

## Strength & Conditioning for Aikido by Charlie Levine

“If you think lifting weights is dangerous, try being weak. Being weak is dangerous.”

– Bret Contreras



I’ve been in sports, fitness and training since the late 70’s when I began playing youth soccer. I swam at the high school and college (D1) levels, I’ve coached age group and high school swimming, and in 2002, got certified as a personal trainer. Over the years I’ve continued to learn from some of the best in fitness. (As well as seen a lot of fads and gimmicks come and go.) I’ve been in aikido since 2000 and as of this writing, hold the rank of Nidan.

This training guide I wish I’d known when I began training in aikido. Heck, I wish I’d known this when I was a high school swimmer!

This is the guide that I want you to have. Whether you’re looking to shed body fat, put on lean muscle, or simply get more physically competent and confident, this is the advice that I would give you.

When I began in aikido I was 5’10” and weighed 150 pounds soaking wet. I was an endurance guy, but I didn’t feel comfortable being that skinny. In fact, a big part of why I chose aikido was because I thought I could never gain muscle, so my reasoning was that if I couldn’t get strong, that I should learn to use leverage.

Over my first ten years of aikido, I delved into functional training as well as Pilates and yoga. I learned a lot of movements and was in really good condition, but I was a gangly collection of parts.

By the time I got to Shodan, I weighed 160 and while I’d put in the time and my aikido skillset was better, my basic athleticism still wasn’t very good. I was still moving in a very piecemeal way.

*Side note: this is not to say that you can’t be strong or move better without bulking up. Pound for pound, Shawn Shannon is the strongest human being I’ve ever met. He’s my height and he only weighs in at 160.*

*The key to improving overall strength? [Loaded carries](#).*

Nidan was a different story. I was much happier with this than my previous test as well as with my health and physique. I’d gotten significantly stronger. I weighed in at 175 while staying lean. I could lift bigger weights, while maintaining good quality of movement, my athleticism had improved, and I’d begun to learn to move my body as one piece, which made learning and practicing aikido much easier.

What changed?

I got serious about the weight room. I began learning from people who made the goal the goal, kept things simple, and didn’t just change up the training all the time in order to be entertaining.

I chose to pursue one goal at a time and learned to stick with a plan for weeks or months at a time instead of my old routine of a little cardio one day, a little lifting on another, and whatever catches my fancy the day after that.

## **But how will this help my aikido? Isn't it more about technique than strength?**

Yes, aikido is driven by technique rather than strength, but being strong makes everything easier. It makes you more resilient to stress. (Hmmm...isn't there something somewhere about having a stable center, even in the midst of chaos?)

But, no, you won't lose your "touch" for aikido. In fact, if you strength train the way I outline, you'll get better body control. One of the things we lose as we get older are motor neuron units. The fewer you have, the less body control and finesse you have. Strength training with good control and challenging loads helps reverse this loss.

Strength training, specifically performing squats, lunges, hip hinge/extensions, push, pull, and other total body coordinated exercises allow you work on the movement patterns which are the building blocks of aikido. It's like learning math. You need to be able to do simple tasks like addition, subtraction, multiplication, and division before you can do algebra, calculus, or trigonometry.

The better your foundation of basics, the easier time you'll have learning more advanced concepts.

But, I understand many people's initial reservations.



It wasn't very long ago that coaches in pretty much every sport thought that strength training would make athletes "muscle bound" and cause them to lose their knack for the sport.

Any casual fan of sports, from high school, to college, to the pros, knows that everyone is in the weight room now, no one is looking back, and there isn't an epidemic of muscle bound, herky-jerky athletes who lack skill and are zero fun to watch.

Pursuing strength builds work capacity, meaning that you'll be able to handle aikido classes more easily and be able to focus on learning and refining technique rather than just surviving and hoping to pick something up along the way.

Training for strength in the movement patterns I'm going to cover teaches you to move from your center, which is really about maintaining frame and stabilizing so that your body can move as one piece. It also strengthens muscles that get weak and lengthens areas that get tight, reducing your odds of injury and allowing you to maintain good posture without any special effort.

And it builds athleticism.

If you look at videos of [Yamada Sensei](#), [Kanai Sensei](#), [Osawa Sensei](#) you'll see tremendous athleticism as well as world class technique. My point is that athleticism makes it easier to learn aikido and it is a quality that can be developed.

## Being strong makes everything easier, especially if you do the following:

1. Train foundational movement patterns - squat/lunge, hip hinge/extension, push, pull, and carry
2. Get competent moving heavier weights with good quality of movement (no ugly, grinding reps)
3. Make choices to support your goals – eat real food, sleep, take care of nagging injuries rather than pushing through them.
4. Commit to consistency. Nothing great was achieved haphazardly. Make training and healthy choices your default habits.
5. Treat it like a strength practice rather than a “workout just to get sweaty”.

It really is that simple. I know that many of us came to aikido because we didn't like the traditional training route and the typical gym. If you don't like the gym, then consider getting an Olympic barbell set (Check out Play It Again Sports), a few kettlebells (8, 12, 16KG), a few heavy dumbbells, [Jungle Gym training straps](#), or an [Ultimate Sandbag](#).

You could find a rec center with a weight room. They're great if you're on a budget or don't need any fancy extras. Or, put on your game face and your big boy/girl pants, and get to the gym.

If you buy weights, don't fall into the common mistake of getting a set of 3 pound and 8 pound dumbbells or a Kathy Smith 5 pound kettlebell. My 80 year old client Margie carries two 20 pounders for distance and overhead presses 10's for 10 reps.



### Do you really need to lift?

No, but in the absence of a strength program, you lose muscle every year after your mid 20's. That makes everything harder to do, slows your metabolism, and you'd be missing out on one of the best ways to prevent physical decline. Plus, if you lift, unlike cardio, you'll actually look like you work out.

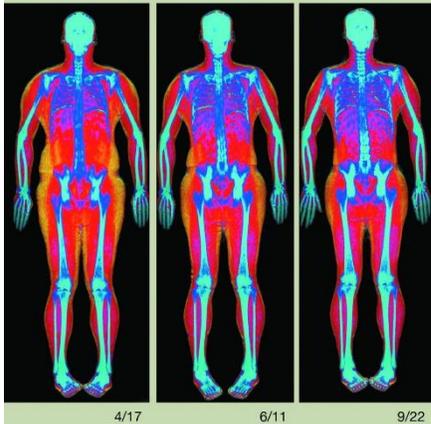
And then there's a huge intangible.

When you challenge yourself as you build strength, you really do train your spirit. We hear about the warrior spirit and ways to instill it, but after over 17 years in the martial arts, and being an athlete since grade school, in my experience, very few things come close to building the spirit as the pursuit of strength.

### But Charlie, I'm a woman and I don't want to get big!

I hear this a lot. No, you won't suddenly get big. Avoiding strength training out of fear of getting HUGE overnight is like not driving to work, to the store, or anywhere else because you might suddenly become a top level Formula One driver. It's just not going to happen. Unless you

dedicate much of your waking existence to a single goal of getting bigger by training insanely hard, eating everything in sight and taking large doses of steroids.



**And for Pete's sake, everybody please, stop falling for the "cardio makes you little and weights get you big" mentality!**

As we age we lose lean muscle, meaning that the metabolic engine that burns the most fuel is shrinking. It's going to get easier and easier to store excess energy as unwanted fat and harder to lose it.

Cardio isn't going to reverse that. The solution is to build or rebuild a bigger engine. I'm not saying don't do cardio or conditioning, but it shouldn't be the primary tool in your toolbox.



**I'm a man, I'm over forty and that gym stuff is for 25 year old guys who work out for two hours a day and have nicknames like "The Situation", so why should I bother?**

Much of what we chalk up to as the aging process is simply unchecked atrophy. Slowing metabolism, losing strength and muscle mass, and generally feeling old. Cardio is better than nothing, but it doesn't really address the main issue. Strength training does. Moving heavy objects at least three times per week for 40 minutes to an hour can do a lot to keep atrophy in check and reverse much of it.

David Harbour (who is well past 25) plays Chief Jim Hopper in Stranger Things [recently got fit for an upcoming role](#). Admittedly, actors can focus a lot more time and resources than most people, but they usually have to work within a much faster timeframe. That's not where most people live.

Focus on what you can keep up year in and year out. Don't overestimate what you can do in a month or underestimate what you can do in a year.

Every few weeks I change things up, going with heavier barbell training or getting better at gymnastic style strength work, which keeps things interesting. But, I show up with one or two main goals and that keeps the progress going. Three hours per week keeps me in fighting shape and makes aikido a lot, lot easier.

### **You can't out train a bad diet!**

To reverse muscle loss, to improve athleticism, and to create a positive hormonal cascade, nothing is better than strength training. But, when it comes to fat loss, nothing is more important than diet.

You don't have to go Keto, Paleo, Whole 30 or anything else. Just eat like a grown up.

If you want an in-depth, habit-based book, check out [Fat Loss Happens on Monday](#).

And, just so you know, cooking doesn't have to be this overly complicated, difficult thing. When I cook [it usually looks a lot like this](#).

- Mostly eat a variety of real, minimally processed foods.
- Cut out Frankenstein Fats – Corn, Canola, Crisco, anything Hydrogenated, and replace it with healthy fats. Butter, as in real, not “Touch of/Can’t Believe It’s Not” or any other fake version, coconut oil, olive oil (pay extra for the good stuff), bacon fat (if you get humanely raised bacon)
- Include a good source of protein with every meal (this isn’t limited to animal products — I also eat beans and other protein-rich plant foods – just not [soy because it’s a hormone disruptor](#)).
- Make eating fruits and vegetables a priority — this is so simple and beneficial, yet most people don’t do it. You should.
- Eat to the point of satisfaction without getting stuffed.
- Enjoy your *favorite* not-super-healthy foods (this part is important: enjoy your *favorite* foods and not merely foods that are convenient or sitting in the office break-room) on occasion. Notice I refuse to say *bad* or *cheat* foods.
- Understand that the actions you do most often over and over again are what matter most, and not an occasional meal that may be “less than ideal”.
- Eat [fermented foods](#). These are tremendously helpful for energy, immune function, and overall digestive health. My midday crash went away when I added these to my diet.

### **You also need to sleep**

If you don’t sleep then everything gets thrown off. Everything. Dr. Kirk Parsley is a retired Navy SEAL. He’s pretty smart. You should check out his [TED Talk](#) and [his website](#).

### **This is your challenge**

If you’re ready to get great results, spend less time in the gym, get stronger, have more energy, improve the building blocks of athleticism, and actually enjoy your workouts, then keep reading for a sample training program.

## The Exercises

*Note – acceptable exercise alternatives and training equipment are in parenthesis*

- **Squat** – including [DB front squat or goblet squat](#) (Sub in a deadlift variation)
- **Deadlift** ([Sumo](#), [Romanian](#), or [Single Leg Romanian](#))
- **Reverse lunge or Split Squat** (Sub in [lateral lunges](#) if your knees won't allow a lot of bending while under load). I demonstrated several lunge variations in that first video, but reverse are the easiest to do correctly.
- **Hip thrust** (or [45 degree back extension](#))
- **Standing barbell overhead press** (only if you have healthy shoulders and proper thoracic mobility – you may also use dumbbells or kettlebells for [double arm overhead presses](#) or [single arm overhead presses](#). If you can't properly perform, or tolerate, overhead pressing, substitute a horizontal push such as push-ups or dumbbell bench press)
- **Chin-ups** ([use bands for assistance](#) if you can't perform them with your bodyweight. I prefer, and recommend, you use a Jungle Gym or some other suspension trainer device because it's much more shoulder and elbow friendly. If this isn't an option, stick with a neutral grip).
- **Push-ups** (or [parallel bar dips](#) or [bench press](#) if you can perform at least 10 perfect push-ups)
- **Inverted rows** (I prefer these be performed on a Jungle Gym, or TRX, but you may also use a [barbell set in a power rack](#); you may also do [one arm dumbbell rows](#))
- **Farmer walks** – **dumbbell or kettlebell**
- **Waiter carries** (only if you have proper shoulder and upper back mobility; use a dumbbell or kettlebell)
- **Leg Lowering**
- **Rocky Abs** or **hollow body holds**
- **Kettlebell Swings**

That brief list of exercises is all you will use for this training program.

## The Program

Now that you know which exercises you'll be using, let's get to the sample training program. You'll be performing three total body strength training sessions each week, on non-consecutive days. Something like Monday, Wednesday, and Friday or Tuesday, Thursday, and Saturday works well for most people. I recommend you schedule your training days when you know you're fresh and have the most energy.

For example, if Monday's are crazy for you, don't train on Monday's! Set yourself up for success from the beginning.

**Warning!** This program may cause a drastic increase in Self Confidence!

*Note* – keep in mind that you may use the acceptable alternative exercises listed above, but *only* those alternatives.

Side note: A number with no letter behind it means that you just perform that movement (IE Deadlifts) until you complete all the sets and repetitions indicated. After that, then you move onto exercise 2.

When you see a number with a letter behind it (2a, 2b) that means that you perform 2a and 2b back to back with just enough rest to allow you to maintain good form and move bigger weights. Usually about a minute between exercises. Complete all sets and repetitions before moving onto 3.

The workouts don't follow a single set and rep scheme (IE three sets of ten repetitions). Don't let that throw you off. Go heavier on the lower repetition work and as needed, lighter for the higher repetition work.

Especially on squats and deadlifts, include a few warm up sets and build to a heavier working weight for your main sets. Do two to four warm up sets of 4 – 5 repetitions and increase the weight on each successive set as you build up to your working weight.

**Warm Up For All Three Training Days. Do a few easy stretches, then perform three rounds of:**

[Side Lunges \(unloaded or med/light weight\) x 5/5](#)

[KB Goblet Squat x 5 \(Sub KB Swings x 15 – 20\)](#)

[KB or Plate Halos x 5/5](#) the video showed the kettlebell version, but you can also use a weight plate

This will cover almost all your bases in terms of mobility and stability and prepare you to lift heavy things.

### **Training Day 1**

1) Deadlift – 4x6 (4 sets, 6 reps) Favorite variations: Sumo or Romanian

2a) Standing barbell or dumbbell overhead press – 3x6-8, 1x10

2b) Rack pull ups/band assisted pull ups – 3x6-8, 1x10-12

3a) Farmer walks – 5 sets x 30-50 yards

3b) Single leg lowering 5 sets of 5 – 10 per leg

## Training Day 2

- 1a) Reverse lunge – 3×8, 1×12-15 each leg (sub single leg Romanian Deadlifts or Side Lunges)
- 1b) Suspended inverted row – 3×8, 1×10-12
- 2a) Hip thrust – 1×8, 2×10, 1×12-20
- 2b) Push-ups – 3×8, 1×10-12
- 3) Waiter carry – 4 sets each arm for 30-50 yards

## Training Day 3

- 1) Squat – 2×6, 1×10, 1×15 (sub a deadlift variation if the knees need it)
- 2a) Parallel bar dips or dumbbell bench press – 3×6, 1×8-10
- 2b) 1 arm dumbbell row – 3×8, 1×10-12
- 3a) [KB swings](#) – 4×15-20
- 3b) Rocky Abs 4 x 5 – 10 or Hollow body holds 4 – 5 x 30 seconds – 1 minute
- 4) Farmer walks – 3 sets x 60-80 yards

## **You Must Work HARD!**

If you're going to do a minimum amount of work, you must put in a lot of effort. The program outlined above is very simple, but that does not mean it will be *easy*.

Challenge yourself and prepare to get a little uncomfortable under the bar. **I'm in no way encouraging you to push so hard that your form deteriorates**, but I am telling you to push *hard*. Leave a rep in the tank, but no more than two.

I have worked with numerous clients who claimed to “train hard” before I trained them, but they were really holding themselves back. They'd want to stop a set short because they had to strain a little and things got uncomfortable. It wasn't uncommon for them to think a set was “over” when in reality they had at least three more perfect reps left in them.

Don't stop the set because it's getting tough – stop the set when you know you have one more perfect rep, or two, left in you.. If you end the set knowing you could do three or more reps while maintaining proper form, you aren't training hard enough.

## **You Must Improve Your Performance**

Improving your performance is the name of the game with this minimalist training program. If you're not improving, then you aren't challenging your body, and you won't get the results you should.

### **Each week you must do one of three things:**

- 1) Use more weight than last week (even if it's just a single pound)
- 2) Perform more reps with the same weight (even if it's just a single rep)
- 3) Use better form. It's impossible to get better every week without fail, and some days you just won't have the strength. In that case, really focus on making your form picture perfect.

In the case of the farmer walk and waiter carry, you can also walk longer distances or decrease your rest periods between sets.

Improved performance while maintaining proper form – that is what you will focus on throughout the duration of this training program.

### **What about Cardio?**

My answer when it comes to cardio or conditioning is this: It depends. It depends how many times a week you go to the dojo. It depends on your current level of fitness and overall health. There are a lot of variables.

The cardio that I'd recommend for most people on this program is *brisk walking*. You can do it first thing in the morning, after your training sessions, or any time you prefer.

Keep the walks limited to 40 minutes, and no more. Personally I like to walk outside get fresh air and sunshine, and keep my pup Barney healthy and active. Plus, the walks will aid recovery from the weight training sessions and allow you to acquire some extra movement; this is very valuable since most people spend the majority of their days sitting.

Walking get overlooked, but it's great for sustainable conditioning and longevity.

Again, do what's right for *you*. Just because something is harder, doesn't necessarily make it the right tool for the task.

I encourage you to be active in a fun way, but I would advise you to avoid traditional cardio exercise such as the elliptical machine or the stationary bike. [The rowing machine](#), however can present a pretty good challenge. But, even that should take second place to 1. Diet and 2. Strength training.

If you want to get in run based conditioning, I'd recommend that you work more on speed and athleticism and less on high mileage. We lose explosiveness and power as we age and the following approaches help maintain and rebuild those traits.

1. If you have a nearby track or soccer field, [this is a great approach](#).
2. If you have a hill nearby, and really want to step things up even while being kind to your knees, then [hill sprints](#) are the correct answer. [Just ask Walter Payton](#).
3. Or, if you just want to get in [a few miles here and there](#) as a way to get rid of stress and get outside for a while, as the Australians say, good on ya.

**If you want to get in some conditioning, but need a respite from gravity, then get in the pool.**

If you only have access to a shallow water pool, then I'd recommend that you treat it like resisted running and hit multiple directions –forward, backward, left, and right.

If you have access to a deep water pool, then treading and deep water running are two of my favorites. Whatever you do, challenge yourself.

**Speaking of conditioning, treat aikido like a skill practice, not a cardio workout!**

When you lift weights with control and you make moving them more challenging, that's being deliberately inefficient. When you run fast uphill, that's being deliberately inefficient. That's the point. That's how to train to get stronger, burn fat, and put on lean muscle.

By contrast, don't come to the dojo with the intention of trying to get as sweaty as possible. Now is not the time to be inefficient. Definitely push yourself and train hard, but the *goal of aikido is to be as efficient as possible.*

By getting in at least three great training sessions outside of the dojo that are going to move the needle forward in terms of body composition and strength, you take the pressure off from trying to make aikido practice the sweatiest workout possible. Aikido can definitely be hard, but a common mistake is to make it into more work than it has to be, resulting in frustration and an unnecessarily long learning curve.

Work at a pace that allows you to learn and maintain good control.

I know that this is a big shift in mindset when it comes to fitness training, and it's a lot to take in but this approach is something that's dramatically changed things for the better for my clients and myself.



Charlie Levine

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