Introduction: “The great man”

From the context of the Anuruddha Mahāvitaṅka Sutta (A 3.80), especially the Buddha’s “eighth thought of the great man” [§3(8)], it is clear that “the great man” or “the great person” (mahā, purisa) here refers to an arya or noble saint (ariya), that is, a saint of the path, particularly the arhat. In the Commentaries, the word mahā, purisa, however, is always used in reference to the Bodhisattva, that is, the Buddha before his awakening (from his first public aspiration for Buddhahood onwards).

The Cūḷa Niddesa, commenting on the Tissa Metteyya Māṇava Pucchā (Sn 1040-42) simply gives a string of synonyms and near-synonyms, thus:

mahā, puriso agga, puriso saṅkhāra, puriso vīsēṭṭha, puriso pāmokkha, puriso uttama, puriso padhāna, puriso (the great person, the foremost person, the excellent person, the supreme person, the highest person, the main person).

The Canon itself, however, provides at least two important texts directly illuminating the meaning of mahā, purisa, that is, the Tissa Metteyya Māṇava Pucchā (Sn 1040-42) and the Mahā, purisa Sutta (S 47.11). The first text, the question of the brahmin youth Tissa Metteyya to the Buddha, forms part of the ancient Pāṭaya Vagga of the Sutta Nipata.

1040 Ko’dha santusito loke (asks the venerable Tissa Metteyya,) kassa no santi iñjitā (for whom are there no mental agitations?) ko ubh’antam abhiññāya (Who, knowing both ends [extremes], majjhe mantā na lippati a thinker who clings not to the middle?) kaṃ brūsi mahā, puriso ti (Whom do you call a great person?)

1041 Kāmesu brahma, cariyavā (Metteyyā ti Bhagavā)’ vīta, tan’ho saḍā sato saṅkhāya nibbuto bhikkhu majjhe mantā na lippati Who is contented in this world? for whom are there no mental agitations? Who, knowing both ends [extremes], is a thinker, who clings not to the middle? Whom do you call a great person? Who has gone beyond the seamstress here? Who lives the holy life [is celibate] amidst sense-pleasures, (Metteyya, said the Blessed One,) with craving gone, ever mindful, after considering, he is a quenched monk, a thinker who sticks not to the middle——
Although there seems to be five questions here by Tissa Metteyya, they all converge on the key question: “Whom do you call a great person?” The Buddha answers accordingly.

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The Discourse on the Great Man
(S 47.11/5:158)

1 Thus have I heard.
At one time the Blessed One was staying in Anātha,piṇḍika’s Park in Jeta’s Grove near Sāvatthī.

Who is a great man?

2 Then the venerable Sāriputta approached the Blessed One and saluted him. Having saluted the Blessed One, he sat down at one side. Seated thus at one side, the venerable Sāriputta said this to the Blessed One:

3a “‘Great man, great man,’ it is said, venerable sir. How, venerable sir, is one a great man?”

“One who has a liberated mind, I say, Sāriputta, is a great man. One who has an unliberated mind is not a great man, I say.

The four satipatthanas

3a And how, Sāriputta, does one have a liberated mind?

4 Here, Sāriputta,

(1) a monk\(^8\) dwells\(^9\) exertive, clearly knowing, mindful, contemplating the body in the body,\(^{10}\)
removing\(^{11}\) covetousness and displeasure\(^{12}\) in the world.\(^{13}\)

As he dwells contemplating the body in the body, the mind becomes dispassionate, and by non-clinging, it is liberated from the cankers.\(^{14}\)

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7 See The Body in Buddhism = SD 29.6a (7.2).
8 Here “a monk” (bhikkhu) may refer to either an ordained monastic or anyone who is meditating (here, doing satipatthana) (DA 3:756; VbhA 216 f; cf SnA 251). See Satipaṭṭhāna Ss (D 22; M 10) = SD 13.1 §3.0(ii).
9 Atāpi sampajāṇo satimā, vineyya loke abhijjhā,domanassaṁ. Here we find 4 of the 5 spiritual faculties (pañca'-indriya) in action: see Satipaṭṭhāna Ss (D 22; M 10) = SD 13.1 Intro (4.2) above.
10 “Contemplating the body in the body” (kāye kāyānupassā). See Satipaṭṭhāna Ss (D 22; M 10) = SD 13.1 Intro (3.4).
11 Vineyya can mean “should remove” (as pot, like vineyya, Sn 590) or as “having removed” (as ger, like vinā-ivā, Pm 1:244), and both senses apply in Satipaṭṭhāna S (M 10 = SD 13.3). See Intro (4.2c) above.
12 “Covetousness and displeasure,” abhijjhā,domanassam, alt trs: “desire and discontent,” “desiring and disliking,” or “longing and loathing.” Walshe (1995:335 & n632) renders it as “hankering and fretting [for the world].” See Satipaṭṭhāna Ss (D 22; M 10) = SD 13.1 Intro (4.2).
13 “World” (loka). See Intro (4.2d) above.
14 “Cankers” or mental cankers (āsavas), comes from ā-savati “flows towards” (ie either “into” or “out” towards the observer). It has been variously translated as influxes, taints (‘deadly taints,’” RD), corruptions, intoxicants, biases, depravity, misery, evil (influence), or simply left untranslated. The Abhidhamma lists four āsavas: the canker of (1) sense-desire (kāmāsavā), (2) desire for eternal existence (bhavāsavā), (3) wrong views (diṭṭhāsavā), (4) ignorance (avijjāsavā)} (D 16.2.4, Pm 1.442, 561, Dhś §§1096-1100, Vbh §937). These 4 are also known as “floods” (ōgha) and “yokes” (yoga). The list of 3 cankers (omitting the canker of views) [43] is probably older and is found
(2) He dwells exertive, clearly knowing, mindful, contemplating feelings in the feelings, having removed covetousness and displeasure in the world.
   As he dwells contemplating feelings in the feelings, the mind becomes dispassionate, and by non-clinging, it is liberated from the cankers.

(3) He dwells exertive, clearly knowing, mindful, contemplating the mind in the mind, removing covetousness and displeasure in the world.
   As he dwells contemplating the mind in the mind, the mind becomes dispassionate, and by non-clinging, it is liberated from the cankers.

(4) He dwells exertive, clearly knowing, mindful, contemplating dharmas [phenomena] in the dharmas, removing covetousness and displeasure in the world.
   As he dwells contemplating dharmas in the dharmas, the mind becomes dispassionate, and by non-clinging, it is liberated from the cankers.

5 Thus, Sāriputta, one has a liberated mind. One who has a liberated mind, I say, Sāriputta, is a great man. One who has an unliberated mind is not a great man, I say. [159]

— evam —

051129; 070709; 080212; 090724

more frequently in the Suttas (D 3:216, 33.1.10(20); M 1:55, 3:41; A 3.59, 67, 6.63). The destruction of these āsavas is equivalent to arhathood. See BDict: āśava.

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