In the seventh century, a new genre of Buddhist canonical literature began to emerge in India. The esoteric counterparts to the sutras, the new tantras purported to record the teachings of not just the historical Buddha Śākyamuni but an array of cosmic buddhas dwelling in alternative worlds. The tantras introduced all sorts of changes into the Buddhist religion, from complex new rituals involving elaborate mandalas, mantras, and physical postures (mudrā), to an emphasis on secrecy and concomitantly on initiation rites, and more. The present paper explores another element that arose at this time, one that has so far been overlooked by scholars. With the advent of the tantras, this paper will argue, came an unprecedented interest in the imagination, aesthetic experience, and poetic expression. Thus at key points in tantric ritual practice, we see poetic language being used to evoke a taste of awakening. The shift is seen most clearly in early Buddhist ritual manuals, examples of which will be drawn from the Dunhuang archive and analyzed for the kinds of literary moves they make.