

Sword and Spirit

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— Benefits of Budo —

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

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

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Body by Bokken

Physical conditioning for optimal strength, flexibility, and endurance is a critical component of martial arts training. And that's true for iaido as much as for any other art. We get focused exercise on our legs and hips in Suino Sensei's stepping drills—these were created specifically to address weaknesses that Sensei noticed in American students when he first returned from Japan and began instructing—as well as in the practice of iaido *waza* (techniques). Our arms get a workout in Sensei's *bokken* (wooden sword) stepping drills and in *suburi* (swinging; i.e., practicing cuts). But, as Charles Hudson recently pointed out, in our iaido practices we don't target the midsection of the body, the abdominal and lower back muscles, the way we do in our jujutsu conditioning set. We're correcting this omission by means of resurrecting a set of exercises that we used to do in the past for sword students, exercises that incorporate use of bokken.

The importance of strong abdominal muscles becomes obvious when you consider the physical structure of the midsection of the human body. Other than the spine, there are no skeletal supports within the abdominal cavity—that portion of the body is largely dependent on the abdominal and back muscles for core structure.

If you refer to an illustration of the abdomen, you will notice that three layers of muscles form the sides of the abdominal wall. The outermost layer on each side is the external oblique muscle. Underneath, and running perpendicular to the external oblique, is the internal oblique muscle. Both the external and internal oblique muscles serve to compress the abdominal cavity and assist in flexing and rotating the trunk of the body. Beneath the external and internal obliques lies the transversus abdominis muscle. Its fibers run horizontally, encircling the abdomen, and serve to compress the abdominal cavity. The front surface of the abdominal wall is formed by the rectus abdominis, a narrow, flat muscle running vertically from the pubic bone to the rib cage. The rectus abdominis both compresses the abdominal cavity and flexes the trunk. Fibrous bands cross the rectus abdominis both horizontally and vertically. These bands, the tendinous inscriptions and the linea alba, outline the ridges that produce the sought after washboard stomach.



Proper conditioning of the abdominal muscles depends on using the most efficient and effective exercises, with good form, and with due consideration to safety.

The exercises in this article are arranged according to the abdominal muscle(s) they work hardest. As we reintegrate these exercises to our regular practices, we'll work up from 10 to 25 repetitions depending on the exercise. At home, you could perform as many as three sets of each exercise. Bodybuilders prefer to work their abs daily, while other athletes doing abdominal work for conditioning tend to train abs every other day, or three times per week. Experiment, and determine what works best for you.

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.

You can learn to engage the abdominal muscles and shorten your torso 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.

Three important considerations: Keep your knees flexed when doing crunches in order prevent stretching the sciatic nerve and keep psoas muscles from participating in the exercise. You should also breathe out during the "work phase" of any exercise, so that you're not doing a Valsalva maneuver, which is probably not good for cardiovascular function and can be injurious if you have some disk disease in your lower back. (A Valsalva maneuver is trying to blow out with the mouth and nose closed. Scuba divers and airline passengers use the technique to inflate their inner ears to adjust to pressure changes, but it is a dangerous thing to do while exercising.)

Reverse Crunch

Done correctly, reverse crunches are the best way to target the lower rectus abdominis. On first glance, reverse crunches might look like leg-lifts, but nothing could be

further from the truth. Leg lifts involve hip flexion. The feet are raised from the floor, mostly through the action of the psoas muscles. Remembering that crunch exercises require shortening the torso and curling the trunk, perform reverse crunches in the following manner: Lie on your back with your heels on the mat, propped up on your elbows with your head and shoulders slightly off the floor, and your bokken placed across your ankles.



Keeping your knees flexed, and without lifting your feet, roll your hips to pull your knees toward your chin while exhaling. The range of motion of your knees will only be about six inches.



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).



Twisting Crunch

The next two exercises utilize a partner, although the exercises can be done solo if you have something to hold your feet.

Sit on the mat facing your partner and link ankles. As persons tire in this exercise, 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.

Lie back, holding your bokken properly in terms of the *tenouchi* (hand positions) but in a relaxed, essentially horizontal alignment. 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 standard crunch, raising the torso about 30-degrees from the mat. Over time, it’s a good idea to vary the degree of 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 eliminated by the load on the mid-section having been fairly completely removed.





At the 30-degree angle, continue to exhale and push into a twist to the side, looking toward the mat until your bokken touches that of your partner.



Return to the straight crunch position at the 30-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 will normally execute 25 reps, with one twist counting as one rep.

Standard Crunch

To balance the work done by the lower rectus abdominis in the first exercise, we need to include in our routine an exercise which fixes the lower body in place while requiring the trunk to flex from the hips. Normally the most basic of the abdominal exercises, our iaido standard crunches are a bit more complex.

One partner sits in *kiza*, a kneeling position on the balls of the feet, and holds their bokken out from their shoulders in a horizontal position. The partner performing the exercise hooks their feet under the legs of their partner and rests their bokken on that of their partner, holding the bokken with proper *tenouchi*.

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



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



Continue to exhale and execute the crunch itself, sliding your bokken over that of your partner with the sense of crunching along that line, up to about the 30-degree angle.



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



We perform 25 repetitions of straight crunches, but with an important switch mid-way: Change from a proper *tenouchi* to gripping the *tsuka* (hilt) with the left hand by the *tsuba* (guard) rather than on the butt of the hilt. Because the arrangement of the internal organs is not symmetrical, switching the hand positions evens out the load on the muscles. Try it—you'll be surprised.

To intensify a standard crunch, you can hold the crunched position, while exhaling, for three to five seconds.

Arching Up

Shifting the focus to the lower back, to balance the abdominal exercises, the next exercise in the series is normally called a “hyper-extension.” 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 the following manner: Lying face down, hold your bokken behind your neck with your arms relaxed. Placing the bokken this way provides a sense of resistance and helps concentrate the work on the target area. Press the balls of your feet into the mat and keep that contact throughout the exercise—if you allow your feet to float during the arching portion of the exercise you will limit further what is already a limited range of motion.



From the starting position, first flare your elbows and tense the buttocks a bit to establish the proper base and configuration for the exercise. Exhaling, raise your 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 and concentrating slightly more tension on the buttocks to feel the work moving up through the muscles of the back.



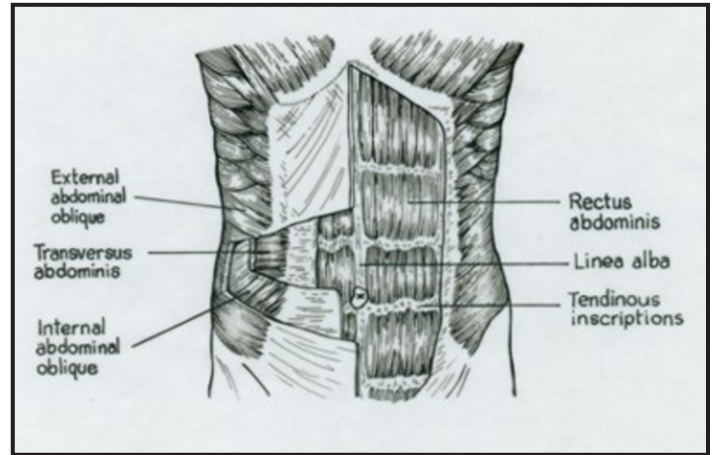
Lower slowly, allowing the elbows to again relax. We will normally execute ten repetitions of “arching up.”



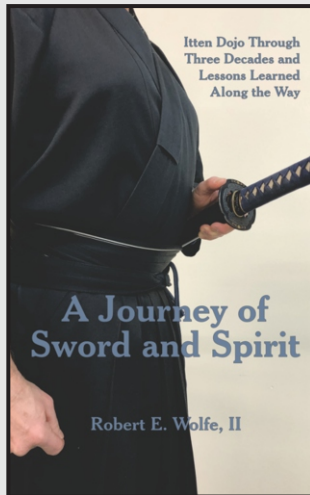
Conclusion

While many people nowadays train their midsections for primarily cosmetic reasons, martial artists know the important role abdominal and lower back muscles play in body mechanics movement and therefore train their midsections for the same reason they train everything else—to achieve higher levels of martial performance and skill.

Iaido students seeking to optimize physical abilities will find that the exercises described in this article will help them build a stronger, more solid core to aid in achieving graceful form and powerful technique. 🌀



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 with his senior student Alan Starner founded Itten Dojo in 1992. His articles on martial arts have been featured in numerous publications, including the *Journal of Asian Martial Arts* and *Bugeisha*.



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