

{What I will refer to here as ‘The Foundational Refuge’ is sometimes called the ‘Hinayana Refuge’, or the ‘Lesser Vehicle’ Refuge’, but I’ve chosen to phrase this differently because some may hear those other expressions as pejorative, and that is not what is intended.}

All Buddhists take refuge in the Buddha as their teacher, in the Dharma as the path, or the teachings we follow, and in the Sangha as the community of support on this path. By developing refuge in ourselves, we are protected from the lower realms – the hell, hungry ghost, and animal realms. We are freed from the fear of having to go through those experiences.

Taking refuge is an active, intelligent decision, a result of wise reflection. It is based on seeing clearly that unenlightened existence is potentially endless suffering and that what can work for us, that what can liberate us, is the practice of ethics, meditation, and wisdom, as taught by the Buddha.

This fundamental refuge, the knowledge, faith and trust that practicing as taught can liberate us from suffering, is the cornerstone of all Buddhist schools, and all Buddhist paths, whether they are aiming to liberate ourselves, or to help others, indirectly or directly.

Mahayana Refuge adds one more element to the Fundamental Refuge. Whereas the Fundamental Refuge sees suffering and relies on the Three Jewels (The Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha) to become free from suffering, Mahayana Refuge adds the element of Great Compassion for all living beings to the taking of refuge. In the Mahayana, we take refuge and cultivate the path for the benefit of all sentient beings.

Taking refuge with the Mahayana motivation, then, we gain what is called ‘The Two-fold Protection’, which is protection from the lower realms, and ‘protection’ from any kind of solitary peace that is thought of as being entirely removed from all others.

The relationship between the Fundamental Refuge and Mahayana Refuge

For a person to develop the Mahayana motivation, they need to have an awareness of the suffering of others. When a person is entirely caught up in their own suffering, the thought of others, if it occurs at all, might be only a remote concept, and maybe not even a welcomed one at that!

The fundamentals on the path, taking the Buddha as our teacher, relying on, in the sense of implementing the teachings, and producing their result, and being supported by the community of fellow practitioners, brings insight and freedom. From this the Mahayana is born. With freedom, and insight into the causes of suffering and our potential liberation from suffering, we become available and naturally more sensitive to others. We can see and cultivate an awareness of their equality with ourselves, becoming sensitive to their needs, problems, their potential, and their wishes for happiness.

Even as we develop the Mahayana mind and motivation, seeking to benefit all beings, we never leave the Fundamental Refuge. In fact, the more we look into it, the more we see the eternal validity, for ourselves and all others without exception, of the Buddha's teachings on liberation, the Four Noble Truths, the Eightfold Path, and the teachings on causality and freedom.

Seen this way, there is no contradiction at all between the Fundamental Refuge and the Mahayana Refuge. In fact, they compliment and fulfill each other: The Fundamental Refuge finds its fullest, most universal expression through the Mahayana view and motivation, and the Mahayana everywhere exalts and works to bring to fruition what is contained in the Foundational Refuge.

Recalling the Foundational Refuge

Even if we were to now have the Mahayana mind and motivation, for every Buddhist it is valuable to review the Fundamental Refuge, to remember what we understand, and our trust in and devotion to those teachings on liberation.

Shantideva says,

If a person does not even dream of this for his own sake,
how can the wish to liberate others possibly arise?

And His Holiness the Dalai Lama, when teaching on Wisdom and Compassion in 2010, said that when a person first has insight into the possibility of freedom from suffering, and on that basis develops bodhicitta (the Mahayana motivation) it is more stable.

Recalling the fundamental refuge can be like a person hurling down a raging river along with others (or, if they are entirely free from suffering, then remembering what it was like to be so) and looking to place his life on a firm foundation. In the Mahayana this is done in order to help others to safety and freedom. Imagine the joy of having found safety, or merely even seeing solid land. For all Buddhists, this feeling of having found solid land, safety and peace, is like the feeling of the value of refuge. Mahayanists wish this and all happiness for all beings.

If a person's life at some time has too much suffering and confusion to really consider others, and to place their needs at the center of all they do, still, it is useful to think, however briefly, or with however much disbelief, that 'at some time I will be able to offer more help'. This plants the seed, even in difficult times, of actually being able to do more in the future.

The organic structure of Vajrayana practice

Often practice texts will begin by placing refuge and bodhicitta together. This is Mahayana refuge, with the aim to become a Buddha in order to bring the greatest benefit to all sentient beings. Then one goes on to cultivate the Four Immeasurables, followed by prayer, mantra recitation, meditation, and dedications prayers.

To me, practice begins with recalling and relying upon the Foundational Refuge. We can acknowledge the validity of that viewpoint – that we all do need happiness, and a source of safety and strength. So we can first honor

and awaken the sense of the truth and great value of the teachings on liberation.

For the sake of all beings

*I take refuge in the Buddha
I take refuge in the Dharma
I take refuge in the Sangha*

At this point, so as to not leave out any steps, I think it's a good idea to meditate on the factor of having loving kindness towards oneself. What this means is a rich subject for reflection, and it is an essential part of the path.

One can do this using phrases, such as

*May I have happiness, health and peace
and share that with all*

or, by resting in the clear sense of generating goodwill toward oneself.

Then, in order to highlight and bring out more of the quality of this as a Mahayana practice, we can reflect on the equality of self and others:

All others are exactly the same as me in wanting only happiness, and not even the slightest suffering.

Think about this for a while, for as long as is needed to generate the actual feeling that recognizes this.

Then we can meaningfully develop the Four Immeasurables, of Universal Love, Compassion, Rejoicing, and Equality of View.

I place Equality first in these contemplations, to emphasize that aspect:

All are equal in deserving our love and our care

and then,

May all beings have happiness and the causes of happiness

May all beings be free from suffering and the causes of suffering

and

I rejoice in all virtue (happiness and good fortune)

Again, reflect, for as long as is needed to generate these feelings

(May all beings have happiness and the causes of happiness...)

On this basis, we can then produce what is called the Special Intention. This is where one takes responsibility on oneself for removing the suffering of others, and bringing them all happiness.

In Mahayana Buddhism, this Special Intention becomes bodhicitta, the thought to become a Buddha in order to bring the greatest benefit to all sentient beings. The way to genuinely help others, in the Buddhist sense, is by ourselves becoming realized, developing freedom and all beneficial qualities. Then, that is what we offer to the world.

The first verse of the Eight Verses on Training the Mind expresses this motivation, based on great love and compassion for all:

*May I always cherish all beings
with the resolve to accomplish for them
the highest good
that is more precious than a wish-fulfilling gem*

The traditional verse for Mahayana refuge and the generation of bodhicitta is:

*I take refuge, until I attain enlightenment,
in the Buddha, the Dharma, and the Supreme Assembly*

*By the merit I have accumulated by practicing Generosity and other Virtues,
May I become a Buddha in order to benefit all sentient beings*

This way of proceeding and in my mind reviewing the stages of development step by step in the Vajrayana is what makes the most sense to me. I would suggest that others also experiment and see what works best for them. As in every meditation, getting a positive result is really all that matters.