

Charhdi Kala in the Sikh tradition

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The Sikh tradition is the youngest of the great world religions originating in the Punjab region of India in the 15th Century and is the 5th largest religious tradition in the world. The name Sikh (pronounced sic, but you probably heard it said seek), takes its name from the Punjab word that is commonly translated to mean “seeker” (hence the mispronunciation), “learner,” or “disciple.” Their beliefs center on the oneness of the divine being, focus on liberation through devotion, service and the pursuit of justice. You may be thinking “I’ve never met a Sikh, or even seen one before!” BUT I bet you have! Devout Sikhs do not cut their hair and men frequently wrap their hair in ornate turbans. Most of the time you see a man with a long beard and a turban they are Sikh, NOT Muslim. Younger women frequently just wear their hair down while older women braid their hair and tuck it up in a loose bun of sorts. (Remember not everyone with long hair is a Sikh.)



I was first introduced to the concept of Charhdi Kala several years ago at the College Conference at Montreat (a Presbyterian Conference Center in NC) by the keynote speaker Valarie Kaur, founder of [The Revolutionary Love Project](#) (seriously go watch her TED talks!). Following that conference I signed up for ALL her mailing lists and tried to friend her personally on Facebook... I’m now a fan of her public page. This past week she sent out an email that brought up the concept again. But this time Charhdi Kala wasn’t attached to politics or social justice or environmentalism, it was attached to deep fear, suffering, and loss. It was the concept that she and her community were clinging on to after losing one of their spiritual leaders, Baba Punjab Singh known as Papa Ji, after SEVEN long years of trying to recover from an injury sustained in the mass shooting in the Sikh gurdwara in Oak Creek, Wisconsin on August 5, 2012. (If you don’t remember this you should go look it up, it was the largest attack on the Sikh population in American History, and they’ve faced a LOT of discrimination following 9-11.)

If you google or Wikipedia Chardi Kala it will tell you that this is a joyful, optimistic, or cheerful approach to the future. It’s a state of living and mind that sounds like someone always seeking to be happy. I’ll be honest, when I just scanned the translations it sounds hallow and unrealistic, and

nearly impossible in our current world situation. But that light and airy, blowing away in the wind kind of optimism is NOT what Valarie described. In her email last week Valarie wrote:

Whenever I grew despondent, I would call Papa Ji's son Raghuvinder Singh, a teacher like his father. He cared for his father around the clock, yet he was ever radiant. He always said, "Valarie, we live in Chardi Kala. Tell the world that our message is Chardi Kala."

I used to translate this Sikh concept Chardi Kala as "relentless optimism." But what I saw in this family was not about the future at all. This was about a state of being in the present moment as if now is all there is. Now and now and now. This is a state of joyfulness inside the struggle—an energy that keeps us in motion, a breathing that keeps us laboring, even inside pain. Chardi Kala is how we labor in love.

On my last visit to Papa Ji, his condition was the same. He still could not move or speak.

I asked him, "Papa Ji, are you in Chardi Kala?"

He could only blink his eyes -- once for no, twice for yes.

Papa Ji blinked his eyes twice – "Yes."

If Papa Ji could be in Chardi Kala until his dying breath, so can I. So can all of us.

So our practice today is to look for Chardi Kala, to sit with this idea for a few minutes and open ourselves to the good around us, and the good in the future. To ask ourselves what our lives would look like if we showed up with the bravery to believe there is hope even in darkness? What does "relentless optimism" mean in the time of a pandemic? Is it seeing people protecting our elders by staying home? Is it our professors and teachers who are learning new things to make sure that we too can continue to learn? Is it the belief that this too will pass and we will get through this? Where do you find hope? Write it down, share with a friend, share it with me, share it with the world. Try, for even a short time to live into that hope, to dwell in it, and see how it feels.