

THE PAYROLL MONK: CULTIVATING CALM IN THE CHAOS OF DEADLINES



AJ Jain MCIPP, Payroll and Pensions Supervisor, Cambridge City Council, introduces the concept of the 'payroll monk' and explains the ways it can help you to work more effectively in your fast-paced, busy payroll role



In his book, *Think Like a Monk*, Jay Shetty draws a riveting contrast between the monkey mind and the monk mind. Having spent significant time in ashrams and living as a monk himself, Jay shares powerful excerpts from that phase of his life. I found the book deeply inspiring – the more I read, the more I felt compelled to take these fundamentals and apply them to my own work.

So, I thought... what if I brought the monk mind into payroll? Hear me out!

Have you heard of the monkey mind? It's that restless, easily overwhelmed, constantly distracted state of mind. And in a profession like payroll where

you're endlessly reprioritising your to-do list, double-checking checklists and accommodating last-minute changes with tight deadlines, stress and anxiety can quickly become second nature.

You get so used to operating in monkey mind mode that even when you try to switch off, your thoughts don't. Holidays stop feeling like holidays, and no matter where you go, work seems to follow.

In the following article, I've outlined a few simple ways to train yourself out of the monkey mind and start practising a monk mind – within the world of payroll. Don't get me wrong, I'm still new to this myself, but I'm already noticing a real

sense of calm settling in. I no longer dread logging on to work each morning; in fact, I look forward to it.

Introduction: who is the payroll monk?

The payroll monk isn't about who you are – it's a mindset. A way of thinking. Something we can learn and practise every day.

Where the monkey mind is reactive and constantly chasing recognition and reward, the monk mind works quietly behind the scenes, anchored in duty, grounded in routine and driven by a strong work ethic and precision.

The monk mind sees payroll not as loud or glamorous, but as measured, consistent and vital. It treats the payroll cycle as sacred – making sure every detail is right, every deadline respected and ensuring every colleague is paid accurately and on time. It doesn't seek praise. It finds peace in process, harmony in data and a quiet reward in simply doing things right.

In a world of constant change, compliance shifts, software updates, new legislation and human complexity, it's this calm and methodical approach which helps create clarity in the chaos.

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Silent precision: the art of getting it right every time

We strive for perfection, but perfection is both subjective and impossible. Just like beauty lies in the eye of the beholder, perfection means different things to different people.

A monkey mind will exhaust itself chasing this ideal that, if we're honest, doesn't truly exist. The monk mind, on the other hand, focusses on accuracy, something which can be measured and trusted.

Just as a monk tends to a quiet garden in the monastery, the monk mind tends to data with calm precision. It double-checks the details, reviews the figures and brings quiet focus to every step. It moves through systems, processes and spreadsheets with deliberate care. It's not chasing applause or recognition, it's chasing accuracy.

Rituals and routines: discipline in the payroll cycle

We're truly fortunate to work in a profession where many processes follow a regular and predictable rhythm each month. Of course, unexpected issues do arise from time to time, but for the most part, our daily routines remain steady. While the monkey mind struggles with these routines, craving novelty and instant gratification, the monk mind embraces them as opportunities for discipline and even bliss.

For the monk mind, consistency and familiarity in these daily rituals help reduce anxiety and stress. They create a calming structure which allows us to fully immerse ourselves in our work, free from distractions and mental clutter.

Guardians of trust: the ethical backbone of payroll

Trust is the cornerstone of practising a monk mind in payroll. Employees trust us to ensure their pay is accurate and on time, while the organisation relies on payroll professionals to uphold confidentiality, integrity and compliance with the relevant legislation. We handle some of the most sensitive data imaginable, and any breach of trust can have catastrophic consequences. Though we have access to mountains of sensitive information, a monk mind operates without bias or shortcuts and its ethics are non-negotiable.

Especially when managing delicate requests like salary advances for staff facing financial hardship, it handles each case with the utmost confidentiality and care.

In contrast, a monkey mind approaches ethics in payroll with distraction and inconsistency. It struggles to maintain a steady commitment to ethical standards, often swayed by short-term pressures, conflict avoidance or the temptation to take shortcuts. The monk mind, however, meets ethical challenges with calm reflection, prioritising transparency, fairness and strict compliance, instead of finding quick fixes.

When chaos calls: the monk in crisis

We've all experienced that moment just before sending payroll when a leaver notification suddenly arrives – one that must be actioned immediately to prevent a massive overpayment. Or when a system outage strikes minutes before the payroll deadline, yikes!

In such chaos, the monkey mind becomes restless and overwhelmed, but the monk mind responds with calm focus rather than panic. Its deep understanding of procedures allows it to act promptly and confidently when things go wrong. It remains emotionally neutral in a crisis, channeling energy into finding solutions. Whether facing restructures, new system implementations or legislative changes, the monk mind serves as a stabilising

force throughout transformation. It expects anomalies as part of the daily discipline and sees them as opportunities to improve systems. It may not be the loudest voice in the room, but when a payroll crisis hits, it's often the most trusted.

“Just like monks, we can create space for reflection and growth”

Mindful leadership in payroll teams

The monkey mind leads with command and clings tightly to control, often resorting to micromanagement. These are the leaders who struggle to let go, driven by anxiety about things going wrong. When mistakes happen, they over-supervise and crowd their staff.

The monk mind, on the other hand, leads with calm, not command. They aren't micromanagers, but mindful leaders who create space for focussed, accurate work by shielding their teams from unnecessary distractions. They model consistency, ethical integrity and balance compliance with compassion. They invest in developing themselves while nurturing growth in others. Monk-minded leaders make tough decisions when needed but never forget the human side of payroll. They normalise honesty and accountability, creating a culture where quiet excellence becomes the team's norm.

Conclusion: embracing the payroll monk within

Now that we've explored the contrast between monkey mind and monk mind, it's clear they represent two very different ways of being. And the truth is, we all carry a bit of both. The key is learning to recognise when our monkey mind is in control. Acknowledge it without judgment and gently shift towards cultivating the monk mind to bring calm to the chaos.

This shift starts with embracing discipline as a daily practice.

It's about doing things properly, not for praise or recognition, but simply because it matters and it's the right thing to do. We can all approach our work mindfully. Just like monks, we can create space for reflection and growth. We can evolve through contemplation and take the time to review and refine our professional practice. ■