Lighting the Lamp:
An Examination of the Structure of the Bsam gtan mig sgron

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I. Introduction

When the Tibetan empire collapsed in the middle of the ninth century, it left an absence of religious as well as political authority. Throughout the eighth and early ninth centuries Tibet had absorbed a great deal of Buddhist literature from all over Asia. By the second half of the ninth century, a heterogeneous mass of teachings was in existence, with no central authority to distinguish orthodox from unorthodox. ¹ In this era, Tibet’s so-called “dark age,” one figure appeared who attempted to make sense of the range of Buddhist teachings available to Tibetans.

Gnubs chen Sangs rgyas ye shes (born c.844 C.E.), a central figure in the chaotic political scene of his time, wrote a work called the Bsam gtan mig sgron (STMG), in which he set out the entirety of the Buddhist path, incorporating the various methods and philosophical systems which were known to him. Gnubs chen’s work shows that, far from a dark age, his was a time of creative assimilation of many varied Buddhist forms deriving from India, China, and Central Asia. Gnubs chen’s work fell into obscurity in later centuries, eclipsed by the great influx of new revealed (gter ma) teachings.

Although the STMG has been the subject of a number of studies, the overall structure of the text has not been fully investigated.² In this pa-

² On the STMG, see Guenther (1983); Tanaka and Robertson (1992); Karmay (1988).
per we attempt to elucidate the thinking behind Gnubs chen's system. Chapter three is the key to the structure of STMG. Here, Gnubs chen introduces the reader to a doxographical system which reduces the various forms of Buddhism into four basic approaches: the gradual (*rim gyis*), the simultaneous (*cig car*), Mahayoga, and Atiyoga. Arranged in this way, these four represent a hierarchy of methods, starting from the gradual approach and culminating in Atiyoga.

In order to organize these different paths into a hierarchical system, a common basis for comparison is required. For Gnubs chen, all Buddhist paths share some form of non-conceptual meditation, and it is on this point that one can evaluate them. The four paths are thus equated with four levels of non-conceptuality, each more subtle than the one preceding it:

I. The gradual approach: not conceptualizing appearances (*snang ba mi rtog pa*)
II. The simultaneous approach: not conceptualizing non-appearances (*mi snang ba mi rtog pa*)
III. Mahayoga: non-dual non-conceptualization (*gnyis su med pa'i mi rtog pa*)
IV. Atiyoga: spontaneously present non-conceptualization (*lhun gyis grub pa'i mi rtog pa*)

Gnubs chen also describes several alternative systems for organizing different forms of non-conceptuality. He cites the following fourfold scheme: (i) not conceptualizing an essence, (ii) not conceptualizing the world, (iii) not conceptualizing certainties, and (iv) not conceptualizing memories. He also mentions a threefold system: (i) worldly non-conceptualization, (ii) transcendent non-conceptualization, and (iii) the non-conceptualization of the lama. It is important to recognize that neither of these alternative systems were employed by Gnubs chen for the structure of the STMG. In Part III below, we have provided an outline of the system which he does use.

Gnubs chen's fourfold doxography was not adopted by the later Tibetan tradition. On the other hand, his system does bear some resemblance to

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3. STMG. 53.5-6
4. STMG. 54.1
certain Chinese doxographies which were current during the same period. For example, the Korean scholar Chegwan (d. 971), taught “four methods of conversion” (hua-i): gradual (chien), sudden (tun), secret (pi mi), and indeterminate (pu-ting). The specific sources for Gnubs chen’s doxography remain unclear, but some Chinese influence is worthy of consideration. Gnubs chen’s familiarity with the Chinese Buddhist milieu is shown by his citations of Chinese teachers and Chinese apocryphal sutras.

As mentioned above, Gnubs chen’s explanation of his fourfold system is contained in chapter three of STMG. The four following chapters (four to seven), which form the bulk of the text, deal with each of the four approaches in turn. Chapter three, which contains summaries of the essential features of each approach, is thus a microcosm of the text as a whole. Although the chapter has been partially translated by H.V. Guenther, his selection of passages and his interpretations do not allow the reader to discern the chapter’s significance within the text as a whole. For this reason we have provided a translation of the complete chapter. Because the chapter itself is difficult to interpret and its structure may not be immediately apparent, we first offer some explanatory notes.

II. Explanatory Notes

Generally speaking, the chapter is divided into three parts addressing the methods, the qualities, and the faults specific to each of the various paths. Gnubs chen postpones his discussion of the first topic, the methods, until chapters four to seven, each of which is dedicated to one of the paths. He divides his discussion of the qualities into two, the qualities of realization and the qualities of meditating subsequent to that realization. It is in this latter category that his discussion of the four non-conceptualizations takes place. The third section on the faults is a treatment of the essential characteristics of the four paths.

The following is an outline of the chapter based on Gnubs chen’s own divisions, to which we have added a few implicit subdivisions:

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I. Methods

II. Qualities

a. Qualities of realization
   [i. According to the gradualists]
   [ii. According to the simultaneists]

b. Qualities of meditating
   [i. Sūtrayāna]
   [ii. Mahāyoga and Atiyoga]
   [iii. Conceptualizations and non-conceptualizations]

III. Faults

   [a. Setting forth the four paths]
   [b. Identifying the faults of the first three paths]

In his discussion of (II.a) the qualities of realization, Gnubs chen presents the two positions of the “sūtra adherents” (mdo sde pa) and the simultaneists. The sūtra adherents are gradualists characterized by their use of logical analysis. The simultaneists (referred to here as ston mun, the Tibetan transliteration of their Chinese name) are characterized as avoiding all such analysis. In an interesting aside, Gnubs chen complains that the simultaneous approach should be taught only to those who are expert in dharma (chos la mkhas pa), but in his time is being taught freely to anyone.

Gnubs chen begins his section on (II.b) the qualities of meditating with the assertion that one must attain a certain level of understanding before beginning to meditate. He supports this claim with an extended series of scriptural citations all making this same point. The citations are drawn first from Mahayana sutras, and then from Mahāyoga and Atiyoga scriptures.

The remainder of the section is dedicated to Gnubs chen’s treatment of the different kinds of non-conceptualization. He begins by addressing the apparent contradiction in applying a conceptual framework to the

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7 Although in the later tradition, the Tibetan mdo sde pa is used to translate the Sanskrit Sautrāntika, a school of the Hinayāna, in STMG the term denotes a gradualist Mahāyāna approach. Such a use of the term is also found in the Lta ba’i rim pa bshad pa by the imperial period translator Ska ba Dpal brtsegs (see Karmay (1988), p.173).
subject of non-conceptuality. Such a framework is necessary, he argues, in order to identify any deviations from pure non-conceptuality. For this purpose, he distinguishes a series of four non-conceptualizations, associating the first three with increasingly subtle deviations. Thus his four non-conceptualizations represent a progression of increasing refinement, culminating in the perfect non-conceptuality.

Before directly addressing the four non-conceptualizations, Gnubs chen sets out two forms of conceptualization which correspond with his first two non-conceptualizations, that is, the conceptualization of appearances and the conceptualization of non-appearances. These two are associated with the gradual and simultaneous approaches respectively. In his comments which follow, Gnubs chen deals with only the conceptualization of appearances. He distinguishes three ways in which gradualists may conceptualize appearances. They can conceptualize the essence, the characteristics, or an absence of essence or characteristics. The first of these ways of conceptualizing appearances is discussed in terms of a four part set deriving from the Mi rtog pa'i gzungs, the second is associated with the conceptualization of conventional truth, and the third with the conceptualization of ultimate truth.

After a brief digression into an alternative fourfold system of conceptualization, Gnubs chen proceeds to set out the non-conceptualizations. He begins with a threefold system of non-conceptualization which corresponds to the three vehicles of the worldly meditators, of the Hinayana, and of the Mahayana. Gnubs chen does not explain how this system might fit into his overall doxography of the four approaches. It seems that all three of these non-conceptualizations would fit into the category of the gradual approach. However, this is yet another alternative system which Gnubs chen does not integrate into his central system.

The author of the interlinear notes to the text seems to want to change this last type to a conceptualization of the inseparability of essence and characteristics.

One possible exception occurs within Gnubs chen’s three subdivisions of the Mahayana: (i) insight (lhag mthong), (ii) calm abiding (zhi gnas), and (iii) the union of insight and calm abiding. This last subdivision is described as “the contemplation of the tathagatas” (de bzhin gshegs pa’i bsam gtan), a term which is found in many Tibetan Chan treatises (see for example, IOL Tib J 710/1). This, of course, would not qualify as a gradualist approach.
In the next paragraph, Gnubs chen finally comes to his main fourfold system of non-conceptualization: (i) not conceptualizing appearances, (ii) not conceptualizing non-appearances, (iii) non-dual non-conceptualization, and (iv) spontaneously present non-conceptualization. The correspondence of the first two with the conceptualizations discussed above should be clear. As in his treatment of the conceptualizations, Gnubs chen concentrates his analysis on the first element, associated with the gradual approach. Once again, he distinguishes between the conceptualization of appearances with regard to their essence and with regard to their characteristics (omitting, however, the third subdivision, the conceptualization of an absence of essence or characteristics).

In his presentation, Gnubs chen reverses these two ways of not conceptualizing appearances, placing characteristics before essence. He does so in order to link them to the two stages of gradualist Yogacara practice, of first identifying the dependent nature (Tib. gzhan dbang; Skt. paratantra) of external objects and then identifying the dependent nature of one’s own mindstream. Thus, in not conceptualizing appearances with regard to their characteristics, one establishes the dependence of objects upon the perceiving subject. Then, in not conceptualizing appearances with regard to their essence, one begins by establishing the dependent nature of the perceiving subject.

In his earlier discussion of conceptualizing appearances with regard to their essence, Gnubs chen adopted a fourfold system from the Mi rtag pa'i gzungs. However, here in the context of non-conceptualization, he replaces that system with three stages of non-conceptualization. As noted above, the first corresponds to the dependent nature of the Yogacara. The second stage corresponds to the absolutely established nature (Tib. yongs grub; Skt. parinispanna) of the Yogacara, and the third to the Madhyamaka.

Thus Gnubs chen divides the first form of non-conceptualization (i.e. not conceptualizing appearances) into the stages of understanding achieved in the two philosophical schools of Yogacara and Madhyamaka. In this way his presentation of the gradual approach functions both as a doxography and as a graduated system of meditation which passes through the Yogacara and culminates in the Madhyamaka. In comparison to this, his presentation of the other three non-conceptual-
izations, associated with simultaneism, Mahāyoga and Atiyoga, is relatively cursory and not divided into sections.

The remainder of chapter three is dedicated to a concise explanation of the four approaches and their faults. Gnubs chen starts by describing the basic characteristics of each approach, beginning with gradualism, referred to here by its Chinese name, ṭsen men. Here Gnubs chen returns to the fourfold system of conceptualizations taken from the Mi rtog pa’i gzungs: (i) conceptualizing the nature, (ii) conceptualizing the antidote, (iii) conceptualizing suchness, and (iv) conceptualizing attainment. He characterizes the gradual approach as the abandonment of each of these conceptualizations one by one.\(^{10}\)

The simultaneists are introduced as those who train in the ultimate “without alternation” (re mos med pa). This obscure phrase is clarified a little further on in the text when the practitioners of Mahāyoga are described as “those who alternate” (res ‘jog can). An interlinear note states that this alternation is between “the unborn being true and the unborn not being true.” Thus Gnubs chen characterizes the simultaneists as being unquestioningly fixated on the unborn, that is, on ultimate truth. The method of the simultaneists is illustrated with various citations which all make the general point that because the mind is already unborn, the meditator merely has to remain without conceptualization. A series of quotations from Chinese Chan masters in this section seems to be derived from a famous Chan text which is found in the Dunhuang collections.\(^{11}\)

Mahāyoga is discussed briefly in terms of intrinsic awareness (rang rig), luminosity, and the non-duality of the two truths. Atiyoga is described as the spontaneous perfection of all phenomena, with no need for purification. The practice of Atiyoga is neither to conceptualize nor to obstruct whatever appearances arise.

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\(^{10}\) Cf. Ueyama (1983). In this article, it is argued that the Mi rtogs pa’i gzungs (Avikal-papraveśadāraṇī) represents an amalgamation of the gradual and the simultaneous approaches. Note, however, that Gnubs chen consistently associates the work with the gradual approach.

\(^{11}\) P. tib 116, 164-167. For more on this text see Faber (1985).
Having described the basic characteristics of the four approaches, Gnubs chen then proceeds to the faults of each. Using the simile of the rungs on a ladder, Gnubs chen makes it clear that he is arranging the approaches in a hierarchy. The first section, on the gradual approach, is brief. The criticism is that the gradualists work exclusively with conceptualization in order to develop non-conceptualization, which Gnubs chen seems to regard as a self-evident contradiction. Turning to the simultaneists, Gnubs chen criticizes their fixation on the ultimate, stating that it is precisely this fixation that prevents them from seeing the ultimate. They fail to understand non-duality because they assert everything to be the oneness of ultimate truth.

The Mahāyogins overcome this fixation with their “alternations” between the conventional and the ultimate, with the goal of dissolving the distinction between the two in non-duality. This very goal is the fault of the Mahāyogins, for they do not understand that everything is already spontaneously perfect. Spontaneous perfection is the view of Atiyoga, which Gnubs chen does not criticize. In short, the gradualists focus too much on conceptualization, the simultaneists focus too much on non-conceptualization, and the Mahayogins focus too much on non-duality. Atiyoga, the top rung on the ladder, is without faults.

III. Outline of Gnubs chen’s system

Conceptualizations:
1 Conceptualizing appearances (= gradualism)
   1.1 Conceptualizing their essence,
      1.1.a Conceptualizing the nature
      1.1.b Conceptualizing the antidote
      1.1.c Conceptualizing suchness
      1.1.d Conceptualizing attainment
   1.2 Conceptualizing their characteristics,
   1.3 Conceptualizing the absence of essence and characteristics
2 Conceptualizing non-appearances (= simultaneism)

Non-conceptualizations:
1 Not conceptualizing appearances (= gradualism)
   1.1 Not conceptualizing their essence
1.1a The dependent nature of Yogācāra and the Self of the Tirthikas
1.1b The absolutely established nature of Yogācāra
1.1c Madhyamaka insight

1.2 Not conceptualizing their characteristics
2 Not conceptualizing non-appearances (= simultaneism)
3 Non-dual non-conceptualization (= Mahāyoga)
4 Spontaneously present non-conceptualization (= Atiyoga)

IV. Translation of Chapter Three of the Bsam gtan mig sgron

[45.6] With regard to determining the meaning according to [various] views [46] we have {in brief} the methods, the qualities, and the faults of meditating without seeing the meaning.

[I. Methods]
The methods are taught {more extensively} in the context of explaining each particular system.

[II. Qualities]
The {two} qualities are the qualities of realization—that is, one’s own essence {the view}—and the qualities of meditating after that realization.

[II.a. Qualities of realization]
Of these, the qualities of realization are expressed in various ways. According to the system of the śūtra adherents, by using [the logic of] dependent arising, the one and the many, the four possibilities of birth and cessation, and so on {i.e. the vajra fragments, direct perception, and inference}, a grasping at ultimate truth does not arise and one gains an understanding of insight which sees the conventional as illusory.

The ston mun speak of realization through total non-examination in the expanse of the unborn entirety of phenomena. Further, theirs is a in-

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12 In the following translation we have placed interlinear notes in {braces} and our own interpolations and page numbers in [brackets].

13 Rdo rje gzegs: This refers to Nagarjuna’s method of reasoning that demonstrates that a phenomenon cannot be born from itself, another, both, or neither.
sight which realizes that not understanding anything is itself correct understanding, not knowing anything is itself correct knowledge, not seeing anything is itself correct seeing, and not meeting with anything is itself the great meeting. The realization of the two {i.e. the two truths} according to this method should be explained to experts in dharma, but nowadays it is being taught to everyone. [47] In the *Rten 'brel snying po* it says,

> Apart from this there is nothing whatsoever to clarify;
> There is nothing whatsoever to establish;
> Correctly view correctness itself.
> By correctly seeing, you will be liberated.

This is also the meaning of meditation for the *ston mun*. Having realized the view, one is said to accomplish enlightenment without needing to protect one’s conduct. The *'Phags pa 'jig rten las 'das pa'i mdo* says,

> It is easy to transgress moral conduct,
> But in the view there is no one {who can be said to transgress}.
> One who maintains moral conduct will attain a higher birth,
> But with the view, one will attain the supreme level.

The *Chos 'byung ba med pa'i mdo* says,

> Whoever understands {the *śrāvaka*’s} moral conduct to be the {bodhisattva’s} absence of moral conduct.
> {If one comprehends that} perverse conduct and moral conduct are the same,
> That is, for one who understands the nature of moral conduct in this way,
> There is no perverse conduct at all.

The *Zla ba sgron ma'i mdo* says,

> Whoever practises with one dharma
> Perfects all the dharmas of the qualities.

[48] It says in the *Chos kyi rgyal po*,

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If you are able to understand one dharma, you will not be ignorant of any dharma.

It says in the Zla ba mar me’i mdo,

By cultivating one dharma,
All of them will be cultivated.

That is to say, all the qualities of concentration. This is taught widely elsewhere.

[II.b. Qualities of meditating]
Now, the qualities of meditating after realization: If one meditates after having seen the meaning, one will be able to reach the stage of omni-science. In the Gting nge ’dzin rgyal po’i mdo it says,

If you analyze the selflessness of dharmas,
And meditate after that analysis,
This is the cause which results in the attainment of nirvāṇa.
No other cause will be a basis {i.e. you will not reach buddhahood}.

And,

Furthermore, meditating without analysis
Is like entering the water without learning to swim,
Or a blind man following a path.

And from the same sūtra,

Whoever settles without thought
In the inconceivable wisdom,
That childish one is stupid,
And will come to have obscured sense fields.

[49] The qualities are also spoken of in that sūtra in other passages such as,

Whoever settles without thought
After understanding the inconceivable meaning,
Is an omniscient one,  
And will come to have immeasurable qualities.

Also in the context of {the view of} the inner mantra and Atiyoga, there are inconceivable qualities of unique realization. As it says in the Rdo rje sms ds pa'i rgyu 'phrug drwa ba.

The essence of the supreme accomplishment:  
Comprehending this first, one will not go to extremes.

The means for resolving [this view] is to attain realization through scripture, oral instructions, and awareness. This is taught in the following texts:

In the Rdo rje bskod pa it says,  
An intellect endowed with the three kinds of valid cognition  
Performs an analytical elimination.

And in the Bsgom lung of Mkhan po Dpal dbyangs,  
Resolving by means of scripture, oral instructions, and awareness,  
One should gain faith in the genuine nature of phenomena.

And in the Rnal 'byor grub pa'i lung,  
How does one view that which comes out of thusness?  
[50] Is it appearing or not appearing?  
Moreover, is it buddhahood or not buddhahood?  
Does buddhahood exist separate from it or not?  
By discussing in this way, one should decide how it is.

Such passages are found widely in many mantra [scriptures].

Regarding the qualities {of meditation}, the Nam mkha' che says,

In the object of understanding there is great bliss;  
Just that is the world’s complete purity.
Therefore each object of experience is elucidated as the great wisdom. In the *Rtsal chen* it says,

> Understanding [everything] as equal is the lord of all the buddhas.

In the *Rnal 'byor sgrub pa'i lung* it says,

> If one resolves [everything] as thusness,  
> Although the world remains, it is the dharmakāya.  
> Although one has certainty in the ultimate, one engages in the world.  
> One does not weary of the extremes of samsāra.  
> Even the most extreme activities are perfected in oneness.  
> In the demonic realms there is no dread.  
> In the unbearable realms there is no fear.  
> The object of one’s desire is united with space.  
> If the definitive meaning is seen simultaneously,  
> Training gradually seems like a deceptive delusion.

By training in the one ultimate correct intention, one trains in all of the inconceivably many teachings. [51] Thus to become expert in one is to become expert in all of the inconceivable number of teachings. If one cultivates the meaning of suchness, one cultivates hundreds of thousands of concentrations. If the meaning of suchness is [not] transgressed, all the vows are maintained. If the intellect enters the unmistaken meaning, it enters the gates of the inconceivable number of teachings. If the meaning of unmistaken suchness is explained, all the inconceivable number of teachings are explained. If suchness is heard based on an unerring aural faculty, an inconceivable number of teachings are heard. If one sees suchness directly, one sees the faces of all the conquerors. Thus it is widely taught.

Also regarding the faults and qualities, in the *Kun tu bzang po che ba la rang gnas pa* it says,

> Meditation is not foremost, realization is foremost;  
> If realization is not entered with confidence,  
> The meditator is merely meditating on a conceptual state.  
> The seeker is seeking with an afflicted clinging.
[52] and,

Practice in the river of realization,
And from that, self-arising wisdom will dawn.

And in the *Bdud rtsi'i rgyud* it says,

Whoever is acquainted with the river of realization,
Though called a man, he is a buddha.

In the *Sgyu 'phrul drwa ba* it says,

The three kinds of purity {the elements, the *skandhas*, and the eight consciousnesses, as wisdom} are unmistaken.
By cultivating the conqueror of one’s own buddha family,
One will find this supreme enlightenment.

Thus it is always taught that one meditates after realization. What remains are the concentrations, the means, and meditating on one’s no longer heard hearing lineage. One dwells alone somewhere, just like the king of the beasts. The lion renounces companions because he is free of fear; similarly the yogin also renounces distracting friends. This was explained earlier {in chapter one}, where it was also said, “this is why the yogin is like the lion.”

Now, why is freedom from non-conceptuality being systematized if it is said that even thinking about it is mental wavering? Although one should not digress into reified entities, one should still understand the errors which lead to such digressions. Thus there are four [non-conceptualizations] {i.e. the non-conceptualizations of *ston mun*, *tsen men*, Mahāyoga and Atiyoga}. Alternatively, there are three non-conceptualizations. {It is easy to identify these non-conceptualizations by identifying the [corresponding] conceptualizations of [worldly], trans­scendent, and lama.}

Furthermore, in order to be free of conceptualization, conceptualization should first be explained. There is [1] the conceptualization of appearances and [2] the conceptualization of non-appearances {grasping at a non-existent as not existing}. 
The conceptualization of appearances is threefold {i.e. conceptualizing the essence, conceptualizing characteristics, and conceptualizing the indivisibility of essence and characteristics}. [1.1] Conceptualizing the essence consists of {the four}: [1.1.a] conceptualizing the nature {of entities as existent, non-existent, appearing, or empty}, [1.1.b] conceptualizing the antidote {for example, renouncing the afflictions}, [1.1.c] conceptualizing suchness {i.e. grasping at doctrinal positions}, [1.1.d] conceptualizing attainment {i.e. grasping at the fruit}. [1.2] Conceptualizing the characteristics consists of the views which conceptualize the conventional. [1.3] Conceptualizing an appearance as being without essence and characteristics {i.e. they are indivisible} is discriminating knowledge, the view which conceptualizes the ultimate.

Alternatively [ancilliary explanation] there is: [1] the conceptualization of an essence {for whatever arises}. [2] the conceptualization of the world {grasped as one’s own mindstream}, [3] the conceptualization of certainties {in the various doctrinal positions}, [4] the conceptualization of memories {of the past}. For each of these there is a corresponding non-conceptualization. [54] {At the time of pacifying a particular aspect of conceptualization, there is a corresponding aspect of non-conceptualization.}

Non-conceptualization consists of worldly non-conceptualization, transcendent non-conceptualization, and the non-conceptualization of the lama. Regarding those, [1] worldly non-conceptualization consists of {the four} contemplations and {the four} absorptions. [2] Transcendent [non-conceptualization] consists of the cessation of the śrāvakas and the peaceful concentration of the pratyekabuddhas. It is also known as the contemplation which is enjoyed by the childish ones. [3] The non-conceptualization of the lama is the Mahāyāna. This consists of: [3.1] the contemplative insight which investigates the meaning and is brought about by discriminating knowledge, [3.2] the contemplation which perceives thusness, that is, calm abiding without characteristics, and [3.3] the contemplation of the tathāgatas, the union of calm abiding and insight. These are also explained as non-fixation which arises from {the initial} faith, total non-fixation, and the subsequent non-fixation. These are easy to understand, so I will not address them here.
Alternatively, non-conceptualization consists of [1] not conceptualizing appearances and [2] not conceptualizing non-appearances, [55] of which not conceptualizing appearances is twofold. {[1.1] First there is not conceptualizing appearances with regard to their essence.} [1.2] Not conceptualizing appearances with regard to their characteristics refers to those with a consciousness free from {i.e. an apprehension without} conceptualization, one which perceives the dependent nature {i.e. that the sense faculties, such as the eyes, and their objects arise in dependence on each other}. [1.1] Not conceptualizing appearances with regard to their essence is threefold: [1.1.a] Not conceptualizing appearances as having an existent essence refers to the consciousness which formulates the dependent nature of the Yogācārins {there is no conceptualization of one’s own mindstream because of the dependent nature, that is, because whatever emerges due to dependent arising is merely illusory}, as well as the consciousness which formulates the Self of the Tīrthikas {i.e. that there is no other}. [1.1.b] Not conceptualizing appearances as having an empty essence refers to meditation on the absolutely established nature of the Yogācārins. [1.1.c] The consciousness that meditates on the Madhyamaka path is insight.

This completes the non-fixations discussed above. Distinct from those, the non-dual non-conceptualization is Mahāyoga, and the great spontaneously present non-conceptualization is Atiyoga.

[III. The faults]
These [four paths] will be set forth in succession so that their errors may then be identified. Those of the gradualist *tsen men*, having gradually abandoned the four characteristics such as conceptualizing the nature [56] {and conceptualizing the antidote, conceptualizing thusness, and conceptualizing attainment}, engage in non-conceptualization. In the *Mi rtog pa'i gzungs* it says,

The men who desire the wish-fulfilling jewels must dig with the mind beneath the hard and solid rocks. The jewels are the precious silver, gold, and diamonds beneath the rock. Beneath these four—the three precious rocks and the hard rock—they dig and obtain the wish-fulfilling jewel which arises as the perfection of all the benefits
to self and others. Similarly, those who desire complete non-conceptualization must separate from the four characteristics: (i) the characteristic of conceptualizing the nature. (ii) the characteristic of conceptualizing the antidote. (iii) the characteristic of conceptualizing thusness, and (iv) the characteristic of conceptualizing attainment. Then if they meditate by this [method] alone without creating existents, they will accomplish the three characteristics.

Thus they meditate gradually. In other words they meditate gradually on the three gates of emptiness, signlessness, [57] and wishlessness, and they meditate on calm abiding, insight, and so on.

Those of the simultaneous ston mun train simultaneously in the unborn ultimate itself, right from the start and without alternation. In the Shes rab kyi pha ro du phyin pa'i mdo it says,

Having first generated the mind of enlightenment, one directs the mind to the knowledge of all aspects.

And from the same sūtra,

Beginners first generate the mind of enlightenment and then commence training in not fixating on any phenomena.

And from the Gtsug tor gyi mdo,

If at the beginning one generates the mind of enlightenment that is without birth and cessation, then at the end one will obtain the result that is without birth and cessation.

This is also taught elsewhere. The gate of simultaneous entry has been explained by various masters {in the teaching texts}:

In the teaching of the great expert Bodhidharmottara, it is correct to abandon partiality and conceptualization. If one remains in vividness, there is neither self nor other. [58] Vile people and noble ones are one

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14. Here, “vividness” translates the Tibetan lhun me, which, in turn, is usually used to translate the Chinese biguan.
and the same. If one remains steady and unchanging, from then on one does not follow words and teachings. This is to rest in the naturalness of the correct meaning, without conceptualization and without incessant activity. This is non-engagement in the meaning.

In the teaching of the contemplation expert ‘Dug ba, not thinking is moral conduct, not being mindful is concentration, and the illusory mind not arising is knowledge.

In the teaching of the contemplation expert Bdud ‘dul snying po, not being mindful of anything is the mindfulness of the Buddha. If the mind is even while gazing at just this, this is the perfect body of the tathāgata itself.

In the teaching of the contemplation expert A dha na her, equanimity, however the mind might be, is the path of the definitive yoga.

In the teaching of the contemplation expert Ma hā yan, one remains in the dharmatā without thinking or conceptualizing.

Because the awareness of the meditator is itself unborn, there is no need to be mindful for the sake of the unborn meaning. [59] This is simultaneous entry. The above constitutes the scripture and reasoning on how beginners who have no previous training are able to enter [simultaneously]. This will be explained in more detail below. Another example of reasoning might be: If an object has a white form, then the consciousness arises as white; thus it is clear that when there is no thought of an object, consciousness is also without objective thought.

Regarding the thusness of the inner non-conceptualization: According to the texts of Mahāyoga, within intrinsic awareness all phenomena are luminous, the non-duality of the two truths. They are not to be acted upon by an agent; just by arriving, they are luminosity, the non-duality of space and wisdom. In the Gsang ba ‘dus pa it says,

16. P. tib. 116 reads: A rdan hver
17. Note that P. tib. 116 inserts the teaching of ‘Gwa lun here.
The reality which is without meditating on real entities  
Is to be meditated on without meditating.  
In that way, because real entities are unreal,  
Meditation is without fixation.

Therefore non-dual thusness is not pursued elsewhere. Wisdom does not fixate on space, so it does not abandon conditioned phenomena. [60] This is intrinsic awareness and intrinsic luminosity. On that point, the Sgyu 'phrul drwa ba says,

The intrinsic awareness without subject and object  
Is one's own perceptions without fixation.

Regarding the thusness of the spontaneous perfection of Atiyoga, the supreme yoga: All the phenomena of appearance and existence are intrinsically luminous from the beginning, without [the need for] purification, in the expanse of completely pure self-arisen wisdom. The effortless and spontaneous perfection of all causes and effects is the great Self, and therefore there is not even a particle of, nor even a name for, wavering from that.

So what is it to meditate vividly, brilliantly, and with primordial radiance, without staying, moving, polluting, or residing with, intrinsic awareness? What is there to be mindful of? There is nothing. There is only the very truth of that nothing. Who is there to undertake that? In the great primordial non-conceptualization, appearances are not blocked, yet they are not conceptualized. Even non-conceptuality is itself a designation. In the Khyung chen it says,

Appearances are like a great ocean;  
Non-conceptuality is vast like the space of the sky.

[Identifying the errors:]

[61] The differences between these are like the rungs of a ladder. Just as there are higher and lower rungs on a ladder, so are there differences between these four non-conceptualizations {of ston mun, tsen men, Mahāyoga, and Atiyoga}.  
As described above, the *tsen men* gradualists, strive exclusively at fixation and then develop non-fixation. They analyze entities with logic and then take on the meaning of the Madhyamaka.

For the *ston mun* all phenomena of self and others are unborn from the beginning, and yet in striving for the ultimate to be born, their minds are corrupted. Therefore they never see the great meaning, just as the paddlings of a grey duck do not stir up the ocean. Even when they do not think at all, they still desire to enter the dharmatā. As it says in the *Ye shes snang ba rgyan,*

Although causes, conditions, and dependent arising are explained,  
And gradual entry is spoken of,  
These are provisional teachings for the ignorant.  
In this spontaneously present dharma,  
What would it be to train gradually?  
Within this nature beyond limits,  
How could composite conceptions be seen?  
There is not even the slightest of assertions. [62]  
At that time, mind is the sky.  
Buddha and the objects of one’s experience are one.

Thus they explain that gradual entry is taught for the sake of those with inferior faculties, yet they are like fleeing insects that cannot reach the top of Mt. Meru. They teach a non-conceptuality that is still fixated. Although these *ston mun* aspire towards non-activity, they do not understand it as non-dual {i.e. they are surpassed by Mahāyoga}. Even if they {the *ston mun*} do speak of non-duality, their view—in which everything is the ultimate truth, the unborn emptiness—holds everything to be a oneness.

Furthermore, those who alternate {between the unborn being true and the unborn being untrue} see inseparability as the true nature of Mahāyoga. Yet they are obscured by their own view, just as one who picks the millet seeds {the crop} does not see the earth, or one who threads a needle does not see the sky even though looking upwards. This is evident from the *Rnal ‘byor grub pa’i lung*:

The nature is unborn and unceasing like the sky.
Thus it is all-encompassing yet not seen in anything 
{i.e. the actual basis of all, without partiality}.
It is precisely the non-appearance of anything, without fault.
[63] Because this {if relied upon} is a delusion, it is ineffectual.

They aspire by means of the truth that emptiness is unable to appear as anything and that {Mantra[yāna]’s} thusness is capable of becoming anything, such as a manḍala of peaceful and wrathful deities which grants confirmation for the sake of beings. Because the great yoga, Ma­hāyoga, aspires towards non-duality, it does not realize the great spontaneous presence {i.e. Atiyoga meditation}.

If you ask why: The followers of Mahāyoga analyze existents and cultivate thusness using a variety of means. Because the emanations projected for the benefit of beings already exist, the meaning of inactivity is that one is already spontaneously perfect. Thus there is obviously no training and no activity. The source of all emanations is merely the un­ceasing needs of beings, the great wisdom, and that alone is one’s own conduct. [The Mahāyogins] do not see this truth.

This is like the above [discussion] {of Madhyamaka}. For example, from the top of the Yoke Holder {mountains}, one cannot see the peak of the Beautiful {Mt. Sumeru}. In that same work [Rnal ’byor grub pa’i lung] it says,

On the king of the Golden Mountains, the Yoke Holder,  
Even having reached the top, one cannot see the peak of the Beauti­ful.

[64] The {Mahā}yogin who aspires to the non-duality of all,  
Obscures himself in the extreme of striving and does not see the great state.

And in the Nam mkha’ che,

The gates to all the branches of enlightenment,  
The accoutrements, when meditated on, are like a moon in water.  
They arise unstained and unobstructed,  
But when meditated on, they are like childish objects of experience.
Using the accoutrements of the wrathful mandala,
The realm of the great wrathful lord is apprehended,
And the syllables manifest,
Yet peacefulness is not perceived.

As the inner Mahāyogins gain competence in the concentrations with characteristics {e.g. the attributes of the syllables and signs}, they may show signs, but because they are fixated on spontaneous presence, they do not see. For example, if one looks at the centre of the sun, eventually one’s eyes, no longer seeing, will become heavy. The differences between these views will be taught in detail below.

From the extensive commentary called the Rnal ’byor mig gi bsam gtan, this is the third chapter which teaches the differences between entry, means, requirements, and aims.

Bibliography