

~ Traditional Bhajan Sequence ~

When we meet together to sing bhajans, there is a traditional order in which the devotional songs are sung. The sequence of the bhajans has an important symbolic significance. In essence, a bhajan session is a microcosm of our complete spiritual journey.

Opening Bhajan: Ganesha

We sing the first bhajan to Ganesha to mark the beginning of the spiritual journey. Ganesha is famed for his quick thinking and cleverness. This sharpness of mind is essential to even begin on the spiritual path. We must have the discrimination to see beyond the material world of illusion and perceive the royal road to Divinity.

The elephant-headed Ganesha also symbolises the traditional task of the elephant to clear a path before us. In olden times in India, armies on the march or royal caravans travelling through the jungle would send the elephant troop ahead to clear a path for them to follow. In the spiritual sense, the jungle represents the material world and the elephant-headed Ganesha represents God leading us through the Maya (illusion). So, we sing to Ganesha to intiate us on the spiritual journey and to clear the path ahead.

Examples of some popular Ganesh bhajans are Ganesha Sharanam, Gaja Vadana, and Vinayaka.

Second Bhajan: Guru

There is an old saying on the spiritual path that “when you are ready for your guru, He will find you”. You don’t need to search for a guru. Just be ready and he will draw you to him. Once you have begun your spiritual journey, the guru becomes the most important person in your life. That is why we sing the second bhajan to the guru.

Progress on the spiritual path without the grace and guidance of a guru is so difficult that it is almost impossible. A guru is one who has successfully navigated through the jungle of Maya and has the ability to lead others through to the other side. The guru is truly the embodiment of God, whose only desire is to serve you and to bring you closer and closer to God.

Some Guru bhajans we sing are ‘Manasa Bhajare Guru Charanam’, which is Swami’s own composition, plus ‘Guru Baba’ and ‘Gurudeva Sharanam Deva’.

Third Bhajan: Mother

Without a mother, how can any of us even have life? The mother is the first God that any child knows. To honour the life-giving Divine Mother, we sing the next bhajan to her.

The nurture and care that the physical mother gives us is one small aspect of the great compassion that the Divine Mother has for each of us. In our human weakness and frailty on the sometimes-difficult spiritual journey, we can turn to our Divine Mother and she will comfort us and protect us.

In the Catholic tradition, Mary is called the Mother of God. We pray to her for what we need, and we ask her to intercede with Jesus on our behalf. It is said that whatever she asks of Him will be granted, because Jesus would never refuse his mother’s request. With this confidence, we sing to the all-compassionate Divine Mother.

Some examples of Mother bhajans are ‘Jai Jai Bhavani Ma’, ‘Jai Jai Janani’, and ‘Durgey Durgey’.

Next Bhajans: Any bhajan of your choice

After we have sung the Ganesha, Guru, and Mother bhajans, we are free to sing in worship and honour of our particular favourite form of God or to invoke the Divine in whatever way we choose.

For example, if someone has a particular devotion to Jesus, he or she can lead a Christian song such as ‘Make me a Channel of your Peace’ or ‘Give me Joy in My Heart, Lord Jesus’. Someone using meditation in his or her spiritual practice may wish to invoke the ideal of Shiva by singing ‘Shivaya Namah Shiva’ or ‘Bolo Bolo Sab Mil Bolo’.

To help absorb Swami’s teachings, someone may sing bhajans in Swami’s own words such as ‘I am God’ or ‘Why Fear When I am Here?’. And so on it goes with bhajans to Krishna (e.g. Hey Nanda Nanda), Rama (e.g. Sri Rama Chandra), Sai (e.g. He is Love), Sarva Dharma - all religions (e.g. We are One in the Spirit), and the formless God (e.g. Sathyam Jnanam).

Final Bhajan: Subramanyam (Superman)

The bhajan session traditionally finishes with the Subramanyam bhajan. The reason for this is that Subramanyam represents the completion of the spiritual journey. He is the perfect human being.

Subramanyam is revered as the leader of the armies of the gods. In his battles against the demons, he encountered great challenges and hardships, but ultimately he was victorious. His battles are symbolic of the spiritual battles we all engage in with the demons of anger, desire, greed etc. We go through many trials and tribulations along the way but the end result is that our ego is defeated and our character becomes polished like a beautiful diamond.

When we sing Subramanyam, we honour the attainment of perfect victory in the spiritual life.

Final Note: What is described above is the traditional sequence for a bhajan session and also some of the symbolic, spiritual meanings behind the songs. What the article doesn’t say is that the MOST IMPORTANT part of singing bhajans is the heart of love from which they come. When you sing to God with love in your heart, that is the most important thing.