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Dharamsala, January 18 – His Holiness the Dalai Lama has reassured Tibetans that he would not abandon the responsibility of leading the Tibetan people. The Tibetan leader was speaking on Sunday to around 2000 Tibetans who had traveled from Tibet to Varanasi where the Tibetan leader concluded Buddhist teachings.

"Democracy is very important part of our political development. It is not that I am discouraged or shirking away from the responsibility. I will never abandon you Tibetans until my last breath. As you can well see, physically I am fit and healthy, even at 76 years of age and now heading towards 77. So don't worry about me quitting from leadership responsibility, stay relieved," the 76 year old Tibetan leader said.

The Dalai Lama, who already calls himself a semi-retired person, recently said he was contemplating "complete retirement" from political and administrative responsibilities leading to deep concerns among the Tibetans both inside Tibet and exile. The Tibetan parliament issued a memorandum urging the Tibetan leader to continue his leadership. The 1989 Nobel peace laureate, however, clarified later that he did not mean complete disassociation from the Tibetan people's struggle for freedom.

His Holiness also informed the Tibetans about the Tibetan government's policy of Middle Way Approach that seeks a "meaningful" autonomy within the People's Republic of China. The Tibetan leader lauded the sense of Tibetan identity and belongingness among the Tibetan people inside Tibet saying that it is not about contending Chinese people. "This is not about antagonizing Chinese people, Chinese people have a sense of belongingness to their race as Hans, and so do the Tibetans. It is not fair to say that Chinese people can have pride and love for their race and the Tibetans can not." He added that equality among the different ethnic people is important to build trust among different ethnic peoples. "If there is no trust, there will be no unity among the races, and eventually there will be no harmonious society."

His Holiness emphasized the importance of the Tibetan language for the survival of Tibetan identity. He said he heard that some Tibetan families in exile encourage children to speak English at homes to habituate them into fluency in spoken English. "I have also heard that some Tibetan families in Tibet encourage children to speak Chinese for the same reason. Despite your requirement to use other languages in your daily lives you must speak your mother tongue and encourage your children to use Tibetan language at your homes," said the Tibetan leader in an apparent reference to the recent protest against a Chinese provincial government's policy of replacing Tibetan by Chinese as medium of instruction in schools.

Asking the Tibetans to embrace vegetarianism as far as possible, the Tibetan leader said there used to be a time when Tibetans in far flung areas, especially nomads, could rely only on meat but that the time now has changed. "I think it will be very good if you can reduce the consumption of meat as far as possible, and if the monasteries switch to pure vegetarianism." His Holiness also suggested that vegetarian meals during household prayers (shabten) at Tibetan homes be served as far as possible.

The Tibetan leader said he heard that many Tibetans in Tibet and also in exile resort to gambling and vagabondage due to lack of education and other reasons. "I heard that there are many people who wile away time just gambling and drinking alcohol, in places like Lhasa and also in Amdo and Kham. Even in exile, in countries like America, I have heard there are people like that. That is wrong. You must tell your fellow Tibetans back in Tibet that I have said it. If they don't listen, fine. That's ok with me."

His Holiness assured the Tibetans from Tibet that things in China will change one day and that the Tibetan brethrens inside Tibet and those in exile shall be united one day.

The Tibetan leader will return to Dharamsala on Wednesday.