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Observation of transverse modes in a microchip laser with combined gain and index guiding

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The transverse-mode profiles for a plano–concave Nd:YVO₄ microchip laser near threshold are examined, both experimentally and theoretically, and in both the near and the far field. We study in particular the transition from dominant quadratic index guiding to dominant gain guiding. The modal profiles change dramatically in this transition, and the agreement between experiment and the theoretical model is excellent. © 2001 Optical Society of America

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1. INTRODUCTION

Microchip lasers¹ are interesting devices from both a practical² and a fundamental³,⁴ point of view. They typically consist of a thin (approximately millimeter) rare-earth-doped laser crystal; the usual dopant is Nd³⁺. The crystal has a dielectric coating on both faces to form a complete plane parallel cavity, longitudinally pumped by a diode laser. Single-frequency operation is readily obtained in these lasers, and the monolithic cavity is beneficial to stable operation. They require little material, and their relatively simple design makes them good candidates for mass fabrication.

One of the aspects of these lasers that has received considerable attention is their transverse mode structure.⁵–¹³ Because of the planar nature of the cavity, the transverse eigenmodes are determined not by mirror curvatures but rather by weaker, residual guiding effects such as gain guiding or thermal guiding. Thus the usual Laguerre– or Hermite–Gaussian transverse modes are not necessarily established in microchip lasers. In quasi-three-level (i.e., not Nd³⁺ based) lasers the inherent absorption in the unpumped regions of the laser crystal leads to a soft transverse gain aperture that typically dominates the guiding,⁷ simplifying the description. In contrast, in four-level lasers (based on Nd³⁺) the unpumped region can have very low absorption, and the situation is not so clear cut. In this case both thermal guiding⁸ and gain guiding⁹ have been observed as dominant mechanisms, but the transition region between the two has received very little attention so far.

An additional motivation to study the guiding mechanism is as follows. Lasers based on rare-earth-doped microchip crystals have already been used for a number of fundamental quantum-noise studies.³,⁴,¹⁴ Of particular interest for so-called excess quantum noise¹⁴–¹⁷ is the combination of conservative (e.g., thermal guiding, index guiding, or gain-related index guiding) and dissipative (e.g., aperture guiding, gain guiding) guiding mechanisms, because it is this combination that generally leads to highly nonorthogonal eigenmodes and hence to large excess quantum-noise factors.¹⁵–¹⁷

Motivated by these considerations, some of us recently investigated the theory of such a combination of guiding mechanisms¹³ and found a highly varied transverse mode structure. Specifically, the combination of a quadratic index guide and a Gaussian gain guide was studied for a four-level laser system, with the waist size of the Gaussian gain being considerably smaller than the lasing-mode waist size that would result from the index guide alone. Although it may seem that this particular combination is one of many cases that could be studied, it is in fact a very common case for microchip lasers: The gain in these lasers is provided by a longitudinal pump whose transverse profile may usually be approximated as being Gaussian. Similarly, the index guide in microchip lasers is usually quadratic, as we now discuss in some more detail.

There are a number of possible origins for index guiding in microchip lasers, e.g., the use of concave mirrors, thermal lensing (temperature-induced change in refractive index), and thermal curvature of the crystal surface. When concave mirrors are used and the cavity is thin, the guiding provided by the mirrors can be treated as an effective quadratic index guide.¹³ The thermal guiding mechanisms are typically much weaker, and these are often neglected compared with the gain-related guiding.⁸,¹¹ When thermal effects are considered, approxi-
mating the resulting weak index guide to the lowest non-
vanishing order (i.e., as a quadratic guide) seems reasona-
ble.5,12

Here we report the experimental observation of the rich
mode structure predicted previously.13 The experiment
employs an external concave mirror and a titanium-
sapphire pump beam as well-defined sources of the qua-
dratic index guide and the Gaussian gain guide, respec-
tively. The dependence on cavity detuning is studied,
and both near-field and far-field mode profiles are shown.
The observed transverse modes are significantly different
from the usual Laguerre–Gaussian modes and exhibit
several noteworthy features, such as conical emission10
and the appearance of several rings in the far field in the
absence of ring structure in the near field. A detailed
comparison with an extended version of our previous the-
oretical model13 is given. The theoretical model has been
compared with experiment over the full range of mode struc-
tures when the laser is operated close to threshold.

The outline of this paper is as follows. In Section 2 we
present the theoretical model. Our previous model13 is
summarized and extended to include the effects of fre-
quency detuning, in particular the dispersion of the in-
verted gain medium (gain-related index guiding). The
latter will turn out to be highly relevant for a proper com-
parison with the experiments. The detuned operation is
in fact quite natural for thin microchip lasers, and the
consequences thereof for the guiding have been pointed
out previously.6,10–12 We illustrate the importance of the
relative strength of the gain-related guiding and index
guiding and emphasize the role of the mirror reflectivity
in determining this relative strength. Next, in Section 3,
we discuss the experimental setup and the precise experi-
mental cavity configuration. The transverse mode pro-
files and their respective modal gains as obtained experi-
mentally and theoretically are presented and compared in
Section 4. This is followed by a discussion of the results
in Section 5. Finally, we summarize and conclude in Sec-
ction 6.

2. THEORETICAL MODEL

The model we use is based on the configuration schemati-
cally depicted in Fig. 1(a). We consider a cavity of length
L, filled with a medium with a base refractive index n0,
having a parabolic index guide Δng and a Gaussian gain
guide represented by a (complex-valued) refractive-index
change Δng. The key simplification made here is that the
gain is modeled as simple linear amplification (i.e.,
Δn is independent of intensity). Only the transverse
spatial dependence of the gain is taken into account,
while saturation and temporal dynamics of the gain me-
dium (including spatial and temporal hole burning) are
neglected. Thus the model is aimed at a laser operating
close to threshold. The condition for lasing will be im-
posed by requiring that the lowest-loss transverse eigen-
mode has zero net loss after a full round trip. A discus-
sion of the above approximations, and how they apply to
our experimental setup, is provided in Section 5.

Because of the approximation of linear gain, we do not
consider longitudinal spatial hole burning, and the
standing-wave cavity of length L in Fig. 1(a) can be un-
folded and treated as a waveguide of length 2L, in which
the optical wave travels in a single direction only. Our
starting point is now the paraxial wave equation, which
may be written in cylindrical coordinates r = (r, φ, z) as

$$\nabla_r^2 u + 2k_z^2 \left( \frac{\Delta \omega}{\omega_\text{at}} + \frac{\Delta n}{n_0} \right) u = -2i k_z \frac{\partial u}{\partial z}, \tag{1}$$

where

$$\nabla_r^2 = \frac{\partial^2}{\partial r^2} + \frac{1}{r} \frac{\partial}{\partial r} + \frac{1}{r^2} \frac{\partial^2}{\partial \phi^2} \tag{2}$$

is the usual transverse Laplacian. Here u(r) is the
(slowly varying) amplitude of the electric field component

Fig. 1. (a) Cavity configuration considered in the theoretical model: a longitudinally homogeneous system of length L, with a trans-
verse quadratic index guide Δng and a Gaussian gain guide Δng. The arrows in this figure indicate the output of the microchip laser
through the end mirror with reflectivity Rm. Arrangements (b) and (c) are equivalent configurations as long as the longitudinal varia-
tion of the mode profile may be neglected. (b) Monolithic cavity with a gain guide Δng and a curved surface. (c) Cavity configuration
used in the experiments: a crystal gain medium with a transverse Gaussian gain profile and a separate concave mirror, with radius of
curvature Rc and reflectivity Rm.
of the electromagnetic field, a monochromatic wave at frequency \( \omega \) and wave vector close to \( k_z = n_0 \omega_0/c \) in the \( +z \) (longitudinal) direction, with a fixed polarization
\[
E(\mathbf{r}) = u(\mathbf{r}) \exp(-i(\omega t - k_z z)).
\]  
(3)

The detuning \( \Delta \omega = \omega - \omega_0 \) refers to the reference frequency \( \omega_0 \) and the (complex-valued) guiding \( \Delta n(\mathbf{r}) = n(\mathbf{r}) - n_0 \) to the (real-valued) base refractive index \( n_0 \) of the medium in the absence of guiding. These have been included to first order only; i.e., we assume \( Dv \) of the electromagnetic field, a monochromatic wave at frequency \( \omega \). The gain guide \( \text{vol}\text{Druten et al.} \]

The explicit form of the guiding we use throughout this paper is \( \Delta n = \Delta n_R + \Delta n_G \), where
\[
\Delta n_R(\mathbf{r}) = -\frac{2n_0r^2}{k_z^2w_0^2},
\]
(4)
\[
\Delta n_G(r, \Delta \omega) = -\frac{cg(\mathbf{r}, \Delta \omega)}{2\omega_0},
\]
(5)
with
\[
g(\mathbf{r}, \Delta \omega) = g_0 \exp(-2r^2/w_0^2) \exp(i - \Delta \omega \gamma_{at}).
\]
(6)

Here \( \Delta n_R \) is the quadratic index guide, with a strength parameterized by \( w_0 \), the waist size of the Gaussian beam\(^{18} \) that would be an eigenmode if this were the only guiding present. The gain guide \( \Delta n_G \) is a radial Gaussian with waist size \( w_g \) and peak gain per length \( g_0 \). It is a Lorentzian in frequency, as is appropriate for a homogeneously broadened gain medium,\(^{18} \) with a FWHM (in radial frequency \( \omega \)) of \( 2\gamma_{at} \); the reference frequency \( \omega_0 \) has been fixed at the line center of the gain medium. The imaginary part of \( g(\mathbf{r}, \Delta \omega) \) represents the gain, while the real part represents the dispersion of the gain medium when detuned from resonance. The latter has been referred to as the gain-related index guide,\(^{12} \) and we adopt that nomenclature here.

It will be convenient to rescale the transverse coordinate \( r \) to \( \rho = r/w_0 \). This transforms Eq. (1) into
\[
\left[ -\frac{1}{2} \nabla^2 + 2\rho^2 + z_0 g \right] u = 2iz_0 \left[ \frac{\partial u}{\partial z} - \frac{i n_0 \Delta \omega}{c} u \right],
\]
(7)
with
\[
\nabla^2 = \frac{\partial^2}{\partial \rho^2} + \frac{1}{\rho} \frac{\partial}{\partial \rho} + \frac{1}{\rho^2} \frac{\partial^2}{\partial \phi^2},
\]
(8)
the rescaled transverse Laplacian, and \( z_0 = \sqrt{k_z w_0^2/2} \), the Rayleigh range corresponding to the waist size \( w_0 \). The amplitude \( u \) is now considered a function of \( \rho \) instead of \( r \). Because the guiding of Eqs. (4)–(6) has cylindrical symmetry, Eq. (1) is separable in cylindrical coordinates. In addition, since the gain is maximum on axis, higher-order angular momentum modes (having zero intensity on axis) will not be important close to laser threshold, and we can limit the analysis to the lowest-order angular momentum modes, eliminating the \( \phi \) dependence.

The transverse eigenmodes of the laser are fully determined by the eigenfunctions of the left-hand side of Eq. (7), which in turn depend on \( z_0 g \). The latter depends on three dimensionless parameters [cf. Eq. (6), inserting \( r = \rho w_0 \)], namely, the on-axis gain per Rayleigh range \( g_0 \), the (rescaled) gain waist size \( w_g/L_w \), and the scaled detuning \( \Delta \omega/\gamma_{at} \). For such an eigenfunction \( u_n(\rho) \) with (dimensionless) eigenvalue \( \mu \), the \( z \) dependence follows directly from the right-hand side of Eq. (7), namely,
\[
u_n(\rho, z) = u_n(\rho, 0) \exp[i(n_0 \Delta \omega/c - \mu/2\pi \gamma_{at})z].
\]
(9)

For a laser at threshold, we demand that the mode amplitude \( E_0 \) of the lowest-loss eigenmode reproduce after one round trip; i.e., taking into consideration the mirror intensity reflectivity \( R_m \), we need
\[
\sqrt{R_m} E_0(z + 2L) = E_0(z).
\]
(10)
This results in a condition on the eigenvalue,
\[
\mu = 2z_0 \left( k_z + \frac{n_0 \Delta \omega}{c} - \frac{\pi m}{L} - \frac{i}{4L} \ln R_m \right),
\]
(11)
with \( m \) the longitudinal mode index, an integer \( (m \gg 1) \). The imaginary part of the eigenvalue, \( \text{Im} \mu \), is thus fixed by the mirror reflectivity with the condition of being at threshold. The real part of the eigenvalue, \( \text{Re} \mu \), is dictated by the fact that the phase shift of the field during a round trip is a multiple of \( 2\pi \).

We can tune this phase shift by adjusting the length of the cavity. By expanding the length \( L \) and the mode index \( m \) around convenient values of \( L_0 \) and \( m_0 \) chosen such that \( k_z = \pi m_0/L_0 \), i.e., such that a multiple of half-wavelengths fits into \( L_0 \), we obtain
\[
\frac{2\Delta L}{L_{at}} = \left[ -\frac{\Delta \omega}{\omega_{FSR}} + \bar{m} + \frac{L_0 \text{Re} \mu}{2\pi z_0} \right],
\]
(12)
where \( \Delta L = L - L_0 \), \( \bar{m} = m - m_0 \), and \( \omega_{FSR} = \pi c/n_0 L_0 \) is the free spectral range of the cavity.

The straightforward approach to the eigenvalue problem of the left-hand side of Eq. (7) would be to specify the three parameters \( z_0 g_0, w_g/L_w \), and \( \Delta \omega/\gamma_{at} \) and numerically find the eigenvalues \( \mu \) and eigenfunctions \( u_n(\rho) \). This is not efficient, however, because an experimental configuration will fix \( \text{Im} \mu \) and \( \Delta \omega \) and \( \Delta \omega \) instead of \( g_0 \) and \( \Delta \omega \). As an additional complication, fixing \( \Delta \omega \) imposes a boundary condition on a combination of \( \omega \) and \( \Delta \omega \) and \( \Delta \omega \) itself depends on \( \Delta \omega \). The parameter space of the eigenvalue equation would thus have to be searched for cases in which \( \mu \) matches the boundary conditions imposed by Eq. (11).

Instead, we have adopted a slightly different procedure to find the transverse eigenmodes. First, a cavity configuration is chosen by specifying values for \( w_g/L_w \) and \( z_0 \ln(R_m/L_0) \). This directly determines the required modal gain \( \text{Im} \mu \) [cf. Eq. (11)]. The eigenmodes at threshold can now be found numerically from Eq. (7) as a function of \( \Delta \omega/\gamma_{at} \) by allowing \( g_0 \) (instead of \( \text{Im} \mu \)) and \( \text{Re} \mu \) to vary, subject to the boundary condition that \( u(\rho) \) vanishes as \( \rho \to \infty \). The resulting \( g_0 \) is proportional to the pump power needed to bring the mode to threshold, while \( \text{Re} \mu \) can be used together with Eq. (12) to find the length at which the mode is resonant. Taken together, this allows us to plot threshold pump powers and mode profiles as a function of cavity length for that particular cavity configuration. For each solution the near-field pattern of the modes, and the ratio of the on-axis to off-axis intensities, can be calculated.
In some cases other radial gain distributions) included the saturation of the gain medium instead (and file

\[ V_5 \]

0.3, and for the detuning \( \Delta \), where the modal gain needed to reach threshold is lowest. The transverse mode profile of the lowest-loss eigenmode (solid curve, with the vertical scale adjusted in each plot), is shown for comparison. Left, \( \text{Im} \mu = 0.36 \) (corresponding to \( R_m = 98\% \) in the experiment); the parabolic part (the mirror curvature) of the real index guide dominates. Right, \( \text{Im} \mu = 6.3 \) (\( R_m = 70\% \)); the Gaussian guide dominates, as it confines the mode to a region where the parabolic index guide is relatively small. Note the difference in vertical scale (for \( V \)) between the two plots.

Fig. 2. Transverse profile of the real (dashed curve) and imaginary (dotted curve) part of the guiding potential \( V \propto \Delta n \), for \( w_g/w_0 = 0.30 \), the case that will be studied in Sections 3 and 4. In Fig. 2 the guiding is shown in terms of the real and the imaginary part of the potential \( V(\rho) = 2\rho^2 + \zeta g \) in Eq. (7), where \( V(\rho) \) is proportional to \( \Delta n \). The detuning was set at the point where the lowest threshold occurred; for comparison, the near-field intensity distribution of the lowest-loss eigenmode is also shown. The data are for \( \text{Im} \mu = 0.36 \) and \( \text{Im} \mu = 6.3 \) (corresponding to \( R_m = 98\% \) and \( R_m = 70\% \) in the experiment).

In the left-hand plot in Fig. 2 the real part of the refractive index is clearly dominated by the parabolic index guide. The gain-related index guide adds only a small extra dimple near the axis \( \rho = 0 \). Note that this corresponds to a small positive detuning in frequency \( \text{Re} \Delta n_\rho > 0 \); cf. Eqs. (5) and (6), and a small additional focusing effect. Although the imaginary part of the refractive index is significant on axis, the lowest-loss mode extends beyond the radial range of the gain and is thus confined mainly by the parabolic index guide. Hence in this regime the index guide still dominates, as anticipated above.

For \( \text{Im} \mu = 6.3 \), in the right-hand plot in Fig. 2, the gain-related guiding dominates. Both the real and the imaginary part of the gain-related guide are much stronger here (note the change in vertical scale with respect to the left-hand plot). The resulting decrease in width of the lowest-loss mode reduces the possible influence of the parabolic index guide even further. Note that the detuning is now even larger than in the left-hand plot, as can be seen from the increased relative strength of the gain-related index guide (in \( \text{Re} V \)) compared with the pure gain guide (in \( \text{Im} V \)). It may seem surprising at first that the lowest threshold is reached by detuning away from gain maximum. Although this detuning decreases the on-axis gain, the modal gain can still increase. This is because the additional gain-related index guide for positive detuning serves to further confine the eigenmode, improving the overlap with the gain function.

As noted in the introduction, in this paper we are particularly interested in the intermediate regime (\( \text{Im} \mu \approx 1 \)) where the parabolic index guide and the gain-related guiding are of similar strength. The experimental setup was specifically designed to address this regime.
3. EXPERIMENTAL SETUP

As was discussed in Ref. 13, the configuration shown in Fig. 1(a) can be mapped onto the configurations of Figs. 1(b) and 1(c), as long as the cavity length is shorter than the Rayleigh range of the cavity modes involved. Experimentally, the configuration of Fig. 1(c), consisting of a separate laser crystal and a concave mirror, is preferred, since it allows both flexibility and good control over the guiding parameters. For instance, the strength of the effective quadratic index guide is determined by the curvature of the concave mirror [cf. Eqs. (14)–(16) below and also the discussion in Section 5].

The cavity used in the experiments is shown in more detail in Fig. 3. The laser crystal is a 1% doped Nd:YVO₄ chip of 3 mm × 3 mm × 0.21(3) mm. The left face in the figure is coated antireflective at the pump wavelength, 808 nm, and highly reflective at the lasing wavelength, 1064 nm. The other face is coated antireflective at 1064 nm. An outcoupling mirror with a radius of curvature of $R_c = 200$ mm and a diameter of 10 mm is placed as close as possible to the latter end, leaving only a small air gap in between.

The distance between the laser crystal and the output coupler could be varied with a micrometer-based translation stage. In practice the two elements were first moved together until they touched at the edge of the crystal holder (diameter 5 mm) and then moved back a sufficient distance to allow fine alignment of the relative tilt. The resulting size of the air gap is estimated from the translation stage readout to be 0.10(3) mm, where the uncertainty is due mainly to variations in the precise alignment procedure.

The use of a separate output coupler allows us to switch output couplers, so that we can study the same cavity configuration with different outcoupling intensity reflectivities, i.e., different intracavity losses. Five different reflectivities $R_m$ were used: 98%, 94%, 90%, 80%, and 70%. The laser crystal was mounted on a piezoelectric transducer, so that the cavity length could be fine-tuned on the subwavelength scale.

The microchip laser is pumped by a Coherent 899 titanium–sapphire laser operating at 808 nm. The titanium–sapphire laser itself is pumped by a Spectra-Physics Millennia laser operating at 532 nm. The transverse profile of the pump is Gaussian and has a waist size $w_p = 14 \mu m$ in the focus, on the crystal. The pump power incident upon the Nd:YVO₄ crystal was varied with a combination of a rotatable half-wave plate and a polarizer in the collimated part of the pump beam. Typical pump powers were in the 1–50 mW range.

The transverse profile of the output beam of the microchip laser was studied by alternately imaging the near field or the far field onto a HiSiS22 CCD camera with a calibrated two-lens imaging system. The estimated resolution of the imaging system was 3 mm for the near field and 0.2 mrad for the far field. Optical-quality beam splitters were used to reduce the intensity of the light incident upon the camera to within its dynamic range. The camera was custom modified by replacement of the original CCD device with a Kodak KAF-0440L CCD, which had an antiblooming system and (more important) which did not have a glass window in front of the chip. Avoiding this glass window eliminates optical interference effects originating from the reflection of the glass surfaces; this was found to significantly improve the quality of the images obtained. The size of the chip is 768 pixels × 512 pixels, where the physical size of one pixel is 9 mm × 9 mm; the camera is capable of producing 16-bit gray-scale images. The resulting mode profiles were generally found to have excellent circular symmetry. For comparison with the theoretical model, a cross section was taken along the long (768-pixel) axis of the CCD chip through the center of the mode profile.

To map the experimental parameters for the configuration of Fig. 1(c) onto those of the theoretical model based on Fig. 1(a), we use Eqs. (12), (13), and (19) of our earlier paper. For convenience these are reproduced here in the present notation, namely,

$$ n_0 = \left[ \frac{n_1 n_2}{n_1^2 L_1 + n_2^2 L_2} \right]^{1/2}, $$

$$ L = \left[ \frac{L_1}{n_1} + \frac{L_2}{n_2} \right]^{1/2}, $$

$$ w_0^2 = \frac{2}{k_z} \left( \frac{L R_c}{n_0} \right)^{1/2}. $$

An overview of all the relevant parameters of the laser used in the experiment is given in Table 1, including the model parameters derived by use of Eqs. (14)–(16). Note that the gain waist size $w_g$ is indeed smaller than the waist size $w_0$ for the parabolic index guide, $w_g/w_0 = 0.30$.

The output of the laser was investigated spectrally by sending it through a planar Fabry–Perot interferometer. The laser was found to operate in a single transverse and longitudinal mode for all the data presented in Section 4. By operating the laser further above threshold, and carefully tuning the cavity length close to the point of a longitudinal mode hop, it was possible to have two longitudinal modes oscillating simultaneously. This allowed us to determine the longitudinal mode spacing to be 0.27(3) THz, where the estimated variation is due mainly to the fact that the cavity needed to be rebuilt for every different mirror reflectivity. This value is consistent with the the-
Table 1. Overview of the Experimental Parameters and the Corresponding Values of the Derived Theoretical Parameters

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Value</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>L1</td>
<td>Crystal thickness</td>
<td>0.21(3) mm</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>n1</td>
<td>Crystal refractive index</td>
<td>2.1652</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>L2</td>
<td>Size of the air gap</td>
<td>0.10(3) mm</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>n2</td>
<td>Refractive index of air gap</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rm</td>
<td>Mirror radius of curvature</td>
<td>200 mm</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>wg</td>
<td>Gain (=pump) waist size</td>
<td>14(1) μm</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>λat</td>
<td>Laser output wavelength</td>
<td>1064 nm</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>γg/π</td>
<td>FWHM of the gain</td>
<td>207 GHz</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>L</td>
<td>Effective length</td>
<td>0.3 mm</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>n0</td>
<td>Effective refractive index</td>
<td>1.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>w0</td>
<td>Waist size of parabolic index guide</td>
<td>46 μm</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

describes the pump power needed to yield a particular mode and, when two curves cross, a different mode has the lowest lasing threshold. Each curve is smooth, and, when two curves cross, a different mode has the lowest threshold and will become the lasing mode. The lowest-loss transverse modes from adjacent longitudinal-mode manifolds [cf. Eq. (12)] have also been plotted to indicate the free spectral range. The right-hand side of Fig. 4 shows experimental results of the laser output power (i.e., not the threshold power) as a function of the cavity length. These were taken with the pump power fixed at a value close to the point where lasing over the entire free spectral range was just observed.

Although strictly speaking the left-hand and right-hand sides of Fig. 4 should not be directly compared, we do expect to see similar behaviors. When the laser is operated not too far above threshold, as in the experimental data of Fig. 4, the output power will usually be proportional to how far above threshold the laser is operated. As long as the laser remains single mode (i.e., as long as the saturation is sufficiently homogeneous, both spatially and spectrally), we thus expect the experimental output power curve to follow the topmost curve of the calculated modal thresholds. A crossing of the theoretical curves should result in a discontinuous derivative of the experimental curve as the laser performs a mode hop (accompanied by a sudden change in transverse mode profile, as will be discussed extensively below).

Comparing the theoretical and experimental data in this way, we indeed see similar behaviors for each of the reflectivities. In addition, the modal behavior shows the signature of a transition from index-guiding dominated at high reflectivities to gain-guiding dominated at low reflectivities. At high reflectivity there are many modes with similar modal gains, but only the lowest-order modes (e.g., in the case of Rm = 98%, the two modes shown in Fig. 4) have sufficient overlap with the localized gain to become the lowest-loss mode for a particular detuning.

For the lower reflectivities, Fig. 4 shows just a single smooth curve. In this case higher-order modes actually have much higher thresholds, and this reflects the strong mode discrimination that is typical for gain guiding.

At intermediate reflectivities higher-order modes appear toward positive cavity-length detuning, each in a rather narrow range of cavity detunings. This effect is caused by the gain-related index guide and is discussed in more detail in Subsection 4.B. Figure 4 illustrates that the intermediate regime is of special interest: it exhibits features that are present neither in the index-guiding-dominated regime nor in the gain-guiding-dominated regime. Note also that in all cases the lowest threshold is achieved for a cavity detuning away from gain maximum toward a shorter cavity length, corresponding to Δω > 0, as was discussed for Fig. 2.

Apart from the general qualitative agreement between theory and experiment in Fig. 4, there are also quantitative differences. At 98% reflectivity the theory predicts two possible modes, but the experiment shows no discontinuities, just one mode. At 94% and 90% the theory also predicts more modes than the experiment shows (five versus three and six versus four, respectively). The modes that do not appear in the experiment are the last few higher-order modes in the calculations. This deviation and possible causes for it will be discussed more extensively in Section 5. We have verified that varying the theoretical parameters within the range allowed by experimental uncertainties is insufficient to resolve the discrepancy. The above comparison is possible only at positive cavity detunings where the higher-order modes appear. In contrast, it is almost impossible to determine the theoretical value based on the numbers in Table 1, ωFWHM/2π = c/2n0L = 0.29 THz. Note that the longitudinal mode spacing is somewhat larger than the gain bandwidth γg/π. This situation is typical for practical rare-earth microchip lasers and is favorable for single-mode operation.

In the case of the mirror with 90% reflectivity, it was also possible, under a very limited set of cavity and pumping conditions, to have two transverse modes oscillating simultaneously. The estimated transverse-mode frequency splitting was 3(2) GHz, where the uncertainty is determined mainly by the difficulty of obtaining stable simultaneous oscillation in two transverse modes. This value is in rough agreement with the calculated value of 1.3 GHz.
from Fig. 4 whether theory and experiment differ significantly for negative cavity detunings.

B. Modal Profiles

We now come to the main topic of this paper and compare the calculated and the experimental transverse modal profiles for each reflectivity. As a pragmatic solution to the systematic deviation between theory and experiment noted in Subsection 4.A, we have taken the following approach: for reflectivities of 98%, 94%, and 90% it was found that the profiles did not depend sensitively on cavity detuning (provided, of course that the detuning did not induce a mode hop). For these reflectivities we compare the experimentally observed modes with their theoretical counterparts for the cavity detuning that corresponds to the highest laser output and the lowest threshold.

For the lower reflectivities (80% and 70%) the modal profiles change continuously as a function of detuning. For large negative cavity-length detunings the modal profiles change only very modestly, but for small and positive detuning the changes are much more profound. Here we resort to a slightly different procedure for comparing theory and experiment, guided by the above observations. We assume that the most negative cavity detuning within the free spectral range in the theory and experiment match. Then we match the most positive cavity detuning within the free spectral range in the experiment to the largest detuning in the calculations for which the same high-order mode profile occurs as in the experiment (using the 94% and 90% reflectivity data). This leaves us with approximately 85(5)% of the original free spectral range in the theory to match with the entire free spectral range in the experiment. We note that this scaling is the only arbitrary scaling factor that we have applied to our data; all other theoretical parameters are directly taken from the experiment and have not been adjusted to improve the agreement between theory and experiment. Note also that a single set of values for the theoretical parameters was used to produce the full set of mode profiles discussed below.

Fig. 4. Left, theoretical calculation of the threshold of the modes against the cavity detuning for various reflectivities of the outcoupling mirror. Right, experimental results that show the laser intensity output against the cavity detuning. The cavity detuning is measured in terms of the voltage $\Delta V$ on the piezo-electric transducer, normalized to the voltage required for scanning a full free spectral range $\Delta V_{\text{FSR}}$. When in the calculation the laser jumps from one mode to the next, the experiment should show a small discontinuity as well.
For mirror reflectivity $R_m = 98\%$, we observe only one mode in the experiment. The modal profile changes very little as a function of detuning, both in the near field and in the far field. The theoretical and experimental profiles at the point of lowest threshold (highest output power) are compared in Fig. 5. The theory matches the experimental curve reasonably well, both in the near field and in the far field. For comparison the theoretical profile of the lowest-order Laguerre–Gaussian mode $LG_0$ of the purely parabolic index guide (both in the near field and in the far field). The $LG_0$ mode is shown as the dotted curve in the near field; in the far field the $LG_0$ profile is not shown, as it would overlap the curve of the theoretical model.

In Fig. 6 the three experimental mode profiles observed at $R_m = 94\%$ are compared with theoretical profiles. The three lowest-order Laguerre–Gaussian mode ($LG_N$, $N = 0, 1, 2$) of the pure parabolic index guide are also shown. Especially at the higher-order modes, there is a clear difference between $LG_N$ on the one hand, where the minima go to zero, and our theory and experiment on the other, where the minima are nonzero. Note also that in the near field the additional rings are generally weaker than their $LG$ counterparts, while in the far field the rings are generally stronger. These profiles can be interpreted as standard Laguerre–Gaussian profiles deformed under the influence of the gain guide.

For 90% reflectivity we have four modes, with four different profiles, shown in Fig. 7. Here the deviations from the conventional $LG$ modes are obvious, as the direct comparison in Fig. 7 shows. The near-field patterns show only very weak rings, while in the far field the outer ring becomes quite strong—stronger in fact than the inner rings. In addition, the outer ring starts to merge with the inner rings. The theoretical mode profiles reproduce these features and match the experimental profiles quite well. The only significant difference is that the theoretical profiles seem to be more deeply modulated.

Based on the near-field profiles in Fig. 6 and Fig. 7, a qualitative explanation can now be given as to why each of these modes appears at a narrow range of detunings, a fact that was noted in Subsection 4.A; see Fig. 4. The near-field modal profiles are essentially strongly deformed Laguerre–Gaussians. Each mode has the lowest threshold when the overlap with the pump beam is maximized, i.e., when the rings are suppressed and when the central peak has a width similar to that of the gain profile, approximately one third of the $LG_0$ mode in Fig. 7. To deform the central peak in this way, the lowest-order mode, a deformed $LG_0$ mode, needs significant additional guiding. This additional guiding is provided by the gain-related index guide for positive detuning, i.e., for negative cavity-length detuning.

The next mode, a deformed $LG_1$ mode, requires less additional guiding, since the central peak of the $LG_1$ mode has a reduced width to begin with. The width of the central peak of the third mode, a deformed $LG_2$ mode, is similar to that of the gain profile; hence it does not need additional focusing, and it appears near zero detuning. The central peak of the $LG_3$ and higher-order modes actually needs additional antiguiding for maximum overlap with the gain profile. Thus the related deformed modes will have the lowest threshold at negative frequency de-
tuning (positive cavity-length detuning), where the gain-related index guide provides antiguiding. In summary, each deformed mode has a specific detuning at which the gain-related index guide yields maximum overlap with the gain profile. This effect is somewhat similar to mode pulling in a lossy cavity, the shift of the longitudinal modes toward the line center by the dispersion of the gain-related refractive index, hence it could be called transverse mode pulling.

At 80% reflectivity we enter the gain-dominated regime, and only a single mode is observed (Fig. 8). In contrast to the above, however, the modal profile now does change shape, and it does so in a continuous fashion while the cavity is being detuned. The evolution of the near field is not very interesting, as it always shows a ringless profile, changing only in width when the cavity length is detuned. Note, however, that, since the profile is not Gaussian, the word “width” is actually ill-defined. Taking the standard deviation of such a profile as the width, we find that it decreases by approximately a factor of two when cavity lengths are detuned from short to long over the available free spectral range. Although a longer cavity length causes less focusing or even defocusing for the gain-related index guide, the mode also requires more on-axis gain to remain at threshold, causing the field to be pulled toward the center. Apparently, at longer cavity lengths the imaginary part of the gain guide has more influence on the mode formation than the gain-related index guide, causing a narrower near-field profile at longer cavity lengths.

The far-field profile changes much more dramatically. The continuously changing profile is illustrated by a number of representative examples in Fig. 8. The theoretical value for the cavity detuning \(2D/L\) at is shown in the upper left corner of each graph (i.e., these numbers correspond to the horizontal axis in the left-hand part of Fig. 4). For negative cavity-length detunings the mode profile changes only slowly, while for positive cavity-length detunings the change is much more rapid.

Finally, at a mirror reflectivity of 70% the gain guide is even more dominant [see also Fig. 2(b)]. Again a single mode with a continuously changing profile as a function of detuning is observed. The shape in the near field seems to be fairly constant; it remains a more or less ringless profile (see Fig. 9). While detuning, again only the width of the profile changes.

The profiles in the far field, also shown in Fig. 9, are diverse. When detuning, we see the maximum intensity move outward continuously while new maxima and minima form in the center. This is an example of a laser showing conical emission. This gives us profiles that

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Fig. 7. Left, near-field and, right, far-field mode profiles at reflectivity \(R_m = 90\%\). Four modes are found in the experiment (solid curves), and the profiles agree well with the results from the theoretical model (dashed curves), both in the near field and in the far field. For the higher-order modes the deviations from Laguerre–Gaussian modes are large: the near-field rings are strongly suppressed while the far-field rings become quite strong compared with the central peak. A direct comparison with the \(LG_N\) modes (dotted curves) is shown for the first three modes.

Fig. 8. Near-field and far-field profiles for \(R_m = 80\%\) mirror reflectivity. The experimental data (solid curves) are again reproduced well by the theoretical model (dashed curves). The near-field profile changes only in width, and we show only one profile. The far-field profile changes much more drastically; a number of representative examples are shown. The value of the cavity detuning \(2D/L\) (cf. Fig. 4) of the theoretical curves is indicated in the graphs of the far-field profiles. The lowest-order Laguerre–Gaussian mode \(LG_0\) of the purely parabolic index guide is also shown for comparison (dotted curves).
show a transition from the usual Laguerre-removed with a single scaling factor. accessible cavity detunings, which we have pragmatically parameters. The only serious discrepancy is in the range of experiment, as compared in Section 4, is surprisingly good. In fact, the present study seems to be the first experimental demonstration of the kind of conical emission predicted by Longhi and Laporta. Apparently this behavior is a generic feature of gain guiding once the dispersive effect of the gain medium upon detuning from gain maximum (the gain-related index guide) is taken into account. As was already noted, conical emission occurs when the gain-related index guide actually yields antiguiding (i.e., is equivalent to a negative lens, for negative detuning in frequency).

change from ringless to profiles with three rings. Note that the outer ring is the strongest and that the minima in the profile never go to zero. Also interesting is that the highest-gain profile in the far field has its maximum away from the center. Once again the agreement between theory and experiment is quite satisfying, considering the complexity of the observed behavior.

5. DISCUSSION

The agreement between the theoretical model and the experiments, as compared in Section 4, is surprisingly good. The large variety in observed modal profiles matches well with the model, which has essentially no adjustable parameters. The only serious discrepancy is in the range of accessible cavity detunings, which we have pragmatically removed with a single scaling factor.

For decreasing mirror reflectivity, the modal profiles show a transition from the usual Laguerre–Gaussian profiles for parabolic index guiding to profiles that are typical for gain guiding. For the lowest reflectivities our observations are similar to the predictions for a system with only the gain (-related) guiding of Longhi and Laporta. In particular, we also find that the cavity detuning plays a major role and that conical emission appears for negative detuning in frequency. The similarities are striking, even though the actual transverse gain profile considered by Longhi and Laporta (a sech² function) is different from our (Gaussian) gain profile. In fact, the present study seems to be the first experimental demonstration of the kind of conical emission predicted by Longhi and Laporta. Apparently this behavior is a generic feature of gain guiding once the dispersive effect of the gain medium upon detuning from gain maximum (the gain-related index guide) is taken into account. As was already noted, conical emission occurs when the gain-related index guide actually yields antiguiding (i.e., is equivalent to a negative lens, for negative detuning in frequency).

We now discuss the approximations made in the theoretical model and their relevance for the observed differences from the experimental data. The most important approximation we made in the theoretical model is describing the cavity as a longitudinally uniform waveguide; i.e., we have assumed that the gain medium, the gain, and the mirror curvature are spread throughout the cavity. For this to be a reasonable approximation, the transverse profile of the field inside the cavity must not change significantly during one round trip. To satisfy this requirement, the Rayleigh range of the field inside the cavity should be larger than the cavity length. However, since the transverse modal profiles are not really (Laguerre–) Gaussian, the Rayleigh range is not well defined. Instead it seems appropriate to use the waist size of the gain, $\frac{w_g}{\lambda}$, as the smallest near-field feature size expected (see also the curves for $R_m = 70\%$ in Fig. 2). This yields a lower boundary of $\sim 0.98$ mm for the Rayleigh range, while the optical length of the cavity is $n_0L = 0.51$ mm. Thus we expect the approximation to be reasonable but not perfect, and the observed size of the deviations (of the order of 10%) seems reasonable. We expect this to be the main cause of the observed deviations.

As further evidence for this conjecture, we mention here that we have done similar experiments for the same configuration (e.g., also with $\frac{w_g}{w_0} \approx 0.3$) but with a more tightly curved mirror, $R_c = 25$ mm. In that case the Rayleigh range was approximately three times shorter, and the agreement between experiment and theory was significantly worse, in particular in terms of the number of observed modes.

We have also neglected all thermally induced guiding effects. It is possible that the heat deposited by the pump light causes an extra guide, but it will probably be weak compared with the two strong guiding mechanisms that we have included in the calculation. For instance, from a previous experiment in which the thermal guiding alone was examined for a configuration similar to ours, the purely thermally guided mode would have a waist size of $\sim 200$ $\mu$m. Since our mirror curvature alone gives much stronger guiding (the purely index-guided mode waist is 46 $\mu$m), we can assume that the thermally induced guiding effects are indeed negligible.
Another approximation in the theory is that we folded out the cavity to a waveguide, neglecting saturation. In the experiment, saturation can deform the transverse gain profile to be non-Gaussian through, for example, transverse spatial hole burning. Aside from this, the temporal dynamics, resulting from the slow inversion, were neglected as well. Because of the slow inversion, the field inside the cavity fluctuates strongly in intensity near threshold. This fluctuation combined with the saturation might cause complicated forms of mode competition. It might cause higher-order modes to occur at, for example, higher cavity detunings. To avoid the effects of saturation as much as possible, the experiments were performed close to threshold (with a pump parameter of less than 1.3), and we may expect saturation effects on the transverse mode profiles to be relatively weak.

A last effect that might cause the gain profile to be deformed, probably resulting in less deeply modulated profiles, is the diffusion of excited states of the Nd$^{3+}$ ions. The typical diffusion length of an excited state (less than 1.3), and we may expect saturation effects on the transverse mode profiles to be relatively weak.

A more quantitative comparison between microchip lasers and our experimental laser can be based on the rescaled Eq. (7), which contains as important dimensionless parameters the ratio $w_g/w_0$ of the pump beam size and the size of the eigenmode of the index profile, and the dimensionless gain per Rayleigh range $z_0g_0$ (as well as the scaled frequency detuning $\Delta \omega/\gamma_0$). The presented results are therefore directly applicable to microchip lasers, with their larger index-guided waist $w_0$, if the size of the pump spot is increased and if the mirror losses are reduced as compared with the values given in this paper; this is indeed the case in practical microchip lasers.

To describe a laser far above threshold requires a more significant extension of the present results. Far above threshold the effects of saturation of the gain medium need to be included in the theoretical description. The amount of saturation will depend on the local intensity. As a result, the gain profile will depend on the intensity profile of the lasing mode and on how far above threshold the laser is operated. The gain profile will deviate from the pump profile and will generally become non-Gaussian. These complications are beyond the scope of this paper. The results presented here do provide a good starting point for further work in that direction. We expect that the essential features noted here (e.g., the role of the mirror reflectivity in determining the relative strength of the gain guide and index guide) will remain valid far above threshold.

6. SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

In this paper we have theoretically and experimentally studied transverse-mode formation caused by combined Gaussian gain guiding and parabolic index guiding in a microchip laser. We have used a Nd:YVO$_4$ crystal and a separate curved mirror to form a plano–concave configuration pumped by a narrow-width Gaussian beam, resulting in the emission of an interestingly wide variety of transverse profiles.

We have shown that at higher reflectivities ($R_m \geq 90\%$ in our case), where we are still in the index-guide-dominated regime, higher-order modes appear with Laguerre–Gaussian-like profiles. The lowest-loss mode never has any rings, and the higher-order modes each have one ring more than the mode before; i.e., the laser profile is characteristic for the mode number. Also, with a decrease in reflectivity we see an increase in the number of visible modes. This is a consequence of the gain-related index guide, by means of transverse mode pulling. The deformation of the Laguerre–Gaussian profiles and the effects of the gain guide become stronger as well.

When lowering the reflectivity, there is a relatively sudden transition to the gain-dominated regime (in our case, for 80% and 70% reflectivity), and we see only one mode. The near-field profile is ringless, and changes only in width when the cavity is detuned. In contrast, in the far field the profile changes continuously. As the cavity length is increased, the maximum intensity moves outward; i.e., conical emission is observed, and rings appear inside. The more the cavity is detuned, the farther the high-intensity rings are from the center. This situation is typical for gain guiding, where a single trapped filament is supported with a smooth amplitude profile and a rapidly varying phase profile. This near-field phase structure leads to ring structure in the far field that strongly depends on detuning.

Theory and experiment show profiles with a similar number of rings, and these rings have similar strength. Also, the appearance of higher-order modes at high reflectivities and their disappearance at low reflectivities is reproduced by the theory. The deviations between theory and experiment are typically on the 10%–20% level. We expect that the approximation of the longitudinally uniform waveguide is the main source of these deviations. Going beyond this approximation would require a two-dimensional (radial and longitudinal) calculation, and hence a considerable additional computational effort. This is beyond the scope of this paper.

In conclusion, we have experimentally studied transverse mode formation in which several (anti)guiding effects are present, and we have used a relatively simple model for this intrinsically complicated process. Considering the simplifications made (as discussed in Section 5), we find excellent agreement between theory and experiment.
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