Everything is Broken (23/08/15)

“There is a crack in everything, that’s how the light gets in” Leonard Cohen

I hear the sound of glass shattering in the kitchen as I work upstairs in my study. My wife laughs. It has been a long standing joke between us, the number of wine glasses that have slipped from her fingers following their natural course home towards the hard floor, and shattering into a thousand shards.

This tendency of forms to shatter and break is a universal principle – it is a return back to the wholeness and formlessness they always were. This illusion of form, of separate “things” is just the play of the cosmic dance and drama. Or, as Shunryu Suzuki expresses it, the world is out of balance. This out-of-balance world is the world of dukkha, impermanence, constant change. But as Suzuki points out, “the reason everything looks beautiful is because it is out of balance, but its background is always in perfect harmony.” The glass was really always broken. Its seeming solidity was the illusion. As Dylan sings, “Everything is broken”.

Brokenness is our True Nature. From the moment we are born, the process begins. Till finally the body breaks down for the last time and we return into the eternal compost heap to replenish and nurture the growth of new things which in turn will also break and return, break and return to their natural state of formlessness.
Brokenness is an expression of this out of balance world that we live in, and if we flow with this tendency of things to break, like my wife was able to do, after years of sculpting in clay and learning from brokenness a way of flowing with this tendency of things to break, we can live our lives with ease and joy. But, how difficult this is when we are attached to the things that break. My wife always jokes with me about my “Dalek” story. I told her how when I was 8 years old my sister bought me a toy Dalek for Christmas. I fell in love with my toy Dalek immediately, and took it round to a friend’s place the following day, to show him my new present. I let him play with it and before I knew it, the toy Daleks extended robotic arm, had been broken off. I went home with tears in my eyes, and although my mother helped me to glue it back on, it was never quite the same. How we are attached to the forms of things staying the same, as we cling and hold onto them in the hope that somehow they will be able to avoid the universal law of impermanence. However, to go with the flow of brokenness when it comes to our most intimate attachments is a very different story altogether. A few years later I would be walking home as a seventeen year old with a broken heart that seemed no one would be able to mend. As Sigmund Freud once said, “We are never so defenceless against suffering as when we love, never so forlornly unhappy as when we have lost our love object or its love”.
Hopefully, we can learn to flow lightly with a wine glass breaking, but if our heart is broken, what then? Maybe we can still flow, but by opening to the pain of the loss and allowing grief to carry us along its natural course.

So every time I hear the sound of breaking glass these days, it reminds me to awaken from the dream of solidity, and realise that we are already broken and there is nothing to fear in being broken. To realise our wholeness, we need first to accept our brokenness, including our inner brokenness. How do we practice with our inner brokenness? We hold each shattered fragment with tenderness, no matter how sharp and cutting it may feel, till the wound itself teaches us how to heal.