strong relationships in a community of achievement.**
- **Forging a disciplined and positive mindset.**
- **Enhancing your physical health and capabilities.**

These are exactly the benefits membership in a dojo provides.

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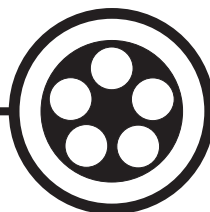
The Conditioning Set

An Exercise Routine We Use for Aikijutsu

“Train hard; fight easy,” was a phrase frequently heard in the karate dojo that formed the foundation of my martial arts experience. Although there are many aspects of the training regime in that dojo I would not dream of inflicting on my students nowadays, one element I do preserve is the importance of physical conditioning in support of optimal performance. Several of the exercises we still use date back to that Isshinryu dojo. While some instructors oppose spending time in class on anything not directly related to the art being taught, and others due to the length of classes must encourage conditioning be conducted outside of regular practices, the 90-minute class format we use allows an investment of up to 20-minutes in conditioning and *kihon* (fundamentals), with more than an hour remaining for deeper focus on the art itself.

The exercises presented here are the usual routine we utilize at the start of weeknight aikijutsu practices. There are alternatives to several of the exercises that we use as a change of pace or to help mitigate adaptation to the routine—we have, on occasion, run the routine backwards—and there are variations on the exercises that can be performed while holding a *bokken* (wooden sword) and are appropriate for use in kenjutsu or related practices. Experience has proven the benefits of the investment of time in the conditioning set: At a variety of different seminar situations over the years with students from other dojo, even other dojo from within the same overall organization, our students have very clearly and consistently been in far better shape.

Potential members of the dojo visiting to observe a practice prior to applying can easily be intimidated by the intensity of the conditioning set. We emphasize to visitors that new students are guided very carefully so that they can build the requisite level of fitness safely and relatively comfortably, without undue risk of injury. In practice, we nag the new students unmercifully, insisting that they focus purely on form rather than trying to keep up with the count. We encourage beginners to alternate execution of a single repetition of an exercise with just watching a rep or two, or more.



The only people that have ever had trouble with our system are those that fancy themselves in shape—and maybe they are, for something else—and rather than listening to our advice ego demands they prove it. There have been instances of such individuals running outside to puke, or of (literally) not being able to step out of bed the next morning. Most people, though, do just fine.

After the conclusion of our weeknight aikijutsu practices, those members able to stay for an additional ten or 15 minutes participate in a standardized stretching routine—but that’s a topic for a future issue.

1. Knuckle Pushups

The conditioning set focuses first on the upper body, and the initial exercise is the favorite of karate dojo everywhere: knuckle pushups. Although not as entertaining on *tatami* (mats) as when performed on hardwood, the same elements of structure are emphasized despite the soft surface.

When punching, we use a fist configuration originally from old styles of Okinawan karate: The middle through little fingers are rolled into the palm, the index finger is laid across the middle finger, and the structure is locked down by the thumb. The purpose of this geometry is a slight but noticeable strengthening of the wrist and consequent resistance to buckling under impact. We use this fist for knuckle pushups as well.

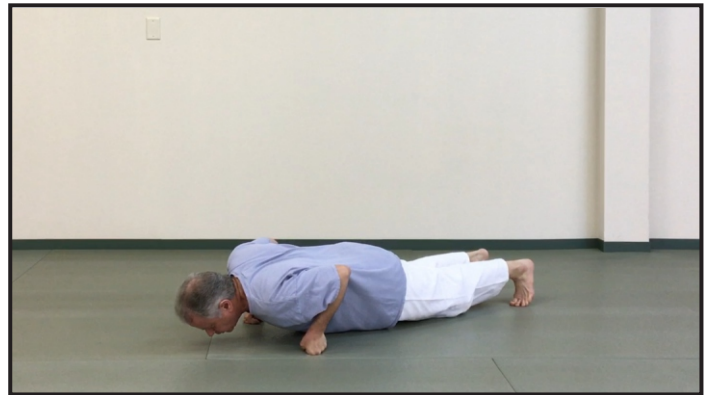
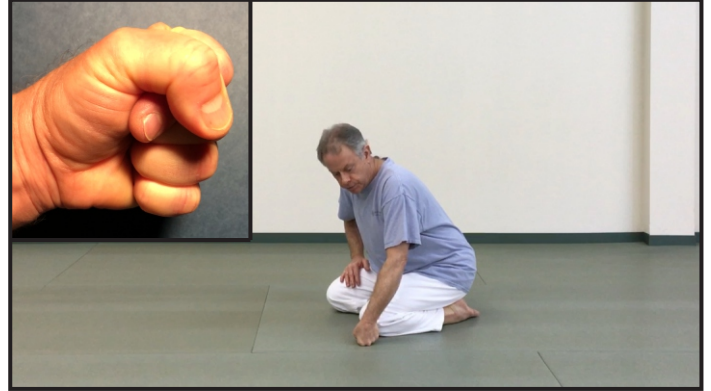
The alignment of the arm in the pushup should place the entire weight on the base knuckles of the index and middle fingers (also the points of impact in a proper punch). When placed on the mat, the wrist should be rolled a bit forward and to the outside, to ensure contact on only those two knuckles on each hand.

Start in the “down” position, one-inch off the mat.

Push up, maintaining the specified configuration and placement of the fists. Typically, I like to inhale on the upward stroke, to practice that aspect of breath-power.

At the top of the pushup—and as should be the case throughout the exercise—be certain to maintain an exact plank position, with the body ramrod straight.

Lower at a pace twice as slow as the upward stroke. Pause in the down position, prior to the next repetition. I exhale when lowering.



We normally do 20–25 repetitions of knuckle pushups. One variation is ten reps with a *very* slow lowering to and longer hold at the down position.

2. Plank Leg Raises

The next exercise in the set targets the lower back and buttocks, and is critical to building strength for *ukemi* (literally “receiving body,” the skills of escaping or countering techniques by means of rolls or breakfalls). In aikijutsu, *ukemi* is very often effected by boosting the body up and over, and especially in breakfalls this is powered by kicking up with a leg. For details, see “Ukemi 101” in the February 2019 issue of this journal, and “Ukemi 201—Teaching the Solo, ‘Aerial’ Breakfall” in the June 2019 issue.

Originally, we performed leg raises from the down position while still in the knuckle pushup configuration. While recovering an injury I had to substitute planks for pushups and discovered this position enhanced the effects of the leg raises. Some students were not quite as delighted with the discovery.

Assume a standard, plank position, supported by the forearms and balls of the feet (toes forward, as though kicking the mat). Avoid the tendency, especially as the exercise progresses, to bend the plank by sticking the rear end up in the air. Note that I usually place my arms such that my fists touch, providing some cross-body support to the leg being raised. When wearing *keikogi* (the training uniform), I push back the sleeves to expose my forearms so that my arms won’t slip on the mat.

As mentioned, the idea of this exercise is to work the lower back and buttocks, so as the leg is raised try to concentrate the effort on that portion of the body. Raise the leg briskly, and then lower it more slowly back to the mat. It’s fine to push into the mat with the base foot as the leg is raised. Turning the head in the direction of the leg being raised can make the exercise more comfortable.

The foot of the leg being raised will tend to turn out a bit; try to keep the toes pointed down toward the mat to greatest degree possible. This is an important configuration to ensure maximum lift into *ukemi*, most critically in “aerial” breakfalls.

We exhale on the lift and execute ten reps on each leg.



3. Arching Up

Continuing the focus on the lower back, and to balance the upcoming abdominal exercises, the next exercise in the series is also called “hyper-extensions.” In a gym or at home with a weight lifting bench, this exercise is typically performed by securing the feet and draping the upper body over the end of the bench so as to maximize the range of motion. On the mat, that isn’t possible, so we execute this exercise in conjunction with the previous, leg raising exercise.

Lying prone, link the fingers behind the neck. While in other exercises (such as the abdominal crunches later in the series) placing the hands this way is avoided so as not to put strain on the neck, I find that not to be a problem in this exercise. In fact, placing the hands this way provides a sense of resistance and helps concentrate the work on the target area. Allow the elbows to rest on the mat.

Press the balls of the feet into the mat and keep that downward pressure throughout the exercise. I often correct beginners that are placing their insteps on the mat and allowing their feet to float during the arching portion of the exercise, which limits (the already limited) range of motion.

From the starting position, first flare the elbows and tense the buttocks a bit to establish the proper base and configuration for the exercise.

Exhaling, raise the head as far as possible off the mat. Looking up toward the ceiling and further flaring the elbows can help. Hold the arched position momentarily while continuing to exhale (as is the case with every exercise I can think of, holding the breath is a bad idea). While holding the arch, I concentrate slightly more tension on the buttocks and try to feel the work moving up through the muscles of the back.

Lower slowly and relax, allowing the elbows to again rest on the mat. (Secret revealed: I always try to be the last one to lower, figuring the extra effort helps keep me ahead of all the damn younger people that increasingly appear to be comprising the aikijutsu-kai. The only person that seems to have tumbled to this strategy and won’t lower until I do is the female *nidan* (second-degree black-belt) in the group.)

We execute ten repetitions of “arching up.”



4. Reverse Crunches

The importance of strong abdominal muscles becomes obvious when you consider the physical structure of the mid-section of the body. There are no skeletal supports on the front side of the abdominal cavity, so that portion of the body is entirely dependent on musculature for structural integrity. We use three exercises to focus conditioning on the rectus abdominis and transverse abdominis.

It's common to think of crunches as two-count exercises: crunch on "one," relax on "two." But in reality these exercises should all be performed to a four-count—or more, in the case of twisting crunches. The sequence we use is to first shorten the torso to engage the muscles prior to the crunch; perform the crunch; relax; and finally push the belly up to stretch the muscles for maximum range of motion in the exercise.

The initial exercise in the abdominal set is "reverse crunches," and the idea is to hit the rectus abdominis with an emphasis on the lower portion of the muscle.

Lie on the mat face-up, propped on the elbows and with knees slightly bent and the heels resting on the mat. Engage the abdominal muscles by shortening your torso—learn to do this by standing in front of a mirror and seeing how far you can lower your head and shoulders without in any way changing your posture. You may be surprised to find you can move almost an inch.

Perform the crunch by trying to touch nose and knees while exhaling. The heels slide on the mat, in contact the entire time. It was mentioned previously that holding the breath during an exercise is a bad idea. It's a *really* bad idea during crunches. Doing so can cause blood pressure to skyrocket and place other strain on the heart; clearly something to be avoided.

Relax from the crunch by sliding the heels away from the body. I continue the exhalation during this portion of the exercise.

On the fourth "count" of reverse crunches, inhale and expand the belly as much as possible. Really feel the stretch of the abdominal muscles, so that the exercise range of motion goes from maximum extension to maximum contraction (and thereby provides maximum benefit from the effort expended).

We normally perform 25 repetitions of this exercise.



5. Twisting Crunches

I'm often the odd-man-out during aikijutsu practices, in which case I make use of an I-beam on *shimoza* (the back wall) on which to hook my feet, as demonstrated here. Normally, twisting crunches are performed as a paired-exercise, with both partners lying on their backs with their ankles linked. Actually, I find the paired-partner version to be less challenging than is the case using the I-beam.

As persons tire, there can be a tendency to lift the feet—it's very important to concentrate on pushing the heels out and down into the mat to avoid ruining the partner's base. Also avoid pulling the feet against the base provided by the partner. Keep the work entirely on the internal and external oblique abdominis muscles.

To facilitate the required twisting action while guarding against strain on the neck, place hands beside the ears, just lightly touching. Prepare for the first repetition by inhaling and expanding the belly as much as possible.

Initiate the exercise by shortening the torso.

Exhale and perform a straight crunch, raising the torso 30- to 45-degrees from the mat. It's a good idea to vary the inclination of the torso, in order to work the muscles slightly differently. Don't rise past 45-degrees, however, because beyond that point the effectiveness of the exercise is compromised by the load on the mid-section having been fairly completely removed.

From the 45-degree angle, continue to exhale and push into a twist to the side, looking toward the mat. Don't change the configuration of the arms, but do have a sense of allowing the trailing arm to "hang," providing resistance to the twist.

Return to the straight crunch position on the 45-degree angle, and then slowly relax to the prone position on the mat. Continue to exhale during this portion.

Inhale and expand the belly between reps. Execute the same sequence, twisting to the opposite direction.

As is the case with each of the exercises in the series targeting the abdominal muscles, a slow cadence is best, with very conscious and intentional focus on proper alignment throughout the range of motion and loading of the area being worked.

We execute 25 reps, with one twist counting as one rep. (I usually do 30 to try to stay ahead of the juniors.)



6. Straight Crunches

Although I'm again using the I-beam for this demonstration, our regular practice is to use a partner for this exercise, as well. In the case of straight crunches, the partner assumes a position on hands and knees to provide a base for the legs of the person performing the exercise.

This final exercise in the three-exercise abdominal series is intended to again work the rectus abdominis, but this time focusing on the upper portion of the muscle.

A different positioning of the arms is utilized in straight crunches. To support the head and preclude placing pressure on the cervical vertebrae, the arms are crossed behind the head with the finger tips touching the shoulder blades.

When working with a partner, it's very important to be cognizant of the forces being directed into the partner's back: There should be none! The legs should only very lightly rest on the partner's back and when switching positions at the conclusion of the exercise absolutely do not push off. (We had a particularly dense junior at one time that would kick off, banging his heels into his partner's spine. Not appreciated. And not with us any longer.)

Start the exercise from the belly-expanded position, with a full inhalation.

Begin to exhale and engage the rectus abdominis by shortening the torso.

Continue to exhale and execute the crunch itself with the sense of trying to touch the nose to the ceiling (rather than the sense of trying to touch nose and knees). The shoulders will only be raised a few inches from the mat—and that's fine. There isn't a large range of motion in this particular exercise.

Relax back to the mat and inhale, expanding the belly.

We perform 25 repetitions of straight crunches, but with an important switch mid-way. For rep #13, extend the arms straight above the head and then reverse whichever arm is on the outside of the crossed position. Because the arrangement of the internal organs is not symmetrical, switching the arms evens out the load on the muscles. Try it—you'll be surprised.

When changing positions with the partner, both can essentially roll-over in place, saving time and a bunch of fiddling around between sets.



7. Knees Chin-high

This exercise constitutes a transition from the abdominal to leg muscles, with “knees chin-high” hitting both areas of the body, and the lower back. The pace is much quicker than is the case with most other exercises in the conditioning set, with what is essentially a kick-up and stomp-down of equal intensity. Note, though, that the foot is not slammed into the mat—it’s dropped very quickly but placed gently and deliberately.

Think of this exercise as “fast-twitch,” targeting the abdominal and lower back muscles, as well as the quadriceps, leg biceps (hamstrings), and buttocks.

The starting position is *shizentai*, a “natural” standing position with the feet angled slightly outward and the knees a bit flexed. The hands are placed, ideally, at the level of the chin, but persons not able to raise their knees that high should place the hands at a level they can be reached by the upward kick—for everyone, the idea is to avoid having to drop the hands to make contact with the knees.

The upward and downward portions of the exercise are executed while exhaling. There is a momentary pause in *shizentai* between repetitions during which students should inhale.

Maintaining proper configuration of the body, punch off the mat, drive the knee up and then drive the foot back down to the starting position.

When I lead the conditioning set and am providing the count, for this exercise I like to make the count, allow the students to start to move, and then start myself to see if I can catch them on the way up and beat them on the way down so that I’m briefly stationary in *shizentai* when the students start and when they finish.

As mentioned, for optimum benefit it’s necessary to expend equal effort in both directions. There can be a tendency to emphasize the upward kick and then lower rather than drive the leg down.

We perform ten repetitions of knees chin-high, with both a right-side and left-side execution together counting as a single repetition.

In this and other exercises that work the sides of the body separately, we alternate practices; one evening the lead is the right-side and the next evening is the left-side.



8. Slowly Down and Up

In the *reishiki* (ceremonial etiquette) used for the aikijutsu *Tachi-no-kata* (sword forms), students need to lower slowly to *sonkyo* (crouching with the heels touching and the knees widely spread) and then rise equally slowly to standing. This is a difficult maneuver to perform under any circumstances, but especially so when the proper pace and positioning are very strictly defined. We decided a long time ago that practicing the transition from standing to *sonkyo* and back should be incorporated to the conditioning set.

Mechanically, the exercise is rather simple. Start from *musubi-dachi* (“knot-stance,” with the heels touching as though tied together and the feet pointed outward at 45-degree angles).

Before bending the knees, rise slightly onto the balls of the feet. Failure to do this will make it much more difficult to keep the heels touching throughout the full range of motion and complicate maintaining balance.

While lowering, keep the back slightly arched so that the head is directly over the hips and center of gravity. Breathing is normal due to the length of time required to achieve *sonkyo*. Lower to *sonkyo* on a six-count—counting slowly without a pause between counts will work out to about a five-second transition from standing to *sonkyo*. The hands slide along the thighs to an elegant position resting just above the knees, with each arm configured in gentle, symmetrical curves.

In the *Tachi-no-kata*, there is often a one-count pause between segments of the form, so we do the same thing in this exercise, pausing for about one-second in *sonkyo*. At this point it’s very common for the heels to separate. Don’t do that.

Where most people have the biggest issue with this exercise, and in the *reishiki*, is with rising from *sonkyo* to standing. The rise is noticeably more work than lowering, so students tend to rush through this portion—especially during the initial couple seconds of rising. It’s essential to be strict with oneself and execute on exactly the same, six-count pace as when lowering to *sonkyo*.

Again, due to the length of time required for the transition, breathing is normal.

We perform ten repetitions of “slowly down and up.”



9. Shiko

During a seminar visit some years ago, Hashimoto Mitsuko Sensei decided to warm us up with an exercise she performs daily: *shiko* (“four thighs,” the peculiar squatting and tipping sequence seen at the start of sumo matches). She had each of us in the circle of students count out ten repetitions, so we ended up doing well more than 100 reps...and none of us could walk normally the next day. Shiko was immediately added to the conditioning set (but not for that many reps!).

The starting and intermediary position is *shiko-dachi*, a *kiba-dachi* (“horse-riding stance”) except the feet are angled outward at 45-degrees instead of straight ahead.

Draw the leg into the center, shifting weight to the opposite, base leg. Turning the head toward the side being worked will aid in maintaining balance during execution of the exercise.

Tip slightly away and raise the leg, while pressing up onto the ball of the foot on the base leg. Note that this action is not a kick; it’s a smooth raising of the leg in an arc. The proper sequence is shift weight; start the raise; press onto the ball of the foot. Coordinate the actions for maximum height on the raised leg.

Drop the raised foot vertically, back into *shiko-dachi*. In the ceremonial preparations prior to a sumo match, this action is often a stomp, but we don’t want that. Instead, lower the foot under control to a soft and quiet landing—the ball of the foot touches first. The only sounds that should be heard during the exercise are that of breathing and the feet sliding on the tatami.

Squat more deeply into the *shiko-dachi*, and then draw the opposite foot into the center and repeat the exercise with that leg.

Since the time these photos were taken—actually, they’re screen captures from videos I shot at the start of the pandemic lock-down, to support dojo members training at home—I discovered a minor but advantageous modification to the form for this exercise. Instead of keeping the hand resting on the thigh of the leg being raised, allow that hand to slip behind the leg as the leg is lifted. This modification both aids in balance and helps focus weight on the base foot.

Both legs count as one repetition—we perform ten.



10. Leg Presses

This exercise is one that most students find to be especially challenging at first. There's a learning curve for performing the exercise with proper form, and with proper form the exercise is some serious work. The difficulty lies in concentrating body weight on one leg at a time, and then accomplishing the transition between legs in such a way that the load is not shifted to skeletal rather than muscular support.

Leg presses start in shiko-dachi, but with the arms held in front of the body rather than resting on the thighs as was the case with the precious exercise.

Drift the center of weight of the body toward the leg to be worked. This should be a purely lateral move, with no raising of the center.

Keeping the back straight and vertical (i.e., no leaning forward in place of lowering the body), concentrate weight and squat as deeply as possible onto the leg being worked. Both feet remain flat on the floor. The arms are held in position, unchanged.

With the weight of the body still concentrated on the leg being worked, press up, in a directly vertical line. Don't raise to any degree higher than a proper shiko-dachi. If anything, staying lower than a proper shiko-dachi is better. The main thing to avoid is standing up far enough to lock the knees, which shifts the load primarily to the skeleton rather than muscles. I visualize and pay attention to the feel of drawing in through my center while making the leg press—I allow my elbows to relax inward during the press to aid with the visualization.

Remaining at that level, drift the center of the body to the opposite side and execute the press on that leg. This transition is another place people have difficulties with the form, because of the temptation to steal some rest between reps by standing up a bit. The track of the center point of the body should be a straight line from one side to the other rather than any degree of an arc.

As new students are acclimating to the exercise, an appropriate adjustment can be made in the depth of the squat, but the track of the center from one side to the other should still be a purely horizontal line.

An execution of a leg press to both side legs counts as a single repetition. We perform ten reps.



11. Stretching

From the shiko-dachi utilized in the previous exercise, we lower to a hamstring stretch. The point of including this is as much to train balance and the ability to shift between unusual positions as it is to accomplish the stretch for its own sake.

Lower to whichever side of the body is to be worked first. Lower, but don't sit down. The base foot needs to be flat on the floor; the foot of the extended leg should be held vertical, with the toes pulled back toward the body (as though forming the limb to kick with the ball of the foot). My arms augment the stretch by pressing out a bit on my legs, and my base leg is at more than a 90-degree angle to the extended leg. The stretch is static, with no bouncing.

Shift to the opposite side without using the hands to balance or help (i.e., keep the hands off the mat).

If new students cannot achieve the proper position, they should lower only so far as their base foot remains flat on the mat.

Hold the stretch (both sides) for about eight breaths.



12. Toe Stretches

This is another exercise going back to my old karate dojo. There's obvious utility in helping form the feet for proper *mae-geri* (front-kicks), but there's an element of conditioning to pain as well. We always tell new students, "If it's comfortable, it isn't right."

There should be a straight line from the ball of the lead foot to the knee, with weight evenly distributed between the lead and base feet—toes are being stretched on the base foot, too. Push the lead knee a bit up and forward.

Toe stretches are also performed to both sides and held for about eight breaths, each side. ☸

Robert Wolfe, chief instructor of Itten Dojo, began martial arts training in 1975 while attending Bucknell University, where he earned a degree in Japanese Studies. Mr. Wolfe has taught since 1985, and founded Itten Dojo in 1992. His articles on martial arts have been featured in publications such as *The Bujin*, *Budo Shinbun*, the *Journal of Asian Martial Arts*, *Bugeisha*, *Aikido Today Magazine*, *Inside Karate*, *Martial Arts Training*, and *Martial Arts Professional*.

