

MULTI-PASS OPTICAL POWER AMPLIFIER

Technical Field

[0001] The present disclosure relates to a solid state laser amplifier used in high power applications.

Background Information

[0002] Fiber and semiconductor lasers and diode-pumped solid-state (DPSS) pulsed lasers with output power in the range of several Watts to tens of Watts are applied primarily in laser micromachining in the field of electronic device manufacturing. Micromachining applications require a high pulse repetition frequency (PRF), corresponding to laser pulse durations ranging from nanoseconds to picoseconds, and even femtoseconds. Typical laser output wavelengths range from infrared to ultraviolet. The performance of traditional solid-state lasers that rely on a simple master oscillator is falling behind the overall pace of laser system technology development, primarily because of limited pulse repetition rate and power scaling by a single oscillator.

[0003] As is well known to those skilled persons, progress in power scaling of a TEM₀₀ laser mode has been limited by the formation of aberrated thermal lenses within the active lasing medium. A thermal lens is mainly caused by a temperature gradient in a laser crystal and results in a distortion of the index of refraction of the crystal in response to non-uniform pump power. Peng, Xu, and Asundi, "Power Scaling of Diode-Pumped Nd:YVO₄ Lasers," *IEEE-Quantum Electronics*, Vol. 38, No. 9, 2002, demonstrate that maximum pump power varies inversely with doping concentration, and that the pump power increases to only 40 W for a 0.3% doped vanadate crystal using an 808 nm pump wavelength and a 0.8 mm diameter pump spot size. Fig. 1 is a graph showing maximum pump power as a function of doping concentration for an 808 nm-pumped laser. In addition to thermal lens formation, the maximum incident pump power is restricted by thermal fracture of the laser crystal.

To date, the highest output power achieved for a TEM₀₀ mode narrow bandwidth and linearly polarized beam generated by an end-pumped vanadate laser is less than 30 W, while a power level of about 100 W is desirable. Currently, nanosecond pulsed fiber lasers are limited to generating peak power exceeding 1 kW with a TEM₀₀ mode because of stimulated Brillouin scattering (SBS) and damage issues.

[0004] One way to meet the demand for a high power laser source is to use a laser power amplifier. An advantage of laser power amplifiers is that the final power output may be easily scaled to meet a specific requirement for each different application. Laser power amplifiers also may be paired with different seed laser sources to allow flexibility in seed laser design and manufacturing. However, maintaining a high quality beam and stable output in a laser power amplifier remains a technical challenge.

[0005] A typical laser power amplifier uses a single-pass configuration, meaning that the seed laser beam passes once through the gain medium. One example is presented in Maik Frede *et al.*, "Fundamental mode, single-frequency laser amplifier for gravitational wave detectors," *Optics Express*, Vol. 15, No. 2, 2007. A single-pass, four-stage amplifier described in the Maik Frede *et al.* paper and diagrammed in Fig. 2, extracted only 3 W from an amplifier with a 1 W seed laser and 45 W of pump power, which yields an optical-to-optical efficiency of 6.7%. Even state of the art single-pass power amplifiers typically exhibit a low extraction efficiency or a high (40%-60%) optical conversion rate from a diode laser pumping light source. However, a typical diode end-pumped vanadate laser oscillator has 40% - 60% optical-to-optical conversion efficiency.

[0006] A method of improving the energy extraction efficiency entails guiding the laser beam back through the gain material multiple times, thereby compounding the gain until the desired power amplification is achieved. A typical multi-pass amplifier produces much more gain than does a single-pass amplifier. Suitable applications for a multi-pass power amplifier include semiconductor device link processing (IR, green and UV tailored pulse), laser micromachining (picosecond pulse amplification), and via drilling (high-power IR, green, and UV laser). U.S. Patent No. 5,546,222, of Plaessmann *et al.* describes several embodiments of a multi-pass light amplifier, four of which embodiments are presented in Fig. 3. The Plaessmann *et al.* patent demonstrates, using a Nd:YLF twelve-pass amplifier at 10 kHz, that 2.5 μ J of energy was amplified to 45 μ J with 1.6 W of pump energy focused in the amplifier gain

medium. As is typical for traditional multi-pass configurations, a large gain, in this case, twenty-fold, is achieved at the expense of beam quality.

[0007] A number of patents describe multi-pass amplifiers, but all of them share the problem of laser beam displacement within the gain medium, which displacement has two inherent, serious drawbacks. The first is that the pumped region must be sufficiently large to contain all the laser modes in different passes; otherwise, the result is low efficiency mode matching between the laser and the pump. Second, a non-uniform pump distribution in the gain medium, such as the so-called “super Gaussian” mode, causes distortion in laser beam power distribution with each pass, ultimately resulting in degradation of laser beam quality. Therefore, similar to a laser cavity with thermal lensing, compensation optics are needed to optimize laser output with higher beam quality. In addition, these multi-pass amplifiers generally require a fairly complicated optical setup, possibly even specially shaped optical elements. More important, multi-pass laser beams normally share the same two or three optical elements, making it fairly difficult to control the influence of thermal lensing. This especially causes problems in high-power applications because each pass modifies the laser beam parameters.

[0008] U.S. Patent No. 5,268,787 of McIntyre describes a method and an apparatus for multi-pass laser amplifiers but does not address thermal depolarization issues and unwanted lasing in the amplifier. It also fails to address how the gain material, the key component of a laser power amplifier, affects performance of the laser amplifier when pumped by a high power light source. In the case of YAG solid state lasers, high power pumping induces significant thermal birefringence, causing orthogonal polarization directions to exhibit different gain in such a setup. Thermally induced birefringence in YAG rods under strong optical pumping has been observed, reported, and analyzed in numerous articles. Q. Lu et al., “A novel approach for compensation of birefringence in cylindrical Nd:YAG rods,” *Optical Quantum Electronics*, Vol. 28, pp. 57-69, 1996, showed that 25% of optical power was lost through laser beam depolarization caused by thermal birefringence. Q. Lu et al. report that a carefully designed compensation method reduced the power loss to just 5%. Thus, it would seem that controlling and compensating for thermal birefringence in laser amplifiers is necessary and important.

[0009] U.S. Patent No. 6,384,966 of Dymott addresses this power loss problem by rearranging optical components of a previous laser amplifier design to

compensate for thermal birefringence, while passing the laser beam multiple times through the gain medium. For example, in the Dymott patent, a quarter-wave plate is placed between the gain medium and a first reflecting mirror. The Dymott patent specifies that the quarter-wave plate be oriented such that linearly polarized beam emerging from a Faraday rotator pass through the quarter-wave plate without undergoing any phase retardation. However, because of thermally induced birefringence, light passing once through the gain material generally becomes elliptically polarized. Upon two passes through the quarter-wave plate, the rotation direction of the elliptical polarization is reversed, and the thermally induced birefringence in the gain material is compensated.

[0010] The Dymott patent describes use of additional optical components in the design of the optical power amplifier to address other issues. For example, a 45° polarization rotator, or “Faraday rotator,” is needed in this amplifier to separate amplified light from incident seed light. But the Faraday rotators (reference numerals 2, 4, 23, and 73 in Figs. 1-5 of the Dymott patent) are placed in a region where the laser beam spot size is difficult to control, potentially causing damage in the case of high-average-power and high-peak-power applications. Another example is the placement of a pair of concave and convex mirrors on either side of each laser crystal to construct an unstable cavity to eliminate undesired lasing action.

[0011] In addition, the strong thermal lens in high-power applications acts as a major lens in the amplifier, contributing to instability of the cavity. As is well-known, the degree of thermal lensing varies with PRF, cooling temperature, and pump power. Multi-pass power amplifiers described in the Dymott patent are fabricated from Nd:YAG, an isotropic gain medium that is subject to depolarization effects. The Dymott patent points out that gain materials may include Nd:YAG, Nd:YVO₄, Nd:YLF, or Ti:sapphire to compensate for thermally induced birefringence, by design.

Summary of the Disclosure

[0012] The Dymott patent fails to recognize that anisotropic gain materials, including Nd:YVO₄ and Nd:YLF, exhibit an intrinsic benefit in that they themselves are naturally birefringent, so adding a component to compensate for thermal birefringence is unnecessary in preferred embodiments disclosed. For example, if a seed laser beam polarized along the c-axis of a Nd:YVO₄ crystal passes through an

Nd:YVO₄ amplifier crystal, the effect of depolarization on the incident linearly polarized light is negligible. Adding an extra component in a high power laser amplifier increases the cost and the risk of optical damage, while it deteriorates the quality of the amplified beam. Moreover, configurations shown in the Dymott patent drawings cannot benefit from anisotropic gain materials such as Nd:YLF because the emission wavelengths are not the same in all directions. Emission along the a-axis is at 1047 nm, whereas emission along the c-axis is at 1053 nm. Double-pass and quadruple-pass amplifiers have, therefore, effective amplification functions equal to those of single-pass and double-pass amplifiers, respectively.

[0013] None of the above-mentioned patents pertaining to laser power amplifiers explores the use of anisotropic laser gain media. In the past few decades, anisotropic crystals such as Nd:YVO₄, Nd:YLF, and Nd:GdVO₄ have become preferred gain materials for many laser applications because they have high emission cross sections and, therefore, a high rate of stimulated emission. These materials are also capable of generating a linearly polarized beam without introducing separate polarization compensation. In addition, the anisotropic gain medium can be implemented with suitable optics to correct thermal lensing and reduce thermal lens effects, without ancillary compensation, to ensure there is less degradation of laser modes when passing through the gain medium.

[0014] With these advantages, preferred embodiments of an optical power amplifier that incorporates an anisotropic gain medium can achieve power scaling with multiple passes while also maintaining good mode matching between the laser and the pump during each pass. The present disclosure emphasizes efficiency of the amplifier and quality of the amplified beam in properly matching a pumping light mode and a seed laser mode. Preferred embodiments are capable of maintaining a beam with substantially zero displacement, which leads to greater efficiency, and provide an economical, reliable solution that achieves high power TEM₀₀ output to meet the demands of micromachining, via drilling, and harmonic conversion applications.

[0015] When constructing a laser amplifier including Nd:YVO₄, or other anisotropic gain material, neither compensating for thermal birefringence nor undesired lasing is a main concern, as indicated by the placement and configuration of optical components in multiple pass amplifiers. Data from amplifier experiments involving anisotropic laser gain media further support this conclusion. Data for

Nd:YVO₄ suggest that a strong seed laser beam impinging upon anisotropic Nd:YVO₄ may be amplified along the a-axis, but at a magnitude of about 3-4 times less than that along the c-axis.

[0016] Additional aspects and advantages will be apparent from the following detailed description of preferred embodiments, which proceeds with reference to the accompanying drawings.

Brief Description of the Drawings

[0017] Fig. 1 is a graph comparing calculated and measured values of maximum pump power as a function of doping concentration for a prior art vanadate laser pumped at 808 nm.

[0018] Fig. 2 is a diagram of a prior art four-stage amplifier design described by Frede et al.

[0019] Fig. 3 is a collection of ray diagrams of four embodiments of a prior art multi-pass amplifier design described by Plaessmann et al.

[0020] Figs. 4A, 4B, and 4C are implementations of, respectively, double-, triple-, and quadruple-pass amplifiers. Fig. 4A-1 illustrates the law of reflection in relation to a laser beam incident on and reflected by a curved reflective surface.

[0021] Figs. 5A, 5B, 5C, and 5D are plots of simulated seed power and output power as a function of time for the c-axis and a-axis of a gain medium of a single-pass amplifier configuration, one double-pass a-c configuration, and one c-a-a-c quadruple-pass configuration, respectively, with seed laser parameters set at 100 kHz PRF, 20 ns pulse width (PW), and 3 W absorbed pump power.

[0022] Figs. 6A and 6B are plots of measured seed power and output power levels achieved using an experimental single-pass amplifier with pump power applied.

[0023] Fig. 7 is a plot of simulated output power (increase) as a function of pump power for a single-pass amplifier and a quadruple-pass amplifier with parameters equal to those used in Fig. 6.

[0024] Figs. 8A, 8B, 8C, and 8D are plots of simulated power output as a function of time after each successive pass of a seed laser beam through a quadruple-pass power amplifier configuration, with seed laser parameters set at 20 W power, a 40 ns pulse width, and 50 W measured total absorbed pump power.

[0025] Fig. 9 is a plot of measured power amplification of a 100 kHz seed laser, as indicated by output power as a function of seed power along the c- and a-axes of a vanadate crystal pumped with 30 W at a wavelength of 808 nm.

[0026] Fig. 10 is a diagram of a preferred embodiment in a-a or c-c double-pass power amplifier configuration.

[0027] Fig. 11 is a diagram of a preferred embodiment in a-a-c-c or c-c-a-a quadruple-pass power amplifier configuration.

[0028] Fig. 12 is a diagram of a preferred embodiment in c-c-c-a or a-a-a-c quadruple-pass power amplifier configuration.

[0029] Fig. 13 is a diagram of a preferred embodiment in c-c-c-c-a-a and a-a-a-a-c-c six-pass power amplifier configuration.

Detailed Description of Preferred Embodiments

[0030] Materials suitable for general use as anisotropic gain media in multi-pass configurations are solid state media such as, but not limited to, rare-earth ion-doped crystalline solid state material including Nd:YVO₄, Nd:YLF, Nd:GdVO₄, Tm:YLF, Tm:YVO₄, Ho:Tm:YLF, Ho:Tm:YVO₄, Ho:Tm:GdVO₄, Yb:YLF, Yb:YVO₄, Yb:GdVO₄, Cr:LiSAF, Cr:LiCAF, Ti:Sapphire; alexandrite; other Nd-doped materials; and other materials comprising YLF, YVO₄, and GdVO₄ crystal hosts. Certain semiconductors may also be used as gain media, and optical or electrical pumping may also be employed. Each of the materials listed above has the ability to support light beam amplification at one or more wavelengths. Various pump laser wavelengths may be chosen to improve the conversion efficiency of a gain medium, for example, Nd:YVO₄ at pump wavelengths of 808 nm, 819 nm, 880 nm, 888 nm, and 914.5 nm. The laser may be either end pumped or side pumped. A seed laser suitable for solid-state amplifiers, such as a fiber laser, laser diode, solid-state laser, mode lock laser, or single laser mode (SLM) laser can be a source of a multi-pass amplifier.

[0031] Figs. 4A, 4B, and 4C show embodiments of a multi-pass optical amplifier in, respectively, double-pass, triple-pass, and quadruple-pass configurations. Each of these embodiments allows for multiple passes of a seed laser beam **100** along a common beam path **101** through an anisotropic gain medium **102** with substantially zero angular beam displacement **104** (Fig. 4A-1) from beam path **101** during each pass. In contrast to the prior art configurations that are shown in Fig. 3 and entail non-specular reflection, in each of the multi-pass configurations of Figs. 4A, 4B, and 4C, seed laser beam **100**, when incident on a curvilinear HR mirror **106**, is

perpendicular to a concave surface **107** of the mirror. With reference to Fig. 4A-1, according to the law of reflection, in general, the angle of incidence **108** of an incident beam **110**, measured with respect to a surface normal **112**, equals the angle of reflection **114** of a reflected beam **116**. The angle between reflected beam **116** and incident beam **110** defines angular beam displacement **104**. For normal incidence, in which angle of incidence **108** is 0° , reflected beam **116** re-traces beam path **101** of incident beam **110**, resulting in substantially zero angular beam displacement **104**, or equivalently resulting in alignment between incident and reflected beams. The alignment of beams **110** and **116** facilitates control of beam propagation in gain medium **102** and ensures a good mode match between the lasing mode and the pump mode.

[0032] The double-, triple-, and quadruple-pass configurations of Figs. 4A, 4B, and 4C, respectively, and employing anisotropic gain medium **102** illustrate a substantially zero angular beam displacement **104** of beam path **101** of seed laser beam **100** with respect to an optic axis **118**. That is, seed laser beam **100** travels and retraces its path in opposite directions generally along optic axis **118** and exits the optical amplifier system as an output laser beam **119a**, **119b**, or **119c** in a direction perpendicular to optic axis **118**. In each configuration, seed laser beam **100** first passes through a Faraday isolator **120** and is incident on a polarizing beam splitter **122** (Figs. 4A and 4C) or **133** (Fig. 4B) that either allows seed laser beam **100** to pass through polarizing beam splitter **122** or **133** or deflects seed laser beam **100** by 90° , according to the polarization direction of the beam and the orientation of the optics within the beam splitter. Various optical components positioned around gain medium **102** direct laser beam **100** through gain medium **102** for the requisite number of consecutive passes before output laser beam **119a**, **119b**, or **119c** exits the optical amplifier system.

[0033] A double-pass configuration **124** shown in Fig. 4A includes a quarter-wave plate **126** placed between gain medium **102** and curvilinear HR mirror **106**. Seed laser beam **100** emerging from Faraday isolator **120** first passes through polarizing beam splitter **122**, through gain medium **102**, and then through quarter-wave plate **126**. Reflecting from curvilinear HR mirror **106**, now-amplified laser beam **100** passes back through quarter-wave plate **126**. Quarter-wave plate **126** has an optical axis oriented at an angle of 45° relative to the polarization direction of linearly polarized light emerging from gain medium **102**. The purpose of quarter-wave plate

126 is to rotate the polarization direction of the amplified seed laser beam by a total of 90° for the two passes. The rotated linearly polarized light then passes through gain medium **102** a second time and is separated by polarizing beam splitter **122** before exiting the optical system as output laser beam **119a**. Double-pass configuration **124** is not implemented with a Faraday rotator and, therefore, differs from prior art designs that are intended to compensate for thermally induced birefringence. Such compensation is unnecessary in double-pass configuration **124** because it is implemented with anisotropic gain medium **102**.

[0034] A triple-pass configuration **130** shown in Fig. 4B includes a half-waveplate **132** as a substitute for quarter-wave plate **126** used in double-pass configuration **124**; a polarizing beam splitter **133** as a substitute for polarizing beam splitter **122**; and as added components a second curvilinear HR mirror **134**, a second polarizing beam splitter **136**, and a Faraday rotator **138**. Seed laser beam **100** emerging from Faraday isolator **120** first passes through polarizing beam splitter **133** and gain medium **102**. Laser beam **100** then passes through Faraday rotator **138**, half-wave plate **132**, and second polarizing beam splitter **136**, reflects from curvilinear HR mirror **106**, and passes back through each optical component of the system until laser beam **100** encounters first polarizing beam splitter **133**, which deflects laser beam **100** by 90° so that it reflects off curvilinear HR mirror **134**. Laser beam **100** then returns to first polarizing beam splitter **133**, which reflects laser beam **100** back to gain medium **102** and then passes through Faraday rotator **138** and half-wave plate **132** a third time. Laser beam **100** is then deflected 90° by second polarizing beam splitter **136** and exits as output laser beam **119b**.

[0035] A quadruple-pass configuration **140** shown in Fig. 4C includes components of triple-pass configuration **130**, rearranged, with the addition of quarter-wave plate **126**. Seed laser beam **100** emerging from Faraday isolator **120** first passes through polarizing beam splitter **122**, Faraday rotator **138**, and half-wave plate **132**. After propagating through polarizing beam splitter **133**, laser beam **100** travels back and forth between curvilinear HR mirrors **106** and **134** and thereby passes four times through gain medium **102** and quarter-wave plate **126**. After the fourth pass through gain medium **102**, laser beam **100** passes in reverse direction through polarizing beam splitter **133**, through half-wave plate **132** and Faraday rotator **138**, and toward polarizing beam splitter **122**, and exits as output laser beam **119c**.

[0036] A good mode match between seed laser and pump beams beneficially affords the possibility of achieving a high quality beam with highly efficient extraction. In addition, gain medium **102** can be configured in an end-pumping or in a side-pumping architecture. In the case of single laser mode (SLM) operation, curvilinear HR mirrors **106** and **134** can be replaced by phase conjugate cells to eliminate the need for lenses, because phase conjugation eliminates distortions in the amplifier. Furthermore, there is no undesired lasing action in the amplifier disclosed. Instead, curvilinear HR mirrors **106** and **134** are designed to achieve good mode matching and to improve amplified beam quality.

[0037] A preferred embodiment of the multi-pass configuration resembles a diode-pumped vanadate (Nd:YVO₄) power amplifier. Although Nd:YVO₄ has anisotropic gain, it can still be used for this multi-pass scheme because Nd:YVO₄ crystals are capable of lasing when the polarization direction of laser beam **100** is aligned with either the a-axis or the c-axis. When the polarization direction of laser beam **100** is aligned with the c-axis, the gain is about three times greater than the gain when the polarization direction of laser beam **100** is aligned with the a-axis. (This is the reason why the prior art primarily uses the c-axis for lasing.) The laser-related parameters of Nd:YVO₄ along the a- and c-axes are as follows, for 1% Nd doping concentration:

	Emission cross section, $\times 10^{-19} \text{ cm}^2$	Fluorescence lifetime, μs
c-axis	25	90
a-axis	7	90

[0038] A numerical model was designed and developed to simulate amplification in a Nd:YVO₄ crystal along its a- and c-axes. Simulation results comparing amplification along the c- and a-axes are shown in Figs. 5A and 5B, respectively, for a single-pass amplifier. Both the simulations and an experiment (presented below) include the following common parameter settings: 100 kHz PRF, 20 ns PW, and 3 W absorbed pump power. Peak power levels are in the kW range while average power values are on the order of 1 W - 10 W. Fig. 5A shows a curve **150c** that represents the time evolution of single-pass c-axis power output and a curve **152** that represents seed laser power over a 50 ns time interval **154**. Comparison of curves **150c** and **152** reveals a single-pass c-axis peak power output **156** of 1.4 kW corresponding to a peak seed laser power **158** of 1.1 kW. The average power over a

full 100 kHz cycle (equal to 10 μ s or 10,000 ns) is calculated as 2.86 W and represents the single-pass c-axis energy emitted within the very short 50 ns time interval **154**. Fig. 5B shows a curve **150a** representing the corresponding time evolution of single-pass a-axis power output and curve **152** over the 50 ns time interval **154**. Comparison of curves **150a** and **150c** reveals a peak single-pass a-axis power output **162** of 1.3 kW and average single-pass a-axis power output of 2.6 W. Corresponding extraction efficiencies show that amplification in the c-direction exceeds that in the a-direction by about a factor of three.

[0039] The progression from single-pass, to double-pass, and to quadruple-pass power amplifiers entails sequentially higher extraction efficiencies and corresponding c-axis output powers for the same values of pump power and seed power.

Extrapolating from the 12.4% single-pass extraction efficiency along the c-axis corresponding to single-pass amplifier results in Fig. 5A, the simulation predicts an a-c double-pass amplifier **124** to have 15.5% extraction efficiency and 3.0 W average output power (Fig. 5C) corresponding to 1.45 kW peak output power **164**, and a c-a-a-c quadruple-pass amplifier **140** to have 23.0% extraction efficiency and 3.2 W average output power corresponding to 1.6 kW peak output power **165** (Fig. 5D).

[0040] Simulation results for the single-pass amplifier agree well with experimental results of single-pass amplification along the c-axis shown in Fig. 6A and Fig. 6B. Figs. 6A and 6B display the outcome of a power amplifier experiment conducted using a 2.5 W average power seed laser at 1064 nm pulsed at 100 kHz PRF with a 20 ns PW to calibrate the numerical model. The laser beam spot size was 250 μ m, and the pump beam spot size at the beam waist was 280 μ m. The 808 nm pump source was a fiber-coupled laser diode with 100 μ m diameter and a numerical aperture (NA) of 0.22. The experiment resulted in absorption of 3 W of pump power at 808 nm by a Nd:YVO₄ crystal. Using a single-pass amplifier configuration based on this power amplifier experiment, 2.8 W average output power was produced with the laser polarization direction aligned with the c-axis, and 2.6 W average output power was produced with the laser polarization direction aligned with the a-axis. A 3 W average output power can be expected from a double-pass configuration, based on the disclosed power amplifier model.

[0041] Using a 0.7 W seed laser pulsed at 100 kHz, with a 20 ns PW, a laser beam spot diameter of 350 μ m and a pump beam spot diameter of 380 μ m, a simulation was run for both a single-pass amplifier and a quadruple-pass amplifier,

showing output power and gain as a function of pump power, respectively. Results presented in Fig. 7 indicate a roughly linear relationship **166** for both configurations, with a much steeper increase **168** with pump power for the case of the quadruple-pass amplifier.

[0042] The multi-pass power amplifier designs implemented in the embodiments of Figs. 4A, 4B, and 4C are also suitable for high-power applications on the order of tens of Watts. A seed laser beam **100** with 20 W average power at 100 kHz PRF and a 40 ns PW passes through the gain medium, which absorbs a total of 50 W of pump power at a 808 nm pump wavelength. The laser beam spot size is 550 μm , and the pump beam spot size is 580 μm . Simulation results **170** for the high-power application are given in Figs. 8A, 8B, 8C, and 8D. The extraction efficiency of a single-pass configuration along the c-axis is 22.9%, producing 31.4 W average power output, increasing to 44.4% efficiency using a c-a-a-c quadruple-pass amplifier like configuration **140**, with average output power of 42.2 W. The high-power amplifier of Figs. 8A, 8B, 8C, and 8D produces peak power levels **176a**, **176b**, **176c**, and **176d** that are approximately 2-3 times greater than the seed laser peak power **178** (about 7 kW - 10 kW produced from about 4.5 kW).

[0043] Output power as a function of seed power is shown in Fig. 9, in which a distinction between a-axis amplification **182** and c-axis amplification **183** is apparent. As seed laser power **152** increases, power output **160** increases dramatically, especially in the case of a quadruple-pass configuration, and especially when seed laser beam **100** is directed along the c-axis of the vanadate crystal.

[0044] When it is necessary to compensate for thermally induced birefringence, such as in prior art systems, a multi-pass amplifier configuration is limited to an even number of passes, in which the polarization states of the light beam traveling back and forth through the gain medium must be orthogonal. Consequently, on the first pass, if the beam is polarized along the c-axis, it must be polarized along the a-axis on the second pass. Only a-c or c-a configurations would be allowed for a double-pass amplifier, and only a-c-c-a or c-a-a-c configurations would be allowed for a quadruple-pass amplifier. However, with an anisotropic medium such as vanadate, ancillary compensation for thermally induced birefringence is not needed, allowing for more freedom in the amplifier design.

[0045] Figs. 10, 11, 12, and 13 are diagrams of alternative embodiments of multi-pass amplifiers shown in Figs. 4A, 4B, and 4C and implemented with anisotropic

gain media, thus allowing for variation in the order of passes along the c-axis and a-axis. Optical components in these embodiments are arranged so as to take advantage of the properties of the anisotropic gain media. Specifically, in the first couple of passes, the seed laser beam polarization direction is aligned to the crystal axis of the vanadate gain material yielding the greatest emission cross section (c-axis), before it is aligned to the a-axis. Additional double-pass configurations such as a-a or c-c become possible (Fig. 10), as well as quadruple-pass configurations such as a-a-c-c or c-c-a-a (Fig. 11). Fig. 10 shows a double-pass configuration similar to that shown in Fig. 4A, except that a Faraday rotator **138** and a half-wave plate **132** within a first dashed line box **184a** have been added upstream of gain medium **102**, and quarter-wave plate **126** next to curvilinear HR mirror **106** in Fig. 4A has been removed. The same two modifications were made to the quadruple-pass configuration shown in Fig. 4C to form the configuration in Fig. 11.

[0046] The quadruple-pass configuration shown in Fig. 12 is based on the double-pass configuration in Fig. 10, with added optical components shown in a second dashed line box **184b**. A second gain medium **185** is inserted between polarizing beam splitter **122** and a second curvilinear HR mirror **134**, along with a second quarter-wave plate **186**. The beam therefore passes twice through each of gain medium **102** and gain medium **185**, for a total of four passes.

[0047] Fig. 13 represents a configuration for an even more efficient, six-pass amplifier, which is the same as the quadruple-pass configuration of Fig. 12 that includes second gain medium **185**, except for an additional block of three optical components shown enclosed in a third dashed line box **188**. The additional optical components include a second polarizing beam splitter **122**, a second Faraday rotator **190**, and a second half-wave plate **192** inserted in the beam path just after Faraday isolator **120**, with second quarter-wave plate **186** removed.

[0048] It will be obvious to those having skill in the art that many changes may be made to the details of the above-described embodiments without departing from the underlying principles of the invention. The scope of the present invention should, therefore, be determined only by the following claims.

Claims

1. A method of configuring a multi-pass optical power amplifier to perform polarization-dependent amplification of laser energy to produce laser output with reduced beam distortion, comprising:

providing an anisotropic gain medium having first and second orthogonally related gain axes characterized by inherent differential axial gain and associated inherent differential thermal birefringence;

guiding a polarized seed laser beam for multiple passes through the anisotropic gain medium, the seed laser beam for each of the multiple passes propagating along a common beam path and undergoing substantially no displacement from the common beam path, and the seed laser beam having a polarization direction transverse to the common beam path; and

coordinating the alignment of the polarization directions of the polarized seed laser beam with the first and second gain axes of the gain medium to establish a number of the multiple passes through the gain medium and produce a laser output beam;

whereby the seed laser beam undergoing substantially no displacement from the beam path reduces laser output beam distortion and the inherent differential thermal birefringence enhances laser output energy extraction efficiency.

2. The method of claim 1, in which the anisotropic gain medium comprises a rare-earth ion-doped crystalline solid state material.

3. The method of claim 2, in which the rare-earth ion-doped crystalline solid state material includes Nd:YVO₄, Nd:YLF, Nd:GdVO₄, Tm:YLF, Tm:YVO₄, Ho:Tm:YLF, Ho:Tm:YVO₄, Ho:Tm:GdVO₄, Yb:YLF, Yb:YVO₄, or Yb:GdVO₄.

4. The method of claim 1, in which the anisotropic gain medium comprises Cr:LiSAF, Cr:LiCAF, Ti:Sapphire, or alexandrite.

5. The method of claim 1, in which the anisotropic gain medium is a crystalline solid state material in the shape of a cylindrical rod of circular cross section.

6. The method of claim 1, in which the anisotropic gain medium is a crystalline solid state material in the shape of a cylindrical rod of polygonal cross section.

7. The method of claim 6, in which the polygonal cross section of the cylindrical rod is square.

8. The method of claim 6, in which the polygonal cross section of the cylindrical rod is hexagonal.

9. The method of claim 1, in which the coordinating the alignment of the polarization directions of the polarized seed laser beam includes passing the polarized seed laser beam multiple times through a beam splitter and causing exit of the laser output beam from the beam splitter.