The first common foundational practice is the practice of the appreciation for this precious human life. This is very important. Practicing the "precious human life" will help you understand who you are, and at the same time it will help you to have confidence and energy to practice dharma. Also, there are many different parts and domains and you may feel that some wonderful things are happening to you, a wonderful path, wonderful dharma, and sometimes we might feel, "Maybe I’m not worthy. I’m not worthy to be happy. I’m not worthy to be able to practice these wonderful teachings." Therefore, the first step is to practice the "precious human life."

What is the "precious human life?" Actually, you already have it. You have this body—the human body and the human mind. These are already with you. This human body and human life are so precious. There are a lot of wonderful things within it. But, if we don’t recognize this, even though there are a lot of wonderful things, a lot of good qualities, there’s freedom, there’s richness and so many things, then we still think there’s something missing, that something is incomplete.

Sometimes we say: If there are ten qualities within you, nine of them are positive, and one of them is negative, normally, what you look at is only the negative one. You ignore, or you don’t see the nine positive parts. You only see the one negative part and then you exaggerate that part. If you don’t see your nine good qualities it almost becomes the same as if you don’t have them.

I went to the mountains for four and a half years. In the mountains I met a cowherd. He was looking after cows and I was trying to make a fire. The first time I tried to make a fire it took me two hours. I was blowing and blowing until I got dizzy. Then, this cowherd came to see me and he gave me some wood. He said, "If you don’t know how to
make a fire, I will help you.” He brought a small stick and he did like this (Rinpoche pretends stirring a fire with a stick) and boom! The fire came and I could boil hot water. Then we had a conversation and he asked, “Where are you from? What did you do in the past?” I said, “I studied Buddhist philosophy and I did retreat.” He said, “Wonderful! You are such a wise person. You are so smart, but I’m very stupid. I’m dumb. I know nothing, but you are great!” He was saying things like that. I told him, “No! We are the same! You are unique. We all are unique and we both are good!” But, he didn’t believe that. The next day, he came to me again, and again he was telling me that he was stupid and dumb. He had brought a cheese which was round—it looked like a round bread. It’s very nice and it tastes very good! I asked him how to make cheese, and he explained the process, which is very difficult. Before, I didn’t know where this cheese came from—from milk? or from yogurt? Then we had a long discussion, and after that he was still saying that he felt bad, and that he was stupid, so I told him, “You are not stupid. You are not dumb. I didn’t know how to make fire but you came and with just stirring a stick you made fire! And you know how to make this cheese—the whole process. Even though I studied for a long time and I did retreat, I don’t know how to do all these things, but you do! So, in some cases, you know things much better than me, and in some cases, I know much better than you. I don’t know how to look after cows, but I know many other things.” Therefore, we are all unique. We are all wonderful. You are wonderful. I am wonderful.

The important thing is that we have to recognize this. We have to see it and we need to appreciate this wonderful thing, this wonderful quality of being human and being who we are. Therefore, if you recognize this, it’s really beneficial. It’s kind of like a discovery. Sometimes we say: You’re holding a handful of diamonds in your hands, but if you don’t know that these are diamonds—even though they are—the benefit of having diamonds is not there. You might think they are just pieces of stone. You may still feel hunger, and you may feel bad so you go out to look for food. But, if you recognize your own diamond, then your life will be wonderful, right? It’s a big diamond, so you can stay in a wonderful house and have a wonderful life. But, actually, you were
rich from the beginning but, you didn’t know that you were rich. So, it's the same. And in particular for us, we have this wonderful human life and wonderful body. There are a lot of good things. Therefore we have to appreciate this and we have to recognize it.

How to practice this? The first important thing is, for example, freedom. We try to see the freedom which is already with us. In order to practice this, you need to kind of like compare things. Normally, we compare with many different realms—for example the animal realm. We need to appreciate just being alive. Having this body is different than an animal’s. An animal doesn’t have the same body as you, or the same mental capacity as you. You need to appreciate and recognize this.

Traditionally, we call this "Being appreciative to life," or "Being appreciative to be a human being." Appreciate that you have senses. Appreciate that you have wonderful eyes so that you can see and wonderful ears so that you can hear. Appreciate all your senses. Appreciate that you can breathe—that you are breathing. Appreciate that you can move. Normally, we ignore all these basic things. We take them for granted.

For this practice, you just begin to feel and to recognize what you have. Recognize even the fundamental aspect or human quality which exists within you. Just begin to appreciate them one by one. Then, you can appreciate everything good that has happened in your life. You can appreciate that you have friends, family, a wonderful teacher, a wonderful practice, and wonderful spiritual friends. There are so many things you already have. You have human intelligence, knowledge, love, compassion, you have different skills and talents. If you make a list, there are so many things. You can even make a list and you can try to be aware of that, and you can also see that there are some places that don’t have that—many people or in different realms don’t have that. You just sometimes exchange yourself and put yourself in another’s situation, and kind of look at it from a different perspective. Contemplate these things, appreciate them, and then rest in open awareness. You can alternate them. Appreciate, and then rest.
This is the main practice for the first thought that we call, "precious human life."