“Buddha continually employed the example of seedlings in his discourses, a very ancient analogy, perhaps because of its great similitude to the fluid characteristics of karmic cause and effect. There are other analogies, but none as fitting. First, the right environment has to be present for a seed to sprout—the right amount of moisture, sun, soil conditions, and so on—and yet even then its germination cannot be accurately determined, nor can the duration of the event. And it is possible that the seed will produce no effect whatsoever—the sprout may not manifest even after the seed is sown in a seemingly perfect environment and tended with the greatest care. There are all kinds of variables in the analogy, which point to karma’s not being a one-to-one mechanical kind of operation. In terms of how karma is created mentally, the right environment has to be present for our thoughts, the karmic seed, to take root. The environment in this case is often our general mental attitude and beliefs. So when a fresh thought appears in one’s mind, what then happens to that thought depends on the mental condition that is present. Whether that thought will take root and flourish, or whether it has very little chance of survival, depends on this environment. Thus one of the reasons for the enduring use of the seed analogy is that it is unpredictable what will happen after a seed is planted. A seed may fail, or may produce only a very faint effect, an insipid sapling, or become something that takes off and grows wild like a weed. A lot of our thoughts, feelings, and so on, exist in this way, depending on the environment. A thought that comes into our head when our mood is low, for instance, or when we are depressed, will be contaminated by that mood. Even positive thoughts that crop up will manage to have a negative slant put on them, and this is how karma works. The karmic seed is planted, and then, depending on the conditions, the seed may remain dormant for an extended period of time, or it may germinate in a shorter period of time. Therefore the effect does not have to be a direct copy of the cause, so to speak. There is no necessary or direct correspondence between the original cause and the subsequent effect. There is variance involved, which might mean that there is invariance as well, in a particular instance.”

“Even though each individual, however he or she acts, necessarily bears the fruit of that deed, there will always be variance and elasticity built into the workings of karma. For instance, in the Samyutta Nikaya, the Buddha states that even individuals who commit terrible things while alive will not necessarily go to hell. This type of idea is often seen as a modern one, but it can be found in this sutra. The reasoning here is that of all the mentation done in our life, of paramount significance is what we think about at the time of our death. What is addressed here is the quality and depth of our sincerity as we “take stock” of our life: reflecting and reviewing our past, regretting certain things, wishing we could have done better here and there, and so forth. Even though there is nothing to be
done at this stage, it is important to reflect on this matter. These are just examples of the
types of words and thoughts we might use, of course. A Buddhist might reflect on
appreciating the Buddha and his teachings and the precious few opportunities he or she
had to practice meditation, or follow the spiritual path. Or we might reflect on a time we
were kind to somebody, helped a neighbor, or vice versa. Thinking these types of
thoughts, according to Buddhism, significantly mitigates the circumstances of one’s life.
Of course, the opposite type of attitude, that of bitterness, is very unfortunate. To think,
“Why am I dying? My friend is far worse than I ever was and is still alive and doing
well!” This sort of response would not help at all.”

“As we have seen so far, two of Buddha’s principal assertions on karma are that we are
personally responsible for our actions in life and that the consequences of these actions
are not fixed. Even if we were to do evil deeds, we are not necessarily condemned, be it
to hell, or to something similar. We can make reparations at the point of death. Also, hell
itself is not a permanent station in Buddhism; it too is temporary. Third, he strongly
emphasized the idea of character as a crucial ingredient of our karma. While alive, we
should think about what kind of person we are becoming. It is not just the action
performed that is important but also the character formation that goes with it. Of course,
character has to do with the accumulation of so-called karmic dispositions, a long-
standing part of Buddhist philosophy. What is not so explicitly stated though, but rather is
implied in the sutras, is that in trying to develop certain character traits, an individual
does in fact, as a consequence of this effort, become a different person. Once more this
relates back to the idea of anatta, or the selflessness of the agent who acts. In modern
parlance, we might say that it is not about trying to find out “who I am,” as if that were a
fixed thing, or “who am I really.” Rather the whole point of our existence is to learn to
see things in a different light to feel things in a different way. We are right back to the
five skandhas at this point—seeing and feeling things differently, taking cognizance of
things differently, and trying to develop different dispositions (which would follow from
the above anyway). This is how to develop the character required to really live fully in
this life, and it will also help in the next.”

“The type of character associated with a Buddhist life is often envisaged as austere, of
low means, and with sights fixed firmly on a future reward in a blessed next life. The
Buddha was not particularly encouraging toward that ideal but rather emphasized the
notion of character, which in essence centers on selflessness. If one has done terrible
things in this life, and comes to deeply regret them, then one becomes noble. If a person
of high standing, a so-called noble person, remains arrogant and conceited throughout his
or her life, indulging in associated vices, then that person is not noble. The notion of
selflessness means just that. This is how one builds character.”