



# The Charyapadas: Where Bangla Began

(Seven charyas on the themes of life and death, being and non-being)

TRANSLATED BY FAYEZA HASANAT

**Charya 22: Sarahapada**  
(Raga: Gunjari)  
Creating the world and nirvana on their own,  
People construct their limitations.  
I do not know what cannot be known.  
Our births and deaths—how do they happen?  
Life is what death also is.  
Between the living and the dead, no difference exists.  
Whoever is afraid of birth and death, he Should seek solace in alchemy.  
One who wanders through the three phases,  
Can neither avoid old age nor be deathless.  
Does karma cause birth, or does birth cause karma?

Saraha says all perceptions are surpassed by Dharma.

**Charya 29: Luipada**  
(Raga: Patamanjari)  
Being doesn't exist; non-being exists not.  
How does one grasp such a puzzling thought?  
Lui says true wisdom is hard to attain.  
It's revealed in three metals, yet it remains unknown.  
When its color, nature, and form are beyond knowledge,  
How can it be found in the Veda and the treatises?  
What shall I say when I'm asked this question?  
The moon in the water—is it true, or is it illusion?

Lui asks, how can I meditate, when What I'm seeking cannot be known?

**Charya 37: Tarakapada**  
(Raga: Kamod)  
What is to fear when in myself I am not?  
My desire for the Great Seal is also destroyed.  
Don't err while experiencing the Sahaja, O Yogi!  
Like the four states of mind, keep yourself free.  
The way you were is the way you are.  
The Sahaja is different; O Yogi, don't err!  
Phallus and testes are known because they float;  
How does one explain the inexplicable in words?  
There's no way to know it, Taraka concurs;  
He who knows it has his neck in the noose.

**Charya 40: Kanhupada**  
(Raga: Malasi Gabura)  
Whatever the mind perceives is imaginary,  
So are the religious scriptures and the rosary.  
Say, how can you speak of the Sahaja, when  
The body, speech, and the mind are not one?  
The Guru's advice may appear useless.  
How can one speak of what defies speech?  
The more you explain, the more it gets confusing  
The Guru is mute; the disciple is hard of hearing.  
How do I explain the Jewel of the Jina?  
Kanho says,  
It's like the deaf being instructed by the voiceless.



**Charya 41: Bhusukupada**  
(Raga: Kanhugunjari)  
From the beginning, the world is uncreated and revealed through illusion.  
Does a viper bite the frightened man who takes a rope for a serpent?  
The world is a strange place; Yogi, don't let your hands get soiled.  
If you understand its nature, your temptations will be foiled.  
It's a mirage in a desert, a city of the Gandharbas, or an image in the mirror,  
It's like a hardened form of water that's transformed into a rock. Or  
It's like a barren mother's son, busy playing his various games.  
It's like the oil from the sand, a hare with horns, or the sky in full bloom.  
'Strange,' says Rautu. 'Strange,' says Bhusuku. Everyone's nature is similar.  
If you're still deluded, O Fool, go seek help from your preceptor!

**Charya 42: Kanhupada**  
(Raga: Kamod)  
The mind is spontaneously filled with

the Void.  
Don't be depressed when your components are lost.  
How can you say that Kanhu is no more? When he's merged in three worlds and exists there?  
Fools are afraid to see the destruction of their senses.  
Can the broken waves ever swallow the oceans?  
Fools don't see the world that always exists.  
Like the cream of the milk is hidden in the milk.  
No one comes to this world, and no one goes away.  
This thought entertains Kanhil the Yogi.

**Charya 43: Bhusukupada**  
(Raga: Bangal)  
Over the three worlds is spread the Sahaja tree;  
When void is one's nature, can anyone be free?  
No difference can be seen, when water is mixed with water  
The Mind-Jewel ascends the Sky—absorbed in each other.  
When there is no self, how can the other remain?  
Unborn since the beginning, how can birth and death happen?  
'Strange,' says Rautu. 'Strange,' says Bhusuku; it's the nature of everyone.  
No one comes in, and no one goes; being or non-being, there's none.

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## Hunting for Hilsa

SOHANA MANZOOR

My mother told me to get a big Ilish maach for Pohela Baishakh. My face went pale. However much I claimed to love my mother, I had no wish to go to the maachher bazaar.

I whimpered, "I'm a girl, Amma. The few times I had been to fish-market, I ended in disaster. Remember, I even fell down and created a scene at the bazaar? And you want me to go to there for Ilish?" Mother was ill but her temper was as unpredictable as ever. She raised her head a little from her pillows and scowled at me like a cat. At that moment, she looked exactly like the feisty grey cat that many have seen frolicking about the Road 4 and 5 of Dhanmondi. "When have I ever asked you to go to fish-market? What gibberish! Go straight to Agora and get the Ilish. And bring a big one." Then she started grumbling about the inefficiency of her two children (poor me and my poor brother), the two lazy buas who apparently gossiped through the day, and the two useless drivers that did nothing but smoke.

I looked around her room. It was clean and shining—obviously the buas kept it neat and clean. I had just been to the bathroom, and it was spotless too. I am at least five times pickier than my mom and I would be yelling at the maids if they left things in a sorry condition. They were actually more scared of me than my mother. I sighed and got up.

It was only April 3 and she wanted the fish right away. I did try to make my mother understand that hilsa would indeed be available a day or two before April 14. But as things were, it was easier to placate my entire extended family, but my mother would not be satisfied. I did ask Jamal bhai, my driver (he was not strictly speaking my driver, but a friend's), to get a hilsa. Unfortunately, the fish-market men had secreted the hilsa or frozen them at the prospect of Pohela Baishakh. All there was to be had were what they call Jatka (young hilsa).

As I was going out of her room, my mother barked, "A big Ilish, you understand? I don't want to eat Ilish all the year round, do I? Just on Pohela Baishakh. Why have you pulled a long face?" I turned around to give her the flash of dazzling smile and then hurried out of her room. The two buas

were grinning at me at the prospect of hilsa. I remembered that only a few months earlier, Mom had thrown out two whole hilsa my uncle had brought for my dad. She was adamant that she could not possibly inhale the aroma of cooked Ilish. She had been ill for quite some time and had dietary restrictions. Somehow our healthy food habit also irked her. Only the other day she was shouting at me for having *kochu shak bharta*. "How did that thing get on the dining table? Don't you know that I hate *kochu*?"

Sometimes I couldn't help wondering what had gone wrong. She was always so caring and had our favourite dishes on the table. At our home, the staple these days were soft rice, green papaya, gourd, bitter-gourd, plantain, potato and two or three types of fish that were cooked alternately. Oh, and chicken and eggs, of course. But nothing else could enter the kitchen. She would sniff the air and if scented anything else, there would be havoc. My father had a voracious appetite but whenever he wanted beef or some other kind of meat, mom would whisper hoarsely, "How can you think of eating when I'm so ill?"

Anyway, I should have been happy that she had finally agreed to have hilsa at home. But if I didn't get it within a day or two, she would surely start screaming and exhaust herself in the process. I heaved a sigh again and asked Jamal bhai to drive me to Agora which was just a few blocks away. Yes, there were fish, alright. There were huge sized ruis, katlas, boal and what not, and different kinds of sea-fish. There were pomfrets, shrimps and lobsters. Tunas, crabs and squids even. But no sign of my mom's precious Ilish. I asked the vendors and learnt that they would surely come before the *Pohela Baishakh*. They showed me the jatkas, as usual. Those were barely a foot long and staring at me from the ice. One of the men grinned, "Don't you worry, Madam. The Ilish are being prepared for the *Pohela Baishakh*." I was exasperated and bit out, "Yes, of course. You are raising them from the eggs to sell at an exorbitant price." The man who knew me as a regular customer, touched his earlobes with both hands and said, "What are you saying, Madam? Would

we do that?"

I instructed both Mamun and Jamal Bhai to be on the lookout for a big hilsa. There were none at the regular fish market. The only problem was that my mother would not believe us. She said

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she knew that there were Ilish hidden somewhere in those super shops, but we, her two good-for-nothing children were unable to fulfill the wishes of a dying mother. As I was heading to the university, I suddenly saw one of the trucks that sold fish. These were run by the government I had heard and they usually carry fresh fish.

"Jamal Bhai, stop," I screamed. Jamal Bhai, thankfully, was an expert driver and hence managed not to collide with the road divider. He asked politely, "What's it, Apu? Have you forgotten something? Should I go back home?"

"No, no, stop by the fish truck. Maybe, they'll have Ilish."

Jamal bhai parked the car behind the fish truck. As I got down, I could see two men sitting under the truck and working away on large fishes—scaling, chopping and slicing for waiting customers.

Jamal Bhai also got down with me. "Hey, do you have Ilish?" he hollered.

One of the fellows looked at us and laughed. "It's not *Pohela Baishakh* yet.

You look for Ilish a day or two before the *Pohela Baishakh*. Have other kinds now. We've Rui and Pangash—fresh from the pond. Would you like some?"

I shook my head and said, "They're good fish but mother wants Ilish. And she wants it NOW."

I wondered frantically where else we could get hilsa. We had been to Meena Bazar, to Shopno. Hilsa was nowhere to be found. Mamun, my brother's driver, is a young fellow and full of ideas. He scratched his head and asked if catching an Ilisha would not be easier.

On the morning of April 8, I woke up with an aching neck and sore body. I had been dreaming of at ten hilsas smirking at me. I was sure if it went like this a few more days, I would wake up as an Ilish Maach myself. Someone rang the bell and I looked at the wall-clock. It was 7:10. Who could it be? I could faintly hear voices since my room was right beside the main entrance. I thought I heard "Ilish maach!" I bolted and ran out of the bedroom. Oh, our full-time bua was standing with a wide smile at the door, chatting away amiably while Jamal Bhai and Mamun stood holding out not one but two beautiful

silver hilsas. Both were quite big. I could not fathom how the two of them got together so early in the morning since they work on different schedules. I heard them saying that they had gone to Narayanganj to get the hilsas directly from the fishermen.

She sat at the lunch table. Her eyes were closed and she seemed to be savouring the aroma of the cooked mustard hilsa with a beatific expression on her face. My brother looked on bemused. Things that parents do for their children! At that moment, I keenly felt our reversed roles. All the hassle we had been going through for the past five days seemed worth that one smile on her face. Finally, Amma was finally having her Ilish.

It has been ten months since my mother left us. It is not that I have not had hilsa since then. But I cannot help wondering how in the world am I going to eat Ilish this coming *Pohela Boishakh*!

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