



“Oss,” the Karate Greeting

One doesn't have to be around a karate dojo very long before hearing this word pass between members. Students and instructors alike will commonly bow to each other upon meeting, or as class is about to begin, and say *oss*. But what exactly does it mean?

In Japanese the word *oss* is written as a two-character combination. The first character means “to push,” and the second means “to suffer.” Together they symbolize the importance of pushing, striving and persevering while suffering through whatever difficulties, pains and hindrances are encountered along the way. So, at the literal level, *oss* is simply an affirmation of the positive attitude, high spirits and refusal to quit that all karate people seek to develop as they train. On a deeper and more general level it might be translated as “keep the faith,” in the sense of karate philosophy and goals. And, finally, it serves as a greeting expressing warm respect and friendship, the Japanese equivalent of a warm handshake.

Sometimes students who do not clearly understand the meaning of this word will use it incorrectly. For example, it is not usually used as an affirmative remark to signify agreement, in the same way that *hai* (“yes”) or *wakarimasu* (“I understand”) might be used. Nor should it be shouted out as a *kiai* word while executing strikes and kicks.

Should it be used by parents of students when greeting instructors or students? In practice, anyone who supports the goals of karate and has an interest in learning about it may appropriately greet *karateka*, if they wish, with a bow and an *oss*, as a sign of respect and admiration for what they do. Alternatively, the good old American smile-and-a-handshake are equally acceptable.

Reference

FEY, B.R. (1994) To oss or not to oss: that is the question. *Dojo* magazine, Winter 1994, p. 80-81.

©Wendell E. Wilson (2010)

(email: minrecord@comcast.net)

from [Essays on the Martial Arts](#)

Home: <http://www.mineralogicalrecord.com/wilson/karate.asp>