

RSF neurosurgeon is also a newly-accomplished polo player whose team won the coveted United States Polo Association's Rossmore Cup

By Arthur Lightbourn
Contributing writer

RSF resident Lokesh Tantuwaya, 38, may be the only physician in America who majored in Sanskrit and Buddhist literature as an undergraduate in college.

But, in fact, it was these very studies that not only profoundly shaped his outlook on life but inspired him to become a neurosurgeon.

In private practice in San Diego since 1999, Tantuwaya specializes in skull base neuro-interventional surgery, complex spine surgery and minimally invasive radio spine surgery.

He's also a student pilot and a newly-accomplished polo player whose team won the United States Polo Association's coveted Rossmore Cup this summer at the San Diego Polo Club in Del Mar.

We interviewed Tantuwaya at his home of two years in Rancho Santa Fe's Rancho Del Lago community which he shares with his wife of eight years, Kristen (nee Carpowich), their two young children, Maya, 6, and Devan, 3, and their toy poodle, Cupcake.

Tantuwaya was born in the Bhopal area of central India. His father is currently an aviation engineer with the U.S. Space and Missile Defense Command in Alabama. When Tantuwaya was 5, the family moved to suburban Chicago where he grew up with his younger brother, Vito, who is also a neurosurgeon in San Diego, and their sister, Amy, an international marketing analyst with Tiffany's in New York.

While a premed undergradu-

ate at Northwestern University in Evanston, Illinois, Tantuwaya became fascinated with Buddhist literature. Although he came from a Hindu family, he decided to study the ancient Buddhist literature in its original Sanskrit at New College, Oxford University.

"When I was there, I was studying an aspect of Buddhist philosophy that has to do with epistemology, an understanding of how our mind perceives our surroundings."

At the same time, one of his dons introduced him to the writings of Karl Pribram, a professor of neuropsychology at Stanford University, who also wrote on how the mind and brain function to help us perceive our surroundings.

"My don wanted me to see a modern translation of the same thoughts [as were expressed in the 2,000-year-old Buddhist literature]," Tantuwaya explained.

Another don referred him to the Richie Russell House in Oxford, a rehabilitation facility for the neurologically impaired. Tantuwaya served as a volunteer at the home for two years.

He saw how people's physical capacities influenced the way they perceived the world around them. "And that got me back again interested in medicine," he said.

For example, he said, one patient who had suffered a stroke, could not perceive the left side of his body.

"If you held his left arm in front of his face, and asked him, 'What is this?' he would say, 'That's your arm.' Although he

could see things, there was nothing wrong with his visual apparatus, he couldn't perceive it as part of his own body."

Another patient was a former rugby player who was paralyzed as a result of a spinal cord injury, but who "was a hell of a chess player" who transferred his former rugby aggressive play into aggressive play on the chess board against Tantuwaya. "If you played a more controlled, less aggressive game, in defending against him, he'd actually get mad, get really mad."

"I decided medicine was the right field for me," he concluded. "That there were enough avenues in medicine where I could still engage my interest in neuro-philosophy. I thought initially that it [medicine] was a confining sort of thing, just all math and science, but I realized it wasn't just that."

There was an obvious human element to it."

He doesn't necessarily consider himself a Buddhist, he said, "but if there's a philosophy that I lean towards that helps me understand the world, that would probably be the one."

What remains with him to this day from his exploration of Buddhism, he said, is an understanding of the impermanence of the world, the concept that life is change and until one can deal with that change, life is inherently full of suffering.

"And, two, is the absolute importance that we should place on human life... and human life is the ultimate form [in the reincarnation cycle] [and] because of consciousness and free will, you can choose to behave in such a way as to attain enlightenment."

When Tantuwaya completed his studies at Oxford, he returned to Chicago, picked up his B.A. degree from Northwestern and entered Northwestern's Medical School, earning his M.D. in 1992, followed by internships in surgery and neuropathology at UCSD and neurosurgery residencies at UCSD and Allegheny General Hospital in Pittsburgh, Pa.

He opened his private practice in San Diego in 1999.

The use of minimally invasive techniques, he said, is a major change going on in his field of specialization and in medicine in general.

"For example," he said, "in treating brain tumors we are using more radio surgery, focused beams of radiation to destroy tumors rather than making an incision in the scalp and an opening in the bone. For treating abnormalities in blood vessels, now, rather than opening the skull to get access to the blood vessels, we can treat them now from inside the blood vessels using catheters."

"There's a lot in spinal surgery that's been developing in terms of artificial disc implants."

Philosophy, he said, has been helpful to him in the way he approaches his patients "and how I try to grasp what's happening to



(Top photo) Dr. Lokesh Tantuwaya

Photo/Mile Sullivan

(Bottom photo, on the right) Dr. Tantuwaya during a recent polo match.

Photo/Courtesy of Dr. Lokesh Tantuwaya

them and their ability to understand the world."

In the end, he said, it probably makes him more of an "empathic" person.

Another passion in his life these days is polo.

"I can't explain why, but I always wanted to play polo ever since I was little," he revealed, "but I never ever really had the time or means to do it."

Then, three years ago, while driving to work past the polo field in Del Mar, "I saw a sign that read, 'Try Polo, First Lesson Free.' My wife jokes [that] it was probably the most expensive 'free' lesson ever."

When he started taking lessons, he admitted, he could barely swing the mallet, much less ride.

As with all beginners, they started him off practicing with a larger ball in the smaller playing area of an arena.

He now sponsors a team which consists of himself as an

amateur, another amateur, and two or three professionals. "Polo very much is what I call a true pro/am sport, a professional and amateur sport, usually one to two amateurs on a four-member team that hires two to three professionals and then you enter your team into tournaments."

His team, he said, is the Coastal Neurosurgery and Spine Polo (CNS Polo).

The day after his birthday in August, his team won the prestigious 20th Anniversary Rossmore Cup.

When he's not working, playing polo or tennis or skiing, you'll find Tantuwaya behind the controls of his four-place Diamond Star plane in which he is currently taking flying lessons to earn his pilot's license.

All of which fits in his philosophy that you have to make the most of every moment in life. Or as he says, "Carpe diem, seize the day."

Quick Facts

Name: Lokesh S. Tantuwaya, M.D.

Distinction: Board-certified neurosurgeon Lokesh Tantuwaya is also a newly-accomplished polo player whose team won the coveted United States Polo Association's Rossmore Cup at the San Diego Polo Club last August.

Resident of: Rancho Santa Fe

Born: Bhopal, India, 38 years ago. Grew up in suburban Chicago from age 5.

Education: B.A. in Sanskrit and Buddhist literature from Northwestern University and New College, Oxford University, 1988; M.D. from Northwestern University Medical School, 1992; surgical internship and interventional neuropathology, UCSD, 1992-97; neurosurgery residency, UCSD, 1993-95, and Allegheny General Hospital in Pittsburgh, Pa., 1995-99.

Family: Married almost eight years to nurse practitioner Kristen (nee Carpowich). They met at UCSD. They have two children: daughter, Maya, 6, and son, Devan, 3. And family pet toy poodle, Cupcake.

Activities: Polo, flying (working on his pilot's license), tennis, skiing.

Reading: Enjoys reading histories of scientific discoveries and the history of civilizations.

Recent reading: *The Human Story*, by James C. Davis.

Favorite Fiction Author: J.D. Salinger

Philosophy: "Every day should be cherished. Every moment that we have with family and friends should be cherished. And, as hard as it is sometimes, that every minute of my professional life is an opportunity for me to practice compassion. And life is so fleeting, we have to take advantage of every moment. A 'Carpe Diem' mentality."